

CABINET

18 October 2022

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

Report of the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and Performance, Change and Transformation

Strategic Aim:	All	
Key Decision: No	Forward Plan Reference: FP/300922	
Exempt Information	No	
Cabinet Member(s) Responsible:	Cllr K Payne, Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and Performance, Change and Transformation	
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Ward Councillors	N/A	

DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

- a) **RECOMMENDS TO COUNCIL** to approve a financial strategy for closing the financial gap;
- b) **NOTES** that the Council will aim to balance the budget (without the use of reserves for recurring expenditure) by 27/28;
- c) **NOTES** that the Strategy assumes maximum council tax rises;
- d) **NOTES** that the Strategy accepts that the Council's current service offer is not affordable and that all services will have to move in the direction of an 'affordable service offer' over time; and
- e) **NOTES** that the Medium-Term Financial Plan is subject to change as more information becomes available.

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval of a Strategy for achieving financial sustainability over the medium term.

2 BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 Our objectives

- 2.1.1 We have two key financial objectives which are clearly stated in our approved Corporate Strategy:

- The Council is committed to being financially sustainable. This means ensuring it can live “within its means”, only spending the funding it receives and balancing the budget in any given year without using General Fund reserves. This is our number one priority. The Corporate Strategy reaffirms this commitment and it was supported by most Members. This is an important message to all stakeholders – Members, staff, partners and public alike.
- The second key priority is to maintain our reserves above the current recommended minimum limit of £3m as approved by Council. This is important because the context we are working in is changing all the time and is laced with uncertainty. We always want to keep a level of funding aside to respond to a crisis, unexpected costs or increased demand. This level is advised by the Council’s s151 Officer (see budget report 09/2022) and is revisited every year.

2.2 Current outlook

- 2.2.1 Our Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) projects the resources we will have available in place over the next five years to support delivery of services and our strategic aims and objectives. Our MTFP is kept under constant review and tells us whether we can “live within our means” or whether we need to take action. It is an important document and is reported frequently to Councillors in finance reports and briefings.
- 2.2.2 We are emerging from a global pandemic and public finances are under real pressure resulting from unprecedented levels of borrowing. This context plays heavily into our corporate plan priorities and commitments but against a backdrop of financial uncertainty and an unprecedented cost of living crisis.
- 2.2.3 The MTFP has its limitations – it is based on lots of unknowns and assumptions (most of which are outside our control). This report does not go into detail about these assumptions – many of them have been explored in the Budget Report (09/2022) and Outturn report.
- 2.2.4 Cabinet has been advised of the projected financial position including the detailed assumptions and uncertainties that underpin it. Cabinet understands the assumptions made and the extent to which the Council has control over them. We have also modelled alternative funding scenarios and their impact so that Cabinet is not only of the projected financial gap but how this could change. Cabinet understand the financial position and the serious challenge facing the Council. We are also confident that other Members understand the challenge facing the Council, the state of both the local and national financial position.

2.2.5 Whatever its limitations, the MTFP tells us that:

- Our spending plans exceed our available funding;
- Our “excess spending” is significant in terms of the % reduction in expenditure required particularly given savings already made;
- We have reserve balances that can meet the “excess spending” in the short term;
- The reserve balances will eventually be depleted unless one of two things happen – we generate/receive more funding or reduce expenditure.

2.2.6 Our projections indicate that we are likely to have a financial gap of around £2.8m in 23/24, but one that grows over the period of the strategy. The growth in the gap reflects the fact that our projected increases in funding cannot keep pace with the inflation applied to existing spending plans. The increase in the gap is such that our balances (non ringfenced earmarked reserves and general fund) are projected to go from £15.8m (predicted by the end of 22/23) to below the minimum level by the end of 26/27.

2.2.7 Table 1: Projected Deficit (from mid year report 22/23, Appendix E)

23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
2.793m	4.443m	4.778m	5.835m	6.989m

2.3 Learning to date

2.3.1 The issue of financial sustainability has never been far from the Council’s priorities. The Council has always taken its financial responsibilities seriously. The Council has a good track record of delivering savings and over the years has rarely used reserves as a means of balancing the budget. Members have also increased Council Tax by the maximum amount, in all but one year, recognising the Council’s high dependency on council tax under the current funding methodology.

2.3.2 Based on the funding position, previous savings delivered and current work ongoing, there is some key learning that will shape future plans:

- a) Officers have been through all budgets to identify the extent to which budgets are controllable. They have posed question for Members to consider informally such as “Should we continue to offer business rate discounts for local sports clubs and societies?” and “Should we reduce our current respite offer?”. **The total savings that could be made if Members pursued all savings generated by the review is not sufficient to close our financial gap.**
- b) In light of the above, our considered view is that our scrutiny of the budget/spending has to go deeper and requires independence. **Across the Council we need to fundamentally change what the Council delivers to the community in order for our total service offer to be affordable – one where spend is much less.** The detail of what an affordable service offer” will look like will depend on political preferences, choices and whether the

Council can through different ways of working deliver the same outcomes for less.

- c) Many Councils including our own are now entering uncharted territory. **The seriousness of the financial outlook means that the Council's prioritisation and rationalisation of services will probably need to go beyond what most might find acceptable in any other circumstances.** Fundamentally, there is a significant risk that the Council will not be able to command a majority to support the difficult decisions that may have to be made. Informally, Members have undertaken work to determine their preparedness to take decisions on a wide range of issues following the work done by Officers. The outcome of this work has been largely positive but there are areas where there is not unanimous agreement and more importantly delivery of all options is not sufficient to close the gap.
- d) We are now entering a phase where strong leadership is required. **There is a risk that Officers and Members avoid tabling difficult choices that impact them, their staff or the community they represent or to look for reasons to avoid making decisions.** No one wants to bring forward a financial decision that might divide the Council like the Local Plan proposals did. But financial survival depends on it.
- e) There may be some Officers and Members with an optimistic outlook, who believe that Councils will not be allowed to 'go bankrupt' and that future funding will increase to the point that a plan is not required. This is not the case. **We are clear that even with a substantial increase in Government funding, we are left with the same challenge.**

2.3.3 The above learning has been factored into our proposed plan.

3 OUR PLAN

3.1 Our responsibilities

3.1.1 Council Members and Officers have various responsibilities in relation to financial management as per the Corporate Strategy commitments. At a more detailed level, these include:

- Approving a strategy for achieving financial sustainability (3.2);
- Putting in place a plan to deliver that strategy (3.3). A plan that does two things a) transforms the way we deliver so that we reduce waste and efficiency and we get maximum value for our spend, and b) delivers a smaller Council spending less on its portfolio of services whilst protecting the most vulnerable and enabling the community to do more for itself;
- Take the necessary action to deliver that plan through budget setting, policy decision making, monitoring and other behaviours (3.4).

3.1.2 These elements are discussed in more detail below.

3.2 Strategy

3.2.1 There are various questions that will drive any plan of action. One key question is

around “what is our target date for breaking even?” Financially, the preferred answer is as soon as possible as no organisation wants to spend more than the funding it has coming in.

3.2.2 However, it is difficult to envisage a situation where the Council could or should realistically break even in the next budget - 23/24 or even 24/25. There are various reasons for this:

- i) The size of the gap is significant as it is 7% of the projected budget;
- ii) There are no savings left to deliver that do not have an impact on the current service offer – this makes any further savings more difficult to approve politically as individuals/community may be affected;
- iii) The Council has ‘business as usual’ to deliver and a significant additional workload – some of which is driven locally but a lot is driven by the national agenda (see Appendix A);
- iv) The Council does not have a set of savings proposals ready to present in areas where we know the current service offer will have to change to an ‘affordable’ one. For example, whilst it may be easy to say we would like to spend 50% less on any service, working up an offer, consulting upon it and then seeking political agreement takes significant time and investment. The spending tap cannot be turned off quickly; and
- v) Breaking-even would require significant cuts to services including reductions in support to the most vulnerable at a time of great uncertainty. The assumption/expectation that Members would commit to such reductions without future funding certainty is unrealistic. In addition, cutting quickly would reduce capacity to deliver the medium term change.

3.2.3 It is Cabinet’s view, which is supported by the s151 Officer, therefore that there are many good reasons to set a medium-term target for breaking even:

- i) We have a volatile gap with many uncontrollable variables, e.g. pay award, which make it difficult to be certain about the size of the gap;
- ii) We await our Government funding envelope - we expect a two year settlement in 23/23 based on direction from the then Minister Michael Gove and a multi-year settlement after a General Election which should give us greater certainty;
- iii) We are required to implement Government reforms - the reforms to be implemented over next 2-3 years will reshape key services. Failing to implement reforms would be a breach of our statutory requirements;
- iv) We need to undertake key procurements - Council retendering of key services (leisure, waste management, highways) will provide certainty over costs and allow the financial impact can be assessed;
- v) We have a range of activity ongoing that will positively impact our financial position but will take time to deliver including investment in a Transformation programme;

- vi) We have sufficient reserves (current non ringfenced reserves projected to be £15.8m at 31 March 2023) to get through the next two years and plan a more considered approach to closing the financial gap.

3.2.4 It is Cabinet's proposal, based on current information, that:

- i) A target date of 27/28 is set for a break even budget. This means that the Council's aim will be set a 27/28 budget with no reliance on reserves for ongoing expenditure.
- ii) The Council will use non ringfenced reserves to balance the budget prior to 27/28 (if required) but will limit use of such reserves to £2m per annum for a maximum of 4 years.
- iii) The Council commits to making the necessary savings that allows it to limit use of reserves to £2m.
- iv) The Council pursues a policy of maximum council tax rises (current maximum allowable) reinvesting part of any additional yield to support the cost of living crisis and those on low incomes.
- v) The Council continues with the range of activity outlined in Appendix A.
- vi) The Council produces a detailed savings plan building on the initial draft set out in Appendix B.
- vii) The Council continues to lobby for fair funding for Rutland and reform for the sector as a whole.
- viii) The Council continues to bid for available grants that contribute to our overall ambition.
- ix) The Council reinforces the financial principles agreed in June 2021 by Council (Appendix C)

3.2.5 The Strategy is exemplified in the table below.

	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
Projected gap	2.793m	4.443m	4.778m	5.835m	6.989m
Total savings required	0.800m	2.443m	2.778m	3.835m	6.989m
(New savings)	0.800m	1.643m	0.335m	1.057m	3.831m
Use of reserves (capped at £2m)	2.000m	2.000m	2.000m	2.000m	0.000m
Reserve balances	13.800m	11.800m	9.800m	7.800m	7.800m
For the purposes of our work, the Council will use the term non ringfenced reserves to include the General Fund balances plus earmarked reserves that whilst earmarked could in effect be made available to subsidise the budget.					

This classification is helpful as it excludes statutory ringfenced reserves and those such as the Local Plan reserve which is already committed.

3.2.6 The implications of these proposals are noted below:

- successful delivery of this Strategy will mean that the Council will be able to retain a healthy reserve balance by 27/28;
- the savings required, even with the use of reserves, are still significant and are likely to have a big impact on services;
- should no additional Government funding be forthcoming then it will be difficult for the Council to deliver services and reduce expenditure;
- the numbers and assumptions are subject to change.

3.3 Our change plan

3.3.1 In our context, a written statement and understanding of the financial position is in itself not sufficient. However difficult and challenging the Council must have a realistic plan to close the financial gap and must take the necessary action to deliver it.

3.3.2 Ideally the size of the programme would cover the whole gap by at least 10% accepting that some initiatives may deliver less, additional pressures will emerge or Members decide to reject some proposals. The programme as it stands is not sufficient. The key direction for our Transformation partner is to help us add to the plan.. The Council has now appointed Human Engine as its partner and this work has begun.

3.3.3 From our work to date and conversations thus far with our Transformation Partner, is clear that any plan will have to achieve two things:

- a) transform the way we deliver so that we reduce waste and maximise efficiency, and we get maximum value for our spend. Our Transformation work will allow us to develop an operating model that achieves this. But, the notion that a change of operating model will in itself will deliver the extent of savings required is unrealistic with the vast majority of savings expected from moving to an “affordable service” offer.
- b) delivers a smaller but functional Council that spends less on service offer (its portfolio of services) whilst protecting the most vulnerable and enabling the community to do more for itself.

3.3.4 The Council has drafted a savings programme – bringing together all work done over the last few years and existing activity. The programme comprises various elements:

- a) **a programme of work targeted at working up an ‘affordable offer’ across a range of key services.** Appendix B1 shows a list of key service areas and the level of savings required to get to an overall affordable level. Working with our Transformation Partner, we would like to define what an affordable service offer might look like taking into account statutory responsibilities and

alternative delivery models. The responses to the questions answered by Members will play into this. To be absolutely clear, this means that after Transformation and most likely after the May 2023 election, we would like to present to Members proposals that would achieve the targets (or similar) set out in Appendix B1.

- b) **a programme of other planned savings work** which Officers will progress outside the Transformation programme (Appendix B2). These are more short term in nature but can be progressed without Transformation assistance. Alongside this work, the Council will have to consider **short savings options**. This may involve holding vacant posts e.g. climate change officer approved but not yet recruited to, reducing service hours e.g., libraries and temporary spending reductions e.g. public rights of way or IT. These options will need to be evaluated with proposals coming forward in the 23/24 budget. The need for this type of saving is imperative as it will some take some time to progress more substantial projects but will impact on our ability to deliver.
- c) **a range of other work being done (Appendix A) that contributes to the savings programme including work which is focused on cost avoidance.** The Council recognises that cost avoidance is as important as savings. Work on SEND and the Asset Review will need to deliver to avoid the financial gap increasing.

3.3.5 From here on, the Council's Finance workgroup group (comprising Cabinet and CLT) will be closely monitoring the status of the programme and will provide periodic updates to all Members. We are also developing our governance arrangements for the Transformation work which will involve keeping Members abreast of what is happening.

3.4 Corporate behaviours

3.4.1 The endorsement of a Strategy and Plan must be accompanied by commensurate decision-making and other behaviours. **Failure to do so could compromise what the Council is trying to achieve.**

3.4.2 To this end, Council Members are asked to:

- Be fully committed to the principles agreed in Appendix B and adopt behaviours that are commensurate with them;
- Support adherence to agreed policy and commitments;
- Carefully consider any budget pressures and either a) reject them if that is an option or if this is not possible then b) require that something else is stopped or reduced to accommodate them. This may be challenging;
- Minimise additional non-financial workload on service teams unless absolutely necessary;
- Understand that delivery beneficial change eats into capacity and that there may be times where performance may be impacted;

- Be prepared to support short term savings action such as holding vacant posts (and the associated impacts) whilst the Council takes medium term savings projects forward; and
- Lead and Support Council's efforts to make savings with residents recognising that there may be some discomfort but that the Council does not have significant alternatives.

3.4.3 It is imperative that we create a working environment where can deliver the change necessary whilst delivering our usual work. Actions taken to support our overall ambition such as deferring expenditure or not recruiting to posts may have a short term impact that are difficult for Members and staff to absorb but we cannot achieve financial sustainability without managing some challenges.

3.5 What-If and contingencies

3.5.1 Everyone is aware that our financial position is fraught with risk and that the MTFP could change quickly leaving us with a much bigger (or smaller gap). There are some inevitable questions that arises – what will we do if variables change and make the position worse?

3.5.2 In one way, this question is easy to answer. Short term, we will identify whether there are things we can do quickly to buy time e.g. freeze posts, stop expenditure. Medium term, we will continue to take action to move as close as possible to an affordable service offer (as per the comment in 3.3.4b) and put proposals to Members to that effect.

3.5.3 The Council can do no more that identify all of the possible options available to it. An increasing gap does not mean more opportunities become available, it simply means we have to pursue options that may feel like the 'last resort' as explained above.

3.5.4 Conversely, if the Council was to receive more funding then the position does not change. A substantial increase in funding, say 20%, would still leave a sizeable gap. Substantial savings would still be required and progressing all options may give choices that a lower level of funding may not.

4 CONSULTATION

4.1 The Council is not required to consult on this matter.

5 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

5.1 The Council has a choice to reject, approve or modify the proposed strategy. Extending the period for balancing the budget with reserves is not considered advisable.

6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The implications associated with this Strategy are set out in Section 3.2.5 and 3.2.6.

7 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 The Council has a duty to balance the budget. Not being able to balance the budget

has more serious consequences for local authorities than the public may realise because for a local authority avoiding a deficit is a legal requirement under the Local Government Finance Act.

- 7.2 What is meant by 'balanced' requires s151 Officers to use their professional judgement and interpretation. The Director for Resources supports the CIPFA definition. For local government, at its very simplest, a balanced budget means that the council is content that the combination of income, the sensible use of reserves and having robust savings plans in place means that underlying income will cover on-going costs and future commitments in a sustainable and manageable way.
- 7.3 The Director for Resources believes that the proposed strategy meets this requirement for now.
- 7.4 The provisional inclusion of savings in the Savings Programme does not circumvent the need for savings to be approved (or consultation to take place) in due course through budget setting and other financial decision making.

8 DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 A Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIA) has not been completed because there are no risks/issues to the rights and freedoms of natural persons.

9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed because there are no service, policy or organisational changes being proposed.

10 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

11 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are no health and wellbeing implications arising from this report.

12 CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 12.1 The Council has a duty to produce a balanced budget and this Strategy explains how that will be achieved

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 There are no background papers.

14 APPENDICES

Appendix A - Ongoing activity

Appendix B1 – Savings: Illustrative “Affordable Service” Offer

Appendix B2 – Other Savings Programme

Appendix C - Principles

A Large Print Version of this Report is available upon request – Contact 01572 722577.

Appendix A – Ongoing activity

The Council has action in train some strategic work which could have an impact on its financial position. This is a significant agenda that has a capacity impact.

Area	Focus	Potential impact
Transformation	Development of a new organisational business model and delivery of savings	Minimum £1m built into savings programme but aim to go beyond that
Asset Review	Review of assets with a view to disposing of non required assets	Minimise future liabilities, possible ongoing revenue savings
SEND	Participation in Delivering Better Value programme aimed at facilitating the Council to live within its DSG budget	Possible reduction of use of SEN reserve and reduction in ongoing revenue costs (outside of DSG)
Continuous Lobbying	Involvement with the MP and lobby groups e.g Sparse regarding Levelling up and Fairer Funding for Rutland residents. Grant application	Maximum Government exposure. Maximum opportunity for receipt of additional grant income
Social Care reforms	Council is implementing the care cap for which it will receive additional funding. It is also undertaking a Fair Cost of Care review which is likely to see an increase in residential and home care rates which the Government will provide funding.	Funding may not cover all costs.
Local Transport Plan	This work necessitates a review of local transport arrangements which is local priority and a target area for savings. Scrutiny is also doing some work which may contribute.	Reduction in amount spent on transport but a transport network that better meets local needs.
Culture	Scrutiny undertaking a review of Museum operations to provide input to a wider review of the Cultural Offer	There is an ultimate target to run cultural services at nil cost.
Local Plan	Work continues to developing a new Local Plan.	Working group should be focusing on minimising spend and releasing funds back to the General Fund
Highways reprocurement	Highways services to be reprocured	Potential for costs to go up or down depending on the market and what the Council chooses to commission

Area	Focus	Potential impact
Waste reprocurement	Waste and environmental services to be reprocured in future and consideration to be given in investment in a Council owned waste transfer station. Delays in reprocurement may give time to reconsider options.	Potential for costs to go up or down depending on the market and what the Council chooses to commission
Elections 2023	Council preparing for next May all out elections	New Council may have a new agenda and different priorities

Appendix B1 – Illustrative ‘Affordable service offer’

In key areas of spend, the Council’s current offer is unaffordable irrespective of performance or the views of residents. The Council will have to move towards an ‘affordable service offer’. Exactly what this looks like have to be defined in due course but it will involve spending substantially less, reductions in service unless mitigations can be identified, reduction in management and overheads.

The areas listed below are key areas of spend and illustrative figures which shows the extent of spending reduction required.

Area	Budget 22/23 (original)- £m	Affordable budget
Adult Social Care	£13.940m	£12.600m
Childrens services	£5.874m	£5.374m
Back Office services	£4.746m	£4.346m
School transport	£2.185m	£1.900m
Public transport	£1.021m	£0.700m
Waste and recycling	£3.349m	£3.000m
Public protection/environment	£1.955m	£1.700m
Highways	£1.277m	£1.000m
Cultural Services	£0.704m	£0.550m
Council tax discounts and support for business	£0.800m	£0.650m
Total	£35.851m	£31.820m

Appendix B2 – Potential “Other savings”

Area	Project	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
Grants	The Council plans to set aside a %/amount of new grants to cover the associated service and management overhead subject to terms and conditions.	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000
Council Tax	A new law will provide billing authorities with the power to levy a premium of up to 100% on council tax bills for second homes, and for empty homes after one year (as opposed to two years which is the current requirement). The new powers reinforce the incentive for owners to bring empty properties back into use and support councils in addressing the impacts of empty and second homes.	£0	£0	£400,000	£400,000	£400,000
Printers	The Council leases 24 printers with the contract expiring. A key factor on the cost of the contract is the number of printers and as part of a new printer procurement we would expect to radically reduce the total number of printers in the contract. In the interim, Council to consider tighter rules over printing.	£0	£5,000	£5,000	£5,000	10,000
Community Learning Fees and Charges Review	Community Learning charges are checked regionally through The Local Education Authorities' Forum for the Education of Adults (LEAFA) (next review due 25-03-2023) and through HOLEX which represents a network of adult and community learning providers across the country.	£0	£10,000	£10,000	£10,000	£10,000
Fees and charges	Various opportunities to be explored for new charges for additional black bins, stolen bins, developers bins and inert waste	£0	£0	£0	£0	£0
Post 16 Transport	The Council could revise its current offer and policy (i.e. means test) and alternatives will be explored.	£0	£50,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000

Area	Project	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
Offer	Any revised offer would need a policy change timed to be implemented in the summer months before the start of a new academic year. It would also need to include continued support for year 2 of any current learners on the 2nd year of a course.					
Support Services	Pending wider review of support services offer, interim savings of £100,000 are expected from vacant posts in Business Support	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000
Short term vacancy savings	Pending further work on affordable service offers, some planned recruitment has been deferred and vacancies held. This includes Climate Change Officer	£50,000	£0	£0	£0	£0
Schools Admissions service	The Council has a contract with Capita to provide the IT system for the admissions service. On renewal there may be alternative options for this service.	£0	£0	£50,000	£0	£0
Investment Income	Interest rate projections give us an opportunity to review our strategy and achieve more from investments	£300,000	£300,000	£0	£0	£0

Appendix C – Financial principles

We will enable and empower our communities to do more for themselves

We will work with others who are better placed to deliver objectives

We will seed fund initiatives that will deliver long term savings

We will borrow to capital invest (and reduce revenue costs)

We will focus on those in greatest need

We will not deliver services that have low value

We will identify services that we will operate commercially (minimum break-even)

We will focus ringfenced/grant funding on prevention/work that reduces ongoing revenue costs

We will charge for services where we can

We will provide information, guidance and advice to help people self-serve

