Financial Strategy 2020/21

Overview

The Financial Strategy supports the delivery of all other council strategies, such as the Corporate Plan and the Capital & Investment Strategy. It links the council's more detailed service plans, asset management plans and capital plans with the longer term to show that the council's plans are financially achievable.

This budget is underpinned by a financial strategy to ensure the financial sustainability of the Council, deliver essential services to residents and achieve our vision for **thriving communities for everyone in Oxfordshire**, within a limited amount of resource. This will continue to be achieved by focusing on continuous improvement and increasing income generation.

In order to continue to deliver for our residents and thrive in the longer term, financial sustainability and resilience is essential. This requires successful delivery of two critical elements which reflect the financial planning principles for the budget and medium-term plan:

- Managing the impact of rising need, caused by population growth and increased complexity, for adult and children's social care through demand management approaches, more effective pathways and commercial improvements.
- Delivering the programme of service redesign and organisational development which will drive improved outcomes.

Over the last six years, we have generated savings to taxpayers of £260m. The Council has a good track record in delivering savings and delivering value to our residents, with a constant focus on our strategic outcomes and financial prudence.

Funding Context

When the 2019/20 to 2022/23 MTFP was set in February 2019 there was a high degree of uncertainty about funding beyond 2020/21. As set out in the Financial Strategy for 2019/20[1], a spending review was expected in 2019 combined with a new funding formula, following the Fair Funding review, and the introduction of 75% Business Rate Retention.

This spending review has now been delayed until 2021/22. The technical consultation on the settlement for 2020/21, released in October 2019, proposed a roll forward of funding from 2019/20. The Changes to funding assumptions for 2020/21 arising from the detail provided in the technical consultation were set out in Service and Resource Planning update to Cabinet[2].

The 50% Business Rates retention scheme was introduced in 2013/14 with a planned reset of the baseline due in 2020/21. Growth across Oxfordshire has been consistent

[1] Link to Section 4.6 Financial Strategy to Council February 2019
[2] Link to Cabinet report – September

since 2013/14 and by 2020/21 Oxfordshire County Council will be receiving approximately £3.1m[3] annually. It is now expected that the reset will not take place for 2020/21 but will be delayed until 2021/22 to align with the Fair Funding Review.

The technical consultation confirmed the continuation of the improved Better Care Fund and Adult Social Care Grant. It also included a further 2% adult social care precept for 2020/21. In recognition of national concerns about social care funding levels and the impact of these on NHS pressures a further un-ringfenced grant for social care was included in the consultation, totalling £1 billion nationally.

The general election, held on 12 December 2019, created a delay in the announcement of the provisional settlement which was originally expected on 5 December 2019. This was announced on 20 December 2019. There were no significant differences from the technical consultation. However, this may mean that the government will also miss the target date of 31 January 2020 to publish the final settlement.

Medium Term

We recognise the challenges we face and there will be a continued focus on service redesign, commercialism, effective contract management and working with partners to secure value for money in delivering our Corporate Plan priorities.

The impact of the Fair Funding Review is unknown. This makes it very difficult to predict the level of funding available for 2021/22 and beyond. A budget is expected to be brought forward by the new Government in February 2020. This budget may provide an indication of funding beyond 2020/21 but the prospect of a new budget creates further uncertainty in the short term.

The proposed MTFP has a budgeted shortfall of £25.1m in 2021/22. Within this shortfall, it is assumed that the business rate baseline is reset (£4.5m), social care support grants end (£12.0m), the Settlement Funding Assessment is reduced (£7.3m), the Fire Fighters pension grant ends (£1.4m), New Homes Bonus scheme winds down (£1.9m).

The current MTFP includes a £10.2m additional budgeted contribution to contingency in 2021/22. This contribution provides some cover should the Fair Funding Review adversely impact on the Council's funding beyond the assumptions already made.

Although the impact of the Fair Funding Review is unclear, beyond 2021/22 the current working assumption is that the level of government support will remain stable as the review should deliver a clear and sustainable funding model.

Tax base growth is expected to be 4,977 Band D equivalent properties or 1.98% for 2020/21 and an increase in taxbase of 5,000 approximately 2.00% beyond. After taking into account an allowance for inflation and the current levels of demographic

[3] Excluding element of s31 grant for Business Rates compensation

growth, the tax base increase required to give a breakeven position is around 1.75%. Given the ambition to plan for and support the delivery of 100,000 homes by 2031 as part of the Housing & Growth Deal secured in February 2018, this increase is expected to be surpassed in the medium term. This is equivalent to around 15,000 new houses over the medium term to 2024.

As set out in the Earmarked Reserves and General Balances Policy Statement (Appendix 6) it is expected that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs Reserve will be in deficit at the end of 2019/20 and the medium term. This is a common position for upper tier local authorities and there is uncertainty about how this projected deficit should be accounted for. The current CIPFA guidance[4] does not allow for useable reserves to be presented in a deficit provision which means that the deficit would need to be met from general balances. In contrast, the Department for Education issued a consultation in Autumn 2019 which proposed to amend the conditions of grant and regulations applying to the DSG to clarify that the DSG is a ring-fenced specific grant separate from the general funding of local authorities. Under this proposal, any deficit an authority may have on its DSG account would be carried forward and should not be covered by the authority's general reserves. The position taken by external auditors is in line with CIPFA guidance, that an authority cannot have a negative reserve and not planning to meet the shortfall from general balances or earmarked reserves could result in an adverse assessment of the authority's financial position. In order to help mitigate this risk, a demographic risk reserve has been created which will reach £17m over the MTFP. This reserve, combined with a planned higher level of general balances (as set out in Annex 2 – Appendix 6), means that it is possible to offset the expected deficit over the medium term.

Long Term

In planning for the long term, it is important to understand both the context of Oxfordshire as well as the main drivers of change. In this context, we need to ensure that the most fundamental issues facing the organisation which have been identified are responded to. Longer term planning needs to account for alternative possible future economic and political environments.

The Capital & Investment Strategy sets out the long-term context in which capital expenditure and investment decisions are made and gives due consideration to both risk and reward and impact on the achievement of priority outcomes. This strategy effectively becomes the long-term plan.

The capital programme is a ten-year programme which offers strategic choice and options around developing our community assets and respond to the fundamental issues of rising demand in adults and children's services and allow for a for planned approach to replacement of assets.

The Council has already taken advantage of this longer-term approach. In July 2018, Cabinet approved investment Street Lighting LED replacement programme of £41m replacing traditional lanterns with LED. And as an invest to save scheme, the costs

[4] CIPFA LAAP Bulletin 99 'Local Authority Reserves and Balances'

will be repaid from the savings in the energy costs that will be generated from the programme. In September 2018, Cabinet approved investment of £120m in the Council's assets to be funded by borrowing. Reduced funding and deterioration in asset condition in highways and property led to reassessment of the benefits of investment. Investment at this stage will allow repairs to many of the roads already in poor condition and reduce the number of potholes that arise and improve the longevity of future repairs in these areas, thus reducing the increasing pressure on revenue resources.

Measuring financial performance

Measuring the Council's financial health through a set of targeted measures is a key way of measuring our financial health and resilience in supporting the Council's plans and priorities. The key indicators upon which we will measure ourselves are set out in Annex 1 below.

The CIPFA Financial Resilience Index was published on 16 December. The index is a comparative analytical tool based on publicly available information. It is intended to support good financial management by providing an assessment of relative financial health, giving reassurance to councils that are relatively stable or prompting challenge where councils are outliers.

The index offers insight into the comparative level of earmarked and general balances held by local authorities. The level of reserves as a percentage of net revenue budget and the rate at which reserves are being depleted are both identified as indicators of financial stress. The Earmarked Reserves and General Balances Policy Statement (Appendix 6) considers the potential stress factors identified by index.

Financial Management

Financial indicators alone do not give a complete picture of financial health and sustainability; strengths of financial management and governance are also an essential foundation of any successful organisation.

CIPFA have recognised this and in November 2019 launched the first Code of Practice for Financial Management (the FM Code). The FM code is not statutory but compliance with the code is obligatory. It brings together elements that are already part of existing statutory guidance:

- Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government
- Prudential Code for Capital Finance
- Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom

The FM Code clarifies how Chief Finance Officers should satisfy their statutory responsibility for good financial administration as required in section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972. Importantly it emphasises the collective financial responsibility of the leadership team, including the relevant elected members, of which the Chief Finance Officer is one member.

The FM Code has six key themes:

- Organisational **leadership** – demonstrating a clear strategic direction based on a vision in which financial management is embedded into organisational culture.
- **Accountability** – based on medium-term financial planning that drives the annual budget process supported by effective risk management, quality supporting data and whole life costs.
- Financial management is undertaken with **transparency** at its core using consistent, meaningful and understandable data, reported frequently with evidence of periodic officer action and elected member decision making.
- Adherence to professional **standards** is promoted by the leadership team and is evidenced.
- Sources of **assurance** are recognised as an effective tool mainstreamed into financial management, including political scrutiny and the results of external audit, internal audit and inspection.
- The long-term **sustainability** of local services is at the heart of all financial management processes and is evidenced by prudent use of public resources.

The FM Code includes 19 standards which the Council must measure itself against to demonstrate compliance with the six key themes. An early assessment indicates that the Council is well placed for full compliance by April 2021. Where possible, compliance with standards will be achieved by 2020/21.

Indicator	2020/21 Target	Within MTFP period
Delivering to budget & Achieving Savings:		
Directorates deliver services and achieve planned performance within agreed budget	=<1% budget variation (with service outcomes achieved and planned activity delivered)	=<1% budget variation (with service outcomes achieved and planned activity delivered)
Total outturn variation	0%	0%
Achievement of planned savings	95% of all savings in year	n/a
Progress towards achieving savings in 2021/22	90% of all future savings are on track to be achieved	n/a
Systems and processes operate effectively and are well controlled to reduce and detect error and fraud:		
Positive assurance from Internal Audit and External Audit		
Late payments	>95%	>95%
Use of Grants / Earmarked Reserves		
Total outturn variation for DSG grant funded services	Schools and early years to break even. Use of high needs DSG to match Action Plan	Schools and early years to break even. Use of high needs DSG to match Action Plan
Use of non – DSG revenue grant funding	>=95% of grant funding is spent in year.	
Ability to manage unplanned/unforeseen events		
General balance outturn at the risk assessed level	=>the risk assessed level	=>the risk assessed level
Forecast outturn of cost of insurance claims received in year	=< the actuarial assessment	=< the actuarial assessment
Capital Programme Delivery		
Average cost variation from Concept Design (Gate 1) baseline to Practical Completion (Gate 3)	<=2%	<=1%
Value of committed capital expenditure funded by s106 not yet received	<=5% of total programme	<=2.5% of total programme
Debt Management		
Invoice Collection Rate	Corporate debtors 97.50%	98%
	ASC contribution debtors 92%	94%

Indicator	2020/21 Target		Within MTFP period
Debtor Days	Corporate debtors	35 days	30 days
	ASC contribution debtors	100 days	65 days
Debt requiring impairment	Corporate debtors	<£0.300m	<£0.250m
	ASC contribution debtors	<£2m	<£1m
Write offs as a percentage of invoiced income	Corporate debtors	<0.10%	<0.05%
	ASC contribution debtors	<1%	<0.60%
Unsecure debt over 1 year	Corporate debtors	<£0.5m	<£0.250
	ASC contribution debtors	<£1.6m	<£1m
Treasury Management			
Average interest rate achieved in-house compared to treasury Management Budgeted Rate	>=0.85%		2021/22 >=0.75% 2022/23 >=0.75% 2023/24 >=0.75%
Average Annualised Return achieved compared to Benchmark Rate* (Pooled Fund)	>=3.75%		>=3.75%

(*) composite of 7 Day LIBID, 7 Day LIBID + 50BPS, IPD Other Balanced Property Funds Index, BofA Merrill Lynch 1-10 Year Non-Gilt Index & BofA Merrill Lynch Euro High Yield ex Financials Index (GBP Hedged)