

CABINET

Date of Meeting	Tuesday 19 December 2023
Report Subject	Medium Term Financial Strategy and Budget 2024/25
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value & Procurement
Report Author	Corporate Finance Manager and Chief Executive
Type of Report	Strategic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the Council's revenue budget position for the 2024/25 financial year in advance of the receipt of the Welsh Local Government Provisional Settlement on 20 December.

In July, Cabinet and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee were advised of an initial additional budget requirement for the 2024/25 financial year of £32.222m

This was revised upwards to £32.386m in September and the cost pressures and cost reduction options to date were referred to relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees throughout October. At this time there was an estimated funding gap of £14.042m.

Feedback from all Overview and Scrutiny sessions was reported back to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 November.

Two Member budget workshops were also held on 5 and 10 October which included analysis on the future national financial outlook. This is expected to be exceptionally challenging based on forecasts provided by Wales Fiscal Analysis.

The Chancellor announced his Autumn Statement on 22 November and the key components in the main related to reductions in taxation affecting individuals and

businesses. As such there is unlikely to be any additional consequential funding for Local Government to improve the provisional settlement.

This report sets out the changes to the 2024/25 additional budget requirement since the last reported position in September. The report also updates on the progress made to identify solutions to bridge the remaining budget gap.

Following receipt of the provisional settlement a briefing will be provided to members to advise of the impact on the overall 2024/25 budget position.

Whilst progress has been made it should be noted that the Council still has a major challenge to identify the remaining solutions that will enable it to agree a legal and balanced budget by March next year which it continues to address with urgency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	To receive and note the revised additional budget requirement for the 2024/25 financial year.
2	To note the progress made and the ongoing work on budget solutions that continue to be urgently addressed to enable the Council to set a legal and balanced budget by March 2024.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND BUDGET 2024/25
1.01	This report provides an update on the Council's revenue budget position for the 2024/25 financial year in advance of the receipt of the Welsh Local Government Provisional Settlement which is scheduled for 20 December.
1.02	In July, Cabinet and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee were advised of an initial additional budget requirement for the 2024/25 financial year of £32.222m
1.03	This was revised upwards to £32.386m in September and the cost pressures and cost reduction options to date were referred to relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees throughout October. At this time there was an estimated funding gap of £14.042m. Feedback from all Overview and Scrutiny sessions was reported back to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 November

1.04	Two Member budget workshops were also held on 5 and 10 October which included analysis on the future national financial outlook. This is expected to be exceptionally challenging based on forecasts provided by Wales Fiscal Analysis.																											
1.05	<p>National Context</p> <p>It is clear from a recent Society of Welsh Treasurers survey coordinated by the Welsh Local Government Association that all Councils in Wales are experiencing the same financial challenges. For example, there is an estimated overspend of £220m across the 22 Welsh Councils in the current financial year and total estimated cost pressures of £720m for 2024/25.</p> <p>On the funding side, the planned increase in Aggregate External Finance (AEF) for 2024-25 is £169m, or 3.1%, which will cover just over a quarter of the pressure in the financial year with the aggregate annual budget gap in each of the next three years projected to be £411m, £408m and £412m in the run up to 2026-27. Clearly based on this assessment there is going to be an extended and potentially deteriorating financial position for local authorities across Wales in future years.</p>																											
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THE REVISED ADDITIONAL BUDGET REQUIREMENT																												
1.07	<p>Since September there have been some changes to the additional budget requirement, and these are set out in the table below:</p> <p><u>Table 1: Changes to the Additional Budget Requirement 2024/25</u></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="320 1429 1406 1906"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th style="text-align: right;">£m</th> <th></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>September Cabinet Report</td> <td style="text-align: right;">32.386</td> <td>Note</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3">Increases to Existing Pressures:</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Additional Coroners Costs</td> <td style="text-align: right;">0.027</td> <td>(1)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Adjustment for Members Allowances</td> <td style="text-align: right;">0.028</td> <td>(2)</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3">New Pressures:</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Free School Meals (Term Time)</td> <td style="text-align: right;">0.615</td> <td>(3)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>NDR Transitional Relief</td> <td style="text-align: right;">0.131</td> <td>(4)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Revised Additional Budget Requirement</td> <td style="text-align: right;">33.187</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Notes in support of table 1:</p> <p>1. Further increases on toxicology and coroners' costs.</p>		£m		September Cabinet Report	32.386	Note	Increases to Existing Pressures:			Additional Coroners Costs	0.027	(1)	Adjustment for Members Allowances	0.028	(2)	New Pressures:			Free School Meals (Term Time)	0.615	(3)	NDR Transitional Relief	0.131	(4)	Revised Additional Budget Requirement	33.187	
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2. An increase to the original cost pressure to bring in line with the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW).
3. Due to an increase in the cost of free school meals as well as increased demand in the current financial year.
4. Impact of transitional relief ending on council buildings

FUNDING SOLUTIONS

1.08 Since September a significant amount of work has been undertaken to identify solutions to meet the remaining budget shortfall. An update on the latest position is detailed in the table below:

Table 2: Funding Solutions identified to date

	£m	
Increase in Welsh Government AEF	(7.285)	(1)
Council Tax (indicative planning fig only of 5%)	(5.431)	(2)
Review of Cost Pressures	(0.718)	(3)
Review of 2022/23 Outturn	(0.150)	(4)
Review of RAG's	(1.538)	(5)
Review of Fees and Charges	(0.310)	(6)
Actuarial Review	(4.000)	(7)
Reduction in Energy Costs	(0.600)	(8)
Corporate Loans and Investment Account	(0.500)	(9)
Remove Business Recycling Pressure	(0.438)	(10)
Croes Atti - reprofiling	(0.330)	(11)
Reprofile of Borrowing Costs	(0.312)	(12)
Reduction in IT Costs	(0.129)	(13)
Reduction in GwE contribution	(0.099)	(14)
Fund one-offs from Reserves	(0.089)	(15)
Review of External Partners	(0.087)	(16)
Reduction in Feasibility Study Budget	(0.050)	(17)
Fast Track Income	(0.018)	(18)
IT – RSA tags	(0.013)	(19)
Total Funding Solutions identified to date	22.097	
Remaining Additional Budget Requirement	11.090	

Notes in support of table 2:

1. The Distribution Sub Group is considering changes to data sets as a result of PLASC and the latest statutory returns. These changes could reduce the amount of funding for Flintshire by £0.515m.

2. The Council Tax base and collection rate has now been set. The revised figures (for planning purposes) is an indicative 5% increase are shown.
3. Reduction of Pressures as included in the September Cabinet report.
4. Further efficiencies identified from the review of Outturn as included in the September Cabinet report.
5. Further review of efficiencies has identified some are not achievable and some that will have only a partial impact in 2024/25. These changes have reduced the figure to £1.538m, from the previously advised figure of £1.766m.
6. Increased income from the 2023 review of fees and charges as reported in the September Cabinet report.
7. Impact of year 2 saving from the Actuarial Review comprising a reduction in employer contributions and a surplus return.
8. There has been a recent reduction in energy prices which will reduce costs by an estimated £0.600m.
9. There continues to be a positive return on investment income due to continuation of higher interest rates and therefore a further £0.500m can be included (over and above the £0.500m previously reported)
10. Following further guidance from Welsh Government, this pressure can now be removed. It is now anticipated that we will be able to levy a charge for this service to achieve full cost recovery.
11. Due to the revised time frame for the redevelopment of the Croes Atti residential home, the pressure for 2024/25 can be moved to 2025/26.
12. A review of timescales for a number of Capital Schemes together with the removal of the pressure included for Levelling Up match funding.
13. Following further information regarding the E5 security licences this pressure can be reduced by £0.129m
14. A potential reduction in the contribution paid to GwE which is subject to ongoing discussion.
15. Removal of the one-off pressures for the Mayrise system and for additional ADM support which can be met by reserves.
16. Work is ongoing with our external partners to limit any inflationary increase for 2024/25 to 3.1% which is the anticipated increase in the provisional Local Government Settlement.
17. A review of the feasibility study budget which is held to evaluate potential capital schemes has reduced it by £0.050m.

	<p>18. Anticipated income forecast to be received from the Fasttrack project.</p> <p>19. An efficiency of £0.013m from the cessation of the use of RSA tags across the Council.</p>
1.09	<p><u>ONGOING RISKS</u></p> <p>There are still a number of remaining risks that could affect the budget requirement and these are outlined below.</p>
1.10	<p>Pay Awards</p> <p><u>Impact of National Pay Awards</u></p> <p>Agreement has now been reached for the 2023/24 pay award for NJC (Green Book) employees. As this was in line with previous assumptions this risk is now closed with no additional budgetary impact.</p> <p>Assumptions for teachers pay are in line with current awards communicated by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language.</p> <p><u>Pay Modelling</u></p> <p>No figures are currently included for any impact of the pay modelling review which has commenced to address the difficulties currently being experienced in recruitment and retention. The review is due to be completed later this financial year.</p>
1.11	<p>Homelessness</p> <p>The homelessness service is continuing to see increasing numbers presenting for support and the projected overspend in the current financial year has increased to £2.6m.</p> <p>An additional amount of £2m is currently included in the budget requirement so the longer-term outlook will need to be kept under close review and risk assessed as part of final budget setting.</p>
1.12	<p>Social Care</p> <p>Risks remain within the service such as on-going recruitment and retention challenges, new statutory responsibilities, and the impact of inflationary increases as well as match funding for projects such as the Regional Integration Fund (RIF).</p> <p>On-going support from existing grants is an area on which the service depends, so the continuation of these is critical. Any reduction would clearly present a negative risk to service delivery.</p>

	<p>Potential changes by Welsh Government (WG) to harmonise foster care fees across Wales may lead to a new pressure, however, at this stage indications are that this will be met by WG.</p>
1.13	<p>Streetscene and Transportation</p> <p>The review of the Waste Strategy is likely to impact on future costs of the service in relation to the ongoing risk of potential infraction fines for failing to achieve Welsh Governments statutory recycling targets in 2022-2023 (estimated to be in the region of £470k).</p> <p>The risk that the Sustainable Waste Management Grant (SWMG) may cease or reduced is still a concern. The SWMG is a revenue grant of £0.742m provided by Welsh Government to support the provision of re-use and recycling services, as well as preventing waste. Confirmation of the grant and existing funding levels has been confirmed in the current financial year but not for subsequent years.</p> <p>The funding arrangements for the Bus Emergency Scheme (BES) and the Bus Transition Fund (BTF) is also still unknown beyond March 2024 so will need to be kept under close review. These have previously been funded by Welsh Government.</p>
1.14	<p>Education and Youth</p> <p>Confirmation has been received that employer teacher pension contributions will increase by 5% from April 2024. A high-level estimate is that this will lead to a pressure of £3m for schools. At this stage it is anticipated that this will be met by Welsh Government although this is still yet to be confirmed.</p> <p>Increases in demand and complexity for Additional Learning Needs, Specialist Provision and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) is currently being funded by additional Welsh Government grant. There are a number of risks relating to the continuation of grant funding into 2024/25 which will need to be kept under review.</p> <p>Further work is being undertaken on demography and the impact of any changes on revenue costs due to the school modernisation programme.</p>
1.15	<p>Out of County Placements</p> <p>The position on Out of County placements remains an ongoing risk and the projected overspend in the current financial year is now more than £1m. An amount of £0.500m is included in the current forecast which will need to continue to be kept under close review and risk assessed as part of final budget setting.</p>
	<p>Other Solutions still under consideration</p>
1.16	<p>Council Tax</p>

	<p>The scale of the additional budget requirement due to increases in service demand and persistent higher inflation, together with the significant remaining gap means that it is inevitable that a further increase may need to be considered as part of final budget setting. This is in line with the position in many councils across Wales and is reflective of fiscal analysis presented at a recent presentation by the WLGA.</p> <p>Each further increase of 1% in Council Tax (net of the impact on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme) would provide an additional £0.882m towards the gap.</p>
1.17	<p>Schools Budget</p> <p>The delegated schools budget has been relatively protected in recent years.</p> <p>However, as the Council's largest budget it is inevitable that consideration will need to be given to a reduction in the 2024/25 financial year.</p> <p>School budgets benefitted from a net uplift of £5.761m in 2023/24 after taking into account increases for pay, energy, free school meals, demography offset by a 3% reduction and agreed savings on National Insurance and Pension Contributions.</p> <p>The current additional budget requirement for 2024/25 includes total cost pressures of £8.369m for school budgets for pay awards and other identified pressures.</p> <p>Each further 1% reduction on the schools budget would equate to £1.091m off the cumulative cost pressures currently included.</p>
1.18	<p>Social Care – Commissioning Costs</p> <p>Social Care budgets have also been relatively protected in recent years and commissioning costs increased above average across North Wales for the current financial year.</p> <p>An increase at similar levels is not sustainable due to the Council only expecting to receive an increase of 3.1% in its annual Welsh Government settlement.</p> <p>Therefore, the Council will need to provide a much more prudent uplift in 2024/25 which will be subject to negotiation with care providers over the coming weeks.</p>
1.19	<p>Additional Portfolio Cost Reductions</p> <p>Following the Autumn Statement it is clear that the the remaining options available to the Council will not be sufficient to meet the current funding shortfall.</p> <p>Therefore, all portfolios are revisiting their cost base with a view to achieving further budget reductions of up to 5%. This will be a significant challenge but</p>

	<p>is essential to provide Council with the options it requires for consideration at final budget setting.</p>
1.20	<p>Strategic Programme of Transformation</p> <p>Work on planning and delivering a strategic programme of service transformation to ensure that the Council is developing cost reductions over the next five years in order to protect its ongoing future financial position and ensure it is further prepared for inevitable future budget challenges has commenced. However, these workstreams are to provide financial support from 2025/26 onwards so don't assist with the immediate budget challenge for 2024/25.</p> <p>These workstreams would concentrate on the following areas and be broadly in line with a set of principles defined for previous change projects such as Alternative Delivery Models (ADM's) for example which the Council has already successfully developed and undertaken. In this context overarching and revised set of values and principles would be coproduced to reflect these workstreams.</p> <p>Further areas may fall in scope as transformation work develops: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rationalisation and streamlining of services and reductions in service levels; • Rationalisation of the councils land and property estate and the subsequent demolition of its headquarter building in Mold; • The consolidation of services into three core office buildings based on the existing operating model; • A review of the education estate; • Review of opening times for some service areas; • Consideration and future implementation of the outcomes flowing from the waste strategy consultation; • Review of the current leisure estate and provision; • The exploration of regionalisation of services, where appropriate and in the interests of the council; • Increase, where it is in the Councils interest, of joint working with the third sector and building on existing positive relationships and arrangements; • Detailed consideration relating to services which may have to be stopped for financial expediency; • Review and streamlining of internal process linked to greater digitisation/automation <p>The above list is not exhaustive and future engagement with members will be important to ensure that there is an opportunity to contribute and positively influence the programme of activity and ensure that it is progressed on a timely basis.</p>
1.21	<p>Summary and Conclusions</p> <p>The United Kingdom Autumn Statement on 22 November can be described as unhelpful and extremely disappointing from a Local Government viewpoint.</p>

As there is no anticipated additionality for Local Government, the Council clearly still has a major budget challenge for financial year 2024/25.

The expected uplift of potentially less than 3.1% is significantly below the level required to meet current service demand and inflationary impacts – most of which are outside of the Council’s control.

Representations will continue to be made for a better settlement alongside all Welsh Councils through the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), although it does appear clear that Welsh Government also have a challenging budget situation which they are continuing to grapple with.

At this stage the amount remaining to be found to reach a legal and balanced budget is in the region of £11m and though there are potential ways this could be met; these are not easy and will have a significant impact on council services. The Council will continue to urgently consider further cost reductions of significant scale to bridge this gap as a matter of priority.

Following receipt of the provisional settlement on 20 December a briefing will be provided to members to advise of the impact on the overall 2024/25 budget position. Further reports and proposals will then be brought to members in January and February 2024 in line with the timeline below.

1.22

Table 3: Budget Timeline

Date	Event
19 December 2023	Report to Cabinet and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Budget Update
20 December 2023	WG Draft Budget/Provisional Settlement
16 January 2024	Report to Cabinet and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Proposed budget requirement and solutions
20 February 2024	Report to Cabinet and Council - Final Budget Proposals
March 2024	WG Final Budget/Settlement

2.00

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

2.01

Revenue: the revenue implications for the 2024/25 budget are set out in the report.

Capital: the borrowing needs for the capital programme are built into the revenue estimates for 2024/25.

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT	
3.01	Ways of Working (Sustainable Development) Principles Impact	
	Long-term	<p>Negative – the absence of longer-term funding settlements from Welsh Government means that sustainable support for service delivery is challenging for the longer term. Sustainable funding from Welsh Government that provides additional funding for Indexation, Service demands and new legislation will provide a positive and sustainable position for the Council in the longer term.</p> <p>Negative – failure to agree a balanced and legal budget and may lead to potential Welsh Government intervention.</p> <p>Negative – failure to balance the budget may lead to the section 151 Officer issuing a section 114 notice effectively declaring the Council bankrupt.</p>
	Prevention	As above
	Integration	Neutral Impact
	Collaboration	Services continue to explore opportunities for collaboration with other services and external partners to support positive impacts.
	Involvement	Communication with Members, residents and other stakeholders.
	Well-Being Goals Impact	
	Prosperous Wales	Longer term funding settlements from Welsh Government that provide additional funding for indexation, service demands and new legislation will aid sustainability and support a strong economy that encourage business investment in the region. The opposite will be true if settlements are inadequate.

	Resilient Wales	Continuation of services to support communities and social cohesion will have a positive impact. The opposite will be true if settlements are inadequate.
	Healthier Wales	An appropriate level of funding will ensure that communities are supported and will have a positive impact. The opposite will be true if settlements are inadequate.
	More equal Wales	A positive impact with greater parity of funding from Welsh Government for all Welsh Local Authorities. The opposite will be true if settlements are inadequate.
	Cohesive Wales	Appropriate level of funding will support services working alongside partners. The opposite will be true if settlements are inadequate.
	Vibrant Wales	As Healthier and Cohesive Wales above
	Globally responsible Wales	Neutral impact.

4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	Consultation has taken place with Portfolio Management Teams and the Chief Officer Team, the Finance Team, Cabinet Members, Group Leaders and Scrutiny Committees. Workforce conferences have been held for employees.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	None to this report

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	Cabinet Report 18 July 2023 Cabinet Report 19 September 2023 Scrutiny Reports and Presentations October 2023 School Budget Forums

7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Gary Ferguson Corporate Finance Manager Telephone: 01352 702271 E-mail: gary.ferguson@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS): a written strategy which gives a forecast of the financial resources which will be available to a Council for a given period, and sets out plans for how best to deploy those resources to meet its priorities, duties and obligations.</p> <p>Revenue: a term used to describe the day to day costs of running Council services and income deriving from those services. It also includes charges for the repayment of debt, including interest, and may include direct financing of capital expenditure.</p> <p>Capital: Expenditure on the acquisition of non-current assets or expenditure which extends the useful life of an existing asset.</p> <p>Budget: a statement expressing the Council's policies and service levels in financial terms for a particular financial year. In its broadest sense it includes both the revenue budget and capital programme and any authorised amendments to them.</p> <p>Revenue Support Grant: the annual amount of money the Council receives from Welsh Government to fund what it does alongside the Council Tax and other income the Council raises locally. Councils can decide how to use this grant across services although their freedom to allocate according to local choice can be limited by guidelines set by Government.</p> <p>Specific Grants: An award of funding from a grant provider (e.g. Welsh Government) which must be used for a pre-defined purpose.</p> <p>Welsh Local Government Association: the representative body for unitary councils, fire and rescue authorities and national parks authorities in Wales.</p> <p>Financial Year: the period of 12 months commencing on 1 April.</p> <p>Local Government Funding Formula: The system through which the annual funding needs of each council is assessed at a national level and under which each council's Aggregate External Finance (AEF) is set. The revenue support grant is distributed according to that formula.</p> <p>Aggregate External Finance (AEF): The support for local revenue spending from the Welsh Government and is made up of formula grant including the revenue support grant and the distributable part of non-domestic rates.</p>

Provisional Local Government Settlement: The Provisional Settlement is the draft budget for local government published by the Welsh Government for consultation. The Final Local Government Settlement is set following the consultation.

Funding Floor: a guaranteed level of funding for councils who come under the all-Wales average change in the annual Settlement. A floor has been a feature of the Settlement for many years.

External Partners: Organisations outside of the Council that we work alongside to deliver services.