



**Harlow Council**

***Medium Term Financial  
Strategy***

**2021/22 to 2023/24**

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## MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

### 1. KEY MESSAGES

- 1.1. This document sets out the Council's approach to its medium term financial planning. It builds on and rolls forward the current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) agreed for the planning period 2020/21 to 2022/23 in January 2020.
- 1.2. The Council's current MTFS is underpinned by the following priorities:
  - **Resilience and Recovery**
  - **More and better housing.**
  - **Regeneration and a thriving economy**
  - **Wellbeing and Social Inclusion**
  - **A clean and green environment**
  - **Successful children and young people**
- 1.3. The General Fund finances must continue to be managed so that for the planning period commencing 1 April 2021:
  - a) General Fund revenue reserves are maintained at or above the approved recommended minimum level of £2.5m, with an aim to operate above this level to provide flexibility in managing the Council's budget throughout the year and over the MTFS planning period.
  - b) General Fund uncommitted revenue reserves are not used to support the budget except for funding one-off and exceptional items of expenditure.
  - c) Any increase in Council Tax shall be no greater than the maximum permissible under the Localism Act 2011, which is announced annually by Government. This will ensure that increases are maintained at a reasonable and affordable level whilst avoiding the need to undertake a costly local referendum.
  - d) Revenue funds are reallocated from low to high priority areas as necessary.
  - e) The Council's Fees and Charges Policy forms part of its wider income strategy. An annual review of fees and charges will be carried out.
  - f) In setting the following year's General Fund budget there must not be any unidentified savings.
- 1.4. As required, the Council must continually seek to secure savings or introduce new ways of working to ensure it can deliver sustainable budget proposals in line with the MTFS and provide finance for investment in priority areas

wherever possible against a backdrop of ongoing Government funding reductions.

- 1.5. The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), the General Fund element of the MTFS, produced at Appendix E, is to be reviewed at least annually by the Cabinet.
- 1.6. The Council's Housing Revenue Account will be managed in line with the principles contained within the HRA Business Plan including:
  - a) The uncommitted HRA Working Balance must be maintained at or above a minimum level of £2.5 million.
  - b) In setting the following year's HRA budget there must not be any unidentified savings.
  - c) Rent levels will be set in line with Government guidelines and/or legislation, as appropriate.
  - d) There must be sufficient investment in the housing stock to maintain the Decent Homes Standard.
  - e) 50% of the proceeds from Right-to-Buy sales will be used to fund the Non Housing Capital Programme.
- 1.7. The Capital Programme must align with the Council's priorities and:
  - a) The Council will use prudential borrowing to fund its Housing and Non Housing Capital Programme if necessary but utilising internal borrowing wherever possible.
  - b) In view of the limited resources available for capital investment the Council will seek to categorise surplus assets in to the "Opportunity Asset" category as defined within the Non Housing Asset Management Strategy. At the appropriate time these assets will then be considered for disposal to help sustain ongoing non housing capital investment and reduce revenue costs incurred by the Council wherever possible or for wider community benefit.
  - c) The total cost of the Capital Programme will not exceed a realistic and affordable assessment of the capital finance available to fund it.
  - d) The projects in the Capital Programme will cover at least a three-year planning horizon and will be reviewed at least annually to ensure that schemes within the programme continue to support the priorities of the Council.
  - e) The Council will comply with the Treasury Management Code of Practice and Prudential Code. Borrowing undertaken to finance capital expenditure will be prudent and affordable in terms of the impact on the revenue budget.

## **APPENDIX B.**

- 1.8. The Council will seek to develop existing partnerships and forge new ones to achieve further benefits for the local area, particularly in its priority areas.
- 1.9. The Council will continue to evaluate and manage the financial and operational risks it faces.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1. This document sets out the Council's approach to its strategic medium term financial planning and provides an operational framework for both Councillors and Officers to ensure economic, efficient and effective financial management by the Council on behalf of its residents, taxpayers and other stakeholders. It is a document that also identifies the processes that are used to link corporate priorities to resources and forecast the level of resources needed and available over a number of years.
- 2.2. The document links to the Council's other corporate and financial strategies, and in particular supports the following:
  - a) The Council's Corporate Plan.
  - b) The Council's priority areas.
  - c) The prudential regime for capital finance in local government.
  - d) The Council's Asset Management Strategies.
  - e) The Council's Service Plans.
- 2.3. The Council's strategic financial objective is to ensure access to sufficient financial resources, applied efficiently, effectively and economically to enable it to meet its corporate priorities and service objectives. The means for achieving this aim are set out in the Key Messages section above.
- 2.4. In developing a balanced General Fund, HRA and Capital budget for 2021/22:
  - a) The proposed net budget for General Fund services is £11.154 million.
  - b) Total gross expenditure on the Housing Revenue Account will be £54.997 million, which will be funded from rents, service charges and interest.
  - c) The Council's total planned capital expenditure will be £44.139 million, split between £26.319 million allocated for housing and £17.820 million allocated for other services including the Enterprise Zone developments.

## **3. General Fund**

- 3.1. General Fund revenue expenditure is incurred on the day-to-day services the Council provides other than those provided through the HRA. General fund expenditure incurred by the Council falls into two main categories:
  1. Statutory services which the Council is legally obliged to provide or commission, such as refuse collection.
  2. Discretionary services i.e. those, which the Council is empowered

but not legally obliged to provide or commission.

General Fund revenue expenditure is currently financed from:

- a) Council Tax.
  - b) Fees and charges.
  - c) Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA) which combines Revenue Support Grant and retained Business Rate income.
  - d) Other specific and non-specific grants.
- 3.2. The Council receives Government financial support towards its General Fund budget through the local government finance settlement which sets out the Government's assessment of the Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA) for Harlow along with all other local authorities in England.
- 3.3. The General Fund MTFs for 2021/22 incorporates the government funding allocations in line with the announcements contained within the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement made on 17 December 2020. These assumptions are aligned with the one year funding deal announced in the chancellors Autumn Statement and Spending Review 2020. Given the ongoing funding review taking place regarding Business Rates Retention there are currently no indications of funding levels relating to 2022/23 and beyond but the planning assumption included in future forecasts is for a one per cent annual reduction beyond 2021/22.
- 3.4. Through the changes introduced as a result of the move to Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA) and Business Rate Retention, the Council carries the risk of the volatility in local business rates and will be reliant on the growth in the local economy for future increases in funding.
- 3.5. The Council operates some of its discretionary services through the use of the Discretionary Services Fund. A key funding stream for the fund is the money received by the Council as part of the New Home Bonus scheme (NHB). In the draft Local Government Finance Settlement the Government has indicated that the annual payment in 2020/21 will be £1,079,239. The full amount received will be contributed to the reserve in 2021/22.

**4. Housing Revenue Account (HRA)**

4.1. Revenue expenditure within the HRA is incurred on:

1. The day-to-day services provided in maintaining and managing the Council's housing stock.
2. Contributions towards capital expenditure that is not funded from usable capital receipts, or other capital funding sources.

The expenditure is financed from:

- a) Rents charged for Council dwellings and garages.
- b) Charges made to leaseholders.
- c) Investment income.

4.2. The Housing Revenue Account Business Plan sets out the Council's priorities for its housing stock and reflects the changes which took place with effect from 1 April 2012 as the existing housing subsidy system was replaced by Self-Financing. The priorities for the Council's housing in the town are driven by national, regional, sub-regional and local housing priorities. They are also informed by the views and perspectives of stakeholders, especially tenants and leaseholders with whom the Council undertakes ongoing engagement and consultation. In addition, local housing priorities are driven by the Local Plan, Community Plan and the Corporate Plan.

4.3. Details of the medium term financial planning and financial projections and outcomes are included in the HRA Business Plan. The HRA Business Plan also contains an action plan that sets out responsibilities and timescales for the delivery of the key housing priorities. Despite the introduction of Self-Financing in 2012/13, and the significant borrowing undertaken by the Council in March 2012, there have been significant changes to the HRA financial arrangements announced by the government which continue to have long-term impacts on the HRA including the enforced reduction of rents over the period 2016 - 2020.

4.4. Although the Council must account for its General Fund services and Housing-related services separately by law, there are major areas where Housing activity and finances interact with General Fund activity and finances:

- a) The HRA is a user of support services from the rest of the Council for which appropriate charges are levied.
- b) The allocation of investment and borrowing interest from the General fund to the HRA based on the net indebtedness position of the HRA.
- c) Harlow Trading Services (Property & Environment Ltd) undertakes a wide range of work that impacts on these activities.

- d) The HRA services manage a proportion of the non HRA garage stock including the capital repairs programme associated with them.

## **5. Fees and Charges.**

- 5.1. The Council obtains income from fees and charges levied for providing certain services. The Government determines some of these charges but there are a number of areas where the Council has discretion as to whether to levy a charge and, if it decides to do so, the level of that charge.
- 5.2. In carrying out the annual review of fees and charges, existing charges are:
  - a) compared against the legally permissible maximum as well as local and national market rates,
  - b) compared against the cost of providing the service,
  - c) compared against the objective for this charge (i.e. charge to make a surplus/ breakeven/ subsidise).
- 5.3. The annual review of fees and charges will seek to identify areas where charges could be made where currently it is not the Council's policy to do so. It will also consider the timing of the introduction of any changes.
- 5.4. For 2021/22 fees and charges proposals have once again taken into account the ongoing economic conditions and their impact upon income streams, existing income targets and the wider impact of increases in businesses and residents.

## **6. Capital Expenditure and Treasury Management**

- 6.1. Capital expenditure is essential to the successful delivery of the Council's priorities and is financed from capital receipts, capital grants, revenue contributions and long-term borrowing under the Prudential Code, in accordance with the Council's Capital Strategy, treasury management and annual investment strategies. These are reviewed annually.
- 6.2. The Council is, however, currently restrained by the limited availability of capital and revenue resources to finance capital spending. Under Government capital receipt pooling regulations, 75% of sale of Council house capital receipts under Right-to-Buy, and 50% of other housing asset disposal capital receipts, have to be paid over to the Government "pool".
- 6.3. The projects in the Capital Programme (as summarised at Appendix C) help to meet the Council's priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan within

available and affordable resources.

- 6.4. The Local Government Act 2003 brought about a new statutory borrowing regime for councils known as The Prudential Code. This arrangement gives the Council much greater flexibility and freedom to borrow without Government consent, as had previously been the case, as long as it can afford to repay the amount borrowed.
- 6.5. The aim of the Code is to support councils when making capital investment decisions, to ensure that capital investment plans are affordable, prudent and sustainable and that treasury management decisions are taken in accordance with good professional practice and in line with the Council's Corporate Plan.
- 6.6. The Code was updated from 2017 and there is now a requirement to present a Capital Strategy for approval by Council in advance of the 2021/22 financial year. The Strategy has been prepared and is presented elsewhere on the Cabinet agenda alongside associated reports on investment and Treasury Management as part of the Capital and Treasury Report.
- 6.7. The Code requires councils to determine a set of prudential indicators that are intended to determine and measure the financial strength of their investment and treasury plans. It prescribes some of these prudential indicators that must be used and the factors that must be taken into account in order to show that the Council has fulfilled its objectives. They are not used to compare performance between Councils but to measure an individual Council's performance over a period of time. The Code also lays down clear procedures for setting and revising the prudential indicators with the Council's Head of Finance responsible for ensuring that the Council has taken into account all matters specified in the Code, and for monitoring compliance with the established limits approved by the full Council before the start of each financial year. Prudential indicators relating to borrowing and investments are now contained within the revised Treasury Management Code of Practice, rather than the Prudential Code of Practice.
- 6.8. The Council has customarily considered and approved an annual Treasury Management Strategy Statement as required by the CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management (revised 2011). The Prudential Code referred to above introduced new requirements for the management and reporting of borrowing and investments.
- 6.9. The Council made provision to enter into borrowing to fund the Housing Capital Programme from 2008/09 onwards, and for the Non- Housing Capital Programme in 2008/09 and 2009/10, on a short term basis only, pending securing capital receipts from planned asset sales. The borrowing

to fund the Non-Housing Capital Programme was anticipated to have been repaid in full once the capital receipts are realised. However, as a result of the reduced asset base available for disposal and the current market conditions the MTFP contains provision to finance borrowing of up to £3m per annum for non-housing capital investment in each year of the planning period. This limit was increased by £1m per annum from 2020/21 to accommodate the need for additional investment in the non-housing asset portfolio and to enable the outcomes of the non-housing stock condition survey to be accommodated within the capital strategy of the council. Limited short-term borrowing for cash flow purposes has also been authorised under the Code. It had been envisaged that Self Financing for the HRA would enable the investment levels in the housing stock both for major repairs programmes and for the potential building of new affordable homes within Harlow. The changes announced by the Government on the rent reduction proposals particularly have changed this significantly and this is covered in more detail within the HRA Business Plan.

- 6.10. An Annual Investment Strategy is drawn up as required under the Code. At present the Council has a considerable sum invested - £20.5m as at 31 December 2020.
- 6.11. The investments are handled by the Council's own staff. The investments are managed so as to secure the best possible return with the minimum of associated risk as set out in the principles of the Treasury Management Strategy Statement.

## **7. Annual Revenue Budgets and Medium Term Financial Plans.**

- 7.1. The Council's HRA and General Fund budgets represent the Council's expectation of the cost of providing its ongoing services in a year. As such they are integral parts of the MTFP, reflecting the financial implications of the Council's aims and objectives for the year.
- 7.2. The Council has worked extremely hard to ensure that it sets realistic and achievable budgets. Over the years 2007/08 to 2020/21 it has achieved General Fund savings of over £22 million to ensure that this objective is achieved and has sensibly and prudently reviewed and replenished reserves as appropriate whenever possible. Given the significant level of savings already made by the Council and the on-going funding reductions measures being implemented by Government, it is proving extremely difficult for the Council to sustain ongoing budget reductions whilst protecting service provision unless there is an improvement in the Councils funding through the anticipated introduction of 75% Business Rates Retention Scheme now expected in 2022/23.

- 7.3. Like all other Councils, in planning its finances, the Council recognises that there will be changes that will affect it financially, but over which it has little, or no, control. Some of those facing the Council in the medium term include:
- a) The medium to long term impacts of the Covid crisis.
  - b) National and world wide economic environment including the end of the transition period from the European Union.
  - c) New, or changes to existing, legislation and changes to the operation of Government policy.
  - d) Changes in Government grant and the anticipated formula review.
  - e) Pay and price variations.
  - f) Movements in the costs of employee pensions.
  - g) Variations in asset disposal values and volumes.
  - h) Changes in interest rates.
- 7.4. Each year the Council is required by law to approve balanced budgets, which means that planned levels of expenditure on services, after taking into account government grant income and contributions from reserves, must be covered by the budgeted amount of Council Tax income (for the General Fund) and rent income (for the HRA). In doing so the Council has to decide upon:-
- Competing demands for additional expenditure.
  - The level of investment required in priority areas.
  - The level of, and the areas in which, savings can be made.
  - The level of rents and council tax to be levied.
- 7.5. The Council operates a budget monitoring system, which involves monthly reports to the Corporate Management Team and quarterly reporting to the Cabinet. The Council has tightened its fiscal policy in the light of the considerable challenges it faces over the medium-term. Accordingly, a key strategic financial objective within the MTFS is that annual Council Tax increases shall be no greater than the Government prescribed limit before a referendum would be triggered. The revised MTFP at Appendix E shows the net reduction in General Fund expenditure over each of the subsequent two financial years required to maintain a balanced budget. For illustrative purposes Appendix E is based on an assumed Council Tax increase of 1.99% across each of the financial years of the MTFS period as previously agreed.
- 7.6. Work will be required during the early part of 2021 to engage with the Governments latest and ongoing consultations in relation to the future

proposals for local government funding arrangements. Having developed the current three year MTFP proposal as set out in Appendix E to this report it will now be extremely important to focus resources on the engagement with the Governments formal and any informal consultation in order to try to influence changes which could have a significant impact upon Harlow.

- 7.7. The Plan is a key component of individual service plans and a major objective for the Council's Senior Management Board. In drawing up their service plans each Head of Service must set out the extent to which their proposals assist the Council in achieving its financial targets and priorities over the next three years. The service plans include proposals for capital and revenue growth bids, savings, reallocation of resources and additional income.
- 7.8. The total planned cost of the Capital Programme must never exceed a realistic and affordable assessment of the capital finance available to fund it. Where this is not achievable the programme will either be reduced or the costs of external borrowing will be considered. Where necessary, borrowing to fund the programme will be undertaken within the parameters agreed in the Council's Prudential Borrowing Strategy and as a result of declining receipts from the disposal of surplus assets the MTFP reflects the need to finance borrowing costs.
- 7.9. Financial projections for the HRA covering the period 2021/22 to 2023/24 are set out in the HRA Medium Term Financial Plan, attached at Appendix D.
- 7.10. A summary of the revised General Fund Medium Term Financial Plan for 2021/22 to 2023/24 is attached at Appendix E. The details set out in the appendix show that given the assumptions regarding Council Tax levels, Government funding the General Fund budget is well placed as the Council moves towards a fundamental change to local government funding over the next two years.

## **8. Reserves**

- 8.1. The Council's statutory finance officer, the Deputy to the Chief Executive and Head of Finance and Property Services, is required to consider the adequacy of reserves when the budget and Council Tax are set. This assessment distinguishes between committed or earmarked reserves and general or uncommitted reserves.
- 8.2. Levels of the Council's earmarked reserves are reviewed on an on-going basis as part of the annual budget process and through the preparation of the Council's Statement of Accounts.

- 8.3. The minimum level of general or uncommitted reserves for the General Fund and HRA, as currently assessed by the Head of Finance, are to be £2.5million each. The projected level of actual uncommitted reserves balances held over the 3-year period of the MTFs are set out in the General Fund Medium Term Financial Plan at Appendix E, and the HRA financial plan at Appendix D, respectively.
- 8.4. In order to benefit from an option to pay the councils assessed pensions deficit in one single payment covering the full three year actuarial review period it was agreed as part of the 2020/21 budget process that £1.6m of the General Fund balance would be used to unlock the pension deficit savings. Replenishment of the balance is being made over the 2021/22 and 2022/23 financial years as previously approved.

## **9. Key Partnerships**

- 9.1. The Council is committed to working in partnership with local community groups, the voluntary sector, the private sector and other service providers so that, as far as possible, the co-ordination of services with community needs is realised and also with a view to maximising economy and efficiency and securing additional funds for the benefit of the local community.
- 9.2. As part of this strategy the Council seeks to develop existing partnerships and forge new ones to achieve further benefits for the local area, particularly in its priority areas.
- 9.3. With regard to working with the voluntary sector, the Council is anxious to achieve value for money from the grants that it provides to these organisations. Partners applying for financial support are required to demonstrate efficiency savings comparable to the targets that the Council has to meet, and work towards achieving the Council's priorities.
- 9.4. The Council has safeguarded the provision of some of its discretionary services through the funding allocated to its Discretionary Services Reserve. In light of the current market position with regard to services such as the Playhouse and Pets Corner and the importance of the services delivered by Community Safety the MTFP has been adjusted in previous years to enable these services to be reintroduced back in to the Council's core base budget. Those services which remain dependent upon the reserve for ongoing funding will be supported until at least the 2024/25 financial year by which time it is anticipated that arrangements for the remaining services to be reintroduced to the base budget will also have been identified.

**10. Risks**

- 10.1. The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 state that the Council should ensure that its accounting control systems include measures to ensure that risk is appropriately managed.
- 10.2. The Audit Commission's Code of Audit Practice makes it clear that it is the responsibility of the audited body to identify and address its operational and financial risks, and to develop and implement proper arrangements to manage them, including adequate and effective systems of internal control. The financial risks to the Council should be assessed in the context of the Council's overall approach to risk management. Risk management continues to be a key area of focus for the Council and is now regularly reported to the Audit & Standards Committee.
- 10.3. In order to manage and mitigate risk in the Council it includes a statement on the system of internal control with its Annual Statement of Accounts. This review and reporting mechanism incorporates a broader statement of corporate governance than had previously been required as set out in the CIPFA/SOLACE Corporate Governance Framework. Under this framework the Council must review both its internal controls as well as its wider governance arrangements, and publish an Annual Governance Statement as part of the Accounts.
- 10.4. The Council is very aware of the need for effective risk management and considers that the assessment and minimisation of all types of risk to be vital. It has an adopted Risk Management Strategy in place, the aim of which is 'for the systematic identification and control of risks, hazards and losses, to reduce the impact of risk upon Council decision making. The MTFP supports this aim through the continued provision of financial resources to enable this work to be progressed particularly in relation to insurable risks.
- 10.5. The Deputy to the Chief Executive and Head of Finance and Property Services as the Councils appointed Section 151 officer has identified the risks set out in Appendix D of the 2021/22 General Fund Revenue Budget report, which appears elsewhere on the Cabinets agenda, as the most significant for the MTFP. The mitigation of these risks is an integral part of the Council's performance management framework.