

Enabling Services 18/01/23

Officers provided an overview of the service which included Finance & Performance, Chief Executives, Human Resources & Governance, Transformation Customer Services & IT.

A General Budget Summary was provided –

Draft Budget Summary 2023/24			
Summary by Directorate	2023/24 £000	2024/25 £000	2025/26 £000
Adults, Wellbeing and Communities	132,530	141,696	158,607
Children and Education	69,530	70,157	71,897
Place & Economy	68,500	72,833	77,316
Enabling Services	36,102	35,536	36,226
Corporate	29,833	37,268	42,196
Base Budget Gross Budget (Excluding DSG Funding)	336,495	357,490	386,242
Total Base Gross Budget	336,495	357,490	386,242
Total Funding	(336,495)	(339,200)	(332,274)
Budget Gap	0	18,290	53,968

Finance & Corporate

Finance Service Objectives

Delivery of Exchequer Services

Provision of accurate and timely payment and Income collection services; payroll services and insurance arrangements

Procurement

Ensure effective procurement processes in place to meet statutory requirements, while achieving Value for Money (VFM) for the Authority. The development of a procurement strategy to ensure compliance with the carbon neutral agenda and empowering Local Suppliers and implementing Social Values for the residents of North Northamptonshire e.g. local jobs, apprenticeships, training etc.

Internal Audit

Internal Audit delivers a plan of work for the year, which seeks to inform the annual assurance opinion over the Council's governance, risk and control framework. We

focus on the Council's key risks and seek to provide assurance over the controls in place to manage these. In the year to date, we have issued 13 audit reports and certified spend on 8 grants – which is demonstrating good progress against the agreed plan.

In times where services are facing increasing risks and are reviewing processes to deliver efficiencies, the role of internal audit becomes even more vital in ensuring the Council is not exposed to intolerable or unmanaged levels of risk and that value for money is sought in every process. Internal Audit provides assurance over management of risk but also seeks to support services in maximising value for money.

Revenue and Benefits

- Robust and efficient income collection for the Council through Council Tax and NNDR
- Timely and accurate payment of grants to businesses/individuals as required.
- Timely and accurate payment of benefits e.g. Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing Payments
- Provide money, debt and budgeting advice to our customers via our Social Inclusion Team.

MFTP – Finance

Members raised concern about the Audit Fee increase of £500k as they were under the impression that fees would reduce not increase. There was also concern that Auditors were stepping back from some unitary councils citing this was due to the complexity of the audits.

It was clarified that fees were set at a national level and this was being looked at by the sector. It was noted that in the early years of NNC that the work involved with audit was very resource intensive. It was also clarified that there had been changes in provision under the PSSA agreement and confirmed that the cost had been queried.

One member did comment that historically fees had been low and that this was probably a more realistic figure for Audit fees.

MFTP - Corporate

The Treasury performance had been better than expected due to the increase in interest rates.

Reference was made to bad debt provision and a member asked if a breakdown of this could be provided and asked for clarification that this did not relate to any Covid payments.

It was confirmed that separate pre-payment fraud checks had been undertaken to ensure that payments were made correctly, and this did not relate to Covid payments. It was confirmed that an analysis could be provided.

Chief Executive's Office

The presentation detailed the services that fell under the Chief Executive's budget which included:

- Chief Executives Office
- Chief Executive
- Executive Support
- Assistant Chief Executive
- Communications
- Consultation, Engagement and Corporate Equalities
- Web Team (content)
- Performance & Business Intelligence

Reference was made to the medium-term financial plan and closing budgets and reference to the increase in subscriptions and the cost of the website migrations.

Members questioned if access to the former websites would be available as many found this particularly useful, particularly in relation to planning issues.

It was clarified that the functionality would remain. If councillors wished to contact the Assistant Chief Executive about what they particularly would like to be able to access that would be helpful.

Human Resources & Governance

The Executive Director reported on the service area of Human Resources & Governance, including:

- HR Advisory, Workforce Planning & Development, Learning and Development and Health and Safety and
- Legal & Governance, including Legal Services, Democratic & Election Services, FOI & Data Governance and Registration and Coroners Services.

The Executive Director referred to the pay and grading review that was a very complex and time intensive project, which was ongoing. In relation to the Coroner's Office, there was a need to provide a cold storage and that had been costed in.

Within the service area there were ongoing restructures which would result in changes to pay structures. Legal Services, which was now in-house, were predicting an increase in legal fees for the coming year.

There had been some reductions to costings in the Civic office and this had resulted in savings.

Members asked what the total income had been for legal previously and what it was proposed to be.

It was confirmed that previous income had been £50k and it was expected that there would be an increase to £200k.

Members also asked about the Coroners Storage and asked why this could not be covered within the Crematoria.

The Executive Director clarified that this was a statutory service and had to be delivered and provided as part of death management.

Transformation, Customer Service & IT

The meeting considered the Customer Services area which also fell under this remit.

- **Business Transformation**
- Service Transformation
- **Customer Services**
- Customer Services
- Blue Badges
- Complaints
- **IT**
- Applications
- Security
- Technical Services
- Service Delivery
- IT Projects
- Services delivered by WNC – Programme Team, Business Systems, Digital Services, IT Leadership, IT Managed Service, IT Service Delivery, IT Operations

There was a new telephony system being introduced and it was referenced the savings this would achieve. The system would be in place by 1 April 2023.

Members asked if the time it took to get through to the required service could be improved rather than the three minutes it currently took pressing options which, particularly for the elderly, was very frustrating and time consuming.

It was confirmed that this was being looked at with a view to improving the customer journey and experience. There would be an improved case management system, with a reduction in costs and increased productivity.

The costings for ICT and the increases in licensing costs were also highlighted. There was an ongoing programme to rationalise the cost of the mobile phone contracts and Office 365 migration costs. There was work ongoing in relation to the infrastructure and remote working and there would be additional costs for the ongoing replacement of IT hardware, such as laptops. The IT Strategy was being reviewed along with the infrastructure, including the design of new networks and service areas with a focus on security. Generally, the service would become more agile and suited to the current and future methods of working.

Conclusion

Councillor Smithers, as Leader, addressed the meeting and commended the work of the finance team and senior officers in setting a balanced budget, which was not an easy task in the current climate particularly with world events having an impact.

A member asked what the three main concerns were in relation to the budget and the future finances of the council.

The Leader considered that his biggest concern was uncertainty around global conflicts, the cost of Petrol and Diesel and general utility costs which would affect everyone including the Council.

Members considered that it would be useful to have notification of a four-year settlement.

Members thanked officers and members for the improvements made to the reporting and scrutiny process implemented this year.

General Point

With regard to Fees & Charges concern was expressed that these had not been made available for scrutiny as part of the budget scrutiny process. Fees & Charges were a vital income stream and Members felt that these should be available for perusal, whilst recognising that any increase/reduction to these was a delegated Executive responsibility.

In addition, there was concern that figures presented across the budget presentations gave no indication of the 2022/23 base figures, or an indication of the % increase over 2022/23, thus making it difficult for Members to assess the robustness of the proposals or the indication of trends.

END