



**NEWCASTLE
UNDER LYME**
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 – 2028/29



Contents

Corporate Plan	Page 3
Finance Strategy	Page 3
Economic Context	Page 5
Borough Profile	Page 6
Refresh of Financial Assumptions	Page 9
Response to Covid-19	Page 12
Approach	Page 12
Reserves	Page 16
Capital Strategy	Page 16
Treasury Strategy	Page 17
Budget Timetable	Page 18
Appendix A – MTFS Summary	Page 19

Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 to 2028/29

1. Corporate Plan

- 1.1 The Council Plan for 2022-2026 sets out the Council's priorities for the next four years and serves to focus the work of everyone at the Council.
- 1.2 The Council Plan is shaped around our four key priorities:
 - One Council Delivering for Local People
 - A Successful and Sustainable Growing Borough
 - Healthy, Active and Safe Communities
 - Town Centres for All
- 1.3 The Council Plan sets out how we will work to make Newcastle-under-Lyme a better place for everyone who lives here or comes here to work, to study or for leisure. Our aims can only be achieved by taking advantage of every opportunity available and developing further opportunities through innovation and collaborative working.
- 1.4 The Council is committed to strong and sustainable economic growth for the borough, focusing on opportunities around Keele University, Newcastle Town Centre and Kidsgrove.
- 1.5 The Council has worked hard to secure more than £50m from government programmes aimed at boosting the economic fortunes of areas such as ours. This plan includes a transformational portfolio of major projects but also reflects our ambition to attract yet more funding and take this work even further.
- 1.6 The Council Plan builds on a number of years of achievement, despite the huge disruption caused by the Covid-19 lockdown. It is very likely that the initial period of this plan's delivery and the delivery of the Medium Term Financial Strategy will be strongly influenced by the impact of rising energy costs and inflation and their impact on the cost of living.

2. Financial Strategy

- 2.1. A sound financial strategy is key to the delivery of the Corporate Plan and financial resilience.
- 2.2. There are five key strands to the strategy:
 - A financially self-sustaining Council
 - Value for Money
 - Everyone's responsibility culture
 - Underpinned by robust financial position
 - Ensuring a fair financial settlement for Newcastle-under-Lyme

Financially Sustainable Council

- 2.3. The change in the balance of funding to local authorities has shifted over the last ten years. The reduced Revenue Support Grant awarded by Government has been replaced by income from retained Business Rates and Council Tax. This has led to a need for local authorities to increase self-financing with a need to promote and grow the local economy and Council Tax bases to provide prosperity and reduce need alongside delivering efficiencies and generating more income.

- 2.4 Newcastle-under-Lyme has a growing population, but in recent decades it has seen low levels of house building which have not kept up with housing demand. The resulting affordability gap for residents influenced by the cost of living puts pressure on our homelessness and temporary accommodations services but also has the risk of dampening council tax income.
- 2.5 Newcastle-under-Lyme's industrial and retail sectors have remained healthy in recent times and the business rates base has grown significantly (rateable value of £101.246m for 2023/24) since the borough joined the Staffordshire business rates pool in 2013/14 (rateable value of £83.842m).
- 2.6 Alongside the growth in the tax base the rates need to keep base with the Council's inflationary and demand pressures, whilst also reflecting the financial pressures facing our residents. Accordingly the MTFS assumes annual inflationary increases in the tax base.

Value for Money

- 2.7 It is essential that the Council makes best use of its finite resources. In simple terms this means evidence based decisions, testing the market, strong business cases, delivering on the corporate objectives.

Culture

- 2.8 The Council's finances need to be everyone's responsibility. It is not the sole responsibility of the Council's Section 151 Officer. Ownership is required across the entire Council. This has increasingly been the case through ten years of austerity and now more than ever with the financial impacts of the Covid-19 and Cost of Living crises and the continued uncertainty around Local Government funding.

Robust Financial Position

- 2.9 There needs to be clear, transparent and integrated service and budget planning to ensure the Council's finite resources are directed to where they are most needed. It is essential that the finances are understood by members, senior officers, managers and the community. The finances need to be sustainable. A single year budget is not enough, the finances need to be planned over the medium term and good practice is for this term to be five years.
- 2.10 The budgets need to be robust with realistic savings plans to avoid in year volatility. The five year plan needs to recognise all future pressures and income flows. Local Government is a dynamic environment with many demand led services and the growth in demand for services needs to be accurately modelled. The same applies on the income side with a clear understanding required of changes to the Council Tax and Business Rates tax bases and the level of Government support.
- 2.11 There is inevitably a gap between the two or the need to invest in priority areas which will need to be met by changing the way in which the Council operates. This will be through delivery of efficiencies, reducing services or generating more income. All of these measures need to be realistic with appropriate processes in place to ensure their delivery.
- 2.12 Finally, the Council needs to hold an appropriate level of reserves to ensure that it can continue to deliver its objectives in times of financial uncertainty. These reserves will cover the smoothing of spend areas that are known to move from year to year, for specific and general risks and a general provision for unknown risks.

- 2.13 Much work has been done over the past five years to put the Council's finances on a robust sustainable footing. Undeliverable savings and historical overspends have been built back into the base budget, there is a more focussed view of the medium term and there is a far more realistic assessment of future demographic pressures and investment needs. In addition, a 'Ten Year Capital Strategy' has ensured that decision making considers this wider, long term context. This Strategy will set out how this approach can be taken further forward.
- 2.14 The Council has been operating in a period of great uncertainty with the impact of the worldwide Covid-19 Pandemic and the Cost of Living crisis. Detailed scenario planning will therefore be required to identify the different actions that may be necessary to ensure the Council's continued financial sustainability depending on the financial impact and any potential ongoing consequences.

A Fair Financial Settlement for Newcastle-under-Lyme

- 2.15 The Government introduced its Business Rates Retention model for funding local government in 2013/14. It however relied on the historical needs data and damping arrangements from the previous model. At the time government committed to address both of these issues and also set out plans to reset the business rates growth on a regular basis.
- 2.16 Government has been developing Fair Funding proposals to remedy the position, this is now overdue and local authorities have been disadvantaged by both the lack of an update of the underlying data and the damping arrangements. Implementation has been held up due to the Covid-19 pandemic and it is currently unclear when the Government will press ahead with plans for a business rates reset which would see the accumulated growth built up since 2013/14 being redistributed across the system.
- 2.17 As a member of the Staffordshire Business Rates Pool the Council currently saves £0.880m per annum in levy payments which would be payable to the Treasury if the Council ceased to be part of a pooling arrangement. In addition to this, growth within the Borough has enabled a further £2.230m of business rates income to be retained by the Council (this has been recognised in previous savings) over and above the funding baseline set by Central Government. In the event that a business rates reset goes ahead strong lobbying will be required to ensure that appropriate transitional arrangements are in place to cushion the impact locally.
- 2.18 The MTFs assumes that a business rates reset will occur during the medium term with a strong likelihood of this taking place during the 3 year period 2025/26 to 2027/28. Initial forecasts assume that this reset will eliminate around half of the benefit that the Council current incurs from the scheme. The MTFs phases the loss over a 3 year period and assumes utilisation of the Business Rates reserve to assist with the transition if the reset occurs in 2025/26 or 2026/27. The Business Rates reserve was established to be utilised in this way.
- 2.19 Finally the Council has been successful in ensuring that significant resources required to regenerate the borough have been secured via Town Deals and Future High Street Fund (a number of projects are well underway) and continue to work closely with the County Council and LEP to secure inward investment in the borough to drive growth and employment opportunities for local people.

3. Economic Context

- 3.1 UK inflation and wage growth remain elevated but, following a no-change Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decision in November, Bank Rate appears to have peaked in this rate cycle. Near term rate cuts are unlikely, although downside risks will increase as the UK economy likely slides into recession and inflation falls more quickly.

The much-repeated message from the MPC is that monetary policy will remain tight as inflation is expected to moderate to target only slowly. In the Bank's forecast, wage and services inflation, in particular, will keep (Consumer Price Index) CPI above the 2% target until 2026.

The UK economy has so far been relatively resilient, but recent data indicates a further deceleration in business and household activity growth as higher interest rates start to bite. Global demand will remain soft, offering little assistance in offsetting weakening domestic demand. A recession remains a likely outcome.

Employment demand is easing, although the tight labour market has resulted in higher nominal wage growth. Anecdotal evidence suggests slowing recruitment and pay growth, and we expect unemployment to rise further. As unemployment rises and rates remain high, consumer sentiment will deteriorate. Household spending will therefore be weak. Higher interest rates will also weigh on business investment and spending.

Inflation will fall over the next 12 months. The path to the target will not be smooth, with higher energy prices and base effects interrupting the downtrend at times. The MPC's attention will remain on underlying inflation measures and wage data. We believe policy rates will remain at the peak for another 10 months, or until the MPC is comfortable the risk of further 'second-round' effects has diminished.

Maintaining monetary policy in restrictive territory for so long, when the economy is already struggling, will require significant policy loosening in the future to boost activity.

Global bond yields will remain volatile, particularly with the focus on US economic data and its monetary and fiscal policy. Like the Bank of England, the Federal Reserve and other central banks see persistently high policy rates through 2023 and 2024 as key to dampening domestic inflationary pressure. Bond markets will need to absorb significant new supply, particularly from the US government.

There is a heightened risk of geo-political events causing substantial volatility in yields.

The MPC held Bank Rate at 5.25% in November. We believe this is the peak for Bank Rate.

The MPC will cut rates in the medium term to stimulate the UK economy but will be reluctant to do so until it is sure there will be no lingering second-round effects. We see rate cuts from Q3 2024 to a low of around 3% by early mid 2026.

The immediate risks around Bank Rate remain on the upside, but these diminish over the next few quarters and shift to the downside before balancing out, due to the weakening UK economy and dampening effects on inflation.

Arlingclose expects long-term gilt yields to eventually fall from current levels (amid continued volatility) reflecting the lower medium-term path for Bank Rate. However, yields will remain relatively higher than in the past, due to quantitative tightening and significant bond supply.

4. Borough Profile

- 4.1 Newcastle-under-Lyme has a population of 123,000 (2021 mid year estimate), a decrease of 850 (rounded up), or 0.7%, since the 2011 census. This is a very different situation than for the national, regional or county who all saw increases over this period – England’s population increased by 6.5 per cent, the West Midlands region by 6.2 per cent and Staffordshire’s by 3.3 per cent.
- 4.2 In the ten years from 2011-2021, the percentage of the borough’s population aged 70+ increased from 12.9 per cent to 16.2 per cent, keeping this rate higher than across the West Midlands region (13.9 per cent) and England (13.6 per cent), though slightly lower than Staffordshire’s rate of 16.6 per cent.
- 4.3 The general population has decreased by 0.7 per cent over the past decade, but with the number of residents over 65s increasing by 18.3%, lower than the Staffordshire increase of 23.5% and the England increase of 19.9 per cent over the same period but higher than the West Midlands increase of 17.9% .The over 65 population is projected to increase by a further 14.6% over the next decade, with the under 65 population projected to increase by only 1.5%.
- 4.4 The 2020 median age for the borough is 43 years, higher than for the West Midlands (40) and England and Wales (40.2) but lower than Staffordshire (45). The borough’s median has barely changed since 2010 when it was 42.
- 4.5 From 2011 to 2021 there has been an estimated 1.6% increase in the number of households in the borough, from 52,600 to 53,400. It is estimated that this will increase to 59,200 by 2029, and to 62,100 by 2039.
- 4.6 Measured through the average rank for IMD 2019, Newcastle-under-Lyme is the 150th most deprived local authority in England, out of 317 overall. Newcastle’s ranking compared with other local authorities in England has improved slightly from 156th in 2015. In terms of Health Deprivation and Disability the borough is the 80th most deprived local authority but 197th most deprived in terms of Barriers to Housing and Services.
- 4.7 Parts of the borough including Cross Heath and Knutton are in the 10% most deprived areas in England. Further parts of Holditch and Chesterton, Kidsgrove and Ravenscliffe, Crackley and Red Street, Town and Westlands are also in the 20% most deprived. However, parts of Loggerheads, Westbury Park and Northwood, Madeley and Betley and Westlands are in the top 10% least deprived parts of England, with parts of Clayton, Crackley and Red Street, Thistleberry, Westlands, Bradwell, Madeley and Betley, Newchapel and Mow Cop in the top 20% least deprived.
- 4.8 Across the borough in 2022, the annual mean gross weekly pay for full-time workers was £567. This was lower than for the West Midlands (£613) and Great Britain £642).

(Gross weekly pay for full-time workers)

	Newcastle-under-Lyme	West Midlands	Great Britain
Females	£528	£550	£585
Males	£593	£661	£688
Overall	£567	£613	£642

- 4.9 In the year up to March 2021, an estimated 74.5% of residents aged 16-64 were classed as ‘in employment’, broadly similar to the West Midlands (73.7 per cent) and Great Britain (75.2 per cent). This reverses a downward trend for the borough over the past few years.

(All people in employment) Numbers in brackets are people.

	Newcastle-under-Lyme	West Midlands	Great Britain
April 2015-March 2016	76.9% (64,300)	70.4%	73.7%
April 2016- March 2017	77.4% (66,600)	71.4%	74.3%
April 2017- March 2018	78.0% (68,500)	72.7%	75.0%
April 2018- March 2019	74.6% (63,700)	73.8%	75.4%
April 2019- March 2020	72.5% (60,000)	73.9%	76.0%
April 2020- March 2021	74.5% (61,600)	73.7%	75.2%

- 4.10 As of 2021, two-thirds (66%) of residents' jobs were full-time, with the remaining one-third (34%) part-time. This is very similar to the rate for the West Midlands and Great Britain, where 68% were full-time.
- 4.11 According to official crime summary data, the number of recorded crimes for headline offences in Newcastle-under-Lyme between April 2022 and March 2023 was 10,024.
- 4.12 The crime rate for headline offences from April 2022 to March 2023 was 81 per 1,000 residents, slightly lower than the Staffordshire rate of 87 per 1,000 people but higher than all of the Staffordshire boroughs apart from Cannock Chase.
- 4.13 In Newcastle-under-Lyme the three most common types of recorded crime were:
- Violence against the person (4,761)
 - Theft offences (2,338)
 - Stalking and harassment (2,058)
- 4.14 The latest available local estimates from the ONS (Life Expectancy at Birth 2021) suggest that life expectancy at birth for males born in Newcastle-under-Lyme is 76.9 years, which is below the Staffordshire (78.9 years) and the England average (78.7 years). Female life expectancy is 82.2 years, while the Staffordshire and England averages are both higher at 82.9 years and 82.8 years respectively.
- 4.15 There are, however, wide variations across the borough with the inequality driven by deprivation. For Newchapel and Mow Cop ward, the life expectancy at birth for males is 82.4 years, but in Town ward it is 6 ½ years lower at 75.9 years.
- 4.16 For females in Loggerheads life expectancy at birth is 87.1 years, but in the Town ward it is 11 years lower at 76.1 years.
- 4.17 Across the borough, the age-standardised mortality rate of 1,047 was higher than the Staffordshire rate of 992 and England's 1,008, but lower than the West Midlands rate of 1,055.
- 4.18 There are circa 53,400 homes in the borough (2021). At the 2021 Census housing tenure was as follows:
- Owned outright 38%
 - Owned with mortgage/loan 30%
 - Social rented 17%

- Private rented 15%

- 4.19 Overcrowding is mostly assessed by the ‘bedroom standard’ which assesses the number of bedrooms needed according to the size and composition of households. In the 2021 census, Newcastle-under-Lyme had an overcrowding rate of 2.1 per cent – very similar to Staffordshire’s 1.9 per cent. and significantly lower than England’s 4.4 per cent.
- 4.20 Across 2021, the local housing affordability ratio i.e. median house price compared to median gross income was 5.59, significantly lower than all of the other Staffordshire districts. Across the West Midlands the ratio is 6.55, and across England it is 7.4. The borough’s rate is lower than in 2009 when the ratio was 5.07.
- 4.21 84.2% of residents of working age have qualifications at level NVQ1 or above, similar to the 84.8% across the West Midlands but lower than the average of 87.9% in Great Britain. As of December 2021, an estimated 36.0% of adults aged 16-64 were qualified to NVQ level 4 or above – lower than both the West Midlands rate of 38.9% and the Great Britain rate of 43.6%.
- 4.22 The unemployment claimant count for the borough of 3.1 per cent as at August was slightly higher than Staffordshire’s rate of 2.8 per cent, but lower than Great Britain’s 3.7 per cent. As with most of the country, there has been an increase from March 2020 when the rate was 2.4%. There is some variance across the borough – in five wards the rate is higher than the national average, in five wards it is lower than half that rate.

5. Refresh of Financial Assumptions

- 5.1 Council agreed a five year Medium Term Financial Strategy in February 2023 covering the period 2023/24 to 2027/28. For 2023/24 Net Expenditure of £16.857m on services was budgeted for with a Council Tax Requirement of £8.169m. There is a Council Tax Base of 38,099 and a Band D Council Tax of £214.42. There was a balanced budget for 2023/24 but a forecast gap of £3.770m across the period 2024/25 to 2027/28.
- 5.2 The MTFS gaps have been rolled forward a year to cover 2028/29, this was reported to Cabinet on 19 September 2023 and the assumptions updated, a further update has been reported to Cabinet on 5 December 2023 and again on 16 January 2024. There will continue to be further review of the gaps throughout the budget setting process, cumulating in an updated gap being reported to Cabinet on 14 February 2024.
- 5.3 The recovery from Covid-19 and the ongoing Cost of Living Crisis are expected to continue to have an impact on the Councils’ finances, however, the degree of that impact is difficult to predict. The MTFS has been revised to reflect current information and includes an estimate of pressures that have both a short and medium term impact on the tax base for Council Tax and Business Rates.
- 5.4 Overall, rolling forward a year the Council is forecast to have a funding gap of £6.885m over the next five years. £2.692m of this is in 2024/25 and whilst the overall strategy is to have a balanced five year plan the focus of attention will be on this first year.

	2024/25 (£000’s)	2025/26 (£000’s)	2026/27 (£000’s)	2027/28 (£000’s)	2028/29 (£000’s)	Total (£000’s)
Income	107	168	150	132	(388)	266
Expenditure	2,585	1,389	847	960	935	6,613
Gap	2,692	1,557	997	1,092	547	6,879

- 5.5 The year one gap has decreased from £2.751m (as reported to Cabinet on 19 September 2023) to £2.692m, primarily due to an increased level of funding expected to be received from Central Government as part of the settlement due to the level of inflation at the close of September (upon which part of the settlement is based).

Income

- 5.6 A provision for income losses of at least £0.100m has been built in for each year of the MTFS. An assumed annual increase in fees and charges has also been included of 4% for 2024/25 and for each year thereafter.

Detail	2024/25 (£000's)	2025/26 (£000's)	2026/27 (£000's)	2027/28 (£000's)	2028/29 (£000's)	Total (£000's)
Government Grant	415	512	512	512	12	1,963
Business Rates	(258)	(174)	(181)	(188)	(196)	(997)
Fees and Charges	(230)	(270)	(281)	(292)	(304)	(1,377)
Income Pressures	180	100	100	100	100	580
Total	107	168	150	132	(388)	169

Government Grant

- 5.7 Local Government has been through an unprecedented period of austerity. The assumption is for legacy New Homes Bonus grant funding to reduce to nil, any loss from the 2023/24 New Homes Bonus award being offset by the Funding Guarantee, with continued one year settlements until further notice.

Business Rates

- 5.8 There have been significant impacts to Business Rates as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Firstly, there have been a wide range of interventions from Government with extensive discounts and also provision of grant to small businesses. These discounts have been matched with Section 31 grant and have therefore not impacted the Council's bottom line.
- 5.9 The MTFS currently assumes an inflationary increase of 4% in 2024/25 and 4% per annum thereafter in terms of collectable Business Rates, this is in addition to an inflationary increase in the base level funding set for the Business Rates Retention scheme by Central Government.

Council Tax

- 5.10 The Council has a market housing supply requirement of 2,153 properties over the 5 year period of the MTFS (excluding affordable housing). The MTFS assumes that the requirement will be met at an average of 431 properties per annum (451 in 2024/25), thus increasing the tax base accordingly. The MTFS assumes a Council Tax increase of 1.99% per Band D property for all years.
- 5.11 The Council operates a Council Tax Support scheme, introduced following the localisation of support by Government at the start of austerity. Increased levels of Council Tax Support were awarded during 2020/21 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The MTFS forecast assumes that the levels of support have now returned to pre-pandemic levels, however this will continually be reviewed in light of the Cost of Living Crisis.

Savings/Income Generation

- 5.12 Work is continuing to identify additional savings proposals in order to address the increased forecast gaps in 2024/25 and beyond. To date savings of £2.692m have been identified for 2024/25 enabling a balanced position to be proposed. £2.370m has been identified to largely close the gap for the remainder of the MTFs (total shortfall of £2.798m).

Detail	2024/25 (£000's)	2025/26 (£000's)	2026/27 (£000's)	2027/28 (£000's)	2028/29 (£000's)	Total (£000's)
Income	680	91	-	-	-	771
One Council	230	-	-	-	-	230
Staffing Related	199	-	-	-	-	199
Good Housekeeping	489	-	-	-	-	489
Tax Base	424	383	394	407	419	2,027
Council Tax Increase	164	166	168	170	172	840
Government Grants	506	-	-	-	-	506
Total	2,692	640	562	577	591	5,062

Expenditure

- 5.13 Employee pressures relate to assumed pay awards of 3.5% for 2024/25 (£0.483m) and for all years thereafter, 2024/25 also provides for the 2023/24 pay award (£1,925 per full time employee regardless of grade) that was over and above the 4% assumed, this amounts to a further pressure of £0.316m excluding the associated increases to National Insurance and pension contributions.
- 5.14 National Insurance contributions related to assumed pay awards and the 2023/24 pay award amount to an additional £0.116m for 2024/25, whilst associated pension contributions result in a pressure of £0.224m.
- 5.15 A number of new pressures facing the Council in 2024/25 have also been provided for, these include increased costs relating to temporary and supported Accommodation, ICT maintenance and software licences and other inflationary costs and pressures regarding service provision.

	2024/25 (£000's)	2025/26 (£000's)	2026/27 (£000's)	2027/28 (£000's)	2028/29 (£000's)	Total (£000's)
Employees	1,179	734	749	773	799	4,234
Premises	146	62	65	67	69	409
Transport	21	22	23	24	25	115
Financing	574	561	-	86	32	1,253
Pressures	665	10	10	10	10	705
Total	2,585	1,389	847	960	935	6,716

Inflation

- 5.16 Provision for price increases is made in line with the Bank of England target 2% for CPI (Consumer Price Index), with the exception of 2024/25 whereby budgets have been analysed following the Cost of Living Crisis and pressures accordingly accounted for.

Investment

- 5.17 The base budget includes an annual contribution to the Borough Growth Fund of £0.250m to fund investment in key Council priorities. At the present time the assumption is that this level of investment will continue over the life of the MTFS.

Capital financing

- 5.18 The proposed Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2026/27 is based on new schemes which are vital to ensure continued service delivery and in assisting the Council to achieve its corporate and service objectives as set out in the Council Plan 2022-26. These schemes total £41.269m including major investment into the Borough via external funding in terms of the Future High Streets Fund and the Town Deals Fund for both Newcastle and Kidsgrove and associated projects.
- 5.19 The capital programme will require to be part funded by borrowings. The total amount of borrowing over 3 years of the proposed Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2026/27 will amount to £2.131m, in addition to £16.709m that may be required for the 2023/24 capital programme. The associated borrowing costs have been factored into the MTFS.

Other financing adjustments

- 5.20 The Council has eliminated total reliance on capital receipts to finance revenue expenditure.

6. In Year Response to Financial Pressures Arising from Covid-19 and Cost of Living Crisis

- 6.1 There is uncertainty at present with regards to the recovery of lost income levels resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis. The medium term therefore contains risks around loss of income, these are included as part of the risk assessment informing the Council's level of reserves. A number of steps have been taken in year, or are planned for future periods to continue to address the financial impact and ensure that the Council remains financially resilient including:
- A review of income forecasts as part of monthly budget monitoring processes.
 - Maintaining spend within the existing budget envelope as far as possible.
 - Identifying management action to reduce in year cost pressures.
 - Re-focusing the income collection approach to reduce the impact of bad debt.
 - Reassessment of Capital Programme commitments.
 - A comprehensive review and risk assessment of the Council's reserves.
 - Use of grants to substitute for existing spend wherever possible.
 - Asset review to maximise receipts from disposals.

7. Approach

- 7.1 The following section sets out the central approach to developing the Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2024/25 to 2028/29.

Foundation analysis

- 7.2 Over the summer and early autumn the groundwork for the MTFs has been undertaken which is primarily the review of the Borough Profile and assessment of the impact of Covid-19 and the Cost of Living Crisis, a full benefit opportunity assessment and benchmarking to give a clear context in which to identify areas for investment and redirection of resources, opportunities for efficiency and income generation and service reconfiguration. Service level benchmarking has primarily been based on DLUHC Revenue Outturn data focussed on the Council's CIPFA statistical "nearest neighbours" and Staffordshire geographical near neighbours. Spend has also been mapped to strategic priorities and outcomes.

One Council

- 7.3 The One Council Programme was launched in February 2021 following Full Council approval of the budget in order to meet the changing needs of our residents by increasing our ability to provide flexible, efficient and customer driven services. The programme is designed to respond to the key lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, how this impacted on how customers accessed Council services, and how services flexed in order to remain resilient. The programme focusses on reviewing customer need alongside modernising internal processes whilst developing our internal cultural transformation and ensuring we address financial demands.
- 7.4 The One Council programme facilitates a fundamental change in Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council's operating model and how we address our challenges. Significantly, it sets out to enable the Council to make better use of the resources available to it, ensuring both efficient and effective service delivery.
- 7.5 Given the broad remit of the programme, overall aims have been considered by integrated work streams aligned to core principles of delivery and achievement and the initial work has been supported by the delivery partner Ignite Consulting who have enabled the team to develop skills in management change and service redesign. Whilst a significant aspect of the programme is to facilitate a move to customer self service via an enhanced website, traditional face to face and telephone access will remain available to those who need it.
- 7.6 One Council is a "spend to save" programme with an agreed investment of £1.2m. Recurrent benefits will continue to be achieved moving forward. The savings have been staggered over the life of the 3 year programme (£0.196m has been achieved in 2021/22, £0.601m has been achieved in 2022/23 and a further £0.376m has been achieved in 2023/24).
- 7.7 In order to build the programme and consider the areas for change and focus, the broad concepts of purpose were considered alongside a benchmarking exercise which placed the customer and delivery of services at centre stage. This analysis supported the development of certain big ideas which have formulated the overall Future Operating Model design and have given a structure to the design of service change through the development of the "Big operating Model Building Blocks" of:
- Leadership and Management
 - Information Advice and Guidance and Website
 - One Front Door
 - Internal Support
 - Mobile Multifunction Team
 - Strategy and Performance Team

Leadership and Management

- 7.8 The programme realises the importance of cultural development, attitudes, behaviours and overall quality and consistency of leadership as a driver for success. As such a dedicated Culture work stream was initiated which considered our purpose as a Council and provider of services as well as the important people driven elements which would support the achievement of our goals. Focus groups across the council considered our purpose, strengths and weaknesses and contributed to the development of an overall mission statement and related values.

Information, Advice and Guidance / website

- 7.9 A core aim of the overall programme is to enable residents and local business to self-serve wherever possible, thereby freeing up expertise and staff time to support delivery of complex tasks and innovative services in a more efficient model.
- 7.10 The Digital work stream engaged with services to consider changes needed to enable this transition for users of our website and contracted with Jadu to develop the new website which was launched on 27 October 2021.
- 7.11 The site is cleaner and more modern than our previous site and has been developed with a focus on functionality and ease of use to support the customer. The website developments integrate directly with the new One Front Door (or Customer Hub) and drive traffic away from resource heavy phone lines enabling a deeper and broader remit and function to develop within our customer facing team.
- 7.12 Another aim of One Council is to make our site more commercial. Using the new tools and techniques in Jadu we will be able to sell our services more effectively to increase revenue. Examples include J2, Bereavement Services and Garden Waste.

One Front Door

- 7.13 The One Front Door, now known as the Customer Hub, is the customer facing function designed to offer end to end service, advice and transactional support to customers of the Council. Overtime this will sit across all outward facing services and by contacting the team, our customers will be able to undertake a range of tasks from planning related queries, to questions around waste collection. A strong feature of this service is providing the team with training and development across a range of services, as well as giving them access to in service technology to allow them to have up to date information and ability to transact specific elements of queries easily and efficiently.
- 7.14 Work initially focussed on the previous teams for Customer Services and Revenues and Benefits and the two areas have now been consolidated. Pulling the teams together, with focussed work on processes alongside the website development has enabled the team to be resourced more efficiently and for knowledge to be spread amongst a larger number of employees.
- 7.15 As we continue to embed the learning and knowledge in the team, the service is looking across the rest of the organisation and considering how this concept and model can grow to incorporate further processes and support our customers across a wider range of matters.

Internal Support

- 7.16 Work is continuing on developing efficiencies within our internal services. This will again provide services with streamlined support and guidance whilst releasing those with technical expertise to focus on value added delivery.

- 7.17 Much like the One Front Door, efficiencies of scale have been identified here as well as process and technology developments which have enabled a reduction in Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) assigned to the teams.

Mobile Multi-Function Team

- 7.18 The Mobile Multi-Functional Team enables an agile and diverse team of operatives to be dispatched where there is immediate need. Linked to a preventative delivery arm and the One Front Door, the impact on the Borough and residents will be significant and positive.

Strategy and Performance Team

- 7.19 The Strategy and Performance Team supports services in their strategic aims as well as becoming a critical friend and challenging function in terms of performance and delivery. This function enables the Council to better use data and performance indicators to drive outcomes against the Council Plan and other strategic aims.
- 7.20 In addition this service will look outward to strengthen relationships with our partners, consider policy and strategy development and ensure effort and activity drive us closer to our overall aims and vision.

Commercial

- 7.21 The Council approved its Commercial Strategy in October 2019 with the objectives of maximising commercial opportunities as Government support drops away, requiring councils to become more self-financing. Key themes set out in the Commercial Strategy include:

- Creating and nurturing commercial and development opportunities
- Greater focus on procurement and contract management
- Creating a sustainable commercial programme
- Establishing a strong commercial culture and investing in staff and member skills
- Extracting maximum value from our land and property assets and income streams
- Challenging where services can be commissioned
- Driving our digital agenda forward

- 7.22 Progress in implementing the commercial strategy in the current year has been limited due to restrictions placed on borrowing for commercial purposes. However, going forward this remains a key supporting strand of the MTFs whereby regeneration priorities can also be met and will need to be properly resourced.

Property

- 7.23 The Council last updated its Asset Management Strategy in 2018. A further review now needs to be undertaken in order to identify assets which may be suitable for disposal, generating funding for the Capital Programme.

8. Reserves

- 8.1 Forecast balances for the Council's reserves as at 31 March 2024 are as follows:

Reserve/Fund	Balance 31.3.23 (£'000's)	Forecast Balance 31.3.24 (£'000's)
General Fund	2,160	2,157
Walleys Quarry Reserve	672	200
Income Reserve	100	-
Equipment Replacement	37	30
Budget Support Fund	528	450
Budget Support Fund (Local Plan)	195	300
Budget Support Fund (Homelessness)	312	200
Borough Growth Fund	59	-
Conservation & Heritage Fund	32	30
Mayor's Charity Fund	10	-
Museum Purchases Fund	38	38
Business Rates Reserve	1,043	1,654
Elections Reserve	-	50
Clayton Community Centre Fund	19	24
Totals	5,205	5,133

8.2 A full reserves risk assessment is completed as part of the 2024/25 budget preparation. Based on a preliminary assessment it is considered that the current balance of the general fund reserve will require an increase of £0.247m to provide sufficient cover for foreseeable risks.

8.3 It should be noted that the balance of the Business Rates reserve is to be held to mitigate against future collection fund losses and as a contingency for the Fair Funding Review.

9. Capital Strategy

9.1 The Council agreed its Capital Strategy and Ten Year Capital Programme 2023/24 to 2031/32 in February 2023, this will be refreshed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process. The Capital Strategy explains how the Council invests its capital funds and the various sources of funding and how this facilitates the delivery of its objectives.

9.2 The main governance of the Capital Strategy is through the Capital, Assets and Commercial Investment Review Group which:

- Reviews and recommends to Cabinet all new General Fund Capital projects
- Ensures capital resources are viewed corporately with a clear link to corporate objectives
- Ensures any revenue costs are identified and considered in the Treasury Management Strategy and the Council's MTFS
- Develops a Capital Strategy which supports the Council's corporate objectives
- Oversees the development and implementation of the asset management and commercial strategies
- Reviews new capital project and commercial investment requests on behalf of Cabinet.

9.3 As part of the Efficiency Board process every capital scheme and in-year capital commitment has been reviewed.

9.4 The draft 10 year Capital Programme for the period 2024/25 to 2033/34 provides for investment into the Borough. This programme will be funded by capital receipts, significant external contributions (Town Deals and Future High Streets Funding) and borrowing. The revenue impact of borrowings has been included within the MTFS.

10. Treasury Management Strategy

- 10.1 The Council agreed its Treasury Management Strategy for 2023/24 in February 2023, the strategy for 2024/25 will be updated alongside the proposed budget and capital programme as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process.
- 10.2 As referred to in the above section, the Council will be required to borrow to fund the draft Ten Year Capital Programme. The PWLB and Council to Council borrowing are the primary borrowing options that the Council is currently reviewing to fund borrowing in relation to the capital programme.
- 10.3 The Capital Financing Requirement is set to increase to £29.522m by 2026/27 based on the 3 year Capital Programme for 2024/25 to 2026/27, the Capital Financing Requirement at 31 March 2023 (£10.682m) and the Capital Financing Requirement for 2023/24 capital expenditure (£16.709m).

Funding Stream	Capital Receipts (£000's)	External Contributions (£000's)	Borrowing (£000's)	Total (£000's)
2023/24	3,325	35,399	16,709	55,433
2024/25	2,450	6,545	7,685	16,680
2025/26	21,050	3,543	(8,852)	15,741
2026/27	4,050	1,500	3,298	8,848
Total	30,875	46,987	18,840	96,702

11. Budget Preparation Timetable

- 11.1 Work on the development of budget proposals for 2024/25 is at an advanced stage. The final revenue budget and Council Tax proposals, along with the Capital Strategy, Capital Programme and Treasury Management Strategy will be presented for approval at Council in February 2024.
- 11.2 An Efficiency Board chaired by the Leader of the Council plays a key role in shaping the MTFS and providing input and challenge to savings and investment proposals.
- 11.3 The decision making timetable was as follows:

Event	Committee	Date
Budget consultation	Proposed to run during December	
Scrutiny of first draft savings proposals	FAPSC	5 December 2023
Approval of final MTFS & consideration of draft budget proposals	Cabinet	16 January 2024
Scrutiny of draft budget proposals	FAPSC	18 January 2024
Final budget proposals recommended for approval by Full Council	Cabinet	6 February 2025
Full Council to approve budget	Full Council	14 February 2024

Appendix A – Summary of Refreshed MTFS Assumptions

	2024/25 (£000's)	2025/26 (£000's)	2026/27 (£000's)	2027/28 (£000's)	2028/29 (£000's)	Total (£000's)
Employees	1,179	734	749	773	799	4,234
Premises	146	62	65	67	69	409
Transport	21	22	23	24	25	115
Financing	574	561	-	86	32	1,253
Pressures	665	10	10	10	10	705
Income	107	168	150	132	(388)	169
Total	2,692	1,557	997	1,092	547	6,885
Savings						
Income	680	91	-	-	-	771
One Council	230	-	-	-	-	230
Staffing Related	199	-	-	-	-	199
Good Housekeeping	489	-	-	-	-	489
Tax Base	424	383	394	407	419	2,027
Council Tax Increase	164	166	168	170	172	840
Government Grants	506	-	-	-	-	500
Total	2,692	640	562	577	591	5,062
Gap	-	917	435	515	(44)	1,823