

### Budget Risks and Adequacy of Reserves

The assessment of budget risks and the adequacy of reserves is even more important for the 2024-25 final draft budget and the medium-term financial plan due to the priority to restore the council's financial resilience as set out in "Securing Kent's Future – Budget Recovery Strategy" and the announcement of the Final Local Government Finance Settlement (FLGFS) for 2024-25. The administration's final draft budget for 2024-25 includes a package of £19.8m of one-off measures to balance the budget together with the expectation that these will be replaced by recurring savings in 2025-26/2026-27. As well as these one-off measures, the balanced position includes completely removing the 1% risk contingency, a one-off increased dividend from the trading companies, and reduced debt charges as a result of capital programme rephasing and lower levels of borrowing. The final draft budget includes increased spending following the announcement of additional social care grant in the final settlement, final notification of council tax base and collection fund estimates from district councils, the Personnel Committee recommendation on Kent scheme pay, and rephasing of one saving from 2025-26 into 2024-25. Putting all this together means the final draft is marginally less risky than the updated draft published in January with a lower use of reserves to balance the budget and scope for some investment to deliver transformation reducing risk albeit offset by drawdown from local taxation equalisation reserve for the Collection Fund estimate reducing the overall level of reserves, and still requires the Council to agree and deliver significant savings both in 2024-25 and over the medium term. The package of one-off measures includes the following:

- £2.1m for the announcement of a further one-year payment of New Homes Bonus Grant
- £7.7m flexible use of capital receipts
- £10.1m use of corporate and public health reserves

The 2023-24 budget monitoring shows a significant forecast overspend largely on adult social care and children's services. Management action (the majority of which is one-off) has been identified and is expected to substantially reduce the level of the overspend, although the latest monitoring shows there may have to be some offset from reserves by year end further weakening financial resilience going into 2024-25.

This section includes a new and separate assessment of the current position of the council against the key symptoms of financial stress identified by CIPFA in its report entitled "Building Financial Resilience".

There are a number of significant risks that could affect either the cost of providing key services and/or the level of service demand or its main sources of funding. In addition, there are general economic factors, such as the level of inflation and interest rates that can impact on the net cost of services going forward. Pressures from the main cost drivers and in some cases from service demand are evident in children's and adults social care, waste volumes, and home to school and special educational needs transport.

The main risks are summarised below.

### Risks

#### Cost of Living

- Extraordinary increases in the costs of goods and services procured by the Council
- Market instability due to workforce capacity as a result of recruitment and retention difficulties leading to exit of suppliers, increased costs, and supply chain shortages
- Increased demand for Council Services over and above demographic demands, including crisis and welfare support
- Reductions in income from fees and charges
- Under collection of local taxation leading to collection losses and reductions in tax base
- Increased Claimant eligibility for Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme discounts

#### International Factors

- Impact of war in Ukraine and other conflicts
- Impact of the decision to leave the European Union
- Legacy impact of Covid-19
- Ongoing supply chain disruption including energy supplies
- Breakdown of hosting arrangements under Homes for Ukraine scheme

#### Regulatory Risk

- **High Court ruling on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking (UAS) Children** – the judgement that the council is responsible for supporting all UAS children arriving in the county until they are transferred under the National Transfer Scheme impacts on the availability and therefore cost of carers for local children as well as risks of shortfalls in funding refugee schemes (see below)
- **Replacement Legislation and Regulation following Brexit** – including additional council responsibilities, impact on businesses and supply chains, and economic instability
- **Statutory overrides** – currently there are a number of statutory overrides in place which reduce short term risks e.g., high needs deficit, investment losses, etc. These are time limited and require a long-term solution
- **Funding settlements** - adequacy of the overall settlement and reliance on council tax over the medium term, and uncertainty over future settlements (especially beyond 2024-25)
- **Delayed Reforms to Social Care Charging** - uncertainty over future plans and funding, and providers' fee expectations
- **Other delayed legislative reforms** – impact on council costs and ability to deliver savings/spending reductions e.g. Extended Producer Responsibilities

## Appendix I

- **Departmental Specific Grants** - Unanticipated changes in specific departmental grants and the ability to adjust spending in line with changes
- **Asylum and Refugee Support** – increase in numbers of refugees (adults and families) accommodated within the community impacting on council services. Inadequate medium-term government funding for asylum and refugee schemes
- **New Burdens** – Adequacy of funding commensurate with new or additional responsibilities
- **Further delay of the Local Government Funding Review** - The government has committed to updating and reforming the way local authority funding is distributed to individual authorities. However, this has now been even further delayed until 2025-26 at the earliest. The Fair Funding Review of the distribution methodology for the core grants was first announced as part of the final local government settlement for 2016-17. The majority of data used to assess funding distributions has not been updated for over 10 years, dating from 2013-14 to a large degree, and even as far back as 2000.

### General Economic & Fiscal Factors

- Levels of national debt and borrowing
- Inflation continues to be well above the government target for a sustained period with consequential impacts on contracted services (see below) and household incomes (including incomes of KCC staff)
- Poor economic growth
- Rise in unemployment
- A general reduction in debt recovery levels
- Reductions in grant and third-party funding
- Increase in fraud

### Increases in Service Costs and Demand

- Long term impact of Covid-19 pandemic on clients and suppliers
- Higher cost for new clients coming into care than existing clients especially but not exclusively older persons' residential and nursing care and children in care
- Adult Social Care cost and demand increases from increased complexity
- Children's Social Care including sufficiency of Foster Carers and numbers of UAS children or those with no recourse to public funds
- Significantly higher than the national average Education and Health Care Plans with consequential impact on both Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs placements/services and General Fund services for assessment and home to school transport
- Waste tonnage
- High demand for mandated Public Health services
- General demographic trends (including a rising and ageing population and growth in the number of vulnerable persons)

### **Contractual Price Increases**

- Index linked contracts rise above budgeted amounts
- Containing locally negotiated contracts within the amounts provided in the budget
- Financial sustainability of contracted providers

### **Efficiencies and Savings Programme**

- Slippage in the expected delivery of the savings programme
- Non-delivery of planned savings
- Shortfalls in income from fees and charges

The main opportunities are summarised below.

### **Opportunities**

- Growth in local taxbase for both housing and businesses
- Service transformation and redesign including digital services
- Invest to save approach to reduce revenue costs
- Service remodelling
- Extension of the power to use capital receipts to fund revenue spending on transformation activity and other spending that reduce future costs until March 2030
- Further flexibilities due to be announced in January over the use of ring-fenced grants

### Adequacy of Reserves

Reviewing the level of reserves the Council holds is an important part of the budget setting process. The review must be balanced and reasonable, factoring in the current financial standing of the Council, the funding outlook into the medium term and beyond, and most importantly, the financial risk environment the Council is operating in. The assessment of reserves is based on factors recommended by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) as set out below together with an indication of the direction of travel (up arrow represents an improved position i.e., the risk is less than it was last year).

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Assumptions  
for inflation



The direction of travel for this indicator was showing as deteriorating in last year's budget due to the historically high levels of inflation that arose during 2022. The annual rate of inflation (using CPIH) peaked at 9.6% in October 2022 and has been on a downward trajectory in the subsequent months (CPI peaked at 11.1% and RPI at 14.2% in October 2022).

The November 2023 Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts are for the rate of inflation to peak in quarter 4 of 2022 (CPI 10.7% in quarter 4 2022), before the rate of prices growth falls back as follows:

- 10.2% in quarter 1 2023
- 8.4% quarter 2
- 6.7% quarter 3
- 4.8% quarter 4
- 4.6% in quarter 1 2024
- 3.7% quarter 2
- 3.3% quarter 3
- 2.8% quarter 4
- 2.3% in quarter 1 2025

Thereafter inflation is forecast to be below the 2% target.

The latest inflation release for December 2023 showed the annual rate of increases in CPI at 4.0% (compared to 3.9% in November and 4.6% in October). CPIH was 4.2% in December 2023 (compared to 4.0% in November and 4.7% in October). If these trends continue then the rate of inflation would be reducing compared to forecasts on which the final draft budget is based although it is too early to confirm this at this stage.

The higher than forecast inflation is the reason why this measure is still showing as constant for 2024-25 and not improving. Inflation is still volatile and subject to external shocks such as a return to higher oil prices and other global impacts on prices.

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Estimates of the level and timing of capital receipts



The Council uses receipts as part of the funding for the capital programme. The Administration's final draft budget for 2024-25 assumes £7.7m of receipts will be used to fund revenue spending using the direction powers under the Local Government Act 2003. This flexibility has now been extended to March 2030. Delivery of receipts against the target has continued to fall behind in recent years necessitating additional short-term borrowing/use of reserves (without adding to our overall borrowing requirement which has been capped). However performance is forecast to be above target in 2023-24, which together with the previous unapplied balance allows scope to use the flexibility powers.

Performance in the current year has been mixed with the rise in interest rates dampening large new-build housing developments. Although there is a reasonable pipeline of assets for disposal, the risk profile for potential delays remains high therefore leading to a continued deterioration in this measure.

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Capacity to manage in-year budget pressures and strategy for dealing with demand and service delivery in the longer term



2022-23 ended with a revenue budget overspend for the first time in 23 years. The net overspend in 2022-23 was £47.1m after roll forwards (3.9% of net revenue). Overspends before roll forwards were reported in Adult Social Care & Health (ASCH) of £24.4m, Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) of £32.7m, Growth Environment and Transport (GET) of £0.9m, Deputy Chief Executive Department (DCED) of £1.6m. These were partly offset by underspends in Chief Executive Department (CED) of £3.5m and Non-Attributable Costs and Corporately held budgets (NAC) of £11.8m

The most significant overspends were:

- £30.5m older persons' residential and nursing care in ASCH
- £16.1m home to school transport in CYPE
- £9.9m children in care in CYPE

The most recent 2023-24 revenue budget monitoring reported to Cabinet on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2024 shows a forecast overspend of £32.1m based on returns as at November before outstanding management action. This represents a reduction from the previous month of £35.6m before outstanding management action. The movement includes delivery of some of the previously identified management action as well as updated activity/cost forecasts and latest forecast delivery of savings/income plans. The latest monitoring report identifies the remaining management action that needs to be delivered to bring the 2023-24 outturn into balance by the year end and now includes the previously identified management action which cannot be delivered in 2023-24 (as well as any over

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delivery). The management action includes an increased amount to be delivered from the introduction of more stringent spending controls including additional approval requirements for high value purchases (over £10,000) and staff recruitment. The report also recognises that the Council is now close to the point where changes in monitoring forecasts cannot be offset by curtailing non committed spend across the rest of the organisation and alternative solutions to balance 2023-24 may be needed including use of reserves. The overspend is largely driven by higher spending growth than the £182.3m (excluding spending on externally funded activities) provided for in the budget. The largest overspends are in the same main areas as 2022-23 (adult social care, children in care and home to school transport). This is despite including additional spending in the budget for the full year effect of recurring spend from 2022-23 and forecasts for future price uplifts, increases in demand and cost increases unrelated to price uplifts.

Cabinet on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023 and County Council on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023 agreed “Securing Kent’s Future – Budget Recovery Strategy” setting out the broad strategic approach to providing reassurance on the necessary action to bring the 2023-24 budget back into balance and the opportunity areas for further savings and avoidance of future cost increases over the medium term 2024-27 to restore the council’s financial sustainability.

However, until this strategic plan has been converted into detailed plans and these have been delivered, managing in-year spending and spending growth over the medium term presents the most significant risk to the Council’s financial resilience and sustainability and therefore the highest rating of deterioration.

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Strength of financial reporting and ability to activate contingency plans if planned savings cannot be achieved



There continues to be a reasonable degree of confidence in the validity of financial reporting despite the uncertainties and volatility as a result of overspends. However, the ability to activate contingency plans if planned savings cannot be achieved has been restricted as a result of these overspends. although the 2023-24 budget includes an overall risk contingency that can be activated at any point in the year once every effort is being made to reduce the forecast overspend in 2023-24.

Reporting has been enhanced to include separate analysis of delivery of savings plans, treasury management and council tax collection. Further improvements have been made in terms of the timeliness of financial monitoring and reporting to ensure corrective action is taken as early as possible.

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Some areas of spending can still be changed at short notice if required as a contingency response if planned savings cannot be achieved (or there are unexpected changes in spending). A significant plank of the 2023-24 recovery strategy is to reduce non committed spending for the remainder of the year. Initially this was via an expectation that managers across the whole organisation will exercise this restraint to reduce forecast spending for the remainder of the year. However, whilst spend is reducing, it is not reducing at the rate required to balance the budget and is not resulting in a corresponding reduction in the forecasts. Consequently more stringent spending controls have been introduced including additional authorisation requirements. These spending reductions are largely anticipated to be one-off and will not flow through into 2024-25 or later years unless the spending controls remain in place into 2024-25.

The increased focus on savings monitoring and delivery has had some impact and the majority of the overspend in 2023-24 and budget growth forecast for 2024-25 is due to unbudgeted spend rather than savings delivery, although savings delivery is still a contributory factor and remains a risk, this is no greater a risk than in previous years, hence this measure has not been rated as deteriorating.

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Risks inherent in any new partnerships, major outsourcing arrangements, and major capital developments



Partnership working with NHS and districts has improved. The council has not embarked upon any major outsourcing or agreed any large scale capital developments (other than grant/externally funded). The council has restructured and strengthened its Commercial & Procurement team. However, further sustained improvements are still needed to change the direction of travel to overall improvement.

Trading conditions for Council owned companies continue to be challenging although a higher one-off dividend is included in the administration's final draft budget 2024-25.

A number of outsourced contracts are due for retender and the Council is still vulnerable to price changes due to market conditions.

The ability to sustain the capital programme remains a significant challenge. It is essential that capital programmes do not rely on unsustainable levels of borrowing and additional borrowing should only be considered where absolutely essential to meet statutory obligations. This will impact on the condition of non-essential assets possibly resulting in the closure of facilities although the planned spending to limit

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modernisation programmes to essential measures to ensure buildings are safe warm and dry has proved to be inadequate and the draft capital programme includes additional spending in 2024-25 and 2025-26 to reflect a more realistic level of spend on the assets the Council needs to sustain necessary functions. Despite the action taken to limit additional borrowing, just under ¼ of the draft capital programme (£376m) is still funded by borrowing. Slippage within individual projects remains an issue leading to lower than planned spending in the short-term but potentially higher medium to long term costs due to inflation. This slippage defers borrowing rather than reducing it.

The quarter 2 capital monitoring report showed a forecast net underspend of £106.4m, comprising £5.7m real overspend on projects and programmes, and £112.2m reduction due to slippage. £4.3m of the real variance is due to spending on grant and externally funded projects where funding was announced after the capital programme was approved.

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Financial standing of the Authority (level of borrowing, debt outstanding, use of reserves, etc.)



The financial standing of the Council has weakened significantly as a result of the overspend in 2022-23 that was balanced by the drawdown of £47.1m from general and risk reserves (39% of general reserve and all of the £25m risk reserve). Usable reserves were also reduced through the transfer of £17m from earmarked reserves to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) reserve as part of the Council's contribution to the Safety Valve agreement with the Department for Education (DfE) in March 2023 (with a further transfer of £14.4m planned for 2023-24). Overall, the council's usable revenue reserves have reduced from £408.1m at 31/03/22 (40% of net revenue) to £355.1m at 31/03/23 (29.8% of net revenue) with a further reduction to £316.3m (24% of net revenue) forecast for 31/03/24. This forecast assumes the 2023-24 revenue spend is brought back to a balanced budget position by year end with no further draw down from reserves, this is now looking increasingly unlikely.

The reduction in usable reserves has significantly reduced the Council's ability to withstand unexpected circumstances and costs and reduced the scope to smooth timing differences between spending and savings plans. The levels of reserves now pose a more significant risk to the Council's financial resilience than levels of debt. Levels of reserves are now considered to be the second most significant financial risk after capacity to deal with in-year budget pressures. Reserves will need to be replenished at the earliest opportunity and will need to be factored into future revenue budget plans.

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The Council has an ongoing borrowing requirement of £1.1bn arising from its historic and ongoing capital expenditure which is expected to remain broadly stable over the medium term. Most of this requirement is covered by existing external debt, which is forecast to decline gradually over the medium term (from around 72% in 2023-24 to 66% in 2026-27. The remaining portion is met via internal borrowing (namely the temporary use of internal cash balances in lieu of investing those balances with external counterparties).

Although the Council has been protected to a significant extent from the material increase in interest rates over the past two years (given that most of its borrowing requirement is already met by fixed rate debt) the higher rate environment has increased the expected cost of internal borrowing as well as costs associated with any new external borrowing over the near and medium term.

A small portion of the borrowing requirement (8.4% in 2023-24) is met via “LOBO” (Lender Option Borrower Option) loans. These instruments provide lower cost financing in exchange for giving the lender the periodic opportunity to reset the loan’s interest rate. The Council manages the risks around these loans being “called” by restricting their use to only a minor portion of the borrowing portfolio and by avoiding any concentration in the loans’ associated option dates.

In managing the structure of its borrowing (the balance between internal and external borrowing, and the portion of the latter that is made up of fixed-rate as opposed to variable-rate loans), the Council is chiefly concerned with risks arising from uncertainty around interest rates as well as ensuring it has adequate liquidity over the medium term. The Council reviews its borrowing strategy formally on an annual basis to ensure it remains appropriate. The final draft budget report includes an updated Treasury Management Strategy.

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The Authority’s record of budget and financial management including robustness of medium-term plans



The direction of travel for this factor was shown as deteriorating in the final budget presented to County Council on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2023 due to the quarter 3 monitoring for 2022-23 showing a significant £53.7m forecast revenue overspend. The overspend reduced a little by year-end to £44.4m before roll forwards (£47.1m after roll forwards). However, this was not sufficient to change the direction of travel bearing in mind the scale of the forecast overspends for 2023-24.

The most significant cause of the overspends is higher than budgeted spending growth despite significant increases already factored into the budget. The need to include the full

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year effect of current year overspends as a variance to the published medium-term plan means that the capacity to manage in-year budget pressures (highest rated risk assessment) is the most significant factor in MTFP variances rather than the robustness of MTFP forecasts. This is the only reason that this particular assessment has not been shown as a significant deterioration with a double arrow. Nonetheless, the robustness of forecasts included in the MTFP does need improvement (hence this assessment is still showing a deterioration until these are improved).

The final draft budget for 2024-25 and MTFP for 2024-27 is balanced albeit through a significant number of one-offs for 2024-25 which are shown as being replaced in the balanced position for 2025-26 and 2026-27. However, this replacement does increase the savings requirement for these years. As yet details of these savings have not been confirmed and will only be confirmed over the coming months. Consequently, until these savings have been confirmed and are delivered, this measure is still showing as deteriorating.

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Virement and year-end procedures in relation to under and overspends



The direction of travel for this factor was shown as deteriorating in last year's budget due to the 2022-23 forecast overspend and ongoing issues with Whole Government Accounts. The forecast for 2023-24 is a further forecast overspend and issues remain with Whole of Government Accounts meaning there has not been sufficient progress to date to change the direction of travel on this assessment.

The Council continues to adhere to its virement and year end procedures as set out in its financial regulations. The Council's ability to close the year-end accounts early or even on time is becoming increasingly difficult. The audit certificate for 2020-21 was issued on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2023, following confirmation that no further work was required on the Whole Government Accounts. The audit certificate for 2021-22 has not been issued due to the audit of the 2021-22 Whole of Government Accounts being outstanding as the external auditors have prioritised the audit of the 2022-23 accounts.

The draft outturn for 2022-23 was reported to Cabinet on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023 outlining the main overspends and underspends together with roll-forward requests. This was presented alongside an update of the medium-term financial outlook. The net overspend of £47.1m was reported after roll forwards of £2.7m. The overspend was funded from a drawdown from earmarked and general reserves. The draft accounts for 2022-23 were published on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2023 and are due to be signed off following the February Governance and Audit Committee.

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The availability of reserves and government grants/other funds to deal with major unforeseen events



As identified in the assessment of the financial standing of the Council, the levels of usable reserves have reduced at the end of 2022-23 and are forecast to reduce further by the end of 2023-34. A number of significant risks remain unresolved (including at this stage balancing the 2023-24 revenue budget) which could impact on reserves and the assessment of their adequacy if the management action to reduce spending in the current year does not result in a balanced outturn.

The most significant risk to reserves in previous years has been identified from the accumulated and growing deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) reserve largely from the overspending high needs support within the DSG. This has now been addressed over a number of years through the Safety Valve agreement with the Department for Education (DfE). However, at this stage the Safety Valve agreement is a recovery plan that will be delivered over a number of years with spending on high needs support gradually brought back into balance with the available grant funding and the historic accumulated deficit cleared with contributions from the DfE and the Council. However, this does not fully mitigate the risk as should the plan not be fully delivered there is a risk that the DfE could withhold contributions and a residue deficit would remain.

The reserves forecast includes the transfer to the DSG reserve of the Council's contribution for 2022-23 and a further forecast transfer for the Council's contribution in 2023-24. Provision is included in the 2024-25 final draft budget and 2024-27 MTFP for the remaining Council contributions. The DSG reserve forecast also includes the DfE contributions for 2022-23 to 2027-28. These contributions together with the recovery plan to reduce the in-year deficit on high needs spending would see the accumulated deficit cleared by 2027-28. However, resolving this aspect of risk to reserves results in £82.3m over the term of the agreement of the Council's resources which would otherwise have been available to mitigate other risks.

Although this DSG risk has been addressed the risk of the requirement for further drawdowns if the 2023-24 current year spend and the one-offs including use of reserves in 2024-25 final draft budget and 2024-27 MTFP and the overall forecast level of reserves means the assessment of this risk cannot yet show an improvement and could be a further deterioration.

A new risk has arisen during 2023-24 following the high court judgment that the Council must take all possible steps to care for all Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking (UAS) children arriving

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in the county under the Children's Act 1989, unless and until they are transferred to other local authorities under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The risks from the judgment not only arise from the cost of securing additional care provision for UAS children should government departments not fully compensate the council but also knock-on consequences on the availability and cost of care for other children already in Kent. At the time this report was drafted we are close to reaching agreement with government departments on both capital and revenue funding which would increase the capacity to care for UAS children in appropriately registered and regulated provision which would substantively reduce this risk, although there are still financial and operational risks in both the short and medium-terms should arrivals exceed the increased capacity or transfers through NTS are delayed or don't happen at all.

A register of the most significant risks is published as part of the final draft 2024-25 revenue budget, 2024-27 medium term plan, 2024-34 capital programme and Treasury Management Strategy.

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The general financial climate including future expected levels of funding



The Autumn Statement 2022 included departmental spending plans up to 2024-25 and high-level spending plans up to 2027-28. The plans for 2023-24 and 2024-25 included additional support for local government including additional grants and increased assumptions for council tax. These plans were updated in the 2023 Autumn budget on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2023 but are still only high-level overall forecasts beyond 2024-25 with no individual departmental details.

The Autumn Budget 2023 identified that while day to day spending on public services will continue to grow above inflation in future years (1% in real terms), public spending will continue to face many pressures and the government remains committed to boost public sector productivity and focus spending on government priorities. This combination is likely to impact on the distribution of spending between departments and priorities. Forecasts suggest that unprotected areas of spending, including local government, could be facing a real terms reduction in funding of around 1.8% implied by the overall plans for 2024-25 to 2028-29. If these forecasts are correct this could result in another sustained period of flat cash settlements for local government.

The Final Local Government Finance Settlement (FLGFS) only included individual grant allocations and core spending power calculations for 2024-25. The settlement did not include indicative council tax referendum levels beyond 2024-25.

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Other departmental specific grants are not included in the settlement.

The planned reforms to social care charging have been delayed until 2025 at the earliest. It is this delay that has enabled Government to redirect the funding allocated for social care reform as a short term increase in funding for current pressures in adult social care. A further tranche of funding for the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund for workforce reform for 2023-24 and 2024-25 was announced in July 2023 and included in the PLGFS.

However, the inadequacy of medium to long term sustainable funding for adult social care remains, and the lack of certainty that the additional funding available in 2023-24 and 2024-25 will be baselined for subsequent years.

The lack of detailed government departmental plans beyond 2024-25, the unexpected reduction in Service Grant for 2024-25, uncertainty over future levels of social care grants and the forecast that the planned growth in public spending is unlikely to be distributed evenly means that the assessment of this risk is still rated as deteriorating compared to previous years and more likely than not to continue to deteriorate over the medium term.

The long-awaited update and reform to the funding arrangements for local government have also been delayed again until 2025 at the earliest.

Despite increased certainty of funding for 2023-24 and 2024-25, medium term financial planning remains uncertain, particularly future spending and income forecasts. The plans for 2025-26 include a higher level of uncertainty. Plans can only be prepared based on prudent assumptions and forecasts for later years remain highly speculative.

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The adequacy of insurance arrangements



The Council's insurance policies were reviewed for January 2022. At that time a hardening market along with changing levels of risk resulted in a rise in premiums, with some deductibles being increased to mitigate this but there has been no further deterioration since. A fund audit confirms the levels of insurance reserve are adequate, however as the corporate contribution to the fund is remaining unchanged, more reliance will be placed on the reserve to balance insurance claims.

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## Appendix I

Of the eleven factors used to assess risk and the adequacy of reserves, five have been assessed as unchanged since last year, and six are deteriorating. However, there has been a deterioration since the revised draft budget published in January with the enhanced risk 2023-24 budget may not be brought back into balance, and the contingency may need to be activated and/or further use of reserves. The risk from availability of government grants has lessened with the additional grant in the final settlement and close resolution of funding to support UAS children.

The capacity to manage in-year budget pressures and strategy for dealing with demand and service delivery in the longer term, and financial standing of the Council (level of borrowing, debt outstanding, use of reserves, etc.) continue to be assessed as the most significant deterioration and therefore the biggest risks to the Council's financial sustainability and remain a cause for serious concern. There are aspects of these deteriorations as well as a number of the others that are largely due to external factors, but these still need to be managed and mitigated as much as possible. No weighting has been applied to the individual factors, but the general financial risk to the Council should now be regarded as substantially and severely increased compared with a year ago, which in turn, was increased from the year before and has hardly improved since the initial draft budget.

The amounts and purposes for existing reserves have been reviewed to ensure the Council achieves compliance with Local Authority Accounting Panel (LAAP) Bulletin 99. This bulletin sets out the recommendations on the purposes for holding reserves. Reserves are split between general reserves (working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cashflows/avoiding unnecessary temporary borrowing and contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events/emergencies) and earmarked reserves to build up funds for known/predicted specific events.

The administration's final draft 2024-25 budget includes a £2.4m net increase from changes in contributions and draw down from reserves in 2024-25, this has changed from the January draft due to reduced use of reserves to balance 2024-25 (from £12.8m to £9.1m) and additional drawdown from local taxation equalisation reserves for the estimated collection fund balance (£4.5m). This includes additional contributions to replenish the draw down from general reserves in 2022-23 over two years 2024-25 and 2025-26 and provision for the Council's contribution to the DSG reserve under the safety valve agreement, as well as a further £13.8m of drawdowns from/reduced contribution to corporate reserves and use of public health reserves as part of the one-off measures to balancing 2024-25 budget. A full reconciliation of all the changes to contributions and draw down from reserves for 2024-25 is available through the detailed dashboard of budget variations.