

Report of the Chief Officer Financial Services

Report to Corporate Governance and Audit Committee

Date: 22nd March 2019

Subject: Annual assurance report on the financial management and control arrangements and compliance with the Chief Finance Officer Protocol

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. The Chief Finance Officer's protocol, which constitutes Section 5k of the Council's constitution, requires that the Chief Finance Officer will report to the Corporate Governance and Audit Committee annually whether the arrangements set out in the protocol have been complied with and will include any proposals for amendments in the light of any issues that have arisen during the year.
2. Recognising the significant financial challenges facing the Council, and in the context of a number of high profile authorities running into financial difficulties, most noticeably Northamptonshire County Council who issued Section 114 notices in 2018, it is critical that the Council has in place sound arrangements for financial planning and management.
3. The Council has established an effective financial control environment and specifically robust arrangements for strategic financial planning combined with effective financial management and control.
4. The Council also has a sound framework for reviewing and challenging financial performance, has realistic plans in place to make the necessary savings in the 2019/2020 financial year, and is taking the appropriate steps to deliver them. Directorates have contingency plans in place to help to manage unforeseen variations against the budget.

5. The financial management and control framework is subject to a number of independent assessments, including the Council's Internal Audit function which has reviewed and given substantial assurance that there are robust controls in place to support the central co-ordination of the setting and monitoring of the Council's budget.
6. The financial management and control framework is continually being assessed and reviewed to ensure that it remains fit for purpose. This will continue and any issues and developments will be reported back to this Committee.

Recommendation

7. Members of the Corporate Governance and Audit committee are asked to note the assurances provided that the appropriate systems and procedures are in place to ensure that the Council delivers sound financial management and planning.

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1 The overall purpose of this report is to provide assurance to this committee that the Council has in place effective and robust arrangements for financial planning, financial control and other financial management activities. In doing so the report sets out the current arrangements for complying with the requirements of the Chief Finance Officer's protocol that are set out in Section 5k of Council's constitution.
- 1.2 Given the financial challenges facing the Council both currently and in the medium-term, it is essential that we continue to ensure that we have in place appropriate arrangements around financial performance, strategic financial planning, financial governance and financial control. This report outlines;
 - The key systems, controls and procedures,
 - New developments and improvements which have been put in place,
 - New developments in the near future
 - New risks and any issues arising.
- 1.3 The report aims to give members assurance that the financial control and financial governance arrangements in place are fit for purpose, up to date and embedded across the organisation.

2. Background information

- 2.1 This is the eighth year of reporting to this Committee on the financial planning and management arrangements of the Council. Previous reports have outlined the following arrangements;
 - a) Overarching controls;
 - The strategic role within the council of the Responsible Financial Officer;
 - Professionally qualified and accountable staff;
 - Financial regulations;
 - Monitoring of the integrity of financial systems;

- A statutory code of practice for treasury management arrangements.

b) Main financial processes;

- Budget preparation and setting.
- In-year budget monitoring and management.
- Closure of accounts and reporting.

2.2 Reports to this Committee over a number of years have provided a detailed assessment of these arrangements, along with appropriate assurances that they are fit for purpose and embedded. As in previous reports, rather than just report the main financial processes and arrangements, this report seeks to highlight any new developments or risks that have emerged over the last year. For information and reference, the basic processes and systems of financial control are contained within Appendix A.

2.3 The financial procedures and controls are part of the overall financial control environment and form a fundamental part of the assurances received by this Committee when approving the Annual Governance Statement as required by the Accounts & Audit Regulations 2015.

2.4 The Chief Finance Officer's protocol, which constitutes Section 5k of the Council's constitution, requires that the Chief Finance Officer will report to the Corporate Governance and Audit Committee annually whether the arrangements set out in the protocol have been complied with and will include any proposals for amendments in the light of any issues that have arisen during the year. The protocol provides some general information on how the Chief Finance Officer's statutory requirements will be discharged. A copy of the Chief Finance Officer's protocol is appended as Appendix B.

3. Main issues

3.1 Chief Financial Officer & Section 151 Officer

3.1.1 Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 requires local authorities to make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and appoint a Chief Financial Officer to have responsibility for those arrangements. The role of Chief Financial Officer and the statutory Section 151 officer within Leeds City Council is being fulfilled by the Chief Officer (Financial Services).

3.1.2 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) sets out the role of the Chief Financial Officer in local government in its Statement which was last updated in February 2016. This Statement sets how the requirements of legislation and professional standards should be fulfilled by Chief Financial Officers in the carrying out of their role.

3.1.2 In its Statement, CIPFA asserts that the Chief Financial Officer in a local authority;

- is a key member of the leadership team, helping it to develop and implement strategy and to resource and deliver the organisation's strategic objectives sustainably and in the public interest,

- must be actively involved in, and able to bring influence to bear on, all material business decisions to ensure immediate and longer term implications, opportunities and risks are fully considered, and alignment with the organisation's financial strategy,
- must lead the promotion and delivery by the whole organisation of good financial management so that public money is safeguarded at all times and used appropriately, economically, efficiently and effectively.
- to deliver these responsibilities the Chief Financial Officer must lead and direct a finance function that is resourced to be fit for purpose and must also be professionally qualified and suitably experienced.

3.1.3 The governance requirements in the Statement are that the Chief Financial Officer should be professionally qualified, report directly to the Chief Executive and be a member of the leadership team, with a status at least equivalent to other members. The Statement requires that if different organisational arrangements are adopted the reasons should be explained publicly in the Annual Governance Statement, together with an explanation as to how these different arrangements deliver the same impact.

3.1.4 As referenced in paragraph 3.1.1 the Council's designated statutory Section 151 officer currently holds the position of Chief Officer (Financial Services). In undertaking this statutory Section 151 function, and recognising that Chief Officer (Financial Services) reports to the Director of Resources & Housing, it is necessary in this governance statement to explain how these arrangements fulfil the statutory Section 151 officer role.

3.1.5 To this end, the Chief Officer (Financial Services);

- Will be a member of the Council's Leadership Team and have advance notice of all agendas and reports;
- Will attend meetings of the Council's Executive Board and have advance notice of all meetings, agenda and reports and the right to attend and speak;
- Will have advance notice, (including receiving agendas, minutes, reports and related papers) of all relevant meetings of the Authority (including meetings at which officer delegated decisions are taken) at which a binding decision may be made (including a failure to take a decision where one should have been taken);
- Will have the right to attend (including the right to be heard) any meeting of the Authority (including meetings at which officer delegated decisions are taken) before any binding decision is taken (including a failure to take a decision where one should have been taken);
- Will report directly to the Chief Executive in terms of their the statutory Section 151 responsibilities;

- Will have sufficient resources to enable them to address any matters concerning their Section 151 functions;
- Will appoint a deputy and keep them briefed on any relevant issues that they may be required to deal with in the absence of the Section 151 officer;
- Will meet regularly with the Head of Paid Service and the Monitoring Officer to consider and recommend action in connection with corporate governance issues and other matters of concern regarding any legal, ethical standards, probity, propriety, procedural or other constitutional issues that are likely to (or do) arise;
- Will report annually to the Corporate Governance and Audit committee regarding whether the arrangements are satisfactory and have been complied with and will include any proposals for amendments in the light of any issues that have arisen during the year.

3.1.6 These arrangements contribute towards satisfying the requirements of the Chief Finance Officer protocol which forms part of the Council's constitution.

3.2 Strategic Financial Planning.

3.2.1 It is clear that the current and future financial climate for local government represents a significant risk to the Council's priorities and ambitions. The Council continues to make every effort possible to protect the front line delivery of services, and whilst we have been able to successfully respond to the financial challenge so far, it is clear that the position is becoming more difficult to manage and it will be increasingly difficult over the coming years to maintain current levels of service provision without changes in the way the Council operates. The report to Council in February 2019 'Best Council Plan 2019/20 – 2020/21' explains how this will be done: that, while continuing its programme of efficiencies, the Council needs to work differently, to keep evolving and innovating in terms of *what* it does and *how* it does it, exploring different service models and greater integration with other organisations and skilling up staff to grow their commercial and business acumen.

3.2.2 The final local government finance settlement was announced on the 29th January 2019. Through the settlement, government re-confirmed the Council's Settlement Funding Assessment for 2019/20 and the North and West Yorkshire's successful bid to pilot 75% business rate retention. However there remains uncertainty after 2019/20 which is the final year of the current multi-year funding settlement. Specifically the implications of the Government's future spending plans from 2020/21 onwards remains unclear, the implications of implementing 75% business rate retention nationally have yet to be finalised by Government, the outcome of the Government's own Fair Funding review won't be known until the autumn of 2019 and the future funding of adult social care awaits the publication of the Green Paper.

3.2.3 The 2019/20 budget was approved by Full Council on the 27th February 2019. The headlines from the 2019/20 budget proposals, when compared to the 2018/19 budget, are as follows:

- An increase in the Council's net revenue budget of £5.8m to £516.7m;
- No revenue support grant from government: authorities piloting 75% business rates retention will forego revenue support grant and the value of the grant foregone is taken into account in setting the new business rates baseline as was the case when piloting 100% retention in 2018/2019.
- An increase in business rates income of £5.9m after this baseline adjustment;
- A budgeted contribution of £4.5m to the Council's general reserve;
- A reduction in the settlement funding assessment of £15.2m (7.7%);
- An increase in the general Council Tax of 2.99% together with a further 1% in respect of the Adult Social Care precept and an increase in the Council Tax base, generating an additional £15.1m of local funding;
- A combination of reduced funding and cost pressures means that the Council will need to deliver £22.6m of savings by March 2020 and;
- A net increase in staffing of 3 full time equivalent posts.

3.2.4 The Council has a proven and comprehensive approach to the development of its medium-term financial strategy, its annual budget setting and the identification of saving plans. The 2019/20 to 2021/22 Medium Term Financial Strategy was agreed by Executive Board in July 2018 and work is already underway to update this strategy in preparation for a report to the Executive Board in July 2019.

3.3 Financial Health Performance.

3.3.1 Budget management and monitoring is a continuous process which operates at a number of levels throughout the Council. Although Directors are ultimately responsible for the delivery of their Directorate budget, operationally these responsibilities are devolved down to budget holders across the various services. The Council's budget accountability framework clearly articulates roles and responsibilities and aligns financial accountability within service decision-making. Every budget has a named accountable budget holder, supported by a finance officer, who is responsible for managing, monitoring and forecasting income and expenditure against the approved budget.

3.3.2 Financial monitoring across the Council is facilitated by the Council's Financial Management Systems (FMS). On a monthly basis budget holders, taking a risk-based approach, review their spend and commitments against the approved budgets and project their year-end position. There are also instances where spending is controlled on systems other than the Council's FMS, for example community care payments. In these instances, procedures are in place to ensure that information held in these systems is regularly reconciled to FMS. Ensuring the integrity of the accounts is as important to our budget monitoring processes as it is to the accounts, and this is a key role of the Corporate Financial Integrity Forum which includes senior finance staff and is chaired by the Head of Finance (Financial Management).

- 3.3.3 Financial monitoring is undertaken on a risk-based approach where financial management resources are prioritised to support those areas of the budget that are judged to be at risk, for example the implementation of budget action plans, those budgets which are subject to fluctuating demand, key income budgets, etc. To reinforce this risk-based approach, specific support and reporting around the achievement of the key budget actions plans is in place in 2019/20.
- 3.3.4 As part of in-year budget management and monitoring, year-end projections for income and expenditure are submitted to the Chief Officer Financial Services, and the Corporate Leadership Team, and are also reviewed and challenged by the Corporate Finance Performance Group. In addition, budget monitoring reports are presented monthly to Directorate leadership teams, individual executive members, Executive Board and respective Scrutiny Committees.
- 3.3.5 In line with the Council's financial regulations and value of 'Spending Money Wisely', it is critical that where projected overspends are identified that action is taken to bring spending back into line with the approved budgets or to identify other sources of funding such as areas of under spend. All Directorates are required to have an agreed contingency plan in place before the beginning of each financial year.
- 3.3.6 Within the year, any decision to amend the approved budget has to be undertaken within the virement rules which, as part of the budget and policy framework, are agreed annually by Full Council as part of the annual budget setting process.

3.4 Capital Programme Controls and Monitoring

- 3.4.1 The Council recognises a number of pressures and development schemes that bring economic and wider benefits that have implications for the level of debt. The Council will look to manage these pressures and limit the impact on debt costs by ensuring where possible that new schemes are fully funded (either by external resources or departmental prudential borrowing), or are essential (under health and safety grounds or in order to ensure Council assets are maintained for continued service provision).
- 3.4.2 A revised approach to ensuring that new capital schemes are prioritised and injected at two points in the year has been implemented. This strategy does however allow for spend to save schemes or those of an immediate health and safety nature to be injected throughout the year. Proposals for new capital schemes must follow a rigorous business case process to demonstrate investment is aligned to capital objectives, meets the needs of the public, will deliver best value, and identifies the necessary resources. The proposal involves submission of bids for review by the Council's Strategic Investment Board before CLT, cabinet and member engagement and consideration takes place
- 3.4.2 One of the main risks in developing and managing the capital programme is that insufficient resources are available to fund the programme. A number of measures are in place to ensure that this risk can be managed effectively:

- Ensuring written confirmation of external funding is received prior to contractual commitments being entered into;
- Monthly monitoring of overall capital expenditure and resources forecasts alongside actual contractual commitments;
- The capital programme includes a central contingency to cater for any unforeseen circumstances. In addition individual programmes and schemes contain a risk provision for unexpected circumstances;
- Monthly updates of capital receipt forecasts prepared, using a risk based approach, by the Director of City Development;
- Quarterly monitoring of the Council's VAT partial exemption position to ensure that full eligibility to VAT reclaimed can be maintained
- Compliance with Financial Procedure rules, Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules to ensure the Council's position is protected.

3.4.3 The forecast of borrowing costs resulting from capital expenditure are budgeted for within the revenue budget. In the year following capital expenditure, as well as budgeting for interest costs, the revenue budget must make provision for the minimum revenue provision on borrowings which is accounted for over the life of the asset. Forecasts for the debt budget are dependent upon the interest rate assumptions, the likely level of capital spend and the Council's cash balances. The affordability of new borrowing and existing borrowing is reported on a monthly basis as part of the financial health reporting to the Executive Board, with specific treasury strategy reports presented to the Executive Board at least three times a year.

3.5 Financial Control Arrangements.

3.5.1 External Audit provide independent assurance on the Council's accounts and accounting practice as well as the arrangements to ensure value for money and the controls around the key financial systems. The 2017/18 KPMG's Annual Audit Letter received at this Committee on the 23rd November 2018 concluded that Leeds City Council had "made proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources". In respect of financial resilience KPMG concluded in the same Annual Audit letter that the "Authority has adequate arrangements in place regarding the management of its financial risks and potential impact on resource deployment".

3.5.2 It is important that this Committee is informed of the key assurances provided and that these processes are still fit for purpose and are being complied with. Members should therefore note the following assurances;

- The Council has tried and trusted arrangements for treasury management which complies with CIPFA's Code of Practice on Treasury Management and the Prudential Code. At the same time as this report this Committee will also be receiving separate Treasury Management Governance Report which reports on the robustness of these arrangements.
- In response to the government's deficit reduction plans and subsequent cuts in the grants which we receive from government, the Council has delivered

significant reductions in expenditure and increases in income with a further £22.6m of savings assumed in the 2019/20 budget. Establishing robust and achievable budgets under such difficult financial circumstances provides strong evidence that the financial process underpinning the budget and budget monitoring processes are effective. Grant Thornton, who are now the Council's external auditors having replaced KPMG, will provide in respect of the 2018/19 accounts the independent assurance that the Council has made proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. Grant Thornton have already commenced upon the process of providing this independent assurance.

- Internal Audit continues to provide assurance to members that all of the key core financial systems and processes are robust and are operating effectively. The financial management and control framework is subject to a number of independent assessments which include annual reviews of the major financial systems undertaken by the Council's Internal Audit function. Internal Audit has provided a substantial assurance opinion, which is the highest level, for each of the major financial system audits completed year to date. This includes the audit of Financial Management Central Controls which provides independent assurance that there are robust controls in place to support the central co-ordination of the setting and monitoring of the Council's budget.
- The Corporate Financial Integrity Forum, which meets each month and is chaired by the Head of Finance (Financial Management), has a key role within the financial control environment and its function is to help ensure that there are procedures and operations in place to provide the necessary quality, integrity and reliability of financial information and accounts. The overall purpose is to help ensure the financial stewardship of the Authority by monitoring;
 - The regular review and reconciliation of financial systems to the financial ledger.
 - The regular review and reconciliation of balance sheet accounts.
 - The requirement to have effective systems and procedures in place to facilitate the posting of financial data to the ledger.
 - That there are up to date bank mandates for all bank accounts to which LCC officers are signatories and that bank statements are regularly received and reconciled.
 - Reviewing any other area of financial control or financial governance risk, including partnerships and other joint working arrangements.
 - Areas of concern affecting financial integrity are investigated and reported on.

3.6 Key issues and developments for 2019/20 and future challenges and improvements;

- 3.6.1 In December 2018 the Government notified the Council that the North and West Yorkshire Business Rates Pool bid to pilot 75% business rates retention had been successful. This pilot scheme is for one year only and allows the North and West Yorkshire Pool to retain all additional growth in business rates above the business rate baselines determined by Government and associated Section 31 grants. For the North and West Yorkshire pilot this additional income is estimated to be in the region of £29m with the Pool retaining £6m to continue to support and enable regional economic growth. The other £23m will be allocated to the member authorities themselves to improve financial stability within their organisations. Of the 50% allocated to member authorities, half will be based on each authority's actual additional growth and half will be redistributed by population. For Leeds this additional business rates income as a result of the Pilot is estimated to be £7.97m
- 3.6.2 On December 2018 the Government issued their consultation document in respect of the planned introduction of 75% business rate retention nationally from 2020/21. Whilst the proposals include options to mitigate volatility in income from business rates, the plans to devolve business rates need to be managed carefully as they are a volatile source of income that can vary according to valuations, appeals and how the national and local economy is performing with local authorities ill-equipped to absorb short-term risks and economic shocks.
- 3.6.3 In December 2018 the Government issued a further Fair Funding Review consultation document on proposals to simplify the assessment of local authorities' relative needs. It also considered the type of adjustment that will need to be made to an authority's relative needs assessment to take account of the relative resources available to them and principles for the design of transitional arrangements. The current funding baselines for local authorities are based on an assessment of relative needs and resources introduced over ten years ago and on data which has not been refreshed since the introduction of the 50% business rates retention system in 2013/14. Even under a scheme of 100% business rate retention, there will still be a need for a mechanism whereby resources are re-allocated between local authorities to reflect relative needs and resources. The key risk is the impact that the review will have upon the level of resources available to Leeds and the Government themselves recognise that "introducing a new needs and resources formula could result in significant changes to the funding baselines of some local authorities." The outcome of this consultation won't be known until the autumn of 2019, and alongside a similar timescale for the publication of the Government's future spending proposals, contributes towards a period of uncertainty with regard to the Council's financial projections from April 2020 onwards.
- 3.6.4 2019/20 is the second transitional year of the national funding formula for schools. During this transitional period local authorities will be allocated an amount based on the new national funding formula but they will still decide on a local formula for allocating this to schools. Local authorities will also continue to determine a local formula in 2020/21, a year longer than previously thought. The schools funding formula for 2019/20 has now been approved following consultation with all schools and the Schools Forum. In line with the majority view, some funding will be transferred from schools to provide additional funding for pupils with high needs, in order to address to ongoing pressures in this area. After taking account of this

transfer and the views from the consultation, the 2019/20 funding formula will move as close as possible to the national funding formula. In addition work continues to be carried out to assess the financial impact and risk to the Council should maintained schools become academies.

- 3.6.5 In addition, new CIPFA codes and government guidance require a local authority to produce a Capital and Investment strategy. The capital element of the strategy sets out the principles that underpin the Council's 3 capital programme and as such how it supports the corporate priorities and objectives. The strategy sets the framework for all aspects of the Council's capital expenditure and investment decisions. It supports strategic planning, asset management and robust option appraisal. The investment strategy covers the council's approach to non-treasury investment decisions. Treasury investment decisions are already contained within the Treasury Management Policy Statement that is presented as part of the annual Treasury Management report. The Capital and Investment strategy was approved in February as an appendix to the Capital Programme report. It also included elsewhere on this agenda as an appendix to the annual Treasury Management Governance Report.
- 3.6.6 Financial management systems - the current Financial Management System (FMS) is an in-house developed and managed Oracle-based system. The system is an excellent ledger system, but the general feel of the system is not modern and not user-friendly and there are specific gaps in the system's capabilities, for example procurement/purchasing. It is also anticipated that further economies and efficiencies could be realised through a review of our Financial Management System and following a soft market exercise that was undertaken at the end of 2018 to review what other Financial Management Systems can offer, the decision has been taken to undertake an option appraisal and subsequently develop a business case to determine whether to keep and develop FMS or commence a procurement exercise to replace FMS.
- 3.6.7 Financial Management System (FMS) – the integrity of the data within the Council's core FMS is very much dependent on the data and information from a multiple of source feeder systems, for example SAP for employee costs, Mosaic Framework- for foster carer payments and CIS for Adult Social Care payments, Qube for property rental income, etc. In 2019/20 the work programme for the Corporate Financial Integrity Forum will include seeking specific assurances as to the integrity of the source data that feeds into the core FMS, and in particular the new Civica system which is being introduced during the year for housing management functions.
- 3.6.8 Supporting the Best Council Plan – the 2019/20 budget recognises the Council's ambition to be the best city by being a strong economy and a compassionate city as well as achieving it best City priorities. Financial Services have a key role to play in this around supporting the Council to realise its ambitions. As well as ensuring that resources are aligned in the budget to support these priorities, specific support is being provided in respect of the priorities such as the Clean Air Zone and Housing Growth.

- 3.6.9 Financial Services review – as part of the ongoing Council-wide review of support services Financial Services have a budget savings plan target of £0.3m with a commensurate reduction in staffing posts by March 2020. Given the reductions that have already been achieved to date, and the scale of the challenge going forward, the finance function will continue to review the way that it operates and realise the benefits of being geographically based together in the Civic Hall which has facilitated increased effectiveness, economy and efficiency of the function.
- 3.6.10 In 2018 a number of high profile local authorities ran into significant financial difficulties. Most noticeable of these was Northamptonshire County Council whose Section 151 officer first issued a Section 114 notice in February 2018 as in his opinion the Council was at risk of not being able to balance its budget. A subsequent MHCLG Best Value inspection of the Council identified a number of key weaknesses that had ultimately led to the issue of the first Section 114 notice. As a result of this all local authorities are under increased scrutiny to demonstrate that they have appropriate governance arrangements in place to manage their financial affairs. This report forms part of that re-assurance to members with regards to the Council's financial management and control arrangements.
- 3.6.11 In response to a number of high profile authorities reporting financial difficulties CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) have brought forward proposals for the creation of what is termed a financial resilience index for local government. Utilising historic figures this index will measure the resilience of individual authorities to continue to deliver annual savings and manage significant financial shocks while still pursuing ambitious goals for their local communities. These proposals will be publicly launched in the autumn of 2019 and that reference will have to be made to the index in robustness statements (section 25 of the LGA 2003) which Section 151 officers are required to make as a part of the annual budget setting process. It would appear that CIPFA are looking to bring this in for the 2020/21 budget and it will reinforce the new CIPFA Financial Management Code which is to become operational in advance of 2020/21.
- 3.6.12 Implementation of the code will complement the Council's Statutory Financial Officer's statement, which is required under the 2003 Local Government Act, on the adequacy of on the adequacy of reserves as a part of the annual budget setting process. It is also good practice for the Authority to have a policy on the level of its general reserve and to ensure that it is monitored and maintained.

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 Extensive consultation was undertaken as part of the budget setting process, as outlined in the Revenue Budget and Council Tax 2019/20 report to Full Council on the 27th February 2019. This report has no direct issues requiring consultation or engagement.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

- 4.2.1 A specific equality impact assessment of the budget at a strategic level was undertaken and was reported to Full Council on the 27th February 2019 as part of

the Revenue Budget and Council Tax 2019/20 report. This report has no direct equality and diversity/cohesion issues.

4.3 Council policies and Best Council Plan

4.3.1 The 2019/20 – 2020/21 Best Council Plan's ambitions, outcomes and priorities underpin the 2019/20 budget and have been used to ensure that the Council's financial resources are directed towards its policies and priorities and, conversely, that these policies and priorities themselves are affordable. Spending money wisely is one of the core Council's values, with the priority being for Directorates and services to keep within their budgets. Ensuring that the Council has appropriate financial management systems and procedures in place is clearly a key aspect and as such this report does provide some assurances, albeit not comprehensive, assurance that money is being spent wisely.

4.3.2 The terms of reference of the Corporate Governance & Audit Committee require the Committee to consider the adequacy of the Council's policies and practices to ensure compliance with statutory guidance and the adequacy of the Council's corporate governance arrangements.

4.4 Resources and value for money

4.4.1 This report deals with the Council's overall financial control environment and specific arrangements for ensuring effective financial management and control and is aimed at providing assurance to members as to their fitness for purpose.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information and call in

4.5.1 Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 requires local authorities to make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and appoint a Chief Financial Officer have responsibility for those arrangements. The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 came into force on the 1st April 2015 and set out the responsibility for internal control, the published accounts and audit.

4.5.2 This report does not require a key or major decision and is therefore not subject to call-in.

4.6 Risk Management

4.6.1 An analysis of the key budget risks is maintained and subject to monthly review. Any significant and new risks are contained in the budget monitoring reports submitted to meetings of the Executive Board, together with any identified slippage on budget savings plans.

4.6.2 The Council's external auditors provide a risk assessment on the Council's financial resilience and the accounts process as part of their interim audit. As part of the interim report, officers are able to outline the processes put in place to mitigate these risks.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The Responsible Financial Officer has established an effective overall financial control environment framework for financial planning and exercises effective financial management and control which, in his opinion, discharge both his statutory responsibilities and are consistent with the Chief Financial Officer protocol which forms part of the Council's constitution.
- 5.2 The framework of control and developments outlined in this report are fit for purpose, up to date, embedded and are regularly complied with.
- 5.3 Members can also take assurance from a number of rigorous reviews and assessments undertaken, including;
- Internal Audit provide annual assurances on the major financial systems and controls.
 - Member scrutiny via Scrutiny Boards, Executive Board and Full Council ensures that the budget continues to meet the council's priorities and objectives. In addition, Corporate Governance & Audit Committee approves the Council's accounts.
 - Officer review of the financial strategy, annual budget and in-year budget management and monitoring processes through the Financial Strategy Group, Finance Performance Group, Directorate leadership teams and the Corporate Leadership Team.
 - Officer review of the adequacy of the control arrangements through the corporate Financial Integrity Forum.
 - External Audit evaluated the Council's key financial systems as part of their audit work in respect of the 2017/18 accounts and will do so again as part of the 2018/19 audit. They also provide an opinion in respect of the Council's financial resilience.
- 5.4 Whilst the above arrangements should provide members with substantial assurance that the Council does have in place appropriate systems and procedures to deliver sound financial management and planning, it is important that this is kept continually under review and improved upon where appropriate.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Members of the Corporate Governance and Audit committee are asked to note the assurances provided that the appropriate systems and procedures are in place to ensure that the Council delivers sound financial management and planning.

7. Background documents¹

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing

7.1 None

Appendix A

1. Overarching financial control environment

1.1 In order that the Council's statutory Chief Financial Officer can discharge his duties a number of overarching arrangements and controls are in place as part of an effective financial control environment;

1.1.1 **Chief Financial Officer** - The Chief Officer Financial Services, in the role of the Council's Chief Financial Officer, undertakes a strategic role and has established appropriate arrangements to discharge his responsibilities in line with CIPFA's recommended practice.

1.1.2 **Professionally qualified and accountable staff** - financial management across the council, both corporately and directorate-based is delivered by colleagues who are managerially responsible to the Chief Officer Financial Services. Many of the staff within the Financial Management service are professionally qualified accountants with many years of experience, and are themselves personally and professionally responsible for their actions and advice. This is reinforced through the council's performance and appraisal scheme which incorporates identifying key skills for finance staff, programmes of training, development and continuing professional development and peer review forums to ensure integrity as to the accounts and budget management and monitoring processes.

1.1.3 **Capital and treasury management arrangements** – The approach to setting the capital programme has been revised with the aim of ensuring that capital spending decisions and affordability are considered at the same time that the revenue budget is set for the following year. Directorates submit their scheme spending intentions for the next three years and are challenged and reviewed by the Council's strategic Investment Board. Proposals for new capital schemes must be accompanied by robust business cases and ensure that they are aligned to the Best Council Plan objectives. Only those priority and deliverable schemes are put forward for inclusion within the capital programme. The framework seeks to ensure that schemes that have a revenue implication are only injected in February and November. However schemes of an essential health and safety nature or those where the debt cost is supported by a revenue stream or costs savings can be injected at any point in the year.

1.1.4 The capital programme continues to be closely monitored with Directorates and progress on schemes reported on a monthly basis. Quarterly updates are presented to the Executive Board. The cost and affordability of the borrowing required to fund the capital programme continues to be managed within the debt budget. The affordability of new borrowing and existing borrowing is reported on a monthly basis as part of the financial health reporting to the Executive Board, with specific treasury strategy reports presented to the Executive Board at least three times a year. A further report to ensure compliance with the prudential code, treasury management code of practice

and internal audit compliance is presented to Corporate Governance and Audit Committee on an annual basis.

1.1.5 The Council has also produce a Capital and Investment strategy that is annexed to the Capital programme update report. The capital strategy element sets out the principles that support the Council's 3 year capital programme and as such how it supports corporate priorities and objectives. It provides a high level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contribute to the provisions of services along with an overview of how associated risk is managed and the implications for future financial sustainability.

1.1.6 The investment strategy element considers three broad areas:

- treasury management – covered in the Treasury management strategy document annexed to the annual treasury strategy report;
- other financial investments such as loans and equity investment which are made to achieve service objectives; and
- non-financial investments such as property.

1.1.7 **Financial Regulations** - The council has a number of overarching Financial Regulations contained within the Council's constitution. Each regulation is supported by a series of toolkits to provide supporting guidance.

1.1.8 **Integrity of the accounts** - The integrity of all the financial data is of fundamental importance in ensuring financial information is both timely and accurate in order to correctly inform decision making. This is a key role of the corporate Integrity Forum which includes senior finance staff and is chaired by the Head of Finance – Financial Management. The forum reviews all key financial control accounts such as cash and tax; the validity of all feeder systems into the financial ledger; along with such things as system access rights and coding structures.

2. Main financial processes

2.1 The above arrangements are intrinsic to all aspect of the overall financial control environment but are perhaps best illustrated in practice through the annual financial cycle which covers;

- Financial planning and budget preparation and setting.
- In-year budget management and monitoring.
- Closure of accounts and year-end reporting.

2.1.1 Financial planning and budget setting

2.1.1.1 Local authorities are under a statutory duty to set a balanced budget each year. Whilst at a basic level this can simply be seen as an annual exercise, given the financial challenges facing local authorities this needs to be set within a context

of a medium term financial strategy. Since 2016/17, the first year covered by the 2015 Spending Review, the Council has delivered significant reductions in expenditure and increases in income and the 2019/20 approved budget requires the realisation of a further £22.6m of savings.

- 2.1.1.2 The Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy provides a framework within which the annual budget process can sit. The strategy does not attempt to provide a detailed budget but it does recognise the Council's ambitions, policies and priorities, sets out the main financial challenges facing the Council and provides a broad framework for the delivery of efficiencies and savings to bridge the identified funding gap. This financial strategy was last presented to the Executive Board in July 2018 and will be updated and reported to the Executive Board in July 2019 to reflect the 2019/20 local government finance settlement and the Council's 2019/20 budget.
- 2.1.1.3 Within the context of the financial strategy, as well as being a financial expression of the Council's policies and priorities, the annual budget is also a means of controlling spending to the available resources and re-enforcing financial accountability and responsibility.
- 2.1.1.4 The annual budget process is led by the Chief Officer Financial Services and involves a wide range of officers and members across the council. The process starts soon after the budget setting of the previous year with an early assessment of available funding and key pressures. Undertaking such an assessment involves a range of assumptions including the level of core government support as reflected through the Settlement Funding Assessment (SFA), other specific funding, council tax base, the determination of the level of business rates receivable, the level of inflation, demand and demography trends, interest rates, levels of income and fees & charges as well as new or developing spending pressures. This part of the process is led by corporate finance staff, but will involve financial and non-financial staff based in directorates and service areas. The process will, at such an early stage, invariably identify a budget shortfall. This high level exercise will be subject to a number of iterations with assumptions being subject to regular review and reassessment.
- 2.1.1.5 At the same time Directorates start to prepare detailed estimates for the forthcoming year although ultimately the totality of these estimates need to be consistent with the overall resources envelope that is available to the Council.
- 2.1.1.6 The development of options to balance to available resources is a key aspect in any budget process and needs to balance both capital and revenue pressures. This clearly can be a difficult area of work and whilst needing to be pragmatic and sufficient, it is crucial that the process reflects the Council's ambitions, policies and priorities. This is ensured through close engagement of senior officers and Executive Board portfolio members at appropriate points in the process.
- 2.1.1.7 The Council's constitution determines that initial budget proposals are submitted to scrutiny eight weeks prior to the council's budget meeting. In practice this is after Executive Board approval, and requires the proposals to be submitted to the December and January meetings of the respective Scrutiny Boards.

- 2.1.1.8 Budget preparation and setting is a demanding process and operates to strict timescales. This places an emphasis upon not just process planning but also engagement with elected members and senior management.
- 2.1.1.9 In many ways the budget is an exercise in managing risk. With limited resources, it is inevitable that elements of the budget will depend upon actions which have yet to happen, or upon assumptions that may in reality vary from those assumed at budget setting. As such an important element of the budget process is the development and maintenance of a list of key budget risks which attempts to identify and assess the risks built into the budget. It is important to appreciate that the time frame of the list of budget risks is a single budget year. The list of key budget risks not only assists in assessing the robustness of the budget but also acts as a means of assessing the adequacy of the general reserve in that it provides an assessment of what may go wrong in-year.
- 2.1.1.10 Reaching a view of the robustness of the budget and the adequacy of the general reserve not only requires consideration of the processes and systems used in preparing the estimates, but also a consideration of the strength of the arrangement in place for internal financial management and control.

2.1.2 In-year Budget Management and Monitoring

- 2.1.2.1 Budget management and monitoring is a continuous process which operates at a variety of levels throughout the Council. Although Directors are ultimately responsible for the delivery of their Directorate budget, operationally these responsibilities are devolved down to budget holders within the Council. In line with the budget holder accountability framework, every budget has a named budget holder who is responsible for managing and monitoring income and expenditure against the approved budget.
- 2.1.2.2 In advance of the financial year, and after the revenue budget for the forthcoming year has been approved, Directorates are requested to produce budget action plans for their services which detail what action is required to deliver the approved budget e.g. staffing restructure or a delegated decision to implement price increases; when the action is required to be completed by and; who is responsible for delivering the action required. In addition through taking a risk based approach to their respective budgets, Directorates are requested to identify contingency arrangements that could be implemented to address any variations from budgeted assumptions that will result in an overspend. The outcome of this exercise also informs how much is required in the Council's general reserve to provide for risks.
- 2.1.2.2 Financial and budget monitoring in the Council is facilitated by the Council's financial management system (FMS). The system holds information as to the approved budgets, actual spend and income, commitments and year-end projections. On a monthly basis budget holders review spend to date, against the approved budget and against profiled budgets. In addition, budget holders are also required to predict their end of year position which is done with the assistance of directorate-based finance staff – this clearly does involve a degree of judgement. In practice some budgets are more difficult to manage and forecast than others. There are also instances where

spending is controlled on systems other than the Council's main FMS, for example community care payments. In these instances, procedures are in place to ensure that information held in these systems is regularly reconciled to FMS.

- 2.1.2.3 Financial monitoring is undertaken and operates on a hierarchical basis, whereby the monthly projections of budget monitoring officers and budget holders are aggregated upwards to be reviewed by budget holders, Chief Officers and Directors. The year-end projections for each Directorate are submitted to corporate finance and are reviewed and challenged each month by the Council's Finance Performance Group (FPG). This group is primarily made up of Heads of Finance and is chaired by the Head of Finance (Financial Management). The year-end projections are then reported monthly to the Council's Corporate Leadership Team and the Executive Board. As well as being accurate, monitoring also needs to be timely, and as such monthly reporting is operated according to a strict timetable. In addition, at each monthly FPG meeting, monitoring statements in relation to the capital programme and debt are also reviewed. Monitoring performance reports on the capital programme, capital receipts, council tax and business rate collection, and treasury/debt activities are considered during the year by the Executive Board.
- 2.1.2.4 In line with the Council's values of Spending Money Wisely, it is critical that where projected overspends are identified that action is taken to bring spending back into line with the approved estimates or to identify other sources of funding such as areas of under spend. All Directorates have agreed contingency plans identified to the value of the key risks identified in the budgets. In-year, any decision to amend budgets is undertaken within the virement rules agreed annually by Full Council as part of the budget-setting process. All such decisions are recorded as part of the delegated decision making process.
- 2.1.2.5 It is also important to appreciate that both External and Internal Audit also review our budget and budget monitoring arrangements in order to assess whether they are satisfied that, in all significant respects, the Council has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

2.1.3 Closure of accounts

- 2.1.3.1 The first stages of the closedown process is a natural extension of the budget monitoring arrangements with budget holders compiling the final figures for their areas of responsibility to determine an outturn position to be reported to Executive Board, in June each year. This report compares the budget to the final outturn for each directorate and provides an explanation as to the reason for any variation, including explanations of major variations on individual capital schemes. This comparison to the budget provides a clear indication as to the robustness of the original budget setting and the quality of the budget monitoring process.
- 2.1.3.2 Alongside the budget monitoring process, significant accounting decisions are referred to the strategic accounting team within corporate finance to ensure compliance with applicable accounting standards. The Council's external

auditors, Grant Thornton, are also consulted on such decisions to ensure they are agreed by all parties before a major financial decision is made.

- 2.1.3.3 All changes to accounting practice are assessed and, where applicable, implemented by officers in corporate finance. All finance officers and relevant directorate officers are informed of the implications of any changes. The application of appropriate accounting practice is assessed by the council's external auditors and reported back to members of this Committee.
- 2.1.3.4 Staff in corporate finance oversee the closedown process and the Chief Officer Financial Services will review both the accounts themselves and the processes used to compile them, before certifying signing them as a true and fair view. The Council's external auditors provide members with independent assurance that, in their opinion, the accounts do reflect a true and fair view of the council's financial position and that they comply with proper accounting practice.
- 2.1.3.5 New accounting requirements and outturn projections are taken into account when the budgets are set for the following year.