

Report title: Everyone's Essex Annual Plan and Budget 2023/24 – Part 2: Budget and Plan	
Report to: Council	
Report author: Councillor Christopher Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs and Councillor Louise McKinlay, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance	
Date: 9 February 2023	For: Decision
Enquiries to: Nicole Wood, Executive Director for Corporate Services (Nicole.Wood@essex.gov.uk), with respect to the budget or Richard Puleston, Director, Policy (Richard.Puleston@essex.gov.uk) with respect to the annual plan.	
County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1 Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 Everyone's Essex sets out the Council's strategic aims and commitments for the period of the current administration along with key principles for how we operate as an organisation including commitment to ensuring excellent service delivery. In line with Everyone's Essex, this budget seeks to align our financial resources to ensure delivery against our commitments over the next three years whilst also maintaining well-funded and sustainable core and statutory services that can continue to deliver improved outcomes to our local residents.

2 Purpose of the Report

- 2.1 The report presents information to enable Full Council to consider and approve the Everyone's Essex Annual Plan and Budget 2023/24 including the revenue budget, capital programme, financial strategy and capital strategy. In doing so, the report of the Section 151 (S151) Officer on the robustness of the 2023/24 Budget and adequacy of reserves, included elsewhere on this agenda, should be considered.
- 2.2 The Annual Plan publishes the Council's plans for 2023/24, highlighting those actions that the Council will focus on. It also includes a section on performance detailing how the Council will measure performance against the organisational aims and the outcomes the Council expects to see following the implementation of those actions.
- 2.3 The statutory process for setting the budget is that a budget is recommended to the Council made by or on behalf of the Leader. On 17 January 2023 the Cabinet made recommendations to the Council, but the Cabinet Member for

Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs was authorised to amend those recommendations in the light of any revised information, for example relating to council tax bases or actual council tax receipts collected by billing authorities.

- 2.4 The recommendations from the Cabinet are set out in section 3.
- 2.5 The statutory deadline for the final information from billing authorities was 31 January 2023. Given the proximity to the time that the Council agenda was required to be published, there has not been time to reflect any changes between the final and anticipated figures from billing authorities. Any impact arising from this will be provided as an addendum report issued before or at the meeting with revised recommendations from the Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs.
- 2.6 Additionally, details of the final settlement had not been received at the time the Council agenda was required to be published. We anticipate that this will be received on or before 7 February 2023. If final settlement becomes available in the period between production of the report and the Council meeting, the impact will also be set out in the addendum.
- 2.7 It is therefore likely that an addendum report will need to be circulated before the meeting to reflect final information received from billing authorities and the final settlement.

3 Decision Areas and Recommendations

Everyone's Essex Annual Plan and Revenue Budget:

- 3.1 That the Everyone's Essex Annual Plan and budget be approved in the form appended to this report (Appendix A).
- 3.2 That the net cost of services to be set at **£1,164.2million (m)** for 2023/24 – Appendix A (page 26).
- 3.3 That the net revenue budget requirement to be set at **£1,005.2m** (net cost of services less general government grants) for 2023/24 – Appendix A (page 30).
- 3.4 That the total council tax funding requirement be set at **£799.0m** for 2023/24 – Appendix A (page 30).
- 3.5 That Essex County Council's element of the council tax be increased by 3.5% comprising of a 1.5% increase in general council tax and 2.0% adult social care precept. This would result in the Essex County Council element of the council tax being **£1,450.17** for a Band D property in 2023/24. A full list of bands is as follows:

Council Tax Band	2022/23 £	2023/24 £
Band A	934.08	966.78
Band B	1,089.76	1,127.91
Band C	1,245.44	1,289.04
Band D	1,401.12	1,450.17
Band E	1,712.48	1,772.43
Band F	2,023.84	2,094.69
Band G	2,335.20	2,416.95
Band H	2,802.24	2,900.34

- 3.6 Full Council approve the Essex County Council element of the council tax for each category of dwelling and the precepts on each of the council tax billing authorities for 2023/24, together with the final tax base, as set out in the table below:

Billing Authority	2023/24 Final Tax Base Band D Equivalent	2023/24 Gross precept £000
Basildon	61,230	88,794,199
Braintree	55,801	80,920,936
Brentwood	33,870	49,117,258
Castle Point	31,258	45,329,414
Chelmsford	70,763	102,618,220
Colchester	65,865	95,515,592
Epping Forest	54,884	79,590,550
Harlow	28,483	41,305,192
Maldon	25,892	37,548,208
Rochford	32,889	47,694,496
Tendring	51,050	74,031,179
Uttlesford	39,007	56,567,086
Total for ECC	550,992	799,032,330

- 3.7 That the proposed total schools budget be set at **£639.2m** for 2023/24 which will be funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant, Pupil Premium Grant, Universal Free School Meals Grant, PE and Sports Premium Grant, COVID-19 Recovery Premium Grant, Sixth Form Grant, Teachers Pay and Pension Grants, NQT Grant, Senior Mental Health Lead Training Grant and YPLA Funding Grant. The majority of this will be passed through to maintained schools.

- 3.8 That the underlying balance on the General Balance be set at **£68.1m** as at 1 April 2023 (Appendix A, Annex 1, page 58).
- 3.9 That the capital payments guideline be set at **£274.9m** for 2023/24 (Appendix A, page 29)
- 3.10 That for the purposes of section 52ZB of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 the Council formally determines that the increase in council tax is not such as to trigger a referendum.

Capital Strategy:

- 3.11 That the 2023/24 to 2026/27 Prudential Indicators and limits, together with updated limits for 2022/23 as set out in Annexes 3A and 3B of the Capital Strategy (Appendix A, pages 96-100) be approved. This includes an authorised limit for external debt of **£1,260m** for the 2023/24 financial year, which defines the maximum amount of external borrowing by the Council, and represents the statutory limit determined under section 3(1) of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 3.12 That the Treasury Management Strategy for 2023/24 be approved, comprising:
 - a. Borrowing strategy, as set out in Annex 3 of the Capital Strategy (Appendix A, Annex 3, page 81).
 - b. Treasury management investments strategy, as set out in Annex 3 and Annex 3D of the Capital Strategy (Appendix A, Annex 3, page 88).
 - c. Indicative strategy for commercial investment activities, as set out in Annex 3 of the Capital Strategy (Appendix A, Annex 3, page 91).
- 3.13 That the policy for making a prudent level of revenue provision for the repayment of debt, (the Minimum Revenue Provision policy) as set out in Annex 3C of the Capital Strategy (Appendix A, Annex 3, page 101), be approved.
- 3.14 That the revised Treasury Management Policy Statement (Appendix A, Annex 3, page 108) and Treasury Management Practices (Appendix A, Annex 3, page 109), which set out the policies, objectives, and approach to treasury management, are adopted.

Pay Policy Statement:

- 3.15 That the Council adopts the Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24 as set out in Appendix C.

4 Changes since the Cabinet Meeting

- 4.1 There are no changes to the proposals since the Cabinet Meeting but as set out in section 2 of the report, it is likely that there will be changes between the issue of the council summons in which case an addendum will be circulated to members.

5 Statement of the Executive Director Corporate Services (S151 Officer)

- 5.1 The Executive Director for Corporate Services is the Chief Finance Officer appointed under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and is also the Chief Financial Officer for regulatory and statutory purposes.
- 5.2 The report by the Executive Director for Corporate Services (S151 officer) on the robustness of the estimates, reserves and capital strategy is set out in the separate report elsewhere on this agenda.

6 Other Issues

- 6.1 The findings of the Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment (ECIA) carried out are included at Appendix B of this report.
- 6.2 The review of the fees and charges schedule is an annual process with fees and charges being agreed by officers or by the relevant Cabinet Member. The proposed fees and charges for 2023/24 budget are published on the Council's website. These are provided for information only and none of the recommendations in this report ask Council to set these fees and charges. It should be noted that the fees and charges policy sets out charges should normally be increased annually by the Retail Price Index (RPI), subject to cost recovery and unsustainable charges, and subject to legal requirements about setting charges. However, given the RPI rate is now at a 40 year high, and residents are facing the impact of cost of living, it is proposed that the rate set for 2023/24 is 5.9% compared to the latest RPI figure of 14%.

7 Relevance to the Council's Everyone's Essex Strategy and Plan

- 7.1 The Annual Plan for 2023/24 covers the action the Council will take next year to contribute to Everyone's Essex, alongside the Budget. The Annual Plan is set out in Appendix A.

8. Internal and External Consultation

- 8.1 All Executive Directors and Directors have been involved in the preparation of the Annual Plan and the Budget.
- 8.2 Through budget consultation meetings the Council engages with representatives from the unions.
- 8.3 Public consultation was undertaken throughout November 2022, for a period of 4 weeks. Through this exercise, the Council gathered the views of residents and

those who run businesses within the county. The consultation was promoted via the Essex residents panel, through the Council's corporate communications channels and through digital / social media.

- 8.4 There were 2,434 responses to the consultation (including both residents and self-employed/business owners). The full report on the budget consultation is shown in Appendix D. The key messages from respondents to the consultation are that:

Essex-wide issues and resident concerns

- The National Health Service/health care is viewed by participants as the most important issue facing Essex today. Participants also see social care provision and crime/community safety as a key issue to be addressed.
- There is an immediate concern around inflation/prices for participants. They have concerns around road repairs and traffic congestion which has become far more prevalent and question whether the infrastructure can withstand this.

Commitment priorities

- When asked about things that should be prioritised for immediate action, participants identified; Developing Essex infrastructure; Supporting those who care for the sick or vulnerable children; Securing high standard education and Providing support to struggling families.
- Residents feel accessibility to health services, traffic levels and road safety are key priorities, and that the Council needs to help support social care provision needed for older people within our communities and address climate changes.

Spending decisions

- Participants did not agree between strategies of spending allocation (see appendix D) and acknowledge that these are difficult decisions for the Council, but there is a need for a balanced approach to ensure all residents are catered for.
- Strategies for dealing with financial pressures centre around:
 - Prioritise services that benefit the majority of residents and taxpayers, in order to provide an optimum for the majority of residents
 - Streamline services, though keeping this within the Council powers to ensure value for money and deliver the same outcomes
 - Help people to help themselves, making them less reliant on public funded services

- Increasing council tax, in order to prevent services from being reduced or stopped. Yet, there is an expectation to see the results in terms of it going back into local communities.

8.5 In response to the key messages, the Council is investing an additional £68m in portfolio budgets for 2023/24 (£74m including other operating costs). The most significant part of the budget is spent on health and social care services (65% of gross expenditure, excluding dedicated schools grant (DSG)). The Council is also continuing to invest in the maintenance of roads and footways, children's services, economic regeneration and waste. To assist residents during the cost of living crisis the Council has capped its increases on fees and charges at almost half the current level of inflation and is not proposing to increase council tax by the maximum 5% allowable by government.

8.6 A briefing on the budget for members of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee was held on 26 January 2023.

9. Legal Implications (Monitoring Officer)

9.1 In each financial year the Council must make its budget calculation in accordance with sections 42A and 42B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992. In particular, it must calculate the total of:

- The expenditure the authority estimates it will incur in the year in performing its functions and will charge to a revenue account for the year
- Such allowance as the authority estimates will be appropriate for contingencies in relation to expenditure to be charged to a revenue account for the year
- The financial reserves which the authority estimates it will be appropriate to raise in the year for meeting its estimated future expenditure
- Such financial reserves as are sufficient to meet any estimated revenue deficit for previous financial years which has not already been provided for.

9.2 Those calculations are then used to determine the council tax requirement for the year.

9.3 The Council is required to set a balanced budget and in considering the budget the Council must have regard to the advice of its Chief Finance Officer appointed under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972.

9.4 The Council must issue any precept or precepts in accordance with section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992. The section prescribes what must be included in the issue of the precept. It must be issued before 1 March in the

financial year preceding the year for which it is issued but is not invalid merely because it is issued on or after that date.

- 9.5 Under section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003, the Chief Finance Officer (section 151 officer) is required to report to the authority on the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the calculations required to be made by the Council. These are the estimates which the Cabinet is required to determine and submit to Full Council and are contained within this report. The Chief Finance Officer is also required to report on the level of reserves.
- 9.6 In deciding its Capital Programme for the year, the Council must have regard to the 'Prudential Code' established by the Local Government Act 2003. This is addressed in the report.
- 9.7 The budget makes provision on the basis that a number of changes to Council services which are under consideration may be made. The budget does not itself authorise any changes to services and does not assume that changes will be made. Any changes to services will need to be the subject of appropriate consideration by the Cabinet Member or the Cabinet following, where appropriate, consultation and a full report setting out options for change, the impact of the proposed changes on service users, including in particular the impact on different equality groups. Where a decision is made not to implement any changes then budgetary adjustments may need to be made but the Council is confident that whilst savings over the 2023/24 budget are assumed, each can be implemented in a number of ways, thus no particular changes are assumed.
- 9.8 The setting of the budget is a function reserved to the Full Council, but the Cabinet is required to make recommendations it wishes to make to Full Council on the various calculations the authority is required to make. Once the budget is agreed by Full Council, the Cabinet cannot make any decisions which conflict with that budget, although variations and in year changes may be made in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations. Similarly, any decision made by the Cabinet or by an officer exercising executive functions must be made in accordance with the policies, plans and strategies agreed by Full Council, including the Everyone's Essex Strategy.
- 9.9 Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 restricts any member of the Council from voting on the budget or council tax requirement if they owe any amount of council tax to any local authority which has been outstanding for more than two months. If this applies to a member and they attend a meeting at which the council tax requirement is to be set they must declare this fact and they cannot vote. It is an offence to vote or to fail to make this declaration.
- 9.10 Section 52ZB of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 requires the Council, when setting council tax, to determine whether or not the increase is 'excessive'. An increase is excessive unless it is within parameters determined by the Secretary of State. If an increase is 'excessive' it can only be implemented if supported by a referendum.

- 9.11 The Secretary of State has not taken the final decision on what is an 'excessive' increase for 2023/24, but a decision is anticipated on or before 7 February in which case an addendum report will be circulated.
- 9.12 The draft principles for 2023/24 published by the Secretary of State in December 2022 state that for the Council any increase of 3% or more (excluding the 'social care precept') would be defined by the then Secretary of State as 'excessive'.
- 9.13 In addition, social care authorities are permitted to levy a 'social care precept' of 2% or less. There is no legal requirement for the money raised to be used for adult social care services, but the Secretary of State has previously indicated that he will ask local authorities how they have spent the money. If an authority is unable to demonstrate usage for social care purposes, he may restrict that authority's ability to raise council tax in future years.
- 9.14 This means that any increase by ECC of 5% or more would trigger a referendum. The recommendations in this report would not trigger a referendum.

10. Staffing and Other Resource Implications

- 10.1 An element of reorganisation and reshaping will be required to support efficiency gains in some operational areas. Staffing implications which may arise as a result of operational plans flowing from this budget will be addressed under their specific implementation plans.

11. Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment

- 11.1 Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 creates the public sector equality duty which requires that when the Council makes decisions it must have regard to the need to:
- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 11.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation. In addition, marital status is a relevant protected characteristic for 9.1(a).

- 11.3 The equality implications have been assessed as part of the budget setting process as detailed in Appendix B. Equality impact assessments will be carried out before any decision is taken to change any services in response to the budget or otherwise - please see paragraphs 6.1 and 9.7 of this report for further information.

12. List of Appendices

Appendix A – Essex County Council Annual Plan 2023/24

Appendix B – Equalities Comprehensive Impact Assessment (Annual Plan and Budget)

Appendix C – Pay Policy Statement

Appendix D – Budget Consultation Report