

## REPORT

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>Revenue and Capital Budget 2023/24 – Final proposals following scrutiny and public consultation</b>
<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>Cabinet</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> March 2023</b>
<b>DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:</b>	<b>ALL</b>

### 1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To update Cabinet with the consultation responses to the draft budget proposals issued by them on the 18<sup>th</sup> January in respect of the Capital and Revenue budgets for 2023/24.
- 1.2 To make recommendations to Council on the Capital and Revenue budgets and level of Council Tax for 2023/24.
- 1.3 To receive the statutory report of the Responsible Financial Officer on the budget process and the adequacy of reserves.
- 1.4 To receive the Responsible Financial Officer's Prudential Indicator calculations for capital financing.

### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That Cabinet considers the responses to consultation and recommends to Council:
  - a) The 2023/24 revenue budget as attached in **Appendix G2**.
  - b) The 2023/24 to 2026/27 capital programme as attached in **Appendix H1**.
- 2.2 That a 5.95% increase in the Band "D" equivalent Council Tax is used as the planning assumption in the budget model and to apply for County purposes for 2023/24, and that Cabinet asks that efforts are doubled to ensure that individuals and households eligible for council tax exemptions or reductions claim the benefit available to them.
- 2.3 That Cabinet approves changes to proposed saving and pressures, updated following public consultation, scrutiny and more up to date information being made available since the draft proposals were released on consultation on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023.
- 2.4 That Cabinet approves the proposed changes to the capital programme and that significantly include additional highways capital investment of £0.5m for 2023/24 and a further £1.5m over indicative capital budgets from 2024/25 to 2026/27.
- 2.5 That Cabinet recommends to Council the undertaking of a review of property assets, to identify assets which are under-utilised, where costs can be reduced, income increased and sites re-purposed or redeveloped to meet the objectives set out in the Community and Corporate Plan.
- 2.6 That Cabinet considers the Responsible Financial Officer's report on the robustness of the budget process and the adequacy of reserves issued under the provisions of the Local

Government Act, 2003, together with an assessment of the current and future financial risks facing the Council.

- 2.7 That Cabinet adopts the Responsible Financial Officer's report on Prudential Indicators.
- 2.8 That Cabinet requests that:
- a) More regular budget monitoring and scrutiny is now undertaken, and with the monitoring and reporting of budget savings being strengthened in acknowledgement of the deliverability risk involved.
  - b) A financial strategy is developed and that is accompanied by a medium-term financial plan (MTFP) that looks to put the Council onto a secure and sustainable path going forward.
  - c) Regular review is undertaken of the MTFP to ensure it remains up to date, and that it includes an assessment of evidence-based pressures and risks, underlying modelling assumptions and the ongoing affordability implications of the Community and Corporate Plan.

### **3. KEY ISSUES:**

#### **BUDGET CONTEXT**

- 3.1 Councils are facing financial challenges on an unprecedented scale. It is widely acknowledged that local government funding has not kept pace with service demand and inflationary pressures.
- 3.2 The size of the budget challenge for Monmouthshire for 2023/24, prior to any intervention, was over £26m with the cost of delivering existing services increasing by 14%. Income and funding has increased by 9% (£16m) to meet some of these costs, but the Council has still been left to find savings of 5% (£10m) from services.
- 3.3 Cabinet released its draft budget proposals on consultation following its meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> January. The feedback received from public consultation and member scrutiny is shown below and appended to this report.
- 3.4 Cabinet has listened carefully to the feedback received and is acting upon the concerns raised. The scope to reduce the level of savings or to generate additional income through council tax or fees is very limited. However, Cabinet has worked hard to extend further the limited flexibility available and as a result is proposing to make a limited number of adjustments in response to the concerns of the public.
- 3.5 Given the scale of the challenge it was inevitable that council tax needed to rise, although at a rate well below inflation. Council tax is a key source of income that allows the council to sustain services that meet the needs of residents and in particular those who are most vulnerable.
- 3.6 Following consultation feedback Cabinet considered whether a modest reduction to the council tax increase was appropriate. However, it was felt that the consequential impact and risk that this could have through requiring an increased level of savings to be made in services that provide for the most vulnerable was too high. Notwithstanding that the council tax reduction scheme, which offers mitigation for those on low incomes and those in receipt of benefits, will still be in place and single person households are also eligible for a 25% reduction on council tax.

- 3.7 Cabinet will double its efforts to ensure that individuals and households eligible for council tax exemptions or reductions claim the benefit available to them. Take-up will be monitored through the year. There are currently 5,522 (12.7%) council tax payers benefitting from the council tax reduction scheme, and 14,612 (34.2%) in receipt of single person discount.
- 3.8 Cabinet is committed to making changes which improve the way in which social care is delivered but it recognises that there are risks in attempting to make those changes too quickly. Having listened to the concerns expressed it is proposed that the level of savings that can be met next year is reduced and a further £1million put back into the budget. This does not alter the commitment to change and improvement, it reflects only the timescale over which changes will occur. Steps are being taken to ensure that there is tight budgetary control and monitoring to support the directorate as the process of change and re-design evolves.
- 3.9 In adult social care it is important to highlight that savings proposed look to ensure care is provided only where it is needed and at the right time. Overall, practice will be strengthened in accordance with the SSWBA to ensure that there is consistency and equity with regards to how care is provided. This will include a re-focus on how early help, prevention and reablement approaches are maximised using statutory care alongside of existing family and community strengths. At the same time ensuring that resources are used carefully and wisely by expanding options for how care is provided, with affordability and value for money being as important as quality of outcomes for people. We will proactively pursue additional funding opportunities to support service design and where it serves us well to do so, work in partnership with others.
- 3.10 Within Children's Services budget savings focus on the development of in-house placement solutions for children who need care, with a maintained emphasis on building in-house preventative approaches.
- 3.11 Cabinet has challenged officers regarding proposed workforce savings in social care and are assured that savings will be achieved through a stepped process firstly of looking for non-staffing efficiencies followed by service review and re-design together with health partners to prevent a reduction in critical front facing staff.
- 3.12 Where it is safe and appropriate to do so, alternative models of delivering care will be considered, as well as ensuring that health contributions to funding are pursued. Disability services will continue to be designed around meeting individual needs.
- 3.13 There are significant risks regarding deliverability of savings within social care in the face of demographic challenge and the on-going ripple effects of the pandemic and pressures within health. However, Cabinet is assured that overall the mandates adopt a strategic approach to both mitigate risk to people and deliver cost savings. A good understanding of community and population needs will underpin appropriate service development, balancing how we support individual and family outcomes within the wider financial context and the overall strategic programme for social care. It is recognised that social care is complex and Cabinet will commit to being clearer in monitoring and evaluating the changes being made.
- 3.14 Cabinet was also keen to ensure that the Council's assets were constantly held under review to ensure that buildings are used to greatest effect. Cabinet have made a commitment to ensure that assets will only be disposed of after an options appraisal and report to Cabinet with appropriate Scrutiny consideration. The aims of the review will be to:
- Reduce the running costs and climate impact of our services,

- Ensure that all our services and public buildings are fully accessible,
  - Put our partnerships with the managers of community and cultural buildings in MCC ownership on a long-term sustainable footing which maximises their funding opportunities and community benefit and reduces any hidden subsidy,
  - Generate rental income for the Council,
  - Consider the best way to repurpose or redevelop any surplus or under-used assets to deliver our Corporate and Community Plan priorities, bringing a report and options appraisal to Cabinet before any disposal is considered.
- 3.15 The Council now needs the certainty of having a clear and robust policy and budgetary framework in place. The Community and Corporate plan once approved will provide the policy framework within which the financial strategy can be produced along with a medium-term financial plan that looks to put the Council back on a sustainable path going forward.
- 3.16 This then allows Cabinet's attention to turn to delivering the Community and Corporate plan and affecting the changes needed to put the Council on a secure and sustainable footing. Changes that ensure that the needs of residents, families, businesses and communities in Monmouthshire are met. With a focus on equality and climate-change and working with and for our citizens being at the heart of everything the Council does. Existing partnerships with the third and public sectors and businesses will be strengthened and expanded to support the Council's priorities.
- 3.17 The in-year position has suffered from the same demand and inflationary pressures that have impacted next year's budget and a budget recovery plan had been put in place and reported to Cabinet in December as part of the month 6 budget monitoring report. The month 9 budget monitoring report is being considered separately on the agenda and highlights a further increase in cost pressures and that in turn is leading to a greater need to call on one-off reserve funding than had been planned for and puts further strain on the Council's finances.
- 3.18 The ongoing financial risks the Council is facing are outlined in this report and these are set against a reducing scope to accommodate these through budget recovery action or through the use of reserves. Reserve and capital receipt balances having been depleted, in particular to support 22/23 and 23/24, and this approach is not sustainable going forward. Subsequently, revenue reserves will need to be protected to cover for foreseen and unforeseen risks and eventualities. Beyond their core role to support the capital programme capital receipts will need to be used to support the Council in driving the service changes needed over the medium to long term.
- 3.19 Budgetary discipline will now be paramount through the remainder of this financial year, next year and over the medium-term. Cabinet will now expect more regular budget monitoring and scrutiny. The deliverability risk is acknowledged and the monitoring and reporting of budget savings will need to be strengthened. Governance and financial control arrangements within social care will also be reviewed and strengthened as required.

## **BUDGET CONSULTATION**

- 3.20 Cabinet issued its budget consultation proposals on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023 thereby allowing a four-week period for public consultation and scrutiny. Given the nature and extent of the budget challenge faced for 2023/24 and the range and extent of the budget savings proposals Cabinet understood the importance of the Council reaching out, engaging and listening to feedback.

- 3.21 Cabinet were intent on purposefully engaging with residents on a face to face basis, as well as in hosting virtual events to enable the Council to reach out to members of the public who otherwise might not have the opportunity to attend a physical face to face consultation event.
- 3.22 As a result the Council:
- a) Held six countywide face to face consultation events across Monmouthshire and two virtual budget consultation events.
  - b) Maintained a dedicated page on the Council's website containing the draft budget proposals, a video blog by the Cabinet Member for Resources and an online budget survey and feedback form;
  - c) Made use of social media linked to press releases, the website and online forms to ensure that there is optimal reach to allow residents to become aware of and respond to the draft budget proposals.
- 3.23 The proposals were also scrutinised by the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee, People Scrutiny Committee, Place Scrutiny Committee, the Schools Budget Forum and the Joint Advisory Group (JAG).
- 3.24 Furthermore, budget consultation was undertaken through meetings with MyMates, Youth Council representatives and Head Teachers.
- 3.25 Extracts of the draft minutes from the Committees are included as **Appendices A1 to A7** respectively and a summary or notes of the engagement events together with feedback received are included in **Appendix A8**.
- 3.26 In terms of public engagement, the use of the website and social media as a mechanism for sharing information and getting feedback has continued with active engagement and responses received. An overview of the Council's budget engagement is included within **Appendix A8**.
- 3.27 As might be expected, responses to consultation varied. However, there was a broad acceptance and understanding of the overall shape of the budget proposals and set against the backdrop of unprecedented financial and demand driven challenges faced. Residents understood that the Council continued to look to protect frontline services and in particular to those most vulnerable in our communities. They also recognised the strain on the Council at this time of responding to a Cost of Living Crisis and how this also influenced the nature of the budget proposals.
- 3.28 There were a number of questions clarified via Scrutiny Committee meetings and other consultation meetings. Clarification was provided at meetings and via responses to pre-submitted questions made available on the Council's website. The budget presentation delivered at the consultation events was made widely available via the Council's website. And the Cabinet Member for Resources delivered a video message to encourage people to engage in the consultation process.
- 3.29 The process in general has worked well, with thorough debate having taken place through scrutiny and public consultation events. Although attendance at public consultation events was generally low those who attended engaged well to ask questions of Cabinet members and to have their feedback or concerns heard. Positive feedback had been received for the positive engagement and consultation that had taken place.

3.30 As a result of the publicity generated through social media and consultation events a significant increase from previous years was seen in the number of budget survey responses received. In total 246 responses were received from residents.

3.31 In terms of the key issues and concerns raised as part of the consultation, engagement and scrutiny process these principally revolved around:

- The majority of respondents to the budget survey agreed with the savings proposals being considered. However, there was broad disagreement in respect of other education savings and that concerned the increased charge for pre-school breakfast clubs, the Gwent Music Service, and potential reductions in staffing in education psychology and the ALN administrative support function. This was similarly echoed in public consultation events and during member scrutiny.
- A significant number of residents raising concern about the level of council tax increase proposed, especially in light of cost of living and inflationary pressures being experienced in households. However, there was a recognition that the choices available to the Council were limited in the face of an unprecedented cost and demand pressures for services that supported the needs of residents.
- Whilst acknowledging the need for increases in discretionary fees and charges to meet the increasing cost of providing those services assurances were asked for to ensure those who don't have sufficient means were not being adversely impacted by the increases.
- Concerns about the deliverability of the proposed savings, the risk involved and the cross-collateral impacts. With particular concerns raising around adult social care and the impact of the savings proposed.
- Concerns were raised around the extent of the cumulative impact of savings proposals on families/parent(s) with children and low pay/income households.
- The need to consider different ways of using the Council's assets to provide services or to support communities. Assurances were asked for and clarification provided around assets that had been identified for potential disposal or alternative use.
- Concerns were raised about the impact on businesses of increased car parking charges and café pavement licences.
- Concerns around the reduced opening hours proposed at community hubs and leisure centres and the impact that would have on residents and users of the services
- Questions and concern about the impact on families from the proposed increase in concessionary home to school transport charges, as well as concern that it might lead to increased car use and reduced enrolment in sixth forms.
- Concern about the introduction of an annual subscription fee for the Grass Routes community transport service and the disproportionate impact this was felt to have on those who use the service.
- Reassurances were asked for around the risks and uncertainties that the Council was facing at this time and into the future. With particular concern around homelessness and adult social care.

- Concerns raised around continued pressure on services such as in social care, operational frontline services and children with additional learning needs.
- Overriding support for the investment in the Adult social care budget and concerns around the growing impact of an ageing population on adult social services and the challenges that result from a fragile and unsustainable social care market in Wales.
- Acceptance from the School Budget Forum and Head Teachers that school budgets will see a cash increase that meets pay and energy increases based on current forecasts but that will require schools to find savings of 2.8% next year.

3.32 As a result of the consultation and upon subsequent reflection of concerns raised, alongside further changes brought about by targeted work undertaken, it is recommended that the following revisions are made to the pressure and savings proposals:

- a) Cabinet are fully aware and acknowledging of the risks regarding deliverability of savings within adult social care, and in the face of demographic challenge and the ongoing ripple effects of the pandemic and pressures within health. To that end and consistent with concerns raised by residents and member scrutiny, £1m of savings will now be delayed into 2024/25 and subsequently reassessed.
- b) To now limit the increase in before school clubs from £1 to £2 per day to only the first child, thus ensuring that families with more than one child are not disproportionately impacted.
- c) To remove the proposed increase in the concessionary fee for home to school transport.
- d) To remove the proposal for an annual subscription of £30 for users of the Grass Routes bus service, and in light of recent funding announcements causing uncertainty on what type of bus services can be sustainably delivered in Monmouthshire.
- e) To remove a proposed increase in the licence fees for pavement cafés and to ensure that businesses are supported to flourish in our town centres and across Monmouthshire.
- f) To remove a proposed reduction in opening hours in leisure centres during the summer months, leaving it to the service to undertake ongoing review and to ensure that services are responding to customer demands.
- g) To confirm that opening hours at community hubs will now no longer be reduced, albeit community hubs will still be operated with reduced staffing levels as planned.
- h) The removal of a proposed saving to delete a post in the internal audit team resulting from feedback received from the Governance & Audit Committee and concern that the level of audit coverage will fall below acceptable levels.
- i) Further investment is made in the capital programme, and that will result in additional investment in our highways infrastructure and specifically £500k in 2023/24 and each of the subsequent three years of the capital MTFP for pothole repair.
- j) Capital investment of £50,000 to allow for surveys and assessments to be undertaken of bridges across the Council's public rights of way network, and to ensure that a risk based approach is being taken to maintain assets and keep the network safe.

- 3.33 Cabinet have used Integrated Impact Assessments to inform its decision making and ensure mitigations are identified wherever possible to minimise the impact on people in greatest need. Mitigations that have been identified include the increased charge for before school clubs only applying to one child in a household that is attending and will not affect those eligible for free school meals, and while the amount given to people who pay for their own social care will be reduced, this will be looked at on a case-by-case basis and people needing higher levels of care will not see their payments reduced.

### **FINAL SETTLEMENT**

- 3.34 The provisional settlement from Welsh Government received on 14th December 2022 provided a better than anticipated funding increase of 9.3% and introduced a year-on-year increase of £10.213m of funding to the Council.
- 3.35 Welsh Government is due to publish its final budget on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023 and alongside it the final settlement for local authorities in Wales. Due to the provisional settlement being issued in mid-December it is not expected that there will be any further significant changes.
- 3.36 However, there is one change planned that concerns the intention to transfer funding for the increased employer costs related to Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) pensions from a grant to the FRAs into the final local government settlement. Councils have been kept informed and this will be accommodated as part of the final budget proposals.
- 3.37 Whilst a significant proportion of pressures have been funded by this settlement there is still a question mark over the actual pressures that will arise for pay. Welsh Government has been clear that authorities' budget planning must accommodate the cost of pay awards and in light of the settlement. Welsh Government recently made a revised pay offer for teachers adding 3% to the original 5% pay offer for the academic year 2022/23. If this pay offer is accepted commitment has been made by Welsh Government to fund the increase for the period September 2022 to March 2023. Confidence is held that Welsh Government will look to make that same commitment late in the year for the period from April 2023.
- 3.38 As a result of the final settlement being announced the day prior to the meeting of Cabinet a verbal update will be provided at the meeting to confirm any further changes and how these would be accommodated in the final budget proposals.
- 3.39 Whilst no further changes to funding levels are anticipated as a result of the final settlement announcement by Welsh Government on 28<sup>th</sup> February any further changes to the budget will need be considered as part of the Council Tax resolution when it is considered by Full Council on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023.
- 3.40 There is still however a need to think differently about the even greater challenges over the medium term. This work and engagement will continue in the coming months, with other local authorities, Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and notably where funding distribution and projections are concerned.

### **BUDGET PROCESS CONTEXT AND CHANGES**

- 3.41 Subsequent to Cabinet on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023, revenue budget proposals went on consultation and which looked to accommodate an unprecedented £26m of cost pressures principally through increases in Welsh Government funding and council tax income of £14.3m and savings proposals of £11.4m. This still left a budget shortfall of £230k to be found at that time. Work has continued to review and revise savings and pressures in the light of further engagement and scrutiny. All the original proposals are available as part of

the draft budget proposals. Details of revised savings and pressures and the movement from draft to final proposals are included in **Appendix D**.

3.42 The table below illustrates the movements that have been seen as a result of the budget proposals being finalized and subsequent to public consultation, scrutiny and more up to date information being made available since the draft proposals were released on consultation on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023.

<b>Budget Reconciliation</b>	<b>Amount £'000</b>
Draft budget proposals – budget shortfall	230
Revisions and additions to pressures	585
Update to specific grant funding	(500)
Reduction in savings	1,101
Update to treasury and appropriation budgets	(400)
Update to full cost Corporate budgets	2,165
Update to core WG funding	(181)
Proposed one-off use of reserves	(3,000)
<b>Final budget proposals – budget shortfall</b>	<b>0</b>

3.43 The revisions and additions to pressures are summarised as follows:

- £240k additional ALN transport pressures due to increased operator costs. This is a combination of agreed contract uplifts to cover pay and fuel inflation (average 8%) awarded in April 2022 plus increases as a result of operator hand-backs pushing up prices on re-tendering due to market forces.
- As a consequence of the updated month 9 forecast a further £540k increased and recurrent pressure within Children’s Services where costly emergency arrangements continue despite stable overall numbers of looked after children. This pressure has been offset in part by confirmation of a £500k specific grant from Welsh Government to support radical reform in social care. Welsh Government have committed this funding and that will benefit both 2022/23 and 2023/24.
- As a result of Welsh Government advising of 5.5% increases in national minimum allowances for foster carers for 2023-24 a pressure of £90k has been included in the final budget proposals.
- Inflationary price increases with Microsoft licences have resulted in £29k pressures for 2023/24.
- Updated energy forecasts have resulted in the energy pressure for 2023/24 reducing by £314k as Crown Commercial Services have been able to forward purchase energy contracts at lower rates than had been previously forecast.

### 3.44 The revisions to savings are summarised as follows:

- Cabinet are fully aware and acknowledging of the risks regarding deliverability of savings within adult social care, and in the face of demographic challenge and the on-going ripple effects of the pandemic and pressures within health. To that end £1m of savings will now be delayed into 2024/25 and subsequently reassessed.
- To remove the proposed increase in the concessionary fee for home to school transport (£18k).
- To remove the proposal for an annual subscription of £30 for users of the Grass Routes bus service (£15k).
- To remove a proposed increase in the licence fees for pavement cafés (£6k).
- To remove a proposed reduction in opening hours in leisure centres during the summer months (£20k).
- The removal of a proposed saving to delete a post in the internal audit team (£44k).
- A £40k reduction in the energy reduction saving as a result of a revised energy forecast.
- £ 42k increase in the saving in the Shared Resource Service collaboration saving.

### 3.45 Further key changes to the budget proposals for 2023/24 include:

- As is the case ahead of the final budget proposals being prepared a full and further update is undertaken, based on most recent forecasts, of treasury budgets. This aligns with the work done in parallel in producing the Council's treasury strategy for 2023/24. With short-term interest rates currently lower than long-term rates and rates having stabilised, it is likely to be more cost effective in the short-term to either use internal resources, or to borrow short-term loans instead. This is known as internal borrowing and will form a key part of the borrowing strategy for 2023/24. The consequence of this has been a net reduction in anticipated treasury costs of £400,000.
- Earmarked reserve contributions of £3m and that include:
  - The modelling assumption for the non-teaching pay award has been maintained at 4.25%. Any increase in pay award above this will draw further on the Council's finances and therefore this remains a key risk. In light of this a contribution from reserves of £1.5m will be held corporately to act as further cover and contingency. This contingency has only been modelled on the non-teaching pay award. The assumption being that Welsh Government will ensure that funding is secured for local authorities to meet any increase in the teacher's pay award and that goes beyond current modelling assumptions.

However, a risk remains regardless given inflation and the extent and success of any strike action. The Council awaits subsequent notification on pay from awarding bodies and that will now extend into 2023/24 and where pay awards are subject to consultation with trade unions.

- A budget is based on a set of best estimates and alongside which sits an ongoing assessment of financial risks. In light of the inflationary pressures that still exist in the UK economy contingency is being put in place of £0.5m and being held corporately to allow for any unforeseen inflationary pressures that can't otherwise being managed through in-year budget recovery action.

- £1m of one-off reserve funding to allow for the delay in savings in adult social care as noted.
- Welsh Government plan to make one key change and that will feature in the final settlement. This concerns their intention to transfer funding for the increased employer costs related to Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) pensions. This will move from being a grant to the FRAs to it being included in the final local government settlement. The consequence being that there will be a corresponding increase in the Fire Authority levy to compensate. The adjustment is anticipated to be £181k.

3.46 It is worth noting that the ongoing financial challenges remain as always a dynamic situation. As stated in recommendation 2.8 further work will be undertaken to develop the MTFP and that will include an ongoing assessment of pressures, risks and modelling assumptions. Beyond those risks for which reserve funded contingency budgets are being held the key risks remaining to be assessed and managed in 2023/24 and as yet unknown are:

- The volatility of Social care costs continues to present a significant ongoing risk both for the remainder of this financial year and 2023/24. Forecast costs for the year have increased at every reporting period for Children's Services and have been only partly mitigated by the late notification of substantial unbudgeted grants.

Immediate arrangements have been put in place to closely manage and constrain cost wherever possible, whilst having regard to the challenging parameters that have been documented above. In the short term, in Children's services this centres itself around reviewing and planning packages of care with a view to progressing care plans using less costly arrangements, whilst in Adults services the steps in place to re-focus our internal teams to reable clients is intended to avoid the need for more costly care packages.

- Clarification is still being sought on levels of specific revenue and capital grant funding for next year. It is hoped that further detail will be provided when Welsh Government release the final settlement on 28<sup>th</sup> February. Whilst confirmation has been received around all-Wales grant allocation the Council is yet to receive confirmation of all of its specific allocations. This will be closely monitored in the coming weeks and any material impacts will be considered as part of in-year budget monitoring with recovery action being taken as required. Furthermore, and whilst the late and significant grant funding from Welsh Government is very much welcomed it does not aid financial planning over the medium term.
- One specific and significant concern relates to the recent announcement that the Bus Emergency Support Fund will be coming to an end in the first three to six months of 2023/24 leaving uncertainty as to what type of bus service can be viably delivered across Monmouthshire. The Council will need to work with bus companies and other partners and stakeholders to understand the full consequence and implications for the Council.
- Demand-led pressures remain, notably within adult social care and homelessness, as evidenced by the extent and level of pressures needing to be accommodated within these budget proposals. Ongoing and strengthened budget monitoring arrangements will identify whether any further pressures need to be managed. As stated this is a dynamic situation to which the Authority will respond as any situation evolves.

## **Council Tax**

- 3.47 The increase in the Band “D” equivalent Council Tax for the County is proposed to be 5.95% as the planning assumption in the budget model and to apply for County purposes in 2023/24, reverting to a 3.95% increase for 2024/25 and in each of the subsequent 2 years.
- 3.48 Given the scale of the challenge it was inevitable that council tax needed to rise, although at a rate well below inflation. Council tax is a key source of income that allows the council to sustain services that meet the needs of residents and in particular those who are most vulnerable.
- 3.49 Following consultation feedback Cabinet considered whether a modest reduction to the council tax increase was appropriate. However, it was felt that the consequential impact and risk that this could have through requiring an increased level of savings to be made in services that provide for the most vulnerable was too high. Notwithstanding that the council tax reduction scheme, which offers mitigation for those on low incomes and those in receipt of benefits, will still be in place and single person households are also eligible for a 25% reduction on council tax.
- 3.50 Efforts will now be doubled to ensure that individuals and households eligible for council tax exemptions or reductions claim the benefit available to them. Take-up will be monitored through the year. There are currently 5,522 (12.7%) of council tax payers benefitting from the council tax reduction scheme, and 14,612 (34.2%) in receipt of single person discount.

## OVERALL REVENUE BUDGET POSITION

- 3.51 The current revenue position for each of the next 4 years is included in **Appendix G2**. The proposed position for 2023/24 specifically is:

Services	Adjusted Base 2022/23 £000's	Indicative Base 2023/24 £000's	Indicative Base 2024/25 £000's	Indicative Base 2025/26 £000's	Indicative Base 2026/27 £000's
Children & Young People	59,014	62,140	63,719	65,086	66,484
Social Care & Health	58,373	63,735	60,736	61,655	62,537
Communities & Place	24,067	26,500	26,562	27,363	28,250
MonLife	4,916	5,952	6,307	6,565	6,836
Resources	7,019	7,073	7,397	7,608	7,824
Chief Executive's Unit	3,180	3,074	3,207	3,294	3,384
People & Governance	4,788	4,862	4,739	4,869	5,003
Corporate Costs & Levies	24,268	29,344	38,073	46,770	55,699
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>185,624</b>	<b>202,680</b>	<b>210,740</b>	<b>223,210</b>	<b>236,016</b>
Transfers to reserves	188	63	63	63	63
Transfers from reserves	(164)	(3,572)	(88)	(88)	(88)
Treasury	7,050	9,341	10,408	11,051	11,427
<b>Appropriations Total</b>	<b>7,074</b>	<b>5,832</b>	<b>10,383</b>	<b>11,026</b>	<b>11,402</b>
<b>Total Expenditure Budget</b>	<b>192,699</b>	<b>208,512</b>	<b>221,123</b>	<b>234,237</b>	<b>247,419</b>
Aggregate External Financing (AEF)	(112,278)	(122,671)	(126,351)	(127,236)	(128,126)
Council Tax (MCC)	(62,871)	(66,955)	(69,600)	(72,349)	(75,207)
Council Tax (Gwent Police)	(14,392)	(15,505)	(16,117)	(16,754)	(17,416)
Council Tax (Community Councils)	(3,158)	(3,381)	(3,381)	(3,381)	(3,381)
Contribution to/(from) Council Fund	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Sub Total Financing</b>	<b>(192,699)</b>	<b>(208,512)</b>	<b>(215,449)</b>	<b>(219,720)</b>	<b>(224,130)</b>
<b>(Headroom)/Shortfall</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5,674</b>	<b>14,517</b>	<b>23,289</b>

**Note:** An explanation of how services are grouped is included in **Appendix L**.

- 3.52 Provision of £7.5m per annum is currently made within the medium term financial plan for modelling purposes, reflective of the trend in service pressures developing annually over recent years, over and above the approved budget. This is represented in the table above by the increase in Corporate Costs and Levies over the 2024/25 to 2026/27 period.
- 3.53 The medium term financial strategy (MTFS) that will be developed off the back of an approved Community and Corporate plan will outline the approach to addressing these forecast shortfalls, and align the shape and cost of future service delivery within a financially sustainable model.

## **CAPITAL BUDGET**

- 3.54 The requirement to produce and update annually a Capital Strategy is a requirement of the Prudential Code for Capital Finance since it was updated in 2017.
- 3.55 The Capital strategy gives a high-level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contribute to the provision of local public services along with an overview of how associated risk is managed and the implications for future financial sustainability.
- 3.56 The Capital Strategy sets out the longer-term context in which capital investment decisions are made and demonstrates that the Authority takes capital investment decisions that are in line with its Corporate priorities, and gives consideration to both risk, reward and impact. It also demonstrates that these decisions are taken whilst having proper regard to the stewardship of public funds, value for money, prudence, sustainability and affordability.
- 3.57 In the current climate of financial constraint, capital investment needs to remain within affordable limits. Demand for capital resources remains high and therefore inevitably, prioritisation of projects, leveraging in other sources of funding and working with partners remain key to meeting this demand.
- 3.58 The Authority's Capital Strategy is required to define at a high level how the Authority ensures its capital plans:
- Contribute to the provision of local public services;
  - Are affordable, prudent and sustainable;
  - Demonstrate that existing assets are adequately maintained;
  - Are developed with a full understanding of the risks involved;
  - Are appropriate for the Authority and suit local circumstances; and
  - Have due regard for the long-term financing implications and risks to the Authority.
- 3.59 In preparing the draft capital budget proposals for 2023/24 and the subsequent three years of the capital MTFP regard has been given to underlying principles of the current strategy and that remained fit for purpose.
- 3.60 An updated capital strategy for 2023/24 will be considered by Council alongside the treasury strategy at its meeting on 9th March 2023. The capital and treasury strategies were scrutinised by Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> February. The draft revised strategy is appended for information at **Appendix J**.

- 3.61 The capital MTFP and capital strategy seek to work towards a financially sustainable core capital programme, whilst balancing the need to deliver capital investment plans in line with policy commitment and need.
- 3.62 During the financial year, any new schemes volunteered can only be added to the programme if the business case demonstrates either:
- That they are self-financing;
  - The scheme is deemed a higher priority than current schemes in the programme and therefore displaces it;
  - They do not compromise the core principles of affordability, sustainability or prudence
- 3.63 When considering the relative merits of projects and potential displacement, the priority matrix in the capital strategy will be applied, either endorsing or amending it for onward consideration by full Council.
- 3.64 The Welsh Government provisional funding settlement announced on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2022 highlighted a small increase of £56k in respect of core general capital grant for 2023/24. This is extremely disappointing, especially in light of the Councils limited recourse to internal resources in the form of capital reserves and receipts, or the additional revenue burden that materialises from any resultant borrowing to meet the funding gap.
- 3.65 The draft capital budget proposals were released on consultation by Cabinet on January 18<sup>th</sup>. Feedback from public consultation and scrutiny, more up to date information being made available, and clarification of the urgent capital risks impacting 2023/24 have resulted in the following proposed changes to the capital budget proposals:
- Additional investment in our highways infrastructure and specifically £500k in 2023/24 and each of the subsequent three years of the capital MTFP for pothole repair (£2m of investment in total).
  - Investment of £50,000 to allow for surveys and assessments to be undertaken of bridges across the Council's public rights of way network, and to ensure that a risk-based approach is being taken to maintain assets and keep the network safe.
- 3.66 The investment in the highways infrastructure is achieved through a reduction in the Council's capital grant match funding budget from £1.0m to £500k. In the event that the match funding budget is exhausted then any bids and business cases would have to be separately assessed and considered by Cabinet or Council as required.
- 3.67 The further recommended capital investment has been assessed using the principles of the Council's capital strategy, with the investment representing a requirement for more urgent and targeted investment and that unless addressed, will present significant Health & safety or legal implications for the Council. It therefore represents investment that is considered affordable, prudent and sustainable and that will prevent future additional cost burden falling upon the Council.
- 3.68 The Summary Capital MTFP is shown in **Appendix H1**. Whilst the core capital programme is being sustained, and sees planned investment in the Council's infrastructure, there still remains a considerable number of backlog pressures that sit outside of the core capital programme as indicated in **Appendix H6**, and this will continue to have varying levels of risk associated with it. Cabinet have previously acknowledged and accepted this risk and given the affordability and funding constraints facing the Council at this time.

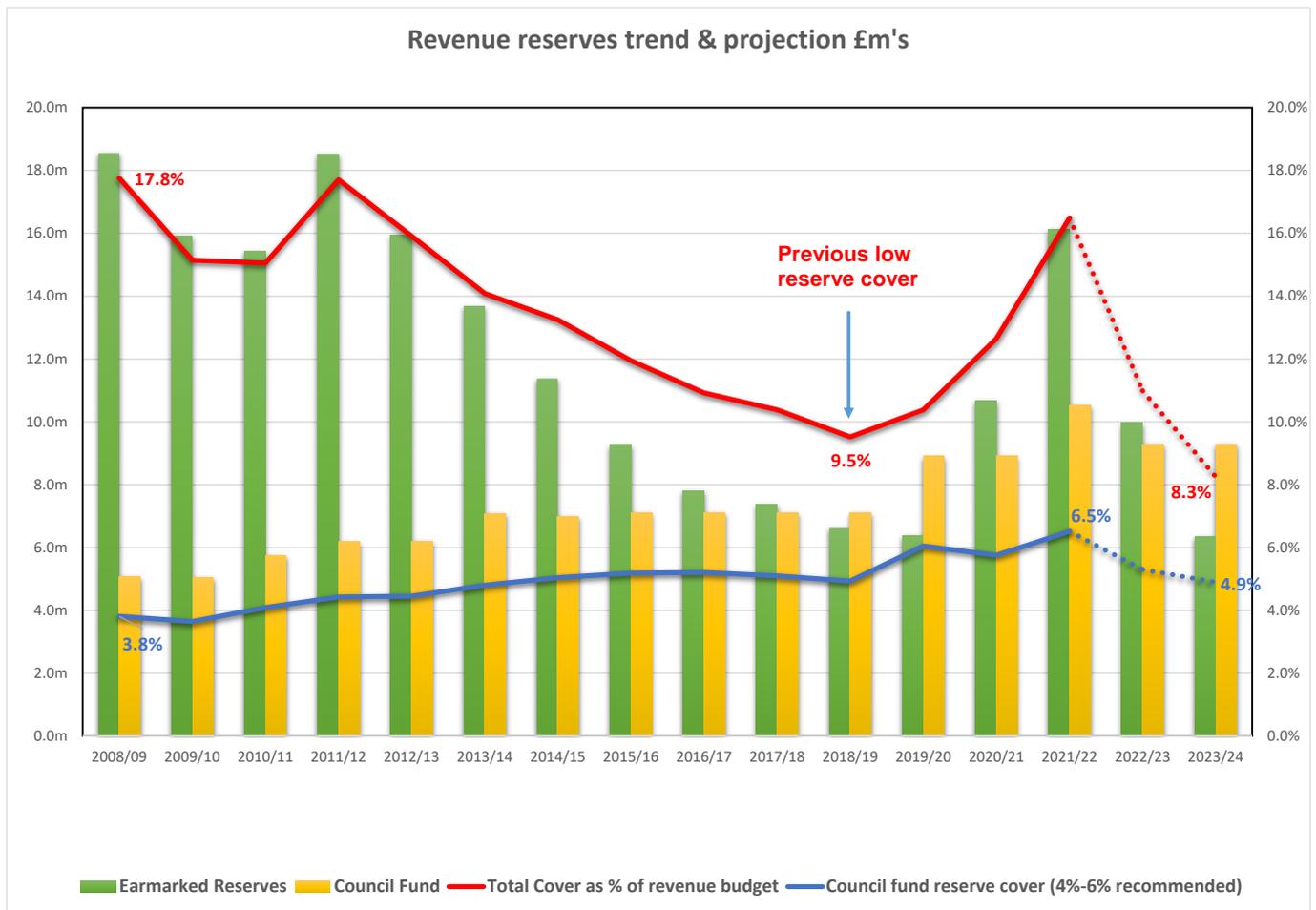
- 3.69 **Appendix H2**, the capital receipts summary shows the expected level of receipts and planned usage and highlights the balances available in the next few years. Future investment in capital schemes, is in part dependent on future success of achieving capital receipts and there are risks attached to some receipts materializing as shown in **Appendix H3**. The revised forecast receipt schedule is provided as exempt background papers to this report for Members approval as **Appendix H4**.
- 3.70 The value of Capital receipts forecast after 2022/23 drops off quite considerably which is reflective of the replacement local development plan (RDLP) not proceeding as quickly as envisaged in the original delivery agreement. This will have a substantial impact on the balance of receipts available to fund future capital investment demands. It is therefore important that reliance on capital receipts used to support capitalisation direction (to fund one-off revenue costs eligible to be met from capital resources) is seen as a short-term measure only.
- 3.71 Assets are only disposed of following options review and where there are alternative means of maintaining existing services or where disposals better enable policy objectives of the Council to be met.

### **THE PRUDENTIAL CODE**

- 3.72 Under the Prudential Code, local authorities are required to publish Prudential Indicators produced to demonstrate that capital programmes are prudent, sustainable and affordable in the longer term. The indicators for 2023/24 to 2026/27 are contained at **Appendix I** to this report, assuming eventual Council approval of Cabinet's budget and Council Tax recommendations. The indicators have been subject to scrutiny via the Governance and Audit Committee at its meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

### **THE ROBUSTNESS OF BUDGET PROCESS AND RESERVES**

- 3.73 As can be seen from the table below the Council's reserves have been and will be significantly depleted as a consequence of the budget recovery action needed in 2022/23 and to support the budget proposals for 2023/24. This follows a period through the pandemic where reserves were restored as a result of significant Welsh Government funding. The decisions taken to draw on reserves have been carefully considered as the consequence of not doing so would have led to very significant consequences for service delivery. Ultimately a balance had to be struck and given the extent of the inflationary and demand pressures faced as a result of the Cost of Living and Health crises.



3.74 The level of the Council Fund, The Council’s general reserve, stood at £10.53 million at the beginning of the 2022/23 financial year. The Council tactically created headroom in its general reserve in the last few years as a result of significant additional Welsh Government funding received through the pandemic.

3.75 As a consequence and due to the extent of the in-year over spend and the budget recovery plan in place a draw on the Council Fund of £1.25m is forecast and subject to 2022/23 year-end. With this anticipated draw taken into account the level of the reserve remains in the range of 4-6% at 4.9% of net revenue budget and considered to be at a prudent level. The final revenue budget proposals do not include a requirement to use any of the general reserve to balance the budget in 2023/24.

3.76 The focus therefore turns to the uncertain outlook and future financial challenges and where the headroom in the Council Fund balance is reserved and if required to cover the following, and where mitigating budgetary recovery action is unable to manage such pressures on the Council's budget:

- Any budget pressure in 2023/24 resulting from pay award announcements in excess of the modelling assumptions and reserve funded contingency in the final budget proposals;
- Any continuing pressures caused by the cost of living and health care crisis, particularly in the areas of Homelessness, Adult social care and Children’s Services;
- Any one-off contributions needed in 2023/24 and to the extent that in-year budget recovery action is unable to mitigate service pressures and over spends;

- To allow for any future reserve cover across the MTFP and beyond and as the Council looks to put its finances back on a sustainable footing, and to the extent that they cannot be funded from capital receipts under Welsh Government guidance allowing for one-off costs of service reform to be met.
- 3.77 Pre pandemic, net school balances had remained at low levels and had reduced to a net deficit balance of £435k. Receipt of unprecedented levels of grant support from Welsh Government during 2020/21 and 2021/22 had looked to ensure support for schools and their pupils during a period of significant disruption to learning. This has resulted in schools balances being in surplus at the beginning of 2022/23 of £6.95m.
- 3.78 The investment plans enacted by schools look to deliver the best learning outcomes for pupils in line with the purpose of the grant funding provided over the past two financial years. Whilst it is clear that the investment plans enacted will bring many school balances more in line with those levels guided by Welsh Government, it is disappointing to note that a further nine schools are now forecast to move into deficit by year-end based on the month 9 forecast.
- 3.79 There remains significant concern from a financial perspective that the inherent structural budget deficits that led to a significant number of schools being in deficit pre-pandemic in some cases remain. Whilst the current economic climate is severely challenging with schools being required to find 2.8% of savings for 2023/24, school balances are designed to provide a level of financial resilience to mitigate and smooth such risks and are not expected to fund ongoing day-to-day expenditure. Officers will continue to work closely with those schools of concern and look to aid the return to a more sustainable budget plan over the medium term.
- 3.80 Continued emphasis is placed by LEA finance colleagues to agree budgets with schools that are sustainable to the resources available rather than passporting additional deficits to their school reserve. Recovery plans are put in place for schools that move into deficit and these are being closely monitored by the LEA and relevant Cabinet members.
- 3.81 The total planned use of earmarked reserves in support of the 2023/24 revenue and capital budget is £3.61m. This adds to the currently forecast use of earmarked reserves for 2022/23 of £6.15m, nearly £10m over a two year period. **Appendix F1** shows the call on and contributions to reserves for the 2023/24 budget and **Appendix F2** shows the reserve balances projected for the medium term.
- 3.82 Total planned reserve use in support of current year revenue and capital budgets means that by the end of 2022/23 the balance of earmarked reserves is likely to be £9.96m. The further call in 2023/24 means that the earmarked reserves will then fall to £6.35m, with the useable balance down to £4.99m. The low level of revenue reserves now requires the reserves policy to adapt such that revenue reserves are very much protected to provide cover for foreseen or unforeseen risks that might result. Improved budget management and discipline going forward will need to ensure that in-year over spends are quickly identified and to the extent they cannot be mitigated for in-year savings to be found.
- 3.83 Useable capital receipts also provide a limited one-off resource to support financing of the capital programme. In recent years the Council has also made use of Welsh Government's guidance allowing flexible use of capital receipts to meet one-off costs associated with service reform. The Council has needed to make use of this flexibility since 2019/20. The

planned use in 2022/23 has been extended to support the budget recovery plan and will continue for 2023/24.

- 3.84 Useable capital receipts are forecast to reduce to £3.0m by the end of 2026/27 based on the capital MTFP. The continued use of capital receipts for this purpose is recognized as a necessary approach to support the Council to transition itself on to a more sustainable financial footing. However this is not a sustainable approach in itself and has the added consequence of requiring the Council to fund any further and future capital investment through prudential borrowing where it cannot be met from other sources.
- 3.85 Under the provisions of the 2003 Local Government Act, the Responsible Financial Officer has to provide conclusions on the robustness of the budget process and the adequacy of reserves. Those conclusions are shown at **Appendix E**. The RFO opinion also includes an acknowledgement of the risks taken into account in producing the budget proposals for 2023/24 as well as those budgetary risks that will need to be managed going forward in the MTFP.
- 3.86 The effect of Cabinets revenue budget recommendations is shown at **Appendix G**. The effect of Cabinet's capital recommendations is shown at **Appendix H**. Final Council Tax and budget setting is reserved for decision of Full Council on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023.

#### **4. OPTIONS APPRAISAL:**

- 4.1 Chief Officers and Directorates are required to consider and outline the options that have been considered for each of the budget savings proposals and pressures accommodated within the final budget proposals presented in this report.
- 4.2 The detail is contained in the original budget mandates that supported the drafted budget proposals. Where budget proposals have been amended or new changes introduced these are outlined in the report as part of the final budget proposals. These changes are summarised in **Appendix D**.

#### **5. EVALUATION CRITERIA:**

- 5.1 The means of assessing whether the final budget proposals for 2023/24 have been successfully implemented is undertaken throughout the year via regular budget monitoring and periodic reports to Cabinet and then through Scrutiny committees. As outlined in the report and given the financial risks facing the Council budget monitoring will be strengthened in 2023/24 and that includes the monitoring and evaluation of budget savings being implemented.
- 5.2 The Community and Corporate Plan will, once approved, inform and influence a full update of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Plan and that will build the further foundation leading into the 2024/25 budget process. This comprehensive update will include an ongoing assessment of pressures, risks and modelling assumptions. As well as savings proposals and options that together with a robust and updated capital receipts and reserves strategy enables the Council's finances to be put on a sustainable footing.
- 5.3 Regular monitoring of the performance of the Council will take place against service business plans, and once approved the Community and Corporate Plan. Taken together these arrangements enable the Council to evaluate its success and progress against its longer-term plans within the resources available.

#### **6. REASONS:**

- 6.1 To make appropriate recommendations to Council on the revenue and capital budgets for 2023/24, and the resultant Council Tax recommended to be set for County purposes, taking into account the public consultation and scrutiny in January and February.
- 6.2 To sustain the capital programme and establish capital resources to support the programme by the sale of surplus assets where this is deemed necessary and appropriate.
- 6.3 As required by statute, to consider the Responsible Financial Officer's conclusions on the robustness on the budget process and the adequacy of reserves going forward.
- 6.4 To approve the Prudential Capital Indicators calculated by the Responsible Financial Officer.

## **7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

As identified within the report and appendices.

## **8. WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS IMPLICATIONS (INCORPORATING EQUALITIES, SUSTAINABILITY, SAFEGUARDING and CORPORATE PARENTING):**

- 8.1 There is a requirement placed on Local Authorities to comply with the general equality duties set out in the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act 2010 places a general duty on Monmouthshire County Council to eliminate discrimination according to "protected characteristics" (age, religion or belief, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, sex and sexual orientation). Also we need to comply with the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Welsh Language Measure 2011 through which the Welsh Language Commissioner has shaped the Welsh Standards which came into force from 30th March 2016.
- 8.2 The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act requires public bodies to improve social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing, by taking action in accordance with the sustainable development principle aimed at achieving the Wellbeing Goals.
- 8.3 Where a budget proposal could alter a service, or the way it is delivered an Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed. This assesses its potential impact on the national well-being goals and the ways of working enshrined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act and also the people and groups who possess the protected characteristics specified as part of our duty under the Equality Act 2010. This also assesses the potential impact on those in poverty and on those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, in line with the socio-economic duty in Wales and the impact on the Welsh language.
- 8.4 The Council has continued to respond to these issues by building considerations of equality, diversity and sustainability into the planning and delivery of its 2023/24 budget. It has done this by:
  - Requiring Chief Officers to undertake an Integrated Impact Assessment of savings proposals they offered for their service area to contribute towards the Council's overall savings target. Where necessary this evaluation has since been updated to reflect the final budget proposals and individual evaluations are linked to each budget proposal.
  - Producing an overall Integrated Impact Assessment of the revenue budget proposals and publishing this as part of the revenue budget proposals for consultation. This is attached as **Appendix K** and the assessment has been updated as a result of budget consultation and the final revenue budget proposals

being presented to Cabinet for consideration. Given the scale of the budget challenge for 2023/24, and the requirement for services to deliver a level of savings proposals that require service reforms, it is inevitable that this assessment shows that some proposals have identified a negative impact and where mitigating actions have been considered, identified or are in place. The assessment also identifies some of the pressures to support services have potentially a mostly positive impact on equalities and Future Generations.

- Enabling the Council's Cabinet Members to consider savings proposals with the benefit of the Integrated Impact Assessment, and to make initial decisions based on this information.
- Including the Integrated Impact assessments (on individual proposals and the overall assessment) as part of this report and published on the Council's website so that residents can understand the factors that went into the planning of the 2023/24 budget, potential impacts and any mitigations identified.
- Ensuring that where proposals will be the subject of further reports it is expected that further Integrated Impact Assessment will be undertaken at that time and where savings are being made from decisions already taken then those implementing those decisions should consider mitigating any negative impacts where necessary.
- Deciding that once the final shape of the budget is agreed by Council in March, Council service areas carry out more detailed work to mitigate and manage any impacts that have been identified in the impact assessments and that actual future generations and equality impacts are reviewed and monitored during and after implementation.

8.5 Almost any change to a council service has some impact. This is because of the nature of the council's responsibilities and the extent to which some groups, communities and vulnerable people rely on public services. The aim is to properly understand this impact so that appropriate mitigations can be identified wherever possible minimising the impact on people in greatest need.

The mitigations include:

- Charges for social services are linked to peoples' ability to pay and service users will be required to undergo a means tested assessment of their financial ability to meet a reasonable charge calculated for these services.
- Increases in the charge for before school clubs will not affect those eligible for free school meals and the charge only applies to one child from each household, lessening the impact for many families.
- The amount we give to people who pay for their own social care will be reduced. However, we will look at these on a case-by-case basis and people needing higher levels of care will not see their payments reduced
- The accessibility of charged events at museums or attractions will be monitored and those not able to pay will be supported through grant funding/concessionary rates.

## 9. **CONSULTEES:**

**10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

- a) Directorate Budget builds, detailed capital programme and associated papers
- b) Draft revenue budget proposals, draft capital budget proposals – released on consultation by [Cabinet](#) on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023
- c) Provisional Local Government Settlement
- d) The CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Expenditure

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## **Appendices:**

- A1 Draft minutes of Performance & Overview Scrutiny Committee – 25<sup>th</sup> January 2023
- A2 Draft minutes of People Scrutiny Committee – 26<sup>th</sup> January 2023
- A3 Draft minutes of Place Scrutiny Committee – 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2023
- A4 Draft minutes of Schools Budget Forum – 30<sup>th</sup> January 2023
- A5 Summary of Head Teachers meeting – 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2023
- A6 Draft minutes of JAG (Joint Advisory Group) – 16<sup>th</sup> February 2023
- A7 Extract of draft Governance & Audit Committee minutes – 16<sup>th</sup> February 2023
- A8 Overview of Monmouthshire County Council budget engagement, including feedback from:  
MyMates livestream event – 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2023  
Youth Council (young people) event – 6<sup>th</sup> February 2023
- B1 Provisional Settlement Data
- B2 Provisional Settlement – MCC response letter
- C Specific Grants 2023/24 (All Wales)
- D Summary of savings and pressures
- E Responsible Financial Officers Opinion
- F1 Use of reserves for Revenue Budget Purposes
- F2 Reserve Balances
- G1 Reconciliation through the Revenue budget process
- G2 Revenue Budget Summary
- H1 Capital Budget Summary
- H2 Capital Receipts Balances
- H3 Receipt Risk Factors
- H4 Detailed Capital Receipts (Exempt – supplied under separate cover)
- H5 Exemption form for Appendix H4
- H6 Backlog capital pressures and medium term Monlife Investment considerations
- I Prudential Indicators
- J Capital and treasury management strategies 2023/24
- K Overall Wellbeing and Future Generations Evaluation
- L Revenue budget service groupings