

MEETING OF THE CABINET

THURSDAY, 9 JANUARY 2025

ADDITIONAL PAPERS

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33. DRAFT BUDGET 2025/26

The Strategic Director of Resources presented the first two of four reports for consideration, these being the Draft 2025/26 Robustness of Budget Estimates and Draft Capital Strategy, Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators. Additionally, he referred to the associated Cabinet reports being published in a single document as an additional paper to make all documents easily accessible.

The Chair requested clarity about the management of risk regarding the General Fund overspend in 2024/25.

The Strategic Director of Resources advised that a key contributor had been the pay award, which had consequently been more cautiously budgeted for in the 2025/26 budget. The use of agency staff had also contributed. It was intended that these issues would be accounted for in the 2025/26 General Fund Budget.

Some Members suggested that reserves should be invested to improve service delivery and that the use of capital expenditure to certain posts could reduce use of agency staff and consultants, which would thus lead to a net saving for the General Fund budget.

The Strategic Director of Resources advised that sensitivity analysis and scenario planning would be undertaken in Spring 2025 to assist the Medium-Term Financial Plan. Though the projected Business Rates Reserve would be approximately £30 million by 2029/30, significant amounts of this would be invested. Furthermore, it was prudent to retain healthy reserves due to medium and long-term financial uncertainty, a situation facing all local authorities. The Chair accepted this but suggested it should be clarified in future budgets that a portion of the Business Rates Reserve would be invested.

The Chair requested clarification on the expected Business Rates reset. The Strategic Director of Resources advised that 2026/27 was the year when the changes were expected, but there would be a transitional period. The expectation was that the Council would see a reduction in business rates funding, and the Finance Team were working with external consultants to model this.

The Strategic Director of Resources presented the final two reports, these being the Draft 2025/26 General Fund Budget and Council Tax and Draft 2025/26 Housing Revenue Account and Rent Setting.

In response to a Member, the Strategic Director of Resources clarified that the £500,000 allocated for salaries within the General Fund Capital Reserve was a budgeting procedure which other local authorities also utilised, and which went through a robust process to demonstrate these could be capitalised within accounting conventions.

A discussion was had about the plans to partner with a registered provider to mitigate issues regarding homelessness, within the HRA budget. The Strategic Director of Communities advised on the factors leading to an increase in homelessness within the district and nationally. He agreed to provide the Committee with an update on the status of the registered provider project. The Committee were updated on the grant received from government for next year.

The Chair noted that the General Fund Revenue Account had only been balanced this year by drawing from reserves to support one-off expenditure. He also noted that the planned increases in staffing focused on internal facing rather than external facing staff, and there had been a reduction in Community Focus staffing provision.

In response, the Strategic Director of Resources clarified that the Community Focus post had been vacant since early 2024 without impacting service delivery. The new posts the Chair referred to had followed the standard process of Heads of Service being provided with the opportunity to make additional resource requests as part of the budget setting process. He also emphasised that though the pay award had been funded from reserves last year, he wanted to move away from this. Improved financial performance monitoring, the Transformation Programme, and schemes to solicit more external grant funding would all contribute to avoiding this scenario in future years.

A Member expressed concern at the reduction of the new supply programme in the HRA budget and the lack of ambition shown. Officers suggested this was not the case and simply reflected planned investments rather than a vehicle for aspirational approaches. They would provide a note to the Committee outside of the meeting with further details.

A discussion was had about the reduction of a staff member working at the Measham Community Leisure Centre. The Strategic Director of Communities advised that this had been done in consultation with the Leisure Centre. He would provide further information outside of the meeting.

A discussion was had about the HRA underspend and whether this related to a lack of suitable sites, and the HRA repayment reserve and the prospects of rolling debt over. Officers advised that the budget followed identified lines, not aspirations, so projected future underspends related to a lack of currently identified sites. Officers also noted that the HRA Business Plan would be updated next year and the debt management options would be considered with external treasury advisors.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments, which would be presented to the Cabinet on 9 January 2025.

	Unitary Proposals and a Strategic Alliance for the East Midlands, 24 July 2018 Council Report- Update on County Council's intention to consider unitary proposals and a Strategic alliance for the East Midlands, 11 September 2018	
Financial Implications	There are no immediate resource implications arising from the recommendations in this report.	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes	
Legal Implications	There are no direct legal implications arising from this report, however, legal advice will be sought, where necessary, in relation to the next steps.	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	There are no staffing implications arising from undertaking any initial preparatory work.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes	
Purpose of Report	To advise Cabinet of the content of the Government's recent Devolution White Paper and to seek approval to commence such work as is considered necessary in response.	
Reason for Decision	To enable the initial engagement and work to commence in response to the White Paper.	
Recommendations	<p>THAT CABINET:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. AUTHORISES THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE, IN LIAISON WITH THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, TO UNDERTAKE SUCH WORK AS IS CONSIDERED NECESSARY IN RESPONSE TO THE WHITE PAPER AND SUBSEQUENT APPROACH FROM GOVERNMENT; 2. NOTES THAT A FURTHER REPORT WILL BE BROUGHT TO CABINET FOR CONSIDERATION ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL OF THE WHITE PAPER AND THE NEXT STEPS PRIOR TO ANY SPECIFIC PROPOSALS BEING SUBMITTED TO GOVERNMENT. 	

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The English Devolution White Paper was published on 16 December 2024. The White Paper sets out the Government's plans for changes to local government in England to extend devolution powers and funding, and proposes a redistribution of powers from central to local government, including extending powers to Mayoral authorities. It includes a programme of local government reorganisation for two-tier areas.
- 1.2 An English Devolution Bill is intended to be brought forward by the Government.

2.0 PROPOSALS

- 2.1 The Government wishes to see universal coverage in England of 'Strategic Authorities' – which should be a number of councils working together, covering areas that people recognise and work in. Many places already have Combined Authorities that serve this role e.g. the East Midlands Combined Authority. The Government intends to continue to develop new Strategic Authorities collaboratively and in partnership with places. However, in order to ensure that citizens across England benefit from devolution, and to ensure the effective running of public services, they will legislate for a ministerial directive. This will allow the creation of those Strategic Authorities where local leaders have, after due time has been allowed, not been able to make progress. This, combined with plans to support local government reorganisation, will align public service boundaries with Strategic Authorities and will ultimately lead to fewer elected members.
- 2.2 The White Paper states that all remaining two-tier areas and smaller unitary councils will be expected to develop proposals for reorganisation, with all councils working to develop unitary proposals in the best interests of the whole area as swiftly as possible. The Government will be writing to council leaders to formally invite proposals and will detail its criteria for sustainable unitary structure and how and when to submit proposals. The overall timetable for the proposals set out in the White Paper remains to be confirmed, although it is understood those areas wishing to be part of what the Government is calling its priority programme will be invited to submit proposals by March 2025, with remaining areas to submit their plans by autumn 2025. The government is asking to hear, by 10 January, from those areas who want to be part of the Priority Programme, and for those councils with elections, to advise whether they wish to request a cancellation of the elections due in May 2025.
- 2.3 This deadline is extremely tight and it is understood that the Priority Programme is for those who are ready and able to progress Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, and where there is a clear and shared consensus for any proposals.
- 2.4 The Government is clear that reorganisation should not delay devolution and plans for both should be complementary. They intend to work with areas to deliver an ambitious first wave of reorganisation in this Parliament. New unitary councils must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. For most areas this will mean creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more but there may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area, including for devolution, and decisions will be on a case-by-case basis.

3.0 INITIAL RESPONSE TO PROPOSALS

- 3.1 The Council welcomes the opportunity for devolution of powers and funding from central government to the regions as a good way to secure investment and stimulate economic growth within our communities.
- 3.2 The Council, along with other district and borough councils in Leicestershire, believes that a population of 500,000 would be too big to be able to provide good local services to local people, especially in rural areas. The Council wants to make sure local government remains local.
- 3.3 Local government in Leicestershire works. No single authority is failing. North West Leicestershire is a well-run council with a strong financial track record and the Council will be working hard to ensure that it gets the best for its residents.
- 3.4 The Council would like to work collaboratively with other partners to develop proposals that work for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland and that make sense to local people.
- 3.5 Reports will be submitted to Corporate Scrutiny and Cabinet as necessary to enable detailed consideration of the White Paper and proposed next steps prior to any proposals being submitted to Government.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning and regeneration - Communities and housing - Clean, green and Zero Carbon - A well-run council
Policy Considerations:	None directly arising from the report.
Safeguarding:	None directly arising from the report.
Equalities/Diversity:	There are no equality implications arising from the recommendations in this report. In developing any proposals for a unitary structure regard will be given to equality implications and how the proposals might affect those groups with protected characteristics.
Customer Impact:	None directly arising from the report although depending on the future structure of local government the services customers may be impacted. This will need to be given detailed consideration.
Economic and Social Impact:	None directly arising from the report.
Environment, Climate Change and Zero Carbon:	None directly arising from the report.
Consultation/Community/Tenant Engagement:	Local people should be engaged in shaping proposals that will impact on how they receive services in the future.

Risks:	<p>That no consensus on local government arrangements for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland will be reached and a solution could be imposed on the Council by Central Government.</p> <p>Local Services could be impacted negatively. Financially, the biggest drain on council budgets is with social care. Putting this huge, important and costly service in the same authority as other services that are important to local people – things like street cleaning, anti-social behaviour, parks, leisure centres – could put these other services at risk as the cost of providing social care increases.</p>
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