

**SPECIAL COUNCIL
15 FEBRUARY 2024**

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP)

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Stephen Harker
Leader and all Cabinet Members**

Responsible Directors – Chief Officers Executive

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To approve a Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2024/25 to 2027/28, including setting a budget and Council Tax increase for 2024/25. To also approve the 2024/25 to 2027/28 Capital Programme.
2. The Final Local Government Finance Settlement was received on Monday 5 February 2024, subsequently this report updates the Cabinet report of the 6 February to take into account the final settlement figures which have improved the annual position by £1.064m per annum.

Summary

3. The Council is facing unparalleled financial challenges stemming from reductions in public spending between 2010 and 2019 where the Council's budget was reduced by £46m in real terms, a 36% reduction in budget. This financial position has been further compounded in the aftermath of covid and the current economic climate, the cost of living is increasing, and income deprivation and poverty rising. It is a challenge for everyone including the Council with a spiralling increase in demand for children's social care, high inflation, and rising interest rates, all of which have a direct impact on the Council's contracted expenditure.
4. The Council has previously met the challenges faced head on through value for money service delivery, shared services, economic growth, and strong financial management and has utilised built up reserves to continue to provide vital services for the residents of Darlington. However, the additional demands and inflationary increases are putting an unprecedented pressure on affordability and our reserves will be significantly reduced by the end of 2025/26.
5. Unless additional government funding is forthcoming the Council will need to undertake a fundamental review over the course of 2024 to decide what and how services will be delivered in the coming years. Extensive consultation with residents, staff, charities, businesses and key stakeholders will be carried out to explore how we can deal with the scale of the financial challenge we face.

6. Over two thirds of our expenditure is spent on Adult and Children's social care, caring for our most vulnerable residents and children. The rise in inflation and interest rates directly impacts on our adult care contracts which increased by 15.6% over the last year, in addition, since the pandemic there has been a continual rise in the demand for children's care services. We are seeing more vulnerable children with increasingly complex needs requiring help and support, there has during this year been a 33% increase in children in our care since pre pandemic levels. These are our largest budgets, and we have a statutory requirement to provide the services, but they only touch 4% of our population.
7. Darlington has the second lowest Council Tax in the North East and as such we cannot raise sufficient income from Council Tax charges to fund the spending pressures we face, every 1% increase in Council Tax increases revenue by £0.625m. Darlington has a low tax base with 44% of our properties in Band A and 79% Band A - C, this along with the council tax level means we generate significantly less Council Tax than some other more affluent areas. If Darlington had the average England Band D Council Tax level, we would generate an additional £8.7m per year. This highlights the disparity in how local government is funded.
8. To protect services as far as possible and push back the impending cliff edge, all budgets have been reviewed and challenged and savings of £4.019m achieved through back office efficiencies, restructures and income generation which do not affect front line service delivery. In addition a proposed Council Tax increase of 2.99% and a 2% social care precept to help fund adult social care has been made which would generate £1.869m and £1.250m respectively to help continue to provide vital services.
9. Darlington has some significant inequalities challenges across the borough from a financial as well as a health perspective. Duncan Selbie, the prior Chief Executive of Public Health England, said the best thing you can do to improve health is a good home, a good job, and a good friend. The Council is determined to address inequalities, and to have the best possible chance of doing this we need to continue to grow the Darlington economy, attract businesses and companies to the area helping to create more better paid jobs and provide energy efficient affordable homes to ensure inclusive growth for our residents.
10. However, this ambition is not an overnight fix, inclusive economic growth takes time, particularly in this economic climate. We have made a great start over the last 10 years, the structural landscape of Darlington has changed, new businesses and government departments have relocated to the town bringing high quality jobs, and 293 new Council houses have been built providing good quality affordable housing. There is significant investment going into Darlington station paving the way for improved rail services for the town and wider area as well as the redevelopment of Darlington's railway heritage quarter, both of which will help regeneration and jobs. But more needs to be done and we will allocate the resources we do have into realising this ambition.
11. The Final Local Government Finance Settlement delivered on the 5 February 2024 confirmed funding for one year only and the anticipated Council Tax referendum limits of 3% for Council Tax and 2% for Social Care Precept. As part of the settlement reference was made to the development and sharing of productivity plans which will require local authorities to set out how they will improve service performance and reduce wasteful expenditure. The Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) will be working with the sector on the approach to the plans in the coming months.

12. Future years funding beyond this period have not been confirmed and the consequence of this is that the 2024/25 – 2027/28 MTFP has an eye to future years but does not seek to presume what the future will look like. It aims to ensure that the Council can set a legal budget in 2024/25 and continue to provide our core offer level of services to the residents of Darlington.
13. The Council has performed well in responding to the financial challenges over the years, taking early action to ensure that it is ahead of the curve and not therefore pushed into short term decisions. However the overwhelming demand for services, increased contract costs linked to inflation and living wage increases is making future budgets untenable without additional government funding.
14. Darlington is not alone in facing these pressures, Council's across the country are struggling with the same issues which have been widely reported in the media over the last year with a number indicating the inability to balance their books. A review of local government finances was discussed by Government in 2019 however proposals have been postponed over the years and it is not clear when, or if, a fundamental review will take place. The financial pressures faced have been raised with the Local Government Association and the Department for Levelling up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) directly.
15. The Council operates a core offer which is at a statutory service level with a small provision for discretionary services and this is the base level the new MTFP has been prepared on. A healthy level of reserves had been maintained for medium term stability and this is now a crucial component of the budget strategy given the unprecedented pressures faced in the coming year. The reserves will be utilised to meet the 2024/25 funding gap and allow time for detailed work to be completed on savings options during 2024 if no government funding is forthcoming.
16. In summary, if the recommendations are agreed, the Council can deliver a 2024/25 budget which will allow net revenue investment in Darlington and its residents of £128m and new capital investment of £98m to add to the current capital programme of £317m. It also allows time to undertake a detailed review of all service provision during 2024/25 to deliver savings required in future years.

Recommendations

17. It is recommended that Council:
 - (a) Note the responses and comments received to the consultation.
 - (b) Approve the Revenue MTFP as set out in **Appendix 6** and the Capital Programme as set out in **Appendix 7**, including the following:
 - (i) A Council Tax increase of 2.99% plus a 2% Adult Social Care Precept to help fund social care for 2024/25.
 - (ii) The Schedule of Charges as set out in **Appendix 3**.

- (iii) Funding for Children's Services to address the dependence on expensive external provision and improve placement sufficiency for children and young people in Darlington as noted in the report and detailed in **Appendix 8**.
- (c) Approve a delegation for Cabinet to vary the Revenue Budget for 2024/25 by up to £0.5m without further Council approval.
- (d) Approve a delegation for Cabinet to vary the Capital Budget for 2024/25 by up to £0.5m without further Council approval.

Reasons

18. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:

- (a) The Council must set a budget for the next financial year.
- (b) To enable the Council to continue to plan services and finances over the medium term.
- (c) To ensure decisions can be made in a timely manner.
- (d) To reduce the pressures on the MTFP in the medium term.
- (e) To ensure investment in our assets is maintained.

Chief Officers Executive

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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S17 Crime and Disorder	The report contains proposals to continue to allocate resources in support of the Council's Crime and Disorder responsibilities
Health and Well Being	The report contains proposals to continue to allocate resources in support of the Council's Health and Well Being responsibilities
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	The proposals in the report seek to continue to support the Council's responsibilities and ambitions to reduce carbon impact in the Council and the Borough.
Diversity	There are no specific proposals that impact on diversity issues.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected
Groups Affected	All groups are affected by the Council Tax increase.
Budget and Policy Framework	The MTFP, Budget and Council Tax must all be decided by full Council
Key Decision	The MTFP, Budget and Council Tax must all be decided by full Council
Urgent Decision	The MTFP, Budget and Council Tax must all be decided by full Council
Council Plan	Within the constraints of available resources, it is necessary for the Council to make decisions involving prioritisation. The proposals contained in this report are designed to support delivery of the Council Plan within those constraints.
Efficiency	Efficiency savings which do not affect service levels have been included in the MTFP.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Children's social care continues to be resourced to provide good outcomes for Looked after Children or Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Background and context

19. The Council is facing unparalleled financial challenges stemming from reductions in public spending between 2010 and 2019 where the Council's budget was reduced by £46m in real terms, a 36% reduction in budget. This financial position has been further compounded in the aftermath of covid and the current economic climate, the cost of living is increasing, and income deprivation and poverty rising. It is a challenge for everyone including the Council with a spiralling increase in demand for children's social care, high inflation, and rising interest rates, all of which have a direct impact on the Council's contracted expenditure.
20. The Council has previously met the challenges faced head on through value for money service delivery, shared services, economic growth and strong financial management and has utilised built up reserves to continue to provide vital services for the residents of Darlington. However, the additional demands and inflationary increases are putting an

unprecedented pressure on affordability and our reserves will be significantly reduced by the end of 2025/26.

21. Over two thirds of our expenditure is spent on Adult and Children's social care, caring for our most vulnerable residents and children. The rise in inflation and interest rates directly impacts on our adult care contracts which increased by 15.6% over the last year, in addition, since the pandemic there has been a continual rise in the demand for children's care services. We have seen more vulnerable children with increasingly complex needs requiring help and support, referrals have increased by 118% and early help assessments by 165% in the last two years alone, and there has been during this year a 33% increase in children in our care since pre pandemic levels. These are our largest budgets, and we have a statutory requirement to provide the services, but they only touch 4% of our population.
22. Darlington is not alone in facing these pressures, Council's across the country are struggling with the same issues which have been widely reported in the media over the last year with a number of Councils indicating the inability to balance the books. A fundamental review of how local government is financed (the Fair Funding Review) was announced by government back in 2019 but it has continually been postponed with no indication on when or if this will happen. The pressures Darlington faces have been raised with the Local Government Association and DLUHC directly.
23. The Council's core offer budget, which is based on statutory service provision along with a small discretionary provision, is the starting position for the 2024/25 budget. Back in 2014 it was recognised that strong economic growth was needed to help the Council's overall financial position but that it takes time to realise so we needed to maintain reserves as far as possible. This strategy to preserve reserves worked well to date allowing time for the financial impact of the economic growth strategy to come to fruition, however, the additional demands and increased costs have escalated the financial pressures faced to unprecedented levels and our reserves will be significantly reduced by the end of 2025/26. Unless additional government funding is forthcoming the core offer will be unaffordable, and the Council will need to undertake a fundamental review over the course of 2024 to decide what and how services will be delivered in the coming years.
24. Income and resource levels are discussed in detail later in this paper, however as we only have a one year finance settlement, along with the turbulent times we find ourselves in, it makes it challenging to predict expenditure and income levels moving forward. Consequently, best estimates have been used and assumptions made on the impact of inflation and demand in 2023/24 going into 2024/25 and the income and resources we will receive in future years.

Updated Information and changes to the draft MTFP

25. As a result of updated information since the draft MTFP was approved for consultation, a number of changes have been made to this proposed MTFP. The net effect is an additional £7.105m in revenue resources across the life of the plan. These changes along with the references to where they appear in the report are shown below:

No.	Change	Effect	Para	App
1	Council Tax - Additional properties.	Over the life of the MTFP increases reserves by £0.943m	73, 74, 77	4,6
2	Increase in business rates retained locally due Septembers CPI being used and changes in the multiplier.	The increases reserves by £1.018m in 2024/25 with a further increase in reserves of £4.568m over the life of the MTFP	73, 74, 77	4,6
3	Settlement – Reduction in Top Up Grant due to changes in the multiplier and the rate of increase applied.	Over the life of the MTFP reduces reserves by £0.431m	73, 74, 77	4,6
4	Settlement – New Homes Bonus scheme continues for a further year.	Increases reserves by £0.436m.	58, 73, 74, 77	4,6
5	Settlement – Increased Revenue Support Grant due to uplift of inflation	Over the life of the MTFP increases reserves by £0.730m	54, 73, 74, 77	4,6
6	Settlement – Reduction in Services Grant	Over the life of the MTFP reduces reserves by £3.040m	56, 73, 74, 77	4,6
7	Settlement – Increase in Social Care Grant	Over the life of the MTFP increases reserves by £0.300m	57, 73, 74, 77	4,6
8	Settlement – Increase in Social Care Grant- Additional funding announced 24/1/24	Over the life of the MTFP increases reserves by £4.176m	57, 73, 74, 77	4,6
9	Additional pressures/savings	Pressures identified in Waste Management, and Financing Costs. Reduces reserves by £0.908m over the life of the MTFP	26, 28-34, 51,52, 74,77	1,2 & 6
10	Stronger Communities Fund	Reduces reserves by £0.050m	41-43, 77	6
11	Quarter 3 Revenue Budget Management	Improved position at Quarter 3 increases reserves by £0.381m	75,77	5,6
12	Additional ring-fenced Social Care Grants.	Conditions for use. No impact on reserves.	71	1
13	Corporate Capital Schemes	Increase in quote for fully accessible toilet £0.010m. No impact on reserves.	86	7

Financial Analysis

Projected Expenditure

26. As noted previously the core offer budget is the level of service provision the MTFP is based upon. Estimates attached at **Appendix 1** have been prepared based on current service levels and include known pressures and the savings proposed which are summarised below and detailed in **Appendix 2**. The most significant are discussed in the following paragraphs. The assumptions used when preparing the estimates are set out at **Appendix 4**.

<u>Summary of Pressures</u>	2024/25 £m	2025/26 £m	2026/27 £m	2027/28 £m
Service Demand	4.249	5.493	5.846	5.994
Price Inflation	1.629	2.776	3.309	4.745
Reduced Income	0.573	0.418	0.510	0.445
Pay Award	1.808	1.857	1.920	1.966
Other	0.421	0.434	0.448	0.464
Total	8.680	10.978	12.033	13.614

Pressures

27. There are some significant pressures emerging which fall into one of five categories being increased demand, price inflation, reduced income, pay award and other.
28. **Increased Service Demand** – The largest area by far regarding increased demand is Children’s Services, accounting for £3.631m of the 2024/25 pressure, and £18.889m across the MTFP. The past year has seen a 36% increase in the number of contacts (from partner agencies and the public concerned for a child’s welfare) compared to pre covid numbers in 2019/20. This has led to an increase in referrals of over 71% which must statutorily be responded to by a social work assessment. The increases in demand have subsequently led to an increase in the numbers of Children in Care, which during the year has increased by 33% from pre pandemic levels.
29. Darlington is not alone in seeing these pressures and Councils across the country are experiencing the same issues. Darlington has been proactive and partnered with Leeds City Council and the Department for Education in 2019 to develop Strengthening Families, a restorative and relational approach designed to improve family partnership working and reduce the need for children to become looked after. The approach we are taking is one of three nationally recognised best practice approaches and whilst increases to Children in Care has been experienced, it is the view of the service that the increases would have been much greater had the approach not been in place. Through the approach we have significantly increased the number of children being diverted from care through our Keeping Families Together Edge of Care Team and our Family Group Conferencing Team, both of whom have won prestigious national awards over recent years.
30. It is also worth noting that the governments independent review of children’s social care (the MacAllister review) concluded that children’s social care needed to be reset and to do that required an investment of £2bn. To date only £200m had been allocated.
31. **Price Inflation** – is a significant strain on the budget at £1.629m next year and £12.459m over the MTFP. 93% of that strain is related to our adult and children’s social care contracts. The Adults care contracts are linked to various inflation factors including the Consumer Price Index which in October stood at 4.6%, the national living wage of £11.44 per hour from 1 April 2024 – an increase of 9.8%, which automatically feeds through to the care providers. Also, the residential care contract contains an additional factor for interest rates increasing by 7.25% which impacts on the contract rate. Whilst this is a significant

pressure on the Council’s finances the pressure on the care sector is recognised and these uplifts are required to ensure stability in a very fragile market.

32. In the increased demand section, the rise in the number of children looked after was highlighted, whilst the number of children requiring help and support and in particular care has increased significantly, so too has the availability of care placements and the costs of care placements for children. The cost of commissioning external foster placements and external residential placements for children, which Darlington are heavily reliant upon due to our own limited number of in-house placements have increased by 17% and 33% respectively.
33. As a proactive measure to reduce the reliance on costly external provision a proposal has been put forward to reduce dependency on these placements for children as noted in paragraph 44 below.
34. **Reduced Income** - The main area of reduced income is crematorium fees with a reduction in numbers of people using the service, some of this is due to new facilities opening in the nearby area. There has also been slippage in Joint Venture investment returns which have been deferred for a year due to slower progress on schemes because of nutrient neutrality issues.
35. **Pay Award** – the 2023/24 pay award was settled at a flat rate of £1,925 per employee. The percentage increase was therefore different depending upon base salary; however, the average increase was approximately 6.5%. The 2023/24 MTFP budgeted for a 5% increase hence the pressure which is recurring each year. Given the high inflation rates a 4% award has been budgeted for in 2024/25 reverting back to 2% thereafter. Together this is a significant pressure of £7.551m over the life of the MTFP.
36. **Other** – this section includes a number of smaller pressures across all service areas, the main one being an increase in external audit fees of £110k, a 151% increase. This is due to the fragile state of the external audit market and an attempt by Public Sector Audit Appointments to alleviate the backlogs. The Government are looking to reset the system and take action to address the backlog and make the system more sustainable and timelier. The increase in fees should address the issue in part.

Savings

<u>Summary of Savings</u>	2024/25 £m	2025/26 £m	2026/27 £m	2027/28 £m
Back office efficiencies & general house keeping	(2.420)	(1.801)	(1.869)	(1.901)
Energy savings	(0.550)	(0.550)	(0.550)	(0.550)
Increased income	(1.049)	(1.747)	(1.859)	(1.601)
Total	(4.019)	(4.098)	(4.278)	(4.052)

37. To protect front line services to our residents as far as possible we continually work to maximise savings and efficiencies across the Council. In total over £4m per year has been identified, £16.447m across the MTFP.
38. By reducing costs in management, back office, general housekeeping, £2.420m has been identified in 2024/25, and £7.991m over the life of the MTFP. These savings come from staffing vacancies through redesign of service provision, removal of historic underspends and reduction in supplies and services budgets, e.g. subscriptions, travel, printing, stationary, furniture and equipment.
39. Energy usage has been closely monitored over the year given the substantial increase and £2.200m in savings over the MTFP are anticipated following reduced rates and usage savings.
40. We have also reviewed income streams and anticipated an additional £1.049m in 2024/25 £6.256m over the MTFP. This includes additional income from partners, rental income, increases in sales income at our leisure facilities, increase car parking patronage and additional income from garden waste collections.

Previous budget provision

41. **Stronger Communities Fund** – the Stronger Communities Fund was established in 2021/22 to assist in grass roots projects and initiatives in each of the elected members wards with £0.001m made available to each member to utilise as they see fit in their communities and reviewed on an annual basis.
42. A report was taken to the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee on 11 January and subsequently forwarded to the Economy and Resources Committee on 18 January, updating on the spend to date and initiatives Councillors had funded.
43. Scrutiny recommended to Cabinet that the scheme should be extended for a further year. At the beginning of the financial year each member's fund will be topped back up to £1,000.

Children's sufficiency investment

44. Sourcing placements for looked after children is at crisis point nationally with an increasing reliance on high-cost unregulated emergency placements or expensive residential care due to a lack of more appropriate placements. This issue has been compounded in Darlington by increases in our looked after population and the mandated National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).
45. The increased number of children cared for by Darlington Borough Council, coupled with a lack of placement sufficiency has resulted in a significant increase in placement expenditure along with a reduction in placement stability for children and young people looked after by Darlington Borough Council.
46. A range of responses to these challenges have already been implemented which includes a panel to provide the needed peer challenge and ensure when a decision is made to make a

child looked after, it is after all other options have been exhausted. There is a strong focus on discharging Care Orders where children are living with parents.

47. These measures on their own cannot effectively meet the scale of the pressure. Darlington do not have the in-house sufficiency to meet the diverse needs of children downstream and our baseline support offer benchmarks negatively in the region in terms of core support.
48. A number of proposals have been developed in response which comprise the enhancement and growth of the Darlington Borough Council foster care service along with the expansion of Darlington’s own residential support provision.
49. The proposals are detailed in the Children’s Sufficiency Cabinet report tabled at the 5 December 2023 Cabinet meeting and attached at **Appendix 8**, in summary the proposals require a net investment of £1.292m in 2024/25 which is anticipated to deliver savings of £0.270m, £0.507m and £0.736m in 2025/26, 2026/27 and 2027/28 respectively.
50. The proposal was scrutinised at the Childrens and Young People Scrutiny on the 15 January 2024 who welcomed the proposals and their inclusion in the MFTP.

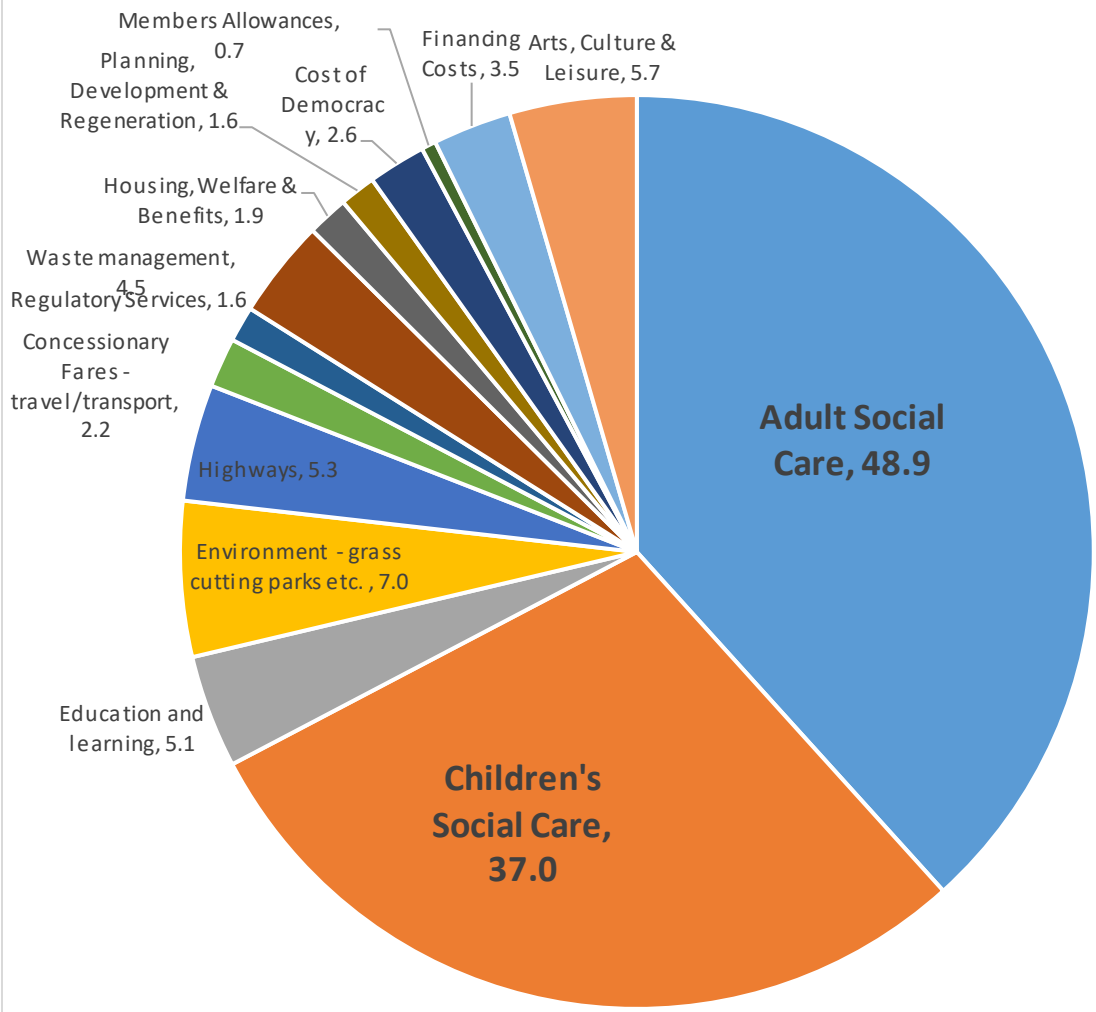
Total Expenditure

51. Taking the above savings, pressures and children’s sufficiency proposal into account the summarised projected expenditure is shown in the table below:

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
	£m	£m	£m	£m
People Services	84.432	86.880	89.906	92.790
Chief Executives Office & Economic Growth	1.472	1.566	1.416	1.448
Services	25.347	26.276	26.947	27.590
Operations	13.580	13.964	14.268	14.571
Financing costs	3.547	3.722	3.539	3.468
Investment Returns - Joint Venture	(1.517)	(1.828)	(1.750)	(1.452)
Council Wide Pressures	0.631	0.643	0.658	0.669
Council Wide Contingencies	0.202	0.202	1.655	1.664
Total Expenditure	127.694	131.425	136.639	140.748

52. This proposed net investment in services of £128m in 2024/25 covers a wide range of areas from adult residential care to refuse collection, from Childrens Services to street lighting and grass cutting to our Leisure and Culture provision. The chart below shows the split of investment and as can be seen Social Care, both Children’s and Adults, are the most significant proportion of funding, accounting for two thirds of the overall budget.

WHERE THE MONEY WILL BE SPENT ON SERVICES FOR 2024/25 £m



- Adult Social Care
 - Education and learning
 - Highways
 - Regulatory Services
 - Housing, Welfare & Benefits
 - Cost of Democracy
 - Financing Costs
 -
- Children's Social Care
 - Environment - grass cutting parks etc.
 - Concessionary Fares - travel/transport
 - Waste management
 - Planning, Development & Regeneration
 - Members Allowances
 - Arts, Culture & Leisure

Projected Income

Local Government Finance Settlement

53. The Final Local Government Finance Settlement delivered on the 5 February 2024, confirmed funding for one year only and the anticipated Council Tax referendum limits of 3% for Council Tax and 2% for Social Care Precept. Future years funding beyond this period have not been confirmed and the consequence of this is that the 2024/25 – 2027/28 is based on the final 2024/25 settlement and assumptions for years two to four of the plan using the best estimates on the latest information available. All assumptions are summarised in **Appendix 4** and detailed in the sections below.

Core Grant funding to Local Government

54. **Revenue Support Grant (RSG)** has become a reducing element of the Council core funding over recent years; however, it has been confirmed this will be uplifted by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in 2024/25, and it has been assumed this will continue into future years with an annual inflationary increase of 2% in 2025/26 and 1.16% in future years.
55. **Better Care Fund and Adult Social Care Support Grant**- these funds were in recognition of the significant challenges faced in the Adult Social care sector and were initially time based. They have however been included as core funding for the last couple of years so it has been assumed this funding will continue into future years on a cash equivalent basis.
56. **Services Grant** – was announced in 2021 as an un-ringfenced package of support for Local Government, the Council received £1.579m in 2022/23 reduced to £0.926m in 2023/24. This grant has been significantly reduced in the final 2024/25 settlement to £0.166m, which was unexpected and has been an unwelcome surprise across local authorities. It has been assumed this level will continue into future years on a cash flat basis.
57. **Social Care Grant** - this funding was announced in two tranches in the 2021 and 2022 spending reviews and can be spent on children's and adult social care. Whilst the 2022 grant was repurposed monies from delaying the charging reforms in 2023/24 and 2024/25 it is anticipated this funding will continue into future years given the significant pressures on the system. The final Local Government Finance Settlement included an additional £500m for social care of which Darlington's allocation was £1.044m.
58. **New Homes Bonus (NHB)** has been extended for a further year without legacy payments. There was no announcement on the future of the New Homes Bonus so it has been assumed no further NHB payments will be received in future years.

Council Tax Income

59. Due to reduction and reliance on Government funding over the last ten years, Council Tax is now by far the largest single funding stream and will increase further as a percentage over the coming years representing 58% of projected resources anticipated by 2027/28. The ongoing increases reflect the Cabinet's view that income from Council Tax needs to increase to protect key service provision and enable investment in vital services. Members will recall that a 1% increase in Council Tax equates to an annual revenue of £0.625m.

60. In recognition of the significant pressures facing local authority budgets particularly in regard to social care with contract inflation, demographic demand and increased complexity of needs, the Chancellor announced in the 2022 Autumn Statement that further flexibilities would be given to Councils in both Council Tax and the Social Care Precept for two years with the referendum limit set at 5%, 3% for Council Tax and 2% for the Social Care Precept.
61. This MTFP assumes a Council Tax increase of 2.99% for 2024/25 reducing to 1.99% thereafter and an Adult Social Care precept of 2% for 2024/25 reverting to 1% thereafter. As can be seen in the chart in paragraph 52, Adult Social Care is by far our largest overall budget with a spend of £49m. The precept will raise £1.250 m which is crucial to meet the overall costs and pressure faced in this service area.
62. Darlington has the second lowest Council Tax in the North East, to put this in perspective if Darlington had the average North East Band D level the Council would generate an additional £3.3m per annum, and if we had the average England band D level, we would generate an additional £8.7m per annum.
63. Darlington has a low Council Tax Base with 44% of our properties in Band A and 79% of our homes in Band A – C, meaning we are limited to the amount we can collect.
64. Nutrient Neutrality has had an impact on the Council Tax Base with planning permissions stalled whilst mitigation schemes or credits are obtained by developers. It was also anticipated there would be an impact on housing demand due to rising interest rates and mortgage costs however we are still seeing a buoyant housing market and moving forward planning estimates anticipate growth levels to be an average of 511 Band D equivalent properties over the period of this plan which is a growth on the tax base of 1.4% per annum. These figures have been used to prepare the estimates; clearly should this be any different income levels will differ. The collection rate (of collectable debt) is anticipated to remain at 99% in 2024/25.

National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR)

65. The Council retains 49% of NNDR collected and can gain or lose depending on whether the net tax collected increases or decreases. The Government via the valuation office sets rateable values and the rate paid in the pound is increased each year in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The business tax-base is far more volatile than the Council Tax base and requires very close monitoring. In addition to the potential to “lose” income due to business closures, the Council also carries the risk of losing appeals by businesses against valuations.
66. Growing the economy is the key priority for the Council and the Economic Strategy gives priority to increasing business within the borough and significant effort has been put into achieving growth. This has been rewarded with a positive net increase in NNDR collection. Sites such as Symmetry Park and Central Park are all contributing to the growth and the new Darlington Economic campus has been confirmed at Brunswick Street in 2026 housing His Majesty’s Treasury Department along with several other government departments including the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities. This is providing a boost to the town with other employers looking to relocate to Darlington.

67. Notwithstanding these major developments, attracting businesses into the town by their very nature takes time and upfront investment and therefore is an area which needs continued prioritisation and pump prime funding so growth can continue. It needs to be remembered that net growth in NNDR collected relies on growth outstripping revaluations and reductions which can be very challenging in the current economic climate.
68. One area of uncertainty is the business rate reset. The business rates system changed in 2013 and Councils received 49% of the NNDR collected above the base level, this was to incentivise Councils to drive economic growth. The system was due to be reviewed in 2020, with the intention of resetting the baseline and a review of need across the board and a subsequent redistribution of funding. This was part of the Fair Funding Review which has been postponed for several years now and there is no indication if this will happen in 2024/25. As Darlington has seen a healthy increase in business rates any reset would likely reduce funding in this area. Given the review has been postponed and there would need to be consultation on any new formula system, it has been assumed this would not impact on Darlington until 2026/27.
69. The in-year collection rate target for NNDR is 98.0% and as at the end of December 2023 is 84.85% and on track to achieve the target.

Collection Fund

70. The Collection Fund account reflects the statutory requirements for the Council to maintain a separate fund in relation to the operation of Council Tax and the Business Rates Retention Scheme (BRRS). The Fund records all the transactions for billing in respect of National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) and Council Tax, exemptions and discounts granted, provision for bad debts and appeals and payments made to the Council's General Fund, the Police and Fire and Rescue precept authorities and Central Government.

Other Grants

71. Set out below are the estimated specific grants which as the title suggests are for specific areas of expenditure as dictated by the government and cannot be used for other areas; the main areas being the Dedicated Schools Grant which funds Darlington's maintained schools, special educational needs and early years provision and Public Health Grant, both which are ring-fenced. These grants are included in service estimates at Appendix 1.

Description	2024/25 £m
Public Health Grant	9.335
PFI Grant	3.200
Market Sustainability & Improvement Fund	2.193
Youth Justice Board	0.272
Local Reform & Community Voices	0.057
Adult & Community Learning	1.142
Staying Put	0.056
Remand Grant	0.037
Garden Village	0.088
Pupil Premium	1.662
Dedicated Schools Grant	29.704
Virtual Headteacher	0.150
School Improvement	0.040
Domestic Abuse	0.051
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children	0.356
Homeless	0.184
Home Office Anti-Social Behaviour	0.120
Towns Fund	0.087
Delayed Discharge Grant	1.049
	49.783

Fees and charges

72. The proposed fees and charges of the Council are set out in **Appendix 3** the increases proposed are based on the cost of providing the services and take account of inflation and market conditions. Overall, the proposed increases are anticipated to generate approximately £300,000 of income to help offset the cost of service provision.

Total Income

73. The table below summarises the Council's estimated income for the period of this plan which thanks to continued economic growth and house building activity, and the subsequent increases in Council Tax and NNDR, confirms a much-needed increase in income given our expenditure pressures.

Resources - Projected and assumed	2024/25 £m	2025/26 £m	2026/27 £m	2027/28 £m
Council Tax	65.872	68.778	71.977	75.196
Business rates retained locally	26.081	26.434	17.026	17.299
Top Up Grant	8.390	8.645	15.682	15.982
RSG	4.572	4.663	4.738	4.814
New Homes Bonus	0.436	0.000	0.000	0.000
Better Care Fund	4.488	4.488	4.488	4.488
Adult Social Care Support Grant	3.753	3.753	3.753	3.753
Social Care Grant	7.153	7.153	7.153	7.153
Services Grant	0.166	0.166	0.166	0.166
Strengthening Families Grant	0.500	0.000	0.000	0.000
Total Resources	121.411	124.080	124.983	128.851

Projected MTFP

74. Set out in the table below are the projections based on the income and expenditure analysis discussed in the previous sections, as can be seen there is a significant funding gap in each financial year. We are anticipating having £16m reserves which can be utilised to support the plan which would cover the position until 2025/26, however it is clear significant expenditure reductions will be required in future years if additional government funding is not forthcoming.

	2024/25 £m	2025/26 £m	2026/27 £m	2027/28 £m
Estimated Expenditure	121.741	124.815	129.391	131.922
Children's Sufficiency	1.292	(0.270)	(0.507)	(0.736)
Pressures / Additional Savings	4.661	6.880	7.755	9.562
Projected Total Expenditure	127.694	131.425	136.639	140.748
Projected Total Resources	(121.411)	(124.080)	(124.983)	(128.851)
Projected budget deficit	6.283	7.345	11.656	11.897

Revenue Balances

75. The projected revenue outturn for 2023/24 detailed at **Appendix 5**, has improved by £0.381m since quarter two from £16.003m to £16.384m, after taking into account the Risk Reserve of £5.350m, it is anticipated we will have £16.4m of reserves which will reduce to £4.998m at the end of 2025/26. This is not a sustainable position, and a full review of service provision will need to be undertaken during 2024/25 to reduce expenditure and increase income unless further government funding is received.

76. In light of the significant financial pressures the Council is facing, efficiency measures and savings to reduce expenditure in areas which do not directly hit service provision has been undertaken and services are continually reviewed in this regard, a number of those savings at £4.019m are noted in the paragraphs above.
77. The Council has reviewed its earmarked reserves and there are three areas where it has been determined the provision can be released or partially released. £0.826m was held in the Covid reserve, £0.315m in the EU exit preparation reserve, both of these can be released fully. There is also £0.151m in the insurance reserve which it is felt prudent to release. In total, £1.292m will be transferred into general fund balances as show below.

Revenue Balances	2024/25 £m	2025/26 £m	2026/27 £m	2027/28 £m
Opening balance	16.384	12.343	4.998	(6.658)
Net contribution from Collection Fund	1.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Transfer to Stronger Communities Fund	(0.050)	0.000	0.000	0.000
Release of Earmarked Reserves	1.292	0.000	0.000	0.000
Contribution to/(from) balances	(6.283)	(7.345)	(11.656)	(11.897)
Closing balance	12.343	4.998	(6.658)	(18.555)

Capital Expenditure

78. The Council has an extensive capital programme with significant resources invested to purchase, improve, protect, and maintain our assets, to enable the Council to deliver its priorities, for example purchasing land to enable road improvements or investing in modernising school buildings and housing. The Council continues to deliver a significant capital investment programme in the main funded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and grant or other external funding which is targeted at specific schemes and programmes such as Transport and Schools. Furthermore, investment from the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) along with other external funding sources are being used for economic growth initiatives.
79. The Council can also supplement these funding sources with its own resources such as capital receipts or prudential borrowing where there is a need, however as capital receipts are limited, and prudential borrowing comes with future revenue implications there must be a strong case for doing so.
80. In recent years there has been significant investment in economic growth either funded or pump primed by the Council; schemes such as Central Park including the National Biologics Centre and Business Central along with the Development of Feetham's House which is now the temporary home for the Darlington Economic Campus, and recent Town Centre purchases funded from the Towns Fund and Indigenous Growth Fund are helping to make Darlington a more vibrant place to be. The Council's Investment Fund and Economic Growth Investment Fund are both being utilised to invest in these areas which ultimately increases business rates and the finances of the Council helping vital services to be funded.

81. The current capital programme stands at £317m as summarised in Table 1 below. The programme is monitored monthly and reported to Cabinet on a quarterly basis; the latest available monitoring report for 2023/24 was presented to Cabinet on 7 November 2023 and noted there was a projected £0.728m underspend on the approved capital programme.

Table 1

	Construction				Other Schemes/Not Allocated			Total
	Live Schemes 75k & Over	Annualised Schemes	Completed Schemes awaiting review	Live Schemes under 75k	Non construction	Capital investment fund	Housing New Build - not yet allocated	
Area	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
Housing	60.099	10.021	0.627	0.033	1.205	0.000	15.673	87.658
Economic Growth	41.593	0.080	3.388	0.337	10.817	33.481	3.476	93.172
Highways/Transport	63.152	10.011	14.949	1.380	1.645	1.877	1.512	94.526
Leisure & Culture	29.883	0.000	2.618	0.176	0.000	0.000	0.000	32.677
Education	5.279	0.230	0.007	0.361	0.079	0.000	0.290	6.246
Adult Social Care	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.071	0.000	0.000	0.071
Other	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	2.455	0.000	0.000	2.455
Total	200.006	20.342	21.589	2.287	16.272	35.358	20.951	316.805

82. In addition to the current agreed programme (including schemes approved in previous MTFP but not released to date) the Council looks ahead to future capital requirements based on the principles of the capital strategy. A four-year timeframe has been adopted to fall in line with the revenue Medium Term Financial Plan. Attached at **Appendix 7** are the priority proposals for addition to the plan along with the funding methods. The majority of schemes are focused on Housing and Transport, funded via the HRA and government grants respectively; there are also a number of Council funded corporate schemes that have already been approved.

83. The following paragraphs describe the major elements of the capital programme priorities for approval. Specific scheme funding release will be subject to detailed reports to Cabinet.

Corporate Schemes – funding required.

84. As noted previously the Council can supplement government capital funding, albeit options are limited in the current financial climate. Funding can come from prudential borrowing, repaid via revenue, which puts additional pressure on the revenue account or from capital receipts. Given the financial position of the Council only schemes that are a health and safety risk or that are self-funding have been considered while there is uncertainty over the overall funding envelope.

85. The risk assessed usable capital receipts over the next four years are in the region of £10m although they are not guaranteed.

86. There will be many competing priorities against the available resources for both regeneration and refurbishment and these schemes will emerge over the coming year/s. At this stage Members are requested to make capital provision for three priority schemes with a total value of £1.940m, which will be subject to full reports to Cabinet in due course, these are:

- (a) **A167 Victoria Road culvert repairs - £1.400m** - B19 Victoria Road Culvert is a large structure that carries the A167 over the River Skerne through Darlington. It was designed 60 years ago for modern weights and traffic volume; however it is overdue major maintenance to maintain its structural function. It requires replacement of its 20 expansion joint and concrete repairs and reinforcement due to water ingress caused by the failure of its expansion joints. Currently these repairs can be carried out from inside the culvert without affecting traffic flows or full carriageway reconstruction and resurfacing that would be necessary should more major works be necessary due to further deterioration.
- (b) **Changing places accessible toilet at the Hippodrome - £0.040m** – for the provision of a changing places accessible toilet large enough to allow parents and carers to change their children in a safe environment. The total cost is £0.080m due to the positioning of the toilet and the complexity of the work in the space, however £0.040m has been received in grant so the ask is £0.040m.
- (c) **Capitalised repairs - £0.500m** – £0.250m is required for repairs on the Council building stock in 2026/27 and 2027/28 to ensure it is fit for purpose. This is a rolling programme and funding has already been agreed for 2024/25 – 2025/26. Details on specific areas of spend will be brought to Cabinet for consideration.

Government Funding

87. Set out below are details of the levels of Government funding available for investment by the Council in 2024/25 and an outline of the proposed use of these funds.

	2024/25 £m
Children’s Services	
School Condition Allocation	0.067
Transport	
Local Transport Plan	3.068
Other	
Disabled Facilities Grant	1.063
Total Capital Grant Available	4.198

School Condition Allocations

88. The Local Authority now only receives school condition funding for Maintained Schools. Maintenance funding for Academies is available through other routes. The funding

received by the Local Authority will be spent in line with key priorities identified with each maintained school through the locally agreed asset management planning (LAMP) process, carried out each January. There are no strict spend deadlines for these small-scale condition related projects which are prioritised and completed as funding becomes available.

Transport and Highways

89. A new Local Transport Plan for the Tees Valley was endorsed by the Tees Valley Cabinet in 2021. This will help set the spending plans for the funding allocations from the Department for Transport and from the Devolution deal. The Integrated Transport Programme (ITP) of TVCAs Investment plan identifies £256.7m of investment over the next 10 years. There will be projects and initiatives delivered in Darlington from this fund.
90. The new Tees Valley Local Transport Plan has a number of accompanying documents that set the strategy and vision for different modes of transport. Each Local Authority is required to produce a Local Improvement Plan, which will effectively replace the local authority Local Transport Plan. These plans will cover local priorities and maintenance requirements. Prior to this year the Council received funding via TVCA that was based on needs formula. However, all the funding has now been merged into the new City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS), which is a 5-year allocation of funding. The Tees Valley have been allocated £310m. The details of this allocation have been finalised and the Council has been awarded £15.340m over the 5 years to 2026/27. The annual amount of £3.068m is based on the following breakdown which includes £0.893m for the Integrated Block, £1.206m for the Highways Maintenance Block plus £0.969m for the Pothole action programme. The new CRSTS will provide the opportunity to deliver larger improvement schemes in Darlington identified in the Tees Valley and Darlington transport plans and these are currently being developed on an individual scheme basis.

Disabled Facility Grants

91. These grants are available if you are disabled and need to make changes to your home with examples being:
 - (a) Widen doors and install ramps,
 - (b) Improve access to rooms and facilities – e.g. stair lifts or a downstairs bathroom,
 - (c) Provide a heating system suitable for your needs, and
 - (d) Adapt heating or lighting controls to make them easier to use.

Housing

92. All Housing capital schemes are funded fully from the Housing Revenue Account. The priorities identified through the Housing Business Plan will be funded from the estimated capital resources for 2024/25. Further detail is given in the Housing Revenue Account financial plan but in summary includes:
 - (a) Adaptations and lifts - £0.214m
 - (b) Heating Replacement - £1.286m
 - (c) Structural Works - £0.427m
 - (d) Lifeline Services - £0.250m

- (e) Repairs before Painting - £0.066m
- (f) Roofing and Repointing work - £1.050m
- (g) Garages - £0.050m
- (h) External Works - £0.210m.
- (i) Pavements - £0.027m
- (j) Window & Door Replacement - £1.495m
- (k) Internal planned maintenance (IPM) - £2.898m
- (l) Communal Works - £0.160m
- (m) Energy Efficiency Improvements - £3.068m
- (n) New Build housing - £15.815m
- (o) Fees - £0.254m

Scrutiny and Consultation

93. Consultation on the draft plan ran from 5 December 2023 to 22 January 2024. The plan was promoted on the Council's consultation website, social media, an article in the One Darlington Magazine and there was coverage in the Northern Echo. There was also information available at Cockerton and Crown Stret Libraries.
94. Council Scrutiny Committees reviewed the MTFP and its proposals through January and the Economy and Resources Committee met on 18 January 2024 to consider the responses from all the Council's Scrutiny Committees. The minutes of that meeting are shown in **Appendix 9** and include the resolution from all the scrutiny meetings; in summary the committee submitted the following response for Cabinet consideration:
95. That Cabinet be advised that the following is the response of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on behalf of all the Council's Scrutiny Committees in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2027/28 consultation:
- (a) That the report and the input of the scrutiny committees' representatives be noted with the majority view that the MTFP is approved for onward submission.
 - (b) A minority view was recorded from members who do not support the MTFP in its current form.
96. Further feedback has been received from four members of the public via the website consultation pages and is summarised into two categories as follows:
- (a) Council Tax levels
 - (i) Questions concerning what impact the rise in Council Tax is going to achieve.
 - (ii) A note that Council Tax and the social care precept increases will push more people into poverty, impacting on other services and businesses.
 - (b) Services
 - (i) A lack of plans to reduce the Council's liabilities over time.
 - (ii) A request to invest more into preventative anti-social driving on green spaces.

- (iii) A question of allocating funding to adult social care with this reaching a small percentage of the population.
- (iv) To build a greener, healthier and more educated Darlington as the focus of the new MTFP.
- (v) A review of social housing.
- (vi) A review of management costs and Council buildings.

97. Further feedback has been received from organisations operating in Darlington via the website consultation pages and is summarised as follows:

- (a) A request for further consultation and meaningful involvement of disabled people and their families in future Council plans.
- (b) An appreciation of the constraints on Local Authority funding and the pressure that will put on all organisations supporting local people.
- (c) Evidence suggests that disabled people and their families are likely to be amongst the most impacted by changes to services.
- (d) A question regarding the language used in the report concerning the percentage of the population that social care touches.
- (e) A recognition of the strong efforts of officers and members to maximise service delivery.
- (f) To support the raising of Council Tax, despite the unfairness of the current funding regime.
- (g) To be kept informed through normal channels of future developments for service delivery which impact on policing.

Conclusion

98. The Council has faced significant financial challenges over the last decade, with significant reductions in government funding followed by the financial instability during the pandemic, but to date has risen to these challenges well which has previously enabled a balanced MTFP.
99. 2023 has presented further challenge with continued high inflation, and demand for services increased since the pandemic, particularly in children's social care where there is a £4.5m overspend this financial year anticipated to increase in 2024/25.
100. The future of Local Government financing is still uncertain; there have been a number of Councils issuing a section 114 notice and evidence of more to come, however, it is clear from the Autumn Statement and the Local Government Finance Settlement that public funding will not keep up with inflation. The Council can deliver a balanced position until

2025/26 utilising reserves as per our financial strategy, however there is a significant annual budget deficit which is not sustainable and will need to be addressed. Unless additional government funding is forthcoming the Council will need to undertake a fundamental review over the course of 2024 to decide what and how services will be delivered in the coming years.

101. Planning beyond the current year is extremely difficult, given the uncertainty around future funding and the review of the new Local Government financial system, inflation, and economic uncertainty. Current planning suggests reserves will be significantly reduced to £4.998m by the end of 2025/26 with an in year budget deficit of £11.7m in 2026/27, however for the reasons above, this will certainly change. At this stage it is not possible to know whether this will be a positive or negative position.
102. In summary, the Council continues to face significant financial challenges which have increased substantially over the last year due to the demand in children's services. However, due to the healthy reserves position which now play a crucial role in the budget strategy, the Council can afford a 2024/25 budget and have reserves available enabling time to achieve the savings required for future years. Making these savings will be challenging, there are no easy options and there are risks given current economic uncertainty and estimated impacts of interest rates, inflation and demand have been factored in, if these change plans will need to be adjusted.
103. As the Council's Statutory Chief Financial Officer, the Group Director of Operations must advise the Council on the robustness of the budget and adequacy of reserves. The budget presented to Members in this report has been based on the most accurate information available at this point in time, therefore the Director is confident that they are an accurate reflection of the Council's financial position. Notwithstanding this there is a significant degree of uncertainty about the future economic position and local government funding so the position presented whilst as accurate as possible will change, however at this juncture I cannot be sure if that will be for the better or worse.
104. General Fund reserves are adequate for the coming financial year; however, the Council is carrying a significant financial risk over the lifetime of the plan with an unsustainable annual deficit which will need to be met from changes in service provision and increased income if no further government funding is realised. It is essential income is maximised where possible, services are provided in the most efficient and effective manner, and the growing pressures in social care are addressed through transformation, to ensure reserves are preserved allowing as much time as possible to reduce the ongoing annual funding gap. Savings will need to be identified during 2024/25 to ensure the medium term stability of the council.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Detailed Revenue Estimates 2024/25
Appendix 2	Budget Pressures/Savings
Appendix 3	Fees and Charges Proposals 2024/25
Appendix 4	Assumptions used to prepare estimates
Appendix 5	Projected Revenue Outturn 2023/24
Appendix 6	Proposed MTFP 2024/25 to 2027/28
Appendix 7	Capital Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 – 2027/28
Appendix 8	Children’s Social Care in Darlington: Ensuring Placement Sufficiency and Enabling Creative Alternatives
Appendix 9	Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee Minutes 18 January 2024