

North East Derbyshire District Council

Audit and Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee

22 September 2021

North East Derbyshire District Council –Assessment of Going Concern 2020/21

Report of the Head of Finance and Resources

Classification: This report is public

Report By: Jayne Dethick, Head of Finance and Resources

Contact Officer: as above

PURPOSE/SUMMARY

To inform the Committee of an assessment of the Council as a 'going concern' for the purposes of producing the 2020/21 accounts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Audit and Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee accepts the outcome of the Council's Section 151 Officer's assessment of the Council's 'going concern' status for the purpose of preparing the Statement of Accounts for 2020/21.

Approved by the Portfolio Holder – Yes

IMPLICATIONS

Finance and Risk

Yes

No ✓

There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

On Behalf of the Section 151 Officer

Legal including Data Protection

Yes ✓

No

The process has been undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations. It should be noted that following a Government consultation exercise, this year the Council is required to complete and approve the audited Statement of Accounts by the 30 September 2021.

On Behalf of the Solicitor to the Council

Staffing

Yes

No ✓

There are no staffing issues arising directly from this report.

On Behalf of the Head of Paid Service

DECISION INFORMATION

Is the decision a Key Decision? A Key Decision is an executive decision which has a significant impact on two or more District wards or which results in income or expenditure to the Council above the following thresholds: <i>BDC: Revenue - £75,000</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Capital - £150,000</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>NEDDC: Revenue - £100,000</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Capital - £250,000</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Please indicate which threshold applies</i>	N/A
Is the decision subject to Call-In? (Only Key Decisions are subject to Call-In)	N/A
Has the relevant Portfolio Holder been informed	Yes
District Wards Affected	All
Links to Corporate Plan priorities or Policy Framework	All

REPORT DETAILS

1 Background

- 1.1 The statement of accounts are audited by the Council's external auditors, Mazars LLP who provide an opinion with regard to the quality or integrity of the financial information, including the principal of 'going concern'.

2 Details of Proposal or Information

Assessment of Going Concern

- 2.1 The concept of 'going concern' assumes that a Council's functions and services will continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. This assumption underpins the accounts drawn up under the Code of Practice for Local Authority Accounting and is made because local authorities carry out functions essential to the local community and are themselves revenue raising bodies (with limits on their revenue raising powers arising only at the discretion of central government).

- 2.2 If a Council was in financial difficulty, the prospects are that alternative arrangements would be made by central government either for the continuation of the services it provides or for assistance with the recovery of a deficit over more than one financial year.
- 2.3 Where the assessment determines the 'going concern' status is not proven, particular care would be needed in the valuation of assets, as inventories and property, plant and equipment may not be realisable at their book values and provisions may be needed for closure costs or redundancies. An inability to apply the going concern concept would potentially have a fundamental impact on the financial statements.
- 2.4 Given the significant reduction in funding for local government in recent years and the potential threat this poses to the ongoing viability of councils as a consequence, external auditors continue to place a greater emphasis on local authorities undertaking an assessment of the 'going concern' basis on which they prepare their financial statements. The current medium term financial plan and the 2020/21 financial statements reflect an entire year of the ever evolving circumstances surrounding the Covid19 pandemic and we need to be confident that we continue to understand and take into account any threats to financial sustainability. This report sets out the position for the Council and provides justification for the 2020/21 financial statements being prepared on a 'going concern' basis.
- 2.5 As with all principal local authorities, the Council is required to compile its Statement of Accounts in accordance with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting for 2020/21 ("the Code"). The Code is published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). In accordance with the Code, the Statement of Accounts is prepared each year assuming that the Council will continue to operate in the foreseeable future and that it is able to do so within the current and anticipated resources available. By this, it is meant that the Council will realise its assets and settle its obligations in the normal course of business.

The Assessment for Going Concern

- 2.6 The main factors which underpin this assessment are:
- The Council's current financial position;
 - The Council's projected financial position;
 - The Council's balance sheet;
 - The Council's cash flow;
 - The Council's governance arrangements;
 - The regulatory and control environment applicable to the Council as a local authority.

Each of the above is considered in more detail below.

- 2.7 The provisions in the 2020/21 Code section 3.4 (Presentation of Financial Statements) on the going concern accounting requirements, reflect the economic and statutory environment in which local authorities operate. These provisions confirm that, as local authorities cannot be created or dissolved without statutory

prescription, it would not therefore be appropriate for their financial statements to be prepared on anything other than a going concern basis.

- 2.8 The requirements to use the going concern basis of accounting mean that Council's do not apply paragraph 25 of IAS 1 Presentation of Financial Statements mandating management to make an assessment of the authority's ability to continue as a going concern. However, this reporting requirement is separate from the need for them to report on the impact of financial pressures in the Narrative Report and, for example, other relevant liquidity reporting requirements such as those under the Code's adoption of IFRS 7 Financial Instruments: Disclosures.

The Council's Current Financial Position – Revenue Resources

General Fund

- 2.9 As reported to Cabinet in July, the General Fund's Net Cost of Services was under spent by £0.627m in 2020/21. At 31 March 2021 the Council held a General Fund Balance of £2.0m and Earmarked Reserves totalling £20.526m. The Earmarked Reserves balance has increased by £7.103m during the year largely the result of Covid related grants. The adequacy of reserves and balances and the ongoing requirement for specified earmarked reserves, is reviewed on a regular basis.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

- 2.10 The financial performance in 2020/21 resulted in a net under spend of £0.016m on the HRA revenue budget. As at 31 March 2021 the Council held an HRA Balance of £3m which was in line with the revised budget. HRA Earmarked Reserves totalling £34.677m were held and the net reserve movement during 2020/21 was an increase of £1.342m. The level of adequate reserves and balances and the ongoing requirement for specified earmarked reserves, is reviewed on an annual basis. The HRA has a 30 year Business Plan which is showing as affordable with the required estimated resources available to meet the plan.
- 2.11 The Head of Finance and Resources (Section 151 Officer) is therefore satisfied that the Council's 2020/21 financial outturn for both General Fund and HRA, does not present any material uncertainties regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern.

Covid-19

- 2.12 During the year, the main impact on the budget was the Covid 19 pandemic which inevitably had an impact on the Council's financial position. Whilst additional costs were incurred as a result of the pandemic the main pressure came from lost income from fees and charges, predominately within the leisure centres. In addition, whilst not income foregone like fees and charges, collection rates for local taxation were also lower in 2020/21. These pressures have been met from the Covid grant received from the Government so no additional burden has been placed on the budget. Support was also received from the sales fees and charges compensation scheme where the Government reimbursed 75% of lost income on fees and charges as a direct result of Covid. Support packages

have also been put in place to assist with council tax and business rates. These schemes allow council tax and business rates collection fund deficits to be repaid over three years instead of one and there is also a scheme to compensate for lost income when compared to pre Covid forecasts. These measures provide management with the confidence that the Council will be able to manage the financial challenge of Covid in the medium term.

The Council's Projected Financial Position – Revenue Resources

- 2.13 The financial projection for 2021/22 to 2024/25 was approved by Members in January 2021 in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). The Council set a balanced budget for 2021/22. The requirement to achieve financial savings over the medium term was 2022/23 £1.055m; 2023/24 £1.855m and 2024/25 £2.610m.
- 2.14 To help mitigate losses caused by changes in Government funding and wider budget pressures the Council has established a Resilience Reserve in the MTFP. Un-ring fenced surpluses are accrued in this reserve and accumulated balances will be utilised to even out the government funding losses and other identified budget pressures over the life of the current MTFP. The balance on this reserve currently stands at £2.320m.
- 2.15 The Council's Section 151 Officer made a formal statement in January 2021 as part of the approval on the robustness of estimates and the adequacy of reserves, as contained within the Medium Term Financial Plan. The underlying assumptions within this plan have been reviewed and at this stage remain in place. Performance continues to be reviewed through robust budget management and will be updated as part of the mid-year review. The medium term financial planning process will fully challenge the assumptions and estimates and refresh the position accordingly. At this stage the S151 Officer is satisfied that the Council's forecast financial position does not present any material uncertainties regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern.

The Council's Balance Sheet as at 31 March 2021

- 2.16 The Council's net assets amounted to £240m and Usable Reserves totalled £69m. There are no material liabilities or underlying issues regarding the strength of the Council's balance sheet which present any material uncertainties regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern.

The Council's Cash Flow

- 2.17 The Council maintains short and long term cash flow projections, and manages its cash, investments and borrowing in line with the Council approved Treasury Management Strategy. As at the 31 March 2021 the Council has long term borrowing commitments of £147m and held £39m in Cash and Cash Equivalents. The Council has adequate financial resources to meet its immediate financial obligations. There are no significant issues regarding the strength of the Council's underlying cash flow which present any material uncertainties regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern.

The Council's Governance Arrangements

- 2.18 The Council has a well-established and robust corporate governance framework. This includes the statutory posts of Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 officer in addition to the current political arrangements. An overview of this governance framework is provided within The Annual Governance Statement.
- 2.19 Whilst it is not possible to provide absolute assurance, the review process as outlined in the Annual Governance Statement does conclude that the existing arrangements remain fit for purpose and help provide reasonable assurance of their effectiveness. There are no plans for the Council to be reorganised or dissolved and we expect to operate under the current framework in the near future. There are no significant issues regarding the Council's governance framework which present any material uncertainties regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern

The External Regulatory and Control Environment

- 2.20 As a principal local authority the Council has to operate within a highly legislated and controlled environment. An example of this is the requirement for a balanced budget each year combined with the legal requirement for the Council to have regard to consideration of such matters as the robustness of budget estimates and the adequacy of reserves. In addition to the legal framework and central government control there are other factors such as the role undertaken by the external auditor as well as the statutory requirement in some cases for compliance with best practice and guidance published by CIPFA and other relevant bodies.
- 2.21 The provisions in the Code on the going concern requirements reflect the economic and statutory environment in which local authorities operate. There are no significant issues regarding the external regulatory and control environment which present any material uncertainties regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern.

Material Uncertainties

- 2.22 The Council is aware that there is a requirement to consider any material uncertainties which would impact on the Councils ability to continue as a going concern.
- 2.23 Economic uncertainty and difficulties in attaching weight to previous market evidence for comparison has impacted on valuers being able to inform opinions of value at 31 March 2021. In accordance with the Council's actuary and in common with other local authorities the valuation of the Pension Fund property investment assets have been reported by the valuer on the basis of 'material valuation uncertainty' as per the requirements of the VPGA 10 of the RICS Red Book Global. These valuations therefore have less certainty and should be viewed with a higher degree of caution than what would normally be the case. This has been disclosed in the 2020/21 accounts for completeness, as under the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting these assets are required to be disclosed at valuation. There is a statutory override in place though which means that any valuation movements do not affect the cost to tax payers or useable reserves. There are no indications that this presents a significant medium term issue for the Council.

2.24 There are no material uncertainties which, under the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting framework, represent significant issues regarding the Council's ability to continue as a going concern.

3 Reasons for Recommendation

3.1 It is considered that having regard to the Council's arrangements and such factors as highlighted in this report that there are no material uncertainties regarding the Council's status as a 'going concern' and the Council's accounts for 2020/21 have appropriately been prepared on this basis. This report gives that assessment by the Council's Section 151 Officer in support of presenting the Accounts for approval and provides assurance to the Audit and Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee and Mazars, the Council's external auditor.

4 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

4.1 There are no alternative options for consideration.

DOCUMENT INFORMATION

Appendix No	Title
Background Papers (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers)	
Report Author	Contact Number
Jayne Dethick – Head of Finance and Resources	(01246) 217078