

Budget Speech 2022/23

The financial year 2021/22 has been a challenging one for Maldon District Council, again impacted by the Covid-pandemic, but one in which much has been achieved.

The Council has continued supporting the national response to the Covid Pandemic assisting the Vaccination programme, by provision of the Maldon vaccination centre delivered, by the NHS, through our District Council offices.

We continued to support our businesses distributing over £10 million of government support to local businesses to ensure that they, associated jobs and livelihoods are protected.

Core services throughout the pandemic have been maintained, including:

- Maintaining kerbside collection of waste and recycling through working with our partners SUEZ, despite challenging operating conditions including the national driver shortage.
- Delivered Environmental Health service whilst meeting the increased challenges and regulation regarding Covid
- Ongoing delivery of customer engagement and service delivery whilst working remotely

We continued supporting the community response to Covid. We will build on the strong partnerships formed, with the establishment of 'One Maldon District'. Bringing together the public, private and community sectors to support health and wellbeing in the district.

We adopted our Climate Action Strategy – Our Home Our Future, - to bring about positive change for the District. The Strategy was welcomed and praised as excellent work by ECC's Climate Action Commission's Chairman.

The Maldon District Local Development Plan (LDP) is an essential important document. The LDP Review has started and the Issues and Options consultation is underway and I urge everyone to engage and respond.

Work continued to improve the efficiency of the Council via the process improvement programme funded through the 20/21 budget.

Other notable achievements include:

- Resilient IT systems meant we were not impacted by the national ‘Log4j’ cyber-attack in December 2021
- Shortlisted for the Workplace Transformation award for our work on Future Ways of Working ([Shortlist | Smarter Working Live 2021](#))
- Jointly secured a Local Digital Fund (LDF) bid of £280k with Colchester and Tendring, to develop a Dynamics task allocation tool in line with our ICT strategy
- Continued commitment to encourage residents’ views, using them to shape services through running a budget survey as part of the budget setting process, plus our annual resident and business survey.
- The Council developed and approved a new Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy with a focus on how we can support and engage better with our communities.

In November, we launched the ‘Enough is Enough’ campaign highlighting the recent increase in unacceptable behaviour towards our staff and members. This has been supported by other local authorities. We look now to move on from these challenges but it remains we will challenge any form of unacceptable behaviour towards the Council.

I recently became Leader of the Council. I thank those that have gone before me.

I also thank all Councillors and Officers for their dedication, relentlessly defending in the fight against Covid. Working closely with partners and various other bodies all have applied great effort to support and protect our communities.

We now need to march positively and proactively forward in the recovery from Covid.

Promotion and support of our economy; environment; efficient, effective and value services are important.

We had to be innovative and adopt new ways of working during the pandemic and those foundations can be built upon in seeking further improvements in the delivery of accessible cost- effective services.

We need to do the right things. Continue to be a Council that is focussed on its residents. Services need to support people. It matters for them, we need to be

responsible. People need to have confidence in our Council, our ability to deliver.

Therefore, budgets need to be sustainable, it is not just about balancing budgets, it is important that use of reserves is not increasing year on year. We need to look ahead, organise things, consider, and take action .

With the challenges of the past year it is not totally unexpected that the budget for the year succumbed to some pressure. There was additional budget pressure that could not be offset, currently the forecast indicates £112k will be utilised from the general fund to balance the budget.

Council finances may appear healthy with the General Fund Reserve currently sitting at £5.6 million. However, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy shows increasing budgetary pressures in coming years forecasting the General Fund level will slip below the minimum reserve level of £2.6m by 2024/25, unless action is taken. This being against a potentially worsening picture with costs rising due to increased inflation at 5.5%. Regular review of the MTFs will maintain an accurate forecast.

The financial settlement from Government for 2022/23 is a one-year settlement. It includes Business Rates Baseline funding; Lower Tier Services Grant; Services Grant; Rural Services Delivery Grant plus New Homes Bonus with an increase to £961,172 from £929,981 in 2021 / 22. The Rural Services Delivery Grant allocation remains at £32,339 ,the same as 2021 /22 .The Services Grant allocation of £105,646, is to help alleviate the 1.25% increase in National Insurance. The provisional base Homelessness Prevention Grant is maintained at £142,320, with an additional £3,690 for Domestic Abuse New Burdens.

It is important to highlight that the settlement funding assessments calculation regarding the core spending power of local authorities includes Councils increasing Council tax by £5 per annum.

During the budget setting process for 2022/23 the Council's cross-party Finance Member Working Group has met on several occasions to provide input into the budget. I'm pleased that members have had the opportunity to work collaboratively and share their views at these and other meetings, particularly the Strategy and Resources Committee. Part of that process ensuring that any growth is kept to a minimum recognising the financial challenges and unknowns ahead of us.

However, some investment was considered right. This includes:

Some additional staffing to ensure services have the capacity to operate.

Investing in our commercial activity to bring forward income generation and wider benefits for the District

Ensuring capacity to deliver on Council policy such as the Climate Action Strategy.

Due to the financial challenges ahead, 2022/23 requirements are for consolidation, focus on delivery of existing policies and priorities, as per our Corporate plan 2021-23. The Council will be exploring the opportunities for the District that may emerge from the recently published Levelling Up White Paper.

Priorities will include:

- Deliver process improvement training for staff and build capacity for continual improvement work across the organisation
- Review major corporate contracts including waste and leisure.
- Explore opportunities for closer partnership working and shared service opportunities with other local authorities where they improve efficiency, enhance resilience and capacity of the individual councils.
- Deliver a Customer Access Strategy, linking with the ICT strategy and Process Improvement Framework and demonstrating how we will support our customers offline.
- Deliver an updated commercial strategy, seeking to increase Council income through an approach that brings together our strategy and commercial objectives.

Tourism is a key driver for our local economy and the council can help to create opportunities for further growth and prosperity, focussing again on our tourism offer now restrictions are lifting.

All Members need to be kept informed, engaged with, so enabling greater understanding and sound decision making. Officers have been charged to prepare briefings on, initially, Commercial Projects and the Levelling Up White Paper.

Constant challenge remains to ensure best value services and deal with the need for financial sustainability whilst acknowledging the pressures that households are also facing.

Bearing in mind our financial pressures and need for financial sustainability we are proposing that Maldon District Council's Band D Council Tax is increased by £5 for 2022/23; this equates to 42p per month for a band D Property. Whilst bringing in this increase, we note that:

- Government has recognised the pressures currently facing both Councils and residents and has introduced a £150 refund for those in band A-D properties as well as allocating money for a discretionary fund.
- The Council tax rise of £5 equates to approx. 10p a week.
- The Council continues to be impacted by the cost of COVID
- Inflation is at 5.5%, Council tax increase is well below at 2.41%.
- Commercial activities being developed to generate income.

The Council is the guardian of the public purse and needs to spend wisely. To ensure our residents know how we perform, if services are efficient, effective, and best value, do we deliver on our priorities, officers are charged to prepare an easily readable understandable Annual Report for them.

I thank Chris Leslie, the Director of Resources and his team for all the hard work they have done regarding the budget.

CHAIRMAN I COMMEND THE BUDGET TO THE COUNCIL.