Appendix 1

COVENTRY CITY COUNCIL MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2025-2028

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) sets out the financial planning foundations that support the setting of the Council's revenue and capital budgets, including the policy assumptions and financial management framework that underpin the strategy. The Strategy is consistent with the 2025/26 Budget Setting Report to which this Strategy is appended. The purpose of the MTFS is to describe the environment within which the Council operates and bring together resource and cost projections to explain how the Council plans to address its funding gap, whilst retaining focus on the strategic priorities.

1.2 An introduction and the policy framework provided by the existing One Coventry Plan is provided in **Section 2**. This sets out how the Council continue to focus on increasing the economic prosperity of the city and region, improving outcomes, and tackling inequalities within Coventry communities, and tackling the causes and consequences of climate change.

1.3 **Section 3** explains the national financial context and the medium-term uncertainty that exists around local government funding. The Council is still only able to plan for 2025/26 with any certainty as funding announcements at this stage do not go beyond that. The new Government, in announcing additional monies for the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2025/26 and doing so in a way that starts to reflect need, are also consulting on principles intended to 'fundamentally improve the way the sector is funded, moving to a fairer system which matches funding with need'. As an authority who has been disadvantaged by the current funding regime, the proposals are very much welcomed, however until such time as these proposals have been understood, and the local implications for Coventry of their implementation worked through, it will not be possible to plan with certainty beyond one year.

1.4 The key factors that the Council has identified as influencing current and future demand for Council services, are outlined in **Section 4**. These continue to include recurrent challenges such as sustained demand for social care as a result of the ageing population and increasing numbers of children with complex care needs. In addition, councils are faced with increasing demand for support from citizens driven by current national financial challenges, the greatest cumulative inflationary pressures witnessed in a generation and the consequent cost of living crisis. Homelessness is one such impact, and our statutory obligation to place people in temporary accommodation therefore places significant further pressure on the Council's finances

1.5 **Section 5** outlines the Council's financial planning context and assumptions which draw on the information above and provide the foundations of the medium-term financial position. This includes the key spending forecasts, inflation expectations and planning assumptions in areas such as Council Tax.

1.6 The Council's response to the current financial gap is set out in **Section 6**. This sets out the Council's approach to how it will seek to balance its Budget in future, subject to future Budget decisions and other major policy approvals.

2. INTRODUCTION AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

2.1 The strategic direction for the Council is set by the One Coventry Plan (OCP).

2.2 The OCP sets out a vision for One Coventry of “working together to improve our city and the lives of those who live, work and study here”. The Plan describes outcomes for:

- a city with a strong and resilient economy, where inclusive growth is promoted and delivered, businesses are enabled to innovate and grow, and new local jobs are created.
- a city where our residents get the best possible start in life, experience good health and age well, in a city that embraces diversity, protects the most vulnerable and values its residents and communities.
- a city, that leads the way and invests in the green industrial revolution. Ensuring the future well-being of our residents by embedding environmentally friendly behaviours and exploring opportunities to lessen the pressures caused by climate change.

2.3 The OCP is clear that there are fundamental conditions that need to be in place in order to achieve these outcomes. These are that the Council has a strong and sustainable financial position, with resources and assets that are aligned with our priorities and that it plays a key role as a civic leader, working in genuine partnership with local residents, communities and partners. Central to the achievement of the aims set out in the OCP, a One Coventry approach will focus on the way in which the Council and its employees work, both within the organisation and collaboratively more widely, in order to improve services and make the biggest possible positive impact on people’s lives.

2.4 The OCP clearly sets out the need for financial resilience in order to achieve its objectives. It is also necessary therefore, for the MTFS to reflect the principles, visions and priorities set out for the city within the OCP. The MTFS complements the Council Plan by defining the financial framework within which these priorities will be delivered. It should also ensure through appropriate resource allocation decisions that it supports the plan, alongside the fundamental aims of delivering a balanced budget and enabling the Council to fulfil its statutory duties.

2.5 The OCP sets out the Council's role as a partner, enabler and leader and the importance of partnership working to the delivery of the Plan. This approach is equally important to delivery of the MTFS and incorporates elements such as: responding to national and regional policy for local government; leading on innovative approaches to working differently; acting as a civic leader, in collaboration with local residents, communities and partners (public, private, and voluntary and community sectors); working with residents and communities to find solutions to challenges faced in local neighbourhoods; leading and co-ordinating Coventry's response on how the city tackles climate change and the necessary transition to a zero-carbon economy; and leading the delivery of aspirational investments through regional partnerships such as development of the Gigafactory in Coventry. These approaches are set out more fully within the OCP.

2.6 There are a number of local factors that provide a solid foundation on which the city can build towards sustainable economic growth: two major universities; excellent transport infrastructure links; pockets of highly innovative businesses; significant infrastructure and connectivity investment including the Friargate Business district, the Coventry Very Light Rail project and the implementation of City Centre South. Further work continues to improve the attractiveness and desirability of the city as a venue. However, significant challenges do exist for the city. The level of average pay within the city is lower than in both the West Midlands region and England as a whole and the city's unemployment rate is higher than average compared to a group of similar local authority areas, whilst inequalities in healthy life expectancy exist between areas of the city. A comprehensive range of factors is set out in full within the Council's Annual Plan Performance Report 2023/24.

3. FINANCIAL CONTEXT

3.1 Coventry City Council's revenue spending is funded from four main sources: Council Tax, Business Rates (net of Government tariff), specific grants and other income in the form of fees, charges, dividends, and interest. Some councils also receive Revenue Support Grant (RSG) but as part of the West Midlands Business Rates Pilot, Coventry does not receive RSG and instead retains a greater share of the business rates income it collects. The following table summarises how the Council's 2024/25 revenue budget is funded.

Table 1: Funding of 2024/25 Gross Budget

	2024/25 £m	
Council Tax Requirement	(175.9)	
Business Rates Income (net of tariff)	(101.6)	
Funding of Net Budget		**(277.5)**
Specific Grants	(476.8)	
All Other Income	(113.5)	
All Other Funding/Income		**(590.3)**
Total Funding of Gross Budget		**(867.8)**

Business Rates

3.2 The national system of retained Business Rates allows local government to retain 50% of business rates income with the remainder payable to central government for redistribution through government Revenue Support Grant. However, authorities that are part of Business Rates Pilot schemes retain a greater share of Rates. Along with the other 6 West Midlands authorities, Coventry is a member of the West Midlands Business Rates Pilot with all member councils retaining 99% of the business rates collected (with 1% going to the West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority). The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) receives a payment from each authority as a proxy for a share of the growth in business rates income. Discussions held between the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the WMCA on behalf of the WM Mets as part of the most recent devolution deal discussions, concluded that this will be extended for a further (up to) 10 years.

3.3 For several years the previous government had discussed updating the assessment of needs and resources used to determine individual authority funding allocations via retained Business Rates and Revenue Support Grant. The current methodology and much of the data that feeds it is now significantly out of date and results in an unfair distribution of resources. However, the new Government have started a consultation process with the intention that a new system, intended to reflect need, could be implemented from 2026/27. Until further details are shared however, it is not possible to predict how it will affect individual authorities. Due to the significant growth experienced in Coventry and the demographic make-up of its population, the local expectation is that system reform should result in a greater share of resources for the city, with relative needs and resources given more priority in the new distribution. It is hoped that the effect will be to shift resources towards councils such as Coventry which are considered to be relatively more deprived than many others.

3.4 Since the introduction of business rates retention in April 2013, the previous government has made a number of policy announcements affecting the amount of business rates that local authorities can collect, such as increasing the amount of relief available to certain businesses and restricting the increase in the multiplier. In order to protect councils from the impact of these decisions, local authorities were compensated for the resulting cumulative loss in income through specific non-ring-fenced grants. We would expect any such further policy decisions by the new government to also be cost neutral to Local Authorities.

Council Tax

3.5 Council Tax remains the most significant source of Coventry's net income, funding 63% of the net revenue budget in 2024/25. The Council has experienced a sustained period of growth in the Council Tax base for some time and the MTFS assumes this will continue. The Provisional Settlement received on 18 December 2024 has confirmed that the referendum threshold for increases in core Council Tax will be 3% in 2025/26, with a further increase of up to 2% allowed in respect of the Adult Social Care precept (from 25/26, this will be presented as a single % increase). In future years therefore, an underlying (collective) assumption of 3% Council Tax rises and no precept will be made for planning purposes. The final level of increase will be determined by full Council through the budget process. For illustrative purposes, an increase of 1% in Council Tax equates to c£1.7 million of income.

Specific Grants

3.6 The Council receives a very significant level of specific revenue grant funding. £549m budgeted in 2025/26 with further grants often announced through the year. The vast majority of these are provided by Government with most of this being allocated for specific and ring-fenced purposes. By value, the most significant elements relate to Dedicated Schools Grant[1] (£251m), Housing Benefit Subsidy (£70m) and a combination of funding for Adult Social Care funding (£84m). Other major elements budgeted for are Business Rates (£32m), Public Health (£26m), Recovery Grant (£9.6m), Pupil Premium (£11m), Extended Producer Responsibility (£6.1m) and Adult Education funding (£5m).

Fees and Charges

3.7 The Council budgeted to receive £113.5 million in fees, charges, dividends, and interest in 2024/25. Such income supports the expenditure of individual service areas. Increases in the fees and charges set for individual services vary depending on any statutory requirements, specific market considerations and on the objectives a particular service may be trying to achieve. Overall, there is an expectation that traded

[1] Indicative allocation, shown net of estimated recoupment

services will seek to recover the full cost of services, or better, and reflecting external markets where relevant.

3.8 Whilst we do not consider there to be any material legacy impacts of the pandemic within our direct fees and charges income, many services are however experiencing a downturn in activity as a direct consequence of the high inflationary environment affecting the economy and in turn, cost of living. Additionally, the imminent implementation of the City Centre South scheme has resulted in the ceasing of income from the many properties which previously delivered rental income for the City Council, becoming void, soon to be demolished. Conversely there are budgeted new income steams available to the Council including charging for Green Waste, the implementation of which was approved by members in February 2024 and contributes to the overall balanced budget for 2024/25 and subsequent years.

3.9 Whilst current inflation levels (at December 2024) have returned to more sustainable levels, they are (at 2.5%) still above the Bank of England target of 2%, so it is expected that there will be a continued impact on the cost of living for individuals, businesses and other organisations, and could continue to impact on the Council's ability to generate income from fees and charges over the short to medium term. Additionally, this could impact on the cost base of CCC owned subsidiaries, such that it could also put pressure on the level of dividends generated by Council owned companies, and potentially the repayment of loan principal and interest from organisations to which the Council has made loans.

Other Income

3.10 For 2025/26 and subsequent years, the Government are introducing the 'Extended Producer Responsibility' for waste packaging, or EPR. Resources were announced that indicate £1.1bn of resources for waste disposal authorities nationally for the EPR scheme, which effectively transfers the financial liability for disposal costs to the manufacturers (producers) of waste in order to incentivise waste reduction. As waste disposal costs are already factored into the Councils baseline position, compensation through the EPR scheme will result in additional income. The expected receipt of £6.1m will be underwritten by Government in 2025/26, however subsequent years will be driven by service specific data and could decline if the intended impact on producer behaviour is borne out.

Financial Outlook

3.11 The Chancellor's Autumn Statement 2024 and the 2025/26 Local Government Financial Settlement still only provides a one-year focus for 2025/26 with no detail for local government finances beyond this. There is however, additional grant funding of £2bn in the settlement nationally in 25/26, beyond what had previously been announced for local government, the local impact of which has been included within our planning assumptions.

3.12 The Provisional Settlement references a cash increase in Core Spending Power (CSP) for councils in England of 6.8% (£4.4bn) with Coventry receiving an above average increase of 8.0% (£29.6m). Net of additional (new) burdens for National Insurance contributions, this equates to a national increase of 6%, and a local increase of 7.2%. Whilst a significant proportion (47%) of this (net) increase is made up of Council Tax and Business Rates income, both generated locally, a significant amount of grant income has been provided in new monies reflecting the £2bn additional sector resources referenced in 3.11.

3.13 Any changes to Core Spending Power, and the impact of the specific allocations to Coventry in the Final Settlement are presented within the Council's 2025/26 Budget Report.

3.14 The anticipated changes to how local government funding is allocated described above make it difficult for the Council to determine medium-term financial plans with complete certainty. In addition, the local government sector has historically been affected by resource constraints imposed across the whole of the public sector whilst there are also limitations to the funding that local authorities can raise locally through Council Tax and fees and charges. Demographic pressures have continued to increase with the cost-of-living issues affecting individuals' experience and expectations of when local authorities and Government will intervene to protect them. All of this has created a very challenging environment in which councils need to manage limited resources and increasing expenditure pressures, even with additional Government funding.

3.15 Whilst it is a reality that public sector finances are always faced with the need to balance budgets under resource constraints, it is the cumulative severity of these constraints that have caused some Local Authorities to be unable to afford the cost of providing services. Nationally a number of authorities have faced acute financial difficulties, with S114 reports being issued as some councils struggle to set balanced budgets with insufficient reserves to manage the transition to greater financial stability, and others receiving 'Extraordinary Financial Support' to prevent a S114 notice being issued. It remains critical that Coventry continues to observe sound financial management principles, strict budgetary control practice, prudent budget setting and a level of reserve balances that provides adequate protection against financial risks and shocks.

3.16 Commercialisation across local government through investment in property, shares and loans has come under national scrutiny, particularly where such investment is funded through borrowing. As some authorities have encountered problems with a number of their commercial investments there has been an increased focus on the regulatory framework in which authorities operate. As a result, the rules governing the Public Works Loans Board – the Government's main vehicle to provide long-term lending to local government – have changed in order to limit investment in commercial assets where this has the prime purpose of achieving a financial return or yield.

4. SERVICE DEMANDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

4.1 Local authorities have faced a series of financial and service pressures over recent years incorporating significant historic central government funding reductions, increasing service demand particularly across social care services and housing for the homeless, severe inflationary pressures across virtually all areas of budgets, and the knock-on impact that inflation has had on individuals, families and businesses.

4.2 <u>Inflation</u>

4.2.1 Like all organisations and individuals, the Council has been affected by high inflationary pressures since 2022, and this has had a very material impact on both current and future costs. This has been caused by a range of over-lapping factors including but not limited to higher direct (and indirect) energy prices, labour shortages in some aspects of the UK jobs market, and other global political issues, the effects of which have impacted over several financial years.

4.2.2 Although the Consumer Price Inflation continued to fall steadily during 2024, from a starting position of 4% in December 2023, to 1.7% in September 2024, it started to rise again to 2.5% between October and December respectively. This only reflects that the rate of price increases has slowed and does not mitigate the cumulative level of increases endured during the year and over time, or some of the lagged impacts on the wide range of Council contracts, particularly high value social care contracts. The inflation rate was also instrumental in the agreement of a higher than planned pay award agreed for most local government employees which averaged c6% for both 2023/24 and 2024/25. Given that Council's budget was put together in late 2023 (and agreed in February 2024), the full extent of these financial movements was not known at that time and not sufficiently factored into the Council's 2024/25 budget. As a result, the budget process for 2025/26 has had to factor in a higher base position, in order to 'catch up' on inflationary rises for 2024/25 and to provide for 2025/26.

4.3 Adult Social Care

4.3.1 The financial cost of delivering Adult Social Care is driven by a number of factors including demand for services from the health system (primarily hospital discharge), people's own ability to contribute/pay for social care, people's pre-existing support networks including the presence of informal carers, the complexity of need that people present with or develop whilst supported by social care and demography including life expectancy. These costs are expected to be met from the numerous funding streams identified for Adult Social Care. In establishing the budget for Adult Social Care within the MTFS, the impact of national changes to the care market, such as National Living Wage and the recent National Insurance contribution changes are considered as most of social care is delivered by organisations contracted to the City Council.

4.3.2 Whilst capacity to service demands for social care and market sustainability pressures are a long-standing issue in Adult Social Care, these have been exacerbated by the additional costs outlined above alongside ongoing challenges in recruitment and retention largely deriving from the terms and conditions that social care providers can offer for a skilled job that requires both intelligence and compassion. Although the large increases in inflation that have been seen during the past several years are beginning to slow, costs are still increasing with cost pressures expected to continue for the foreseeable future, adding further strain to a market already heavily under pressure.

4.4 Housing

4.4.1 The financial cost of delivering Housing and Homelessness support is driven by the number of people presenting to and requiring support from the Housing and Homelessness service which is largely driven through national external issues regarding supply and affordability of social and affordable housing.

4.4.2 Nationally, the significant increases in demand for housing & homelessness services seen during 2023/24, has continued into 2024/25, with the number of people accessing/receiving homelessness support as yet not showing any sign of reducing.

There are a number of drivers that have contributed to the increases including the cost-of-living crisis, a buoyant private rented sector and a lack of social housing.

4.4.3 In Coventry the number of people seeking assistance with housing issues and subsequently being placed in Temporary Accommodation (TA) increased by nearly 20% during the past year. Although this upward trend has begun to slow compared with 2023 following the initial implementation of Coventry's detailed TA reduction plan, it is expected that number of households in TA will continue to increase during 2025/26.

4.4.4 A number of further mitigations have been and continue to be put in place to limit this as far as possible and secure appropriate accommodation through additional, lower cost TA schemes, in preference to more expensive short-term options.

4.4.5 The Council will need to continue to monitor emerging trends in this area to ensure support is provided in the most appropriate and cost-effective way.

4.5 Children's Social Care

4.5.1 The Council has experienced cost pressure over a number of years driven by high demand in social care services for children and young people. The need to safeguard vulnerable children and young people remains a fundamental priority for the Council, and it has continued to make the necessary budgetary provision through this period.

4.5.2 The number of children in care in the city excluding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has decreased from 735 in March 2021 to 628 in March 2024. However, in line with an annual trend of more children entering care over the summer period, this increased to 649 by September 2024.The financial benefit from this reduction in activity has been more than offset by steep inflationary increases in the cost of individual placements, particularly external residential. This is a local, regional, and national issue. Whilst Coventry will continue to take steps to manage this risk there is a critical role for central government to play in addressing the broken market for private provision. Coventry's established Family Valued ethos is to empower families to identify family led solutions through Family Group Conferencing and network meetings, supporting Kinship arrangements when needed and reunifying children in care back to their families when it is safe to do so. This echoes the central Government's direction of change, alongside taking steps to address the challenges with the market for homes for children in care in terms of sufficiency and tackling significant profiteering by some private providers.

4.5.3 In addition, there is an observed increase in the complexity of care needs leading to a consequent increase in the average cost of each individual placement. The availability of homes for children in care (placements) able to support these children with complex needs has come under increased pressure on a national basis throughout and since the Covid pandemic, with a resulting impact on price. Unit costs have risen significantly from an average residential unit cost of £2.9k per week in 2019/20 to an average residential cost of £6.2k per week in 2023/24. The annual commitment of the Council's 10 highest cost children's commissioned placements is ca. £8m. Coventry City Councils Residential Childrens Homes strategy commits to opening new homes for our children in care, enabling them to remain close to their families, communities and school, whilst offering best value in terms of costs and meeting the needs of some of our children with the highest level of need within the city.

4.5.4 The rise in the number of overall cases across Children’s Services has placed an increased burden on social work staffing capacity and case holding. Children’s Services continues to experience workforce pressures, caused by a shortage of social workers to meet the demand for Children's Services. The strategy to stabilise the workforce included an expansion of the Social Worker Academy, establishment growth to meet the case-holding demand levels and a clinical supervision programme. The workforce strategy has also introduced a social worker progression pathway to promote staff development and retention as well as consideration of market supplements and job re-evaluations where the Council's rates were deemed no longer competitive with comparable Local Authorities. This has resulted in a need to increase employee budget costs through the Council’s budget setting process. These measures have had a positive impact with a reduced reliance on agency staff, however it is important that the service continues to promote Coventry as a good place to practice social work so that progress can be sustained.

4.5.5 Given the pattern of children in care numbers and socio-economic trends in recent years it is difficult to predict overall volumes of cases and when the inflationary pressure on placement costs will begin to ease. This will continue to be an area that is kept under close scrutiny both as an individual service and as part of wider strategies to increase the economic prosperity of the city and reduce the harmful effects of issues such as deprivation, poor education attainment and poor levels of public health in parts of the city.

4.6 Education Services and Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND)

4.6.1 National policy changes such as increased attendance duties alongside local in-year pressure on school sufficiency and impact on related local authority services, coupled with funding reductions continues to put pressure on the ongoing commitment element of the Central School Services Block (CSSB) within the Dedicated Schools Grant. The Council currently anticipates further reductions to the historic commitment element of the CSSB over the next 3 years, resulting in a pressure to be managed via the Council’s budget setting process.

4.6.2 In line with national trends and local in year admission pressure, the number of SEND pupils within Coventry continues to grow. Children with the most complex SEND are issued with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In 2016 the total EHCP cohort in Coventry was 1,559, by 2024 this had increased to 3,062. Alongside significant growth in overall numbers, Coventry has also seen an increase in the number of initial requests for assessments from 329 in 2016 to 924 in 2023. This results in a continuing increase in the number of commissioned special school placements, and consequently more children and young people requiring specialist transportation to school, including transport to schools outside of the city due to local special school provision being full. Additionally, there have been increases in SEND transport demand due to more post-16/19 students remaining in education.

4.6.3 The High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant which funds educational provision for pupils with SEND (2025/26 allocation £76.8M) continues to be an area of pressure. National SEND spending has increased significantly in recent years with many authorities across the country now reporting DSG deficits. The main factors underlying this position stem from the consequences of reform including the expanded offer, rising demand and shortage of specialist provision creating an increased reliance on the independent sector. Ordinarily, authorities would be responsible for meeting any deficit position from other council funding, but currently due the significance of the issues in this area the Treasury have enacted a national statutory override ringfencing the DSG position away from LAs until March 2026. Coventry currently has a DSG surplus but in-line with national trends it is continuing to experience growth in the overall number of young people with Education Health and Care Plans. This will increase pressure on its High Needs Block budget and those SEND services funded via Core budget. The significant increase in demand means that the availability of specialist school placements, both within Coventry and out of city is limited. We are therefore seeing an increase in top-up funding being provided to mainstream schools due to increases in activity (new plans) and unit cost (higher levels of banded funding). In Coventry High Needs Block allocations have increased significantly since 2019/20, however our expectation is that funding increases will be more modest moving forwards. It is therefore key that the Council monitors the position and manages resources effectively to ensure that it remains within funding allocations as far as is possible. The SEND Transformation Strategy is in place and is focusing on supporting inclusivity in mainstream schools through workforce strategy and sharing best practice, developing appropriate support for children with additional needs through alternative provision, and creating additional special school and enhanced resource provision places.

4.7 Other Services, Demographics, and the Cost of Living

4.7.1 A combination of events including the impact of inflation on household incomes and the effect of financial uncertainty on all sectors, has resulted in an increased demand for Council services. The actual impact on the financial circumstances of individuals, businesses and third sector organisations, has changed some expectations on the timing and level of Council interventions in some service areas.

4.7.2 Compared with the national average, Coventry's population has increased at a faster rate over recent years and has a lower age profile. Since 2010, Coventry has consistently been in the top 10 authorities for population increases, and such growth puts considerable pressure on transport, housing, education and public service infrastructure, and there is a shortage of housing and affordable homes across the city. A range of demographic and socio-economic trends, in part linked to the city's steady population growth, has continued to cause increases in demand or expenditure pressures in areas such as waste collection and disposal and the costs of housing homeless individuals and families in addition to some of the social care and education related changes. These have required additional budget allocations each year which can be expected to continue in future years and have prompted policy responses in areas such as housing and recycling facilities to help manage costs going forward.

4.7.3 The Council's public health services are aimed at improving well-being and reducing health inequalities across the city and maximising the wider work of the Council to improve the health of its residents. This includes universal health, wellbeing, and preventative services, such as health visiting and school nursing, and a range of more targeted services such as drug and alcohol services, domestic violence, and sexual health plus statutory responsibilities around health protection. Funding for Public Health activity is primarily provided from within the ring-fenced Public Health Grant from Government and the Council's financial planning assumption is that this will broadly continue going forward.

4.7.4 Through the Covid-19 pandemic, demand increased for services supporting communities directly and in partnership with the voluntary sector. The continued difficult economic circumstances for many, resulting from trends including changes to the Government's welfare reforms and the impact of energy price rises, and general inflationary pressures, have affected the number of people seeking to access local government and voluntary sector services. A greater degree of intervention by the Council and specific Government support in some areas over this period have probably changed perceptions and increased expectations about the timing, nature and level of support that may be available in times of economic hardship compared with those that existed previously, which is a financial risk.

4.7.5 The role of economic regeneration, economic support, skills, and employment investment, remains paramount particularly in the light of the importance of business rates (retention) to the Council's resource base and current financial challenges facing local economies and citizens. In response to the lack of historic funding directed into our region from central government on infrastructure investment, the Council's existing programmes known to members for regenerative investment schemes, including plans this year for the commencement of City Centre South, City Centre Cultural Gateway, works to facilitate the West Midlands Investment Zone project (see section 4.7.6) and Coventry's Very Light Rail demonstrator, all of which will support the City's regeneration aspirations.

4.7.6 Latterly, the most recent Devolution Deal for the region agreed with the Government by the WMCA on behalf of the 7 Mets during 2024, has seen the emergence of the regional Investment Zone (IZ), which for the West Midlands, will be located primarily on the former Coventry Airport site (together with other smaller regional sites), on the border of Coventry and Warwick districts. This initiative, named 'Green Power Park' attracts significant regional funding and tax incentives, together with agreement to retain business rate (growth) for reinvestment in the sites over a 25-year period. It is expected that the investment will attract 'advanced manufacturing' related private sector investment that will further the prospects of the development of a vehicle battery manufacturing Gigafactory on the outskirts of the city.

4.7.7 The move towards net zero emissions in 2050 will present a major challenge to all sectors of the economy. The precise role of local government in meeting that challenge and the financial dimension of doing so will be determined over time. Coventry City Council's One Coventry Plan has already taken a strong stance on the issues around climate change and the Council's Climate Change Strategy was approved in November 2024. A significant development to further this agenda, which will further the Council's net zero ambitions and bring forward some significant projects, relate to the Councils Strategic Energy Partnership with EOn which will bring forward initiatives which contribute to the net zero agenda, and supplement the Councils existing programme of approved 'Net zero' related projects.

4.7.8 The Council is obliged to work towards ensuring that its pension liabilities within the West Midlands Pension Fund are funded. The Council's currently reported funding level stands at 103% as at 31st March 2024, indicating that the Council has a valuation basis surplus. Its contributions to the pension fund are 21.2% as a proportion of the superannuable payroll in 2024/25. The Council will continue to work closely with the West Midlands Pension Fund to agree appropriate employer pension contributions that strike a balance between maintaining the funding level over the long-term and maintaining sustainability and affordability in relation to the Council's overall financial position.

5. FINANCIAL PLANNING CONTEXT AND ASSUMPTIONS

5.1 Revenue Position

5.1.1 The initial revenue position for the Council's MTFS is the forecast multi-year revenue programme carried forward from 2024/25 including all approved future years' budget decisions known at that time plus the provisional changes set out in the 2025/26 Pre-Budget Report in December 2024. The current planning process started with significant forecast deficits from 2024/25 although the pre-budget report included proposals on which to consult, which collectively could form the basis of a balanced budget in 2025/26, albeit with financial gaps in future years.

Table 2: Draft Financial Position 2025/26 to 2027/28

	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000
Initial Budget Gap	**14,310**	**14,761**	**14,761**
Resources	(23,101)	(21,101)	(21,101)
Expenditure and Income Pressures	19,618	24,387	27,162
Subtotal: Adjusted Budget Gap	**10,827**	**18,047**	**20,822**
Options / Actions to Balance Budget			
Technical Savings	(5,100)	(3,100)	(3,100)
Service Savings	(8,827)	(12,383)	(12,383)
Budget Gap/(Flexibility)	**(3,100)**	**2,564**	**5,339**

5.1.2 The Pre-Budget Report, considered by Cabinet in December 2024, set out the financial position over the next 3 years, including emerging pressures, together with potential technical and service savings to partially offset the impact of these. At quarter 3 the forecast outturn for 2024/25 was a net overspend of £7m. Pressures exist across several areas including Adults' and Children's Social Care Services and Housing Services due to a combination of both cost pressures and demand for services. Other pressures exist in other services including income generation and delivery against savings.

5.1.3 The final phase of medium-term financial planning includes the impact of the both the Provisional Settlement published on 18th December 2024 and the Final Settlement, published on 3rd February 2025. This position is updated by the final 2025/26 Budget Report which will be heard by Council on 25 February 2025. Coventry again faces similar challenges and policy choices to many other authorities, although this has been partially mitigated for 2025/26 by additional Government grant monies in the finance settlement. The size of the gap for 25/26 has reduced from £10.8m (table 2 above) to £8.0m, and still requires policy decisions to set a balanced budget for the financial year 25/26. Depending on the policy decisions taken as part of the budget setting report, future years funding gaps are likely, making it necessary that a range of approaches will still be needed to balance funding gaps, particularly in future years. These are considered in Section 6 below.

5.2 Reserves

5.2.1 The Council holds significant reserves which need to be maintained at a sufficient level to protect the Council against risk and to meet the needs of the organisation. The Council maintains a General Fund Working Balance of £10.3m which is held to cushion the impact of uneven cash flows or unexpected events. Additionally, as part of the Councils approach to financial sustainability and resilience, a specific contingency reserve has been created to further protect against financial risk in the current climate. The majority of remaining balances are held as specific reserves which are earmarked for a particular purpose; however, officers are currently reviewing these balances to identify any opportunity to increase corporate resilience further.

5.2.2 The Council's specific reserves include **revenue reserve balances** of £108m (this excludes the General Fund Working Balance); £25.7m of **capital reserves** earmarked to fund major capital schemes; £37.8m of reserve balances belonging to or earmarked to support **schools**. The Council's reserves are reviewed to assess their adequacy for current known liabilities, approved policy commitments and financial risk, including that arising from commercial investments. The level of available reserves is important in maintaining the financial resilience of the Council. The make-up of the Council's reserves as at 31st March 2024 was:

Table 3: Reserve Balances at March 2024

	1st Apr 2023 £000	(Increase)/ Decrease £000	31st Mar 2024 £000
Council Revenue Reserves			
General Fund Balance	(10,277)	0	(10,277)
Adult Social Care	(32,152)	11,582	(20,570)
Financial Risk Contingency	(5,855)	(2,623)	(8,478)
Early Retirement and Voluntary Redundancy	(7,241)	0	(7,241)
Private Finance Initiatives	(8,108)	1,378	(6,730)
Management of Capital	(6,323)	520	(5,803)
Reset and Recovery	(5,467)	0	(5,467)
Business Rates Income Reserve	(3,433)	(1,593)	(5,026)
Innovation and Development Fund	(5,068)	804	(4,264)
Public Health	(3,778)	(248)	(4,026)
Corporate Priorities (2020/21 Outturn Underspend)	(2,994)	0	(2,994)
Covid 19 Government Funding	(4,260)	1,756	(2,504)
Commercial Developments	(2,682)	209	(2,473)
Air Quality Early Measures	(3,921)	1,546	(2,375)
Refugee Resettlement Programme	(619)	(1,722)	(2,341)

Friargate Lifecycle	(1,595)	1	(1,594)
IT Replacement Programme	(510)	(1,016)	(1,526)
Homes for Ukraine	(2,530)	1,255	(1,275)
Adult Education Income	(1,092)	(99)	(1,191)
Housing Enforcement	(590)	(577)	(1,167)
City of Culture & Commonwealth Games Readiness Legacy	(1,400)	275	(1,125)
Corporate Property Management	(819)	(200)	(1,019)
Insurance Fund	(1,063)	140	(923)
Other Directorate	(12,691)	31	(12,660)
Other Corporate	(3,460)	(1,186)	(4,646)
Total Council Revenue Reserves	**(127,928)**	**10,233**	**(117,695)**
Council Capital Reserves			
Useable Capital Receipts Reserve	(18,623)	6,890	(11,733)
Capital Grant Unapplied Account	(5,745)	1,551	(4,194)
Total Council Capital Reserves	**(24,368)**	**8,441**	**(15,927)**
School Reserves			
Schools (specific to individual schools)	(23,413)	(580)	(23,993)
Schools (related to expenditure retained centrally)	(10,237)	(3,968)	(14,205)
Total Schools Reserves	**(33,650)**	**(4,548)**	**(38,198)**
Total Reserves	**(185,946)**	**14,126**	**(171,820)**

5.2.3 The Council will seek to optimise the use of its reserve balances in delivering priorities, making decisions on a corporate basis, and observing opportunities to maintain an appropriate balance between short term expenditure and long-term investment in support of the MTFS.

More specifically, the approach will be informed by:

- The need to maintain, and where possible build working balances to mitigate the key risks faced by the Council including those expressed in the Council's corporate risk register.
- The requirement to hold some earmarked reserves to protect against specific known or potential liabilities but kept to a minimum consistent with adequate coverage of those liabilities and reviewed annually as part of the budget process.
- A general assumption, to be applied flexibly subject to specific financial circumstances that one-off resources will not be used to support on-going expenditure.

- The awareness that there is an opportunity cost of holding reserves (in that these funds cannot then be spent on anything else) – it is therefore critical that reserves continue to be reviewed each year to confirm that they are still required and that the level is still appropriate.
- The awareness that balances help protect the Council from exposure to the external borrowing market at times when rates are high

5.2.4 There are no plans to use working balances over the period covered by this strategy and as a result the anticipated balance at the end of each year is expected to remain at c£10m throughout. We will endeavour however to review the Financial Risk Contingency reserve to reflect prevailing risk.

5.2.5 The Council also maintains capital reserves:

- The capital receipts reserve holds all receipts from the disposal of non-current assets, which can only be used to finance new capital investment or to repay debt.
- The capital grants unapplied reserve holds capital grants without conditions, or where conditions have been satisfied but the grant has yet to be used to finance capital expenditure.

5.2.6 Considering the risks outlined above, the current level of reserves is considered adequate in the view of the Director of Finance and Resources (Section 151 Officer). However, the scope to use reserves within the boundaries of the MTFS framework is significantly restricted.

5.3 Capital

5.3.1 The current capital programme for approval in February 2025 includes the following expenditure profile:

Table 4: Capital Expenditure Profile per 2025/26 Budget Report

	2025/26 £'000	2026/27 £'000	2027/28 £'000	2028/29 £'000	2029/30 £'000	Total £'000
TOTAL PROGRAMME	**171.6**	**142.1**	**86.0**	**31.8**	**78.7**	**510.2**

5.3.2 The programme reflects the Council's ambitions for the city and include: extensive highways infrastructure works including specific schemes relating to continued delivery of the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme that include transport packages of the Foleshill and London Road corridor; completion of the City Centre demonstrator of the Very Light Rail project; the continuation of the City Centre Cultural Gateway; progressing the City Centre South redevelopment; and the commencement of Woodlands School.

5.3.3 The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme has been established by Government to provide a five-year capital funding settlement for Mayoral Combined Authorities for transport totalling £1.05bn, covering the period 2022-2027. Coventry's CRSTS programme of £110m includes allocations for delivery of the Very Light Rail City Centre Demonstrator route within Coventry, the Tile Hill Station Park and Ride improvement scheme, a package of transport improvements focussed on the Foleshill Road corridor, and a package of transport improvements focussed on the London Road corridor supporting the Gigafactory and other developments planned for the Coventry Airport area and within the London Road corridor.

5.3.4 Funding for the non-WMCA funded capital programme consists primarily of a combination of specific capital grants, prudential borrowing, revenue funding and capital receipts from the sale of council assets. Delivery of the programme requires the effective prioritising and management of capital resources and investments, taking into account the level of funding both from government and future capital receipts and the identification of self-funded business cases that can justify the use of prudential borrowing to pay for schemes.

5.3.5 The Council will continue to seek to maximise the amount of funding identified in order to deliver its priorities. It will actively seek external grant funding opportunities both on a stand-alone basis and in partnership with other Councils and partners including the WMCA. It will seek to optimise the Council's land and property portfolio through proactive estate management and effective corporate arrangements for the acquisition and disposal of land and property assets. This will work within the limitations on its ability to purchase assets, and specifically not to do so purely for commercial return.

5.3.6 Where prudential borrowing is identified as a potential source of funding for capital projects, it is essential that funding is identified to pay the principal and interest costs of the borrowing. This can come either from new income generated from the project, service savings delivered as a result of the investment or an existing revenue budget which can be switched to this purpose as a result of the expenditure made. A clear business case must be provided which incorporates these elements and which will form part of any approving report.

5.3.7 The level of prudential borrowing funding has increased in recent years, as significant sums have been invested through the capital programme. Whilst the authority has usually been able to cashflow investment through temporarily using other balances, for example grant monies received up-front prior to spend, this will not be the case on a permanent basis. External borrowing will increasingly be required in line with the underlying Capital Programme. The short term/long term mix of any borrowing will be determined by the Council's cashflow needs and the interest rate environment.

5.4 <u>Risk Management and Financial Resilience</u>

5.4.1 In setting the revenue and capital budgets, the Council takes full account of the known key financial risks that may affect its plans in setting its revenue and capital budgets. The corporate risk register is reviewed by the Strategic Leadership Board on a regular basis and is considered bi-annually by the Audit and Procurement Committee. Where the risks contained within the register are considered to have a financial dimension this is reflected in the Council's Budget process.

5.4.2 Risks around children's and adults' social care continue to be the most significant ones reflected in changes to the budget in recent years and this will be true again for 2024/25. Other significant risks include housing and homelessness.

5.4.3 The current register incorporates a fundamental financial risk that the Council will be unable to deliver a balanced budget in the medium term. The detailed risk is that the Council will not be able to achieve its priorities whilst at the same time balancing its budget because of a combination of increased pressure on all sources of funding, increased demand, and complexity in services, including in adults and children's social care and the recently heightened impact of inflationary pressures across many areas of the budget. This has resulted in difficult decisions having to be made by Members about which services to support, with consequences for citizens and the city. The extent of this risk will be determined by the future funding regime for 2026/27 and beyond.

5.4.4 A further potential revenue risk related to equal pay claims. A number of claims have been received from employees which, if successful, would result in a one-off revenue cost to the Council. This issue is still very much at a relatively early stage and as yet, there has been no reliable assessment of the likely success of these claims or the financial cost if they eventually prove to be valid. The matter will inevitably be subject to complex and protracted legal proceedings, and potential negotiations between relevant parties. Given the significant uncertainty around whether a financial obligation exists, or the value of any obligation, we are not at this point able to make any accurate financial assumptions in the medium-term financial strategy.

5.4.5 To mitigate the risks, the Council has in place a rigorous structure to oversee budgetary processes and continues to seek out opportunities which identify flexibility in existing budgets and undertake technical analysis to identify alternative options to alleviate budgetary pressure. Specific programmes are in place to identify commercial opportunities and optimum service delivery models to produce a medium-term programme of transformation and ensure future financial sustainability. The Council has and will continue to lobby the new Government through local government sector organisations whilst also assisting in the economic recovery of the local economy to try to safeguard local income flows. Some of these themes are revisited in the final section on the Council's MTFS approach. As stated earlier, it should be noted that the new Government have provided a real term increase in funding for 2025/26, although this is not yet sufficient to prevent further service cost reductions necessary. However, the Governments planned funding reform from 2026/27, where a fairer reflection of need is expected to be made in allocation of funds within the Local Government sector will need to be understood to inform this further.

5.4.6 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) maintains an index of financial resilience for English councils which assesses each authority against a number of indicators, including levels of reserves, external debt and auditors' judgements, in order to illustrate each council's financial position relative to that of comparator authorities. The index was developed with the intention of highlighting areas of potential risk to councils' financial stability and informing the judgement of the chief finance officer on the robustness of budgets. CIPFA acknowledges that the index (most recently updated in 2022/23) should not however be viewed in isolation and its interpretation will depend to a large degree on the local context specific to each authority. Coventry's previous results suggest that for most of the indicators used, the authority does not fall into a higher risk category in relation to comparable authorities. However, Coventry's level of children's social care costs and its relatively low level of unallocated reserves were indicators of a higher perceived level of risk.

5.5 <u>MTFS Assumptions</u>

5.5.1 The Council's prospective Budget plans for 2026/27 onwards will continue to face financial pressure. 2025/26 would have marked the first year of the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) however this, and the national economic picture has been much impacted by the timing of the general election, and the incoming new Government. This has meant that the Government have had little time to fully review the national financial position, and as such provided a single year review which was delivered in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement in late October 2024, provisional funding settlement in December 2024 and confirmed in the final settlement in February 2025. A fuller CSR is expected to take place in the first half of 2025, however until this happens the Council's financial plans will necessarily be subject to forecasting uncertainty.

5.5.2 The financial management framework that underpins the MTFS includes:

- Overall direction undertaken by the Leadership Board which will cover transformation programmes, quarterly monitoring, and development of Budget proposals, and savings delivery governance,
- A corporate planning and monitoring process that considers capital and revenue together,
- A framework founded on delegation and clear accountability, with budgets managed by the designated budget holder, reported through Service Management Teams, the Leadership Board, Cabinet and Audit and Procurement Committee,
- A drive to identify efficiencies and achievable savings to enable the Council to optimise delivery of its policy priorities,
- Strong project management approaches, including a specific focus on cost control and programme delivery,
- Where feasible, the establishment of a balanced revenue budget and capital programme over the medium-term planning period.

5.5.3 The Council's approach is to manage its reserves in a way that supports the MTFS and the Council's priorities. In particular, the this is based on:

- A policy that reserves are not to be used to: (i) meet on-going expenditure or (ii) fund capital expenditure other than for mostly short life asset rolling programmes other than in exceptional circumstances or for capital schemes of major importance,
- The classification of reserves as a corporate resource, with Cabinet via Leadership Board considering the application of budgeted amounts unspent at year end,
- Holding reserves for a clearly identifiable purpose. This will include protecting against known or potential liabilities, at a minimum level consistent with adequate coverage of those liabilities, considering the overall level of risk faced by an organisation of the City Council's size.

5.5.4 The key financial or technical assumptions that underpin the MTFS are:

- Whilst we await more information on the new Governments plans for 2026/27 onwards, assumptions regarding government funding beyond 2025/26 are largely flat.
- An updated comprehensive spending review (CSR) will be introduced during 2025.

- For strategic financial planning purposes Council Tax and Adult Social Care precept increases will be assumed to match the maximum level advised by Government. These have been confirmed as 3% for Council Tax and 2% for the precept in 2025/26, however these will be combined to 5% for future presentation as requested by the Government. Subsequent years will be reduced to 3%. As is normal, this will be subject to political debate and decision as well as any changes at a national level,
- Business Rate income (plus compensating Government grants) will be assumed to be inflated broadly in line with Government dictated Business Rates multiplier inflation levels. Income will be amended for trends in Business Rates tax-base, collection performance and appeals,
- Planning based on the underlying Council Tax-Base growing at 0.5% per annum in line with historical trends but flexed each year where shorter-term expectations dictate,
- Increases in pay budgets of 3% in 2025/26, 2% per annum in subsequent years. This area will be kept under close review particularly whilst inflation levels settle back into a normal pattern, and it is expected that the Council will continue to reflect sector agreed pay awards and guideline National Living Wage levels,
- An intention to review the need to make provision for budgetary growth as a result of significant demographic or service demand, subject to optimisation of service operation, review of alternative methods of service delivery, review of Council policy to ensure that it reflects current conditions and recognition of overall financial constraints,
- The budget for the Council's Asset Management Revenue Account (AMRA) will be managed in line with the Council's Treasury Management Strategy, updated annually as part of the Budget Report. The AMRA position will take into account any impact of changes in the size and composition of capital programme, cash-flow forecasts, the level of provision to repay debt through Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP), and prevailing/forecast interest rates. The Council's Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy will be based on an approach that is both prudent and affordable in a way that reflects the long-term nature of local authority debt and assets,
- Forward financial estimates will be guided by existing CPI inflation levels in line with practice adopted across a broad range of public sector areas. Specific contractual agreements on inflation will be honoured where these are in place. CPI will provide the financial planning benchmark for increases in fees and charges and any areas of expenditure subject to specific inflation requirements assessed by the Section 151 Officer. Actual increases in fees and charges will depend upon local factors such as the need to generate enough income to meet the cost of trading services. Contractual inflation has been applied where required along with notional inflationary rises in discretionary areas. This will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that additional costs for external contracts which reflect patterns dictated by pay inflation or other significant inflationary pressures are built into Council budgets in the affected areas.

6. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY APPROACH

6.1 The MTFS supports the medium-term policy and financial planning process which is central to the setting of the Council's revenue and capital budgets. The MTFS approach is crucial to providing a stable financial base from which to deliver the Council's priorities as set out in the One Coventry Council Plan. As part of this the Council will seek to maintain a sustainable financial position over the course of the planning period, with detailed proposals for all years set out in the annual Budget Report.

6.2 In order to ensure that Council financial plans are robust in the medium term the Council's MTFS continues to cover a 3-year period. The starting point for the Council is that it faces large budget gaps across the planning period. The recent Pre-Budget Report to Cabinet included proposals on which to consult, which could collectively form the basis of a balanced budget in 2025/26. In recent years the previous Government have increased the level of grant payments made to local authorities to support the costs of social care and this has been supplemented further in 2025/26 by the new Government. However, inflationary increases and a rise in both the numbers and needs of social care clients mean that the Council will still likely be significantly challenged in subsequent years. Within this environment of pressure on resources, the Council has delivered very significant savings and identified other sources of income in order to balance its overall budget. The remainder of this section sets out the separate strands of financial policy which together are designed to ensure that the Council continues to deliver a balanced short-term and medium-term revenue budget and sustainable and affordable capital programme.

6.3 <u>The One Coventry Approach</u>

6.3.1 The One Coventry Plan recognises that the Council may need to change the way that it works to meet the challenges of delivering services and maintaining a sustainable financial position. This will mean building on good practice where it exists but doing things differently elsewhere, building and sustaining genuine partnerships and city-wide collaboration, actively seeking creative opportunities, considering if the Council is working in the right way, investing resources with other public sector partners if appropriate and working flexibly across roles, services, and organisations. This will involve reviewing some services to see if they need to be delivered differently, potentially embracing latest technologies e.g. A.I., or possibly not delivered at all. This will work in different ways for different services but, for instance, may involve an approach of enabling independence with individuals and organisations being encouraged to do as much as possible for themselves.

6.3.2 Subject to the other component parts of the Budget process, the One Coventry approach is intended to offer the Council a means of identifying service savings to help balance its overall Budget. This could involve a wide range of different solutions including reducing service levels or ceasing services altogether, delivering services more efficiently or with fewer resources and delivering services in partnership, with partners doing more or levering in more external resources.

6.3.3 In addition, Council managers and budget holders will continue to be expected to manage their service areas in a way that pays due regard to delivering economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Delivering services as cost effectively as possible enables the Council to maximise the impact that it can have within a finite level of resources and managers will continue to be held to account for the financial performance of their areas.

6.4 **Commercialisation**

6.4.1 The Council will seek to maximise income and pursue commercial opportunities where these are consistent with its role and legal powers as a local authority, are proportionate, and subject to a responsibility to maintain a robust financial position. The Council's view is that by not acting in this manner, it leaves itself in a more financially vulnerable position and that to do nothing is not a viable option.

6.4.2 The Council will maintain a default position that fees and charges should increase annually in line with inflation and that income earning services should seek to at least cover their costs. Any movement away from these principles should be based on an understanding that such increases would be harmful to the overall trading position or sound policy or 'market led' reasons for not increasing prices.

6.4.3 The Council will generate capital receipts where there is a clear business case for doing so by disposing of surplus and/or poor performing property/assets and thereby providing funds for capital reinvestment in services, driving growth or making savings through the repayment of debt. Such an approach will be undertaken in compliance with the Prudential Code for capital finance, Statutory Government Investment Guidance, and the borrowing requirements of the Public Works Loans Board.

6.4.4 The service dimension of commercial investments is important including in facilitating local regeneration, addressing market failure, accelerating the local response to the climate change agenda, and supporting local organisations. These investments also provide financial returns which help to underpin the Council's budget. The Council will continue to seek opportunities to make investments in a selective, and business cased based manner in commercial ventures to secure a financial return and achieve service policy objectives where this is consistent with its priorities, the One Coventry Council Plan, Commercial Investment Strategy and PWLB requirements. Such investment, for example in the further development of Friargate Business District and Strategic Energy Partnership Projects could potentially include property schemes, share purchase and the provision of loans to external organisations, and would be designed to meet strategic, service, and financial objectives.

6.5 **Council Tax and Business Rates**

6.5.1 The Council will seek to maximise the income it generates from Business Rates and Council Tax. There is an expectation that the Council tax-base will continue to be buoyant as the Council seeks to facilitate the provision of local housing, including affordable housing, for its citizens. In addition, the Revenues and Benefits Service will seek to maximise the Council Tax collection rate (currently set at 97.6% in 2025/26) and take steps to ensure compliance with the applicability of discount and exemption policies.

6.5.2 The One Coventry Plan priority to promote a strong and resilient economy, where inclusive growth is delivered, businesses are enabled to innovate and grow, and new local jobs are created, also enshrines a parallel aim of ensuring that the Business Rates tax-base is resilient. The Revenues and Benefits Service will seek to maximise the Business Rates collection rate, taking steps to identify all relevant taxable properties and to ensure compliance with the applicability of discount and exemption policies.

6.6 **Treasury Management and Capital**

6.6.1 The Council's treasury management function seeks to ensure that cash is available when needed to meet the Council's obligations. The Council's Treasury Management Strategy is clear that the primary objectives of investing cash balances are to maintain the capital security of sums invested and to ensure adequate liquidity. After these, a third objective is to maximise return. The treasury role also extends to maximising revenue benefits by seeking the optimum balance between retaining external investments, repaying existing loans and avoiding new borrowing as appropriate given prevailing and forecast interest rates. Although the Council has an underlying need to borrow as a result of large Capital Programmes funded in part from borrowing, it has continued to avoid the need to undertake new long-term borrowing by utilising cash from reserve balances and grant funding received in advance of the need to spend. This approach seeks to optimise the financial benefit by avoiding unnecessary borrowing costs, particularly whilst prevailing rates are relatively high.

6.6.2 The Council will seek to maximise capital programme funding from external sources such as capital grants and Section 106 contributions in order to protect and sustain existing Council resources. Where appropriate the Council may use revenue funding of capital for on-going programmes of expenditure. In the absence of other funding and if the use of prudential borrowing is not appropriate, the Council will seek to utilise capital receipts to fund capital projects and will only commit capital receipts that have been achieved and are available on the Council's balance sheet.

6.6.3 Any remaining schemes that have a sustainable business case that justifies borrowing as a funding source will be resourced from prudential borrowing. In this manner, the Council will avoid putting any additional burden on Council taxpayers or seeking contributions from service budgets which reduce the net level of resources to fund services. When borrowing, the Council will look for the most cost-effective source of funding, either PWLB or alternative funders.

6.7 **Reserves**

6.7.1 The overwhelming majority of the Council's reserve balances are held to provide a one-off resource to meet service objectives and fund specific projects that have been identified and/or approved in advance. A small number but significant balance of other reserves is held to provide protection against risk. These resources are a one-off source of funding that are not available on an ongoing basis. It is not the intention that the Council's reserves should be used to balance its Budget position in normal circumstances.

6.7.2 Within this context it is also true however, that in exceptional circumstances the Council could divert resources from reserve balances in order to manage a difficult budgetary position. There is significant flexibility which could be applied through delaying projects or service proposals or by cancelling them altogether which could free up reserves to balance the budget. This is not a course of action that would be recommended by the Council's Section 151 Officer except in the most difficult of financial circumstances, but it is important to hold this as a measure of last resort to set against the other tools available as part of a medium-term strategy.