

Warwick District Council Financial Strategy 2020/21-2024/25

1 INTRODUCTION

“Money” is one of 3 keys strands of the Council’s Fit for the Future Programme. The others are People and Services. This document supports the delivery of the Council’s services and the projects within the Programme, as well as supporting all Council Strategies to deliver its aims and objectives.

It considers the major funding issues facing the Council in the Medium Term (the next 5 years). Extending the Strategy beyond this period would rely on broad estimates and many uncertainties. It would not be prudent to base the Strategy on a shorter period as risks and significant issues arising in the medium term could occur before the Council has developed the means of managing these. Forecast future levels of Funding are projected alongside other known constraints and opportunities.

The Council has a Code of Financial Practice and Code of Procurement Practice which underpin the Strategy.

Monthly Budget Review Reports are considered by the Senior Management Team, with Members of the Executive being updated on a quarterly basis. Alongside this, regular updated 5 year Financial Projections are included. Full Council receive the latest 5 Year Forecast alongside this Strategy within the Budget and Council Tax Reports presented in February of each year.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Economic Background, as provided by Treasury Advisors, Link Asset Services – their Report is reproduced as Annex 1.

2.2 Recent years have seen many changes to the nature of Funding Local Authorities receive from Central Government. The new Business Rate Retention Scheme was introduced from 1st April 2013. Whilst setting the NNDR Baseline, Government then allowed Council to retain a share of any growth above this Baseline. There is a safety net whereby the Authority would receive a top up payment should actual Business Rates collected fall more than 7.5% below their Baseline.

Alongside this, the proportion of Business Rates to Revenue Support Grant has increased since this scheme was introduced. The 4 year settlement announced in December 2015 and January 2016 show that by 2019/20 Revenue Support Grant will be zero, having reduced significantly over the 3 year period. The Council’s other main income source is its local Council Tax payers.

- 2.3 In December 2017, the government announced the intention to increase the level of business rates retained by local government from the current 50% to the equivalent of 75% from April 2020. During 2019/20 selected authorities will pilot this scheme. This Council will closely monitor further developments as the scheme evolves. The proposals surrounding the 75% Business Rate Retention show that Revenue Support Grant will cease.
- 2.4 The Financial Strategy and projections have been updated in line with the 2020/21 Government Settlement Figures announced in December 2019. The Council's Financial Strategy is based upon the absence of Revenue Support Grant announced by the Government and its own Business Rates forecasts using the NNDR1 and NNDR3 returns and local intelligence, including support from "Analyse Local", independent Business Rates Consultants.
- 2.5 As referred to above, from 2013/14, the District Council retains 20% of any growth in business rates above the pre-determined Baseline. The Council's Baseline for 2019/20 is £3.392m. This is the amount the Council retains. If the actual amount collected varies to the Baseline, the Council will retain more or less income, working out at the Council retaining 20% of any increased revenues. Conversely, if there is any reduction in the new business rate receipts, the Council will bear 20% of this cost. There is a Safety Net whereby the Council will not be able to receive less than £3.137 million, this being within 7.5% of the Baseline retained income figure. However, this Authority has entered into Pooling arrangements. This means the Safety Net payment would be paid to the Pool rather than the actual authority falling into the Safety Net.

The Baseline has been inflated annually since the scheme commenced in 2013 until 2021, when there is due to be a "reset" of the system. The proposed changes to the Business Rate Scheme are discussed in more detail in Section 3.5 of the Budget Report.

The Council entered into a "pooling" arrangement with the other Warwickshire councils. Under this arrangement the amounts due to be paid to Central Government under the Levy should greatly reduce, meaning more income will be retained locally. Whilst there are risks attached to pooling, especially if income should substantially decline, however, based on the latest projections, the Council should benefit from remaining in the pool in 2020/21.

- 2.6 The Council also receives Government Support by way of New Homes Bonus (NHB) for 2020/21 this is £3.726 million. A proportion of this is allocated to the Waterloo Housing Association as part of the WC Housing Joint Venture. Initially, NHB was funded on a 6 year rolling time limited basis. After consultation the Government phased a reduction for this from 6 (2016/17) to 4 years from 2018/19. It is paid on a rolling basis. To date the Council has not had to use New Homes Bonus to support recurring expenditure on core service provision. This prudence has proved wise so far, whilst allowing the

Council to support new schemes and replenish Reserve balances.

- 2.7 The Council are permitted to increase their share of Council Tax by either 2% or £5 (per band D equivalent) without triggering a Referendum. However, it is proposed to hold a Referendum, and to increase this by an additional £1 per week (£52 per year per band D equivalent) to £223.86 per year. The additional monies generated will be used to fund items within the Climate Emergency Agenda (Appendix 12).
- 2.8 In March 2012 the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowed £136.2m to make a one off 'buy out' payment when the Housing Subsidy system was replaced by 'Self Financing'. This debt is serviced from HRA rental income, in place of the payments previously made to the National Housing Rent Pool under the Housing Subsidy system. A 50 year Business Plan is maintained to demonstrate the viability of the HRA and the capacity to invest in the service and provide new homes.
- 2.9 A 'Prudential Framework' for borrowing was introduced from 2004/05. Local authorities no longer have to obtain Government approval before borrowing. Control is by prudential limits based on the authority's revenue resources. The Council can borrow if it can afford the revenue consequences.
- 2.10 The Council reviews its budgets on a monthly basis, amending these as changes are identified, rather than reporting upon variations and updating its current year's budgets once at part of the following year's budget setting process. The process will be constantly reviewed to identify further efficiencies so that data can be produced in the most timely and accurate manner.
- 2.11 The Council made great strides with publishing the 2018/19 Statement of Accounts, on time and signed by external audit, following the failure to publish its 2017/18 Accounts within statutory deadline. Processes were thoroughly reviewed and scrutinised with an Action plan drawn up, with regular updates provided to members. Internally formal procedures were created, and training was provided to all people involved within the final accounts process.

3. CORPORATE STRATEGY AND FIT FOR THE FUTURE PROGRAMME

- 3.1 The Council's Organisational Purpose being:

"Warwick District: a great place to live, work and visit".

- 3.2 During 2010, the Council adopted its Fit For the Future programme as its Corporate Strategy to provide an organisation framework to progress these objectives. As well as focusing on delivering quality services that its customers' need, the programme and subsequent updates have set

challenging savings targets to be delivered. Achieving these will assist the Council in delivering its services in the future in light of uncertainty surrounding the economic climate, and future reductions in Central Government Support.

This programme needs to stay up to date and relevant in providing the strategic framework for the Council to meet the challenges it faces. Projects within the programme will be adjusted to reflect opportunities and challenges arising from Government initiatives and legislation as well as the Council's own Local Priorities.

These include-

The impact of Brexit on the economy and changes in legislation as Britain leaves the European Union is still uncertain.

In his Autumn Statement 2019, the Chancellor announced that the National Living Wage rise from £8.21 to £8.72 in April 2020.

3.3 As well as these initiatives, other major issues that will affect the Council's finances over this period are:

- (i) Monitoring the medium term financial forecast will identify this Council's progress in meeting its various savings initiatives and the profile of the savings still to be identified.
- (ii) The impact of pressures to improve environmental sustainability, and meet the climate change agenda.
- (iii) Energy costs which are extremely volatile.
- (iv) Major developments that may occur, such as, Kenilworth School Relocation, Europa Way and other potential strategic opportunities.
- (vi) Major investment in multi storey car parks that will require structural renewal.
- (vii) The Council completed condition surveys on its Corporate Assets. The Council continues to strive to ensure its Corporate Asset properties are maintained at a reasonable standard. So far it has been able to resource these costs. Ongoing Funding for future liabilities will need to be found.
- (viii) The potential to work with partners and realising savings by pooling resources.
- (ix) Capital receipts have reduced considerably and any for the future are extremely uncertain.
- (x) The volatility of many of the Council's income budgets.
- (xi) The rate of economic recovery and investment interest returns.
- (xii) Trees throughout the district need replacing for which funding will need to be sought.
- (xiii) Ongoing reviews on how the Council manages and delivers its services.
- (xiv) Development of the Fit for the Future Programme and the Council's ability to adapt to change.

- (xv) Efficient procurement to deliver quality services at minimum cost.
 - (xvi) Superannuation Fund and pensions changes further to the changes to the Local Government Pension Scheme introduced in April 2014. The pensions fund, in common with most others, continues to carry a projected deficit, although plans are in place to seek to ensure the fund is in surplus.
 - (xvii) In June 2016, the country voted to leave the European Union. The initial impact saw a reduction in interest rates and a drop in the pound against other currencies. As there is still a lot to be agreed in terms of the arrangement for UK withdrawal from the EU, this situation will need to be kept under review, with the impact on the Council's finances routinely assessed. The Council will amend its medium term financial forecasts as necessary to reflect any impact and related issues e.g. changes in legislation such as VAT.
 - (xviii) Renewal of the Council's major contracts in 2021/22.
- 3.4 The Council will plan replacements and renewals of equipment (including ICT Resources), and repair and maintenance in a careful manner concentrating on the sustainability of services as a first priority. In addition, the Council needs to continually review its reserves in the light of a very ambitious programme of change, and constant uncertain external pressures on the planning regime.
- 3.5 The Council continues to promote agile working and the electronic storage of records. These link to the asset management plan strategy of reducing office space needs.
- 3.6 During 2017/18, the major refurbishment of 2 of the Council's Leisure Centres, Newbold Comyn and St Nicholas Park Leisure Centres was completed. The Council now moves to Phase 2 of its plan to develop all of its Leisure Centres and redevelop the 2 Kenilworth ones, consulting with Stakeholders prior to undertaking the development. Following the consultation, the Council has selected suitable options for each leisure centre and is progressing to RIBA stage 3 on each. From June 2017, the Council outsourced the management of its Leisure Centres. A private contractor will be able to operate in a more cost efficient way, benefitting from Mandatory Rate Relief and achieving economies of scale from operating many Leisure Centres across the country. From 2019, this Council will receive an annual concession from the Operator. There is potential to receive more income from a "Profit Share" arrangement. In the interests of prudence, none of this 'profit share' has been factored into the Financial Forecasts.
- 3.7 Several Major Projects are currently being worked on, with further reports due to members.
- Demolition of the old Covent Garden Car Park to enable the development of the new Multi Storey Car Park, housing and Council HQ, enhancing the parking offering to residents and visitors and delivering savings on the current HQ running costs.

- Working with partners to develop the land at Europa Way and deliver housing and a new stadium.
- Preparation for the Commonwealth Games Bowls in 2022 at Victoria Park which offers a significant opportunity to promote the Town and its attractions and support the local economy.
- Delivery of the St Marys Lands Masterplan to enhance and promote the landscape character creating a natural open green space and promote St. Mary's Lands as a visitor destination supporting the many organisations within it.
- Phase 2 of the Leisure Centres refurbishment project

4. FINANCIAL PRINCIPLES

4.1 The following are the principles (for both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account) that underpin the Financial Strategy:

- (i) Savings and developments will be based upon corporate priorities as set out in the Council's Fit for the Future programme.
- (ii) In order to achieve further savings the Council continues to explore all avenues including
 - Shared services and joint working
 - Outsourcing where other providers can deliver a minimum of the same standard of service more efficiently
 - Efficient Procurement
 - Benchmarking costs and income and understanding differences
 - Increasing fees and paying customers where there is spare capacity and looking for opportunities to maximize income
 - Accessing grants to assist with corporate priorities
 - Controlling costs
 - Workforce planning
 - More efficient and greater use of technology
- (iii) The Council has ambitions to effectively manage its resources. In setting both its Council Tax and Housing Rents, the Council takes account of its budget requirement, the support it receives from Central Government, inflation and the affordability of its local tax and rent payers.
- (iv) The Council's base policy for Council house rent increases is currently to follow Central Government guidance. Any diversion from this policy will be requested in the annual Rent Setting report to Council, and reflected in the HRA Business Plan.
- (v) Whilst the Council will aim for Fees and Charges to be increased so that income is at least maintained in real terms, it will be mindful of the reality of the current economic conditions and its competitors. The

Council is committed to making good use of the ability to raise funds through charges and put them to good use for the community.

- (vi) The Council still needs to develop its ability to benchmark all services across the Council.
- (vii) This Council takes a positive approach to partnership working, realising the following benefits: -
 - a) Levering in additional external funding.
 - b) Ensuring improved use of sites, whether or not in the ownership of the Council.
 - c) Ensuring the future sustainability of projects.
 - d) Sharing/Reducing costs
 - e) Strengthening the resilience of the service
 - f) Enhancing quality of services
- (viii) The Financial Strategy takes account of all revenue effects of the capital programme to ensure that the decisions taken are sustainable into the future.
- (ix) The Council will hold reserves for specific purposes, as to be agreed by Executive.
- (x) The Capital Investment Reserve shall be maintained with a minimum uncommitted balance of £1m and a General Fund Balance of £1.5m.
- (xi) Any unplanned windfalls of income, whether service specific or more general, will be reported to the Executive who will prioritise how such income is used as part of setting future balanced budgets and meeting the Council's priorities.

5. PROCESS & MONITORING

Preparing budgets

- 5.1 The budget setting process is consistent with the service area planning process and the Fit for the Future Programme with recent years focusing on reductions in budgets and efficiencies.
- 5.2 When the Capital Programme is approved by Council the capital schemes will still be subject to individual approval on the basis of an evaluation and Business Case in accordance with the Council's Capital Strategy.

Monitoring and managing budgets

- 5.4 Under the monthly "Budget Review" Process, Budgets are amended as soon as changes are identified. The Financial Code of Practice is regularly updated to incorporate any changes in practice. The Financial Code of Practice was reviewed and updated in 2015 to reflect changes in this process and procurement practices.
- 5.5 Accountants work with Service Areas to identify budget variances and changes; these are reported to the Senior Management Team on a monthly basis. Regular reports are submitted for consideration by the Executive and Scrutiny Committees. The Council continues to review and refine its current processes, putting tighter controls in place to improve the quality and accuracy of the review process.

Consultation

- 5.6 The Council has a track record of consulting both partner organisations and the public this is an important contribution to assist identifying options and in learning lessons.
- 5.7 There is extensive consultation with partners on Fit For the Future, and the Sustainable Community Strategy.
- 5.8 The Council takes a strategic 5 year approach to determine how budgets are set and service prioritised.
- 5.9 The Council has a record of consulting where appropriate on the development of individual schemes.

6 ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 The following assumptions will be used in bringing forward proposals on the budget
- (i) Forecasts for Business Rates income are based upon the Council's local forecasts and out-turns. The Council uses a company called Analyse Local to forecast its provision for appeals.
 - (ii) Interest projections will continue to be based on the rates projected by Link Asset Services Treasury Solutions, the treasury management advisers.
 - (iii) It is assumed general inflation will increase by 2% per annum. Where the Council is contractually bound to increase costs and the Business Rates multiplier are increased by the relevant percentages.

7. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA)

- 7.1 Housing Self Financing was implemented on 1st April 2012. A 50 year HRA Business Plan has been developed to ensure sufficient funds will be available to service the £136.2m debt taken out with the PWLB in order to 'buy' the Council out of the existing Housing Subsidy system, provide the necessary funding to maintain the stock and enable the building of new homes over the life of the Business Plan.
- 7.2 There is a requirement to follow Central Government National Housing Rent Policy when determining rents on HRA dwellings. With effect from April 2016, the rent charged by local authorities has had to be reduced by 1% per year for 4 years. When a new tenancy begins the Council can re-let at Target Social Rent, in time bringing all social housing rents in line with 2002 Convergence policy. From April 2020 social rents policy will change, allowing the rent charged to be increased by CPI + 1% each year. The council does have discretion over the setting of garage rents, Warwick Response charges and rents for HRA owned shops and commercial properties.

8. REVENUE FORECASTS

- 8.1 Revenue forecasts will be drawn up in line with this strategy, and the strategy itself will be reviewed every year when the budget is set. The current forecasts are set out in the February 2019 Budget Report, which reported savings required as follows in order to keep future Council Tax increases to £5.00 (before the use of any one-off reserves or balances).

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Deficit-Savings Required(+)/Surplus(-) future years	330	1,025	456	574
Change on previous year	330	695	-569	118

These are indicative based on current assumptions, and assumes that savings are achieved and maintained.

- 8.1 The forecasts are reviewed throughout the year, with the Executive being informed of the latest projections as part of the Budget Process.

9. ASSET RESOURCE BACKGROUND

- 9.1 Set out below is a summary of the Council's assets and its existing plans to use its resources to invest for the future.

9.2 The Council's assets as shown in the balance sheet as at 31st March 2018 are summarised below: -

	No	Value £'000
Operational Assets		
HRA		
Operational Land and Buildings	7,542	377,564
Surplus Assets/Work in Progress	-	0
Vehicles, Plant, Furniture and Equipment	-	501
General Fund		
Operational Land and Buildings	119	71,905
Surplus Assets/Work In Progress	3	2,627
Vehicles, Plant, Furniture and Equipment		1,819
Community Assets	-	6,647
Infrastructure	-	2,030
Heritage Assets	-	8,270
Total	7,664	471,363
Investment Properties	88	11,000

9.3 A summary of the proposed capital programme for the period to March 2023 is given below. This programme gives an indication of the level of the Council's available capital resources that are to be devoted to capital expenditure during this period.

	Latest Budget 2018/19 £'000's	Proposed Expend. 2019/20 £'000's	Proposed Expend. 2020/21 £'000's	Proposed Expend. 2021/22 £'000's	Proposed Expend. 2022/23 £'000's	TOTAL 2018/19 to 2022/23 £'000's
Strategic Leadership & CWLEP	414.8	129.0	149.0	302.0	277.0	1,271.8
Health & Community Protection	647.4	600.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1,247.4
Culture Portfolio	3,250.1	623.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3,873.1
Finance Portfolio	200.0	150.0	150.0	150.0	150.0	800.0
Neighbourhood Portfolio	2,972.0	758.0	80.0	80.0	80.0	3,970.0
Development Portfolio	10,962.3	1,939.8	69.8	44.8	44.8	13,061.5
Housing Investment	10,598.1	22,156.3	4,633.2	4,636.0	4,638.9	46,662.5
Total Capital Programme	29,044.7	26,356.1	5,082.0	5,212.8	5,190.7	70,886.3

10. CAPITAL PRIORITIES

10.1 The main focus of the programme is:

- Realising local aspirations as expressed within the Corporate Strategy (which incorporates the Community Plan and the Council's Resource Strategies) and it's Fit for the Future Programme;
- Maintaining, and where possible enhancing, the condition of the Council's existing assets so as to reduce future maintenance liabilities and to encourage their effective use. Where appropriate this will include working in partnership with others such as the Friends of the Pump Room Gardens, Jockey Club and Golf Centre on St Marys Lands. Supporting capital schemes that provide revenue savings to the Council, in particular supporting investment in Information and Communication Technology so as to modernise activities and release resources for other purposes.

- Achieving regeneration and economic vitality in main population centres.

10.2 Key particular projects that link to the corporate strategy are: -

- Enabling developments across the district that improve the environment such as Europa Way, and the improvement of Leamington Old Town.
- To continue to maintain the Government's "decent homes" standard.
- To increase the number of affordable houses in the district.
- Relocation of the Council's main office to a more efficient and cost effective building
- Enhanced Leisure Facilities

11. FINANCING THE CAPITAL STRATEGY

11.1 The Capital Strategy needs to have regard to the financial resources available to fund it. The main sources of funding are detailed below: -

- Capital Receipts – primarily resulting from the sale of the Council's assets as other receipts have fallen in recent years. This income is lumpy and limited, although there are still schemes being considered that could realise further capital receipts.
- The Council is required to sell homes to eligible tenants at a significant discount under the right-to buy (RTB). A proportion of such receipts are taken by the Treasury; with the balance retained by the Council, some having to be to provide for new dwellings and the remainder the Council having flexibility over its use.
- Capital Contributions – including contributions from developers (often under Section 106 Planning Agreements and now from the Community Infrastructure Levy as well) and grants towards specific schemes.
- Use of Council's own resources – either by revenue contributions to capital, or use of earmarked reserves.
- Borrowing – the Council has freedom to borrow under the Prudential System provided it can demonstrate that it has the resource to service the debt.

- Leasing – the Council now requires that, where appropriate, an options appraisal is undertaken in order to identify the most efficient source of financing capital purchases. In certain cases this may take the form of either a lease.

12. REVIEW

12.1 This strategy will be subject to annual review to ensure that changes are included and that development issues have been implemented. It has been reviewed in the light of the Fit for the Future programme.

13. RISKS

13.1 Previous years have demonstrated that the Council needs to consider the risk in setting and managing its budgets.

13.2 The key risks that could arise and ways in which they should be managed are set out in the main February Budget report and associated appendix.

13.3 The Council maintains a Significant Business Risk Register which is reviewed bi-annually by the Executive and quarterly by the Senior Management Team. Each Service Area has its own Service Risk Register. These are presented for the consideration of the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly rotating basis.

13.4 All major projects the Council undertakes have their own separate Risk Register.

13.5 There is a separate section on Risk in all Committee Reports to Members.

Link Asset Services Economic Background

GLOBAL OUTLOOK. World growth has been doing reasonably well, aided by strong growth in the US. However, US growth is likely to fall back in 2019 and, together with weakening economic activity in China and the eurozone, overall world growth is likely to weaken.

Inflation has been weak during 2018 but, at long last, unemployment falling to remarkably low levels in the US and UK has led to an acceleration of wage inflation. The US Fed has therefore increased rates nine times and the Bank of England twice. However, the ECB is unlikely to start raising rates until late in 2019 at the earliest.

KEY RISKS - central bank monetary policy measures

Looking back on nearly ten years since the financial crash of 2008 when liquidity suddenly dried up in financial markets, it can be assessed that central banks' monetary policy measures to counter the sharp world recession were successful. The key monetary policy measures they used were a combination of lowering central interest rates and flooding financial markets with liquidity, particularly through unconventional means such as quantitative easing (QE), where central banks bought large amounts of central government debt and smaller sums of other debt.

The key issue now is that period of stimulating economic recovery and warding off the threat of deflation, is coming towards its close. A new period is well advanced in the US, and started more recently in the UK, of reversing those measures i.e. by raising central rates and, (for the US), reducing central banks' holdings of government and other debt. These measures are now required in order to stop the trend of a reduction in spare capacity in the economy and of unemployment falling to such low levels, that the re-emergence of inflation is viewed as a major risk. It is, therefore, crucial that central banks get their timing right and do not cause shocks to market expectations that could destabilise financial markets. In particular, a key risk is that because QE-driven purchases of bonds drove up the price of government debt, and therefore caused a sharp drop in income yields, this also encouraged investors into a search for yield and into investing in riskier assets such as equities. Consequently, prices in both bond and equity markets rose to historically high valuation levels simultaneously. This meant that both asset categories were exposed to the risk of a sharp downward correction and we did, indeed, see a sharp fall in equity values in the last quarter of 2018. It is important, therefore, that central banks only gradually unwind their holdings of bonds in order to prevent destabilising the financial markets. It is also likely that the timeframe for central banks unwinding their holdings of QE debt purchases will be over several years. They need to balance their timing to neither squash economic recovery, by taking too rapid and too strong action, or, conversely, let inflation run away by taking action that was too slow and/or too weak. **The potential for central banks to get this timing and strength of action wrong are now key risks.** At the time of writing, (early January 2019), financial markets

are very concerned that the Fed is being too aggressive with its policy for raising interest rates and is likely to cause a recession in the US economy.

The world economy also needs to adjust to a sharp change in **liquidity creation** over the last five years where the US has moved from boosting liquidity by QE purchases, to reducing its holdings of debt (currently about \$50bn per month). In addition, the European Central Bank ended its QE purchases in December 2018.

UK. The flow of positive economic statistics since the end of the first quarter of 2018 has shown that pessimism was overdone about the poor growth in quarter 1 when adverse weather caused a temporary downward blip. Quarter 1 at 0.1% growth in GDP was followed by a return to 0.4% in quarter 2 and by a strong performance in quarter 3 of +0.6%. However, growth in quarter 4 is expected to weaken significantly.

At their November quarterly Inflation Report meeting, the MPC repeated their well-worn phrase that future Bank Rate increases would be gradual and would rise to a much lower equilibrium rate, (where monetary policy is neither expansionary or contractionary), than before the crash; indeed they gave a figure for this of around 2.5% in ten years' time, but declined to give a medium term forecast. However, with so much uncertainty around Brexit, they warned that the next move could be up or down, even if there was a disorderly Brexit. While it would be expected that Bank Rate could be cut if there was a significant fall in GDP growth as a result of a disorderly Brexit, so as to provide a stimulus to growth, they warned they could also *raise* Bank Rate in the same scenario if there was a boost to inflation from a devaluation of sterling, increases in import prices and more expensive goods produced in the UK replacing cheaper goods previously imported, and so on. In addition, the Chancellor could potentially provide fiscal stimulus to support economic growth, though at the cost of increasing the budget deficit above currently projected levels.

It is unlikely that the MPC would increase Bank Rate in February 2019, ahead of the deadline in March for Brexit. Getting parliamentary approval for a Brexit agreement on both sides of the Channel will take well into spring 2019. However, in view of the hawkish stance of the MPC at their November meeting, the next increase in Bank Rate is now forecast to be in May 2019, (on the assumption that a Brexit deal is agreed by both the UK and the EU). The following increases are then forecast to be in February and November 2020 before ending up at 2.0% in February 2022.

Inflation. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure of inflation has been falling from a peak of 3.1% in November 2017 to 2.1% in December 2018. In the November Bank of England quarterly Inflation Report, inflation was forecast to still be marginally above its 2% inflation target two years ahead, (at about 2.1%), given a scenario of minimal increases in Bank Rate.

As for the **labour market** figures in October, unemployment at 4.1% was marginally above a 43 year low of 4% on the Independent Labour Organisation measure. A combination of job vacancies hitting an all-time high, together with

negligible growth in total employment numbers, indicates that employers are now having major difficulties filling job vacancies with suitable staff. It was therefore unsurprising that wage inflation picked up to 3.3%, (3 month average regular pay, excluding bonuses). This meant that in real terms, (i.e. wage rates less CPI inflation), earnings are currently growing by about 1.2%, the highest level since 2009. This increase in household spending power is likely to feed through into providing some support to the overall rate of economic growth in the coming months. This tends to confirm that the MPC was right to start on a cautious increase in Bank Rate in August as it views wage inflation in excess of 3% as increasing inflationary pressures within the UK economy.

In the **political arena**, the Brexit deal put forward by the Conservative minority government was defeated on 15 January. It is unclear at the time of writing, how this situation will move forward. However, our central position is that Prime Minister May's government will endure, despite various setbacks, along the route to reaching an orderly Brexit though the risks are increasing that it may not be possible to get full agreement by the UK and EU before 29 March 2019, in which case this withdrawal date is likely to be pushed back to a new date. If, however, the UK faces a general election in the next 12 months, this could result in a potential loosening of monetary and fiscal policy and therefore medium to longer dated gilt yields could rise on the expectation of a weak pound and concerns around inflation picking up.

USA. President Trump's massive easing of fiscal policy is fuelling a (temporary) boost in consumption which has generated an upturn in the rate of strong growth which rose from 2.2% (annualised rate) in quarter 1 to 4.2% in quarter 2 and 3.5%, (3.0% y/y), in quarter 3, but also an upturn in inflationary pressures. The strong growth in employment numbers and the reduction in the unemployment rate to 3.9%, near to a recent 49 year low, has fed through to an upturn in wage inflation which hit 3.2% in November. However, CPI inflation overall fell to 2.2% in November and looks to be on a falling trend to drop below the Fed's target of 2% during 2019. The Fed has continued on its series of increases in interest rates with another 0.25% increase in December to between 2.25% and 2.50%, this being the fifth increase in 2018 and the ninth in this cycle. However, they did also reduce their forecast for further increases from three to two. This latest increase compounded investor fears that the Fed is over doing the speed and level of increases in rates and that it is going to cause a US recession as a result. There is also much evidence in previous monetary policy cycles of the Fed's series of increases doing exactly that. Consequently, we have seen stock markets around the world falling under the weight of fears around the Fed's actions, the trade war between the US and China and an expectation that world growth will slow.

The tariff war between the US and China has been generating a lot of heat during 2018, but it is not expected that the current level of actual action would have much in the way of a significant effect on US or world growth. However, there is a risk of escalation if an agreement is not reached soon between the US and China.

Eurozone. Growth was 0.4% in quarters 1 and 2 but fell back to 0.2% in quarter 3, though this was probably just a temporary dip. In particular, data from Germany has been mixed and it could be negatively impacted by US tariffs on a significant part of its manufacturing exports e.g. cars. For that reason, although growth is still expected to be in the region of nearly 2% for 2018, the horizon is less clear than it seemed just a short while ago. Having halved its quantitative easing purchases of debt in October 2018 to €15bn per month, the European Central Bank ended all further purchases in December 2018. The ECB is forecasting inflation to be a little below its 2% top limit through the next three years so it may find it difficult to warrant a start on raising rates by the end of 2019 if the growth rate of the EU economy is on a weakening trend.

China. Economic growth has been weakening over successive years, despite repeated rounds of central bank stimulus; medium term risks are increasing. Major progress still needs to be made to eliminate excess industrial capacity and the stock of unsold property, and to address the level of non-performing loans in the banking and credit systems. Progress has been made in reducing the rate of credit creation, particularly from the shadow banking sector, which is feeding through into lower economic growth. There are concerns that official economic statistics are inflating the published rate of growth.

Japan - has been struggling to stimulate consistent significant GDP growth and to get inflation up to its target of 2%, despite huge monetary and fiscal stimulus. It is also making little progress on fundamental reform of the economy. It is likely that loose monetary policy will endure for some years yet to try to stimulate growth and modest inflation.

Emerging countries. Argentina and Turkey are currently experiencing major headwinds and are facing challenges in external financing requirements well in excess of their reserves of foreign exchange. However, these countries are small in terms of the overall world economy, (around 1% each), so the fallout from the expected recessions in these countries will be minimal.

INTEREST RATE FORECASTS

The interest rate forecasts provided by Link Asset Services in paragraph 3.2 are **predicated on an assumption of an agreement being reached on Brexit between the UK and the EU.** On this basis, while GDP growth is likely to be subdued in 2019 due to all the uncertainties around Brexit depressing consumer and business confidence, an agreement is likely to lead to a boost to the rate of growth in 2020 which could, in turn, increase inflationary pressures in the economy and so cause the Bank of England to resume a series of gentle increases in Bank Rate. Just how fast, and how far, those increases will occur and rise to, will be data dependent. The forecasts in this report assume a modest recovery in the rate and timing of stronger growth and in the corresponding response by the Bank in raising rates.

- In the event of an **orderly non-agreement exit**, it is likely that the Bank of England would take action to cut Bank Rate from 0.75% in order to help

economic growth deal with the adverse effects of this situation. This is also likely to cause short to medium term gilt yields to fall.

- If there was a **disorderly Brexit**, then any cut in Bank Rate would be likely to last for a longer period and also depress short and medium gilt yields correspondingly. It is also possible that the government could act to protect economic growth by implementing fiscal stimulus.

However, there would appear to be a majority consensus in the Commons against any form of non-agreement exit so the chance of this occurring has now substantially diminished.

The balance of risks to the UK

- The overall balance of risks to economic growth in the UK is probably neutral.
- The balance of risks to increases in Bank Rate and shorter term PWLB rates, are probably also even and are broadly dependent on how strong GDP growth turns out, how slowly inflation pressures subside, and how quickly the Brexit negotiations move forward positively.

One risk that is both an upside and downside risk, is that all central banks are now working in very different economic conditions than before the 2008 financial crash as there has been a major increase in consumer and other debt due to the exceptionally low levels of borrowing rates that have prevailed for ten years since 2008. This means that the neutral rate of interest in an economy, (i.e. the rate that is neither expansionary nor deflationary), is difficult to determine definitively in this new environment, although central banks have made statements that they expect it to be much lower than before 2008. Central banks could therefore either over or under do increases in central interest rates.

Downside risks to current forecasts for UK gilt yields and PWLB rates currently include:

- **Brexit** – if it were to cause significant economic disruption and a major downturn in the rate of growth.
- **Bank of England monetary policy** takes action too quickly, or too far, over the next three years to raise Bank Rate and causes UK economic growth, and increases in inflation, to be weaker than we currently anticipate.
- A resurgence of the **eurozone sovereign debt crisis**, possibly in **Italy**, due to its high level of government debt, low rate of economic growth and vulnerable banking system, and due to the election in March of a government which has made a lot of anti-austerity noise. The EU rejected the initial proposed Italian budget and demanded cuts in government spending which the Italian government initially refused. However, a fudge was subsequently agreed, but only by *delaying* the planned increases in expenditure to a later year. This can has therefore only been kicked down the road to a later time. The rating agencies have started on downgrading Italian debt to one notch above junk level. If Italian debt were to fall below investment grade, many investors would be unable to hold it. Unsurprisingly, investors are becoming increasingly concerned by the words and actions of the Italian government and consequently, Italian bond yields have risen – at a time when the

government faces having to refinance large amounts of debt maturing in 2019.

- Weak capitalisation of some **European banks**. Italian banks are particularly vulnerable; one factor is that they hold a high level of Italian government debt - debt which is falling in value. This is therefore undermining their capital ratios and raises the question of whether they will need to raise fresh capital to plug the gap.
- **German minority government**. In the German general election of September 2017, Angela Merkel's CDU party was left in a vulnerable minority position dependent on the fractious support of the SPD party, as a result of the rise in popularity of the anti-immigration AfD party. Then in October 2018, the results of the Bavarian and Hesse state elections radically undermined the SPD party and showed a sharp fall in support for the CDU. As a result, the SPD is reviewing whether it can continue to support a coalition that is so damaging to its electoral popularity. After the result of the Hesse state election, Angela Merkel announced that she would not stand for re-election as CDU party leader at her party's convention in December 2018, (a new party leader has now been elected). However, this makes little practical difference as she is still expected to aim to continue for now as the Chancellor. However, there are five more state elections coming up in 2019 and EU parliamentary elections in May/June; these could result in a further loss of electoral support for both the CDU and SPD which could also undermine her leadership.
- **Other minority eurozone governments**. Spain, Portugal, Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium all have vulnerable minority governments dependent on coalitions which could prove fragile. Sweden is also struggling to form a government due to the anti-immigration party holding the balance of power, and which no other party is willing to form a coalition with. The Belgian coalition collapsed in December 2018 but a minority caretaker government has been appointed until the May EU wide general elections.
- **Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary** now form a strongly anti-immigration bloc within the EU while **Italy**, in 2018, also elected a strongly anti-immigration government. Elections to the EU parliament are due in May/June 2019.
- Further increases in interest rates in the US could spark a **sudden flight of investment funds** from more risky assets e.g. shares, into bonds yielding a much improved yield. Throughout the last quarter of 2018, we saw sharp falls in equity markets interspersed with occasional partial rallies. Emerging countries which have borrowed heavily in dollar denominated debt, could be particularly exposed to this risk of an investor flight to safe havens e.g. UK gilts.
- There are concerns around the level of **US corporate debt** which has swollen massively during the period of low borrowing rates in order to finance mergers and acquisitions. This has resulted in the debt of many large corporations being downgraded to a BBB credit rating, close to junk status. Indeed, 48% of total investment grade corporate debt is now rated at BBB. If such corporations fail to generate profits and cash flow to reduce their debt levels as expected, this could tip their debt into junk ratings which will

increase their cost of financing and further negatively impact profits and cash flow.

- **Geopolitical risks**, especially North Korea, but also in Europe and the Middle East, which could lead to increasing safe haven flows.

Upside risks to current forecasts for UK gilt yields and PWLB rates

- **Brexit** – if both sides were to agree by 29 March a compromise that quickly removed all threats of economic and political disruption and so led to an early boost to UK economic growth.
- **The Fed causing a sudden shock in financial markets** through misjudging the pace and strength of increases in its Fed Funds Rate and in the pace and strength of reversal of QE, which then leads to a fundamental reassessment by investors of the relative risks of holding bonds, as opposed to equities. This could lead to a major flight from bonds to equities and a sharp increase in bond yields in the US, which could then spill over into impacting bond yields around the world.
- The **Bank of England is too slow** in its pace and strength of increases in Bank Rate and, therefore, allows inflation pressures to build up too strongly within the UK economy, which then necessitates a later rapid series of increases in Bank Rate faster than we currently expect.
- **UK inflation**, whether domestically generated or imported, returning to sustained significantly higher levels causing an increase in the inflation premium inherent to gilt yields.