

Patients 'could be put at risk' by health and social care budget pressures

Health and social care bosses have been warned that a failure to balance the books could put patients at risk after it was revealed the department is on course to experience a real teams overspend of more than £7 million this financial year – after only six months.

Overall, officers expect the council to fall short of its promised savings by £12.2 million – which will be offset by taking around £10 million from the authority's "corporate budgets and reserves" – which includes savings of £4.85 million in non-service areas such as loan charges, contributions from earmarked reserves of £4.3 million and additional council tax income of £1 million.

With these savings, many of which are "one offs", the council is at the moment on course for an overall overspend of £2.1 million, half way through the financial year. Another £28 million of savings will have to be found in next year's budget.

Opposition parties call for the council to focus on getting to grips with health and social care services and warn that patients' welfare could be put at risk if further savings need to be made.



Conservative
Councillor Andrew
Johnston

Conservative Cllr Andrew Johnston said: “They have taken their eye off the ball with it. Health and social care is in crisis and we don’t seem to be any further forward. If we continue in this way and whittle down the reserves, we will run out of reserves.

“The situation is only going to get worse and there will be a human cost of the council being unable to provide a good enough service for patients. The end game is that the council is going to run out of money if it carries on like this.”

It was revealed earlier this week that officers do not know when the council’s health and social care service will improve its performance following a series of missed targets. The service’s finances have been pushed further from a balanced position – and there is now a £7.1 million projected overspend due to a failure to make projected savings. The council’s communities and families service is also facing a £4.1 million overspend.

Green councillors raised fears that further cuts will have an impact on levels of patient care – which are already under pressure to meet targets.

Green finance spokesperson Cllr Gavin Corbett said: “It is no surprise that these are the main budgets which are very much demand-led. That means that cutting services or delaying

investment cannot be done without direct impact on people using services.

“The overall position is partly-masked by £10 million of savings from city-wide budgets but many of them are one-offs that might not be available in future years – and looming on the horizon is a further £28 million of cuts anticipated next year.

“Senior officers are already telling me that this is the toughest budget they have had to deal with. If the age of austerity is at an end, according to the UK Government, then no-one has sent the memo to Edinburgh.”

Executive officers are now “identifying, as a matter of urgency, further proposed actions” to balance the health and social care budget. Next month, the Edinburgh Integration Joint Board (IJB) will discuss a “financial recovery plan” – and has put short-term measures in place to try and get its finances in order.



Councillor Alasdair Rankin the council's Finance Convener

Cllr Alasdair Rankin, Finance Convener said: "Health and social care services are to a significant extent demand-led and, as such are subject to continuing expenditure pressures.

"Work is ongoing to identify and develop further potential mitigating actions and a report with an update on these from the Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership will be brought to the meeting of the EIJB next month."

Union leaders call for more funding

Union leaders have raised concerns that a need to further cut services will put more pressure on staff.

Council officers have previously raised concerns about difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, particularly in the health and social care sector.

Tom Connolly, secretary of UNISON City of Edinburgh branch, said: "UNISON's staff survey in 2017 found that staff felt overworked, over-pressured, unsupported and disbelieved.

"Many members stated they take on more work than they can safely manage because of their sense of obligation to the service users and to their colleagues."

He added: "The simple fact is that any further cuts will just make this situation worse.

"The core issue is Westminster and Holyrood funding. The City of Edinburgh Council has had to cut £240 million over the last five years. The council's financial framework estimates that it will need to make further cuts of at least £106 million by 2022/23, with £28 million required in 2019/20.

"The Scottish Government cannot go on cutting local authority funding when there is a growing need for health and social care services."