

Appendix 3 – Reserves Policy

INTRODUCTION

The establishment, monitoring, and review of the levels of reserves and balances are an important element of the council's financial management systems and financial standing.

The Chief Finance Officer (S151 Officer) is required by law to formally report to the Council his/her opinion on the adequacy of the council's reserves. Irrespective of this, a well-managed authority is clear about the reserves it needs now and, in the future, to support its service aspirations, whilst at the same time delivering value for money within a climate of significant resource pressure and economic/social risk.

This policy does not cover non-distributable reserves required to support financial accounting transactions e.g., the Revaluation Reserve, Capital Adjustment Account and Pension Reserve. (Non-distributable reserves are those that cannot be used for revenue or capital purposes.)

Reserves can be held for four reasons:

- A working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing.
- A contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies.
- A means of building up funds to meet known or predicted liabilities.
- A means of setting aside sums for future identified uses and / or investments.

Such reserves are generally referred to as earmarked reserves.

WHAT ARE RESERVES?

There is no clear definition of reserves even though reference is made to reserves in legislation. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) states "amounts set aside for purposes falling outside the definition of provisions should be considered as reserves." Provisions are required for any liabilities of uncertain timing or amount that have been incurred.

Generally, there are two types of reserves, those that are available to meet revenue or in some cases capital expenditure (Usable) and those that are not available to finance revenue or capital expenditure (Unusable). Useable reserves result from events that have allowed monies to be set aside, surpluses or decisions causing anticipated expenditure to have been postponed or cancelled. They can be spent or earmarked at the discretion of the council.

The council must manage its reserves in accordance with its strategic longer term planning process.

LEVEL OF RESERVES

As mentioned above the council's reserves can be regarded as general and earmarked reserves. In addition, the council maintains a Usable Capital Receipt reserve.

As part of its MTFs, the council also adopts some fundamental principles as to how reserves are used:

- The reserves must primarily be used to fund one off expenditure.
- Any recurring item may only be funded from reserves if plans are in place to replenish the reserve within a defined period.
- Any unplanned revenue income receipt should be put in reserves pending any future decisions as to its use.
- Reserves should be maintained at a sustainable level to ensure an adequate working balance is maintained.
- Reserves may be used as part of a planned process to balance the budget in order to avoid short term responses which may not be in the best interests of the council.

The council has prudently built up its reserves in recent years to be able to provide for its priorities when required. The level of reserves has, in recent years, reduced in line with planned activities such as investments in Oportunitas and Otterpool and their use for other investment or in lieu of borrowing. This strategy means that reserves are currently at an adequate rather than excessive level however it is recognised this use is of a one off nature to secure future income streams for the council.

The use of reserves is a critical part of the council's budget strategy, and the level of reserves is kept under ongoing review. Any future calls on the reserves are considered by looking at the whole position and ensuring minimum reserve levels are adhered to. It is vital that the future needs of the authority such as through the VET reserve are continually refreshed and updated and that earmarked reserves are applied appropriately.

ASSESSING THE ADEQUACY OF RESERVES

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) state that the Institute 'does not accept a case for introducing a statutory minimum level of reserves, even in exceptional circumstances.' It does however confirm that authorities should make their own judgment on such matters, taking into account all relevant local circumstances on the advice of their Chief Finance Officer / S151.

The Local Government Act 2003 requires the Chief Finance Officer to formally report on the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.

To arrive at assessing the adequacy of reserves a number of issues need to be addressed:

- What are the strategic, operational, and financial risks facing the authority?
- Does the authority comply with the requirements to ensure that there is an adequate system of internal control?
- Are the key financial assumptions in formulating the council's budget robust and reasonable?
- Does the council have adequate financial management and cash flow arrangements?

In addition, there are a number of questions an authority can ask to demonstrate that it is managing its affairs satisfactorily, such as:

- What is the track record of the council in its budgetary and financial management?
- What is the council's record regarding Council Tax collection?
- What is the council's capacity to manage in-year budgetary pressures?
- What is the strength of the council's financial reporting?
- What are the procedures to deal with under and overspends during and at the year end?
- In the case of earmarked reserves, will there be expected calls on the reserves that prompted the setting up of the reserves in the first place?

Finally, there is a need to look at the assumptions made in setting the budget, not just for the coming year but also under the MTFS.

The budgetary assumptions cover:

- Inflation and interest rate projections.
- Estimate and timings of capital receipts.
- Treatment of planned efficiency savings.
- Financial risks involved in major funding arrangements.

The assessment of the adequacy of the reserves and the robustness of the estimates are contained within the Chief Finance Officers report to council as part of the budget setting process based upon Section 25 of the Local Government Act of 2003.

Allocation of Reserves

There are to be no withdrawals from reserves, unless of a one-off nature, or if they are part of a planned usage which will lead to the elimination of any deficit and the setting of a balanced budget. It is not normal practice to withdraw from the General Fund Reserve to balance the annual budget, unless the circumstances are exceptional, and plans are in place to provide for an ongoing balanced budget.

Budget Assumptions

These are set out in detail within the Budget Strategy and a sensitivity analysis has been undertaken regarding the financial forecasts for the next five years. The council is responsible for a number of demand-led budgets which are difficult to control.

The council has identified its strategic financial risks and has carried out an assessment of that risk. Based on this analysis, the following levels are considered appropriate:

Required Levels of Reserves

	Minimum Level £m
General Fund	1.5
Housing Revenue Account	2.0
Capital Receipts	0.5

The minimum level of the General Reserve balance has been arrived at after assessing the strategic financial risks faced by the council.

The table above shows that a minimum General Reserve balance of £1.5 million should be maintained until the 2025/26 financial year. This level will be monitored and should be addressed as savings proposals are developed and implemented over the term of this plan. The HRA minimum balance has been set at £2.0 million as part of the preparation of the HRA business plan.

OPPORTUNITY COST OF HOLDING RESERVES

Having set minimum levels, the opportunity cost of holding reserves needs to be considered. All balances are used to either reduce temporary borrowing or are invested subject to other cash flows. Therefore, in measuring any opportunity cost of holding these reserves, consideration needs to be taken of the interest saving. The opportunity cost of holding the reserves is therefore a judgment whether the 'worth' of expenditure foregone is more than the income generated. Given the current economic climate it is a balanced judgement as to whether to invest / spend reserves or to hold these. As part of the MTFs and budget setting, an assessment of the adequacy of reserves and the associated risks will be made annually.

REPORTING FRAMEWORK

The level of reserves is continually monitored, and a full review is undertaken each year.