

Reserves Policy

1. Background and Context

1.1 Sections 32 and 43 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 require councils to consider the level of reserves when setting a budget requirement. Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 requires the Chief Financial Officer (Section 151 Officer) to report formally on the adequacy of proposed reserves when setting a budget requirement. The accounting treatment for reserves is set out in the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting.

1.2 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) issued their latest guidance to Local Authorities in March 2023, [Bulletin 13 – Local Authority Reserves and Balances](#) which updated previous Bulletins. Compliance with the guidance is recommended in CIPFA's Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government. In response to the above requirements, this policy sets out the Council's approach for compliance with the statutory regime and relevant non-statutory guidance for the Council's cash backed usable reserves.

1.3 All earmarked reserves are categorised as per the LAAP guidance, into the following groups:

- **Smoothing** – These are reserves which are used to manage large fluctuations in spend or income across years e.g., Private Finance Initiative (PFI) equalisation reserves. These reserves recognise the differences over time between the unitary charge and PFI credits received.
- **Trading** – this reserve relates to the non-company trading entities of Laser and Commercial Services to cover potential trading losses and investment in business development.
- **Renewals for Vehicles Plant & Equipment** – these reserves should be supported by an asset management plan, showing projected replacement profile and cost. These reserves help to reduce fluctuations in spend.
- **Major projects** – set aside for future spending on projects.
- **Insurance** - To fund the potential cost of insurance claims in excess of the amount provided for in the Insurance Fund provision, (potential or contingent liabilities)
- **Unspent grant/external funding** – these are for unspent grants which the Council is not required to repay, but which have restrictions on what they may be used for e.g., the Public Health grant must be used on public health services. This category also consists of time limited projects funded from ringfenced external sources.
- **Special Funds** – these are mainly held for economic development, tourism and regeneration initiatives.
- **Partnerships** – these are reserves resulting from Council partnerships and are usually ringfenced for the benefit of the partnership or are held for investing in shared priorities.
- **Departmental underspends** – these reserves relate to re-phasing of projects/initiatives and bids for use of year end underspending which are requested to roll forward into the following year.

1.4 Within the Statement of Accounts, reserves are summarised by the headings above. By categorising the reserves into the headings above, this is limited to the nine groups, plus General and Schools. Operationally, each will be divided into the relevant sub reserves to ensure that ownership and effective management is maintained.

- 1.5 Reserves are an important part of the Council's financial strategy and are held to create long term budgetary stability. They enable the Council to manage change without undue impact on the Council Tax and are a key element of ensuring the Council's financial standing and resilience. The risk of unforeseeable events and uncertainties (such as the Council's key sources of funding) remains high and as part of the response to these risks the Council may need to consider using general reserves as short term measure while making the necessary sustainable adjustments to spending over the medium term including replenishing the reserves used as short-term expedience.
- 1.6 Earmarked reserves are reviewed regularly as part of the monitoring process and annually as part of the budget process, to determine whether the original purpose for the creation of the reserve still exists and whether or not the reserves should be released in full or in part or require topping up based on known/expected calls upon them. Particular attention is paid in the annual review to those reserves whose balances have not moved over a three-year period.

2. Overview

- 2.1 The Council's overall approach to reserves will be defined by the system of internal control.
- 2.2 The system of internal control is set out, and its effectiveness reviewed, in the Annual Governance Statement (AGS). Key elements of the internal control environment are objective setting and monitoring, policy and decision-making, compliance with statute and procedure rules, risk management, achieving value for money, financial management and performance management. The AGS includes an overview of the general financial climate which the Council is operating within and significant funding risks.
- 2.3 The Council will maintain:
 - a general reserve; and
 - a number of earmarked reserves.
- 2.4 The level of the general reserve is a matter for the Council to determine having had regard to the advice of the S151 Officer. The level of the reserve will be a matter of judgement which will take account of the specific risks identified through the various corporate processes. It will also take account of the extent to which specific risks are supported through earmarked reserves. The level will be expressed as a cash sum over the period of the general fund medium-term financial strategy. The level will also be expressed as a percentage of the general funding requirement (to provide an indication of financial context). The Council's had traditionally aimed to hold general reserves of 5% of the net revenue budget. With the heightened financial risk the Council is facing in the medium term from continued spending growth we are now aiming to hold general reserves of between 5% and 10% of the net revenue budget, based on the following assessed levels.
 - Below 3% considered dangerous
 - 3% to 5% considered too risky
 - 5% to 10% range considered minimal to acceptable
 - Over 10% considered comfortable

3. Strategic context

- 3.1. The Council continues to face a shortfall in funding compared to spending demands and must annually review its priorities in order to address the shortfall.
- 3.2 The Council also relies on interest earned through investments of our cash balances to support its general spending plans.
- 3.3 Reserves are one-off money. The Council aims to avoid using reserves to meet ongoing financial commitments other than as part of a sustainable budget plan and one of the Council's financial principles is to stop the use of one-off funding to support the base budget. The Council has to balance the opportunity cost of holding reserves in terms of Council Tax against the importance of interest earning and long-term future planning.

4. Management and governance

- 4.1 Each reserve must be supported by a protocol. All protocols should have an end date and at that point any balance should be transferred to the general reserve. If there is a genuine reason for slippage then the protocol will need to be updated.

A questionnaire is completed by the relevant budget holder and reviewed by Finance to ensure all reserves comply with legislative and accounting requirements. A de-minimis limit has been set to avoid small funds being set up which could be managed within existing budgets or declared as an overspend and then managed collectively. This has been set at £250k.

- 4.2 Reserves protocols and questionnaires must be sent to the Chief Accountant's Team within Finance for review and will be approved by the Corporate Director of Finance, Corporate Management Team and then by the Deputy Leader of the Council. Protocols should clearly identify contributions to and drawdowns from reserves, and these will be built into the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and monitored on a quarterly basis.

Accessing reserves will only be for significant unusual spend, more minor fluctuations will be managed or declared as budget variances. In-year drawdowns from reserves will be subject to the governance process set out in the revised financial regulations. Ongoing recurring costs should not be funded from reserves. Any request contrary to this will only be considered during the budget setting process. The short-term use of reserves may be agreed to provide time to plan for a sustainable funding solution in the following financial year.

Decisions on the use of reserves may be delayed until financial year end and will be dependent on the overall financial position of the council rather than the position of just one budget area.

The current Financial Regulations state:

Maintenance of reserves & provisions

A.24 The Corporate Director of Finance is responsible for:

- i. proposing the Council's Reserves Policy.
- ii. advising the Leader and the Council on prudent levels of reserves for the Authority when the annual budget is being considered having regard to assessment of the financial risks facing the Authority.

- iii. ensuring that reserves are not only adequate but also necessary.
- iv. ensuring that there are clear protocols for the establishment and use of each earmarked reserve. Reserves should not be held without a clear purpose or without a planned profile of spend and contributions, procedures for the reserves management and control, and a process and timescale for review of the reserve to ensure continuing relevance and adequacy.
- v. ensuring that all renewals reserves are supported by a plan of budgeted contributions, based on an asset renewal plan that links to the fixed asset register.
- vi. ensuring that no money is transferred into reserves each financial year without prior agreement with him/herself.
- vii. ensuring compliance with the reserves policy and governance procedures relating to requests from the strategic priority and general corporate reserves.

4.3 All reserves are reviewed as part of the monitoring process, the budget preparation, financial management and closing of accounts processes. Cabinet is presented with the monitoring of reserves on a regular basis and in the outturn report. The County Council budget meeting will receive a separate S25 assurance report from the S151 Officer including recommendation on the adequacy of reserves, and the appendices to the main budget report will include an assessment of financial resilience including the extent to which reserves have been drawn down. The Governance and Audit Committee will consider actual reserves when approving the statement of accounts each year.

4.4 The following rules apply:

- Any in year use of the General Reserve will need to be approved by Cabinet and any planned use will be part of the budget setting process.
- In considering the use of reserves, there will be no or minimal impairment to the Council's financial resilience unless there is no alternative.

4.5 The Council will review the Reserves Policy on an annual basis.