

Statement on the Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Revenue Reserves

1. Introduction

1.1 There are a range of safeguards in place to help prevent local authorities over-committing themselves financially. These include:

- the balanced budget requirement (England, Scotland and Wales) (sections 32, 43 and 93 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992)
- the chief finance officer's duty to report on robustness of estimates and adequacy of reserves (under section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003) when the authority is considering its budget requirement (England and Wales)
- legislative requirements for each local authority to make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and that the chief finance officer (CFO) / proper officer has responsibility for the administration of those affairs (section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972)
- the requirements of the Prudential Code
- auditors' consideration of whether audited bodies have established adequate arrangements to ensure that their financial position is soundly based, in the context of auditors' statutory responsibility to satisfy themselves that the body has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (the value for money conclusion).

1.2 These requirements are reinforced by section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 which requires the CFO in England and Wales to report to all the authority's councillors, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, if (in broad terms) there is or is likely to be unlawful expenditure or an unbalanced budget.

Local Government Act 2003

1.3 The 2003 Local Government Act places specific responsibilities on Chief Finance Officers in England and Wales. The Act requires the CFO to report on the robustness of the budget and the adequacy of proposed financial reserves. This statement meets this statutory requirement and **the Council is required to have regard to this report when it sets the budget.**

2. Robustness of Estimates

2.1 In terms of the robustness of the estimates, all known factors have been considered and the financial implications have been assessed at the point of preparation. Various budget assumptions have been made including the treatment of inflation and interest rates, estimates on the level and timing of capital receipts, the treatment of demand-led pressures, the treatment of planned efficiency savings/productivity gains and levels of income, financial risks inherent in any new arrangements and capital developments and the availability of funds to deal with major contingencies and the need for any provisions. In each of these areas the Council's financial standing, management and track record has been considered in order to prepare robust budget proposals.

- 2.2 In addition to the continuation of the embedded budget procedures above, all Service areas have considered where there is the potential for variances caused by the impacts of coronavirus. These areas have been considered separately to the main estimates to assist forecasting for central government and to reflect any budget pressure as a short-term impact that may return to base levels in future years. This piece of work has identified only one area where income levels are expected to remain significantly below pre-pandemic levels (car parking income).
- 2.3 The draft budget has been prepared in conjunction with the Heads of Service and individual business unit managers. The savings / additional income were proposed by / agreed with the relevant Head of Service / business unit manager and all relevant officers have been fully consulted in the estimates now presented to the Cabinet.
- 2.4 I have discussed the estimates with my Accountancy staff to the extent that I deem necessary. The processes followed are sound, well-established and identical to those that have produced robust estimates in the past. The Council has also demonstrated that it has a sound system of internal control in place. I am therefore satisfied that the draft budgets are sufficient to meet the expenditure commitments, of which I have been made aware, for next year and are adequate for the purpose of setting the council tax rate for 2022/23. Subject to some important reservations listed in paragraph 2.5 below, a reasonable degree of assurance can be given about the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of reserves.
- 2.5 The exceptions relate to the provision of estimates for items outside the direct control of the Council:
- Income from fees and charges, especially those affected by coronavirus such as car parking.
 - Income from grants provided by external funders.
 - Demand for an increased level of existing services.
 - External competition and changing markets, e.g. commercial rents.
 - Macro-economic factors - Changes in interest rates have a major impact on the investment returns expected. Inflation is at its highest level in a decade and continuing to increase.
 - The impact of changes in Government funding.
 - The impact of local business rates retention – It is nearly nine years since the new scheme was introduced and monitoring its effect is still proving to be a challenge. The rates income is volatile and can fluctuate significantly in year as it is influenced by changes in the business rates base, business rates relief, losses on collection and losses due to appeals - many of which go back a number of years. There is the possibility that the locally retained share of business rate income may increase to 75% in exchange for as yet unidentified new responsibilities.
 - The ongoing impact of coronavirus on Council services and the level of support provided by central government to limit the impact on local budgets.

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In view of these uncertainties, it will be important for the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee to maintain a diligent budget monitoring regime during 2022/23.

3. Adequacy of Revenue Reserves

3.1 Reserves are an integral part of the annual and medium term financial planning process and are held for two main purposes:

- A working balance (known as the General Fund balance) to help cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and minimise unnecessary temporary borrowing, and
- A means of building up funds to meet known or predicted liabilities. These are known as earmarked reserves.

In addition, the Council builds a small contingency into its budget each year to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies. For 2022/23 an additional sum has been recommended to enable the Council to respond to increased pressures arising from the current high levels of inflation.

3.2 Taking into account the revenue draws that are shown in the budget forecast for 2021/22, 2022/23 and over the remainder of the medium term plan, there will be an estimated General Fund balance at the end of 2022/23 of £2.6M. I consider that, given my comments in the previous section on the robustness of the estimates and the uncertainties surrounding the next three-year period, this represents a prudent minimum level of working balances.

3.3 I have also reviewed the Council's estimated earmarked reserves to assess their adequacy and appropriateness over the medium term. It is clear that if these reserves are to fulfil their purpose, i.e. to meet known or predicted liabilities, then the amount held in them must be sufficient to meet these liabilities.

3.4 The Council currently has a range of earmarked revenue reserves with balances and projected balances as follows:

<i>Earmarked Revenue Reserves:</i>	At 31/3/21 £000s	At 31/3/25 £000s
<u>Equalisation Reserves</u>		
a) Investment Equalisation Reserve	250	300
b) Budget Equalisation Reserve	682	290
c) Income Equalisation Reserve	300	300
d) Pension Fund Equalisation Reserve	500	500
e) Collection Fund Equalisation Reserve	9,255	4,445
Total – Equalisation Reserves	10,987	5,885
<u>Other Earmarked Revenue Reserves</u>		
f) New Homes Bonus	8,375	10,082
g) Developer Commuted Sums	6,541	8,000
h) Capacity Building Reserve	230	160
i) Rejuvenation Projects Reserve	1,135	1,620
j) Special Projects Reserve	227	171
k) Asset Management Plan	3,222	0

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l) Local Development Framework	574	0
m) All Risks Self-Insurance Reserve	93	100
n) Enterprise and Innovation Reserve	315	0
o) Valley Housing Ltd. Reserve	250	100
p) Housing Reserve	526	0
q) Chantry Centre Planned Maintenance Reserve	1,225	0
r) COVID grants carried forward from 2020/21	564	0
s) Other Earmarked Reserves	616	0
Total – Other Earmarked Revenue Reserves	23,893	20,233
Total:	34,880	26,118

- 3.5 The Council has faced severe financial challenges in recent years. Support from the Government has reduced as Revenue Support Grant has been phased out. This has been compounded by the impacts of coronavirus which, whilst recovering, continue to affect financial planning into the medium term.
- 3.6 The government has again deferred the re-set of the business rates baseline which leads to significant uncertainty in budget planning. This has helped enable a balanced budget to be set for the coming year, but only adds to the risk of all accumulated growth since 2013 being lost in a full re-set of the rates system.
- 3.7 In assessing Councils' core spending power, the assumptions made by government have changed to a position where maximum council tax increases are presumed to preserve spending power. Further, 2022/23 is likely to be the last year in which any payment under the New Homes Bonus scheme will be made.
- 3.8 Some of the earmarked reserves above have been specifically established to help with the transition period, and all of the "equalisation" reserves will be available to smooth the impact of volatility from key income streams and spending reductions over the medium term. In particular the Collection Fund Equalisation Reserve is intended to support any major loss of income that is sustained from a re-set of the business rates baseline.
- 3.9 Other earmarked reserves, such as the Asset Management Plan reserve and the Chantry Centre Planned Maintenance reserve also have an important role to play as they have been set up to ensure that the Council has adequate financing available for planned maintenance and renewal of assets.
- 3.10 The balance of the New Homes Bonus will continue to be important to the Council, not only as a source of financing for the Community Asset and Revenue Funds, but also for financing other appropriate community-based schemes in the Capital Programme.
- 3.11 I am satisfied that the earmarked revenue reserves are adequate for their particular purposes, but given the uncertainties highlighted in paragraph 2.5, there is little room for manoeuvre. With this in mind, I have to emphasise the importance of:

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- achieving all of the savings options put forward for 2022/23
- continuing with the systematic review of all budget areas ahead of the next Budget Strategy and Medium Term Financial Forecast
- seizing procurement and capital investment opportunities
- generating new income streams through Project Enterprise
- exploring different ways of working, in particular taking advantage of the opportunities presented by more agile working
- keeping financial forecasts up-to-date in order to plan and adapt to changing circumstances, and
- maintaining firm budgetary control and effective monitoring processes.

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