

Chief Financial Officers' Opinion on Adequacy of Balances and the Robustness of the Budget

The Chief Financial Officer is required to make a statement on the adequacy of reserves and the robustness of the budget. This is a statutory duty under section 25 of the 2003 Local Government Act which states the following:

(1) Where an authority to which section 32 or 43 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (billing or major Precepting authority) or section 85 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 (c. 29) (Greater London Authority) applies is making calculations in accordance with that section, the chief finance officer of the authority must report to it on the following matters-

(a) The robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the calculations, and

(b) The adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.

(2) An authority to which a report under this section is made shall have regard to the report when making decisions about the calculations in connection with which it is made.

Summary Report of the Strategic Director of Resources and Support Services (as Chief Finance Officer for the Authority)

I have examined the budget proposals contained in this report, and believe that whilst the spending and service delivery proposals contained are challenging, they are nevertheless achievable. I am satisfied that, in general, the requisite management processes exist within the Council to deliver this budget, and to identify and deal with any problems which may unexpectedly arise throughout the year.

The key points to highlight are:

- General Reserves are now at a prudent level and have been maintained at or above this level by sound financial management, in fact they have recently been enhanced principally by the Spa settlement and through substantially resolving other matters previously covered by the exceptional risk reserve.
- This budget creates some specific new reserves to deal with the Council's priorities and improve the management of its resources
- Sound financial planning processes are in place, the Corporate Plan is used to prioritise and there is member scrutiny at each key stage
- Revenue spend is closely monitored on a monthly basis and integrated finance and performance management reports are produced

- Capital schemes are managed through a tightly controlled and integrated project management, risk and financial management process
- The risks associated with the exceptional risk reserve, the Spa and Single Status have now been substantially resolved
- The intense external pressures on public finances create a climate of decreasing budgets and this has already begun to impact and will need to be closely managed.
- There is a need to use invest to save approaches to enable the Council to maintain its spend within acceptable parameters and to achieve requisite efficiencies.

The corporate and medium term service and resource plans rely on the delivery of strategies and action plans within individual services and it will continue to be necessary to continue to give a high priority to the monitoring and review of these plans in the performance management processes of the Council.

The level of exposure and commitment in our capital programme in the coming years remains challenging. Solid monitoring, review and programming of schemes will need to continue, as will individual project management processes. Where projects form part of partnership arrangements, satisfactory partnership governance arrangements will need to be in place.

On the matter of general reserves, I have continued to evidence the requisite level by use of internal risk assessment. The 2010/11 recurring budget contains no reliance on the use of unallocated reserves.

The Council is maintaining its general reserves at the appropriate risk assessed level. As a result it is possible to consider use of some of these reserves (above a minimum level) on either an Invest to Save and /or Invest to Avoid basis under the parameters and criteria set out in Appendix 2.

In view of the challenging financial climate ahead, it remains essential that reserves are maintained at the risk assessed target level in 2010/11 and the foreseeable future, the only prudent exceptions being to fund invest to save schemes (provided a minimum level is maintained) and to enable exceptional risks or contingencies to be funded where no other funding is available

It will be essential in the event of any exceptional use of reserves for the Council to continue to put in place arrangements in future years' budgets to recover the level of reserves within 3 years which will place more pressure on revenue and capital budgets.

From 2001/2, the Council adopted a risk management approach, which assesses the level of reserves required against a corporate assessment of the risk being carried. The assessed risk suggests reserves of £10.5M, excluding the provisions made through earmarked reserves.

My recommendation that the budget is reasonably robust and general reserves are adequate is on the basis that the Council and the Cabinet:

- Recognise the need to continue to regularly review the level of reserves in the light of the regularly updated corporate risk assessment
- Recognise that in any use of reserves to fund 'one-off' corporate priorities on an invest to save or invest to avoid basis, the council needs to be clear that the overall level of reserves remains adequate and that the relevant business cases for such expenditure are fully scrutinised and monitored appropriately.
- Recognise that where there is a draw down on risk assessed reserves taking them below the prudent level, for whatever reason, this is paid for within 3 years.
- Maintain a rigorous approach to financial monitoring by ensuring a continued focus risk, particularly at this time when income streams continue to be affected by the recession and budgets are generally being cut back to make them affordable.
- Ensures that capital schemes are funded prudently and do not rely excessively on revenue funding not create unaffordable revenue consequences including maintenance and other running costs
- Maintain a prudent approach to budgeting for capital receipts, given current market conditions and the need to optimise value over the medium term.
- Maintain a rigorous corporate approach to the scrutiny of inflation provisions and ensure that any over-provision is 'clawed back' to assist in funding 'one-off' corporate priorities and/or future years' expected budget gaps.
- The Cabinet Members, Strategic Directors and Assistant Directors achieve their cash limits for 2010/11.

Processes

Budget estimates are exactly that - estimates of spending and income made at a point in time. This statement about the robustness of estimates cannot give a guarantee about the budget but gives members reasonable assurances that the budget has been based on the best available information and assumptions available at the time. The budget process aims to set challenging budgets while recognising the risk of this within its reserves strategy.

In order to meet the requirement on the robustness of estimates a number of key processes have been put in place, including:

- The issuing of clear guidance to Directorates on preparing budgets.

- The development of Council wide risk assessment.
- The continuing use of budget monitoring and financial outturn information to identify risks.
- The Council's s151 Officer and his staff providing advice throughout the process of budget preparation and budget monitoring.
- The Directors' review of the robustness of their budgets and budget sensitivities.

Notwithstanding these arrangements, which are designed to test the budget throughout its various stages of development, considerable reliance is placed on the Strategic Directors and Divisional Directors having proper arrangements in place to identify issues, project costs, service demands, to consider value for money and efficiency, and to implement changes in their service plans. This is supported by appropriately qualified financial advisors.

Corporate and departmental processes will continue to be improved in future years. Recent experience indicates that improvement needs to be greatest in relation to Customer Services where there are inherent risks associated with the large income budgets such as for parking and where there are large management contracts such as for highways.

Robustness of Estimates

The 2010/11 budget and service and resource planning process continue the need to link financial resources to corporate priorities and risks. There are complex and difficult choices for the Council:

- To realise necessary efficiencies – the Government target being 4% next year
- To increase financial resources to meet demand and reduce risk; or
- To reduce where necessary service levels and standards, frequency of service delivery, and eligibility for services.
- To ensure all resourcing decisions reflect statutory and other external requirements, as well as council priorities

As part of developing the budget, Members of the administration have considered these options and they are reflected in the proposed budget.

Most notably the Council has had to address major cost increases, and pressures and corrections to budgets as well as corporate priorities including;

- Priorities as set out in the revised Corporate Plan
- Pensions – potentially significant increases in contribution requirements
- Low levels of interest rates

- Waste Strategy/Concessionary Fares
- Demand and price pressures in Adult Social Care
- Demand and price pressures in Children's Social Care
- Varied pressures from income shortfall's in Customer Service's budgets
- Uncertainty in relation to capital receipts
- Backlog of highways maintenance
- Continued reduction by Government of external general revenue grant as a result of the continued application of 'damping rules'.

The assumptions used for 2010/11 and potentially changing circumstances will require the forecasts for future years to be reviewed early in each financial year leading to more detailed budgets being prepared for the next financial year and the medium term during the autumn of each financial year.

Given all these factors I, as the Council's Section 151 Officer, consider the estimates for 2010/11 to be sufficiently robust, and the reserves adequate, to be recommended for approval by the Council.

Over the medium term, the service and resource plans reflect the continuing impact of only growth in relation to issues that are unavoidable. Within the increasingly tight financial climate over the medium term it is very likely that service improvement and reasonable Council Tax levels, without key service reductions, will only be achieved through improving efficiency, by very difference ways of working, and clear prioritisation.

The Capital Budget

Projects, formally included in the capital programme (i.e. excluding 'italics' items'), were prepared by Divisional Directors and managers in line with financial regulations and guidance. All projects were agreed by the relevant Strategic Director and Cabinet Member and are fully funded, and reviewed through the Project Initiation and Delivery Group.

Projects have been costed at outturn prices with many subject to tender process after inclusion in the programme. This may lead to variance in the final cost.

Directorates are required to work within the given cash envelope so any under or over provision must be found within these limits.

In addition, I will require a clear commitment from the Council to:

- Minimise future commitments on the capital programme except where there is a prudent source of funding and also where investment will lead to savings.

- Carefully consider and balance the use of capital receipts to ensure they are prudently applied to help the council manage its resources effectively and achieve its priorities
- Review capital commitments in light of any future changes to Central Government support for capital projects the Building Schools for the Future and Bath Transport Package schemes being the most prominent examples of those dependant on substantial Government funding.

The Council is advised to be cautious about these risks and commit to restoring any draw down on general reserves within a 3 year period.

In these circumstances, I will require the Council, Strategic Directors and Divisional Directors:

- To remain within their service budget for 2010/11 and to commence early work to identify options to balance medium term service and resource plans for future years while maintaining strict adherence to recovering overspends within future years' plans (i.e. services will need to absorb any overspends, pressures over the medium term).
- Repayment to reserves over 3 years should risks materialise, and need to be funded temporarily from reserves.

Estimated Available Revenue Reserves

Earmarked Revenue Reserves

A review of the Council's earmarked revenue reserves has been undertaken in reaching a position on the overall level of reserves.

Non-Earmarked (General) Revenue Reserves

Detailed in the table below is the estimated level of non-earmarked revenue reserves that will be available to support the General Fund revenue budget in future years, reflecting the specific elements within the Budget as set out in Appendix 2.

Projected Non-Earmarked Revenue Reserves

	2010/11 £'000	2011/12 £'000	2012/13 £'000
Estimated Reserves @ 1st April each year	18,920	10,480	10,480
Provision for 2009/2010 Projected Outturn Overspending	-370	-	-
Transfer to Revenue Budget Contingency	-570	-	-
Transfer to Customer Services Cash Limit – Highways Maintenance	-500	-	-
Transfer to Affordable Housing and Capital Development earmarked reserve	-3,000	-	-
Transfer to Restructuring Reserve	-2,000	-	-
Transfer to Medium Term Financial Challenge Reserve	-2,000	-	-
Estimated Reserves @ 31st March each year	10,480	10,480	10,480

Assessment of Adequacy of Reserves

Under the Local Government 2003 Act the Secretary of State has reserve powers to set a minimum level of reserves. The most likely use of this power is where an authority is running down its reserves against the advice of their s151 Officer.

Determining the appropriate levels of reserves is not a precise science or a formula e.g. a %age of the Council's budget. It is the Council's safety net for risks, unforeseen or other circumstances and must last the lifetime of the Council unless contributions are made from future years' revenue budgets. The minimum level of balances cannot be judged merely against the current risks facing the Council as these can and will change over time.

Determining the appropriate levels of reserves is a professional judgement based on local circumstances including the overall budget size, risks, robustness of budgets, major initiatives being undertaken, budget assumptions, other earmarked reserves and provisions, and the Council's track record in budget management. This judgement is subject to monthly review as an integral part of the Council's financial reporting cycle, and annual review by full Council as an integral part of budget-setting and 3 year financial planning.

Clearly, as circumstances change, the currently recommended level of reserves can be expected to change.

The consequences of not keeping a minimum prudent level of reserves can be serious. In the event of a major problem or a series of events, the Council would run a serious risk of a deficit or of being forced to cut spending during the year in a damaging and arbitrary way.

The recommendation on the prudent level of reserves has been based on the robustness of estimate information and the Corporate Risk Register. In addition, the other strategic, operational and financial risks taken into account when recommending the minimum level of unallocated General Fund reserves include:

- There is always some degree of uncertainty over whether the full effects of any economy measures and/or service reductions will be achieved. Directors have been requested to be prudent in their assumptions and have clear action plans to deliver such savings.
- The Bellwin Scheme Emergency Financial Assistance to Local Authorities provides assistance in the event of an emergency. The Local Authority is able to claim assistance with the cost of dealing with an emergency over and above a threshold set by the Government.
- The extent to which the Council is dependent on traded income.
- The risk of major litigation, both current and in the future.
- Risks in the inter-relation between the NHS and Social Service authorities and in the growth of other partnerships.
- Unplanned volume increases in major demand led budgets, particularly in the context of high and accelerating growth.
- The need to retain a general contingency to provide for any unforeseen circumstances or emergencies, which may arise.
- The need to retain reserves for general day-to-day cash flow needs.

The recommendations of the Council's s151 Officer are:

- That the Council continues to maintain an absolute minimum prudent level of General Fund reserves (excluding schools) of £6m at the end of any financial year, in addition to the specific earmarked reserves. The minimum level is designed to cope with risk and unforeseen circumstances that cannot be addressed by management or policy action within the year. Management and policy action should be the first actions taken before any resort to reserves.
- That an appropriate level of general fund reserves to provide resilience against day to day risks is £10.5m. This level of reserves is designed to

allow the Council to withstand a measure of changes in circumstances during the year or minor variations in projected resources or spending over the period of the medium term service and resource plans.

- That the Council must restore reserves used to meet risks that crystallise within a period of 3 years.