

POLICY ON BALANCES AND RESERVES

1.0 BACKGROUND:

- 1.1 Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 requires the Council's S151 Officer (Chief Financial Officer – Director of Finance) to report to Members on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the reserves for which the budget provides.
- 1.2 The purpose of this Annex is to:-
- support the statement required to conform to Section 25
 - confirm the use of the Council's balances and reserves, and
 - re-affirm the Council's policy on the level of balances and reserves
- 1.3 The Council currently maintains a number of balances and reserves, each of which has a purpose approved by Members. Each of the balances and reserves will be considered in turn later in this Annex.
- 1.4 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) considers that a case for introducing a statutory minimum level of reserves, even in exceptional circumstances has not been made. The Institute believes that Local Authorities, on the advice of their Finance Directors, should make their own judgements on such matters taking into account all the relevant local circumstances. Such circumstances vary and there is a broad range within which authorities might reasonably operate depending on their particular circumstances.
- 1.5 There is no definitive guidance as to the minimum level of balances or reserves, either as an absolute amount or as a proportion of expenditure, since each Local Authority is independent, operates in a unique local environment and the decision is one of a number of inter-related decisions taken as part of its Financial Strategy. Section 32 of the Local Government Act 1992 requires billing authorities (such as Hambleton) to have regard to the level of reserves needed for meeting estimated future expenditure when calculating the budget requirement. Budgets are based upon forecasts of pay and price inflation, changes in interest rates, and the demand for and levels of service to be provided. The purpose of balances and reserves is to provide for unexpected changes from these forecasts and to provide for the financing of some expenditure. Consequently the provision of an appropriate level of balances and reserves is a fundamental part of prudent financial management over the medium term.

2.0 BALANCES AND RESERVES:

- 2.1 Each of the Council's balances and reserves is considered below.
- 2.2 General Fund Working Balance
- 2.2.1 Setting the level of this general reserve is just one of several related decisions in the formulation of the medium-term financial strategy and the budget for a particular year. Account should be taken of the key financial assumptions underpinning the budget alongside a consideration of the authority's financial management arrangements. In addition to the cash flow requirements of the authority the following factors should be considered:-

Budget Assumptions

- treatment of inflation
- interest rates
- treatment of demand led pressures (e.g. take-up of housing benefits)
- levels of income
- financial risks inherent in significant funding partnerships
- the availability of other funds to deal with emergencies
- estimates of the level of and timing and capital receipts, S106 monies and general cashflows

Financial Standing and Management

- the overall financial standing of the authority
- the authority's track record in budget and financial management
- the capacity to manage in-year budget pressures
- the strength of financial information and reporting arrangements
- the authority's financial procedure rules and budgetary flexibility
- the adequacy of insurance arrangements to cover major unforeseen risks

Adequacy of inflation

- 2.2.2 Budgetary provision is made for inflation in respect of pay, prices and contract expenditure. The 2017/18 budget contains a sum of £126,600 for such inflation. An adverse variance of 1% in the assumptions made to these forms of expenditure could result in additional expenditure of £100,980.

Adequacy of interest rate assumption

- 2.2.3 Interest rate assumption are reported in the Treasury Management Strategy Statement. Interest rate assumptions are made for both borrowing and investments. The Council can borrow for its capital expenditure programme if required and also the Council's surplus funds are available for investment. The Council intends to use its surplus funds for the majority of the capital programme but will potentially borrow for the loan to the third party Housing Association. Interest rates are historically low and also volatile in the current market environment, therefore borrowing rates range between 1.6% and 3.0% during 2017/18 depending on the time period. Surplus funds have reduced due to their use in the support for the capital programme and therefore income generated will be lower. The amount under investment is sensitive to changes in interest rates especially given the short-term nature (less than 1 year) of most of the investment activity and the need to retain some cash liquidity for day to day purposes. The interest rate market environment remains at historically low levels with Bank Rate at 0.25%. The 2017/18 budget assumes an average of 0.19% over the year. An adverse variance on interest rates to zero i.e. 0% or below would affect investment income, whereby no interest would be earned. This would be borne by the Council Taxpayers Reserve.

Treatment of demand led pressures

- 2.2.4 Demand volatility can affect both expenditure (e.g. take up of Housing Benefits) and income (eg number of planning applications). Housing Benefit is a significant item of expenditure estimated at £17.86m in 2017/18. The Localised Council Tax Support Scheme presents a particular risk to the Council's reserves position, increases in Council Tax support claimants in year will be funded by the Council, subsidy at a reduced rate will not be received until the following year. If payments increase by 1% the cash flow implications would be in the order of £178,600.

Levels of income

2.2.5 The major income budgets (for fees and charges) in 2017/18 are those relating to:-

	£
Leisure Services	2,689,330
Development Control	797,250
Premises Development	734,860
Parking Charges	725,480
Local Taxation	205,710
Markets	174,750
Licensing	156,690
Land Charges	104,570
Environmental Services	115,430
Planning Services	56,730
Waste Collection	104,890
Recycling	567,210

Total income from fees and charges is budgeted to be £5.654m in 2017/18. The economy is clearly still experiencing difficulties at the moment and recovery continues to be volatile. A moderate fall in demand of say 3% would lead to a reduction in income of about £169,625.

External Partnerships

2.2.6 Members are aware that the Council acts as the 'Accountable Body' for a number of partnerships. With the potential for these to grow in number the financial exposure increases, however it is felt that a contingency to deal with this is not required as there is sufficient funds in reserves.

Responding to emergencies

2.2.7 Examples of emergencies in the past include flooding and the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. As a Local Authority the Council can in certain cases gain financial protection from the Government's Bellwin Scheme, which was available for the recent December 2015 floods. However, this only reimburses 85% of eligible expenditure above a specified threshold. If further resources were required, it is felt that there are sufficient funds in reserves to cover these requirements.

Capital financing and general cashflows

2.2.8 The Council maintains a Capital Programme which is supported by external funding, on-going capital receipts, reserves and external borrowing. The timing of such receipts rarely matches the expenditure profile, often lagging by months.

2.2.9 Similarly the timing of the Council's income, principally from Council Tax and Business Rate income, does not always match the Council's outgoings (mainly salaries, capital and precept payments). This is particularly the case in February and March when income from Council Tax and Business Rates reduces significantly as the normal instalments cease.

2.2.10 Consequently it is necessary to maintain a large amount for cash flow purposes, thereby reducing the need to frequently draw back funds. A sum of £1,000,000 is recommended for this purpose.

2.2.11 On this basis it would appear that a General Fund Working Balance of around £2,000,000 is required. ***It is recommended that the Council maintain a sum of £2,000,000 as its General Fund Working Balance.*** A level of £2m equates to approximately 4.5% of the Council's gross annual budget requirement. This combined with the Council's internal financial controls should ensure the authority recognises financial 'issues' early and has the capacity to respond accordingly.

2.3 Council Taxpayers Reserve

2.3.1 The purpose of this reserve is currently "To support revenue spending on community projects and on enhancing service delivery". ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Council Taxpayers Reserve is maintained.***

2.3.2 The level of the reserve is considered as part of every review of the Financial Strategy, and needs to be sufficient to fulfil its purpose over the life of the Strategy. Clearly over time the level of the reserve will diminish. However, in order for the Council Taxpayer to receive the maximum benefit from the reserve, this should be in a structured and considered way in accordance with expectations of the level of Council Tax assumed in the Financial Strategy.

2.4 Repairs and Renewals Fund

2.4.1 The purpose of this reserve is "To provide revenue and capital support to assist funding of the repairs and renewals". ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Repairs and Renewals Fund is maintained.***

2.4.2 The reserve was established from what was the Capital Fund with monies added to it from the Council Tax Payers Reserve. The reserve will be maintained for the duration of the Financial Strategy.

2.5 Computer Fund

2.5.1 The purpose of this reserve is "To provide revenue and capital support to assist funding of computer related purchases". ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Computer Fund is maintained.***

2.5.2 The reserve was established from monies transferred from the Council Tax Payers Reserve. ***It is recommended that the reserve will be maintained for the duration of the Financial Strategy.***

2.6 Community Safety Partnership Reserve

2.6.1 The purpose of this reserve is currently "To receive surpluses and deficits from the Community Safety Partnership Accounts". ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Community Safety Partnership Reserve is maintained.***

2.6.2 The reserve is kept as good accounting practice and is not expected to have a significant balance in it.

2.7 One-Off Fund

2.7.1 The purpose of this reserve is “To improve or sustain service delivery”. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the One-Off Fund is maintained.***

2.7.2 This reserve is maintained to provide funding for service improvements or unexpected events. It incorporates the former Revenue Efficiency Reserve, Shared Service Efficiency Reserve and the Cyclical Payments Reserve. It is recommended therefore that the minimum balance on this Reserve be kept at £200,000. This is considered adequate, and is sustainable within the current Financial Strategy. In normal circumstances, however, the level of the fund could be substantially higher than this.

2.8 Strategic Forum Reserve

2.8.1 The purpose of this reserve is currently “To bring together members of the public, private, voluntary and community sectors to take forward priorities of the districts identified in the Sustainable Community Strategy”. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Strategic Forum Reserve is maintained.***

2.8.2 The reserve is kept as good accounting practice and is not expected to have a significant balance in it.

2.9 Grants Fund

2.9.1 The purpose of this reserve is currently “To fund revenue grants to organisations on an annual basis”. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Grants Fund is maintained.***

2.9.2 The level of the fund was initially established to provide for three years funding, and will therefore have a reducing balance over the period. It is expected that the fund will run low in funds by 2018/19 and therefore a review will be needed before this time.

2.10 Economic Development Fund

2.10.1 The purpose of this reserve is “To fund initiatives that support and encourage economic growth and stability in Hambleton”. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Economic Development Fund is maintained.***

2.10.2 This fund was established in 2014/15 with a balance of £5,000,000. It is anticipated that this funding will last 5 years with the anticipation that financing will be returned to the fund from projects that have been beneficial to the community.

2.11 Take That Step

2.11.1 The purpose of this reserve is to assist with a Lifestyle Referral service by GPs, for patients where a healthy lifestyle would improve their physical or mental condition. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Grants Fund is maintained.***

2.13 Winter Weather Campaign

2.13.1 The purpose of this reserve is to assist with the advice and guidance relating to the issues of cold winter weather. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Grants Fund is maintained.***

2.14 Make a Difference Fund

2.14.1 The purpose of this reserve is to invest in worthy local community projects which help improve life in neighbourhoods and support the work of the voluntary sector. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Make a Difference Fund is maintained.***

2.15 Arts Grant Reserve

2.15.1 The purpose of this reserve is to fund arts development projects for the benefit of the community. ***It is recommended that the purpose of the Arts Grant Reserve is maintained.***

3.0 LEVEL OF BALANCES AND RESERVES:

3.1 The use of balances and reserves is a critical feature in the Council's approach to financial management. They enable Council Tax to be maintained at low levels, support the Capital Programme and deliver service improvements.

3.2 It is considered important therefore that the level of balances is monitored to ensure that adequate levels are maintained to fulfil their purpose. To a large extent this is done through the Financial Strategy and also targets have been established where each Reserve has a year-end balance which is within a 10% tolerance of the balance reflected in the Council's financial strategy. Performance against the target will continue to be reported to Members as part of the year end procedures.

3.3 Experience has shown, however, that due to the nature of receipts and payments into and out of the One Off Fund, it is not possible to accurately forecast the level of this reserve at the year end. A more appropriate target for this reserve would be to ensure that a minimum balance is retained.

3.4 ***It is recommended that the targets for Reserve balances are:***

- a) A minimum balance for the One-Off Fund of £200,000; and***
- b) For all other Reserves, within a 10% tolerance on the year-end balance as reflected in the Financial Strategy.***