

Reserves Strategy 2025-26

Background

The requirement for financial reserves is acknowledged in statute. Sections 32 and 43 of the Local Government Act require Precepting Authorities (and Billing Authorities) in England and Wales to have regard to the level of reserves needed for meeting estimated future expenditure when calculating the budget requirement.

In England and Wales, earmarked reserves remain legally part of the General Fund, although they are accounted for separately.

There are other safeguards in place that help to prevent local authorities over committing themselves financially. These include:

- The balanced budget requirement (Local Government Act 1992 s32 and s43).
- Chief Finance Officers duty to report on the robustness of estimates and adequacy of reserves (Local Government Act 2003 s25) when the Council is considering the budget requirement.
- Legislative requirement for each council to make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and that the Chief Finance Officer has responsibility for the administration of those affairs (section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972).
- The requirements of the Prudential Code.
- External Auditors will consider whether audited bodies have established adequate arrangements to ensure that their financial position is soundly based.

These requirements are reinforced by section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, which requires the Chief Finance Officer to report to the Council if there is likely to be unlawful expenditure or an unbalanced budget. This would include situations where reserves have become seriously depleted, and it is forecast that the Council will not have the resources to meet its expenditure in a particular financial year. The issue of a section 114 notice cannot be taken lightly and has serious operational implications. Indeed, the Council must consider the s114 notice within 21 days and during that period the Council is prohibited from entering into new agreements involving the incurring of expenditure.

Whilst it is primarily the responsibility of the Council and its Chief Finance Officer to maintain a sound financial position, external auditors will, as part of their wider responsibilities, consider whether audited bodies have established adequate arrangements to ensure that their financial position is soundly based. However, it is not the responsibility of auditors to prescribe the optimum or minimum level of reserves for individual authorities in general.

CIPFA's Prudential Code requires the Chief Finance Officers to have full regard to affordability when making recommendations about the Council's future capital programme. Such consideration includes the level of long-term revenue commitments.

Indeed, in considering the affordability of its capital plans, the Council is required to consider all of the resources available to it and estimated for the future, together with the totality of its capital plans and revenue forecasts for the forthcoming year and the following two years. There is a requirement for three-year revenue forecasts across the public sector and this is achieved through the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

CIPFA and the Local Authority Accounting Panel do not accept that there is a case for introducing a generally acceptable minimum level of reserves. Councils, on the advice of their Chief Finance Officers, should make their own judgements on such matters considering all relevant local circumstances. Such circumstances will vary between local areas. A well-managed organisation, for example, with a prudent approach to budgeting should be able to operate with a level of general reserves appropriate for the risks (both internal and external) to which it is exposed. In assessing the appropriate level of reserves, a well-managed organisation will ensure that the reserves are not only adequate, but also are necessary.

Section 26 of the Local Government Act 2003 gives Ministers in England and Wales a general power to set a minimum level of reserves for authorities.

However, the government has undertaken to apply this only to individual authorities in the circumstances where the authority does not act prudently, disregards the advice of its Chief Finance Officer and is heading for serious financial difficulty.

National Context

The UK's economy still faces several uncertainties, risks and challenges as a result of significant increases in inflation and overall cost of living.

The Autumn Statement on 30th October 2024 set out headline figures with further detail expected in the finance settlement, which is expected in December. There is still uncertainty over the total funding available for the local government sector from 2026-27, but the Government have signalled a reform to the approach to funding allocations within the Local Government Finance Settlement from 2026/27 by redistributing funding to ensure that it reflects an up-to-date assessment of need and local revenues. These changes could be significant, and it will make forecasting for 2026-27 difficult, however there are proposals for a multi-year settlement from 2026-27 which should provide more certainty for the sector.

Types of Reserve

The Councils reserves fall under two main categories, Useable reserves and Unusable reserves. Usable reserves include reserves held for specific reasons that are included within the Medium-Term Financial Plan and a working balance to cover unexpected events and to meet forthcoming events where the precise event, date and amount required cannot accurately be predicted. In addition, the Council is required to hold non-cash backed reserves, Unusable Reserves to adhere to proper accounting

requirements when preparing its annual Statement of Accounts. Reserves falling into these two main categories are explored in more detail below:

- **Useable Reserves**
 - General Reserves and Minimum Level of Reserves
 - Earmarked Reserves
 - Earmarked Reserves – Capital

- **Unusable Reserves**
 - Non-Cash Backed Reserves for Statement of Accounts

General Reserves & Minimum Level of Reserves

The Council will hold a general reserve which sets out the minimum amount of reserves the council is required to hold for the following purposes:

- To meet forthcoming events where the precise date and amount required cannot be accurately predicted.
- A contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies.
- A reasonable amount to meet peaks and troughs in revenue and capital expenditure requirements.
- A working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing.
- The general reserves which include a minimum level of reserves to support the level the assessed level of risk.

The level of reserves will continue to be reviewed until the final budget proposals for approval by Council in February.

Earmarked Reserves

The Council will hold earmarked reserves for the following purposes:

- A means of building up funds often referred to as earmarked reserves, to meet known or predicted requirements; earmarked reserves are accounted for separately but remain legally part of the General Fund.
- To mitigate specific risks in relation to the economic climate and the safety of the Council's financial assets. This would link closely with the Treasury Management and Prudential Code Strategy.
- To meet forthcoming capital expenditure needs where major capital schemes are being planned and the reserve will be utilised to reduce the cost of borrowing and capital charges to the revenue account.
- To meet smaller projects where expenditure is only met from this reserve, and which meets specific policy requirements.

Earmarked Reserves – Capital

The Council will hold a number of reserves specifically for Investment. These are detailed below:

- The Capital Receipts Reserve, this holds the proceeds from the sale of assets and can only be used for capital purposes in accordance with the regulations.
- The Major Repairs Reserve, this is a technical accounting reserve. is restricted to being applied to new capital investment in Housing Revenue Account.
- The Capital Grants Reserves, this holds grants where the conditions of the grant have been met but the grant has not yet been applied to fund capital expenditure. This reserve can only be used for capital purposes in accordance with the regulations.

Non-Cash Backed Reserves for Statement of Accounts

The Council also holds other reserves that arise out of the interaction of legislation and proper accounting practice. These reserves are technical in nature and are not cash-backed and cannot be used for any other purpose, there are detailed below:

- The **Revaluation Reserve** – this is a reserve that records unrealised gains in the value of fixed assets. The reserve increases when assets are revalued upwards and decreases as assets are depreciated or revalued downwards or disposed of.
- The **Capital Adjustment Account** – this is a specific accounting mechanism used to reconcile the different rates at which assets are depreciated under proper accounting practice and are financed through the capital controls system.
- The **Pensions Reserve** – this is a specific accounting mechanism used to reconcile the payments made for the year to various statutory pension schemes.
- **Accumulated Absences Account** – this account represents the value of outstanding annual leave and time off in lieu as at 31st March each year.
- **Collection Fund Adjustment account** – this is specific to the changes in accounting entries relating to the Collection Fund Accounts held by Billing Authorities.
- The **Financial Instruments Adjustment Reserve** – this is a specific accounting mechanism used to reconcile the different rates at which gains and losses (such as premiums on the early repayment of debt) are recognised under proper accounting practice and are required by statute to be met from the General Fund.
- The **Available-for-Sale Financial Instruments Reserve** – this is a reserve that records unrealised revaluation gains arising from holding available-for-sale

investments, plus any unrealised losses that have not arisen from impairment of the assets.

- The **Unequal Pay Back Pay Account** – this is a specific accounting mechanism used to reconcile the different rates at which payments in relation to compensation for previous unequal pay are recognised under proper accounting practice and are required by statute to be met from the general fund. Currently none.

Other such reserves may be created in future where developments in local authority accounting result in timing differences between the recognition of income and expenditure under proper accounting practice and under statute or regulation.

North Northamptonshire Council's Reserves

This document aims to provide an over-arching strategy that defines the boundaries within which the approved budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) operate.

The General Reserve & Minimum Level of Reserves has previously been established that these will be maintained at a level above a minimum of 5.0% of the total net revenue budget for the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account.

The purpose of this reserve is to provide for any unexpected expenditure that cannot be managed within existing budgets. Such expenditure would be one-off and resulting from an extraordinary event.

Similarly, the General Reserve should be set at a prudent and not excessive level, as holding a high level of reserves can impact on resources and performance. As such the maximum level of General Reserves is set at 10.0% of the total net revenue budget.

Authorisation to finance such expenditure must be obtained in advance from the Council's Chief Finance Officer, in accordance with the scheme of delegation.

The request should be supported by a business case unless there is clear and necessary reason for urgency.

As the net budget position changes and risks are reviewed the level of General Reserve must be monitored to ensure that a minimum level is maintained.

Appendix A provides a comparison of North Northamptonshire's general and earmarked reserves to other similar sized unitary councils.

North Northamptonshire Council's Earmarked Reserves

Unlike General Reserves earmarked reserves have been identified for specific areas of expenditure where there are anticipated costs that can only be estimated. It is therefore prudent for the Council to identify such areas of expenditure and set aside amounts that limit future risk exposure.

APPENDIX D

Such expenditure usually arises out of changes in policy or where the organisation is working in collaboration with others to provide a specific service.

Expenditure relating to earmarked reserves has to specifically relate to the purpose of the reserve. There is no set limit to an earmarked reserve as it is to reflect the level of need required.

Appendix B details for each of the earmarked reserves the forecast balances for North Northamptonshire Council in 2025-26 financial year and estimated commitments against these reserves over the medium term.

Protocols for Establishing and Reviewing Earmarked Reserves

For each earmarked reserve held by the Council there is a clear protocol set out, as follows:

- The reason for/purpose of the reserve.
- How and when the reserve can be used.
- Procedures for the reserves management and control.
- A process and timescale for review of the reserve to ensure continuing relevance and adequacy.

When establishing reserves, the Council needs to ensure compliance with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting and in particular the need to distinguish between reserves and provisions. It will also need to pay due regard to the Council's Constitution and Financial Regulations.

When reviewing the Medium-Term Financial Plan, preparing the annual budgets and during the end of year accounts process the Council should consider the establishment and maintenance of reserves.

Procedure for Use of Reserves

The use of reserves requires approval of the Council's Chief Finance Officer. All requests should be supported by a business case unless there is an approved process for use. On occasion where an urgent request is being made this should comply with the Council's Constitution and Financial Regulations.

Monitoring

The level of reserves is kept under continuous review. The Chief Finance Officer reports on the levels of reserves as part of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy updates together with the Reserves Strategy as part of the budget setting and outturn reports.

APPENDIX D

The current level of forecast reserves is not significant and if called upon will impact negatively on the financial viability and resilience of the Council. Reserves and their usage are carefully planned for and monitored throughout the year.

Risk Analysis

Any recommendations that change the planned use of reserves reported within the Annual Budget and Outturn Reports will take account of the need for operational service delivery of the Council balanced against the need to retain prudent levels of reserves.

However, there are significant risks, which affect the level of reserves to be maintained, and it is for this reason that a minimum level of 5% of total net revenue budget has been set for the General Reserve.

The significant risks that have been considered, but which will also be kept under review and are outlined in the main budget report and within the S25 opinion.

STRATEGY REVIEW

This strategy will be reviewed annually as part of the budget process. During the year changes may occur in the MTFs, which affect this strategy. Such changes will be monitored by the Chief Finance Officer and reported through the financial reporting process.

Claire Edwards

Executive Director of Finance (S151 Officer)

APPENDIX A

Comparison of North Northamptonshire's general and earmarked reserves to other similar sized councils and groups of councils.

	Population	Net Revenue Budget	Unallocated Reserves	Earmarked Reserves	% Unallocated Reserves as proportion of Net Revenue Budget	% Earmarked Reserves as proportion of Net Revenue Budget
		£000	£000	£000		
Total England		73,349,044	4,640,326	20,453,272	6.30%	27.90%
Total Unitary		15,457,293	1,000,424	4,100,232	6.50%	26.50%
Selected Unitary Councils						
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	404,050	343,937	11,934	57,757	3.50%	16.80%
Cheshire East	412,458	381,143	2,100	0	0.60%	0.00%
Dorset	384,809	394,966	23,393	153,328	5.90%	38.80%
Cheshire West and Chester	365,061	361,207	26,901	59,006	7.40%	16.30%
East Riding of Yorkshire	350,119	334,342	11,000	49,809	3.30%	14.90%
Northumberland	327,055	402,053	50,955	73,584	12.70%	18.30%
North Northamptonshire	367,991	400,686	23,426	102,641	5.85%	25.61%

Source: [Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2024 to 2025 budget individual local authority data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2024-to-2025-budget-individual-local-authority-data)

Appendix B

General Fund Reserves	Forecast Balance* March 2025 £'000	Transfer to Reserve 2025-26 £'000	Transfer from Reserve 2025-26 £'000	Forecast Balance March 2026 £'000	Purpose of Reserve
General Fund	(23,426)	0	0	(23,426)	To meet forthcoming events where the precise date and amount required cannot be accurately predicted, including sufficient contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies, a reasonable amount to meet peaks and troughs in revenue and capital expenditure requirements and a working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing.
Total General Reserves and Minimum Level of Reserves	(23,426)	0	0	(23,426)	
Smoothing Reserves	(34,025)	(150)	3,619	(30,556)	To provide protection in relations to fluctuations in income, cost or demand
Business Rates Retention Reserves	(28,005)	0	0	(28,005)	To manage smoothing and timing effects of business rates.
Building Maintenance Reserves	(1,831)	0	0	(1,831)	To manage property repairs and maintenance issues.
Planning Reserves	(506)	0	0	(506)	To provide resources for revenue costs of the planning service to meet items such as legal costs, specialist advisors or consultants and other costs required to meet statutory guidelines or regulations.
Regeneration Reserves	(7,140)	0	100	(7,040)	To provide resources for the Council's planning service, assist with the Council's economic development strategy, provide funding for other one-off projects and to assist with the operation of the Council's asset management plan including funds for community Projects
Capital Reserves - General Fund	(10,844)	0	0	(10,844)	To provide resources in support of capital programme development.
Insurance Reserves	(2,695)	0	0	(2,695)	Reserve based on actuarial assessment of Insurance Fund.
Total Non-Specific Earmarked Reserves	(85,046)	(150)	3,719	(81,477)	

Specific Reserves					
Burton Wold Reserve	(119)	0	0	(119)	The reserve has been created from contributions from the developers of the Burton Wold Wind Farm Project. The Council uses this contribution to award grants for energy efficiency and education works.
Capacity Fund Reserve	(1,516)	0	0	(1,516)	To provide resources to fund future expenditure associated with the Joint Delivery Unit, funded by external capacity funding.
Public Health Reserve	(11,005)	0	0	(11,005)	General Reserve comprising unspent Public Health grant to be to utilise in future years.
Adult Social Care Reserve	(2,534)	0	0	(2,534)	To mitigate risks related to the delivery of Adult Social Care.
Local Council Tax Support	(500)	0	0	(500)	To mitigate risks related to increases in Local Council tax Support claims.
Waste Management Reserves	(2,302)	0	0	(2,302)	To mitigate waste management risks.
Transformation Reserves	(2,857)	0	298	(2,559)	Reserve to support continued delivery of transformation activities and costs associated with Local Government Re-organisation.
Other Earmarked Reserves	(629)	0	0	(629)	Various other earmarked reserves.
Total Specific / Other Reserves	(21,462)	0	298	(21,164)	
Total Earmarked Reserves	(106,508)	(150)	4,017	(102,641)	
Total General Fund Reserves	(129,934)	(150)	4,017	(126,067)	

*Balances subject to audit.