

Appendix 6

Minimum Level of Reserves Review

Background Information

It is particularly pertinent when there are significant challenges to councils' budgets and when Central Government funding is falling at an exceptional rate, to consider how this risk is being mitigated and how exposed the Council is to adhoc events, risks and pressures.

With this in mind, the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) requested a review of reserves and for the minimum acceptable level of General Reserves to be challenged to establish whether it is appropriate and to benchmark against other councils to see how we compare and whether we are over-exposed to risk.

Approach and Methodology

Reserves are reviewed by this Council on an annual basis to give assurance that they are appropriate and adequate. Due to the constraints on the Council's budget it is not possible to mitigate every eventuality and it would be imprudent to set aside funds simply as a percentage of net expenditure "just in case" without any further scrutiny. With the current challenges associated with setting a balanced budget, earmarking reserves is an important exercise and each year a review is done to challenge the levels and intended use of these reserves. In some cases, earmarked reserves are deemed to be no longer required/too high and are returned to general reserves.

In order to arrive at an appropriate level for General Reserves (GF), various publications were reviewed and the Council was benchmarked against its nearest neighbours in terms of size, demography, Business Rates (NDR) value per head etc.*.

- LAAP Bulletin 99 Local Authority Reserves and Balances
- CIPFA Stats Nearest Neighbours Model*
- Audit Commission "Striking a Balance" Questionnaire
- CIPFA Delivering Good Governance in Local Government
- Financial Diagnostic Report - LGA

Mitigating Risk – General Reserves

The CIPFA LAAP Bulletin says "When reviewing their medium term financial plans and preparing their annual budgets, local authorities should consider the establishment and maintenance of reserves. These can be held for three main purposes:

- A working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cashflows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing – this forms part of general reserves
- A contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies – this forms part of general reserves.

- A means of building up funds to meet known or predicted requirements – via earmarked reserves (legally part of the General Fund).

As part of the review of the adequacy of the general reserves balance, it is prudent to consider the particular risks that the Council faces and how these are mitigated by earmarked reserves and other mechanisms.

There are a number of general risks which are relevant to all or most councils and for the most part are mitigated by a robust approach to budget setting within the MTFP. These include inflation and interest rates; the timing of capital receipts; demand led pressures; the delivery of efficiency savings; the availability of Government grants and general funding; and the general financial climate. These risks are considered at every stage of the budget setting process and the experience of the S151 Officer and senior finance officers will be fundamental in identifying and addressing the pressures relating to these risks.

An indicator of the risks particular to the Council is the Risk Register. This captures those risks which need to be managed and monitored as they can potentially have a very detrimental effect on the financial or reputational standing of the Council. We have therefore used the Council's risk register as the starting point for the risk matrix.

Quantifying the Financial Risk

The risk-based assessment gave a range of appropriate "minimum" general reserves levels as £1.7m to £2.2m. With consideration to the Council's challenges in setting a balanced budget it is considered that the level currently held in General Reserves is adequate and it would not be necessary to increase this amount in line with an arbitrary percentage.

Striking a Balance Questionnaire

The Audit Commission's (though now defunct) questionnaire is a good aide memoire to highlight the areas a Council should consider when assessing the minimum level of reserves. It also draws on benchmarking to establish how other councils mitigate their risks. This questionnaire and the CIPFA stats Nearest Neighbour Model were used to benchmark against 12 other councils which have similar attributes. The average minimum level of general reserves for the 13 councils for which budget levels were available, was 8.73% as opposed to the 18.74% that Mid Devon Council currently holds. It was also significant that Mid Devon's level of Earmarked Reserves stand at 124.57% of Net Expenditure which is the highest of the 13 councils included. This should give assurance over our ability to mitigate risks without having to over-inflate our General Reserves level,

Conclusion and Next Steps

The risk assessment and Audit Commission questionnaire are useful tools in establishing Mid Devon's minimum level of general reserves. This must be caveated with the assertion that if the Council relies on reserves to address a budget gap it will be immediately exposed to a heightened risk if it does not remain above the minimum level.

With reference to the analysis that has been undertaken and with attention to the risks that the Council faces and its limited ability to mitigate risk, a recommendation is made to adjust the minimum level of reserves to £2m.