

Reserves Strategy 2021-26

Introduction



Councillor Peter Butlin
Deputy Leader and Portfolio
Holder for Finance and
Property

I am delighted to be able to endorse this reserves strategy. It provides a clear framework for making sure the ‘rainy-day’ money we hold is effectively managed to meet the financial risks and uncertainties we face whilst enabling us to hold less overall and providing capacity for investing in the delivery of the Council Plan.

It faces head-on Members’ concerns about the number of reserves, the amount of money tied up and the lack of clarity about how specific financial risks are being managed. Most importantly it supports the building of a common understanding that balances ensuring we remain a financially resilient authority with identifying whether resources could be released for investment in the objectives we are working towards.



Rob Powell
Strategic Director for
Resources

Part of my role, as Strategic Director for Resources and the Council’s s151 officer, is to report on the adequacy of the Authority’s financial reserves and that they are sufficient to ensure the Authority remains financially sustainable and resilient over the medium-term.

This reserves strategy sets out why effective management of reserves is important, how we make decisions about the level of reserves to hold and how our approach enables us to deliver on this.

Our approach will be a success if across the Council it is understood that the money we have in reserves is proportionate to the risks and uncertainties we face, promotes financial resilience and is actively managed to identify where one-off resources that can be invested in support of our outcomes and key objectives.

Section 1: The Purpose of our Reserves Strategy

What are Reserves?

Reserves are revenue resources we have accumulated over time and set aside for a particular purpose as part of an integrated approach to the financial management of the Authority over the short, medium and long-term.

What is a Reserves Strategy?

A reserves strategy sets out the choices we make in relation to the level and purposes for which we hold the reserves we have accumulated. It is made up of three key elements:

1. Our strategic intent – what we are seeking to achieve through holding reserves;
2. Our programme – the level of reserves we hold and our plans for their use over the period of the 2021-26 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS); and
3. Our framework – the way we will determine the level of reserves we need, manage those reserves and plan for their use in line with best practice and statutory requirements.

Together these elements set out our ambition for reserves, the nature of that ambition and how we provide assurance.

Why do we need a Reserves Strategy?

We plan over the short term and medium term how we will use the resources we are allocated and raise to deliver services for and to the residents and communities of Warwickshire. As a large, complex organisation there will always be variations between our actual spending/income and our plans due to variations in demand, demographic change, changes in costs and funding decisions of third parties as well as needing to deliver projects and investments spanning more than one financial year.

To ensure we can manage these financial risks whilst being able to maintain services requires that the Authority holds funds in reserve to meet these costs as and when they arrive. A reserves strategy enables us to do this in a planned way.

How does it fit with our other strategies?

The reserves strategy is part of a suite of supporting strategies that supplement the 2021-26 Council Plan and MTFS. All the supporting strategies are aligned to the Council Plan and MTFS and provide an additional level of granularity that help create a bridge between the high-level over-arching plan and operational delivery. As such it forms part of a collective accountability framework for the management of the Authority's financial resources.

Maintaining the current high standards of financial management across the organisation is critical to the successful delivery of the 2021-26 Council Plan and MTFS. Any weakening of financial management has a direct impact on the level of reserves needed to offset the risk of services overspending and/or the non-delivery of savings targets. The central role in the management of the Authority's reserves lies with Strategic Directors, both individually and collectively, with support and advice from Finance.

Section 2: Our Reserves

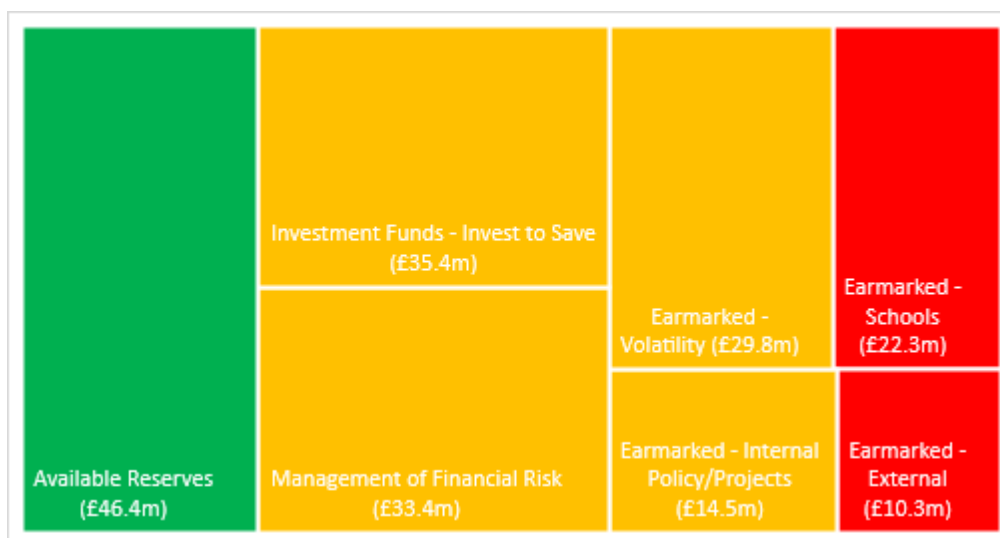
Our drivers for holding reserves are to:

- a) Manage financial risk so that the risk materialising does not undermine the Authority's overall financial position or impact on service delivery;
- b) Plan for the effective use of project resources over time;
- c) Ensure we meet funding conditions in our use of any available resources; and
- d) Retain any other accumulated underspends prior to decisions on their use.

We will always need to retain reserves for each of these reasons. All reserves that do not fall into categories a) to c) automatically fall into category d).

Our reserves are forecast to be £192.1 million at the end of 2020/21. We are holding the £192.1m for the following reasons:

- a) £63.2 million to manage financial risk, including volatility;
- b) £49.9 million for investment in projects to drive forward the delivery of the Council's objectives;
- c) £32.6 million to meet externally set funding conditions; and
- d) £46.4 million available for investing to pump-prime the delivery of the Council's key objectives



Key	
Not available for use	
To be reviewed on an annual basis	
Available for investment	

Section 3: Our Reserves Framework

The Reserves Framework sets out our accountability and governance arrangements around the retention and use of reserves. In doing so it balances speed of decision-making with Member oversight and accountability for decisions about the effective use of the Council's resources.

Guiding principles for managing and using Reserves

Our guiding principles for managing and using reserves are:

- The primary purpose is to manage financial risk and promote financial sustainability.
- Subject to meeting this requirement we will:
 - Maximise the ability to use reserves flexibly to deliver the organisation's priorities;
 - Control the amount of scarce resources held in reserves; and
 - Hold reserves at a corporate/directorate level unless there is a business/technical reason for not doing so.
- The planned use of reserves will be agreed as part of the annual budget setting and medium-term financial planning process. Other than in exceptional circumstances the planned use of reserves is only expected to change in year as a result of:
 - Change projects approved by Corporate Board/Members; and
 - Adjustments to reflect the impact of the previous year's outturn that were not known at the time the budget for the year was agreed.
- Service risk reserves will be held at Directorate level to manage in-year financial risk and to cover any over/underspends across the Directorate at the end of the year.
- All reserves will be subject to a year-end review to ensure the reason for holding the reserve and the plans for its use aligns with the MTFS and this strategy.
- Reporting on each reserve and seeking approval for any variations or to create a new reserve will form part of the quarterly monitoring report to Corporate Board and Cabinet.

Year-end review of reserves

All reserves will be subject to a year-end review by the relevant Strategic Directors in conjunction with the Assistant Director - Finance. At the end of each financial year for each reserve a delivery plan will be prepared that sets out:

- Plans for use of the reserve including sunset clauses/closure dates
- Benefits to be delivered from the investment
- Without an approved delivery plan in place a reserve cannot be accessed

The outcome of this review will be a report to Cabinet in June each year seeking approval for further use of reserves in the current financial year and to identify where there are additional reserves to support the MTFS roll-forward.

Management of Financial Risk - Corporate

- Level of reserve set by the Strategic Director for Resources (as Section 151 officer) as the minimum amount required, based their assessment of the financial risks facing the organisation and the extent to which these are covered elsewhere
- Allocations approved by full Council based on a recommendation from Cabinet or the Strategic Director for Resources
- Any approved use to be replenished up to the minimum level as part of setting the Council's budget for the following financial year

Management of Financial Risk - Directorate

- To manage in-year financial variations e.g. fluctuations in demand, financial risks associated with the delivery of the savings plan and to manage any overspend
- Maximum of 3% of the Directorate net revenue budget
- Held at Directorate level with the Strategic Director accountable
- Decisions and proposals reported to Cabinet as part of the outturn report each year with any use replenished as part of setting the Directorate's financial planning for the following financial year

Volatility

- To manage areas of spending where cost in any one year is variable and unpredictable but where annual fluctuations are averaged out over the medium-term
- The continued need for and level of all volatility funds will be subject to an annual review. Held at both Directorate and Corporate level with accountability at Assistant Director level
- In-year governance arrangements approved by the Strategic Director as part of the Council's scheme of delegation

Earmarked

- To manage external funding received for specific purposes where the decisions on how the funding is used is not wholly within the control of the Council
- Held at Service level with accountability at Assistant Director level
- Governance arrangements agreed as part of the approval process for setting up the reserve, but will be determined by the requirements of the individual ring-fence

Investment Funds

- Funds set up to provide pump-priming investment to deliver on the Council's key objectives
- Held at Service level with accountability at Assistant Director level
- Governance arrangements agreed as part of the approval process for the investment if the project plan is to straddle more than one financial year
- All Investment Fund reserves expected to be time-limited and subject to annual review