

8

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Strategy and Resources Committee
27 November 2024

Reserves and Funds

Report of the Treasurer

For further information about this report please contact James Walton, Treasurer, on 01743 258915, or Joanne Coadey, Head of Finance, on 01743 260215.

1. Executive Summary

This report sets out the issues, which the Fire Authority will need to consider as part of its annual review of reserves and funds.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to propose to the Fire Authority that it confirms the current position of its reserves and funds.

3. Background

The current position on the Authority's provisions, reserves and funds is as follows:

	£000
Reserves	
General Reserve	577
Extreme Incidents Reserve	219
Pension Liabilities and Other Staff Issues	2,059
Capital – Earmarked	0
– Major Projects	8,939
Information and Communications Technology Reserve	529
Income Volatility Reserve	687
Service Transformation Programme Staff Reserve	816
Service Delivery Reserve	9
Operational Equipment Reserve	266
Training Reserve	190
Building Maintenance Reserve	450

Reserves Total

14,741

The Authority's policy is to:

- Make provision for known and quantifiable future expenditure;
- Establish reserves for specific known and potentially significant future expenditure, which cannot be precisely quantified or scheduled;
- Establish a general reserve for known risks, which cannot be easily quantified or scheduled but could be pooled;
- Review the provisions and reserves during the budget process (the purpose of this report) and on closing the accounts;
- Consider the opportunity cost of holding reserves and balances against the opportunity cost of either lower tax demands or alternative service delivery, and consequently also hold no monies in the General Fund, unless agreed to enhance future budgets.

4. Establishment of Reserves

The level of reserves that the Authority holds has been driven by the following principles:

To fund major projects, thereby avoiding debt charges into the long term

The Authority has used reserves successfully in recent years to fund its capital programme, most notably the fire station, workshop and headquarters in Shrewsbury, and elements of the major refurbishment at Telford. The Major Projects reserve and the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) reserve will continue to be used to fund the capital programme into the medium term, with any one-off savings identified used to replace funds.

To fund unexpected and undetermined expenditure that cannot be met by a reducing revenue budget

The General Reserve will cover unexpected occurrences that the Authority would not wish to budget for on a regular basis; in addition, the ICT reserve would be used to cover additional costs that were not anticipated.

To support revenue expenditure and smooth out fluctuations in the revenue budget

A number of reserves have been created to address and support some areas of the revenue budget, and reviews are currently being carried out to identify smarter use of the Authority's resources. Some examples are given below.

- The Pensions reserve will be used to fund transfers into the Pension Account, when operational staff retire on ill-health grounds. This has resulted in a significant reduction to pension revenue budgets.
- The New Equipment, Training, Building Maintenance and Extreme Incidents reserves have all been created to enable reductions to revenue budgets.

The assurance that reserves are available for unexpected and exceptional costs will allow officers to budget at lower activity levels with confidence. The Equipment reserve has been used successfully to cover additional requests that could not be covered with regular budgets.

These reserves will act as enablers to reduce the revenue budget, close any future budget deficit modelled in the planning period, and safeguard the service delivered to the people of Shropshire.

5. General Reserve

The General Reserve meets known risks that are difficult to quantify or schedule. The Authority does not wish to take tax revenue, which may never be needed, and, therefore, holds an unearmarked amount of money for unexpected risks and events. The reserve stands at £577,000, which represents around 2% of gross expenditure, and may be used for events such as those listed below:

Financial Risks – cashflow; changes to national purchasing;

Operational Risks – vehicle accidents; uninsurable health & safety risks; fines from uninsurable offences; other uninsurable risks;

Strategic Risks – new legislation; fines from corporate manslaughter.

A current example of the potential use of this reserve is unexpected additional pay costs due to a change in legislation.

6. Earmarked Reserves

a) Extreme Incidents Reserve

This reserve is in place to deal with extreme weather conditions and unanticipated future activity, which may not be containable within the revenue budgets.

b) Pension Liabilities and Other Staff Issues Reserve

The purpose of this reserve is to meet one-off contributions, required by the Government, to the Pensions Account for sickness retirements. Until 2015/16, only ill health contributions over and above those budgeted in revenue were funded from the reserve. However, as part of the 2020 consultation outcomes, all ill health contributions are funded from the reserve, and the revenue account has been reduced accordingly.

The scope of this reserve was widened to include the potential liabilities arising from the part-time workers employment tribunal case; compensation payable to retained firefighters for terms and conditions has been met from the reserve.

Another small element of this reserve is to provide for staff issues relating to equality and diversity. Provision has been made for expenditure for reasonable adjustments and mediation, in order that

these issues are not budgeted for on an annual basis.

The Authority has enjoyed very low levels of ill health retirements, although provision still has to be made for instances in future years. In addition the Modified Pension Scheme has now been introduced with no one off costs anticipated. It was considered prudent during the reserves review to reduce this reserve while still maintaining a buffer for future costs.

A number of senior officers left or resigned from the Service during 2023/24, and further potential changes were likely during 2024/25. A sum of £1.382m was transferred from the General Fund was transferred to the Pensions and Other Staff Issues Reserve, to mitigate the impact of future employment liabilities.

c) Earmarked Capital Reserve

This reserve is to fund elements of the capital programme, thereby reducing debt charges into the future.

The reserve is now fully depleted and future capital schemes will be funded from revenue, Major Projects Reserve, or borrowing.

d) Capital – Major Projects Reserve

The objective of this reserve was to build up funding from revenue savings that could then be used to maximise major capital schemes. The objective is to minimise borrowing and, therefore, committed debt charges in future years. This reserve will be used towards some of the the funding of major improvements at the Telford site.

Budgeted surpluses on the revenue budget have been allocated to this reserve, as well as budgeted contributions where required.

The Authority is now in a position where borrowing is required; the timing of this will be decided in consultation with our Treasury Services provider. It has been determined that calculations of the minimum revenue provision are most efficient when based on the Telford scheme, due to its 40 year asset life. Therefore, some of this reserve will fund the capital programme as a whole, with borrowing costs based on the Telford project.

e) ICT Reserve

This reserve is designed to ensure that ICT improvements and resilience issues are managed and funded in a clear and consistent manner. The reserve may also be used to fund ICT capital projects.

f) Service Transformation Programme Staff Reserve

The original Service Transformation Programme (STP) was established in 2012 and was based on activities that were assessed as delivering a sustainable service to the community into the future. Central to the programme was the continued investment in technology and systems to improve back-office efficiency and provide operations with technology to

improve service delivery.

Funding for projects will be taken into account in the revenue budget and the capital programme, and this reserve covers the staff elements of the projects. It continues to fund transformational staffing costs, including those relating to the Fire Alliance with Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service.

g) Income Volatility Reserve

This reserve was set up to smooth any volatility or fluctuations in the funding received against estimates in the Medium Term Corporate Plan.

At the end of 2019/20, £450,000 was added to the Income Volatility Reserve, due to the uncertainty of Covid 19 on the Authority's income streams. This was not required, however the increased pressures from pay and inflation may require reserves funding as the revenue budget is built up.

h) Service Delivery Reserve

This reserve was set up to fund initiatives in service delivery and prevention, to avoid irregular movement in the revenue budget.

i) Training Reserve

This reserve was created to enable additional training and development to be carried out, without adding additional pressure to the revenue budget.

j) New Operational Equipment Reserve

This reserve has been established to help provide some stability in the revenue budget in this area. Where a need for new equipment is identified, contributions can be made from the reserve, and any ongoing requirements for the equipment can be established. In the meantime, officers can continue to analyse and manage revenue expenditure, leading to realistic budget setting in future years. The Equipment reserve has been used successfully to cover additional requests that could not be covered with regular budgets.

k) Building Maintenance Reserve

The revenue budget in this area is used to fund preventative or controlled maintenance in line with the Authority's Asset Management Plan, and also covers unexpected reactive maintenance. It is proposed that the revenue budget is used for regular planned maintenance of buildings, and that a reserve is created to deal with exceptional, unexpected repairs, that do not require a regular revenue budget.

7. General Fund

The General Fund is simply the net balance of over and underspendings during the year. The Authority's policy is not to accumulate funds year on year (and obviously to deal with any potential overspend). The balance in the General Fund at 1 April 2024 was £2.560m (subject to audit completion) and

the Fire Authority agreed to hold £57,000 back for protection and prevention activities. The balance of the General Fund (£2.503m) has been allocated to the following reserves:

- £1,000,000 to Major Projects Reserve
- £121,000 to General Reserve
- £1,382,000 to Pensions and Other Staff Issues Reserve

This allocation was approved by the Fire Authority at its June meeting, subject to audit completion.

8. Capacity

Whilst future capacity impacts are referenced, there are no issues arising from this report.

9. Fire Alliance / Collaboration / Partnership Working

There are no comments relating to this report.

10. Financial Implications

The financial implications are as outlined in the report.

11. Legal Comment

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

12. Appendix

There are no appendices to this report.

13. Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.

