

STATEMENT OF THE SECTION 151 OFFICER UNDER THE REQUIREMENTS OF SECTION 25 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2003

ROBUSTNESS OF BUDGET ESTIMATES AND ADEQUACY OF THE RESERVES - at November 16, 2006,

1 Introduction

This Annex focuses on the two responsibilities under the Local Government Act 2003 for the Council's S151 Officer to report to Members on:

- the robustness of estimates, sections 4-6; and
- the adequacy of reserves, section 7.

This Annex builds on the statements made in setting the 2006-07 budgets. It will be further updated, for the full Council at its budget setting meeting in February 2007.

2 Processes

Budget estimates are exactly that, estimates of spending and income made at a point in time. This statement about the robustness of estimates cannot give a guaranteed assurance about the budget, but gives members reasonable assurances that the budget has been based on the best available information and assumptions.

In order to meet the requirement on the robustness of estimates a number of key processes have, or will be, put into place, including:

- the issuing of clear guidance to Business Areas on preparing budgets;
- Work is currently underway with Business Areas to pilot the budget and Risk Registers with Business Areas and to refine the approach;
- peer review by finance staff involved in preparing the standstill [base] budget i.e. the existing budget plus inflation;
- the use of budget monitoring in 2006-07 in order to re-align budgets with current demand, for 2007-08;
- a new medium term planning process that highlights priority services;
- a review via Corporate Management Board of proposed savings and their achievability;
- a member review and challenge of each Business Areas proposals for the budget
- review of the budget by the Leader, which is the responsible Executive Member for the budget;
- the Chief Financial Officer providing advice throughout the process on robustness, including vacancy factors, increments, avoiding unallocated savings and reflecting current demand and service standards (unless

standards and eligibility are to be changed through a change in policy);
and

- Strategic Managers reporting on the robustness of estimates to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and subsequent scrutiny by that Committee.

Notwithstanding these arrangements which are designed to test the budget throughout its various stage of development, considerable reliance is placed on the Strategic Managers having proper arrangements in place to identify issues, project demand data, and consider value for money and efficiency.

A key part of improving these processes is to develop data and information to monitoring service volume and unit costs and tracking changes in both. This will also assist in the Council's Medium Term Planning.

3 Risk Registers

Finance are to undertake and provide a formal Risk Register of the Revenue, and Capital budgets at an appropriate level compared to the risks.

The development and introduction of these Risk Registers is not intended to replace the Council's existing Risk Register, rather that they should inform any revision of the Council Risk Register.

Capital Programme and Revenue Budget Risk Registers – by Business Areas, will be completed and approved by Business Area Management Teams by March 2007 following the final determination of both the Capital Programme and the Revenue Budgets for 2007-08.

The Risk Registers are intended to form part of the 2007-08 and onward Budgetary Control framework and used at Budgetary Control meetings with Business Area personnel and reviewed at least quarterly by Business Area Management Teams (BAMTs).

4 Robustness of Revenue Estimates

The 2007-08 budget process continues the trend of improving the Council's budget preparation, most notably in the £XXmillion of budget re-alignment where current demand exceeds existing resources. In addition to improving efficiency, there are clearly choices for the Council in this respect:

- to increase financial resources to meet the demand and reduce the risk of overspending in 2006-07; or
- to reduce (where possible) service levels and standards, frequency of service delivery, eligibility for services and reduce the risk of overspending in 2006-07.

As part of developing the budget, members of the administration have considered these options and they are reflected in the proposed budget.

A small number of budgets have also been re-based to ensure they reflect the withdrawal of grant income or income withdrawn from the Formula Spending Share which will in future be funded from grants.

The table below shows the factors taken into account in developing the draft budget.

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
<p>1. The treatment of demand led pressures</p>	<p>Four major demand factors affect the 2007-08 and later years budgets. They are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay and Rewards – a recasting of the basis of pay is in negotiation. The modelling will not be completed until January 2007, with firm financial results available in June/July 2007. The first payment is planned to be made in September 2007, albeit backdated to April 2007. The advice is that such exercises add 3-5% to the paybill. Therefore an estimate has to be included. For planning purposes, the mid-range 4% has been used. • NWLL – the arms length leisure trust is experiencing trading difficulties, and has approached the Council for more support in 2006-07. The current prognosis is that further support will be required in 2007-08 and 2008-09. For planning purposes additional budget, to the base subsidy, has been included in those years. • Management re-structure. This exercise commenced in November, • Other pressures – the level of budget correction is to be finalised. An most significant of problem to emerge concerns VAT and a possible liability of £50k a year. <p>All Strategic Managers have reviewed their base budgets including demand led pressures. Business Areas are expected to put forward management and policy actions to manage the additional demand within the relevant legislation either within the relevant budget or reprioritising within their Business Areas budgets. If this is not possible, and under-spending management action or policy actions in other Business Areas are not sufficient to cover the additional demand, then the minimum level of reserves may have to be used to address the additional expenditure temporarily.</p> <p>Such an eventuality has been considered in future years' budgets and it is assumed that general fund reserves are restored to at least the minimum prudent level in the following year.</p> <p>The 2007-08 budget has been based upon budget monitoring and projections made by Strategic Managers of demand in future years.</p>
<p>2. The treatment of inflation and interest rates.</p>	<p>Pay - 4.00% has been provided in the 2007-08 budget for the pay award for staff, with 2.75% for the following years. The current assumption is that there is no net increase in the paybill due to increments – this is to be tested.</p> <p>The 2006-07 employers pension contributions is at 26.1%. No increase is required for 2007-08. A revaluation will be undertaken in 2007-08, to take effect from April 2008. For planning purposes an increase of 1.0% per annum has been assumed for 2008-09 and 2009-10.</p> <p>The current vacancy factor [VF] built into the 2006-07 budget is 3%, which is broadly in line with that 'naturally' achieved. This excludes any areas where teams are so small as to make a vacancy factor impractical.</p> <p>Price inflation has been provided as follows:</p>

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management					
		2007-08	2008-09	2009-10		
	Transport	3%	3%	3%		
	Supplies & Services	2%	2%	2%		
	Premises	3%	3%	3%		
	Other Income	3%	3%	3%		
	Government funding	actual	2.5%	2.5%		
	Council Tax	3%	3%	3%		
	Council Tax base	actual	220 D's?	Band	220 D's?	
	OR					
	<p>Price inflation has only been provided on contractually or quasi-contractually committed budgets either at 2% or the rate stated in the relevant agreement.</p> <p>Interest rates for 2007-08 have been assumed at V% for temporary investment and E% for any borrowing. The effect of each 1% change in interest rates is approximately £0.XXXm for interest on balances (estimated average balances during the year).</p>					
3. Estimates of the level and timing of capital receipts.	<p>See Section 6.</p> <p>However, the budget proposals for 2007-08 are that the balance of £Z.zzzm will be kept in reserve in order to generate additional interest on the 'debt-financing' budget. This will help to support the Council's revenue expenditure.</p>					
4 The treatment of income	<p>LABGI – this Government reward, for increasing the Business base at a quicker rate than predicted, is announced in late January, with two further updates, being finalised in June 2007. The lateness hinders sensible financial planning. The existing MTFP assumed £245k in 2007-08 and nothing in the following years. The 2007-08 amount is part covered by £200k of funds received in 2006-07, that was above the budget assumption (£472k was received but only £270k taken into the 2006-07 budget). The scheme for 2007-08 has been loosened to pass more funds to those who qualify. The planning assumption remains unchanged at £245k in 2007-08 and nothing in the following years.</p> <p>Parking – the restructure of car parking charges would increase the income of the Council. Were the current free first hour to be charged at 10p, it would raise £90k in a full year.</p> <p>Toilets – ways to reduce the net cost will be explored</p> <p>Other income – an annual uprating, to take account of inflation, is expected to increase other income by 3% overall (see 2 above).</p>					
5. The treatment of efficiency savings/ productivity gains.	<p>All Strategic Managers have a responsibility to ensure the efficient delivery of services and when efficiency savings are proposed that those savings are both realistic in terms of the level of savings and timing. Should the level and timing of such savings vary due to unforeseen events and under-spending, management action or policy actions within the relevant Business Area and corporately, are not sufficient to cover the variation, then the minimum level of reserves may have to be used to address the additional expenditure temporarily.</p> <p>Such an eventuality has been considered in future years' budgets and it is assumed that general fund reserves will be restored to at least the minimum prudent level in the following year.</p>					
6. The financial risks	The sharing of risk is in accordance with the principle of the risks being					

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management																								
inherent in any significant new funding partnerships, major outsourcing deals or major capital developments	<p>borne by the party best placed to manage that risk. Inherent risks include any guarantee or variation of service throughput (service volumes). If risks materialise the expectation is that such an eventuality will be considered in future years' budgets and general fund reserves restored to at least the minimum prudent level.</p> <p>Grants – the level of Grants and the contractual arrangements that underlie the partnership, should be reviewed.</p>																								
7. The availability of other funds to deal with major contingencies	<p>The minimum level of reserves assumes that management and policy actions will be taken to address major contingencies. Should these be insufficient, the minimum level of reserves may have to be used temporarily and restored to at least their minimum prudent level or the optimal level through future budgets.</p> <p>The major risk facing the Council is North Wilts Leisure Limited, of which level of exposure is being investigated.</p> <p>There remain outstanding Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy claims for £XX, for which there is a reserve of £YYY,000 on the balance sheet.</p>																								
8. The overall financial standing of the authority (level of borrowing, debt outstanding, council tax collection rates etc)	<p>The Council is debt free. Were it to fund capital expenditure by borrowing it would budget prudently for its level of borrowing, avoiding external borrowing where cash resources allow.</p> <p>The assumed (ultimate) Council Tax collection rate for 2007-08 onwards is 98.5%, judged to be achievable. For each 1% not collected, the cost is approximately £0.056m in lost income to the Council in 2007-08. Legislation requires that any collection fund deficit be corrected through the Council Tax in the next year.</p>																								
9. The authority's track record in budget and financial management.	<p>The Council's recent track record in budget and financial management shows potential variations of +/- 1% of the net budget (equivalent to £186k on the Adjusted 2006-07 net budget):</p> <table data-bbox="518 1321 1372 1691"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th style="text-align: right;">Amount</th> <th style="text-align: right;">% of budget</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>§ 2000-2001 – under spent by</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>§ 2001-2002 – under spent by</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>§ 2002-2003 – over spent by</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>§ 2003-2004 – over spent by</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>§ 2004-2005 -</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>§ 2005-2006 -</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>§ 2006-07* – overspent</td> <td style="text-align: right;">(£619k)</td> <td style="text-align: right;">(3.27)</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>* As projected at P6 monitoring</p> <p>However this has been achieved by considerable management and policy actions to ensure spending is in line with the budget each year.</p> <p>Base budget under provision, the full year effect of previous decisions, demographic growth and legislative change have been identified and will continue to be identified during the budget and Medium Term Planning process.</p> <p>Ultimately, financial performance relies on all budget managers and Strategic Managers actively managing their budgets and complying with financial regulations, including not committing expenditure if there</p>		Amount	% of budget	§ 2000-2001 – under spent by			§ 2001-2002 – under spent by			§ 2002-2003 – over spent by			§ 2003-2004 – over spent by			§ 2004-2005 -			§ 2005-2006 -			§ 2006-07* – overspent	(£619k)	(3.27)
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Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
	is no budget provision available.
10. The authority's capacity to manage in-year budget pressures	<p>The authority needs to improve its ability to manage in-year budget pressures. The following steps are required. Re-set the rules for dealing with overspends. Improve the accuracy of estimates. Improve the monitoring system, in terms of accuracy, the frequency of reporting and the challenge process. Act earlier in the year to correct any over/underspends. Deliver what was planned.</p> <p>The 2006-07 overspend, reported in November 2006, is being responded to. <i>Update with results</i></p>
11. The strength of the financial information and reporting arrangements.	<p>It has been recognised that the financial information and reporting arrangements needs to be strengthened. The Council needs to introduce commitment accounting, improve the usability of the system for non-financial users, and implement a single debtors system. Equally the summer 2006 turnover of senior finance staff has reduced the level of continuity and temporarily affected capacity. The new team is seeking to restore this and improve the standards in all areas.</p> <p>During 2007-08, investigations into a new financial information system will be pursued with a view to implementation for April 2008.</p> <p>The MTPF is based on an existing model, which uses net figures which are adjusted. This is inadequate, time-consuming, and could be subject to error. The MTPF will be reset, using a 'grandfather' gross model, that will strengthen the basis of reporting.</p>
12. The authority's virement and end of year procedures in relation to budget under/overspends at authority and departmental level.	<p><i>To be reviewed</i></p> <p>The Council's virement and carry forward rules are clear. The Council is operating management disciplines to ensure management and policy actions are considered in relation to overspending budgets. Generally virement is considered at a corporate level against corporate priorities, including the contribution towards the optimal level of general fund reserves. The Council operates a policy of clawing back overspends from the relevant Business Areas in the following year – a discipline which needs to be maintained.</p>
13. The adequacy of the authority's insurance arrangements to cover major unforeseen risks.	<p>The Council's insurance arrangements are a balance between external insurance premiums and internal funds to "self-insure" some areas. External premiums are also managed by an excess payable by NWDC for claims received. Premiums and self-funds are reactive to external perceptions of the risks faced by the Council which includes both risks that are generic to all organisations and those specific to the authority.</p> <p>Both those issues produced large increases in risk and thus premiums/costs in recent years that required increases to reserves. Trend analysis indicates that these have now settled and provide confidence that no substantial increases in risks and costs should be seen in near future. But of course, by its very nature, insurance is a service that manages unforeseen risks, and reserve levels must be kept under constant review in this area. The recommended reserves strategy takes this uncertainty into account.</p> <p>The level of the Insurance Reserve has been reviewed for 2006-07 and 2007-08 and is judged to be adequate, the position being that estimated outstanding liabilities are covered by the balance on the Reserve.</p>

Taking into account the above and building on the work over the past 3 years, the proposed budget is significantly more robust than in previous years.

5 Risk

In reports to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee during January 2007, all Strategic Managers, with the support of their financial consultants, will assess the robustness of their budgets, the achievability of savings, income and reductions. It is expected that the key risks will be:

- NWLL performance and the level of support;
- Pay and rewards, the outcome of which is estimated;
- The management restructure;
- The Capital Programme, given the level of slippage in 2006-07 [see 6 below];
- The Pension Fund revaluation, affecting 2008-09 onwards;
- Volatility of income in the Business Areas, especially the Planning Delivery Grant;
- Demographic trends being even slightly higher than projected or estimated;
- Changes in Housing Benefit funding and structure;
- Changes in policy or non-implementation of policy changes built into the budget.

These assumptions and potential changing circumstances will require the forecasts for future years to be reviewed early in each financial year leading to more detailed budgets being prepared for the next financial year and the medium term during the autumn of each financial year.

6 Capital Budget

Projects included in the capital programme, were prepared by the Business Area project managers, with full adherence to the corporate project appraisal procedures and in line with financial regulations. All projects are signed off by the relevant Strategic Manager and Executive member with portfolio. The agreed programme is fully funded.

Projects have been costed at current year prices with many subject to tender process after inclusion in the programme. This may lead to variance in the final cost. In some areas, the design brief may not be finalised, again giving rise to potential price variance.

Business Area are required to work within the given cash envelope so any under or over provision must be found within these limits.

The risk of the Council being unable to fund variations outside of the programme is minimal mainly due to phasing of projects. If necessary the Council can choose to freeze parts of the programme throughout the year to ensure spend is kept within the agreed budget.

The main risk to the capital programme is the ability of the Council to fully deliver it within the agreed timescales. Slippage relating to 2006-07 is fully funded but this in itself will increase pressure on the Council to deliver the anticipated 2007-08 programme.

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
1. Estimates of the level and timing of capital receipts.	<p>The Council's policy is to fund its capital programme generated by general fund capital receipts from the future sales of assets. Unbudgeted receipts received during the year are added to the unearmarked general fund capital reserve and taken into account as a funding source for the following financial year, subject to revenue budget considerations. The reserve currently stands at £X.XXXm.</p> <p>The draft 2007-08 capital programme, which will go to Executive and Council in February 2007 for approval, allows for YYYk of the reserve to be applied to fund the Council's capital expenditure. The budget proposals for 2007-08 are that the balance of £Z.zzzm will be kept in reserve in order to generate additional interest on the debt-financing budget. This will help to support the Council's revenue expenditure.</p>

7 Adequacy of the Reserves

General

Under the 2003 Act the Secretary of State has reserve powers to set a minimum level of reserves. The most likely use of this power is where an authority is running down its reserves against the advice of their Chief Financial Officer.

Determining the appropriate levels of reserves is not a precise science or a formula e.g. a percentage of the Council's budget. It is the Council's safety net for unforeseen or other circumstances and must last the lifetime of the Council unless contributions are made from future years revenue budgets. The minimum level of balances cannot be judged merely against the current risks facing the Council as these can and will change over time.

Determining the appropriate levels of reserves is a professional judgement based on local circumstances including the overall budget size, risks, robustness of budgets, major initiatives being undertaken, budget assumptions, other earmarked reserves and provisions, and the Council's track record in budget management.

A budget strategy should also include a reserves strategy.

The consequences of not keeping a minimum prudent level of reserves can be serious. In the event of a major problem or a series of events, the Council would run a serious risk of a deficit or of being forced to cut spending during the year in a damaging and arbitrary way.

Unallocated General Fund Reserves

During the CPA process, the following definition of adequacy was advanced:

Audit Commission's measure of reserves

Either, the aggregate of the following items is expected to be in surplus at 31 March,

- General Fund balance;
- Other earmarked GF revenue reserves; and
- Liabilities not recognised in financial statements [excluding FRS17 unfunded pension liabilities]

and the GF balance is expected to be at least equal to 5%*, [but not exceeding 100%] of forecast net operating expenditure. There are plans agreed by members on how to use these reserves, which link to the Council's strategic aims.

OR

There is a formal financial risk management process operating which the authority uses to:

- Justify a lower level of reserves;
- Determine its minimum level of reserves; and
- To adhere to this level.

* Equivalent to £m for 2006-07.

The recommendation on the minimum prudent level and optimal level of reserves has been based on the robustness of estimate information (above). In addition, the other strategic, operational and financial risks taken into account when recommending the minimum level of unallocated General Fund reserves include:

- The Council will need to budget for provision for the cost of any redundancies necessary to achieve any budget savings and restructuring to the extent they are not continued in budget proposals. The Council's policy is that redundancy costs are contained in the budget proposals.
- There is always some degree of uncertainty over whether the full effects of any economy measures and/or service reductions will be achieved. Strategic Managers have been requested to be prudent in their assumptions and that those assumptions, particularly about demand led budgets, will hold true in changing circumstances.
- The Bellwin Scheme Emergency Financial Assistance to Local Authorities provides assistance in the event of an emergency. The local authority is able to claim assistance with the cost of dealing with an emergency over and above a threshold set by the Government (NWDC's threshold for 2006-07 has been set at £Y, 0.2% of budget). The assistance is usually 85% of any eligible costs over the threshold. Any incident for which assistance is sought must involve conditions, which are clearly exceptional by local standards and the damage to local authority infrastructure or communities must be exceptional in relation to normal experience. In the first instance these initial costs will have to be met from reserves.
- The risk of major litigation, both currently and in the future.

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- Risk of changes from hypothecated grant to unhypothecated FSS.
- The unpredictability of the Formula Grant in the latter two years, which await the Spending Review 2007 announcements.
- The risk of losing subsidy arising from outstanding Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy claims
- The risk of grants being introduced mid-year that require the Council to contribute.
- Unplanned volume increases in major demand led budgets, particularly in the context of high and accelerating growth.
- Potential short term differences between the Council's Insurance Reserve and outstanding liabilities, although these should be remedied in the following fiscal year.
- The need to retain a general contingency to provide for any unforeseen circumstances, which may arise.
- The need to retain reserves for general day to day cash flow needs.

As a consequence, it is recommended that the minimum prudent level of general fund reserves is £Xm for 2007-08 and, an optimal level is £Ym to be achieved over the medium term.

The 3-year forecast and continuation budget include a contribution/use of Zm.

The recommendations of the Chief Financial Officer are:

- a) The Council maintains a minimum prudent level of general fund reserves of £Y.0m at the end of any financial year from 2007-08. The minimum level is designed to cope with unforeseen circumstances, which cannot be addressed by management or policy action within the year.
- b) That an optimal level of general fund reserves is £Zm. The optimal level of reserves is designed to allow the Council to withstand a measure of changes in circumstances during the year or minor variations in projected resources or spending over the period of a Medium Term Strategy;
- c) However the £Ym target does not represent a medium / long term safe level of reserves reliant as it is upon being able to accommodate just a single significant event. As this year has shown, putting budgets right, demands reducing services to achieve the approved budget, and is critical to the level of reserves and setting a realistic budget.
- d) A prudent approach would accommodate an ability to correct any single significant event over multiple years by creating a longer-term resilience. It also emphasises the need to ensure discipline over the clawback of overspends in future years.
- e) The reserves are currently £k above the General Fund unallocated reserves target.
- f) Based on that approach, a reserves figure of £Zm0 is recommended.