



Item No on Agenda

**Staffordshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel
3rd February 2025**

Reserves Strategy Update

Report of the Staffordshire Commissioner

Introduction

Statutory provision is made within the Local Government Finance Act 1992 that requires precepting authorities in England and Wales to have regard to the level of reserves needed for meeting estimated future expenditure. The Director of Finance / S151 Officer for the Staffordshire Commissioner's Office has a duty to report on the robustness of estimates and adequacy of reserves (under section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003) when the authority is considering its annual budget requirement.

This paper gives due consideration to the overall level of reserves held as at 31 March 2024 and the forecast position as at 31 March 2025. The Panel are asked to note the overall impact on Reserves as incorporated within the approved Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MFTS).

The Reserves Strategy was last approved in February 2024 as part of the budget setting process for 2024/25 and has now been updated to incorporate and reflect:

- The updated MFTS for 2025/26 to 2028/29
- The actual Reserves position as per the audited Statement of Accounts for 2023/24, and a forecast for 2024/25
- The impact of approved reserve utilisation as per the current and updated strategy

A number of different reserves are held by the Staffordshire Commissioner (both usable and unusable) in line with the CIPFA guidance, however this paper focuses on the two key areas of reserves that impact on the future financial strategy:

- **General Reserve**, to allow for unexpected / emergency events – balance as at 31 March 2025 is forecast to be £9.669m (see **Appendix 1**),
- **Earmarked Reserves** – to meet future known or predicted requirements – balance as at 31 March 2025 is forecast to be £30.885m (See **Appendix 1**)

Overall the level of Usable Reserves at 31 March 2024 was £45.850m (includes capital grants unapplied of £0.331m) and forecast to reduce by £4.964m in year to £40.886m by March 2025 (assumes use of £2.276m capital receipts reserve to finance capital programme). The general reserve will be maintained at £9.669m (assumes that the current forecast underspend from 2024/25 is transferred here) across the MTFS period while the earmarked reserves (including capital reserves) are forecast at £21.084m by March 2029. These reserves are in line with sector standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Police Fire and Crime Panel note:

1. the overall reserves position for both General and Earmarked Reserves as contained within this report,
2. to consider the adequacy and proposed earmarking of the reserve that will be incorporated into the budget setting exercise for 2025/26, and utilisation of reserves as incorporated within the updated MTFS.

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1. Prudential Code and Capital Spend

- 1.1. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Prudential Code requires Chief Finance Officers in local authorities to have full regard to affordability when making recommendations about the local authority's future capital programme. Such consideration includes the level of long-term revenue commitments. In considering the affordability of its capital plans, the Staffordshire Commissioner is required to consider all of the resources available, together with the totality of its capital plans and revenue forecasts for the forthcoming year and into the medium term.
- 1.2. The statutory reporting regime discussed within this paper and effective financial management underpin the need for clear, transparent reporting arrangements for reserves and CIPFA recommend that there should be clear protocol setting out the following:
 - the reason for / purpose of the reserve;
 - how and when the reserve can be used;
 - procedures for the reserve's management and control; and
 - timescale for review of the reserve to ensure continuing relevance and adequacy.
- 1.3. Whilst it is primarily the responsibility of the Staffordshire Commissioner and its S151 Officer to maintain a sound financial position, our external auditors Azets annually review for any material uncertainties and test to ensure that Staffordshire Police remain a going concern. However, it is not the responsibility of the auditors to prescribe the optimum or minimum level of reserves for authorities in general. A separate Going Concern report is submitted annually to the external auditor and is also reviewed by the Ethics Transparency and Audit panel.

2. Types of Reserve

- 2.1. When considering the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and preparing annual budgets the Staffordshire Commissioner should consider the establishment and maintenance of reserves. Reserves can be held for these main purposes:
 - a working balance to help cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and avoid unnecessary temporary borrowing – this forms part of general reserves;
 - a contingency to cushion the impact of unexpected events or emergencies – this also forms part of general reserves;
 - a means of building up specific funds, often referred to as earmarked reserves, to meet known or predicted requirements; and
 - A capital receipts reserve generated from the sale of surplus assets, which in line with legislation can only be re-invested back into capital goods (or whilst specific legislation allows transformation spend).

3. Reporting of Reserves

- 3.1. The IFRS-based Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom (the Code) introduced the Movement in Reserves Statement to local authority financial statements in the 2010/11 financial year. This Statement presents the movement in the year of the reserves of the Authority analysed into **usable** reserves, (e.g. General and earmarked reserves) and unusable reserves.

- 3.2. The total usable reserves as per the unaudited statement of accounts is £45.850m as at 31 March 2025, being the general fund £9.636m, earmarked reserves £35.883m, and capital grants unapplied £0.331m.

The Movement in Useable Reserves Statement can be found within the statutory accounts for 2023/24, and is shown below:

	Balance at 31 March 2023 £'000	Balance at 31 March 2024 £'000
General Fund	9,489	9,636
Capital receipt reserve	2,276	0
Capital grants unapplied	331	331
Reshaping the Future	2,329	2,089
IT Transformation Reserve	2,384	2,634
Insurance Reserve	699	314
Pay and Pension Reserve	6,021	5,688
Collaboration Reserve	213	618
Capital Reserve	2,477	1,378
ESN Reserve	1,784	2,422
Major Policing Events Reserve	674	473
Operational Reserves	17,244	20,267
Total Earmarked Reserves	33,825	35,883
Total Usable Reserves	45,921	45,850

- 3.3. Unusable reserves arise out of the interaction of legislation and proper accounting practice either to store revaluation gains or as adjustment accounts to reconcile accounting requirements (i.e. reconciliation of reporting standards to statutory requirements)
- 3.4. 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 local authorities. However, the government has undertaken to apply this only to individual authorities in the circumstances where an authority does not act prudently, disregards the advice of its Chief Finance Officer and is heading for serious financial difficulty.
- 3.5. Whilst it remains the responsibility of the Director of Finance/S151 Officer for the Staffordshire Commissioner to advise on the overall level of reserves that are held; the Staffordshire Commissioner should assist by providing clear protocols for the establishment and use of reserves, as reserves should not be held without a clear purpose.
- 3.6. The Staffordshire Commissioner has indicated that the level of general reserves be set at a minimum level of 3% of the annual revenue budget. The Panel should note that the level of general reserves is currently £9.636m or 3.64% of the 2024/25 net revenue budget. The reserves forecast currently shows the forecast underspend for the financial year as going to the general fund. It should be noted that consideration will be given to transferring the underspend at the end of the financial year to the budget support reserve.

4. Reserves Strategy and Future Outlook

4.1. This paper gives due consideration to the overall level of reserves held as at 31 March 2024 and the forecast position for 31 March 2025, and the panel are asked to note the overall position as scheduled in **Appendix 1**.

4.2. General Reserve

4.3. The Commissioner's policy for the general reserve fund is for it to hold as a minimum a balance of 3% of the net revenue budget of the combined budgets of the Commissioner and Staffordshire Police. This is currently considered to be a minimal safe level which would afford two incidents of maximum exposure to loss in any one year.

4.4. The maximum exposure to loss for a particular event is understood to be 1% of net budget in the light of the guidance which is issued by the Home Office relating to the police special grant. This guidance establishes that in the event that a force can prove it has proportionately policed a major incident which has created an unaffordable cost in one year, and that is independently reviewed by HMICFRS, the force can claim for costs exceeding 1% of the net budget for each incident. This guidance was updated in May 2021 and we expect it to continue to be in place during the period of the MTFS.

4.5. At the end of March 2024, the general reserve was £9.636m; this represents 3.64% of the annual revenue budget for 2024/25. It is assumed that the forecast underspend in 2024/25 goes to the general reserve.

4.6. Earmarked reserves

4.7. The earmarked reserve provision is required not only to fund future projects and investments but also to provide funding –

- To cover specific risk items that are excluded from the MTFS but may present as financial pressures over the life of the MTFS such as the current age discrimination changes to public sector pensions;
- To cover areas of the budget subject to fluctuations in spend based on risk such as self-insured Insurance claims;
- Reserves earmarked to support transformation. Whilst current legislation allows for the use of capital receipts to fund transformation this means these receipts would be used on revenue spend as opposed to re-investing back into assets (which would increase long term debt). The Commissioner is re-investing all receipts back into the acquisition of new assets;
- To provide for future contingent liabilities that have been identified within the statutory accounts;
- A reserve established to provide budgetary support. This reserve is earmarked to support the budget on a one-off basis whilst efficiency savings are phased in with a view to implementing these savings in the most sustainable manner possible;
- Reserves held for specific operational requirements.

4.8. The balance on these reserves as at 31 March 2024 was £35.883m and is forecast to reduce in year by £4.998m to close the year at £30.885m. This decrease is mainly driven by the use of the capital reserve to support the capital programme, the use of the Budget Support Reserve to

support the 2025/26 budget, the use of the Uplift reserve to support various estates projects, and the use of the pensions reserve to fund Pensions Remedy costs.

5. Reserve Forecast

5.1. The following table represent the forecast use of reserves as stated in the MTFS, with other known adjustments.

	2025/26 £000	2026/27 £000	2027/28 £000	2028/29 £000
General Fund	9,669	9,669	9,669	9,669
Capital Receipts Reserve	0	0	0	0
Capital Grants Unapplied	331	331	0	0
Budget Support Reserve	623	0	0	0
Capital Reserve	942	1,190	1,439	615
Collaboration Reserve	618	618	618	618
ESN Reserve	3,423	3,423	2,954	1,704
Insurance Reserve	314	314	314	314
IT Transformation Reserve	1,644	1,244	844	844
Major Events Policing Reserve	291	291	291	291
Operational Reserves	10,191	9,325	9,162	8,999
Pay and Pension Reserve	4,486	4,486	4,486	4,486
Reshaping the Future Reserve	1,344	1,344	1,344	1,344
Uplift Reserve	1,867	1,867	1,867	1,867
Total Earmarked Reserves	25,745	24,105	23,321	21,084
Total Usable Reserves	35,745	34,105	32,990	30,753

5.2. The levels of reserves held is under constant review in order to ensure that any identified risks and issues are adequately provided for. It may be necessary to transfer monies between reserves in future periods in order to meet need, or where it is no longer felt necessary to hold a reserve for the originally intended purpose.

Usable Reserves Forecast 31 March 2025

Actual 31/03/2024 £000		Transfer In £000	Transfer Out £000	Forecast 31/03/2025 £000
9,636	General Fund	33	0	9,669
0	Capital Receipts Reserve	0	0	0
331	Capital Grants Unapplied	0	0	331
5,751	Budget Support Reserve	151	(1,634)	4,268
1,378	Capital Reserve	1,693	(2,378)	694
618	Collaboration Reserve	0	0	618
2,422	ESN Reserve	1,002	0	3,423
314	Insurance Reserve	0	0	314
2,634	IT Transformation Reserve	0	(590)	2,044
473	Major Events Policing Reserve	0	(182)	291
10,435	Operational Reserves	3,672	(2,571)	11,535
5,688	Pay and Pension Reserve	0	(1,202)	4,486
2,089	Reshaping the Future Reserve	0	(745)	1,344
4,080	Uplift Reserve	0	(2,213)	1,867
35,883	Total Earmarked Reserves	6,517	(11,515)	30,885
45,850	Total Usable Reserves	6,550	(11,515)	40,886

The following earmarked reserves have been established (or aggregated as shown above) for the following purposes:

Budget Support Reserve – this reserve was included within the previous MTFS and additional balances have been transferred during the year. This use of this reserve has been included within the updated MTFS and will be fully exhausted by March 2027.

Capital Reserve – to fund future capital projects on assets with a short asset life, as well as to support any urgent H&S works of a capital nature.

Collaboration Reserve – to support the one-off costs associated with local public sector collaboration. This reserve is used to either support projects aimed at generating a financial return on the one-off investment or improving partnership working and outcomes.

Emergency Services Network (ESN) Reserve – the ESN programme will see the current Airwave based communications system replaced with a new 4G based service. Funding will be required for the replacement of devices.

Insurance Reserve – provides for the self-funding of certain uninsurable risks and also to cover the excess (£100,000) for any unknown claims before the insurance cover is applied.

Major Events Policing Reserve – this reserve holds funds to contribute towards the costs of policing major events should the need arise. This has been repurposed and was previously the Covid-19 reserve.

Pension Reserve – provides provision around future unknown costs relating to the public sector pensions age discrimination case (McCloud) as well as for flexibility in the payment of ill health pension payments to the pension fund.

Transformation – these reserves are held to support transformation activity, and are divided between a general transformation reserve and an IT/Digital specific transformation reserve.

Uplift Reserve – to support the further training and development of the force as it brings in new officers.

Operational Budget Reserves – this includes a number of specific earmarked reserves.