

STATEMENT OF THE ROBUSTNESS OF THE BUDGET ESTIMATES AND THE ADEQUACY OF THE DEVON AND SOMERSET FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY LEVELS OF RESERVES

It is a legal requirement under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 that the person appointed as the 'Chief Finance Officer' to the Authority reports on the robustness of the budget estimates and the adequacy of the level of reserves. The Act requires the Authority to have regard to the report in making its decisions.

THE ROBUSTNESS OF THE 2020-21 BUDGET

The net revenue budget requirement for 2020-21 has been assessed as £77.277m (Option B in report). In arriving at this figure a detailed assessment has been made of the risks associated with each of the budget headings and the adequacy in terms of supporting the goals and objectives of the authority as included in the Integrated Risk Management Plan and the Fire and Rescue Plan. It should be emphasised that these assessments are being made for a period up to the 31st March 2021, in which time external factors, which are outside of the control of the authority, may arise which will cause additional expenditure to be incurred. The most significant example of this is the increase in employers pension costs following the GAD Valuation and the unknown funding shortfall as a result, plus employer cost pressures arising from the unlawful application of transitional pensions protections. For example, the majority of On Call pay costs are dependent on the number of call outs during the year, which can be subject to volatility dependent on spate weather conditions. Other budgets, such as fuel are affected by market forces that often lead to fluctuations in price that are difficult to predict. Details of those budget heads that are most at risk from these uncertainties are included in Table 1 overleaf, along with details of the action taken to mitigate each of these identified risks.

Local government and the fire sector are entering a period of significant uncertainty over funding and cost pressures going forward. It is possible that further cuts of 5% in real terms may be made to fire funding which when combined with changes to the Business Rates Retention scheme and the Relative Needs Assessment Reviews could result in significant changes to available resources. Unfunded pension schemes and legal challenges over pension terms represent a significant risk to the Authority going forward. It is therefore vitally important that resourcing and investment decisions are made which minimise risks going forward to enable the Authority to be as resilient as possible in future years.

Whilst there is only a legal requirement to set a budget requirement for the forthcoming financial year, the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) provides forecasts to be made of indicative budget requirements over a five year period covering the years 2020-21 to 2024-25. These forecasts include only prudent assumptions in relation future pay awards and prices increases, which will need to be reviewed in light of pay settlements and movement in the Consumer Prices Index.

TABLE 1 – BUDGET SETTING 2020-21 ASSESSMENT OF BUDGET HEADINGS MOST SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Budget Head	Budget Provision 2020-21 £m	RISK AND IMPACT	MITIGATION
Wholetime Pay Costs	31.4	Wholetime Pay represents nearly a third of Service costs. There is a high level of uncertainty around future pay increases, particularly whether pay awards will be linked to a change to the Firefighter role map to include emergency medical response. Each 1% pay award is equivalent to £0.470m of additional pressure on the revenue budget. It is not anticipated that any additional funding will be allocated for pay and therefore large increases could mean the Authority needs to utilise reserves in order to balance its budget.	An unfunded pay award of 2% has been factored in to the budget which represents a prudent approach.
On Call Pay Costs	15.8	A significant proportion of costs associated with on call pay is directly as a result of the number of calls responded to during the year. The level of calls from year to year can be volatile and difficult to predict e.g. spate weather conditions. Abnormally high or low levels of calls could result in significant variations against budget provision.	Using the budget smoothing reserve to offset pay for availability costs in year one, use of reserve can be extended if necessary
Fire-fighter's Pensions	2.5	Whilst net pension costs funded by the government through a top-up grant arrangement, the Authority is still required to fund the costs associated with ill-health retirements, and the potential costs of retained firefighters joining the scheme.	In establishing a General Reserve an allowance has been made for a potential overspend on this budget
Insurance Costs	0.9	The Fire Authority's insurance arrangements require the authority to fund claims up to agreed insurance excesses. The costs of these claims are to be met from the revenue budget. The number of claims in any one-year can be very difficult to predict, and therefore there is a risk of the budget being insufficient. In addition some uninsured costs such as any compensation claims from Employment Tribunals carry a financial risk to the Authority.	General Reserve
Fuel Costs	0.7	As fuel prices are slowly starting to increase it is highly possible that inflationary increases could be in excess of the budget provided.	General Reserve
Treasury Management Income	(0.2)	As a result of the economic downturn in recent years, and the resultant low investment returns, the ability to achieve the same levels of income returns as in previous years is diminishing. The uncertainty over future market conditions means that target investment returns included in the base budget could be at risk.	The target income has been set at a prudent level of achieving only a 0.7% return on investments. Budget monitoring processes will identify any potential shortfall and management informed so as any remedial action can be introduced as soon as possible.
Income	(0.8)	Whilst the authority has only limited ability to generate income, the budget has been set on the basis of delivering £0.6m of external income whilst setting the reliance on the Service budget for Red One Income at £0.3m. Due to economic uncertainty this budget line may be at risk and is dependent on the ability of Red One Ltd to generate income.	Budget monitoring processes will identify any potential shortfall and management informed so as any remedial action can be introduced as soon as possible. A provision for doubtful debts is available to protect the Authority from potential losses.
Capital Programme	10.7	Capital projects are subject to changes due to number of factors; these include unforeseen ground conditions, planning requirements, necessary but unforeseen changes in design, and market forces.	Capital projects are subject to risk management processes that quantify risks and identify appropriate management action. Any changes to the spending profile of any capital projects will be subject to Committee approval in line with the Authority Financial Regulations.
Revenue Contribution to Capital	2.0	£0.3m of the Contribution is dependent on maintaining trading income levels, if these are not achieved the capital budget will need to be reduced by this amount	Capital programme and strategy, £21.7m Capital Reserve
Business Rates	(1.4)	There is a high degree of uncertainty over levels of Retained Business rates income and the method of allocation between funding and revenue grants in future years.	There is a specific reserve of £1.8m for budget smoothing which could be utilised to smooth in year changes.

THE ADEQUACY OF THE LEVEL OF RESERVES

Total Reserve balances for the Authority as at April 2019 is £38.8m made up of Earmarked Reserves (committed) of £33.4m, and General Reserve (uncommitted) of £5.3m. This will decrease by the end of the financial year as a result of planned expenditure against those reserves during the year. A General Reserve balance of £5.3m is equivalent to 6.9% of the total revenue budget, or 25 days of Authority spending, the figure is subject to a risk assessment annually.

The Authority has adopted an “in principle” strategy to maintain the level of reserves at a minimum of 5% of the revenue budget for any given year, with the absolute minimum level of reserves only being breached in exceptional circumstances, as determined by risk assessment. This does not mean that the Authority should not aspire to have more robust reserve balances based upon changing circumstances, but that if the balance drops below 5% (as a consequence of the need to utilise reserves) then it should immediately consider methods to replenish the balance back to a 5% level.

It is pleasing that the Authority has not experienced the need to call on general reserve balances in the last five years to fund emergency spending, which has enabled the balance, through budget underspends, to be increased to a level in excess of 5%. The importance of holding adequate levels of general reserves has been highlighted on a number of occasions in recent times, the impact of flooding and the problems experienced by the global financial markets are just two examples of external risks which local authorities may need to take into account in setting levels of reserves and wider financial planning.

The Authority’s Reserves Strategy is reviewed annually and is available on the website www.dsfire.gov.uk.

CONCLUSION

It is considered that the budget proposed for 2020-21 represents a sound and achievable financial plan, and will not increase the Authority’s risk exposure to an unacceptable level. The estimated level of reserves is judged to be adequate to meet all reasonable forecasts of future liabilities.

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