

**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 RESERVES 2021/2022

1. INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Act 2003 Section 25 includes a specific duty on the Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) to make a report to the authority when it is considering its annual budget and council tax levels. The report must deal with the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the reserves included within the budget. (For the purpose of the Act 'reserves' includes 'general fund balances'.) The Act requires the Council to have regard to the report in making its decisions at the Council's budget and council tax setting meeting in respect of 2021/22.

In making this report I have considered the risks arising from it, outlined below, and the Council's mitigating actions in arriving at my conclusions which, in summary are:

- Supplies and services and staffing budgets are sufficient to maintain services as planned.
- Budgeting assumptions for treasury management activity reflect the impact of sustained low interest rates and diversification of investments.
- The approach to budgeting for income is prudent given the commitment from Central Government to reimburse Council's 75% of its losses from sales, fee and charges in the first quarter.
- The approach taken to using the New Homes Bonus to support the base revenue budget is prudent and is consistent with the Government's statement that Councils are free to spend the Bonus as they choose, including on front-line services and keeping council tax low.
- The proposal to increase council tax is required to ensure the viability of this Council in future years without having to make significant cuts to front-line services.
- The medium term financial planning assumptions, including future cuts in government support, are prudent and the continued development and revision of the budget strategy for closing the projected budget gap is providing a planned and measured approach to meeting future financial challenges.
- The approach to financing maintenance is acceptable. Looking ahead, the need to model and prioritise future investment aspirations will become critical if the Council is to meet some of the targets within the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
- The level of reserves, including General Balances, is satisfactory.

2. ROBUSTNESS OF ESTIMATES

Budget estimates are assessments of spending and income made at a point in time, based on service needs and known expenditure patterns. The 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 of assessing the robustness of estimates the Section 151 Officer will consider and rely upon the key processes that have been put in place:

- the issuing of clear guidance to Service Managers on preparing budgets through the annual budget strategy report;
- peer review by finance staff involved in preparing the standstill base-budget, i.e. the existing budget plus contractual inflation;
- the use of in-year budget monitoring to re-align budgets in line with projected changes for 2021/2022;
- a medium term planning process that highlights priority services;
- a review of the corporate risk register;
- a service review by the Cabinet, Executive Leadership Team and Service Managers of detailed budget and proposed savings and their achievability; and
- Finance staff providing advice throughout the process on robustness, including vacancy factors, increments, current demand, and income levels.

Notwithstanding these arrangements that are designed to test the budget throughout its various stages of development, considerable reliance is placed on Service Managers having proper arrangements in place to identify issues, project demand data, to consider value for money and efficiency and record key risks within their operational risk register.

The table below identifies assumptions made during the budget process and comments upon the risks and decisions taken when preparing the budget.

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
<p>1. The treatment of demand led pressures.</p>	<p>Service Managers will be expected to manage changes within their budgets by re-prioritising or by taking steps to reduce expenditure where income streams decrease significantly. Undoubtedly, additional expenditure will be incurred as a result of Covid-19 which has been recognised by Central Government through a grant in 2021/22 amounting to £540,136. Where this is not possible it will be necessary to use the working balance or earmarked reserves on the understanding that they may need to be restored in future years.</p> <p>After significant delays to the introduction of UC, the full rollout began in Cheltenham in December 2017. There are currently 1,438 claimants (January 2021) and under present regulations there could eventually be over 2,000, potentially placing considerable pressure on rent arrears. Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) is conducting a proactive campaign to provide support and information to all tenants affected by these changes. Currently 767 accounts are in arrears with approximately 350 direct payment orders in place. The impact on arrears will be closely monitored and the HRA budget proposals reflect an increasing provision for bad debts of £32,000 from the revised forecast.</p>

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
<p>2. The treatment of inflation and interest rates.</p>	<p>The following assumptions have been made in the preparation of the Medium Term Financial Strategy in respect of inflationary pressures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay awards are modelled at 2% per annum from 2022/23. In 2021/22 pay inflation at 1% for 2021/22 has been budgeted, with an additional 1% held in contingency. • Employer’s Superannuation contributions – agreed until 2023 through the latest triennial valuation and through agreement to pay the required secondary sum payments to the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) as an up-front payment for the next 3 years future liability. Future uncertainty in the economy / fund performance may increase or decrease pension fund deficits although budgeting assumptions follow actuarial advice. Current modelling and results support the current strategy which has ensured the Council is in a positive cash-flow position, resulting in an improved funding level. • Contract inflation has been allowed for at the appropriate contractual rate • In line with previous practice, general inflation has not been provided for unless the relevant professional officer has indicated that there are inflationary pressures. Whilst this creates natural efficiency savings it could lead to insufficient budget to maintain service levels. In-year increases will need to be managed. • The Council provides a number of demand led services e.g. green waste collection, car parking, building control charges, etc. The estimates for 2021/22 have been frozen in line with 2020/21 budget estimates to recognise the support being provided by Central Government and the uncertainty surrounding recovery from Covid-19. The impact on council tax, business rates and the implications for the economy, particularly the key income streams for the council such as car parking, are matters that will challenge the medium term financial strategy. • Current Government rent policy is to permit rents to increase by a maximum of CPI (as at previous September) + 1% per annum for the next four years before a further review. The CPI for September 2020 was 0.5% thus allowing a rent increase for 2021/22 of 1.5%. Whilst this is a reduction in the level of income previously projected for the HRA it is good news for tenants who will see a lower increase in their rent at this challenging time. • The treasury management strategy continues to diversify into pooled funds which will expose the Council to investments within property, bonds and equities. These funds have the advantage of providing wide diversification of investment risk, coupled with the services of professional fund managers in return for a fee. These funds offer enhanced returns over the longer term, but are more volatile in the short-term but will allow the authority to diversify into asset classes other than cash. • The Council adheres to the CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management 2011 and updates its policy and strategy statements annually. The Capital Strategy and Investment Strategy is reviewed annually to ensure security of public money. Our treasury advisors continue to advise the Council and Treasury Management Panel on policy. <p>Risks around inflation and interest rate variations have been built into my assessment of the budget. In-year increases will need to be managed but may need to be funded from General Balances and subsequently be built into base budget in future years.</p> <p>The recommended minimum HRA revenue reserve to cover contingencies is £1.5m. The three year projections forecast a reserve balance of £1.5m at 31st March 2024.</p>

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
<p>3. Estimates of the level and timing of capital receipts.</p>	<p>Property services need to ensure our land and property asset portfolio is fit for purpose, secures increased income generation, maximises capital receipts and stimulates growth and investment in the Borough.</p> <p>In November 2020, Full Council agreed its Covid-19 recovery budget alongside a revised Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy and a flexible use of capital receipts strategy.</p> <p>Surplus assets and assets generating a low yield have been identified for disposal to realise c. £4m in capital receipts whilst also contributing to the stimulation of the local economy. A strategic review of our property portfolio has been undertaken to ensure that the council's assets make the maximum contribution possible to support the MTFS.</p> <p>Housing stock sales through Right to Buy (RTB) are estimated to be at 20 per annum. These receipts will be ring-fenced towards the supply of new housing.</p>
<p>4. The treatment of efficiency savings/ productivity gains.</p>	<p>The majority of savings proposals for 2021/2022 are already in progress and no slippage has been identified. This should not undermine our ability to keep expenditure within budget in 2021/22 although provision is made for slippage within working balances.</p>
<p>5. Government support.</p>	<p>The following assumptions have been made in the preparation of the Medium Term Financial projections in respect of Government support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The estimates for 2021/22 are based on the final financial settlement notified by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on 10th February 2021. • The medium term financial projections assume a full business rates reset under the fair funding review, which will only allow for growth achieved in 2021/22 to be retained. It also assumes this Council will no longer receive any Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and that New Homes Bonus (NHB) will be phased out in its entirety by 2023/24. The Government are currently consulting on a replacement scheme for NHB which Officers are working on its submission. The deadline for responses is 7th April 2021. • The budget requires £0.747m of New Homes Bonus (NHB) to support the revenue budget in 2021/22. The fact that this source of funding is being top-sliced from the RSG, means that the Council has little alternative but to regard this money as an important part of its income stream and is therefore assumed to be base funding across the period of the MTFS, albeit phased out. • The budget for 2021/22 includes assumptions for business rates based on estimates of collection rates, bad debts, appeals, reliefs (mandatory and discretionary) and assumed 40% share under the 50% retention system. The medium term financial projections assume that a full reset will be implemented as part of the fair funding review. As in previous years, an earmarked reserve is maintained to help mitigate the risk of any future fluctuations. <p>Despite the uncertainty over future government funding, I am comfortable that the Council has been sufficiently prudent in budgeting for reductions in government support, including dealing with the uncertainty of business rates and NHB receipts.</p> <p>The Government has lifted HRA borrowing restrictions, abolishing the debt cap and left the level of borrowing to be controlled by the prudential code. This should allow a significant increase in the new build programme subject to the identification of appropriate sites and financial viability.</p>

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
<p>6. Proposed level of council tax.</p>	<p>When setting the level of council tax, members should always consider the medium term outlook to ensure that a sustainable budget position is maintained</p> <p>Members also need to acknowledge that the Localism Act 2011 contains requirements for local authorities to hold a referendum where council tax is proposed above a specific increase (the greater of up to 2% or £5 in 2021/22).</p> <p>Council tax is the main source of locally-raised income for this authority and has previously been referred to by MHCLG as ‘an important source of funding which is used to meet the difference between the amount a local authority wishes to spend and the amount it receives from other sources such as government grants.</p> <p>When calculating the core grant settlement, the Government assumes that all Shire Districts will increase their Council Tax by the threshold amount for 2021/22. The indicative grant levels for the period 2021/22 also assumes that all local authorities will increase their Council Tax levels up to the threshold each year.</p> <p>CIPFA has published a financial resilience index and their recommended good practice is that this is referred to within the s25 report for 2021/22.</p> <p>One of the indicators is the council tax requirement as a ratio to net revenue expenditure. This indicator provides a measure of the relative importance of council tax and grants. A low ratio suggests higher dependency on grants which may suggest that a council may experience financial difficulties as grants diminish further. The ratio for this council in 2021/22 is 66.48% and is projected to rise over the duration of the MTFS which equates to this council having a diminishing dependency on grants.</p> <p>There has been an important shift in the Government’s principles, most noticeably, the shift away from freezing council tax to using council tax to generate additional funding. Given the relevance of the indicator outlined above, I support a council tax increase of 2.34% (equivalent to a £5 increase on a Band D property) as this will avoid the requirement for a referendum (cost c. £50k) for council tax increases over the government cap.</p>

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
<p>7. Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) – the strategy for closing the projected funding gap.</p>	<p>Sound financial management requires that the Section 151 Officer and Councillors have full regard to affordability when making recommendations about the local authority’s future revenue and capital programme.</p> <p>The 2021/22 budget includes medium term financial projections of the projected funding gap and indicates broadly how the Council may close the projected funding gap over the period 2022/23 to 2024/25. The Medium Term Financial Strategy outlines the strategy for closing the funding gap and includes efficiency savings and income targets rather than necessarily specific worked up projections of cost savings.</p> <p>The Council has traditionally provided ‘one off’ funding for investment in systems or staff costs i.e. additional short-term resource, redundancy / pension costs funded from savings or earmarked reserves.</p> <p>The Council’s approach to modelling and monitoring the MTFS and planning for meeting future funding gaps outlined in the budget strategy demonstrates robust and effective planning for closing the funding gap and is effectively scrutinised.</p> <p>The Council is developing a more commercial approach to service provision with the aim of becoming self-financing and less dependent of Central Government funding. This approach has helped to refocus on delivering a sustainable MTFS. Developing strategies for regeneration and economic growth which will generate revenue for the council to offset the reductions in government funding streams will be a key strand of the development of the MTFS.</p>
<p>8. The authority’s capacity to manage in-year budget pressures.</p>	<p>The authority has proven its ability to manage in-year budget pressures with no recorded overspends in recent years. Improvements to our Devolved Budgetary Control scheme have improved our management of cash limited budgets. The recent recruitment of a dedicated Head of Finance (Deputy Section 1515 Officer) will provide additional resilience and performance to managing budgets effectively.</p>
<p>9. The strength of the financial information and reporting arrangements.</p>	<p>The Council has strong internal and external reporting standards. Quarterly management reports are made to the Cabinet. These procedures have allowed firm management of any projected overspends in the past. These reports have been enhanced with detailed financial commentary and clear direction with regards to in-year virements which aids transparency and full scrutiny.</p>
<p>10. The authority’s virement and end of year procedures in relation to budget under/overspends at authority and departmental level.</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’s Devolved Budgetary Control scheme gives managers flexibility to manage budget variations within their range of services. Service overspends may be clawed back from future budgets.</p>
<p>11. The adequacy of the authority’s insurance arrangements to cover major unforeseen risks.</p>	<p>The Council’s insurance arrangements are considered adequate. The Council does self-insure on small claims and has reserves to meet any excesses relating to claims. No uninsured risks have been identified.</p>

Budget Assumption	Financial Standing and Management
12. The approach to financing the maintenance programme.	The Council has £475k built into the base revenue budget to fund the annual maintenance budget of the property portfolio. The maintenance schedule of planned commitments has been established for 2021/22 and will be reviewed by the Asset Management Working Group on an annual basis.

Given consideration of the above factors and the detailed scrutiny of the budgets that has been undertaken this year I can give positive assurance on the robustness of the budget estimates. The greatest risk to this assurance is Covid-19 although the rollout of vaccines is a positive step forward in the fight against this global pandemic.

3. ADEQUACY OF RESERVES AND BALANCES

The requirement for financial reserves is acknowledged in statute. Sections 32 and 43 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 require billing authorities in England and Wales to have regard to the level of reserves needed for meeting estimated future expenditure when calculating the budget requirement.

Within the statutory and regulatory framework it is the responsibility of the Section 151 Officer to advise the authority on its level of reserves that should be held and to ensure that there are clear protocols for their establishment and use. Councillors, on the advice of the Section 151 Officer, should make their own judgements on such matters taking into account local circumstances. The adequacy of reserves can only be assessed at a local level and requires a considerable degree of professional judgement. The assessment needs to be made in the context of the authority's MTFs, its wider financial management, and associated risks over the lifetime of the plan. The Secretary of State has reserved powers to set a minimum level of reserves to be held by councils if required.

The CIPFA resilience index also has a number of indicators measuring reserves. The indicators suggest that compared to other district councils, both our earmarked reserves and our unallocated reserves (i.e. general balances) are in the lower quartile. Whilst this is useful information, it needs to be more qualitative, which is around whether reserves are being used in line with policy. There appears to be an assumption within these indicators that having high levels of reserves is a good measure which doesn't necessarily fit well with the equity perspective that Council's should not be sitting on high levels of reserves as this is being funded by local taxpayers that are not getting any benefit.

Reserves should not be held without a clear purpose. Should it be considered that the level (or proposed levels of reserves) is inadequate then a report must be made to Council outlining how this has arisen and what action should be taken to prevent a reoccurrence in subsequent years.

As part of the annual budget setting process and in reviewing the MTFs, the Council needs to consider the establishment and maintenance of reserves. These can be held for three 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 funds (earmarked reserves) to meet known or predicted requirements.

GENERAL (WORKING) BALANCES – CALCULATION OF OPTIMUM LEVEL

There are two approaches for deciding the optimum level of working balance. One approach is to simply apply a percentage range to the Net Budget Requirement, currently assessed as between 5% and 10% or a level between £0.708m and £1.416m. The alternative is a level based upon a risk assessment of the budget. In 2021/22 the Section 151 Officer has used a risk based approach to assess the appropriate level of general balances.

The framework for assessing the risks surrounding the budget needs to consider the following:

- Inflationary pressures.
- Pension Fund changes.
- Planned savings measures.
- Interest rate variations.
- Volume variations on demand-led services such as planning fees, land charges, particularly in light of Covid-19.
- New services/initiatives including waste and recycling.
- The risk of litigation.
- Emergency planning.
- Financial guarantees.
- Grant income.
- Future budget projections.

	Area of Risk	Explanation
1.	Inflationary Pressures	Historically the cost of pay awards has caused major variations to budget estimates. The 2021/22 budget proposals assume a pay rise of 1% will be offered in 2021/22 in line with expectations across the whole Public Sector. The assumptions within the proposed budget also allow for a further contingency of 1% which negates the need to make a provision within the working balance to offset this risk. Inflationary risks on other costs are a factor elsewhere. The Ubico contract is driven by fuel and pay increases and a provision of 1% on the 2021/22 General Fund contract value suggests a figure of £88,000 should be kept as a provision within the working balance.
2.	Pension Fund Changes	The 2019 triennial review has brought a degree of certainty to future pension costs for 2020-2023. These will not impact adversely on the Council in the next 12 months so no specific provision is required at this point.
3.	Planned savings measures	The Savings Strategy identifies £3.482m of targets to be delivered across 2021/22 to 2024/25. Slippage can occur and the Red Amber Green (RAG) system for identifying those work streams at risk of slippage within the Savings Strategy. Currently the strategy notes £200,000 of work streams considered 'amber' for 2021/22 in terms of delivery and so 50% of these (i.e. £100,000) are accommodated within the working balance.

	Area of Risk	Explanation
4.	Interest rate variations	The current low levels of investment rates suggest that there is little down-side risk at present on cash deposits.
5.	Covid-19 expenditure	The Council has incurred significant additional expenditure as a result of the pandemic and this is likely to continue into 2021/22. As such a provision amounting to £500,000 is recognised in the working balance.
5.	Volume variations demand led	During the current economic downturn associated with Covid-19 the Council is extremely vulnerable to drops in key income streams, e.g. planning fees, car parking income, etc. The budget projections reflect current levels of income however the risks associated with volatility should be better reflected particularly given recent fluctuations in planning, car parking and building control income. As such a provision amounting to £500,000 to reflect the volatility is recognised in the working balance. A number of earmarked reserves are also held specifically to deal with this volatility.
6.	Risk of litigation contingency	The level of risk associated with litigation is considered to be reducing over time however risk does still remain and as such a provision of £100,000 is retained which mirrors the budget provision for supplementary approvals. The council holds a separate earmarked reserve for planning appeals which is also available if required.
7.	Emergency planning	Whilst the government will step in to assist in the event of a major disaster there are thresholds at which assistance is given. This threshold is 0.2% of the net budget. Financial support is then given at 85% of costs above this level. Provision of £1m would cost this Council £170,000 which is provided for within the working balance; the cash flow impact would need to be handled from invested cash balances.
8.	Financial guarantees/contingent liabilities	Run-off of the old Municipal Mutual Insurance claims has begun but no provision is required at this stage.
9.	Grant income	A number of one-off grant streams are anticipated in the 2021/2022 budget but no assumptions have been made for their continuation across future financial years. No risks have been identified around existing grant flows that require specific provision in the working balance.
10.	Business rates retention	As part of the pooling arrangement, the Council could be required to contribute to large scale revaluations such as occurred with Virgin Media via Tewkesbury Borough Council. Provision for such occurrences should therefore be included within the working balance and as such £150,000 is held. The council holds a separate earmarked reserve for Business Rates Retention which is also available if required.
11.	The Cheltenham Trust	A contingency provision of £100,000 is to be held in general balances for any unforeseen instances incurred by the Trust as they go through re-organisation and transformation post Covid-19.

The assumptions above total £1,708,000 suggesting that we strive to maintain a working balance around this figure during 2021/22. The Council should aim to not allow the working balance to fall below this figure. The current working balance is projected to be £1,720,470.

EARMARKED RESERVES

In order to assess the adequacy of earmarked reserves when setting the budget, the Section 151 Officer should take account of the strategic, operational and financial risks

facing the authority. Accepting that there are still some areas of uncertainty, the level of reserves appears adequate at this point in time and no other changes are currently recommended, although every effort should be made to increase the level of reserves held as a way of future-proofing against further funding reductions.

Whilst the majority of these reserves are held for specific purposes, there are three reserves which are available to help meet the cost of any changes as the Council meets the challenges of future funding reductions; these are:

	Balance projected at 31st March 2022 £
Budget Strategy (Support) Reserve	520,411
New Initiatives Reserve (Transformation)	336,623
Pension and Restructuring Reserve	254,360
	1,111,394

In determining the budget strategy in October 2015, the Section 151 Officer recommended the creation of a specific earmarked reserve: a 'budget strategy (support) reserve', to provide greater resilience. This reserve secures the Council against short-term challenges which we know we will encounter in the coming years such as the one-off drop in business rates income due to the baseline re-set.

I have reviewed the revenue reserves and propose the transfers as identified in Appendix 6. I also consider that the financial reserves and working balance as proposed in these papers are adequate to fund spending plans for 2021/2022. However, given the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the Fair Funding Review and the Business Rates Retention reset proposed in 2022, I recommend that any future underspends or fortuitous windfalls are earmarked for transfer to either general balances or the budget strategy (support) reserve.

3. CAPITAL HEALTH

The CIPFA Resilience Index highlights 2 particular indicators surrounding capital health:

- Interest Payable / Net Revenue Expenditure
- Gross External Debt

These measures only partially cover capital health as they are unable to analyse how these measures are factored in at a local level. Interest payable is more than covered by income received which have been backed up by prudent business cases when it comes to commercial property investments and regeneration projects. The Council has also approved a prudent Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy that ensures all debt is serviced and repaid over the life of an asset.

Whilst the gross external debt level may be perceived to be high in value, this indicator alone does not reflect the strength of the Council's Balance Sheet or indeed recognise the benefits of debt such as social value, wellbeing and financial return.

The 2019/20 statement of accounts, published in November 2020, reflect the following when analysing the Balance Sheet from the position as at 31st March 2019 to the position as at 31st March 2020:

- net assets have decreased from £321.626m to £320.218m (a year on year decrease of £1.408m);
- long term assets have increased from £500.113m to £536.567m (a year on year increase of £36.454m);
- long term borrowing has increased from £111.965m to £115.293m (a year on year increase of £3.328m);
- the asset to debt ratio is 0.44 as at 31st March 2020.

The asset to debt ratio is a measure of a company's financial risk. That is, it measures how much of a company's debts could be paid off by selling its assets in case of liquidation. If it is less than 0.5, the company's ratio is strong, because the company is easily able to service their debts if they have to. If the ratio is large, like over 0.5 or especially over 1, more of the expenses are being paid by borrowed money, which might indicate less stability. With an asset to debt ratio of 0.44, the council's ratio is therefore strong.

4. OVERALL CONCLUSION

There is a legal requirement under the Local Government Act 1992, section 32 and 43 to set a balanced budget. The budget proposal includes budgets for expenditure and income and uses reserves to fund one off expenditure, fund future expenditure or phase in the impact of increased expenditure per the MTFs without drawing on the General Reserve.

I am, therefore, satisfied that the proposed budget is balanced and meets the legal requirement to set a balanced budget.

My overall view is that the budget is a sound response to continuing challenging financial circumstances, which maintains services, maximises efficiencies and responds to anticipated future financial challenges.

In line with statutory duties, Members are asked to consider the advice provided in this report, based upon my assessment of the robustness of the overall budget and estimates in the medium term financial projections.

PAUL JONES
Executive Director Finance and Assets (Section 151 Officer)