NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COMMISSIONER FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
RESERVES STRATEGY (REVISED JANUARY 2024)

1. Reserves Strategy

1.1. Reserves are a key part of medium-term financial planning with other components including revenue spending plans, income forecasts, potential liabilities, capital investment plans, borrowing and council tax levels. Decisions on these are inter-linked. Consequently, some organisations will need to maintain reserves at higher levels than others.

1.2. All publicly funded organisations should have a reserves strategy to demonstrate transparency and accountability, to comply with best practice financial management and to justify the levels of reserves held.

1.3. The PFCC maintains reserves to provide a measure of protection against risk. Without this protection, any unforeseen expenditure would have to be met either by increases in Council Tax or immediate savings (potentially through reductions in service levels).

1.4. The term "reserves" has a variety of technical and everyday meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. In this strategy, it is taken to mean funds set-aside at the PFCC's discretion for general or specific future purposes.

1.5. Reserves are required to protect and enhance the financial viability and in particular:

- To maintain a degree of in-year financial flexibility.
- To enable the PFCC to deal with unforeseen circumstances and incidents.
- To set aside monies to fund major developments in future years.
- To enable the PFCC to invest to transform and achieve improved service effectiveness and efficiency.
- To set aside sums for known and potential liabilities.
- To provide an operational contingency at service level.

1.6. Reserves should not be held to fund ongoing revenue expenditure as this is unsustainable in the long term. However, they may be important in smoothing a major financial imbalance (revenue or capital) over a longer timescale. CIPFA Bulletin 13 – Local Authority Reserves and Balances (Updated) published March 2023 states:

"Balancing the annual budget by drawing on general reserves may be viewed as a legitimate short-term option. However, it is not normally prudent for reserves to be deployed to finance recurrent expenditure. CIPFA has commented that councils should be particularly wary about using one off reserves to deal with shortfalls in current funding. Where such action is to be taken, this should be made explicit, and an explanation given as to how such expenditure will be funded in the medium to long term."

1.7. The Northamptonshire Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority (NCFRA) was established on the 1 January 2019 with no transfer of reserves agreed as part of the business case. As such, a three year financial stability period was set to establish a more stable budget position, supported by a sufficient level of reserves.

1.8. Tight financial planning, together with assistance from the Home Office has enabled a sufficient reserves position to be sufficient currently. However, work on the budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan has identified that the financial risks from inflation and other pressures are still forecast to be higher than funding available to the service. Despite annual efficiency targets, funding deficits are identified in future years.

1.9. The reserves strategy assumes that the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) is broadly balanced on a sustainable basis across the five year planning period. If the financial impact of current economic conditions continues to impact on taxbase and council tax levels over the medium term, then this could impact on those assumptions.

1.10. This is recognised as a risk as when taking into account the projected shortfalls on the MTFP where savings will need to be achieved to facilitate balancing budgets in future years.

1.11. If savings cannot bridge the full gap, based on current estimates, as a worst case scenario, revenue reserves can balance the gap over the five year MTFP, but this would use almost all available reserves and would impact funding available for investment.

1.12. Due to the lack of investment by Northamptonshire County Council over many years, NCFRA have a significant Capital programme requirement. This is continually reviewed to ensure it is both operationally deliverable and affordable. Previously, the PFCC made successful representation to the Home Office and obtained £0.5m funding to support historic capital programme investment.

1.13. Reserves should reflect the agreed financial strategy and should represent the quantified impact of risks and opportunities over the planning period, weighted for their probability.

2. National Guidance and Compliance with Home Office Guidance on Police Reserves

2.1. The CIPFA Bulletin includes guidance on the establishment and maintenance of local authority reserves and balances, setting out the key factors that should be taken into account locally in making an assessment of the appropriate level of reserves and balances to be held.

2.2. On 31 March 2018, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service published new guidance on the information that each PFCC must publish in terms of police reserves which is still relevant today. This guidance has been adopted for NCFRA to ensure consistency across PFCC governed Fire and Police services in Northamptonshire. The NCFRA reserves strategy is published annually on the PFCC website.

2.3. One of the key requirements is that the information on each reserve should make clear how much of the funding falls into each of the following three categories:

- Funding for planned expenditure on projects and programmes over the period of the current medium term financial plan.
- Funding for specific projects and programmes beyond the current planning period.
- As a general contingency to meet other expenditure needs held in accordance with sound principles of good financial management.

2.4. This information is summarised across the Home Office headings as at 31/3/24, together with the proposed use of the reserves held at that date as follows:

Reserve	Forecast Balance as at 31/3/2024 £m	Funding for planned expenditure on projects and programmes over the MTFP (24/25-28/29) £m	Total Forecast Revenue and Capital Reserves as at 31 March 2029 £m	Funding for specific projects and programmes beyond the current planning period £m	As a general contingency to meet other expenditure needs £m
General	**2.000**		**2.000**		**2.000**
Earmarked Revenue:					
Insurance	**0.250**		**0.250**		**0.250**
Operational Equipment	**0.070**	0.340	**0.410**		**0.410**
Carry Forwards	**0.012**	(0.012)	**0.000**		**0.000**
Smoothing	**0.977**	(0.747)	**0.230**		**0.230**
Transformation	**1.000**		**1.000**	(1.000)	**0.000**
Total Earmarked	**2.309**	**(0.419)**	**1.890**	**(1.000)**	**0.890**
Total Revenue	**4.309**	**(0.419)**	**3.890**	**(1.000)**	**2.890**
Capital:					
Capital Receipts	**0.442**	(0.400)	**0.042**	(0.042)	**0.000**
Capital and ESN Reserve	**0.063**		**0.063**	(0.063)	**0.000**
S106 Developer Contributions	**0.000**		**0.000**		**0.000**
Capital Grants Unapplied	**0.417**		**0.417**	(0.417)	**0.000**
Total Capital	**0.922**	**(0.400)**	**0.522**	**(0.522)**	**0.000**
Total Reserves	**5.231**	**(0.819)**	**4.412**	**(1.522)**	**2.890**

Note: numbers may not sum due to rounding

2.5. Once the Chief Fire Officer has completed their consideration of the operational requirements of the service, plans will be put in place to drawdown from the transformation reserve, which was set aside for this purpose.

2.6. Given the adequate but low level of revenue reserves held by NCFRA, the above table reflects the strategy intention to maintain them at a relatively stable level. However, it is acknowledged that this will be reduced once the Chief Fire Officer's plans take shape.

2.7. Capital reserves will be used to ensure that the capital programme is funded in the most appropriate and prudent manner.

3. General Reserve

3.1. In order to assess the adequacy of the unallocated general reserve when setting the budget, the PFCC, on the advice of the two Chief Finance Officers, should take account of the strategic, operational and financial risks facing the authority. This assessment of risk should include external risks, as well as internal risks, for example the ability to deliver planned efficiency savings.

3.2. Whilst there is no prescribed level of reserves that PFCCs should hold; it is influenced by individual discretion, local circumstances, advice from external auditors, risk management arrangements and risk appetite. CIPFA guidance specifically cautions against prescriptive national guidance for a minimum or maximum level of reserves and states:

"The many factors involved when considering appropriate levels of reserves can only be assessed properly at a local level. A considerable degree of professional judgement is required. The chief finance officer may choose to express advice on the level of balances in cash and/or as a percentage of budget (to aid understanding) so long as that advice is tailored to the circumstances of the authority."

3.3. However, the minimum level of reserves may be set for the authority by the Ministers in England and Wales where an authority does not act prudently, disregards the advice of its chief finance officer or is heading for financial difficulties.

3.4. CIPFA indicate a minimum general reserve level is typically between 2% and 3% of net budget requirement.

3.5. In Policing, average general reserves are around 5%. However, in Fire, there are even higher levels of general and earmarked reserves held. Home Office publications in recent years reflect that despite progress in building reserves, NCFRA still have the lowest level of reserves per core spending power across all Fire and Rescue Authorities in England and Wales.

3.6. In December 2022, prior to the provisional Local Government Settlement, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) issued a policy statement. The statement included specific mention of the level of reserves built up during the pandemic and which applies to Fire and Police as follows:

"The government notes the significant increase in some local authority reserves over the 2 years of the pandemic. We encourage local authorities to consider how they can use their reserves to maintain services in the face of immediate inflationary pressures., taking account, of course, of the need to maintain appropriate levels of reserves to support councils' financial sustainability and future investment. In order to support council members and local electorates to understand the reserves that their local authorities are holding and what they are used for, we will also explore releasing a user-friendly publication of the reserves data currently collected in the Local Authority Revenue Expenditure and Financing Outturn Statistics. We will consult with trusted partners, including the Local Government Association, about doing this".

3.7. The PFCC has considered his reserves strategy and wishes to hold a sufficient but not excessive level of reserves. In determining this position, Annexe 1 outlines how the PFCC complies with the 7 key CIPFA principles which can be used to assess the adequacy of reserves.

3.8. NCFRA have also considered the following factors:

- NCFRA are required to meet the first 1% of any special grant requirement.
- NCFRA was established without the transfer of any reserves.
- Local funding accounts for some 75% of NCFRA's funding streams, which can be affected by local taxpayers and business' ability to pay and can subject to volatility.

3.9. Given the above, it remains prudent to hold reserves at a reasonable level to provide a realistic and comfortable buffer to meet any eventualities, and to mitigate against any unplanned in-year changes being required. It is, therefore, imperative that the General Reserve is held at a sufficient level to mitigate such financial risks alongside any earmarked reserves.

3.10. The Chief Finance Officer advises that it would be prudent to maintain a sustainable and resilient level of general reserves at £2.0m or 5% (whichever is the higher).

3.11. The general reserve also holds the financial risk of any potential industrial action requirements should they arise.

3.12. At present, there are no plans to use the general reserve during the period of the MTFP. They are currently stabilised above 5% of revenue budget in each year of the MTFP as follows:

Year	£m	%
2024/25	**2.000**	6.4%
2025/26	**2.000**	6.2%
2026/27	**2.000**	6.1%
2027/28	**2.000**	5.9%
2028/29	**2.000**	5.8%

4. Earmarked Reserves

4.1. In addition to the general reserve, the PFCC holds a number of reserves which are earmarked for specific purposes.

4.2. At the 31/3/2024, it is estimated that the PFCC will hold £3.231m for Fire in earmarked reserves. The predicted position for each earmarked reserve as at 31/3/2024, together with further details is attached in Annexe 2 and 3.

4.3. The purposes of the different earmarked reserves are as follows:

- **Insurance** – To hold funds set aside where considered prudent for civil claims (Public and Employer liability) in line with professional advice.
- **Operational Equipment** – Given the age and condition of equipment transferred as part of the governance transfer, an annual operational equipment reserve contribution was established to smooth the impact and mitigate the costs of essential operational equipment replacement.
- **Carry Forwards** – To hold previous years underspends which are ring-fenced and carried forward for specific purposes in the medium term.
- **Smoothing** – To enable the savings generated to be earmarked and released over future years as needed, smoothing the impact of uncertain variations and timing of savings programmes on the revenue budget.
- **Transformation** – To support initiatives and transformative activities such as investments in technology and other innovation, and in line with operational priorities.
- **Capital Receipts** – To earmark receipts for disposal of capital assets for use as deemed appropriate to minimise the cost of future capital financing.
- **Capital and ESN Reserve** – To hold amounts set aside for capital investment, applied to the capital programme as deemed appropriate to minimise the cost of future capital financing.
- **Developer Contributions (S106)** – To collect the drawn down developer contributions awarded to the PFCC in line with S106 planning arrangements. These funds will be released in accordance with the terms of the agreements, usually to fund capital expenditure. The reserve only accounts for funds once they have been drawn down.
- **Capital Grants Unapplied** – To hold amounts grants received for specific capital investment, to be applied to the capital programme in line with the grant terms and as deemed appropriate to minimise the cost of future capital financing.

4.4. The forecast balance on the reserves, taking into account a prudent estimate of timings for proposals which are currently being developed is detailed within Annexe 2.

4.5. These reserves will be reviewed on a regular basis and any further opportunities to set aside earmarked reserves to support targeted expenditure and investment will be taken where appropriate.

5. Provisions

5.1. The CIPFA Statement of Recommended Practice is prescriptive about when provisions are required (and when they are not permitted). A provision must be established for any material liabilities of uncertain timings or amount, to be settled by the transfer of economic benefits. In accordance with this statutory guidance, the Force hold an established ‘Insurance Provision’ which is reviewed as part of the closedown process for each year.

6. Procedures for management and control

6.1. Any drawdown from reserves is subject to the approval of the PFCC, on advice from the PFCC's Chief Finance Officer (OPFCC CFO); or under the delegated authority of the OPFCC CFO.

6.2. The Local Government Act 2003 requires the S151 officer to report annually on the adequacy of the reserves and this is included within the statement on the robustness of the estimates used for the budget and the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.

6.3. The Strategy will be reviewed annually by the OPFCC CFO as part of the Budget and Precept process.

Annexe 1
NCFRA - Compliance with the 7 Key CIPFA Principles to assess the adequacy of reserves

Budget Assumptions (CIPFA Principles)	2024/25 Situation in Northamptonshire
The treatment of inflation and interest rates	NCFRA makes full and appropriate provision for pay and price increases, informed by benchmarking with peers. There are also pay and inflation contingencies held in the Fire budgets to mitigate such eventualities. An informed assessment is made in the Treasury Management Strategy of interest rate movements. All income and expenditure in the budget is prepared and published at outturn prices.
Estimates of the level and timing of capital receipts	NCFRA has reviewed its estates strategy as a fundamental part of the capital programme and has made assumptions of future capital receipts. The capital programme considerations require significant investment and until this has been concluded, only essential capital investment has been approved. The achievement of capital receipts in line with the proposed timings is essential to ensuring that prioritised capital investments can be progressed.
The treatment of demand led pressures	NCFRA is required to operate and manage within its annual budget allocation. All budgets except firefighters are devolved and managed by trained budget holders. On an exceptional basis, agreement of the PFCC is given to utilise carry forwards to meet one off demand led pressures. Demand led pressures are scrutinised and built into the budget on zero based budget principles. An agreed budget for Fire is set by the PFCC.

	The PFCC is keen to ensure that NCFRA continue to identify efficiencies where it makes sense to do so, and an efficiency target is set as part of the budget and MTFP and detailed within the annual strategic outcomes agreed with the Chief Fire Officer. Depending on funding availability, the PFCC has and will continue to support investment in areas that reduce demand, or which increase efficiency/capacity to deal with demand. General reserves are used as a last resort to manage and fund demand led pressures.
The treatment of Planned Efficiency Savings/Productivity Gains	NCFRA met all financial savings and challenges required by NCC in previous years. In the years post transfer, NCFRA has underspent each year and used the opportunity to increase reserves as a result. Each financial year is more challenging, but it is forecast the budget will be balanced with a minimal use of reserves. There is a savings plan aligned to the MTFP and any identified savings and efficiencies from service or governance transfers will be monitored and reviewed regularly by the service and are only included as achieved in budgets when confirmed and verified.
The financial risks inherent in any significant new funding partnerships, collaboration, major outsourcing arrangements or major capital developments.	The financial consequences of partnership collaboration working, outsourcing arrangements or capital investment will be reported to the PFCC as part of the medium term planning process. Where relevant, any additional costs are incorporated into the annual revenue budget and/or capital programme. There is a risk that partners will withdraw funding as their own budgets are squeezed, or that the continued viability of private sector commercial partners will be exposed to risk in the face of an economic recession.

The availability of reserves, government grants and other funds to deal with major contingencies and the adequacy of provisions.	NCFRA have built up appropriate reserves from a zero base to build a stable range earmarked reserves and provisions to meet specific expenditure items. Their use and balances are detailed in the attached annexe. NCFRA maintain an insurance provision, the adequacy of which is reviewed and monitored in detail by the legal services insurance advisors. NCFRA continue to build a general reserve to cover any major unforeseen circumstances, supported by earmarked reserves where appropriate to meet targeted investment in a planned manner which does not disproportionately impact on the revenue budget each year.
The general financial climate to which the Authority is subject	It is anticipated that the financial climate will continue to be challenging and the medium-term financial plan reflects the “best estimate” of future inflation rates and increases in government grants and contributions. The Commercial team keep the authority updated on matters/risks affecting large contracts and supply chain. The MTFP will be regularly reviewed and updated to support operational decision making.

Annexe 2

RESERVES OF THE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COMMISSIONER FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
2024/25 to 2028/29

	Rationale	How and when used	Level	Risk If Reserve Not Held	Management and control	Review
GENERAL RESERVE	To maintain a degree of in-year financial flexibility To enable NCFRA to deal with unforeseen circumstances and incidents. To manage and meet financial risks of any industrial action requirements. To set aside sums for known and potential liabilities.	To meet exceptional spending needs or overspends which are unable to be otherwise financed at the year end. To smooth the profile of revenue over a medium term financial period. To allow higher spending without raising council tax on a one-off basis.	To maintain a sustainable level of £2.0m of 5% (whichever is the higher)	The general reserve is held at a level which reflects risk, uncertainties and volatility. If no reserve is held there may be insufficient resources available for major catastrophe, which could jeopardise financial status and reputation of NCFRA. The PFCC would have recourse to discretionary special grant if costs exceed 1% of budget or CLG Bellwin scheme for natural disasters.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual
EARMARKED - INSURANCE	To cover the potential and contingent liabilities of uninsured risks as assessed annually by our insurers based on claims outstanding.	Balance will increase or reduce annually dependent on the NCFRA outstanding claims record. Established in 2018/19 following advice from legal service advisors. Level of reserve reviewed annually with the legal services advisers.	Will vary according to annual risk assessment.	The reserve is held to cover potential uninsured risks. If no reserve is held the NCFRA is potentially open to significant excess and claims payments in year beyond available revenue budgets which would fall on the general reserve. Assessment by insurers needs to be realistic not unduly pessimistic.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual

	Rationale	How and when used	Level	Risk If Reserve Not Held	Management and control	Review
EARMARKED - OPERATIONAL EQUIPMENT	To smooth the impact of operational equipment purchases on the revenue budget	To access the funds a costed request has to be provided.	Will vary according to usage and annual risk assessment.	The reserve is held to smooth the impact of operational equipment replacement rather than have significant variations in the budget. If no reserve is held, the risk is that equipment would have to be replaced from the current year's budget or capital programme.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual
EARMARKED – CARRY FORWARDS	For an underspend in one financial year to be set aside and ring fenced to meet any one off unbudgeted costs or new initiatives in a future year.	Balance will increase or reduce annually dependent on the workforce planning requirements.	Will vary according to year end outturn and usage.	Establishing a reserve enables an incentive and opportunity to utilise year end underspends in a manner which will provide additionality or benefit for the service in future years, rather than finding resources from in-year or reserves.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual
EARMARKED – SMOOTHING	To smooth the impact of fluctuations in the funding receipts from council tax and business rates as Business Rate levels are determined after the budget has been set. To collect efficiency savings realised to smooth the impact on future years budgets. To smooth the impact of budget fluctuations.	Balance will increase or decrease annually, dependent on council tax and business rate receipts.	Will vary according to annual risk assessment.	The reserve is held to receive any funding received in excess of the budget set and to utilise to ensure any variations are smoothed where appropriate. If no reserve is held, NCFRA are required to balance the budget through savings, contingencies and reserves. This reserve enables short term fluctuations to be managed more smoothly.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual

	Rationale	How and when used	Level	Risk If Reserve Not Held	Management and control	Review
EARMARKED - TRANSFORMATION	To build and maintain a reserve sufficient to support invest to save initiatives and provide initial funding to set up transformational activities.	To undertake initiatives and transformation without needing to use the annual operational budget.	Will vary according to activities.	The reserve is held to support the cost of transformation and investment without utilising the general reserve. If no reserve is held, PFCC could find it difficult to invest in transformational activities or savings would have to be made from operational budgets before any initiatives could be undertaken. If no funds were available, it may be that innovative activity is hindered.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual
EARMARKED - CAPITAL RECEIPTS	From sales of equipment above the capital de-minimis level and used to support the capital programme funding requirements.	Used to support funding the capital programme to minimise the cost of external borrowing on NCFRA and the taxpayer.	Will vary according to activities.	The reserve is held when equipment over a certain value is sold. This enables funds to be used in the most appropriate manner to meet capital expenditure and minimise the cost of borrowing.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual

	Rationale	How and when used	Level	Risk If Reserve Not Held	Management and control	Review
EARMARKED - ESN AND CAPITAL RESERVE	To meet the costs of ESN and other capital requirements to support the funding of the capital programme.	Used to support funding the capital programme to minimise the cost of external borrowing on NCFRA and the taxpayer.	Will vary according to activities.	The reserve is held from specific ESN funding or revenue underspends in previous years set aside to meet the revenue costs of capital expenditure. This enables funds to be used in the most appropriate manner to meet capital expenditure and minimise the cost of borrowing.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual
EARMARKED - DEVELOPER CONTRIBUTIONS (S106)	To meet the additional infrastructure and other requirements of new developments.	To implement new infrastructure required as a result of developments without needing to use the annual operational budget.	Will vary according to activities.	The reserve is held for funds allocated to NCFRA from developers towards the cost of NCFRA infrastructure developments. This enables funds to be used in the most appropriate manner to meet capital expenditure and minimise the cost of borrowing.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual
EARMARKED - CAPITAL GRANTS UNAPPLIED	Unapplied grants brought forward from the Governance Transfer with Northamptonshire County Council and additional one off grant received from the Home Office.	Used to support funding in accordance with the grant requirements to minimise the cost of external borrowing on NCFRA and the taxpayer if purchased from capital.	Will vary according to activities.	The reserve is held for grants awarded for a specific capital purpose. This enables funds to be used in the most appropriate manner to meet capital expenditure and minimise the cost of borrowing.	PFCC, on advice from PFCC CFO	Annual

Annexe 3

Summary of Reserves 2023/24 to 2028/2029

	Forecast Balance at 31 March 2024 £m	Forecast Balance at 31 March 2025 £m	Forecast Balance at 31 March 2026 £m	Forecast Balance at 31 March 2027 £m	Forecast Balance at 31 March 2028 £m	Forecast Balance at 31 March 2029 £m
Held to meet budgetary risks						
Insurance	0.250	0.250	0.250	0.250	0.250	0.250
Operational Equipment	0.070	0.110	0.210	0.310	0.410	0.410
	0.320	**0.360**	**0.460**	**0.560**	**0.660**	**0.660**
Held to support the medium term budget						
Carry Forwards	0.012	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Smoothing Reserve	0.977	0.230	0.230	0.230	0.230	0.230
	0.989	**0.230**	**0.230**	**0.230**	**0.230**	**0.230**
Held to facilitate change programmes						
Transformation Reserve	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	1.000	**1.000**	**1.000**	**1.000**	**1.000**	**1.000**
Committed to future capital programmes						
Capital Receipts	0.442	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042
Capital and ESN Reserve	0.063	0.063	0.063	0.063	0.063	0.063
S106 Developer Contributions	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Capital Grants Unapplied	0.417	0.417	0.417	0.417	0.417	0.417
	0.922	**0.522**	**0.522**	**0.522**	**0.522**	**0.522**
Total Earmarked Reserves	**3.231**	**2.112**	**2.212**	**2.312**	**2.412**	**2.412**
General Fund	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000
Total Reserves	**5.231**	**4.112**	**4.212**	**4.312**	**4.412**	**4.412**