

Financial Reserves Policy.



Aldington and Bonnington Parish Council.

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Purpose:

Aldington and Bonnington Parish Council is required to maintain adequate financial reserves to meet the needs of the organisation. The purpose of this policy is to set out how the Council will determine and review the level of general fund reserves.

Sections 32 and 43 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 require local authorities to have regard to the level of reserves needed for meeting estimated future expenditure when calculating the budget requirement. However, there is no specified minimum level of reserves that an authority should hold and it is the responsibility of the Responsible Financial Officer to advise the Council about the level of reserves and to ensure that there are key protocols for their establishment and use. The determination of the Council's reserves will be consistent with meeting the Council's overall strategic objectives, i.e.

- i. improving the quality of the Parish's amenities.
- ii. Promoting the Villages and encouraging inward investment and visitors.
- iii. Strengthening the quality of its community.
- iv. Optimising the Council's administrative costs, assets and income from assets.

The Governance & Accountability For Local Councils Practitioners Guide 2014 stipulates:

2.25 ...as councils have no legal powers to hold revenue reserves other than those for reasonable working capital needs or for specifically earmarked purposes, whenever a council's year-end general reserve is significantly higher than the annual precept, an explanation should be provided to the auditor. Earmarked reserves, which are set aside for specific purposes and for savings for future projects, should be realistic and approved by the council. However, the amount of general reserve should annually be risk assessed and approved by the Council.

Types of Reserves:

Reserves can be categorised as general (held to cushion the impact of uneven cash flows or unexpected events) or earmarked (held for a specific purpose).

Specific Reserves: - as the name suggests these represent amounts which are "earmarked" for specific items of expenditure to meet known or predicted liabilities or projects. Specific Reserves are often used to "smooth" the effects of certain expenditure commitments over a period of time thereby reducing the impact of significant expenditure in any one year. "Earmarked" reserves are typically held for five main reasons:

Renewals: - to plan and finance an effective programme of equipment replacement and planned property repair/maintenance; and grounds maintenance. These reserves are a mechanism to smooth expenditure so that a sensible replacement programme can be

achieved without the need to vary budgets.

Carry forward of Underspend:- Some expenditure budgeted for projects in a given financial year cannot be spent in that year. Reserves are used as a mechanism to carry forward these resources.

Trading accounts: - in some instances surpluses may be retained for future investment.

Insurance Reserve: - to meet the estimate of future claims to enable the Council to meet the excesses not covered by insurance.

Other earmarked reserves:- may be set up from time to time to meet known or predicted liabilities.

General Revenue Balances:- this is often referred to as the “working balance”. This typically comprises of three elements. The first is a sum of money which is not earmarked for specific purposes but rather set aside to deal with unexpected events or emergencies. This “minimum working balance” needs to be regularly reviewed using a risk based assessment. The second is money held in anticipation of uneven cash flow, (for example the precept income received 6 monthly in advance and VAT reclaimed quarterly retrospectively) any amount held in excess of these make up the third sum of monies, and is usually created through surpluses as a result of activities being postponed or cancelled. Reserves of this nature can be spent or earmarked at the discretion of members, subject to approval by Council.

Legislative and Regulatory Framework

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy published guidance in 2003 in support of these matters and it is a requirement of the guidance, backed by legislation through the provisions contained in the Local Government Act 2003 that the Council's Responsible Financial Officer reports to members on the robustness and plans to utilise the Council's reserves and balances. The statement to all members should include:

- The estimated opening and closing General Revenue Balances for the year;
- The estimated addition to and withdrawal from Balances;

The Responsible Financial Officer is also required to provide a statement on the adequacy of the General Revenue Fund, reserves and provisions in relation to the forthcoming financial year and also over the medium term. In reporting generally on the reserves and balances, the Responsible Financial Officer is also required to report on the Specific Reserves of the Parish Council, outlining the purpose for which each is held, establishing an appropriate level of reserve and highlighting any proposed changes during the forthcoming year.

Principles to Assess the Adequacy of Balances and Reserves:

In order to assess the adequacy of unallocated General Reserves when setting the budget, the Responsible Financial Officer should take account of the strategic, operational and financial risks facing the Council. The financial risks should be assessed in the context of the Council's overall approach to risk management. The Responsible Financial Officer needs to ensure that the Council has put in place effective arrangements for internal audit of the control environment and systems of internal control as required by professional

standards.

Setting the level of General Reserves is just one of several related decisions in the formulation of the medium term financial strategy and the budget for a particular year. Account should be taken of the key financial assumptions underpinning the budget alongside a consideration of the Parish Council's financial management arrangements. In addition to the cash flow requirements of the Council the following factors should be considered.

Budget Assumptions	Financial standing and management
The treatment of inflation and interest rates	The overall financial standing of the Parish Council (level of borrowing, debt outstanding, collection rates etc.)
Estimates of the level and timing of capital receipts	The authority's track record in budget and financial management including the robustness of the medium term plans.
The treatment of demand led pressures	The Parish Council's capacity to manage in-year budget pressures
The treatment of planned efficiency savings / productivity gains	The strength of the financial information and reporting arrangements
The financial risks inherent in any significant new funding partnerships, major outsourcing arrangements or major capital developments. The availability of other funds to deal with major contingencies and the adequacy of provisions	The Parish Council's virement and end of year procedures in relation to budget under/overspends. The adequacy of the insurance arrangements to cover major unforeseen risks.

A considerable degree of professional judgement is required. The Responsible Financial Officer should provide advice set in the context of the Council's medium term financial plan and should not focus exclusively on short-term considerations.

Balancing the annual budget by drawing on General Reserves may be viewed as a legitimate short-term option. However, where reserves are to be deployed to finance recurrent expenditure this should be made explicit. Advice should be given on the adequacy of reserves over the lifetime of the medium term financial plan.

Governance concerning the Balances and Reserves.

The policy on Balances and Reserves will be reviewed annually as part of the review of Financial Regulations and reported to the Parish Council as part of the budget setting process. This will include a statement from the Responsible Financial Officer on the adequacy of the General Reserve fund and Specific Reserves in respect of the forthcoming financial year and the Council's medium term financial plan.

The Council will have the opportunity to review the levels of Specific Reserve held in accordance with the Parish Council's Financial Regulations and make recommendations for the creation of additional Specific Reserves as part of the Annual budgeting process.

The Council will be required to identify the following when making recommendations for each reserve:

- the reason for/purpose of the reserve
- how and when the reserve can be used
- procedures for the reserve's management and control
- a process and timescales for review of the reserve to ensure continuing relevance and adequacy.

General Reserve balances will be held by the Parish to cushion the impact of uneven cash flows and the impact of unexpected, unforeseen, emergency and uninsured situation. Decisions on the level of reserve to be held will be made as part of the Annual Budgeting process and following completion of appropriate risk assessments by the Responsible Financial Officer.

Reserves currently maintained:

The Parish Council currently maintains the following “earmarked” reserves:-

- Contingency – held in case of a bi-election and any potential excess resulting from an insurance claim against the Council.
- Play Equipment – to provide for the maintenance and subsequent replacement of the Council's assets.
- Quarry Field – monies that were donated to the purchase and the upkeep of the site
- Monies from the Aldington Meadows Section 106 monies, specific projects and the maintenance of the site. This is allocated into three amounts in accordance with the agreement and will not be replenished.
- General funds – the working balance of the Council maintained to cover cash flow as Precept is received 6 monthly in advance and VAT refunded retrospectively on a quarterly basis.