

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 25TH NOVEMBER 2020, 2.30 PM

THE LANCASTRIAN, TOWN HALL, CHORLEY AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

I am now able to enclose, for consideration at the above meeting of the Governance Committee, the following report that was unavailable when the agenda was published.

Agenda No Item

5 **AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT**

(Pages 29 - 46)

To receive and consider the report of the External Auditor, Grant Thornton.

GARY HALL
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Electronic agendas sent to Members of the Governance Committee

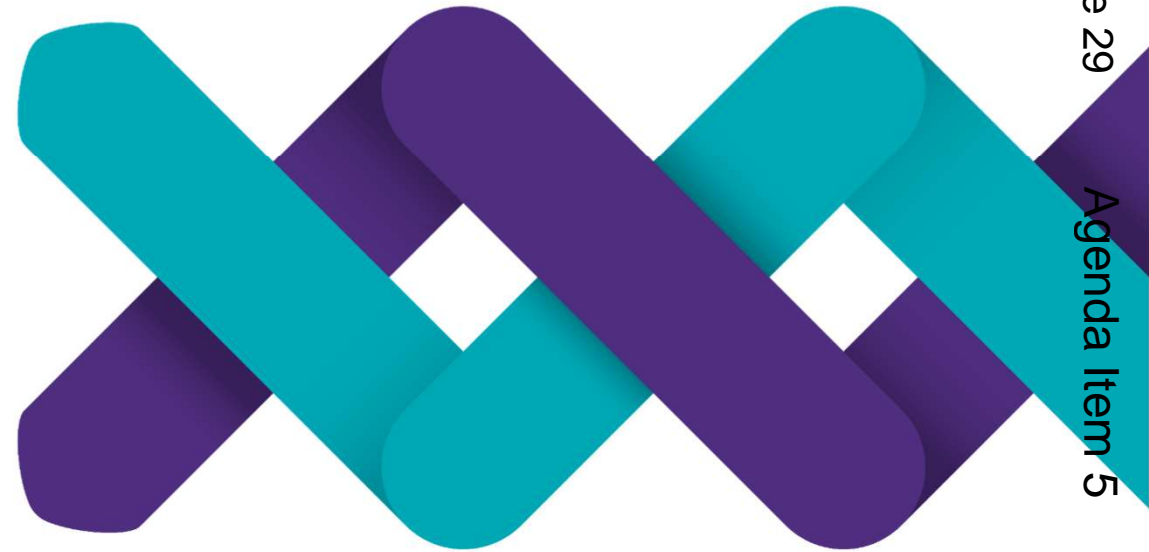
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Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

Chorley Borough Council
Year ending 31 March 2020

18 November 2020



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Agenda Item 5

Introduction

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This paper provides the Governance Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors.

The paper also includes:

- a summary of emerging national issues and developments that may be relevant to you as a local authority; and
- includes a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider (these are a tool to use, if helpful, rather than formal questions requiring responses for audit purposes)

Members of the Governance Committee can find further useful material on our website, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector. Here you can download copies of our publications

www.grantthornton.co.uk

If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, or would like to register with Grant Thornton to receive regular email updates on issues that are of interest to you, please contact either your Engagement Lead or Engagement Manager.

PSAA Contract Monitoring

Chorley Borough Council opted into the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) Appointing Person scheme which starts with the 2018/19 audit. PSAA appointed Grant Thornton as auditors. PSAA is responsible under the Local Audit (Appointing Person) Regulations 2015 for monitoring compliance with the contract and is committed to ensuring good quality audit services are provided by its suppliers. Details of PSAA's audit quality monitoring arrangements are available from its website, www.psaa.co.uk.

Our contract with PSAA contains a method statement which sets out the firm's commitment to deliver quality audit services, our audit approach and what clients can expect from us.

Progress at November 2020

Financial Statements Audit

Our planning for the 2019/20 audit is still in progress as we await information from management. Requests for information have been outstanding for a number of months and we are unable to complete our planning procedures until these are received.

We issued a detailed audit plan setting out our proposed approach to the audit of the Council's 2019/20 financial statements in September 2020, based on the information that we had at that time alongside our existing knowledge of the Council.

We received a 'semi-complete' version of your draft 2019/20 financial statements on the 19 October 2020, this was significantly later than the 31 August 2020 deadline. We have liaised with officers to commence the audit but sufficient and appropriate audit evidence has not been provided and officers have highlighted that large elements of the draft financial statements provided are not finalised and, as such, are not auditable. We have therefore agreed with officers that the substantive audit work will not commence until we are provided with a final version of the draft financial statements that officers of the Council have confidence in.

Our original intention was to provide our Audit Findings Report to this Committee, However, the delays by the Council in providing financial statements that are fit for audit have precluded us being able to commence our audit work. The outcome of our financial statements audit will therefore need to be communicated to a future Governance Committee. At this time, we are unable to commit to when this might be as it is dependent on the receipt of a final version of the financial statements that we are able to audit, supported by sufficient and appropriate audit evidence. In reality, we understand that this is unlikely to be the case until December 2020 which will mean our audit will continue well into 2021.

There have been additional audit costs incurred as a result of the delays and the need to chase for outstanding information that will be passed onto the Council.

Value for Money

The scope of our work is set out in the guidance issued by the National Audit Office. The Code requires auditors to satisfy themselves that; "the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources".

The guidance confirmed the overall criterion as: "in all significant respects, the audited body had proper arrangements to ensure it took properly informed decisions and deployed resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people".

The three sub criteria for assessment to be able to give a conclusion overall are:

- Informed decision making
- Sustainable resource deployment
- Working with partners and other third parties

Details of our initial risk assessment to determine our approach can be seen in our Audit Plan.

Similar to the financial statements audit, our requests for information to support our value for money work have not been responded to. Until we receive sufficient and appropriate evidence to address the risks we have identified, we will not be able to conclude whether the council had proper arrangements in place.

The NAO consultation on a new Code of Audit Practice (the "Code") has finished, and the new Code has completed its approval process in Parliament. It therefore came into force on 1 April 2020 for audit years 2020/21 and onwards. The new Code supersedes the Code of Audit Practice 2015, which was published by the National Audit Office (NAO) in April 2015.

The most significant change under the new Code is the introduction of an Auditor's Annual Report, containing a commentary on arrangements to secure value for money and any associated recommendations. The NAO public consultation ran until 2 September 2020. The NAO will now analyse all consultation responses received and consider what changes are required to the draft guidance. Please see page 18 for more details.

Progress at October 2020 (Cont.)

Other areas

Certification of claims and returns

We certify the Council's annual Housing Benefit Subsidy claim in accordance with procedures agreed with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Work on this return has yet to commence. The original reporting deadline of 30 November deadline has been moved by the DWP, in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, back to 31 January 2021. Given the delays in the production of the financial statements highlighted previously, we will need to liaise with officers on whether we prioritise the completion of the financial statements audit or the certification of this return.

Meetings

We liaise regularly with Finance Officers and the Chief Executive regarding emerging developments to ensure the audit process is smooth and effective. Clearly the priority at present is the resolution of the 2019-20 audit.

Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Council. We will keep officers and members updated on upcoming events.

Further details of the publications that may be of interest to the Council are set out in our Sector Update section of this report.

Audit Fees

Our work in the Local Government sector in 2018/19 highlighted areas where financial reporting, in particular, property, plant and equipment and pensions, needs to improve. There is also an increase in the complexity of Local Government financial transactions and financial reporting. This combined with the FRC requirement that all Local Government audits are at or above the "few improvements needed" (2A) rating means that additional audit work is required.

We have reviewed the impact of these changes on both the cost and timing of all our audits. We have discussed the estimated impact on fees for 2019/20 for Chorley Borough Council and this was presented to the last Governance Committee meeting in the Audit Plan. These have been shared with PSAA who have approved these in principle subject to final sign off of the final fee variations following completion of the audit.

As a firm, we are absolutely committed to meeting the expectations of the FRC with regard to audit quality and local government financial reporting.

In addition, Covid 19 has impacted on the time taken for the Council to produce its financial statements and ourselves in managing and delivering the audit in a more remote working environment. This has clearly impacted our work and we will need to review the actual audit inputs required at the conclusion of the audit, to assess any fee implications arising from this.

In our experience, based on the indications from audits being undertaken to date, the issues highlighted above are increasing the time taken on audits by an average of 25%. We understand from discussions with the ICAEW that this is similar to other firms. We are mitigating this as far as possible through reduced travel time and travel costs and will be looking how we can absorb some of the remaining overrun ourselves. However, this will not be sufficient to cover the full additional cost.

We are aware that the Council's finances are constrained and we will seek to minimise these costs as best we can. Whilst it is too soon to estimate the extent of additional cost to the Council it is important to highlight this matter to you. We will discuss any additional costs with the Council's s151 Officer and Chief Executive as we progress further towards the concluding stages of the audit. We hope the explanation above and the recent Redmond report (that indicates that, before the impact of Covid 19 is taken into account, audit fees are under-priced by 25%) provides some context to any additional fees and the actions we are taking to mitigate them.

Audit Deliverables (updated – Covid-19 impact)

2019/20 Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<p>Fee Letter</p> <p>Confirming audit fee for 2019/20. We have appended the updated fee letter seeking additional fees as a result of the increased regulatory focus facing all audit suppliers.</p>	April 2019	Complete
<p>Accounts Audit Plan</p> <p>We are required to issue a detailed accounts audit plan to the Governance Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Council's 2019-20 financial statements. This includes the findings of our value for money initial risk assessment.</p>	September 2020	Complete
<p>Interim Audit Findings</p> <p>We will report to you the findings from our interim audit in our Audit Progress Report.</p>	November 2020	We are awaiting information from officers to conclude our planning procedures.
<p>Audit Findings Report</p> <p>The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the October Governance Committee.</p>	November 2020	We are awaiting a final set of financial statements that the officers have confidence in, together with sufficient and appropriate evidence in order for us to commence our audit.
<p>Auditors Report</p> <p>This is the opinion on your financial statements, annual governance statement and value for money conclusion.</p>	November 2020	As above.
<p>Annual Audit Letter</p> <p>This letter communicates the key issues arising from our work.</p>	November 2020	This has been deferred until the completion of the Audit.

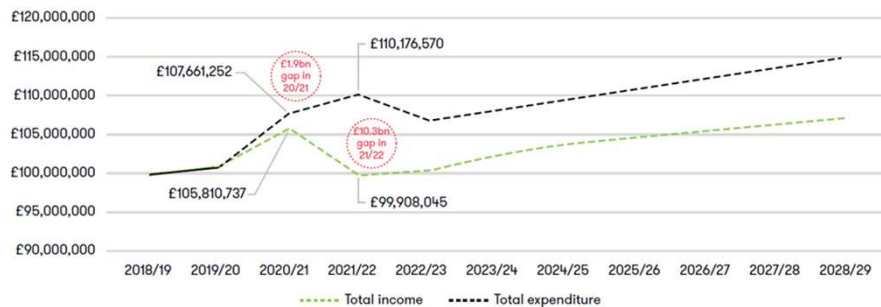
Covid-19 update – Grant Thornton

Where are we now?

Over five months into lockdown and councils have moved from the initial emergency response phase to focus on recovery planning which is running in parallel with on-going responses to the pandemic, such as supporting vulnerable people, and managing the capacity challenges of delivering business as usual alongside covid-19 response.

The Government has confirmed three tranches of funding to support the impact of increase spend and reduced income directly attributed to Covid-19, and are in the process of confirming further support via the income compensation scheme.

Local Authority Income and Expenditure (England) 2018/19 to 2028/29



Source: Grant Thornton/CIPFA Financial Foresight

Financial Foresight (a Grant Thornton future look analytics platform building on our CFO Insights and Place Analytics data) forecast indicates that English local authorities have a funding gap of £1.9bn this financial year, rising to over £10bn in 2021/22. There is significant uncertainty as to whether the Government will provide further Covid-19 related funding, and what the medium-term funding for the sector will be following the Autumn's Comprehensive Spending Review. Our modelling currently assumes that government funding will remain broadly unchanged, with income being affected by ongoing reduction to Council Tax and Business Rates, both in terms of a reduction to these tax bases, alongside reduced payments as a consequence of the recession brought about by the pandemic.

The uncertainty also impacts on future spending pressures and sales fees and charges income. For example, leisure centres and swimming pools can now be opened, but must follow Government guidelines on issues such as social distancing. Not all leisure services have been able to reopen, and those that have are not able to generate levels of income originally forecast pre-covid. Social care faces uncertainty in relation to future demand, for example most councils responsible for children's services are forecasting an increase in case load when children return to schools in September. For adults, where in some cases demand has fallen during the pandemic, there is uncertainty over future levels of demand. There is also concern over provider failure in relation to social care and other services such as leisure and transport, with many councils providing financial support and loans to some providers, which will not be sustainable in the medium term.

As place leaders, councils are managing the conflict between revitalizing footfall in high streets and keeping people safe, with some leading by example and encouraging council officers to spend some of the week in council offices. Use of public transport as a key mode of travel to get to work remains a particular challenge.

Lessons learned

All organisations, including councils, have been reflecting on the lessons learned from the pandemic, and are seeking to maintain the positive experiences as well as learn from the challenges, as part of recovery planning. There is a recognition that technology has enabled many people to successfully work remotely, and that this will have a fundamental impact on working patterns well after Covid-19 has passed. Councils are reviewing their property portfolios to understand the changes required in terms of future usage patterns, including how councils interact with their communities, whether parts of the municipal estate should be disposed, and whether alternate use of space can support income generation.

There will be demographic variations between places, meaning there is no "one size fits all" to economic recovery. For example, home to work geographies will vary, with some people who previously commuted into a council area for their work may now be considering office space closer to home, leading to a rise in demand for shared office space in some areas, that will in part countervail the fall in demand elsewhere.

Covid-19 update (cont'd)

Lessons Learned (Cont'd)

Many councils have recognized the improvement in community engagement and partnership working with the voluntary sector and other public sector organisations during the pandemic and are seeking to build on this, with a recognition that sharing responsibility for place-based recovery plans can help sustain the improvements gained. Although a shared view of place-based recovery takes an investment of time and resource that not all partner organisations are able to provide.

Wider learning relates to central vs local response to issues such as provision of PPE, housing the homeless and rough sleepers, and provision of food and equipment to the vulnerable. This is currently playing out on test and trace and how local lockdowns should be managed, with ongoing tension between national and local government.

Many councils understand the importance of data in supporting recovery planning decision making, to effectively understand where to prioritise resources and activity in the right way and at the right time to achieve the right outcomes.

The future?

Covid-19 has only increased volatility and uncertainty for local government, and when working with councils delivering Financial Foresight we have prioritized scenario planning to support strategic financial planning. Understanding best, worst and optimum case scenarios from the impact of the pandemic are critical in strategic discussion when setting next year's budget and updating the Medium-Term Financial Plan – impacts on the place and communities, as well as on the council services and the council as an organization. Some councils are more confident than others in being able to manage their financial position during 2020/21 but all are concerned about 2021/22 and beyond. And it is not just Covid-19 scenarios that need to be understood, but other global, national and local issues that will impact over the medium term, including the impact of a no deal Brexit trade deal, and new government policies such as those expected on devolution and health and social care integration.

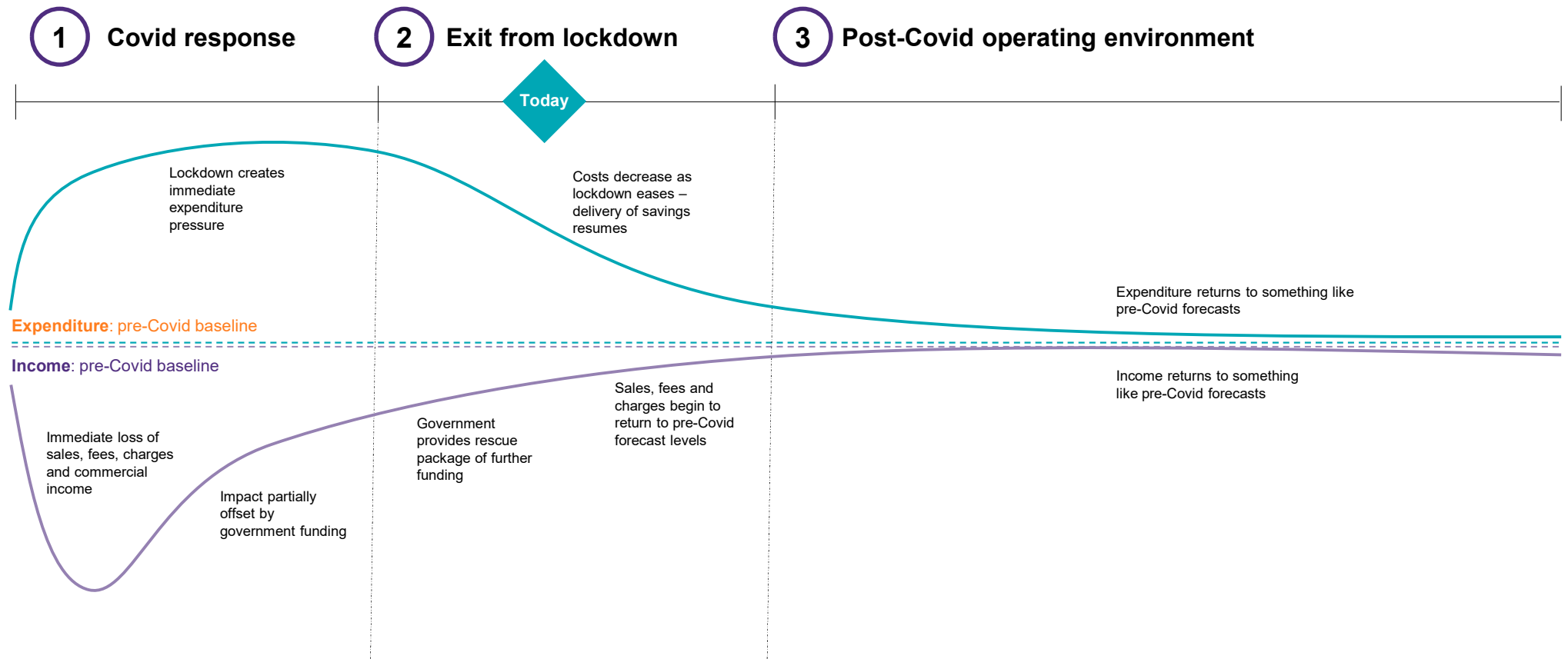
As already noted, places will vary depending on their socio-economic and demographic characteristics, but all councils are working through demand impacts arising from the ongoing pandemic and the associated recession, and ensuring their workforce continue to be supported to ensure they remain personally resilient.

Until a vaccine has been successfully produced and rolled out, the public health threat remains, and there are likely to be further local lockdowns, such as we have seen in Leicester and towns in the north west of England. There could be difficult trade offs for national and local politicians to consider to avert further waves of restrictions. For example to keep schools open after they return in September, will there be a need to increase restrictions elsewhere to ensure the cases of Covid-19 remain at a management level?

Local government has always demonstrated a remarkable resilience in managing significant challenges, including ten years of austerity, and being at the forefront of the pandemic response. And whilst much uncertainty remains, we are confident that councils will continue to demonstrate the capacity to lead places, deliver services.

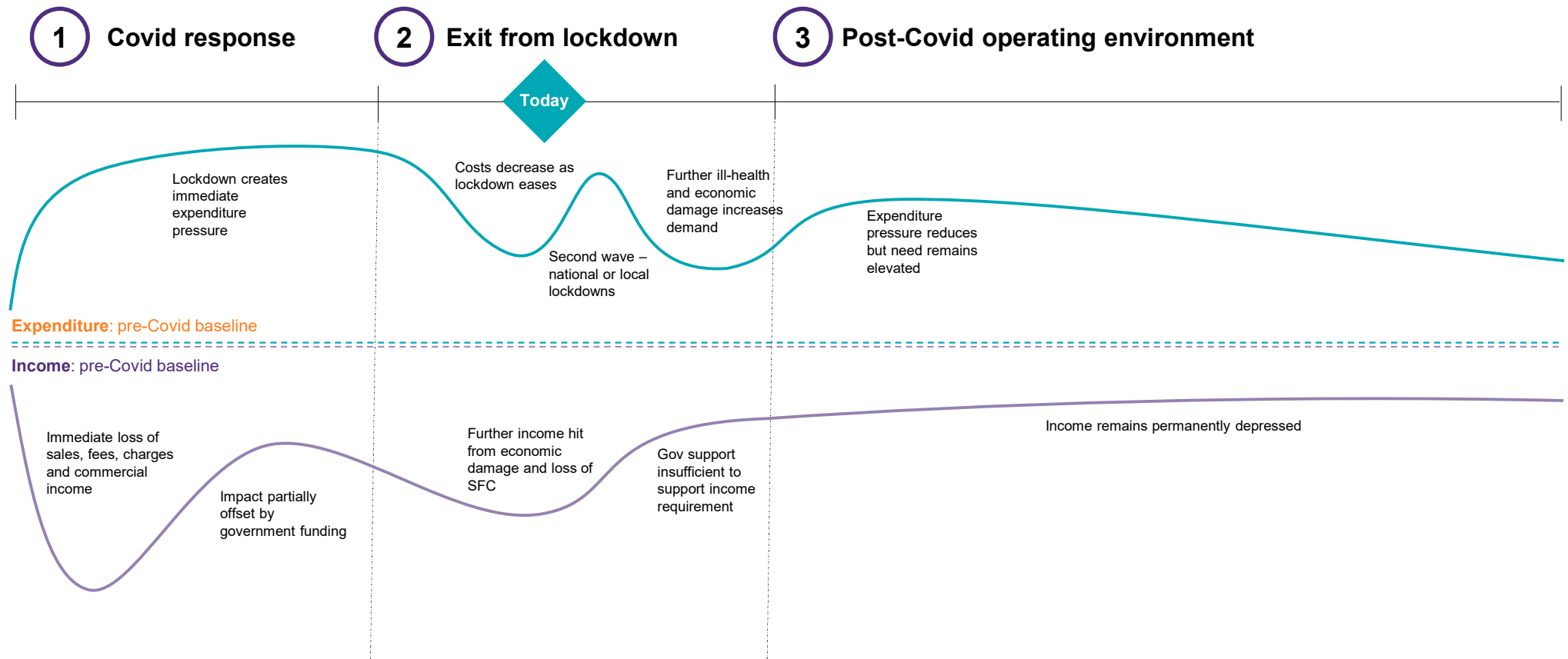
Example scenarios

Scenario 1 – swift return to normality









Example scenarios (Cont'd)

Scenario 2 – second wave and ongoing disruption



Scenarios and hypotheses

Local authority areas in 12-24 months?

Theme	Reasonable worst case	Reasonable best case
People & community	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple lockdowns and ongoing disruption Community dependency and expectation of sustained response Turbulence and activism within the VCS Socio-economic inequality is compounded Failure of leisure and cultural services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smooth exit from lockdown to a “new normal” Community mobilisation is channelled into ongoing resilience Strengthened VCS relationships and focus Systemic response to inequality is accelerated Leisure and cultural services adapted to social distancing
Business & economy	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% reduction in GVA for 2020 based on OBR reference scenario Slow / uneven economic recovery and “long tail” on unemployment Central gov / BEIS focus investment on areas furthest behind Loss of tourist & student spend causes unmitigated damage 'V' shaped recovery results in 2-3 year recovery period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5-10% reduction in GVA Rapid economic recovery with employment levels close behind Central government “back winners” with investment Adaptation allows resumption of tourist and student economy Business base is weighted towards growth sectors
Health & wellbeing	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased demand and escalating need due to fallout from lockdown Newly-vulnerable cohorts place strain on the system Unit costs increase further as markets deteriorate and providers fail SEND transport unable to adapt to social distancing Imposed disruption of care system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive lifestyle changes and attitudes to care reduce demand Needs of newly vulnerable cohorts met through new service models New investment in prevention and market-shaping manage costs New ways of working leading to stronger staff retention Locally-led reform of health and care system
Political & regulatory	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local government side-lined by a centralised national recovery effort Unfunded burdens (e.g. enforcement and contact-tracing) Councils in the firing line for mismanaging recovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local government empowered as leaders of place-based recovery Devolution and empowerment of localities Councils at the forefront of civic and democratic renewal
Environment	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity missed to capture and sustain environmental benefits The end of the high street / town centres Emissions and air quality worsened by avoidance of public transport Capital programmes stuck 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to invest in transport modal shift and green infrastructure Changed working patterns rejuvenate town centres Sustained impact on emissions due to new behaviours New, shovel-ready infrastructure programmes
Organisational	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate funding forces fiscal constraint Working practices return to status quo – increased operating costs Imposed structural change within the place Austerity 2 Commercial portfolio becomes a liability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adequate funding enables a programme of targeted investment Learning and adaptation to new operating environment Energised system-wide collaboration and reform Fiscal reform and civic renewal Commercial portfolio reshaped for economic and social gain

What strategy is needed in response?

From response to recovery

Learn, adapt and prioritise

- Develop and test hypotheses around impact on place, services, operations, finances
- Design rapid interventions - implement, test and evaluate
- Learning from the response to lock in the good stuff – reflection on operations, services and the system
- Set priorities and principles – what is the Council's purpose in an uncertain context and where will it focus?

Mitigating the worst case

Consolidate and build resilience

- Ensure that emergency management and response structures are resilient for the long haul
- What is the minimum operating model to deliver this?
- Predict and model demand for social care and assess care market vulnerability
- Contingency plans for structural disruption
- Re-evaluate infrastructure pipeline

Steering towards the best case

Invest in renewal

- Programme of priority-based investment framed by recovery and renewal
- Focus on inequality, community resilience, targeted economic stimulus, skills and employment support and adapting public spaces
- Continued system leadership, pushing for positive reform and resilience

Sector Update

Councils continue to try to achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of public services, whilst facing the challenges to address rising demand, ongoing budget pressures and social inequality.

Our sector update provides you with an up to date summary of emerging national issues and developments to support you. We cover areas which may have an impact on your organisation, the wider local government sector and the public sector as a whole. Links are provided to the detailed report/briefing to allow you to delve further and find out more.

Our public sector team at Grant Thornton also undertake research on service and technical issues. We will bring you the latest research publications in this update. We also include areas of potential interest to start conversations within the organisation and with audit committee members, as well as any accounting and regulatory updates.

- **Grant Thornton Publications**
- **Insights from local government sector specialists**
- **Reports of interest**
- **Accounting and regulatory updates**

More information can be found on our dedicated public sector and local government sections on the Grant Thornton website by clicking on the logos below:

Public Sector

Local
government

The Redmond Review

The Independent Review into the Oversight of Local Audit and the Transparency of Local Authority Financial Reporting – “The Redmond Review” was published on 8 September.

The review has examined the effectiveness of local audit and its ability to demonstrate accountability for audit performance to the public. It also considered whether the current means of reporting the Authority’s annual accounts enables the public to understand this financial information and receive the appropriate assurance that the finances of the authority are sound.

The Review received 156 responses to the Calls for Views and carried out more than 100 interviews. The Review notes “A regular occurrence in the responses to the calls for views suggests that the current fee structure does not enable auditors to fulfil the role in an entirely satisfactory way. To address this concern an increase in fees must be a consideration. With 40% of audits failing to meet the required deadline for report in 2018/19, this signals a serious weakness in the ability of auditors to comply with their contractual obligations. The current deadline should be reviewed. A revised date of 30 September gathered considerable support amongst respondents who expressed concern about this current problem. This only in part addresses the quality problem. The underlying feature of the existing framework is the absence of a body to coordinate all stages of the audit process.”

Key recommendations in the report include:

- A new regulator - the Office of Local Audit and Regulation (OLAR) to replace the Financial Reporting Council’s (FRC) role and that of Public Sector Auditor Appointments (PSAA)
- Scope to revise fees - the current fee structure for local audit be revised to ensure that adequate resources are deployed to meet the full extent of local audit requirements
- Move back to a September deadline for Local Authorities - the deadline for publishing audited local authority accounts be revisited with a view to extending it to 30 September from 31 July each year
- Accounts simplification - CIPFA/LASAAC be required to review the statutory accounts to determine whether there is scope to simplify the presentation of local authority accounts.

The OLAR would manage, oversee and regulate local audit with the following key responsibilities:

- procurement of local audit contracts;
- producing annual reports summarising the state of local audit;
- management of local audit contracts;
- monitoring and review of local audit performance;
- determining the code of local audit practice; and
- regulating the local audit sector.

The current roles and responsibilities relating to local audit discharged by the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA); Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW); FRC; and The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) to be transferred to the OLAR.

How you can respond to the Review

One of the recommendations was for local authorities to implement:

The governance arrangements within local authorities be reviewed by local councils with the purpose of:

- an annual report being submitted to Full Council by the external auditor;
- consideration being given to the appointment of at least one independent member, suitably qualified, to the Audit Committee; and
- formalising the facility for the CEO, Monitoring Officer and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to meet with the Key Audit Partner at least annually.

Whilst Redmond requires legislation, in practice the second and third bullets are things which authorities could start doing now.

The full report can be obtained from the gov.uk website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-financial-reporting-and-external-audit-independent-review>

Code of Audit Practice and revised approach to Value for Money audit work - National Audit Office

On 1 April 2020, the National Audit Office introduced a new Code of Audit Practice which comes into effect from audit year 2020/21. The most significant change in the Code is the introduction of a new 'Auditor's Annual Report', which brings together the results of all the auditor's work across the year. The Code also introduced a revised approach to the audit of Value for Money.

Value for Money - Key changes

There are three main changes arising from the NAO's new approach:

- A new set of key criteria, covering governance, financial sustainability and improvements in economy, efficiency and effectiveness
- More extensive reporting, with a requirement on the auditor to produce a commentary on arrangements across all of the key criteria, rather than the current 'reporting by exception' approach
- The replacement of the binary (qualified / unqualified) approach to VfM conclusions, with far more sophisticated judgements on performance, as well as key recommendations on any significant weaknesses in arrangements identified during the audit.

The new approach to VfM re-focuses the work of local auditors to:

- Promote more timely reporting of significant issues to local bodies
- Provide more meaningful and more accessible annual reporting on VfM arrangements issues in key areas
- Provide a sharper focus on reporting in the key areas of financial sustainability, governance, and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness
- Provide clearer recommendations to help local bodies improve their arrangements.

Implications of the changes

Grant Thornton very much welcomes the changes, which will support auditors in undertaking and reporting on work which is more meaningful, and makes impact with audited bodies and the public. We agree with the move away from a binary conclusion, and with the replacement of the Annual Audit Letter with the new Annual Auditor's Report. The changes will help pave the way for a new relationship between auditors and audited bodies which is based around constructive challenge and a drive for improvement.

The following are the main implications in terms of audit delivery:

- The Auditor's Annual Report will need to be published at the same time as the Auditor's Report on the Financial Statements.
- Where auditors identify weaknesses in Value for Money arrangements, there will be increased reporting requirements on the audit team. We envisage that across the country, auditors will be identifying more significant weaknesses and consequently making an increased number of recommendations (in place of what was a qualified Value for Money conclusion). We will be working closely with the NAO and the other audit firms to ensure consistency of application of the new guidance.
- The new approach will also potentially be more challenging, as well as rewarding, for audited bodies involving discussions at a wider and more strategic level. Both the reporting, and the planning and risk assessment which underpins it, will require more audit time, delivered through a richer skill mix than in previous years.

The Code can be accessed here:

https://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2020/01/Code_of_audit_practice_2020.pdf

Local government reorganisation in two-tier shire counties – County Councils’ Network

The County Councils’ Network (CCN) has published new independent evidence on the implications of local government reorganisation in two-tier shire counties ahead of the publication of the government’s ‘devolution and local recovery’ white paper.

The report identifies considerations relating to:

- the costs associated with disaggregation;
- what this might mean in terms of risk and resilience of service provision;
- how service performance might be impacted;
- what it could mean for the place agenda; and
- issues arising from the response to Covid-19.

The report also sets out the financial implications of four unitary scenarios:

- Establishing one unitary authority in every two-tier area in England.
- Establishing two new unitary authorities in every two-tier area in England.
- Establishing three new unitary authorities in every two-tier area in England.
- Establishing two new unitary authorities and a children’s trust in every two-tier area in England.

CNN note “With councils in shire counties facing billions in rising costs for care services, alongside financial deficits caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, the study from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) shows merging district and county councils in each area into a single unitary council could save £2.94bn over five years nationally.”

CNN go on to comment “The report concludes a single unitary in each area would reduce complexity and give communities a single unified voice to government. It would provide a clear point of contact for residents, businesses and a platform to ‘maximise’ the benefits of strategic economic growth and housing policy; integral to the ‘levelling-up’ agenda and securing devolution.

However, the report shows replacing county and districts with two unitary authorities in each area would reduce the financial benefit by two-thirds to £1bn over five years, with three unitary authorities delivering a net loss of £340m over the same period. A fourth scenario of a two-unitary and children’s trust model in each county would deliver a net five year saving of £269m.

Alongside a minimum £1.9bn in additional costs from splitting county council services, the report outlines the establishment of multiple unitary authorities in each area creates the risk of disruption to the safeguarding of vulnerable children, while ‘instability’ in care markets could impact on the quality and availability of support packages and care home placements.”



The full report can be obtained from the County Councils’ Network website:

<https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/new-analysis-reveals-that-single-unitary-councils-could-deliver-3bn-saving-over-five-years-and-maximise-the-benefits-of-economic-growth-and-housing-policy/>

Local government reorganisation in two-tier shire counties – District Councils’ Network

The District Councils’ Network (DCN) a report ahead of the publication of the government’s ‘devolution and local recovery’ white paper.

The report comments “Devolution should back the success of districts in delivery. It should not distract from the local recovery effort or reduce delivery capacity through forcing reorganisation into a less local, less agile, less responsive local government pushed by interests wanting county unitary councils everywhere. Local governance is a local matter, places must be free to decide how to organise services and to progress any kind of reform only where there is significant local agreement.”

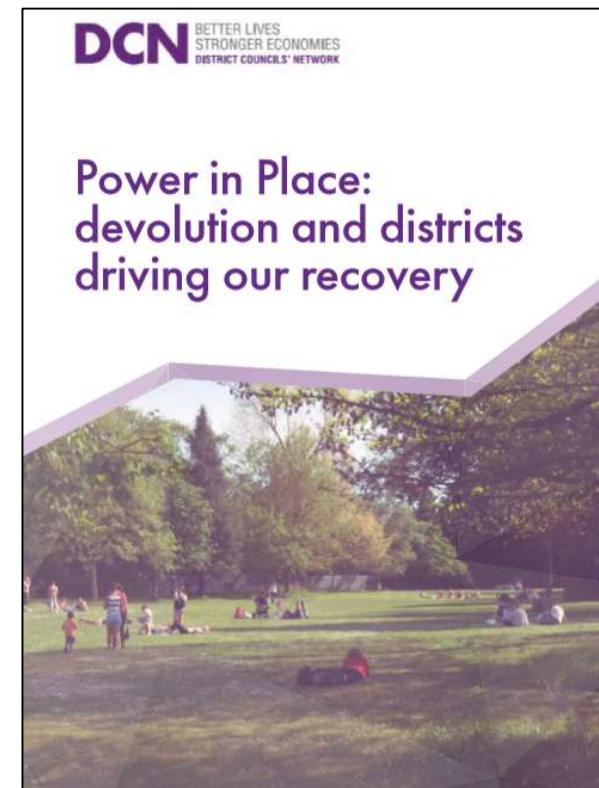
The report calls for the Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper to:

- 1) Deliver genuine devolution that moves quickly to drive local growth
- 2) Retain and build on the local capacity to deliver
- 3) Empower real-world economies
- 4) Continue to anchor local government in local communities
- 5) Reject false arguments that bigger local government is better or cheaper local government
- 6) Support strategic leadership across wider functional economic areas
- 7) Introduce an upper limit for the size of new unitary councils, in line with the principle of electoral equality

The report includes a number of case studies in each of these areas.

The full report can be obtained from the District Councils’ Network website:

<https://districtcouncils.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DCN-Report-Sept-1.pdf>



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