

# understanding local authority financial statements

2016

# \ introduction

Local authority financial statements have a key part to play in accountability to taxpayers and other stakeholders as to how public money is used. However, the complexity of the financial statements has not always helped this accountability, particularly allowing the amounts in the statements to be easily reconciled to management accounting and in-year monitoring of budgets.

The introduction of the Expenditure and Funding Analysis to the 2016/17 Code is intended to allow a clear link to be made between in-year monitoring and General Fund information and final outturn as set out in the audited financial statements, thus closing the accountability loop from budgets through to outturn.

A key to achieving the aims of the changes will be to use the information not just in the narrative section of the financial statements to explain performance during the year, but more widely to all stakeholders, including elected members as citizens' representatives, in a range of formats and media to provide a definitive position on financial performance. Local authorities are also urged to look to their balance sheets as a part of this explanation and the key messages that can be drawn out.

At the same time it is important that opportunities are taken to cut the clutter and remove immaterial disclosures or through the use of technical appendices to separate out the more complex disclosures. Working in partnership CIPFA/LASAAC will itself continue to review opportunities for improvement and explore links with other published information to ensure that the definitive position remains clear.

This briefing note is intended to help chief financial officers and other senior staff to present the financial statements to members and other stakeholders by explaining how the formats can be used to convey key information. It is also designed to give elected members and stakeholders an introduction to the format of the accounts and provide them with key questions on the financial statements.

An important element of financial reporting which will assist local authorities to tell the story of their financial performance is the narrative report (management commentary in Scotland). This report accompanies the financial statements and should provide a commentary on how the authority has used its resources to achieve desired outcomes in line with its objectives and strategies. It should provide an explanation of the main messages of financial performance, financial position and cash flows in the financial statements.

This publication includes extract financial statements to demonstrate key issues. It is important to note that the Code sets out the minimum requirements for the financial statements of the authority, but authorities are free to include more detail if they think it will help them to explain the accounts to members and other stakeholders.

This publication also highlights the opportunities to simplify presentation and make the messages clearer in a number of areas:

- comparisons with budgets (General Fund and Housing Revenue Account performance)
- reserves position, and
- cash flows.

# comparisons with budgets

For members, probably the most important issue will be whether the authority has a surplus or deficit on General Fund or Housing Revenue Account (HRA) balances against its budget for the year.

The financial statements will enable individual authorities to demonstrate performance both in the way in which they organise themselves and, more importantly, in how they budget against the General Fund to provide services.

## **The introduction of the new expenditure and funding analysis**

The financial statements primarily follow accounting standards rather than local government legislation. Although some information is provided on General Fund and HRA balances this hasn't always been easy to identify in the past. However, the new Expenditure and Funding Analysis provides users of the financial statements with more information to make that analysis (for example, by comparison with their budget reports).

The Expenditure and Funding Analysis brings together local authority performance reported on the basis of expenditure measured under proper accounting practices with statutorily defined charges to the General Fund (including the HRA).

Proper accounting practices measure the resources that have been generated and consumed in the year including such things as the use of property (depreciation) and the value of pensions benefits earned by the employees. Statutory provisions determine how much of the authority's expenditure needs to be met from council tax each year.

The Expenditure and Funding Analysis:

- shows for each of the authority's services or directorates a comparison of the net resources applied and the net charge against council tax, and
- provides an opportunity to explain significant differences between the two within the authority's framework for accountability.

The Expenditure and Funding Analysis promotes accountability and stewardship by providing a more direct link with the annual decision making process of the authority and its budget ie the General Fund. The changes are more transparent and follow the performance framework of the authority.

The Expenditure and Funding Analysis takes the net expenditure that is chargeable to taxation and rents and reconciles it to the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement. To demonstrate accountability and to meet segmental reporting requirements it is necessary to reconcile to the statutory position on the General Fund balance. The service analysis for both the Expenditure and Funding Analysis and the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement are now both provided in the way in which an authority organises itself and manages financial performance.

The Expenditure and Funding Analysis needs to be positioned in the financial statements where it is most accessible and relevant to its users. This means it could be placed before the main statements, to accompany the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement, or even included as the first note. An authority will be able to decide for itself.

## Expenditure and Funding Analysis (extract)

The Expenditure and Funding Analysis analysis shows how annual expenditure is used and funded from resources (government grants, rents, council tax and business rates) by local authorities in comparison with those resources consumed or earned by authorities in accordance with generally accepted accounting practices. It also shows how this expenditure is allocated for decision making purposes between the council's directorates/services/departments. Income and expenditure accounted for under generally accepted accounting practices is presented more fully in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement.

| 20X0/20X1   | Net Expenditure Chargeable to the General Fund and HRA Balances<br>£000 | Adjustments between the Funding and Accounting Basis<br>£000 | Net Expenditure in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement<br>£000 |
|---|---|--|---|
| People Directorate  | 47,385  | 898  | 48,283  |
| Neighbourhoods  | 5,929   | 13,608   | 19,537  |
| Business Change   | 30  | 224  | 254   |
| Corporate and Central Services                                | 19,358  | 833  | 20,191  |
| <b>Net Cost of Services</b>                                   | 72,702  | 15,563   | 88,265  |
| Other Income and Expenditure                                  | (72,658)  | (1,019)  | (73,677)  |
| <b>Surplus or Deficit</b>                                     | 44  | 14,544   | 14,588  |
| Opening General Fund and HRA Balance at 31 March 20X0         | (25,247)  |  |   |
| Less Deficit on General Fund and HRA Balance in Year          | 44  |  |   |
| <b>Closing General Fund and HRA Balance at 31 March 20x1*</b> | <b>(25,203)</b>   |  |   |

\*for a split of this balance between the General Fund and the HRA – see the Movement in Reserves Statement

# comprehensive income and expenditure statement

The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement shows how resources have been generated and expended in accordance with International Financial Reporting Standards. It shows whether the authority's operations resulted in a surplus or deficit. The key lines that summarise performance are highlighted below.

## Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement (extract)

The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement shows the accounting cost in the year of providing services in accordance with generally accepted accounting practices, rather than the amount to be funded from taxation [or rents]. Authorities raise taxation [and rents] to cover expenditure in accordance with statutory requirements; this may be different from the accounting cost. The taxation position is shown in both the Expenditure and Funding Analysis and the Movement in Reserves Statement.

| Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement 20X0/X1                      | Gross Expenditure<br>£000 | Gross Income<br>£000 | Net Expenditure<br>£000 |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| People Directorate  | 74,297                    | (26,014)             | 48,283                  |
| Neighbourhoods  | 58,225                    | (38,688)             | 19,537                  |
| Business Change   | 11,624                    | (11,370)             | 254                     |
| Corporate and Central Services  | 24,021                    | (3,830)              | 20,191                  |
| <b>Cost of Services</b>   | <b>168,167</b>            | <b>(79,902)</b>      | <b>88,265</b>           |
| Other Operating Expenditure (Note 9)  | 2,218                     | –                    | 2,218                   |
| Financing and Investment Income and Expenditure (Note 10)                   | 11,340                    | (2,359)              | 8,981                   |
| Taxation and Non-specific Grant Income and Expenditure (Note 11)            | –                         | (84,876)             | (84,876)                |
| <b>(Surplus) or Deficit on Provision of Services</b>                        |                           |                      | <b>14,588</b>           |
| (Surplus) or Deficit on Revaluation of Property, Plant and Equipment Assets |                           |                      | (36,597)                |
| (Surplus) or Deficit on Revaluation of Available-for-Sale Financial Assets  |                           |                      | (101)                   |
| Remeasurement of the Net Defined Benefit Liability (Asset)                  |                           |                      | (8,444)                 |
| <b>Other Comprehensive Income and Expenditure</b>                           |                           |                      | <b>(45,142)</b>         |
| <b>Total Comprehensive Income and Expenditure</b>                           |                           |                      | <b>(30,554)</b>         |

Expenditure of continuing operations, analysed by service segment, these lines are reconciled to the General Fund in the Expenditure and Funding Analysis

Operational costs of providing the services of the authority.

Total income and expenditure of the authority for the year, this line is also reconciled to the General Fund in the Expenditure and Funding Analysis

From 2016/17 local authorities are required to report their service segments based on the way in which they operate and manage services. There is no longer a requirement for that service analysis to be based on the definition of total cost or the service expenditure analysis in the *Service Reporting Code of Practice* in the financial statements. This new format means that the service section of the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement supports accountability and transparency as it reflects the way in which services operate and performance is managed.

Where an authority uses alternative service reporting formats it will need to select the presentation most commonly used by the individual or group within the authority who has the most significant role in allocating resources and assessing performance of services when considering the allocation of resources.

This format of the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement is also more meaningful for both local authority members and users of the financial statements as it follows their budget and performance monitoring and other key documents such as their council tax leaflets.

Treatment of overheads will depend on an authority's arrangements for accountability. If an authority operates and manages some or all of its corporate and support services separately then these service segments would be shown separately on the face of the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement and not apportioned.

The test is whether the expenditure relating to these activities is reported to key decision makers as separate activities or spread across services as overheads for the financial statements. Therefore, there is no longer an absolute requirement to apportion support service overheads to services. However, local authorities will not need to change any of their financial reporting requirements for internal management processes. Whatever you are doing internally determines the structure for external reporting statements.

The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement is then split into two parts.

The first part reflects the full economic cost of providing the services of the authority with the results summarised at the Surplus or Deficit on the Provision of Services line, highlighted above. It represents the operating costs of providing the services of the authority in the year. In the private sector this would be equivalent to the profit or loss of a company.

The second part, other comprehensive income and expenditure, shows the gains or losses in the measurement of the assets and liabilities of the authority. These gains or losses arise as a result of changes in market valuations, interest rates or changes in measurement assumptions in relation to pensions assets and liabilities.

# movement in reserves statement

The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement shows the income and expenditure on the authority's services in the year in accordance with International Financial Reporting Standards as adopted by the Code. However, the amount chargeable to council tax and an authority's General Fund is limited by statutory requirements and requires a number of adjustments. The statutory adjustments largely relate to arrangements for funding local authority capital expenditure or the timing with which some items are charged to council tax. The reserves of the authority represent its net worth; the usable reserves show the resources currently available to spend on services.

The movements in the financial position of the authority are summarised in the Movement in Reserves Statement.

The Movement in Reserves Statement shows how:

- the authority has generated and expended resources in the year; and
- the resourcing position is adjusted under statutory rules to show the funds available to be spent at year end.

The Movement in Reserves Statement prescriptions have been reduced to the absolute minimum in the Code. Authorities can provide additional rows to these minimum requirements if they consider that they need to do so to provide a true and fair presentation of their reserves.

## Movement in Reserves Statement (extract)

The Movement in Reserves Statement shows the movement from the start of the year to the end on the different reserves held by the authority, analysed into 'usable reserves' (ie those that can currently be used to fund expenditure or reduce local taxation) and other 'unusable' reserves. It shows how the movements in year of the authority's reserves are broken down between gains and losses incurred in accordance with generally accepted accounting practices and the statutory adjustments required to return to the amounts chargeable to council tax [or rents] for the year. The Net Increase/Decrease line shows the statutory General Fund balance and Housing Revenue Account balance movements in the year following those adjustments.

|   | General Fund Balance<br>£000 | Housing Revenue Account<br>£000 | Capital Receipts Reserve*<br>£000 | Major Repairs Reserve**<br>£000 | Capital Grants Unapplied Account<br>£000 | Total Usable Reserves<br>£000 | Unusable Reserves<br>£000 | Total Authority Reserves<br>£000 |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Balance at 31 March 20X0</b>   | 22,118                       | 3,129                           | 10,065                            | 1,600                           | 450                                      | 37,362                        | 1,350,567                 | 1,387,929                        |
| <b>Movement in reserves during 20X0/X1</b>  |                              |                                 |                                   |                                 |  |                               |                           |                                  |
| <b>Total Comprehensive Income and Expenditure</b>   | (14,983)                     | 395                             | –                                 | –                               | –  | (14,588)                      | 45,142                    | 30,554                           |
| Adjustments from income & expenditure charged under the accounting basis to the funding basis | 14,835                       | (291)                           | (750)                             | –                               | –  | 13,794                        | (13,794)                  | –                                |
| <b>Increase or (decrease) in 20X0/X1</b>  | <b>(148)</b>                 | <b>104</b>                      | <b>(750)</b>                      | <b>–</b>                        | <b>–</b>                                 | <b>(794)</b>                  | <b>31,348</b>             | <b>30,554</b>                    |
| <b>Balance at 31 March 20X1 carried forward</b>   | <b>21,970</b>                | <b>3,233</b>                    | <b>9,315</b>                      | <b>1,600</b>                    | <b>450</b>                               | <b>36,568</b>                 | <b>1,381,915</b>          | <b>1,418,483</b>                 |

\* Capital Fund Scotland

\*\* Applicable in England Only

An overall increase in usable reserves can arise despite a loss being shown in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement where statutory provisions allow a different charge to revenue from the authority expenditure incurred (eg replacement of depreciation by minimum revenue provision (MRP)). The adjustment to usable reserves is balanced by a movement in unusable reserves.

Unusable reserves such as the Capital Adjustment Account and the Pensions Reserve with debit balances will need to be funded in the future, even if it is over a long period, so increases in these balances show an increasing burden on future taxpayers.



# balance sheet

The balance sheet in local authorities is very similar to other public sector or private sector balance sheets. The balance sheet presents an authority's financial position, ie its net resources at the financial year end. The balance sheet is composed of two main balancing parts: its net assets and its total reserves. The net assets part shows the assets the authority would have control of after settling all its liabilities. The balance of these assets and liabilities is then shown as being attributable to the various reserves of the authority.

For local authorities balance sheet presentation is split between the usable reserves and unusable reserves. Usable reserves are those which the authority can utilise to support future service provision. Unusable reserves cannot be used to support services and include gains and losses where amounts can only become available to support services if the assets are sold. These gains and losses are referred to as unrealised.

## Balance sheet (extract)

The Balance Sheet shows the value as at the Balance Sheet date of the assets and liabilities recognised by the authority. The net assets of the authority (assets less liabilities) are matched by the reserves held by the authority. Reserves are reported in two categories. The first category of reserves are usable reserves, ie those reserves that the authority may use to provide services, subject to the need to maintain a prudent level of reserves and any statutory limitations on their use (for example the Capital Receipts Reserve that may only be used to fund capital expenditure or repay debt). The second category of reserves represents those that the authority is not able to use to provide services. This category of reserves includes reserves that hold unrealised gains and losses (for example the Revaluation Reserve), where amounts would only become available to provide services if the assets are sold; and reserves that hold timing differences shown in the Movement in Reserves Statement line 'Adjustments between accounting basis and funding basis under regulations'.

| Balance Sheet                 | Notes | 31 March 20X1<br>£000 |  |
|-------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|--|
| Property, plant and equipment | 12    | 628,924               | The authority's property portfolio   |
| Highways Network Asset        | 13    | 1,028,700             | The Highways Network Asset (not applicable to district councils). This will be the largest asset balance in a local highways authority balance sheet |
| Heritage assets               | 14    | 3,379                 |  |
| Investment property           | 15    | 4,020                 |  |
| Intangible assets             | 16    | 709                   |  |
| Long-term investments         | 17    | 948                   | Long term assets ie those expected to provide benefits to the authority beyond 12 months   |
| Long-term debtors             | 17    | 3,798                 |  |
| <b>Long-term assets</b>       |       | <b>1,670,478</b>      |  |
| Short-term investments        | 17    | 24,060                | Current assets ie those anticipated to be consumed in 12 months – the normal operating cycle for the authority                                       |
| Assets held for sale          | 22    | 1,409                 |  |
| Inventories                   | 18    | 1,769                 |  |
| Short-term debtors            | 20    | 15,351                |  |
| <b>Current assets</b>         |       | <b>42,589</b>         | Reconciles to the cash and cash equivalents balance in the cash flow statement   |
| Bank overdraft                |       | (13,767)              |  |
| Short-term borrowing          | 17    | (9,500)               | Current liabilities ie those liabilities anticipated to be settled within 12 months  |
| Short-term creditors          | 23    | (21,960)              |  |
| <b>Current liabilities</b>    |       | <b>(45,227)</b>       |  |
| Provisions                    | 24    | (4,297)               |  |
| Long-term borrowing           | 17    | (89,733)              | Long-term liabilities ie those liabilities that are anticipated to be settled beyond 12 months   |
| Other long-term liabilities   | 17    | (155,327)             |  |
| <b>Long-term liabilities</b>  |       | <b>(249,357)</b>      |  |
| <b>Net assets</b>             |       | <b>1,418,483</b>      | Total assets less total liabilities  |

# \ reserves

Reserves – including the General Fund and (where relevant) the Housing Revenue Account – are an indication of the resources available to an authority to deliver services at the balance sheet date. The key messages that members will be looking for in terms of reserves – especially the General Fund and the HRA – are how the balances have changed over the year, whether the balances are still adequate, and what the balances mean in terms of future budgets and services.

Information on the level of reserves can be found in the balance sheet and related notes, and in the Movement in Reserves Statement (and related notes). This latter statement will be more useful in explaining the changes that have taken place during the year.

|                   | Notes | 31 March 20X1<br>£'000 |
|-------------------|-------|------------------------|
| Usable reserves   | 24    | 36,568                 |
| Unusable Reserves | 25    | <u>1,381,915</u>       |
|                   |       | <u>1,418,483</u>       |

The minimum requirement in presenting resources is to include only two lines – usable reserves (such as General Fund) and unusable reserves (such as the Revaluation Reserve and the Capital Adjustment Account).

If there are some reserves you do want to show on the balance sheet, that's fine, as long as these totals are shown.

While the balance sheet aims to show those reserves over which members have control, don't forget that some of the unusable reserves will become a charge against the revenue account – or usable reserves – over time. And in some cases, such as the Unequal Pay Back Pay Account, this might be within a year or two.

As indicated above, not all reserves can be used to deliver services, and the Code reflects this by reporting reserves in two groups – 'usable' and 'unusable' reserves. Usable reserves such as the General Fund are those where members will be involved in deciding on the levels maintained, and their use. Unusable reserves such as the Revaluation Reserve and the Capital Adjustment Account are not subject to such member influence.

# cash flows

The final statement required by the Code is the cash flow statement.<sup>1</sup> The cash flow statement shows changes in cash flows of the authority during the financial year. It shows net cash flows split into three activities: operating, investing and financing. The cash flow statement shows the resulting movement in the authority's cash and cash equivalents. Cash and cash equivalents include short term investments that are readily convertible and which are subject to only insignificant risk of changes in value.

## Cash Flow Statement (extract)

The Cash Flow Statement shows the changes in cash and cash equivalents of the authority during the reporting period. The statement shows how the authority generates and uses cash and cash equivalents by classifying cash flows as operating, investing and financing activities. The amount of net cash flows arising from operating activities is a key indicator of the extent to which the operations of the authority are funded by way of taxation and grant income or from the recipients of services provided by the authority. Investing activities represent the extent to which cash outflows have been made for resources which are intended to contribute to the authority's future service delivery. Cash flows arising from financing activities are useful in predicting claims on future cash flows by providers of capital (ie borrowing) to the authority.

|   | 20X0/X1<br>£000 |  |
|---|-----------------|--|
| Net (surplus) or deficit on the provision of services   | 14,588          | Surplus or deficit taken from the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement   |
| Adjustments to net surplus or deficit on the provision of services for non-cash movements   | (36,267)        |  |
| Adjustments for items included in the net surplus or deficit on the provision of services that are investing and financing activities | 11,523          |  |
| Net cash flows from Operating Activities (Note 26)  | (10,156)        | Three groups of transactions:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Operating</li> <li>■ Investing</li> <li>■ Financing</li> </ul> |
| Investing Activities (Note 27)  | (24,585)        |  |
| Financing Activities (Note 28)  | 35,140          |  |
| Net increase or decrease in cash and cash equivalents   | 399             |  |
| Cash and cash equivalents at the beginning of the reporting period  | (14,166)        |  |
| <b>Cash and cash equivalents at the end of the reporting period (Note 19)</b>   | <b>(13,767)</b> | Cash and cash equivalents figure in the balance sheet  |

<sup>1</sup> Note the format of the cash flow statement shown is produced under the indirect method.

# a checklist of questions to ask about a local authority's financial statements

To assist with the understanding of local authority financial statements a checklist about the core financial statements and the Expenditure and Funding Analysis has been included below.

| <b>Checklist</b>                                      |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Expenditure and Funding Analysis</b>               |   |
| 1   | Have any significant differences between budget reports and net expenditure chargeable to General Fund and Housing Revenue Account balances been explained?   |
| 2   | Are the major statutory adjustments clearly explained and easily understood?  |
| <b>Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement</b> |   |
| 3   | Is the purpose of the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement clear (ie does it show actual financial performance under accounting standards before fiscal adjustments)?   |
| 4   | Do the service net expenditure figures clearly demonstrate the financial performance of the services on the face of the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement during the year?   |
| 5   | Are the material items of income and expenditure in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement presented separately on the face of the Statement or explained in the notes?   |
| 6   | Do the notes to the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement provide easily understandable information relating to the Statement (or lines within the Statement)?   |
| 7   | Are there any unexplained significant variances between current and previous year information?  |
| <b>Movement in Reserves Statement</b>                 |   |
| 8   | Can the major movements in net worth that occur within the Movement in Reserves Statement be easily identified? Are these explained within the financial statements or Narrative Report?  |
| 9   | Do the opening balances in the Movement in Reserves Statement match with the closing balances of the preceding year? Are any adjustments to opening balances explained on the face of the Statement and/or in the notes?  |
| 10  | Is there a clear explanation of the statutory adjustments in the adjustments from income and expenditure charged under the accounting basis to the funding basis line in the Movement in Reserves Statement? (Note this may be linked with the Expenditure and Funding Analysis.) |
| 11  | Do the entries on the statutory adjustment line net to nil?   |
| 12  | Do the related notes on reserves clearly explain the line or columnar items not explained in the Statement?   |

## Checklist

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 13                         | Does the Total Comprehensive Income and Expenditure line in the Movement in Reserves Statement agree with the information in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement?   |
| 14                         | How have the balances of usable reserves moved during the year? Are these balances sufficient to support an authority's financial plans in the immediate future and over the medium term?  |
| <b>Balance Sheet</b>       |  |
| 15                         | Does the property, plant and equipment information tell the story of the authority's property portfolio during the year (including the major movements in that portfolio ie major disposals and acquisitions)? Do these balances reflect the authority's asset management strategy?<br><br>(Note the same question can be asked for local authorities with substantial portfolios of investment properties.) |
| 16                         | For highways authorities – do the movements in the Highways Network Asset represent the transport management/investment decisions of the authority?  |
| 17                         | Has there been any substantial movement in the pension asset or liability? If yes, has the reason for such a movement been explained and the subsequent consequences described in the financial statements or the Narrative Report?  |
| 18                         | Have there been any new provisions or significant movements in provisions in the year? If yes, have the reasons for making these provisions been set out in the financial statements or any material movements been explained?   |
| 19                         | Have there been any significant movements in the authority's borrowings during the year? Are these movements reflected in your council's borrowing strategy and what impact will this have on the prudential indicators or future investment plans?  |
| 20                         | Are there any significant movements in an authority's investment portfolio? Do these agree with the plans in the authority's treasury management strategies and statutory investment plans?  |
| 21                         | Are there any other significant movements in balances in the balance sheet that are not clearly explained?   |
| 22                         | Do the balance sheet reserves agree with the totals in the Movement in Reserves Statement?   |
| <b>Cash Flow Statement</b> |  |
| 23                         | Do the cash balances in the cash flow statement agree with the relevant balances in the balance sheet?   |
| 24                         | Are the council's cash balances reflected adequately in the council's treasury management strategies?  |

# reminders and questions raised on the IFRS-based code

## **IFRS – what is it?**

International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRSs) are a suite of accounting standards used across the world. The Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting is based on IFRS standards as adapted or interpreted for local authority circumstances.

## **The pension deficit is meaningless – why do we have to show it?**

The deficit doesn't have to be funded from this year's budget, but it's still a true cost estimated by actuaries – it represents the amount that will need to be found from future budgets to pay for pension entitlements already incurred in delivering services. So it's a real call on future funding arising from past activity. Not showing this would hide the liability that the authority has incurred.

This also applies to other reserves. Like the Pension Reserve, the Capital Adjustment Account, the Unequal Pay Back Pay Account and similar reserves all do one thing: they hold expenditure that the authority has incurred but not yet financed. Think of them as being a bit like a credit card balance – these amounts will have to be funded in future, either from taxation or from usable reserves.

Concerns have been expressed that all these reserves make the balance sheet incomprehensible. But all that needs to be shown on the balance sheet itself are 'usable reserves' and 'unusable reserves' – the details can all go in a note. This will help to declutter the balance sheet.

## **The financial statements do not clearly demonstrate traditional measures of local authority performance ie General Fund and HRA balances**

The IFRS-based Code sets out that local authority financial statements are intended to be used for assessing the stewardship of local authority resources and for making economic decisions. Thus the information is intended for two purposes. The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement presents information on the real economic cost of providing services in the year and it does not show the movement in General Fund and HRA balances. This reconciliation is provided in the Movement in Reserves Statement, whose bottom line shows the General Fund and HRA resources available at year end. CIPFA has reviewed options for making this even clearer. The new Expenditure and Funding Analysis brings together both the accounting measures of performance and the performance against General Fund for council tax setting purposes.

## **The accounts are too long!**

Yes, the accounts can be long, but local authorities have a complex story to tell. But notes only need to be produced if they are material – leaving out notes that aren't material or required by legislation is a good start. CIPFA/LASAAC as standard setter is continuously challenging the need to introduce disclosures and reporting requirements for local government.

## **What changes were made to the 2016/17 Code?**

CIPFA and CIPFA/LASAAC consulted widely in preparation for these changes, particularly the Telling the Story consultation in the summer of 2015. CIPFA also engaged a working group to consider a wide range of proposals for change. Following feedback from consultations from local authority accounts preparers and the work of the Working Group, the Telling the Story consultation set out proposals for change that CIPFA/LASAAC considers will reconnect the financial statements of local authorities with the way those authorities are both organised and funded.

The changes to the 2016/17 Code therefore have two main strands:

- to allow local authorities to report on the same basis as they are organised by breaking the formal link between the Service Reporting Code of Practice (SeRCOP) and the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement
- to introduce a new Expenditure and Funding Analysis which provides a direct reconciliation between the way local authorities are funded and prepare their budget and the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement in a way that is accessible to the lay reader. This analysis is supported by a streamlined Movement in Reserves Statement and replaces the current segmental reporting note.

The changes to the Code will for the first time allow local authorities to bring together the funding framework and the accounting framework in one analysis.



# further reading

*Financial Statements: A Good Practice Guide for Local Authorities* (CIPFA, 2013)

*Clear out the Clutter* (Public Finance, April 2014)

*Simplified Accounts: Small Isn't Always Beautiful* (Public Finance, September 2015)

*Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom* (CIPFA, issued annually)

*Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom: Guidance Notes for Practitioners*  
(CIPFA, issued annually)



Registered office:

77 Mansell Street, London E1 8AN

T: 020 7543 5600 F: 020 7543 5700

[www.cipfa.org](http://www.cipfa.org)

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy.  
Registered with the Charity Commissioners of England and Wales No 231060