

# Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

Tewkesbury Borough Council  
Year ending 31 March 2020

September 2020



# Contents

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
Introduction	03
Progress at September 2020	04
Covid-19 Financial Statements Update	07
Audit Deliverables	08
Covid-19 Sector Update	09
LG Sector Update	16

---

# Introduction

---



**Julie Masci**

**Engagement Lead**

T +44 (0)29 2034 7506  
E [Julie.masci@uk.gt.com](mailto:Julie.masci@uk.gt.com)



**Beth Garner**

**Engagement Manager**

T +44 (0)117 305 7726  
E [beth.ac.garner@uk.gt.com](mailto:beth.ac.garner@uk.gt.com)

This paper provides the Audit and 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 Audit and 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](http://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.

# Progress at September 2020

## Financial Statements Audit

We commenced our initial planning for the 2019/20 audit in December 2019, and our interim audit in March 2020.

Our work on the final accounts has been arranged over two split periods. We undertook our first period of work in June 2020 and our second period of work is due to begin at the start of October.

Due to the impact from Covid-19, the March 2020 Audit and Governance Committee meeting was cancelled. Instead of being presented to committee, our Audit plan was shared electronically on the 19<sup>th</sup> March. The audit plan sets out our planned approach to the audit of the Council's 2019/20 financial statements.

### Covid-19

In addition to the audit risks communicated to those charged with governance in our Audit Plan, the Covid-19 pandemic led us to update our planning risk assessment and reconsider our audit and value for money (VfM) approach to reflect the unprecedented global response. Our Audit Plan Addendum sets out an additional significant financial statement risk in relation to Covid-19. We also electronically circulated an Audit Plan addendum on the 5<sup>th</sup> May. This addendum set out our adapted approach, in response to the adoption of the new significant risk in relation to Covid-19 .

## Financial Statements Audit 2019-20 progress:

The Council published its accounts on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 2020 and we completed some preparatory work and testing for the final accounts audit during June 2020. Our early work, selecting samples has been completed, and will recommence on our return in October.

We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report at the next Audit and Governance Committee and aim to give our opinion on the Statement of Accounts by the statutory deadline of November 30<sup>th</sup> 2020.

# Progress at September 2020

## 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 was included in our Audit Plan. We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report and aim to give our Value For Money Conclusion by 30<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

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. Further details of the new Code requirements will be communicated to the Council at our next update.

## Value for Money – update on progress to date

We have held preliminary discussions with management on the medium term financial planning process and how this has factored in Covid-19.

At the onset of the lockdown, finance officers have revisited budgets and undertaken robust scenario planning, considering the impact of the lockdown.

The scenarios were based on best case, most likely and worst case financial impacts. A Covid-19 impact report, was considered by the Executive Committee in June 2020. The Council have taken a pro-active approach in understanding the financial implications of the pandemic and we consider this to be ahead of some other councils we work with.

The Council's and local economy's income is reliant on tourism activities and has the potential to be significantly affected by changes and restrictions in leisure activities.

As the lockdown occurred late in the financial year, the impact of Covid-19 in 2019/20 has been moderate. The emergency funding received (£1.1m as at September 2020) has all been allocated to the financial year 2020/21 to support the significant additional expenditure and projected loss of income from the major period of the pandemic and recovery.

The 2019/20 outturn position is a surplus of £1.1m. This is an improved position from the 2019/20 budget, where a surplus of £575k was planned.

We will continue to have discussions with management as we address the work required against the significant risks identified in the Audit Plan, and will report our Value for Money conclusion in the audit findings report.

# Progress at September 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). The certification work for the 2019/20 claim is at the planning stage and we expect to complete our work by the DWP deadline. We have provided samples to the benefits team to commence work on the areas where errors were identified in the prior year in advance of the start date for the certification audit.

It should be noted that, in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the DWP has moved the reporting deadline back to 31 January 2021. We will report our findings to the Audit and Governance Committee in our Certification Letter in March 2021.

### Meetings

We have regularly met remotely with Finance Officers and the Chief Executive as part of our usual liaison meetings and continue to be in discussions with finance staff regarding emerging developments and to ensure the audit process is smooth and effective.

### Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Council.

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

During 2017, PSAA awarded contracts for audit for a five year period beginning on 1 April 2018. Since that time, there have been a number of developments within the accounting and audit profession. Across all sectors and firms, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has set out its expectation of improved financial reporting from organisations and the need for auditors to demonstrate increased scepticism and challenge and to undertake additional and more robust testing.

Our work in the Local Government sector in 2018/19 has 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 audits. We have discussed this with your s151 Officer including any proposed variations to the Scale Fee set by PSAA Limited, and have communicated these fully with the Audit and Governance Committee through our Audit Plan. We can confirm that PSAA has now approved this fee variation in principle, and the final fees position will be reviewed at the conclusion 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.

# COVID-19 Financial Statements Update

## Impact on working arrangements:

- following the government's announcement on Monday 16 March 2020, we closed our Grant Thornton offices for the foreseeable future and your audit team are now working from home
- we will be working remotely during your accounts audit. This is however likely to make the audit process longer. We continue to work closely with your finance team to make this different way of working as efficient as possible.
- there may need to be further changes to planned audit timings due to potential illness within the audit team or the finance team and due to the further developments of Covid-19.

## Impact on accounts and audit opinions:

- There are a number of key issues which your finance team will have had to consider as part of the year end closedown and accounts production:
- impact on reserves and financial health and whether the Council needs to provide additional disclosures that draw attention to a Material Uncertainty around Going Concern (this could also impact on the VfM conclusion) or asset valuations.
  - valuation of Property, Plant & Equipment and assumptions made by valuers, particularly in respect of carrying value to current value assessment.
  - impact on collectability of debt and assumptions made in bad debt provisions.
  - impact on post-balance sheet events. The consequences of the virus post 31 March 2020 will generally be non-adjusting post balance sheet events but some form of disclosure may be needed.
  - disclosure of impact in the narrative report.
  - disclosure of critical judgements and material estimation uncertainties.
  - impact on the content of the Annual Governance Statement, particularly with regards to risks, controls and mitigation.
  - considerations in respect of service continuity and disaster planning arrangements (this could impact on the VfM conclusion).
  - impact on reporting to those charged with governance and signing arrangements.

## Changes to reporting requirements:

- the Secretary of State announced that for the 2019/20 accounting period he would be extending the period for publication of principal authority accounts to 30 August 2020.
- for principal authorities, this means that the whole chain of publication requirements will be amended. The audited financial statements are now to be published by 30 November 2020.
- IFRS 16 implementation has been delayed by 1 year to 1 April 2021. IAS 8 disclosures in respect of new accounting standards which have been issued but are not yet effective are still required for IFRS 16 (Leases) even though implementation is deferred to 2021/22.

# Audit Deliverables

2019/20 Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<p><b>Fee Letter</b></p> <p>Confirming audit fee for 2019/20.</p>	February 2020	Complete
<p><b>Audit Plan</b></p> <p>We are required to issue a detailed audit plan to the Audit and Governance Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Council's 2019-20 financial statements and a Conclusion on the Council's Value for Money arrangements.</p>	March 2020	Complete
<p><b>Audit Findings Report</b></p> <p>The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the Audit and Governance Committee.</p>	November 2020 (Revised)	Not yet due
<p><b>Auditors Report</b></p> <p>This is the opinion on your financial statements, annual governance statement and value for money conclusion.</p>	November 2020 (Revised)	Not yet due
<p><b>Annual Audit Letter</b></p> <p>This letter communicates the key issues arising from our work.</p>	December 2020	Not yet due

---

---

# Covid 19 Sector update



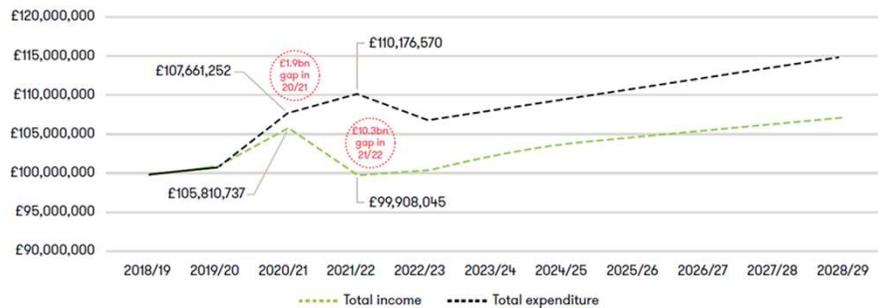
# Covid-19 update

## 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

Foresight 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 counterbalance 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.

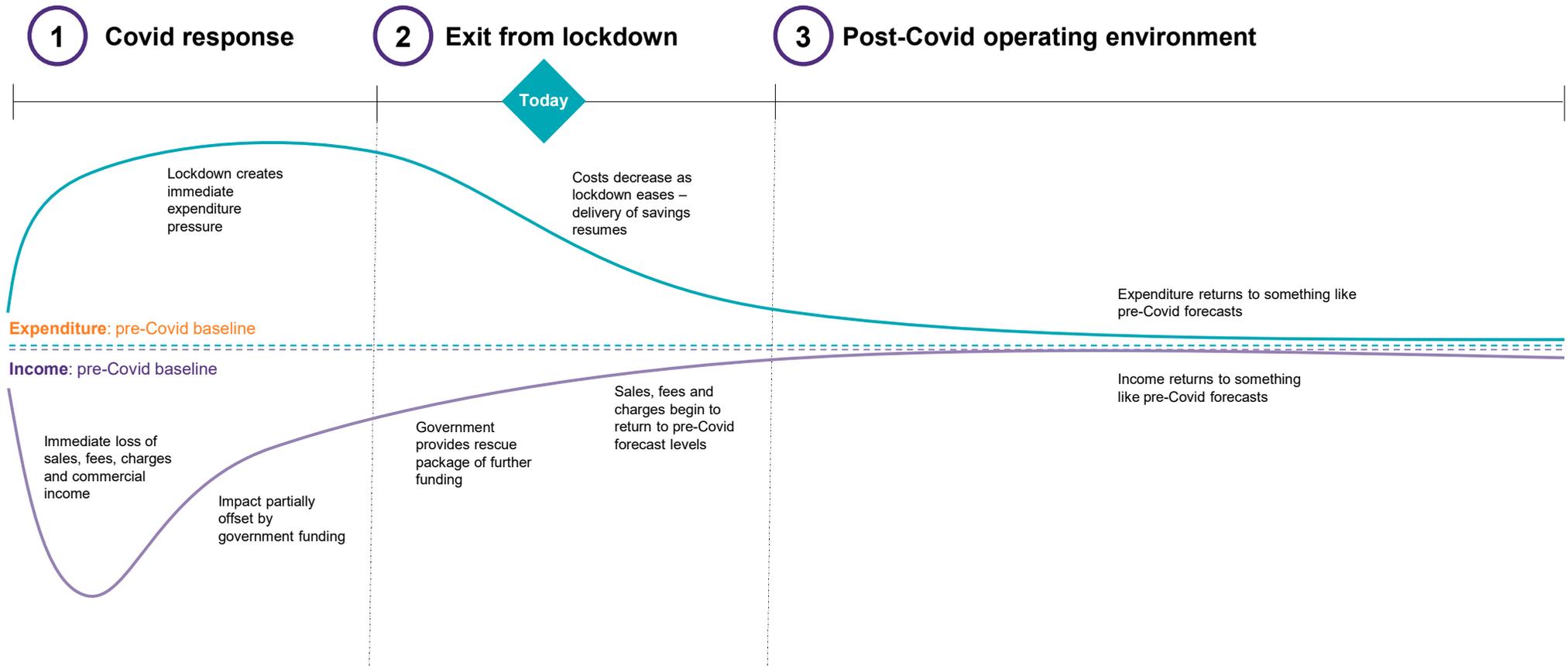
As already noted, places will vary depending on their socio-economic and demographic characteristics, but all councils are working through demand impacts arising from the ongoing pandemic and the associated recession, and ensuring their workforce continue to be supported to ensure they remain personally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

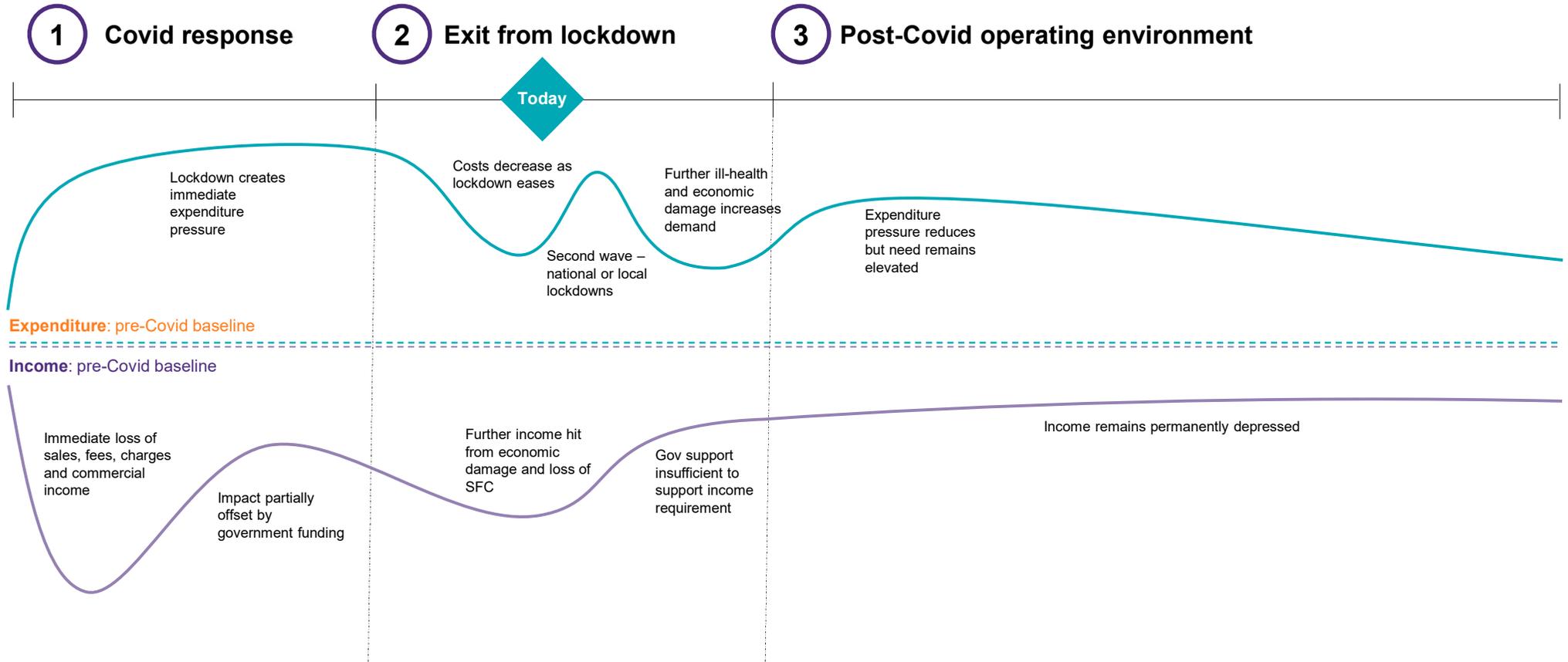
# Example scenarios

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

# 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

---

---

# LG Sector update



# 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 and Governance 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

# In-depth insight into the impact of Covid-19 on financial reporting in the local government sector – Grant Thornton

In June Grant Thornton published a report to help officers and elected members identify points they should consider when assessing and reporting the impact of Covid-19 on their authority. Each authority will be impacted in different ways and will need to make their own assessment of the impact on their financial statements. However, the report identified some of the key challenges for the sector, along with the potential financial reporting and regulatory impact, to support preparers of local authority accounts navigate through some of these key issues. The report also included a number of useful links to other resources.

The report considered:

- Operational challenges and the related financial reporting/regulatory impact
- Government support schemes – considering the accounting implications
- Significant financial reporting issues to consider
- Other sector issues and practicalities to consider
- Impact on audit work/external scrutiny process
- Engagement with experts

We shared the report with your officers and discussed relevant issues with them in a timely manner.

The extraordinary events we are living through follow a decade of austerity, triggered by the financial crisis of 2008/09, which had already placed considerable strain on local authorities' finances. Increased demand for many local public services, directly related to the outbreak of the virus, has placed immediate pressure on authorities' cash flows and expenditure budgets. The longer-term consequences of recession and unemployment on demand for services have yet to be experienced.

At the same time, several important sources of local authority income including Council Tax, Nondomestic (business) rates, fees and charges, rents and investment returns have, to a greater or lesser extent, been subject to reduction or suspension. This perfect storm of conditions presents a real threat to the financial sustainability of the sector. Now, more than ever, strong political and executive leadership is needed to re-establish priorities, review strategies and medium-term financial plans and ensure that public funds are being used as efficiently and effectively as possible. A balance has to be struck between responding to the needs of residents and businesses in a timely manner, protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring appropriate measures and controls around financial management are in place to mitigate against future 'financial shock'. In doing so, iterative scenario planning will help officers and elected members to take informed decisions at key stages, revisiting and revising plans along the way.



The full report can be obtained from the Grant Thornton website:

<https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/globalassets/1.-member-firms/united-kingdom/pdf/publication/2020/impact-of-covid19-on-financial-reporting-local-government-sector.pdf>

# Guide for Audit and Risk Committees on Financial Reporting and Management during COVID-19 – National Audit Office

In June the National Audit Office (NAO) published a guide that “aims to help audit and risk committee members discharge their responsibilities and to examine the impacts on their organisations of the COVID-19 outbreak. It is part of a programme of work undertaken by the NAO to support Parliament in its scrutiny of the UK government’s response to COVID-19.”

The NAO report notes “Audit and risk committees are integral to the scrutiny and challenge process. They advise boards and accounting officers on matters of financial accountability, assurance and governance, and can support organisations, providing expert challenge, helping organisations focus on what is important, and how best to manage risk.

Each organisation will have existing risk management processes in place, but risk appetite may have changed as a result of COVID-19, for the organisation to operate effectively and respond in a timely manner. This may result in a weakening of controls in some areas, increasing the likelihood of other risks occurring. Organisations will need to consider how long this change in risk appetite is sustainable for.”

The NAO comment “This guide aims to help audit and risk committee members discharge their responsibilities in several different areas, and to examine the impacts on their organisations of the COVID-19 outbreak, including on:

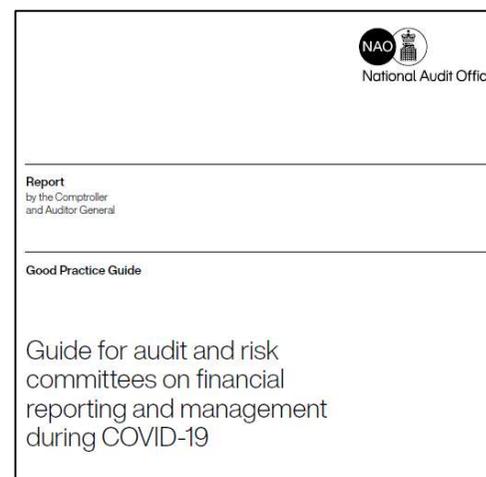
- annual reports;
- financial reporting;
- the control environment; and
- regularity of expenditure.

In each section of the guide we have set out some questions to help audit and risk committee members to understand and challenge activities. Each section can be used on its own, although we would recommend that audit and risk committee members consider the whole guide, as the questions in other sections may be interrelated. Each individual section has the questions at the end, but for ease of use all the questions are included in Appendix One.

The guide may also be used as organisations and audit and risk committees consider reporting in the 2020-21 period.”

The full report can be obtained from the NAO website:

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/guidance-for-audit-and-risk-committees-on-financial-reporting-and-management-during-covid-19/>



# Kickstarting Housing – Grant Thornton and Localis

In July Grant Thornton Head of Local Government, Paul Dossett, wrote an essay, included as part of a collection in the Localis report – “Building for renewal: kickstarting the C19 housing recovery”.

Paul asked “So how do we address “the housing crisis” in the context of an existential threat to the British economy? Just as importantly, how do we ensure our key workers, our new heroes of the Thursday night applause, are front and centre of such a response. Paul suggested that the housing response needs to move away from the piecemeal towards a comprehensive and strategic response, with five key pillars with the key worker demographic at its heart:

- **Public housebuilding.** This will involve more borrowing, but we need a bold and ambitious target to build at least one million new public sector properties at social rents by 2025. This should involve a comprehensive and deep partnership between Homes England and local authorities and underpinned by a need to minimise the carbon footprint.

- **Private sector housing needs a rocket boost** with massive Government supported investment in modern methods of construction and consideration of required workforce needed to meet capacity. This needs to go hand in hand with a major recruitment drive into all facets of the housing industries. This should include national and local training initiatives to support workers from the service sectors who are very likely to lose their jobs because of the pandemic.

- **Strategic authorities based on existing local government footprints** across the country to remove the inconsistent patchwork quilt of current arrangements so that there is consistency between local, county and national strategic priorities. They should be legally tasked and funded for development of comprehensive infrastructure plans to support housing initiatives in their areas with a strong remit for improving public transport, supporting green energy initiatives and developing public realms which create a sense of community and belonging.

- **Building on existing initiatives to improve security of tenure and quality of accommodation,** a new partnership is needed between landlord and tenants that provides a consistent national/regional footing to ensure that housing is a shared community responsibility. This should, like the response to the pandemic, be part of a shared community narrative based on state, business and local people.

- Putting key workers at the heart of the Housing strategy. The country appears to have discovered the importance of key workers. The people that keep the country running and whose contribution is never usually recognised financially or in terms of social esteem. There are several existing key worker accommodation initiatives, but they are local and piecemeal. We need a comprehensive strategy which focuses on key worker needs, including quality of accommodation, affordable mortgages/ rents, proximity to workplaces and above all , a sense of priority on the housing ladder for those who keep the country running in good times and bad and are the best of us in every sense.

Paul concluded “Housing is a basic need and if key workers feel valued in their place in housing priorities, we will have made a giant step forward.

Key workers are not the only group in need of help of course. Utilising the momentum behind keyworkers that their role in COVID-19 has brought into focus, could help kickstart housing initiatives that help all those in need.”



The full report can be obtained from the Grant Thornton website:

<https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/homes-fit-for-heroes-affordable-housing-for-all/>

# CIPFA – Financial Scrutiny Practice Guide

Produced by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and CIPFA, this guide provides guidance to councils and councillors in England on how they might best integrate an awareness of council finances into the way that overview and scrutiny works.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on council finances, uncertainty regarding the delayed fair funding review and future operations for social care – on top of a decade of progressively more significant financial constraints – has placed local government in a hugely challenging position.

For the foreseeable future, council budgeting will be even more about the language of priorities and difficult choices than ever before.

This guide suggests ways to move budget and finance scrutiny beyond set-piece scrutiny 'events' in December and quarterly financial performance scorecards being reported to committee. Effective financial scrutiny is one of the few ways that councils can assure themselves that their budget is robust and sustainable, and that it intelligently takes into account the needs of residents.

Scrutiny can provide an independent perspective, drawing directly on the insights of local people, and can challenge assumptions and preconceptions. It can also provide a mechanism to ensure an understanding tough choices that councils are now making.

This paper has been published as the local government sector is seeking to manage the unique set of financial circumstances arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted, through the Coronavirus Act 2020 and other legislation, in changes to local authorities' formal duties around financial systems and procedures.

The approaches set out in this guide reflect CfPS and CIPFA's thinking on scrutiny's role on financial matters as things stand, but the preparation for the 2021/22 budget might look different. CfPS has produced a separate guide to assist scrutineers in understanding financial matters during the pandemic



The full report can be obtained from CIPFA's website:

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/reports/financial-scrutiny-practice-guide>

# Future Procurement and Market Supply Options Review – Public Sector Audit Appointments

Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) has commissioned an independent review of the sustainability of the local government audit market. The review was undertaken by an independent consultancy, Touchstone Renard.

PSAA note that the report “draws on the views of audit firms active in the local authority market as well as others that are not. In doing so it identifies a number of distinctive challenges in the current local audit market. In particular it highlights the unprecedented scrutiny and significant regulatory pressure on the auditing profession; the challenges of a demanding timetable which expects publication of audited accounts by 31 July each year; and the impact of austerity on local public bodies and its effect on both the complexity of the issues auditors face and the capacity of local finance teams”.

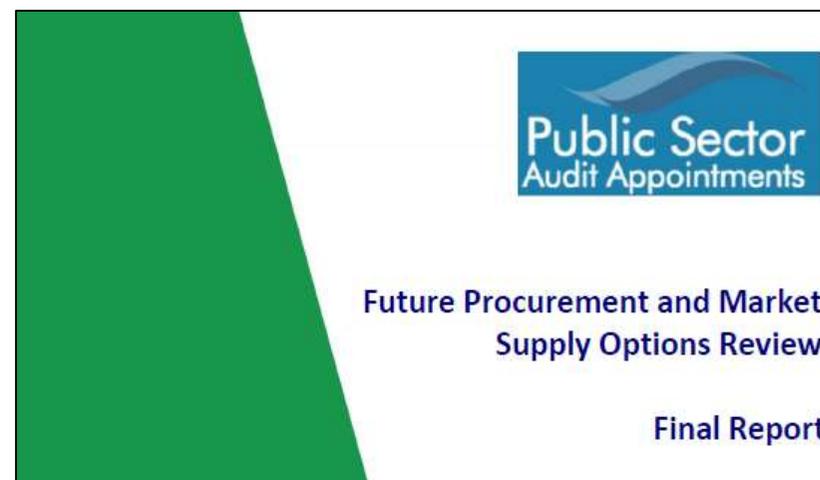
Key findings in the report include:

- A lack of experienced local authority auditors as the main threat to the future sustainability of the market.
- It will be difficult to bring the non-approved firms into the market.
- Of the nine approved firms, only five have current contracts with PSAA.
- Almost all of the approved firms have reservations about remaining in the market.
- Firms perceive that their risks have increased since bids were submitted for the current contracts.
- The timing of local audits is problematic.

Key issues for the next procurement round include:

- Number of lots and lot sizes.
- Lot composition.
- Length of contracts.
- Price:quality ratio.

The report notes that “PSAA will need to balance the views of the firms with wider considerations including the needs of audited bodies and the requirement to appoint an auditor to every individual body opting in to its collective scheme”.



The full report can be obtained from the PSAA website:

<https://www.psa.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PSAA-Future-Procurement-and-Market-Supply-Options-Review.pdf>

