

AUDIT, GOVERNANCE AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEETING

Date: Monday 14 September 2020

Time: 6.30 p.m.

Venue: Remote Meeting - The public proceedings of the meeting will be broadcast live and recorded for playback on the Maidstone Borough Council website

Membership:

Councillors Adkinson (Vice-Chairman), Brindle, Coulling (Parish Representative), Cox, Daley, Fissenden, Harvey (Chairman), Perry, Round and Titchener (Parish Representative)

The Chairman will assume that all Members will read the reports before attending the meeting. Officers are asked to assume the same when introducing reports.

AMENDED AGENDA

Page No.

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Notification of Substitute Members
3. Urgent Items
4. Notification of Visiting Members
5. Disclosures by Members and Officers
6. Disclosures of Lobbying
7. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information
8. Minutes of the meeting held on 29 July 2020 - to follow
9. Questions and answer session for members of the public (if any)
10. Questions from Members to the Chairman (if any)
11. Committee Work Programme
12. Complaints Received Under the Members' Code of Conduct
13. Audit, Governance & Standards Committee Annual Report 2019/20

Issued on Friday 11 September 2020

Continued Over/:

Alison Broom

Alison Broom, Chief Executive

14. 2020/21 Updated Internal Audit & Assurance Plan
15. Accounts 2019/20
16. Budget Strategy - Risk Assessment Update
17. **Urgent Update - External Audit**

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INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

In order to ask a question at this remote meeting, please call **01622 602899** or email committee@maidstone.gov.uk by 5 p.m. one clear working day before the meeting (i.e. by 5 p.m. on Thursday 10 September 2020). You will need to provide the full text in writing.

If your question is accepted, you will be provided with instructions as to how you can access the meeting.

In order to submit a written statement in relation to an item on the agenda, please call **01622 602899** or email committee@maidstone.gov.uk by 5 p.m. one clear working day before the meeting (i.e. by 5 p.m. on Thursday 10 September 2020). You will need to tell us which agenda item you wish to comment on.

If you require this information in an alternative format please contact us, call **01622 602899** or email committee@maidstone.gov.uk.

To find out more about the work of the Committee, please visit www.maidstone.gov.uk.

Audit, Governance & Standards Committee

14 September 2020

Urgent Update – External Audit

Final Decision-Maker	Audit, Governance and Standards Committee
Lead Head of Service	Mark Green, Director of Finance and Business Improvement
Lead Officer and Report Author	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Classification	Public
Wards affected	None

Executive Summary

Committee members are invited to consider the updated audit findings report and progress report of the external auditor.

Reason for urgency

The Chairman has agreed to take this update as an urgent agenda item as the documents relate to the 2019/20 Statement of Accounts which is already on the agenda for this meeting.

Purpose of Report

Committee members are asked to note this report and agree the representations within the amended audit findings report.

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That the updated audit findings report attached at Appendix 1 be noted, and that the representations contained within this be agreed.
2. That the progress report attached at Appendix 2 be noted.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Audit, Governance and Standards Committee	14 September 2020

Urgent Update – External Audit

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities. However, they will support the Council's ability to discharge its responsibilities in relation to the 2019/20 financial statements audit and value for money conclusion.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Cross Cutting Objectives	The recommendations set out above will not have any material impact on the cross cutting objectives.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Risk Management	This report recommends no decisions which give rise to risk management implications.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Financial	There are no direct financial implications arising from the report, although the opinion on the financial statements and value for money conclusion are one mechanism through which the council demonstrates financial accountability.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Staffing	No implications identified.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Legal	The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 sets out the framework for audit of local authorities.	Legal Team
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Public Health	No implications identified.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
Crime and Disorder	No implications identified.	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance

Procurement	No implications identified	Ellie Dunnet, Head of Finance
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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The committee is asked to consider the enclosed reports of the external auditor which relate to the 2019/20 Statement of Accounts, which is already being considered at this meeting.
- 1.2 The Audit Findings Report has already been considered by the committee at its meeting in July. However, at that stage there were a number of areas of work which were outstanding. The version attached at Appendix 1 provides an update on these issues.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 1.3 It is recommended that the committee notes these documents and agrees the revised representations included within Appendix 1. The committee could choose not to consider this report, however this option is not recommended since to do so would impede the council's ability to meet its statutory responsibilities in relation to audit and accountability.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 It is recommended that the committee notes the external auditor's report and agrees the revised representations. This will enable the council and its auditors to move towards closure of the 2019/20 audit.

5. RISK

- 5.1 This report recommends no decisions which give rise to risk management implications.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 No consultation has been undertaken in relation to this matter.

7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 Next steps are outlined within Appendix 1.

8. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix 1: External Auditor's Audit Findings Report (Updated)
 - Appendix 2: External Auditor's Progress Report
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None



The Audit Findings for Maidstone Borough Council

Year ended 31 March 2020

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14 September 2020



Contents



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The contents of this report relate only to those matters which came to our attention during the conduct of our normal audit procedures which are designed for the purpose of expressing our opinion on the financial statements. Our audit is not designed to test all internal controls or identify all areas of control weakness. However, where, as part of our testing, we identify control weaknesses, we will report these to you. In consequence, our work cannot be relied upon to disclose all defalcations or other irregularities, or to include all possible improvements in internal control that a more extensive special examination might identify. This report has been prepared solely for your benefit and should not be quoted in whole or in part without our prior written consent. We do not accept any responsibility for any loss occasioned to any third party acting, or refraining from acting on the basis of the content of this report, as this report was not prepared for, nor intended for, any other purpose.

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Headlines

This table summarises the key findings and other matters arising from the statutory audit of Maidstone Borough Council ('the Council') and the preparation of the Council's financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2020 for those charged with governance.

Covid-19	<p>The outbreak of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on the normal operations of the Council . The Council as well as the finance team have faced a number of front line challenges including access to systems, the administration of support to businesses, closure of car parks and leisure services with additional challenges of reopening services under new government guidelines.</p> <p>Authorities are still required to prepare financial statements in accordance with the relevant accounting standards and the Code of Audit Practice, albeit to an extended deadline for the preparation of the financial statements up to 31 August 2020 and the date for audited financials statements to 30 November 2020.</p>	<p>We updated our audit risk assessment to consider the impact of the pandemic on our audit and issued an audit plan addendum in April 2020. In that addendum we reported an additional financial statement risk in respect of Covid -19 and highlighted the impact on our VfM approach. Further detail is set out on page 7.</p> <p>Restrictions for non-essential travel has meant both Council and audit staff have had to deal with a number of audit challenges, including new remote access working arrangements i.e. remote accessing financial systems, video calling and remotely observing information produced by the entity. The audit has, and continues to be delivered remotely.</p>
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Headlines

This table summarises the key findings and other matters arising from the statutory audit of Maidstone Borough Council ('the Council') and the preparation of the Council's financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2020 for those charged with governance.

<p>Financial Statements</p>	<p>Under International Standards of Audit (UK) (ISAs) and the National Audit Office (NAO) Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'), we are required to report whether, in our opinion, the Council's financial statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council and its income and expenditure for the year; and • have been properly prepared in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC code of practice on local authority accounting and prepared in accordance with the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. <p>We are also required to report whether other information published together with the audited financial statements (including the Annual Governance Statement (AGS), and Narrative Report), is materially inconsistent with the financial statements or our knowledge obtained in the audit or otherwise appears to be materially misstated.</p>	<p>Our audit work has been undertaken remotely during July. Our findings are summarised on pages 6 to 13. We have identified no adjustments to the financial statements to date that have resulted in a £NIL adjustment to the Council's Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement. Audit adjustments are detailed in Appendix C. We have also raised recommendations for management as a result of our audit work in Appendix A. Our follow up of recommendations from the prior year's audit are detailed in Appendix B.</p> <p>In our Audit Planning Report we included reference to the work required on the group accounts which the Council was intending to prepare for the first time. Due to the challenges presented by the new ways of working under Covid-19 restrictions management made the decision to refrain from preparing group accounts in 2019-20 on the grounds of materiality.</p> <p>Our work is substantially complete and there are no matters of which we are aware that would require modification of our audit opinion (Appendix E) or material changes to the financial statements, subject to the following outstanding matters;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of PPE valuation testing • Review of the adjustment relating to Lockwood Meadow carpark; • Receipt of assurance from the Kent Pension Fund auditor • Completion of internal review procedures • receipt of management representation letter – see appendix F; and • review of the final set of financial statements. <p>We have concluded that the other information to be published with the financial statements is consistent with our knowledge of your organisation. The financial statements we have audited is up until 31 March 2020 which was prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>Our anticipated audit report opinion will be unqualified including an Emphasis of Matter paragraph, highlighting PPE valuation material uncertainties for both the Council property and their share of assets included in the IAS 19 pension fund actuarial position.</p>
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Headlines

This table summarises the key findings and other matters arising from the statutory audit of Maidstone Borough Council ('the Council') and the preparation of the Council's financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2020 for those charged with governance.

<p>Value for Money arrangements</p>	<p>Under the National Audit Office (NAO) Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'), we are required to report if, in our opinion, the Council has made proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources ('the value for money (VfM) conclusion').</p>	<p>We have completed our risk based review of the Council's value for money arrangements. We have concluded that the Council has proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.</p> <p>We have updated our VfM risk assessment to document our understanding of your arrangements to ensure critical business continuity in the current environment. We have not identified any new VfM risks in relation to Covid-19.</p> <p>We therefore anticipate issuing an unqualified value for money conclusion. Our findings are summarised on pages 16 to 19.</p>
<p>Statutory duties</p>	<p>The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 ('the Act') also requires us to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • report to you if we have applied any of the additional powers and duties ascribed to us under the Act; and • To certify the closure of the audit. 	<p>We have not exercised any of our additional statutory powers or duties</p> <p>We have completed the majority of work under the Code and expect to be able to certify the completion of the audit when we give our audit opinion.</p>

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Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to record our appreciation for the assistance and timely collaboration provided by the finance team and other staff during these unprecedented times.

Audit approach

Overview of the scope of our audit

This Audit Findings Report presents the observations arising from the audit that are significant to the responsibility of those charged with governance to oversee the financial reporting process, as required by International Standard on Auditing (UK) 260 and the Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'). Its contents have been discussed with management.

As auditor we are responsible for performing the audit, in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (UK) and the Code, which is directed towards forming and expressing an opinion on the financial statements that have been prepared by management with the oversight of those charged with governance. The audit of the financial statements does not relieve management or those charged with governance of their responsibilities for the preparation of the financial statements.

Audit approach

Our audit approach was based on a thorough understanding of the Council's business and is risk based, and in particular included:

- An evaluation of the Council's internal controls environment, including its IT systems and control; and
- Substantive testing on significant transactions and material account balances, including the procedures outlined in this report in relation to the key audit risks

We have had to alter our audit plan, as communicated to you in April 2020, to reflect our response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

We have substantially completed our audit of your financial statements and subject to outstanding queries being resolved, we anticipate issuing an unqualified audit opinion following the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee meeting on 29 July 2020 and following the end of the inspection period on 17 August 2020. These outstanding items listed on page 4.

Our approach to materiality

The concept of materiality is fundamental to the preparation of the financial statements and the audit process and applies not only to the monetary misstatements but also to disclosure requirements and adherence to acceptable accounting practice and applicable law.

Materiality levels remain the same as reported in our audit plan.

	Council Amount (£)	Qualitative factors considered
Materiality for the financial statements	1,800,000	This has been calculated based upon 2% of your prior year expenditure
Performance materiality	1,260,000	This has been calculated as 70% of headline materiality, based upon our assessment of the likelihood of a material misstatement in the financial statements
Trivial matters	90,000	
Materiality for related party transactions and senior officer remuneration	100,000	Due to the additional sensitivity and external interest for these areas a lower threshold was applied.

Significant audit risks

Risks identified in our Audit Plan	Auditor commentary
Covid- 19	<p>We:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> worked with management to understand the implications the response to the Covid-19 pandemic had on the organisation’s ability to prepare the financial statements and update financial forecasts and assessed the implications for our materiality calculations. No changes were made to materiality levels previously reported. The draft financial statements were provided on 19 June 2020; liaised with other audit suppliers, regulators and government departments to co-ordinate practical cross-sector responses to issues as and when they arose. Examples include the material uncertainty disclosed by the Council’s property valuation expert evaluated the adequacy of the disclosures in the financial statements that arose in light of the Covid-19 pandemic; evaluated whether sufficient audit evidence could be obtained through remote technology; evaluated whether sufficient audit evidence could be obtained to corroborate significant management estimates such as assets and the pension fund liability valuations ; evaluated management’s assumptions that underpin the revised financial forecasts and the impact on management’s going concern assessment; discussed with management the implications for our audit report where we have been unable to obtain sufficient audit evidence .
The revenue cycle includes fraudulent transactions (rebutted)	<p>Our work in this area is still ongoing in relation to the pension fund liability.</p> <p>Having considered the risk factors set out in ISA240 and the nature of the revenue streams at the Council, we have determined that the risk of fraud arising from revenue recognition can be rebutted. Therefore we do not consider this to be a significant risk for Maidstone Borough Council. Our audit work has not identified any issues in respect of revenue recognition.</p>

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Significant audit risks

Risks identified in our Audit Plan

Management override of controls

Auditor commentary

We have undertaken work to:

- evaluate the design effectiveness of management controls over journals
- analyse the journals listing and determine the criteria for selecting high risk unusual journals
- test unusual journals recorded during the year and after the draft accounts stage for appropriateness and corroboration
- gain an understanding of the accounting estimates and critical judgements applied made by management and consider their reasonableness with regard to corroborative evidence
- evaluate the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimates or significant unusual transactions.

Our audit work has not identified any issues in respect of management override of controls.

Valuation of land and buildings

We have undertaken work to:

- evaluate management's processes and assumptions for the calculation of the estimate, the instructions issued to valuation experts and the scope of their work
- evaluate the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the valuation expert
- write to the valuer to confirm the basis on which the valuation was carried out
- challenge the information and assumptions used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding
- test revaluations made during the year to see if they had been input correctly into the group's asset register
- evaluating the assumptions made by management for those assets not revalued during the year and how management has satisfied themselves that these are not materially different to current value at year end.

As disclosed in notes to the financial statements, the outbreak of Covid-19 has caused uncertainties in markets. As a result, the Council's valuer has declared a 'material valuation uncertainty' in their valuation report. The Council's valuer prepared their valuations in accordance with the RICS Valuation Standards using the information that was available to them at the valuation date in deriving their estimates

As a result of the material uncertainty being identified on the valuation of Property, Plant and Equipment, our audit opinion will include a Emphasis of Matter, drawing attention to the material uncertainty identified.

During our audit work possible omission in the valuations in prior period was identified in relation to the car park in Lockwood Meadow. This is being discussed with the finance team and valuer.

Our work is ongoing and are not able to conclude on this risk at this time

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Significant audit risks

Risks identified in our Audit Plan

Valuation of pension fund net liability

Auditor commentary

We have undertaken work to:

- update our understanding of the processes and controls put in place by management to ensure that the Authority's pension fund net liability is not materially misstated and evaluate the design of the associated controls;
- evaluate the instructions issued by management to their management expert (an actuary) for this estimate and the scope of the actuary's work;
- assess the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary who carried out the Authority's pension fund valuation;
- assess the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the Authority to the actuary to estimate the liability;
- test the consistency of the pension fund asset and liability and disclosures in the notes to the core financial statements with the actuarial report from the actuary;
- undertake procedures to confirm the reasonableness of the actuarial assumptions made by reviewing the report of the consulting actuary (as auditor's expert) and performing any additional procedures suggested within the report; and
- obtain assurances from the auditor of Kent Pension Fund as to the controls surrounding the validity and accuracy of membership data; contributions data and benefits data sent to the actuary by the pension fund and the fund assets valuation in the pension fund financial statements and consider whether or not any material uncertainties exist in respect of asset values.

Our work in this area is still ongoing. The assurance from the Kent Pension Fund auditor remains outstanding.

Other audit risks

Risks identified in our Audit Plan**International Financial Reporting Standard (IFRS) 16
Leases – (issued but not adopted)****Auditor commentary**

Although the implementation of IFRS 16 has been delayed to 1 April 2021, audited bodies still need to include disclosure in their 2019/2020 statements to comply with the requirement of IAS 8 para 31. As a minimum, we would expect audited bodies to disclose the title of the standard, the date of initial application and the nature of the changes in accounting policy for leases.

We discussed the level of disclosure required with management and upon receipt of the draft financial statements feedback on the disclosure included. This resulted in minor amendments being made to ensure compliance with Code requirements.

Accruals

In our 2018-19 Audit Findings Report we reported that during creditor and accruals testing we had identified items which had been incorrectly accrued at year end resulting in a recommendation to ensure that all accruals are reviewed by the budget holders at year end to ensure they remain valid and are accrued at the appropriate level based on supporting information.

We have therefore identified accruals as a risk.

We have performed sample testing of accruals as part of our creditor testing with no issues identified.

Accounting for the consolidation of the subsidiary

As referenced on page 4, subsequent to the presentation of our Audit Plan the Council decided not to produce Group accounts on the basis of materiality. This was discussed with management during the audit and we are satisfied no group financial statements are required.

Significant findings – key estimates and judgements

Accounting area	Summary of management’s policy	Auditor commentary	Assessment
<p>Land and Buildings – £91,042k</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">145</p>	<p>Other land and buildings comprises specialised assets such as the leisure centre and theatre, which are required to be valued at depreciated replacement cost (DRC) at year end, reflecting the cost of a modern equivalent asset necessary to deliver the same service provision. The remainder of other land and buildings are not specialised in nature and are required to be valued at existing use in value (EUUV) at year end. The Council has engaged Harrison’s Chartered Surveyor to complete the valuation of properties as at 30 November 2019. The valuation of properties valued by the valuer has resulted in a net increase of £2,687k. Management have considered the year end value of non-valued properties to determine whether there has been a material change in the total value of these properties. Management’s assessment of assets not revalued has identified no material change to the properties value.</p> <p>In line with RICS guidance, the Council’s valuer disclosed a material uncertainty in the valuation of the Council’s land and buildings at 31 March 2020 as a result of Covid-19. The Council has included disclosures on this issue in Note 4.</p>	<p>We have assessed management’s estimate, considering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of management’s expert • Completeness and accuracy of the underlying information used to determine the estimate • Impact of any changes to valuation method • Consistency of estimate against a national benchmarking report produced by our auditors expert, Gerald Eve • Reasonableness of the movement in estimate • Challenge of the sensitivities used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding • Adequacy of disclosure of estimate in the financial statements <p>We consider management’s process appropriate.</p>	<p>TBC</p>

Assessment

- We disagree with the estimation process or judgements that underpin the estimate and consider the estimate to be potentially materially misstated
- We consider the estimate is unlikely to be materially misstated however management’s estimation process contains assumptions we consider optimistic
- We consider the estimate is unlikely to be materially misstated however management’s estimation process contains assumptions we consider cautious
- We consider management’s process is appropriate and key assumptions are neither optimistic or cautious

Significant findings – key estimates and judgements

Accounting area	Summary of management’s policy	Auditor commentary	Assessment
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Net pension liability – £73.677m

The Council’s net pension liability at 31 March 2020 is £73.677m (PY £71.481m) comprising the Kent Pension Fund Local Government defined benefit pension scheme obligations. The Council uses Barnett Waddingham to provide actuarial valuations of the Council’s assets and liabilities derived from this scheme. A full actuarial valuation is required every three years.

The latest full actuarial valuation was completed in 2019. A roll forward approach is used in intervening periods which utilises key assumptions such as life expectancy, discount rates, salary growth and investment return. Given the significant value of the net pension fund liability, small changes in assumptions can result in significant valuation movements.

Our assessment of the estimate has considered:

- Assessment of management’s expert
- Assessment of actuary’s roll forward approach taken, detail work undertaken to confirm reasonableness of approach
- Use of PwC as auditors expert to assess actuary and assumptions made by actuary

Assumption	Actuary Value	Assessment
Discount rate	2.35%	●
Pension increase rate	2.35%	●
Salary growth	3.85%	●
Life expectancy – Longevity at 65 for current pensioners	21.8	●
- Males	23.7	
- Females		
Life expectancy – Longevity at 65 for future pensioners		●
- Males	23.2	
- Females	25.2	

TBC

- Completeness and accuracy of the underlying information used to determine the estimate
- Impact of any changes to valuation method
- Assessment of the information received from pension fund auditor
- Reasonableness of the Council’s share of LPS pension assets.
- Reasonableness of increase/decrease in estimate
- Adequacy of disclosure of estimate in the financial statements
- whether there are any material estimation uncertainties in respect of property values that need to be considered.

Our work in this area is ongoing and we are not able to provided a conclusion at this time

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Significant findings – going concern

Our responsibility

As auditors, we are required to “obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence about the appropriateness of management's use of the going concern assumption in the preparation and presentation of the financial statements and to conclude whether there is a material uncertainty about the entity's ability to continue as a going concern” (ISA (UK) 570).

Going concern material uncertainty disclosures

It has been a challenging year due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of this has included administration of grants to businesses, closure of leisure facilities and car parks with additional challenges of reopening services under new government guidelines; staff absences due to being ill, the need to free up capacity of teams in addition to normal responsibilities. The Council is facing significant challenges.

Going concern commentary

Management's assessment process

Management's assessment process is based on your financial planning framework. You have a four year Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) covering the period 2020/21 to 2023/24.

Auditor commentary

- The Council has a history of achieving financial savings plans and delivering services within budget
- The Council has a comprehensive medium term planning framework. The MTFS is updated annually and integrated with your annual budget processes
- Management has concluded that it is appropriate to use the going concern basis of accounting.
- The Council has demonstrated that it has forecast the expected impact of loss of revenue and additional expenditure arising from the Covid-19 pandemic
- Management has determined that there are sufficient reserves at the end of March 2020 to cover the projected impact of Covid-19 in 2020-21.

Work performed

- The Council has delivered a revenue budget overspend of £237k for 2019/20.
- As at 31 March 2020 the draft accounts showed useable reserves of £17,193k.
- At the year end the Council has cash holdings of £10m. A cash flow forecast produced by management is forecasting deficit balances of £909k from October 2020 and a repayment of £4m of short term borrowing in November 2020. They have commented that they anticipate additional government support and the need to borrow later in the year. We requested a cashflow forecast to at least July 2021 updated to reflect these expectations.

Concluding comments

Our work has concluded and we are satisfied management's assessment is appropriate.

Other matters for communication

We set out below details of other matters which we, as auditors, are required by auditing standards and the Code to communicate to those charged with governance.

Issue	Auditor commentary
Matters in relation to fraud	We have previously discussed the risk of fraud with the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee. We have not been made aware of any other incidents in the period and no other issues have been identified during the course of our audit procedures.
Matters in relation to related parties	We are not aware of any related parties or related party transactions which have not been disclosed
Matters in relation to laws and regulations	You have not made us aware of any significant incidences of non-compliance with relevant laws and regulations and we have not identified any incidences from our audit work.
Written representations	A letter of representation has been requested from the Council, including specific representations in respect of the property valuations, which is appended.
Confirmation requests from third parties	We requested from management permission to send confirmation request(s) to banks and third parties with whom the Council has loans. permission was granted and the requests were sent. All but one of these requests have been returned to date with positive confirmation. We are in the process of following up the remaining confirmation.
Disclosures	Our review found no material omissions in the financial statements other than in relation to the inclusion of a post balance sheet event in relation to Covid-19 impacts.
Audit evidence and explanations/significant difficulties	All information and explanations requested from management was provided.

Other responsibilities under the Code

Issue	Commentary
Other information	<p>We are required to give an opinion on whether the other information published together with the audited financial statements (including the Annual Governance Statement, Narrative Report), is materially inconsistent with the financial statements or our knowledge obtained in the audit or otherwise appears to be materially misstated.</p> <p>No inconsistencies have been identified. We plan to issue an unmodified opinion in this respect.</p>
Matters on which we report by exception	<p>We are required to report on a number of matters by exception in a numbers of areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the Annual Governance Statement does not meet the disclosure requirements set out in the CIPFA/SOLACE guidance or is misleading or inconsistent with the other information of which we are aware from our audit • If we have applied any of our statutory powers or duties <p>We have nothing to report on these matters</p>
Specified procedures for Whole of Government Accounts	<p>We are required to carry out specified procedures (on behalf of the NAO) on the Whole of Government Accounts (WGA) consolidation pack under WGA group audit instructions.</p> <p>Work is not required as the Council does not exceed the threshold.</p>
Certification of the closure of the audit	<p>We intend to certify the closure of the 2019/20 audit of Maidstone Borough Council in the audit report.</p>

Value for Money

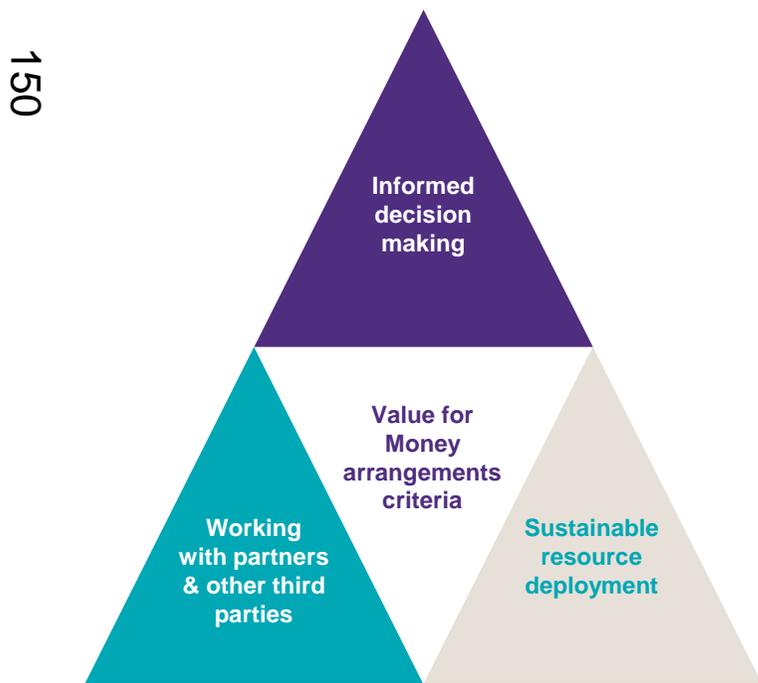
Background to our VFM approach

We are required to satisfy ourselves that the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. This is known as the Value for Money (VFM) conclusion.

We are required to carry out sufficient work to satisfy ourselves that proper arrangements are in place at the Council. In carrying out this work, we are required to follow the NAO's Auditor Guidance Note 3 (AGN 03) issued in April 2020. AGN 03 identifies one single criterion for auditors to evaluate:

"In all significant respects, the audited body takes properly informed decisions and deploys resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people."

This is supported by three sub-criteria, as set out below:



Risk assessment

We carried out an initial risk assessment in January 2020 and identified one significant risk in respect of specific areas of proper arrangements using the guidance contained in AGN03. We communicated these risks to you in our Audit Plan dated 16 March 2020.

We have continued our review of relevant documents up to the date of giving our report, and have not identified any further significant risks where we need to perform further work.

Value for Money

Our work

AGN 03 requires us to disclose our views on significant qualitative aspects of the Council's arrangements for delivering economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

We have focused our work on the significant risks that we identified in the Council's arrangements. In arriving at our conclusion, our main considerations were:

- The Council's 2019/20 financial outturn;
- The robustness of the Council's 2019/20 budget and Medium Term Financial plan, including savings and income proposals; and
- The Council's response to the challenges of Covid-19.

We have set out more detail on the risks we identified, the results of the work we performed, and the conclusions we drew from this work on pages 18 to 19.

15 Overall conclusion

Based on the work we performed to address the significant risks, we are satisfied that the Council had proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

Significant difficulties in undertaking our work

We did not identify any significant difficulties in undertaking our work on your arrangements which we wish to draw to your attention.

Significant matters discussed with management

There were no matters where no other evidence was available or matters of such significance to our conclusion or that we required written representation from management or those charged with governance.

Value for Money

Key findings

We set out below our key findings against the significant risks we identified through our initial risk assessment and further risks identified through our ongoing review of documents.

Significant risk

Findings

Overall Financial Position and Financial Resilience

Whilst the Council has been able to set a balanced budget over the short term, currently there is a requirement for a considerable level of savings of the life of the current Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFS). The Council also plans to enter into significant levels of borrowing over the next few years.

We proposed to:

- review the assumptions behind the latest MTFS, covering the period up to March 2025;
- consider the 2019-20 budget outturn, and any implications this may have for the MTFS, along with the latest outturn against the 2020-21 budget
- review the savings proposals which have been identified to date in respect of the savings requirements, along with the plans that the Council has to identify the additional savings currently required for the life of the MTFS
- review the capital strategy and discuss with management the proposals for debt management and the ability of the Council to meet its commitments

Revenue outturn for 2019/20

Despite the continued challenging funding settlement for local authorities nationally, you have continued your good track record of delivery of service within budget and attainment of planned targets.

The Council has had a challenging year and has delivered a revenue budget overspend of £237k (2018-19: underspend of £154k). This represents good financial performance in the context of the reduction in central government funding, the need to make significant savings, and increasing pressure on services.

Budget for 2020/21 onwards

The Council presented three budget scenarios as part of their Medium Term Financial Strategy – 'adverse', 'neutral' and 'favourable'. We have analysed the detailed breakdown of the reductions in income and increased expenditure budgeted for 2020/21. We discussed the key items with management and looked at the assumptions behind there and concluded that they were realistically and prudently estimated but remain challenging.

We have reviewed the assumptions and estimates which underlie the estimates of the additional revenues and savings included in the plans. We reviewed the revenue which you plan to generate and the savings plans. We found the estimates were reasonable. The Council has a very good track record in setting budgets which are accurate and very close to the reality shown in the outturn position.

We are satisfied that management have demonstrated that sound financial planning processes and robust financial controls are in place.

Value for Money

Key findings

We set out below our key findings against the significant risks we identified through our initial risk assessment and further risks identified through our ongoing review of documents.

Significant risk	Findings
------------------	----------

Overall Position and Financial Resilience (contd.)	Financial	Fiscal indicators and reserves levels
	<p>The level of reserves in the Council's draft accounts is £62,057k comprising usable reserves of £17,193k (including £549k of capital receipts) and unusable reserves of £44,854k.</p> <p>The general fund and earmarked general fund reserves as a percentage of net service revenue expenditure is 74%. The level of usable reserves, which include the general fund, earmarked reserves and capital receipts reserve, has increased from 2018-19 by 9.8%.</p> <p>For the short to medium term, the Council's reserves level provides it with a sufficient cushion to weather the on-going financial challenges that you face over the next few years due to reductions in central government funding and forecast increases in demand for your core services. However, you only have finite reserves available and it is important that you continue to maintain appropriate budgetary controls on spending and ensure that savings plans are fully delivered.</p> <p>Impact of Covid-19</p> <p>The budget and planning discussed above was undertaken prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of lockdown measures on the frontline services of the Council which has included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of revenue e.g. from car parking and leisure services • Reduced levels of Council tax and Business rates collection • Increased expenditure to support local business and to be able to continue to provide services in the changed circumstances. <p>The Council has received additional funding from central government. The amount received initially was £1.7m provided in two tranches. Further support was announced on 2 July 2020 and a further £274k was allocated to Maidstone Borough Council. Further detail relating to income support is also expected.</p> <p>The finance team has responded to the impact by reviewing the assumptions in the 2020/21 budget and the expected income and expenditure streams, including the impact on achieving the planned capital programme. They have provided information to government through financial returns and to members to ensure they are aware of the challenges being faced by the Council. In June, the impact on 2020-21 was assessed and the net impact was forecast to be £6,450k in increased expenditure and reductions in income after taking into account the support already provided by central government. This is within the level of reserves available to the Council. The impact on the Council's cash flow position has also been highlighted. The Council had cash balances of £10.687k in the draft accounts however there were short term borrowings due of £11,000k within 2020-21.</p> <p>The Council has continued to keep this under review and paper was produced in July the 2020-21 revenue budget forecasts were updated for the forecast Covid-19 impact. This amended the original net revenue budget from £18,935k to £24,625k. With any further mitigating actions the projected deficit is £8,563k. This is mitigated by the funding from central government already received and it is expected that, following the announcement on 2 July, further funding is expected. This enables the remainder to be covered by the unearmarked general fund reserves of £8,818k as at end of March 2020.</p>	

Independence and ethics

We confirm that there are no significant facts or matters that impact on our independence as auditors that we are required or wish to draw to your attention. We have complied with the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard and confirm that we, as a firm, and each covered person, are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements

We confirm that we have implemented policies and procedures to meet the requirements of the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard and we as a firm, and each covered person, confirm that we are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements.

Further, we have complied with the requirements of the National Audit Office's Auditor Guidance Note 01 issued in May 2020 which sets out supplementary guidance on ethical requirements for auditors of local public bodies.

Details of fees charged are detailed in Appendix D.

Independence and ethics

Audit and Non-audit services

For the purposes of our audit we have made enquiries of all Grant Thornton UK LLP teams providing services to the Council. The following non-audit services were identified.

	Fees £	Threats identified	Safeguards
Audit related			
Certification of Housing Benefit Claim	22,000 (2018/19 fee)	Self-Interest (because this is a recurring fee)	The level of this recurring fee taken on its own is not considered a significant threat to independence as the fee for this work was £22,000 in 2018/19 in comparison to the total scale fee for the audit of £38,866 and in particular relative to Grant Thornton UK LLP's turnover overall. Further, it is a fixed fee and there is no contingent element to it. These factors all mitigate the perceived self-interest threat to an acceptable level.
155		Self review (because GT provides audit services)	To mitigate against the self review threat , the timing of certification work is done after the audit has completed, materiality of the amounts involved to our opinion and unlikelihood of material errors arising and the Council has informed management who will decide whether to amend returns for our findings and agree the accuracy of our reports on grants.

Action plan

We have identified 1 recommendation for the Council as a result of issues identified during the course of our audit. We have agreed our recommendation with management and we will report on progress on this recommendation during the course of the 2020/21 audit. The matters reported here are limited to those deficiencies that we have identified during the course of our audit and that we have concluded are of sufficient importance to merit being reported to you in accordance with auditing standards.

Assessment	Issue and risk	Recommendations
 Medium	<p>Declarations of interest</p> <p>During our testing of related party disclosures we requested the latest declarations for review. The Council sends these to members on an annual basis and they were sent on 9 April 2020. At the time of the audit work in July, 17 forms remained outstanding and had not been received from members.</p>	<p>We recommend that the process for managing the distribution and collections of returns is reviewed and the importance of responding is reiterated with members.</p> <p>Management response</p> <p>We accept this recommendation and will be reviewing our processes to ensure that declarations of interest are collected promptly in future</p>

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Controls

-  High – Significant effect on control system
-  Medium – Effect on control system
-  Low – Best practice

Follow up of prior year recommendations

We identified the following issues in the audit of Maidstone Borough Council's 2018/19 financial statements, which resulted in 1 recommendation being reported in our 2018/19 Audit Findings report. We have followed up on the implementation of our recommendations below.

Assessment	Issue and risk previously communicated	Update on actions taken to address the issue
✓	During our creditor and accruals testing we identified items which had been incorrectly accrued for at the year end. We recommended that all accruals be reviewed at year end for validity and accuracy.	Our testing of this area in 2019-20 has not identified any issues.

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Assessment

- ✓ Action completed
- X Not yet addressed

Audit adjustments

We are required to report all non trivial misstatements to those charged with governance, whether or not the accounts have been adjusted by management.

Impact of adjusted misstatements

Adjustments were made between the first version of the accounts presented for audit and the final version to include presentational and classification adjustments for preceptor balances and the Kent Business Rates Pool. This resulted in adjustments to the Net Assets between debtors, creditors and provisions with a net nil impact and nil impact on the Comprehensive income and Expenditure Statement.

The other adjusted misstatements are set out in detail below along with the impact on the key statements and the reported net expenditure for the year ending 31 March 2020.

Detail	Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement £'000	Balance Sheet £' 000	Impact on total net expenditure £'000
Impact of prior period adjustment for the valuation of Lockwood Meadow Carpark – Opening property, plant and equipment value		2,825	0
Impact of prior period adjustment for the valuation of Lockwood Meadow Carpark – Opening revaluation reserve (This adjustment was processed in 2018-19 and appears as a revaluation in the prior year as well)		(2,825)	
Reclassification of capital receipt – adjustment to gain on disposal of assets and reduction in income from 'Fees, charges and other service income'	1,030 (1,030)		0
Adjustment for disposal of Brunswick carpark	288	(288)	288
Overall impact	£288	£288	£288

Misclassification and disclosure changes

The table below provides details of misclassification and disclosure changes identified during the audit which have been made in the final set of financial statements.

Disclosure omission	Auditor recommendations	Adjusted?
Inclusion of subsequent event in relation to the impact of Covid-19	Due to the significant impact of Covid-19 on the Council's finances post year end we recommend the inclusion of specific disclosure in the accounts in line with the type of information included in the narrative statement.	

Audit adjustments

Impact of unadjusted misstatements

Our work to date has not identified an unadjusted misstatements above triviality.

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Impact of prior year unadjusted misstatements

The table below provides details of adjustments identified during the prior year audit which had not been made within the final set of 2018/19 financial statements.

Detail	Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement £'000	Balance Sheet Position £' 000	Impact on total net expenditure £'000	Reason for not adjusting
Creditors		189.		
Expenditure	(189)		(189)	
[The accruals balance was overstated as sample testing of the creditors balances identified 4 errors. All errors resulted in an over accrual in the accounts.				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The error is immaterial
Overall impact	189	(189)	(189)	

Fees

We confirm below our final fees charged for the audit and provision of non-audit services.

Audit fees	Proposed fee	Final fee
Council Audit	46,366	TBC
Total audit fees (excluding VAT)	£46,366	£TBC

The fees reconcile to the financial statements.

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Non-audit fees for other services	Final fee
Audit Related Services – housing Benefit Subsidy claim 2018-19	22,000
Total non- audit fees (excluding VAT)	£22,000

Audit opinion

We anticipate we will provide the Council with an unqualified audit report with an Emphasis of Matter

To follow

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Management letter of representation

Grant Thornton UK LLP
110 Bishopsgate
London
EC2N 4AY

[Date] – (TO BE DATED SAME DATE AS DATE OF AUDIT OPINION)

Dear Sirs

Maidstone Borough Council Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2020

This representation letter is provided in connection with the audit of the financial statements of Maidstone Borough Council for the year ended 31 March 2020 for the purpose of expressing an opinion as to whether the financial statements are presented fairly, in all material respects in accordance with International Financial Reporting Standards and the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2019/20 and applicable law.

We confirm that to the best of our knowledge and belief having made such inquiries as we considered necessary for the purpose of appropriately informing ourselves:

Financial Statements

- i. We have fulfilled our responsibilities for the preparation of the Council's financial statements in accordance with International Financial Reporting Standards and the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2019/20 ("the Code"); in particular the financial statements are fairly presented in accordance therewith.
- ii. We have complied with the requirements of all statutory directions affecting the Council and these matters have been appropriately reflected and disclosed in the financial statements.
- iii. The Council has complied with all aspects of contractual agreements that could have a material effect on the financial statements in the event of non-compliance. There has been no non-compliance with requirements of any regulatory authorities that could have a material effect on the financial statements in the event of non-compliance.
- iv. We acknowledge our responsibility for the design, implementation and maintenance of internal control to prevent and detect fraud..

- v. Significant assumptions used by us in making accounting estimates, including those measured at fair value, are reasonable. We are satisfied that the material judgements used in the preparation of the financial statements are soundly based, in accordance with the Code and adequately disclosed in the financial statements
- vi. We confirm that we are satisfied that the actuarial assumptions underlying the valuation of pension scheme assets and liabilities for IAS19 Employee Benefits disclosures are consistent with our knowledge. We confirm that all settlements and curtailments have been identified and properly accounted for. We also confirm that all significant post-employment benefits have been identified and properly accounted for.
- vii. Except as disclosed in the financial statements:
 - a. there are no unrecorded liabilities, actual or contingent
 - b. none of the assets of the Council has been assigned, pledged or mortgaged
 - c. there are no material prior year charges or credits, nor exceptional or non-recurring items requiring separate disclosure.
- viii. Related party relationships and transactions have been appropriately accounted for and disclosed in accordance with the requirements of International Financial Reporting Standards and the Code.
- ix. All events subsequent to the date of the financial statements and for which International Financial Reporting Standards and the Code require adjustment or disclosure have been adjusted or disclosed.
- x. We have considered the adjusted misstatements, and misclassification and disclosures changes schedules included in your Audit Findings Report. The financial statements have been amended for these misstatements, misclassifications and disclosure changes and are free of material misstatements, including omissions. We confirm that we have considered the prior period adjustment in relation to property, plant and equipment and confirm there are no other material omissions in prior year.
- xi. We have considered the unadjusted misstatements schedule included in your Audit Findings Report. We have not adjusted the financial statements for these misstatements brought to our attention as they are immaterial to the results of the Council and its financial position at the year-end. The financial statements are free of material misstatements, including omissions.
- xii. Actual or possible litigation and claims have been accounted for and disclosed in accordance with the requirements of International Financial Reporting Standards.
- xiii. We have no plans or intentions that may materially alter the carrying value or classification of assets and liabilities reflected in the financial statements.

Management letter of representation

- xiv. We have updated our going concern assessment and cashflow forecasts in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. We continue to believe that the Council's financial statements should be prepared on a going concern basis and have not identified any material uncertainties related to going concern on the grounds that current and future sources of funding or support will be more than adequate for the Council's needs. We believe that no further disclosures relating to the Council's ability to continue as a going concern need to be made in the financial statements
- xv. The outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), declared by the World Health Organisation as a "Global Pandemic" on the 11th March 2020, has impacted global financial markets and travel restrictions have been implemented by many countries. As a consequence economic activity is being impacted in many sectors. As at the valuation date, our independent valuers have stated that they consider that they can attach less weight to previous market evidence, to inform opinions of value. Indeed, the current response to COVID 19 means that they are faced with an unprecedented set of circumstances on which to base a judgement. The Council's valuation is therefore reported on the basis of 'material valuation uncertainty' as per VPS 3 and VPGA 10 of the RICS Red Book Global. Consequently, less certainty – and a higher degree of caution – should be attached to the valuation of the Council's land and buildings than would normally be the case. Given the unknown future impact that COVID-19 might have on the real estate market, the valuers recommend that the Council keeps the valuation of its properties under frequent review. For the avoidance of doubt, the inclusion of the 'material valuation uncertainty' declaration above does not mean that the valuation cannot be relied upon. It is included in order to be clear and transparent, that – in the current extraordinary circumstances – less certainty can be attached to the valuation than would otherwise be the case

Information Provided

- xvi. We have provided you with:
- access to all information of which we are aware that is relevant to the preparation of the financial statements such as records, documentation and other matters;
 - additional information that you have requested from us for the purpose of your audit; and
 - access to persons within the Council via remote arrangements, in compliance with the nationally specified social distancing requirements established by the government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. from whom you determined it necessary to obtain audit evidence.

- xvii. We have communicated to you all deficiencies in internal control of which management is aware.
- xviii. All transactions have been recorded in the accounting records and are reflected in the financial statements.
- xix. We have disclosed to you the results of our assessment of the risk that the financial statements may be materially misstated as a result of fraud.
- xx. We have disclosed to you all information in relation to fraud or suspected fraud that we are aware of and that affects the Council, and involves:
- management;
 - employees who have significant roles in internal control; or
 - others where the fraud could have a material effect on the financial statements.
- xxi. We have disclosed to you all information in relation to allegations of fraud, or suspected fraud, affecting the financial statements communicated by employees, former employees, analysts, regulators or others.
- xxii. We have disclosed to you all known instances of non-compliance or suspected non-compliance with laws and regulations whose effects should be considered when preparing financial statements.
- xxiii. We have disclosed to you the identity of the Council's related parties and all the related party relationships and transactions of which we are aware.
- xxiv. We have disclosed to you all known actual or possible litigation and claims whose effects should be considered when preparing the financial statements.

Annual Governance Statement

- xxv. We are satisfied that the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) fairly reflects the Council's risk assurance and governance framework and we confirm that we are not aware of any significant risks that are not disclosed within the AGS.

Narrative Report

- xxvi. The disclosures within the Narrative Report fairly reflect our understanding of the Council's financial and operating performance over the period covered by the financial statements.

Approval

The approval of this letter of representation was minuted by the Council's Audit, Governance and Standards Committee at its meeting on [ENTER DATE].

Yours faithfully



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Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

Maidstone Borough Council
Year ending 31 March 2020

14 September 2020



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Introduction



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This paper provides the Audit, Governance and Standards 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, Governance and Standards 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.

Progress at September 2020

Financial Statements Audit

We undertook our initial planning for the 2019/20 audit in December 2019, and interim audit in January 2020. We began our work on your draft financial statements in June.

In March we issued a detailed audit plan, setting out our proposed approach to the audit of the Council's 2019/20 financial statements.

We reported our work in the Audit Findings Report presented in July 2020 and have provided an updated report to the September Committee. We aim to give our opinion on the Statement of Accounts in 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 will be included in our Audit Plan.

We reported our work in the Audit Findings Report presented in July 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. The NAO public consultation ran until 2 September 2020.

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 planned to start by the end of the year. 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.

Meetings

We met with Finance Officers in June as part of our regular 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. Your officers attended our Financial Reporting Workshop in February, which helped to ensure that members of your Finance Team were up to date with the latest financial reporting requirements for local authority accounts.

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. 2019/20 is the second year of that contract. 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 fully with the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee.

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

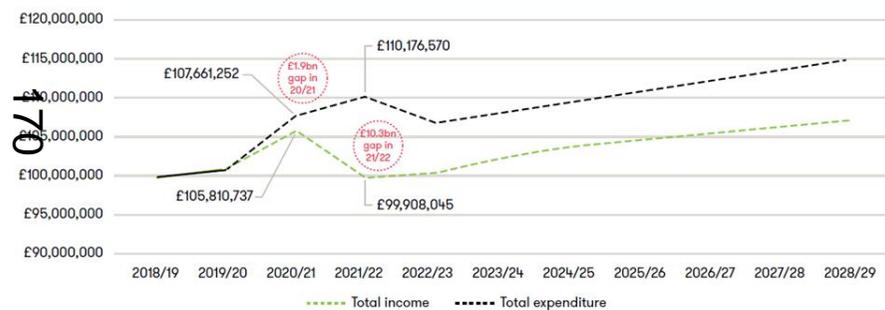
Covid-19 update

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

Financial 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.

and support the vulnerable, whatever scenarios play out in the medium term.

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 RPE, 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.

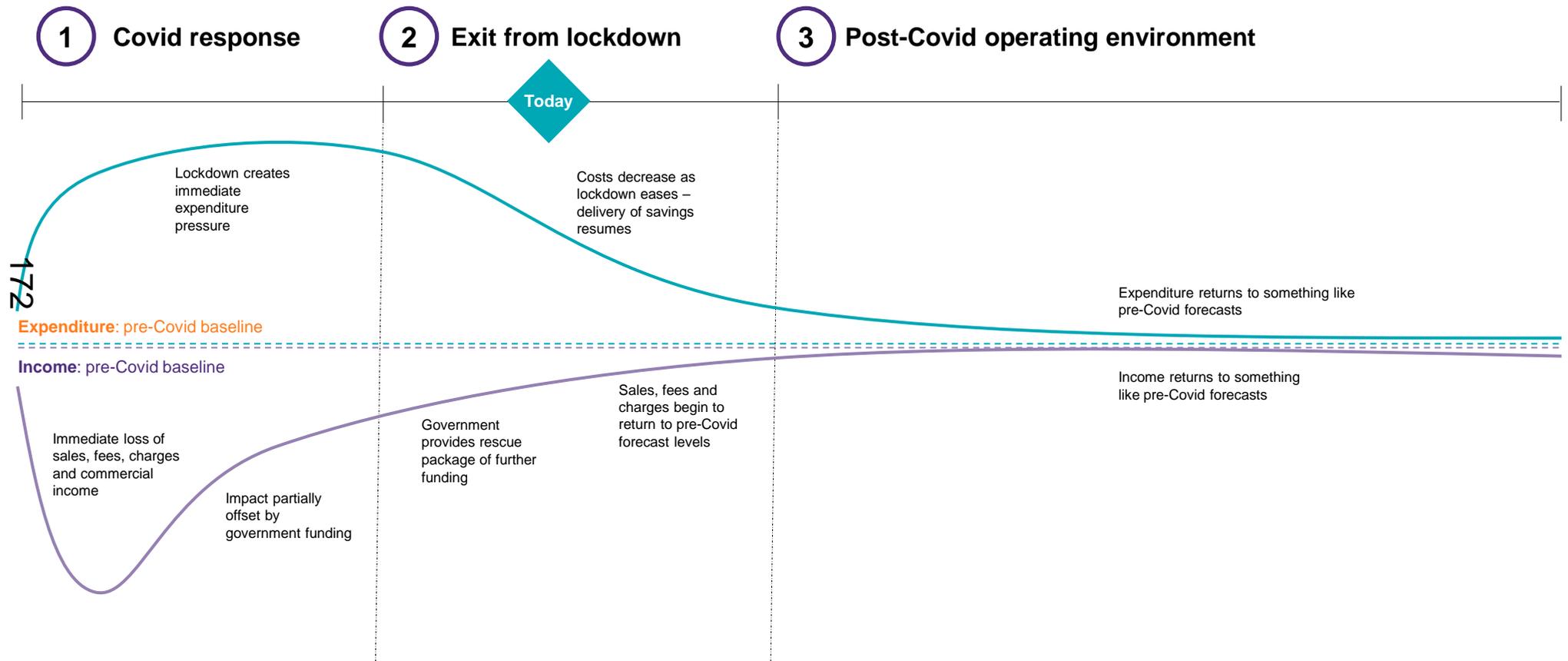
As already noted, places will vary depending on their socio-economic and demographic characteristics, but all councils are working through demand impacts arising from the ongoing pandemic and the associated recession, and ensuring their workforce continue to be supported to ensure they remain personally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

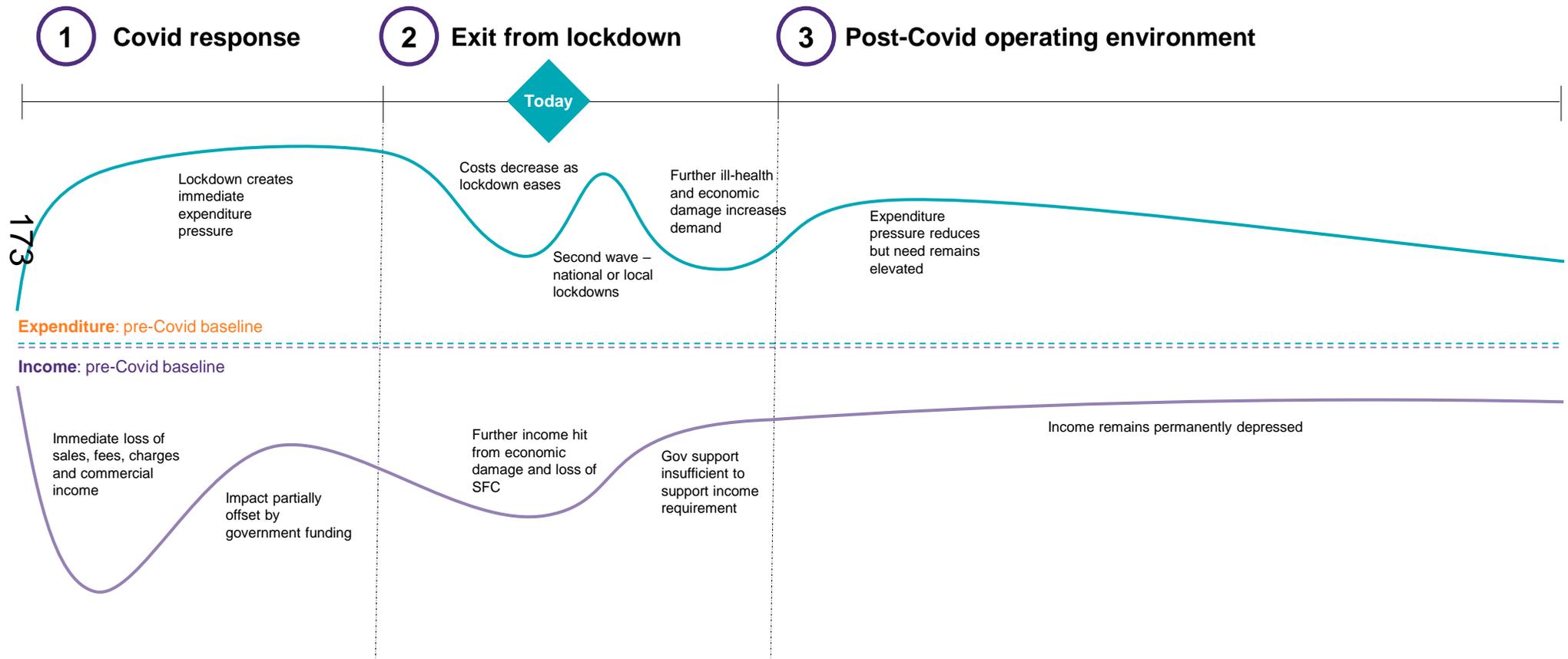
Example scenarios

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?

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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

Audit Deliverables

2019/20 Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
Fee Letter Confirming audit fee for 2019/20.	April 2019	Complete
Audit Plan We are required to issue a detailed audit plan to the Audit, Governance and Standards 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.	March 2020	Complete
Interim Audit Findings We will report to you the findings from our interim audit and our initial value for money risk assessment within our Progress Report.	March 2020	Complete
Audit Findings Report The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the July Audit Committee.	July 2020	Complete
Auditors Report This is the opinion on your financial statement, annual governance statement and value for money conclusion.	September 2020	Not yet due
Annual Audit Letter This letter communicates the key issues arising from our work.	December 2020	Not yet due

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

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 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, Non-domestic (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 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

In terms of key financial reporting considerations for 2019/20, consideration should be given to:

Information published with accounts

- Does the Narrative Report reflect the urgency of the situation, the changes to Council services as a result of lockdown, the partnership arrangements in place, the impact of the pandemic on income and expenditure and possible future scenarios, the impact on savings programmes, the capital programme, treasury management, medium term financial plans and the Council's communications strategy (noting this is not an exhaustive list)?
- Does the Annual Governance Statement reflect significant developments between 31 March 2020 and the finalisation of the accounts? Does the AGS describe emergency governance arrangements for decision making, the postponement of elections, the transition to virtual meetings and plans for the return to normal democratic processes?

Non-current asset valuations

- There has been a significant increase in volatility and uncertainty in markets following the outbreak of Covid-19. RICS has issued a Valuation Practice Alert following the pandemic, and we are aware a significant number of valuers are including 'material valuation uncertainty' disclosures within their reports. Has the Council assessed the impact of such comments, reflected 'material valuation uncertainty' disclosures within the financial statements and taken account of the requirement of Code paragraph 3.4.2.90 to provide appropriate disclosure in their financial statements in relation to major sources of estimation uncertainty?

Non-current asset valuations

- The Council is required to make an assessment at the end of each reporting period as to whether there is any indication that assets may be impaired. There are several types of event or change in circumstance that could indicate an impairment may have occurred, including evidence of obsolescence or physical damage or a commitment to undertake a significant reorganisation. Has the Council assessed whether the impact of the pandemic may have triggered impairments?
- Has the Council considered these matters in relation to Investment Property held? Potentially more so for 2020/21, there may be significant declines in asset carrying values, especially for investments in retail or office premises.

Impairment of receivables

- IFRS 9 *Financial Instruments* introduced an expected credit loss model for financial assets which drives earlier recognition of impairments. Has the Council assessed the impact of the pandemic on its expectation of credit losses?
- Impairment of statutory Council Tax and Non-domestic rate debtor balances is also possible. Has the Council observed a measurable decrease in estimated future cashflow, for example an increase in the number of delayed payments? Has the Council considered whether recent historical loss experience across aged debt may also need revision where current information indicates the historical experience doesn't reflect current conditions? Experience following the 2008/09 financial crisis may prove to be a useful reference point, given the ensuing recession conditions.

Events after the reporting period

- By 31 March 2020 enough was known about the pandemic for accounts preparers and market participants to reflect and, if necessary, adjust assumptions and assessments. By the end of March 2020, it would be extremely difficult to say that the pandemic was not an event that existed and therefore any accounting impact that occurred after this date is not an adjusting event.
- Has the Council distinguished between subsequent events that are adjusting (i.e. those that provide further evidence of conditions that existed at the reporting date) and non-adjusting (i.e. those that are indicative of conditions that arose after the reporting date)? Has the Council got arrangements in place to assess events up to the date the final accounts are authorised for issue?

Sources of estimation uncertainty

Has the Council identified the assumptions required about the future and estimates at the end of the current reporting period that have a significant risk of resulting in a material adjustment to the carrying amounts of assets and liabilities within the next financial year? Have these been appropriately disclosed in accordance with the requirements of IAS 1 paras 125-133?

2019/20 financial statements are being prepared in an environment of heightened uncertainty as a result of the pandemic and the situation is evolving and fast moving. We have drawn out some of the key considerations for local authority financial reporting here, but further details can be found in our full report available on 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:

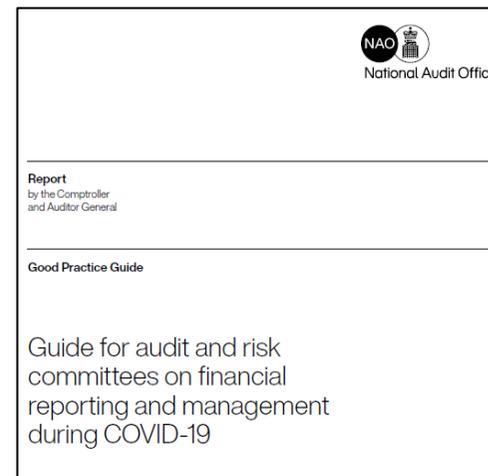
- annual reports;
- financial reporting;
- the control environment; and
- regularity of expenditure.

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/>

Place-Based Growth - 'Unleashing counties' role in levelling up England' – Grant Thornton

In March Grant Thornton launched a new place-based growth report 'Unleashing counties' role in levelling up England. The report, produced in collaboration with the County Councils Network, provides evidence and insight into place-based growth through the lens of county authority areas. It unpacks the role of county authorities in delivering growth over the past decade through: desk-based research, data analysis and case study consultations with 10 county authorities (Cheshire East, Cornwall, Durham, Essex, Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Surrey).

The report reveals:

- Growth, as measured by Gross Added Value (GVA), in county areas has lagged behind the rest of the country by 2.6% over the last five years. GVA in the 36 county areas has grown by 14.1% between 2014 and 2018, compared to 16.7% for the rest of England.
- In total, 25 of these counties have grown at a rate slower than the rest of the country. The research finds no north-south divide, as the county areas experiencing some of the smallest economic growth are Herefordshire (5.3%), Oxfordshire (5.6%) and Cumbria (8.2%), Gloucestershire (9.2%), and Wiltshire (9.7%) – showing that one size fits all policies will not work.
- Some 30 of the 36 county authority areas have workplace productivity levels below the England average. At the same time, counties have witnessed sluggish business growth, with county authorities averaging 7.9% growth over the last five years – almost half of that of the rest of the country's figure of 15.1% over the period 2014 to 2019.

To address these regional disparities in growth and local powers, the report's key recommendations include:

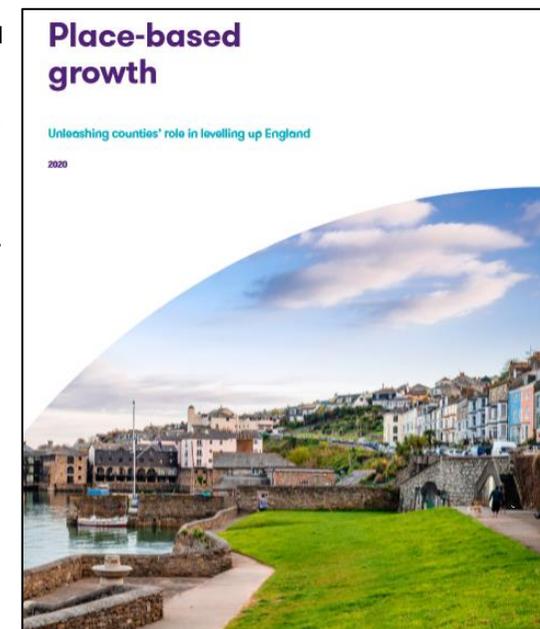
- Rather than a focus on the 'north-side divide', government economic and investment assessments should identify those places where the economic 'gap' is greatest – Either to the national average or between different places – and focus investment decisions on closing that gap and levelling up local economies.

- The devolution white paper must consider how devolution of powers to county authorities could assist in levelling-up the country. This should include devolving significant budgets and powers down to councils, shaped around existing county authorities and local leadership but recognising the additional complexity in two-tier local authority areas and whether structural changes are required.
- Growth boards should be established in every county authority area. As part of this a statutory duty should be placed on county authorities to convene and coordinate key stakeholders (which could include neighbouring authorities). These growth boards should be governed by a national framework which would cover the agreed 'building blocks' for growth – powers, governance, funding and capacity.
- Planning responsibilities should be reviewed with responsibility for strategic planning given to county authorities. In line with the recently published final report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, the government should consider how county authorities, along with neighbouring unitary authorities within the county boundary, could take a more material role in the strategic and spatial planning process.

- The National Infrastructure Commission should ensure greater consideration of the infrastructure requirements in non-metropolitan areas. Their national infrastructure assessments could consider how better investment in infrastructure outside metropolitan areas could link to wider growth-related matters that would help to level up the economy across the country.

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

<https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/unleashing-counties-role-in-levelling-up-england/>



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”.

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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>

