

Learning from the pandemic

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Introduction

The immediate, operational impacts of the pandemic are receding. Government has removed the final legal restrictions associated with COVID self-isolation. Although the disease is still in circulation and new variants may yet emerge, policymakers are growing in confidence that the worst impacts of a resurgence can be countered through further (potentially annual) booster vaccinations and the advent of new therapeutic drugs.

For public bodies working at full capacity for the past two years, now is the time to take stock, and to think to the future.

Many councils carried out a first operational debrief in summer 2020, when the effects of the first infection wave lessened. Scrutiny functions, at this time, were also taking regular reports on pandemic impacts; CfGS recommended during this period that councils consider focusing scrutiny's activity on pandemic impacts through a single committee.

Later in 2020 CfGS suggested that councils embark on "step back" reviews – taking stock, understanding what has gone well and what might need to be refined. This was with a view to the pandemic resuming its intensity, as it did.

It was in 2021 that we highlighted some of the broader opportunities associated with a more general debrief, to learn lessons, and to point a way to the future in a world that post-pandemic feels and looks very different. Although recovery has been slower than we might have hoped, we think the time is now right to embark on this activity in earnest.

In researching this guide we have looked at:

- The experiences of council scrutiny as described to us in a series of workshops and webinars during 2021/22;
- Feedback from our 2021 and 2022 annual surveys;
- A light touch, desktop review of reviews of varying levels of depth in the pandemic, and its impacts, undertaken by around 100 councils;
- Where possible, evidence from operational debriefs undertaken by local authorities following the pandemic. It is worth noting that little documentary evidence relating to such exercises are publicly available.

This guide has been written with English councils in mind, although many of its provisions will also apply to scrutiny in Welsh authorities.

Part 1: debriefing and taking stock

This part covers the immediate process of debrief and reflection on the pandemic experience – scrutiny’s role in helping councils to look back.

Explaining debriefing

Conventional debriefing is a structured process, following on from an emergency, once the operational aspects of that emergency have concluded. It brings together people who were involved to ask what went well, what could have been improved and what lessons can therefore be learned for future working.

Debriefing has a long history in emergency planning, and in the health sector. Here, there are two kinds of debriefing – “hot” debriefing, where the incident is still ongoing but it is felt that participants need to conduct a running review to make improvements in the here and now – and “cold” debriefing, the more conventional kind carried out above.

Before 2020, the systems we had in place for managing emergencies made one key assumption about how those emergencies would pan out – an assumption that also informed a great deal of civil contingencies planning. This was that emergencies would take place over a relatively short timeframe, with a recognisable “end point” at which resources are demobilised, and the emergency “ends”. Emergencies such as the 7/7 bombings and the Buncefield oil storage disaster had short operational response periods; the operational response period of the Grenfell disaster was significantly longer but still falls within a traditional conception of what constitutes an emergency.

The COVID pandemic has been very different. The nature of the emergency has waxed and waned, and even now cannot be sensibly described as definitively “over”. As such there is a real risk that a managed process, involving all relevant stakeholders, will not be carried out consistently across local areas.

Where operational debriefing does happen or has happened, there is the risk that it focuses on the experiences of professionals. In a conventional emergency response this is appropriate – during the pandemic, where a far wider range of people have been involved (including large numbers of the public, through mutual aid) this could be seen as inadequate.

Why debrief?

There are arguments that debriefing from the pandemic is pointless.

- It has lasted so long that memories of activities undertaken in February and March 2020 in particular will have receded.
- It has been a unique event, unlikely to be repeated in the form it took during 2020/21.
- It is an event that is not yet over – a single “debriefing” exercise is a clumsy way of learning lessons from the experience.
- Because it was an event with national scope, local areas should wait to feed into the prospective (at time of writing) public inquiry, which will be in a better position to make broader judgements about what did, and didn’t, work in the response.

These are persuasive arguments for not taking action but they do not take account of the fact that unexpected risks and pressures will continue to emerge for us locally and nationally in the future – our understanding of the last two years will offer profound help in shaping our response to those challenges, which are likely to be systemic and long-lasting (demographic changes, climate change).

It was also something which had a profound impact on the communities we serve. Nearly two hundred thousand people died – many more experienced, and continue to experience, serious illness. As a sector we need to be publicly accountable for the actions we took to respond these events. Debriefing, and debriefing publicly, provides an opportunity both for partial catharsis, as well as for learning and accountability.

Why scrutiny?

- There is clearly a need for councils, their partners, and the wider community to take stock and learn lessons from the pandemic. Using the principles of debriefing, and having that exercise led by scrutiny, has a number of benefits:
- It focuses what might otherwise be an extremely expansive “learning lessons” exercise on understanding what went well, what did not go well, and what lessons can be learned;
- It brings together a range of people in a public space to share perspectives;
- It is led by elected representatives who, while not independent of the council, can mediate and facilitate the process fairly and have the credibility and legitimacy to do so.
- Scrutiny brings transparency and visibility by reflecting upon the lessons learnt in public committee.
- In follow-up work Scrutiny can review the extent to which these lessons have been embedded in the future.

How scrutiny can contribute

- **Understanding plans for a corporate review.** The first step is to understand what, if any, corporate activity is planned. The council may have carried out a range of formal and informal exercises to learn something from its experiences. Members should be able to get access to the results of that activity where it already exists, to inform what additional work they might want to do. Or, if that work is only now getting started, or is ongoing, there might be opportunities to feed in, in real time. Alternatively, the council may have not carried out any meaningful review, and may not have plans to do so. In this case, scrutiny might itself take on some of the task – recognising that any scrutiny-led activity looking at pandemic response in the round will end up being quite high level;
- **Quick vs slow debriefing: the right subject, in the right way.** A quick debrief can highlight key issues and feed into ongoing processes – it can help to ensure that “live” matters can be dealt with quickly and easily. A slower process can be more detailed and reflective but risks reporting after the local policy agenda has moved on, and after corporate debriefing activity has been concluded. It could be the case that certain subjects or areas will lend themselves to quicker processes than others – for more complex areas with a larger range of stakeholders a more considered approach might be necessary;

- **Hearing from stakeholders: a public exercise?** Traditional debriefing focuses on the role of professionals in operationally managing a situation – a group of people coming together to talk about their roles and experiences and what can be learned from their interactions. We have already noted that the nature of the pandemic, and our response to it, was profoundly different, and for this reason there may be reason to open up the process. A national public inquiry is planned for 2023; we do not necessarily suggest a large number of “local” inquiries of this nature but there is the opportunity to draw intelligence and insight from a wider range of people – to talk to those out in the community involved in providing, and receiving, support. This has the potential both to offer catharsis and to highlight challenges which still exist even as the pandemic recedes.

Scrutiny can use tried and tested approaches to carrying out its work. A task and finish group is probably the best way to proceed – although members may consider that, unlike usual task and finish reviews, the bulk should be held in public.

What scrutiny can look at

There are a huge range of issues that scrutiny can investigate. Defining the scope of a review will be important – the pandemic reached into everything that local councils do, and a wide-ranging review into everything is not likely to be feasible. Scrutiny councillors and officers may want to select from one or more of the ideas that follow.

In the coming months, as more councils undertake review work of this kind, CfGS will published individual examples of councils’ work – at the time of writing Summer 2022) that work is ongoing in many authorities.

These are divided into two parts:

- The systemic response. How did the council and its partner work together to support people overall? How did we rally our resources, and what can we learn about the way that the community came together?
- The subject-specific response. How did our response look different for social care, for children’s services, for environmental services? What can this teach us about how local people’s practical needs were met?

A scrutiny-led debriefing exercise will not be able to look at everything. We noted above that scrutiny should aim to understand the scope and nature of any corporate review. It is likely that the scope of a scrutiny-led debrief will need to align with such a corporate review – either to fill in gaps, or to provide additional challenge in areas where high profile issues need to be examined.

Beyond this, scrutiny may want to consider how specific systemic, or subject specific, topics are identified. As scrutiny will not be able to look at everything as part of a debrief of this nature, members will want to consider what the most pressing issues are. For example, they may want to identify the most business-critical issues, or those that presented the greatest risk to life and limb, those that have the potential to cause lasting impacts, or those where acknowledge problems emerged over the course of the pandemic and where the need for learning is particularly acute. It may well be that established principles for the selection of topics for the scrutiny work programme will be a help for scrutiny functions grappling with this difficult decision.

The systemic response

How we dealt with the shock of March 2020

It is now more than two years ago, but memories of March and April 2020 are still likely to feel fresh. There are two things that councils, and local communities, can learn from revisiting those early weeks:

- How, practically, councils and their partners were able to refocus their efforts on supporting local people as the first lockdown was imposed – the establishment of Gold command arrangements and the capacity of public servants and elected politicians to take immediate action;
- The culture of collaboration that emerged, quickly, in those first few weeks – the establishment of mutual aid groups, the ways that councils attempted to work with local people to better understand and meet their needs.

Councils were able to turn around some extraordinary work in that first period – primarily focused on keeping the most vulnerable as safe as possible, but also in managing business continuity arrangements.

Scrutiny can ask:

- What were our initial plans for coronavirus response in February and early March 2020? How quickly did we have to alter those plans as March continued; who was involved in those conversations?
- How did we deal with, and act on, the realisation that “business as usual” activity was essentially going to end?
- How did we use the short window of opportunity when physical meetings were still possible (before the start of lockdown) to change our ways of working so that we would be able to adapt to remote operations?
- How did we (proactively and reactively) engage with those in the local community who were practically helping their neighbours, through mutual aid groups and similar informal working?
- How did we communicate urgent matters to the public – about where and how to get help?
- What went wrong – and what went right – as we were doing all of this? Are there lessons from this experience that can feed not only into future crisis management, but the way that we work more generally?

Working in partnership

Effective partnership working was a hallmark of the way that councils managed their response to the pandemic. The response required a blend of the “usual” formal and informal partnerships at local level – between local authorities, local employers, the NHS, the police, and others – and entirely new partners. In some cases these were wholly new informal groups (like mutual aid groups, which, established on a street-by-street basis to provide assistance but supported by local, regional and national networks) or existing voluntary arrangements radically repurposed to meet the needs of the pandemic (local charities, for example, found themselves at the centre of this).

Often these new arrangements had no formal “organisers” and were non-traditional in how they operated – which made it difficult for councils, as more traditional institutions, to try to work with them. The nature of community organising meant that the question

“who’s in charge?” was impossible to answer, presenting its own challenges to conventional governance and accountability.

The nature of the challenge also highlighted the limitations of conventional emergency planning systems. Emergency planning and civil contingency arrangements have historically been designed on the basis of the presence of a closely-defined, high impact, high intensity and time-bound “emergency” – a specific “incident” where the operational response may last for few weeks at most. COVID was a long-running “event” with chronic impacts for individuals and organisations, in which the pace of the response was stepped up, and stepped down, multiple times over two years – often in unpredictable ways. This all had the potential to impact negatively on planning in partnership.

Scrutiny can ask:

- How did we use our GOLD command arrangements in the crisis period of February to April/May 2020, to step up our operational response?
- How did we identify and engage with individuals, groups and organisations which may not have been part of our GOLD arrangements but who had a stake in our pandemic response?
- At the time what risks did we identify and how did we work with our partners to mitigate those risks?
- As time went on how did we continue to deepen our working relationships with partners?
- Where, when and how did any tensions arise? Were these about styles of operating, finances, power and control, or anything else? How were these overcome?
- How, if at all, did our style of partnership working shift as the pandemic went on – will we be seeking to make any of these changes permanent, and if so how?

Understanding and meeting local people’s needs

One of the biggest challenges of the pandemic was understanding local people’s needs – particularly during the various lockdown periods.

During “Lockdown 1” (March–July 2020) a range of vulnerable people needed help with care, and with ordinary daily activities. This included people who were “clinically extremely vulnerable”, and those who were shielding (either at the direct request of Government or as a result of their own assessment of their risk factors).

Some of these people’s needs were met through mutual aid groups (particularly for shopping, and general care and support) but many were also in receipt of care and support from the council and from other agencies. This support was more difficult to provide during the pandemic – both in the context of residential care and home care (councils had available to them “easements” to reduce the level and standards of certain aspects of care provision, on which CfGS produced a detailed guide in April 2020).

Some would otherwise have been cared for by friends and family members unable to do so while restrictions were in place, which put additional pressure on other individuals and institutions. Some people’s chronic conditions may have worsened, leading to hospital admission.

As well as the individual impact, groups of people would have been impacted in ways that may have been difficult to predict – children of school age, for example. Here, a lack

of daily contact with school meant that potential safeguarding issues may not have been picked up.

Scrutiny can ask:

- How did we approach supporting particularly vulnerable people?
- Did the council feel it had to “co-ordinate” support activity (particularly for existing clients) or were we able to take a different approach?
- How were mutual aid groups able to assist people with more complex care needs? What can the council learn about the presence of wider community support from this experience?
- How was the council able to properly understand how individuals’ needs changed as a result of the pandemic, and how support might therefore need to be provided in a different way? What about for groups of vulnerable people with similar characteristics?
- Did the lack of ability to go and “meet” people physically in the local community hinder the ability to understand their needs – or was the council able to use new technology to greater effect?
- What were councils able to do to understand the pressures experienced by residential facilities, and those living in those facilities? To what extent was the council able to manage the pressures and infection risks arising from discharges of people from hospitals into care homes?

Responding to uncertainty more generally (including our finances)

Many councils found themselves having to transform many of their systems in light of the pandemic. This included decision-making systems. Councils found that certainly during Lockdown 1, emergency decision-making needed to be in place because it was not possible for formal meetings of Cabinet or committee, and Council to convene. By summer 2020 councils were beginning a schedule a full calendar of meetings again, but some problems did persist.

The pandemic also had a significant impact on councils’ exposure to risk. While many councils listed a pandemic incident in their corporate risk register, this was usually in the context of pandemic flu, which has a different infection and morbidity profile. Councils also needed to be proactive in understanding where broader risk emerged. For example, councils’ commercial investments were significantly impacted, as was the income from commercial rents and trading companies. In some areas, the pandemic has caused or can be expected to cause permanent changes to the labour market or local economy.

Many councils saw a huge dropoff in earnings from fees and charges in 2020/21 – in particular, parking charges. A number of councils chose to temporarily reduce or remove parking charges during this period to bolster the local economy.

Councils were subject to substantial cost pressures around spending as well. This ranges from additional spending on care and support to spending on venues to accommodate physical council meetings when expectations around social distancing were still in place. Government provided support for some of this spending, but not all of it.

All of these pressures will have had a significant impact on councils’ medium term financial strategies (MTFS) and in many cases will have had an impact on in-year spending too, leading some councils to dip into their reserves. Councils’ member audit committees will have been keeping these issues under close review, and scrutiny work

on this issue will need to align with the ongoing audit committee work programme – with the advice of the s151 officer and Head of Internal Audit being taken on scrutiny work which engages closely with finance and audit issues.

Scrutiny can ask:

- What was the council's financial position pre-Covid, and how did the pandemic impact on finances in 2020/21 and 2021/22?
- How did the council's risk profile shift over the course of this period? How was member audit, and external auditors, able to keep a grip on financial controls and spending – particularly during the first lockdown period when councils had to rely on emergency decision-making?
- How did councils manage the pressure of needing to redirect resources – particularly in 2020/21, when the budget will have needed to be reframed in the consequence of pandemic impacts?
- To what extent has the experience impacted the MTFs, and the council's expectations on future income from fees and charges, or commercial activity? Does the council expect projected income in these areas to “bounce back” or to remain depressed for an extended period?

Subject-specific responses

The policy response to the pandemic was different across a range of subject areas. Scrutiny may want to delve into some of these areas in order to understand where some of the greatest impacts and risks emerged – and where interesting and innovative practice was developed which might have salience for the future. The following list is not, of course, exhaustive but is intended to highlight what are likely to be some of the most pressing substantive policy issues for scrutiny to look into.

- **In equality and diversity.** A theme running through other policy issues and impacts is the way that the council's understanding of equality and diversity affects the policy response on a wide range of issues. Councils provide services to an extremely wide range of people – many of whom possess protected characteristics under the Equality Act and/or may have complex and changing needs. Councils' systemic response, and its response on substantive policy issues, will have needed to be informed by an understanding of legal obligations in this area – but also the need to draw in different perspectives, and insights, on how local need intersects with those legal obligations;
- **In health, care and health inequalities.** Scrutiny can examine how the council and its partners understood not just the immediate health impacts of the pandemic (deaths, serious illness) but also chronic effects (through Long Covid) and the impacts on people who may not have contracted Covid but who were adversely affected because of, increased waiting lists, less hospital capacity, mental health and so on. Scrutiny can also look at the wider social determinants of health. Here, people with existing vulnerabilities may have been impacted through interruptions in care, or through impacts of social isolation caused by shielding – which for some individuals is still going on. Has the council understood the shifts and pressures which the pandemic gave rise to, and how will these be fed into new structures and systems? Is there a risk that the creation of integrated care boards (ICBs) and shifts in powers and personnel in the health services, will lead to learning, and skill, in understanding these impacts being lost?

- **In children’s services.** There is no doubt that one of the most profound social impacts of the pandemic was on children and their development. Prolonged school closures arrested children’s social and educational development and also meant that more vulnerable children fell off some councils’ radars. Even now, schools are struggling to re-engage some families with whom they have lost touch over the two year period. Scrutiny can help to understand the kind of support that maintained schools, and academies, needed and used over this period, the impacts on children’s development overall, and ongoing concerns about long term impact.
- **In housing.** Scrutiny can work to unpick and understand how people’s housing needs, and experiences, shifted during the pandemic. People living in small, or otherwise unsuitable, accommodation would have experienced real difficulties during periods of lockdown (especially the third lockdown period, which largely took place during the winter). For people in private rented accommodation – especially those in HMOs (houses in multiple occupation) – problems would have been especially acute (it is worth noting that, in some areas, pandemic impacts have caused councils to move more quickly towards HMO licensing than they otherwise might). People without personal access to outside space would have seen impacts on their mental and physical health. Huge efforts were made to house the homeless through the “Everybody In” project in early to mid 2020 – experiences that will have profound lessons for councils with an ongoing homelessness problem. What did councils do to understand and mitigate the worst impacts during the pandemic, and what can it continue to do, and learn? Scrutiny can help to understand the nature of those impacts and how housing needs shifted over the course of the pandemic, and may continue to shift now.
- **In enforcement and community safety.** How were councils able to work with their partners to enforce Covid restrictions? Councils and the police would have worked closely together during this period – was the balance right on enforcement, and were the right calls made in issuing fines, or more serious punishments, when the law may have been broken? Scrutiny can help to understand where and how local decisions were made, at what times, and where rapidly-changing regulations, guidance and laws may have been difficult for local people, and those enforcing the rules, to follow.
- **In our support to the local economy.** Local economies shifted, and continue to shift, as a result of the pandemic. Councils were able to make short term grants and apply freezes to business rates (as well as national schemes like “East Out to Help Out”) to help businesses weather the immediate effects but more profound shifts in the local economy have been more difficult to understand, and mitigate. In large conurbations, city centres emptied out through lockdown restrictions struggled particularly. Scrutiny can seek to understand how the uncertainty of the removal, and introduction, of restrictions impacted on business between 2020 and 2021, and whether councils did all they could to understand the needs of local businesses and to act on them;

- **In transport and infrastructure.** Many councils put in place arrangements to promote active travel during the pandemic, and to support modal shift to walking and cycling as an alternative to public transport (as well as to the use of private cars). Some councils introduced low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) – sometimes as a permanent measure, sometimes on a temporary basis. Some of this action caused significant local controversy. At the same time, the sustainability of public transport was placed under pressure. With farebox revenue collapsing, bus providers in particular found themselves facing an exceptionally challenging financial situation.

Again, scrutiny functions will not be able to look at all of these issues, and their associated impacts, in detail. Focus and discrimination will be required.

Part 2: looking to the future

This part covers the role that scrutiny can play in helping councils to look forward – thinking about the future of the areas we serve and the lives of those who live there.

The pandemic has left us in a world very different to the one that existed in March 2020. For professionals the most obvious shift has been a huge move to remote working, but there have been other significant changes as well. Local economies are likely to operate in a different way in the future – our understanding of the needs of local people (and the nature of those needs) has also changed markedly. The work that we have done over the course of the past two years arguably prepares us for that different future – but there is the risk that we attempt to snap back into old ways of working in an attempt to restore “business as usual”.

The pandemic is not the only thing affecting local government and local services at the moment. Forward-thinking reviews will inevitably look at wider drivers of change. The pandemic has accelerated some existing trends – like home working, and demographic shifts – and has created some new ones – such as the risks arising from “Long Covid” and new pressures and vulnerabilities in and around social care.

Why scrutiny?

The ability to look forward is one of scrutiny’s key strengths. Managed well, scrutiny work that scans the horizon is able to bring councillors’ perspectives to bear on what the medium to long term future will look like – examining local and national trends, existing plans for managing those trends, and seeking to understand whether those plans will be adequate in light of local people’s needs. In the near term, similar work will help to ensure that the council is able to deliver plans that can be sustained amongst the extreme uncertainty which is likely to continue to beset the public sector in the short term.

What is the scope?

Discussion of the future – and of post-pandemic recovery – can have two timescales.

- **Short to medium term.** This involves practical questions about how the Council’s capacity and resilience is being rebuilt, how services are being either restored to normal operation or changed as a result of the pandemic, and so on. An important part of this kind of work is to understand and challenge ongoing assumptions about where certain services, or people, or organisations, continue to need additional support as a result of pandemic impacts. Councils will need to consider where services are reverting to pre-pandemic “business as usual” (not impossible or unwise in some cases) and where a permanent change is necessary.
- **Medium to long term.** This is rather more complex. The rewards of scrutinising longer-term issues and trends are greater – if scrutiny is well-focused and balanced. Under this model scrutiny could set the pace for the long term – particularly because councils tend to lack the ongoing capacity for long-term horizon-scanning. But there is also the risk that such work ends up looking and feeling too abstract, and disconnected from the practical work the council will be doing around recovery.

Ways of working for scrutiny

There is always a risk that work of this nature will be too broad and shallow – because the question of “what should the future look like” is all-encompassing, and because there is enough uncertainty about that future to make it challenges to delve too deeply into any one topic.

The broad canvas of future challenges mean that scrutiny will have to decide a way to tackle the topic in question. If a council wanted to be particularly ambitious about this agenda it might want to (for example) schedule a series of spotlight reviews or other one-off meetings to talk about the short or long term future of certain council services, bringing together those findings at the end to comment on what those changes might mean for the council’s operating model.

It is more likely that looking to the future will need to be a tighter, more limited exercise. Focusing on a single area of service – or a single challenge facing the council and its local residents – which may have been exacerbated or where risk has increased substantially as a direct result of the pandemic – could present the best opportunity.

Understanding the nature of the shift that is occurring

Looking ahead requires a very different range of tools and techniques when compared to looking back. We are in an uncertain world – there are a lot of national and local trends which, together, will be having a big impact in the coming years. Getting a sense of these trends in a broad sense is a good place to start, before delving into the local specific.

Looking to the short term involves reflecting on some of the national issues over which the council has no control which may come to impact on it in the coming months, and the next couple of years – affecting recovery plans significantly. These might include for example):

- Changes to the information that councils must report to Government (both as part of the levelling up agenda and more generally);
- The acceleration of the devolution agenda in England, including the creation of county combined authorities;
- Changes to rules about councils’ commercial activities and investment and management of finances more generally.

While scrutiny will not want to delve into these trends and developments in detail as part of work on this subject, members should be able to ask about the extent to which the council’s expectations in these, and other, areas have been borne in mind in developing recovery plans, and more general plans for the future.

Looking to the long term is more complex.

Some long term changes are explored in more detail in “Docking in: changing the way that we act on local democracy” (CfGS, 2022).

Action requires an understanding of how external pressures will continue to shift the way that councils operate. The pandemic has upended assumptions about how councils might respond to these challenges. For example:

- Changes to how councils are funded – which we knew were coming before the pandemic, but where resilience has been affected by the collapse in revenue from fees and charges, and uncertainty over future income from business rates;
- Changes arising from ongoing reforms in the health and care system, where weaknesses in the business model of providers were known and understood but where the pandemic has heightened the risk of market failure;
- Wider economic changes (from the cost of living crisis onwards) have the opportunity to exert profound long term shifts in how councils do business, and risk doing more damage in a society where the pandemic has significantly harmed the resilience of local communities, and public bodies.

The pandemic can also be said to have accelerated existing trends to recast the relationship between councils and the people they serve – which we explain in more detail below.

Understanding how local people’s needs and expectations are changing

Connecting, and reconnecting, with local people and their needs has been a fundamental part of councils’ experiences during the pandemic. We noted in earlier sections how councils had to develop a new and deeper understanding of the communities they serve in order to respond effectively. Looking at how councils are bringing this into long term planning is important.

In the short and long term this may include:

- Shifts in employment, as local employers either do, or do not, make permanent shifts to remote working;
- Shifts in education, as the post-pandemic economy makes certain careers more or less attractive, with local skills gaps opening in new areas (there may be particular impacts in and around the seasonal economy, hospitality and retail);
- Long term shifts in needs around health and social care and children’s services, as “long covid” and other chronic conditions, exacerbated by the pandemic, continue;
- Shifts in housing demand, associated with all of the above;
- Shifts around local transport, associated with all of the above (exacerbating challenges for public transport provision in particular);
- Changes in the use of parks and open spaces and community facilities.

Needs may change, and so may expectations. Mutual aid has made some communities more resilient, but some have become more atomised and fragmented – with a lack of ability to come together physically having worsened that problem. It might make finding common ground on issues of local contention more difficult – witness the division in some areas of the country on the introduction of “low traffic neighbourhoods” (LTNs). Councils may have to think differently about whether traditional models of engagement and involvement will still hit home in this environment.

Where councils have a new understanding of local needs it may provoke them to substantially shift their operating model - which we go on to discuss below. It may cause them to introduce more co-production and co-design of decisions and services, and to bring local people into decision making in different ways.

Questions to ask might include:

- What are local people telling us about their experiences over the pandemic, how those experiences have caused their lives to change, and what that might mean for their future?
- How can we be sure that we are listening to, and acting on, local people's voices?
- Who are our partners in this space, and in what areas might our vision of the future (and local people's vision) be contested?
- What is the scope for us to experiment with different ways of listening and involvement – and what is the appetite for that amongst the local population?
- How has technology given us the ability to understand people's needs better? Are there innovations in how we collect and use data that could add richness to our understanding?
- How are we ensuring that officers' professional skill and expertise is updated to take account of these major shifts and changes?

Understanding the approach that the council and its partners are taking towards change

Changes to structures

The most immediate opportunity arises from the Government's devolution framework, and the prospect of establishing new county combined authorities. While this may not happen as a direct result of the pandemic the prospects of constituting such authorities may be more attractive to councils whose resilience and sustainability was tested during the pandemic.

This may lead to structural change in the form of local government reorganisation, or to closer working between adjacent councils. Better partnership or joint working during the pandemic may evolve into more permanent changes now, between partners and between neighbours. It may be that people think that larger councils/organisations may be better placed to handle future challenges if smaller ones were placed under strain because of the pandemic. Whether this is true or not of course remains to be seen.

Questions to ask might include:

- How much do we understand about the options for change – what the parameters are and the requirements to which we would need to submit in order to bring about those changes?
- Is our appetite for this kind of structural change different as a result of the pandemic? If not, why not – to what extent has our context shifted the balance?
- Is change inevitable, likely, unlikely? To what extent is it in our gift to set the pace – or are we beholden to decisions made by others? What sort of timescale are we looking at? (This is likely to be especially salient for shire district authorities).
- What is the "prize" – if structural change is in prospect what positive objectives and outcomes for local people would follow from it?
- What do our neighbours think? What is the nature of the conversations we have had with them?
- What do our local partners think? What are their objectives?

The politically sensitive nature of this kind of change may require ongoing communication between scrutiny and the executive to make sure that these kinds of conversations generate more light than heat. But scrutiny can play a useful role in couching these kinds of structural change within the broader context of change post-

pandemic. This kind of anchoring is important in ensuring that structural change, if and when it comes, is seen as being in service of the possibly urgent new objectives of councils in a given area rather than being perceived automatically as a distraction from delivery on those matters.

Changes to operating models

Some councils will be planning changes to their operating models. In short, a council's operating model is its fundamental way of working – who makes decisions, on what subjects, and when.

Examples of councils which have adopted novel operating models include Wigan, where the oft-cited “Wigan Deal” presents an example of an authority seeking to open up decision-making to the wider public. Examples from longer ago include the trend of councils in the early 2010s to move heavily towards strategic commissioning to deliver services – and further back to the 90s, those authorities who moved assertively to contract out a wide range of services. Some of these dynamics are covered in further depth in our guide to scrutiny of critical risks around commercialisation.

The pandemic may have led some councils to conclude that their current operating model is unsustainable – even if it felt robust prior to 2020. Councils may have placed store in planned commercial activity – through a trading company or joint venture – which may seem substantially less attractive. Councils may be seeking to extricate themselves from complex partnerships, agreements or relationships which place them at higher risk.

Councils may be moving towards an operating model which reflects some of what we say below about local people's needs and expectations. They may be pursuing looser partnerships and ways of working that provide flexibility, as well as ways to shore up and provide resilience for critical, “life and limb” services. There is no obvious single model for this – and councils are embarking on these steps in an environment of great uncertainty, making scrutiny that much more important.

Questions to ask might include:

- Do we understand or accept the need for a change in our operating model?
- If so what is our “theory of change” – how do we think change happens and what do we think it means for the way that we work?
- Is our theory of change anchored in a sense of the wider public sector undergoing a big shift – the argument behind moves to promote “community power” – or is it more tactical/operational in nature (for example, framed around imminent financial challenge)?
- How do we anticipate our appetite for risk changing in the medium term, and how will this inform the evolution of our operating model?
- Where and how are we exposed to more risk as a consequence of our existing model (for example around long-term commissioning arrangements / contracts which tie us in to particular forms of service delivery)?
- How have we sought to better understand how our long-term priorities – which are likely to be different post-pandemic – inform our commercial and related activities?
- How are we investigating different forms, and operating models, with fresh eyes – even if we had discussed those possibilities prior to 2020?

Identifying areas of tension and difficulty in light of these changes

All of these factors together can combine to create their own challenges. Members may look at the emerging needs of local people and conclude that proposed changes to the council's operating model are inadequate. Or ways of working may be undermined by risks which have heightened since the pandemic, but which have not been adequately taken into account by council planning.

Difficulty may also be political in nature. Substantial challenges may require long term solutions – but these may be difficult to agree in the context of the political cycle.

Questions to ask might include:

- Have we got a holistic, cross-cutting understanding of the changes that may come (whether they are being instigated by us or are about us responding to changing circumstances), and do our plans reflect that cross-cutting nature?
- Do we have the right skills and capabilities in the organisation to balance these challenges and opportunities?
- How are we having the right political discussions about these matters – both allowing us to be on the front foot and providing assurance that our overall approach on some long term matters will be consistent even if there is a change in political control?
- What are our contingency plans? How do we know when and if we may need to change our approach? Do we have the insight and intelligence to support different ways of working?

Finding solutions

In the face of such challenges, finding solutions is unlikely to be easy. Recommendations will need to be couched carefully.

CfGS has already written extensively on practice around making recommendations, including in the “Good scrutiny guide” (2019); we also plan to publish more on this topic later in 2022. Briefly, however, recommendations should:

- Reflect the fact that while the council has powerful “convening” powers (to bring together partners in the local area), its ability to influence should not be overestimated – so recommendations should focus on levers available to the council;
- The long term (and even medium term) future is uncertain – so scrutiny looking to the future should aim to support the council to increase its capacity to understand and act on emerging issues, rather than recommending policy prescriptions which might not be valid or relevant in six months' time;
- That said, there is still a need to ensure that recommendations feel “concrete” and anchored in local people's needs – there is a risk that a focus on long term strategy makes recommendations feel esoteric.