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## **Financial Sustainability**

### **Purpose of report**

For discussion.

### **Summary**

Financial sustainability is arguably the greatest challenge facing local authorities in the period ahead. The 43% real terms reduction in grant funding across the sector by the end of 2015/16 is the largest cut targeted to any major area of government and the savings that have been delivered so far only take us about half way to that target. There are forecasts of more cuts to come after 2015/16. This report sets out what the LGA is doing to address the issue.

Financial sustainability can be seen from two perspectives; the sustainability of the whole system and the impact on individual member authorities.

All local authorities are dependent upon Government grants to a greater or lesser degree but a combination of issues, some based on current circumstances and some on past decisions, influence the extent of each authority's vulnerability to cuts. Whilst pointing out the dangers to services caused by funding cuts, the LGA is committed to working with authorities individually and collectively to ensure where possible that they can continue to deliver services to an acceptable standard.

### **Recommendations**

That the Finance Panel:

1. Consider the definition of financial sustainability set out at paragraphs 6.1 – 6.2;
2. Consider the approach to the financial sustainability work set out in the report and consisting of:
  - 2.1 lobbying and campaigning work;
  - 2.2 analytical work, resulting in the Future Funding Outlook and spider diagram tools;
  - 2.3 productivity and improvement work with member authorities; and
  - 2.4 endorse the approach.
3. Consider the approach to distribution issues set out at paragraph 19 and whether the LGA should adopt this approach.

### **Action**

LGA Officers to proceed as directed.

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## **Financial Sustainability**

### **A definition for financial sustainability**

1. To discuss financial sustainability in all its aspects, we need a working definition. There is no such definition in common usage in the UK public sector.
2. Some years back, the Australian LGA adopted the following definition;
  - 2.1. “A Council’s long-term financial performance and position (are) sustainable where planned long-term service and infrastructure levels and standards are met without unplanned increases in rates or disruptive cuts in services”.
3. This is a good working definition which emphasises the importance of long-term stability to the system. Financial sustainability is essentially about the ability to continue to deliver current policy objectives in a planned way into the long-term.
4. The current position in England differs in that:
  - 4.1. For individual local authorities to be financial sustainable, the whole system has to be sustainable. The LGA is campaigning for a system of financing local government that will deliver stability and flexibility (among other things) by devolving power to local areas.
  - 4.2. Financial sustainability needs to be seen in terms of both long-term sustainability and the short-term. Notwithstanding the importance of long-term sustainability, many question the short to medium term sustainability of individual authorities.
  - 4.3. The *Rewiring* campaign and our recent lobbying on the Spending Round and Autumn Statement recognise that financial sustainability is about more than money. It is also about localities having more certainty and greater flexibility to respond to local challenges and the ability to invest in and grow local economies.
5. We therefore need a definition that recognises these factors.
6. It is suggested that the following definition is adopted to provide a working definition of financial sustainability for English local government:
  - 6.1. “The local government finance system is sustainable when local authorities are able to manage their finances so as to deliver affordable local services and strong local economies across the whole country.
  - 6.2. Local authorities are financially sustainable when they can meet the realistic aspirations of local people both now and into the future without actions that increase taxes or disrupt services in an unplanned way”.

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**The consequences of non-sustainability.**

7. The experience of certain cities in the US has drawn attention to the consequences of failure in financial sustainability. Under the English system, local authorities cannot be declared 'bankrupt', nor is that a system we would like to see implemented.
8. The accountancy firm Grant Thornton has identified six scenarios at which, what they call a 'tipping point', may be reached.
  - 8.1. A local authority can no longer meet its statutory obligations in relation to a service, leading to legal challenges or government intervention.
  - 8.2. An authority is unable to set a balanced budget, leading to an intervention by the chief financial officer.
  - 8.3. An authority's staff are no longer prepared to work for the offered terms and conditions and either vote with their feet or take protracted strike action. Leading on both cases to service failure.
  - 8.4. Failure of a major supplier (perhaps exacerbated by non-payment by users) leads to service disruption and failure.
  - 8.5. Failure to make the necessary decisions to meet financial and other challenges.
  - 8.6. Multiple, smaller tipping points that accumulate over time leading eventually to a critical mass of failures.
9. Whilst it is possible to challenge aspects of this list, it does helpfully make three points;
  - 9.1. The risk of each of these 'tipping point' scenarios will differ from one authority to another.
  - 9.2. Getting out of a crisis is always likely to be politically, administratively messy and ultimately financially costly. (Long term financial sustainability may well be undermined by short-term crises).
  - 9.3. Ultimately it is always services and the users of those services who will suffer.

**Distribution**

10. In considering financial sustainability of individual authorities, the question of distribution is unavoidable. Austerity measures have seen relatively grant dependent authorities lose a greater than average proportion of their funding to cuts.

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11. Needs based funding has been part of the English system since the 1930s. Different Governments have had, and quite reasonably will continue to have, different views about what constitutes 'fairness' in distribution.
12. The current formula, which has evolved from previous versions, is still reflected in the baseline for the rates retention system. It allocates additional funding on a range of criteria which analysis in previous years has shown have an influence on local costs, including:
  - 12.1. Deprivation.
  - 12.2. Population sparsity (for some services).
  - 12.3. Population density (for others).
  - 12.4. Area costs.
  - 12.5. Ethnicity.
  - 12.6. Winter weather (for highways)
13. Together, with an assessment of potential to generate Council Tax income, these factors have determined the extent to which each authority is funded by Government grant.
14. The effect of grant cuts is inevitably greater on authorities that are relatively grant dependent. By and large (and subject to damping mechanisms), grant reductions take a greater proportion of funding from authorities which are more grant dependent and over time this 'flattens the curve' so that the relative needs and resources aspects of the formula have less potency.
15. This is illustrated in the bar charts shown at **Appendix A**.
16. To some extent, needs based funding has also been replaced with incentive based funding. Again it is a perfectly good policy to allocate funding to authorities in order to incentivise a public good, such as economic growth. There is a question, however, as to the extent to which incentive schemes such as Business Rates Retention and New Homes Bonus are actually incentivising authorities to do things differently or are funding changes that would have happened anyway. The National Audit Office raised this point in its report on New Homes Bonus earlier this year.
17. On top of this can be overlain the extent to which some groups of authorities - for example rural authorities – have questioned the historical basis of their funding. Given all these factors it is inevitable that some member authorities are vocal about the way the LGA addresses these issues on their behalf.
18. The LGA will always be in a difficult position when discussing issues of distribution that have a differential impact on member authorities. Our campaigning position has therefore been:

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- 18.1. That the grant cuts affecting local government are unsustainably high overall.
  - 18.2. That the local government finance system as a whole is 'broken' and in need of radical reform.
19. However, there is perhaps more to be said in relation to two further issues:
- 19.1. The extent to which the funding system as it currently exists reflects recognisable differences in costs between areas.
  - 19.2. The extent to which the system as a whole (and therefore government decisions relating to it) is transparent in the way it distributes money around the country, especially the aggregated effect of change over time.
20. In addition, the LGA should question distribution issues when it appears that a distribution decision is not delivering the objectives that the Government intended.
21. Members' views on this formulation would be welcome.

**LGA Response**

22. The LGA's response to the issue of financial sustainability has therefore been threefold:
- 22.1. Lobbying and campaigning for a system of local government that offers short-term and long-term financial sustainability.
  - 22.2. Analysing the problem to identify where sustainability risks are greatest.
  - 22.3. Implementing a programme of improvement work to head off crises at local level.

**Lobbying and campaigning**

23. The Finance Panel is familiar with our work in this area which involves aspects of the *Rewiring* campaign and our lobbying on Government announcement in the Budget, Spending Round, Autumn Statement and the local government financial settlement.
24. At the last Executive, it was also agreed to run a campaign focusing on the difficulties facing authorities in the 'crunch year' of 2015/16.
25. The issues we focus upon are:
- 25.1. The size of the funding allocation to local government.
  - 25.2. The flexibilities that are given to local authorities to manage at local level.

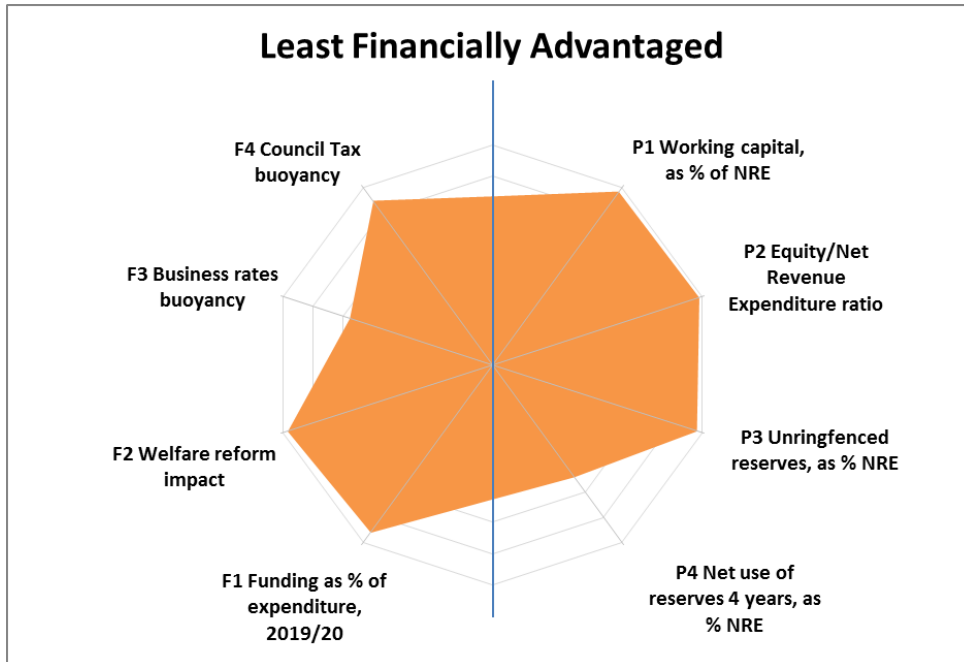
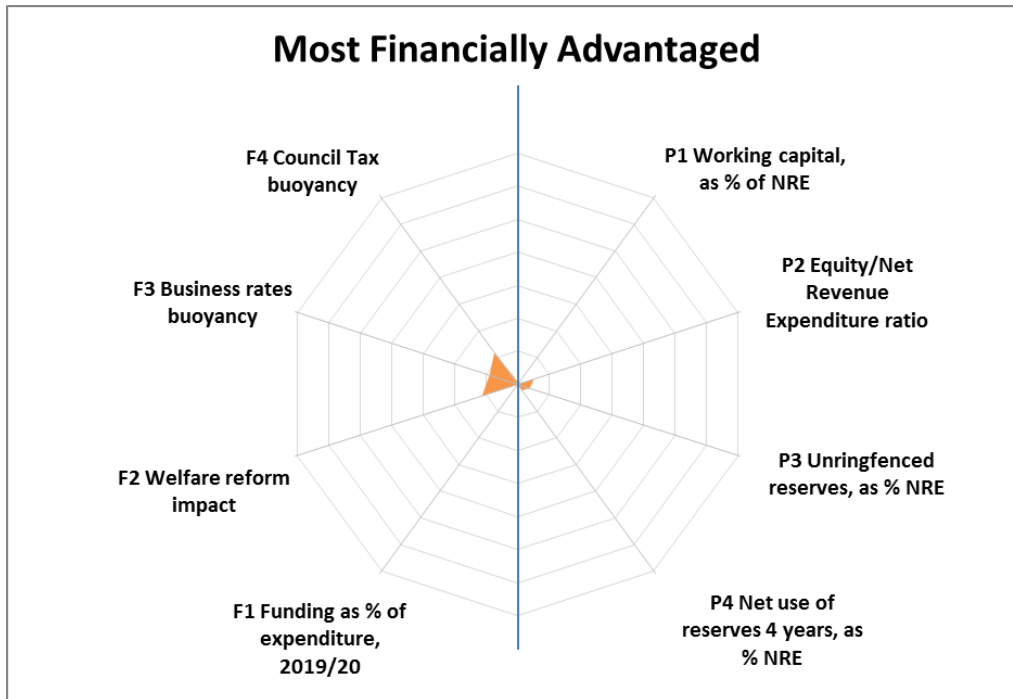
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- 25.3. The certainty that authorities require in order to make decisions that are sustainable in the long run.
- 25.4. Ultimately the need to scrap the broken system which is managed from Whitehall and adopt a system that responds better to local circumstances.

**Analysing the Problem**

- 26. The annual Future Funding Outlook exercise is the cornerstone of our analysis in this area and feeds directly into our campaigning. In 2012, the exercise primarily focused on the national picture, but in 2013 we paid more attention to the position at local authority level, which has allowed us to provide improved modelling to member authorities to support their own planning.
- 27. For 2014, there are two ways in which we can seek to improve the modelling further:
  - 27.1. Better forecasting to see if we can reflect some of those pressures that are more difficult to quantify. This includes, for example, the impact of welfare reform and pension fund revaluations.
  - 27.2. An improved model so that authorities can change more of the parameters themselves - for example, inputting their own assumptions about use of reserves or New Homes Bonus.
- 28. The Future Funding Outlook model which we have developed over the last two years to calculate the funding gap each authority and for the sector as a whole is only part of the story.
  - 28.1. Over the Summer we have been working to identify other metrics which can be used to add to our knowledge of the financial position of authorities collectively and individually.
  - 28.2. This has identified eight metric measures which we believe have something to say about the present and future financial position of authorities. These are listed at e **Appendix B**.
  - 28.3. The measures have been used to create a series of charts which will be shared with authorities individually to assist them in assessing their financial position and considering next steps.
- 29. The key chart will be a 'spider's web diagram' which charts all eight indicators against their ranking with all other authorities. The 'most and least financially advantaged positions are set out below:

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30. It needs to be stressed that the charts do not identify which authorities are more likely to arrive at a position of financial sustainability more quickly than others, but they are intended to inform local authorities' response to financial austerity by identifying some of the opportunities and treats facing individual authorities.



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31. Each authority's own chart has been circulated to the Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer to inform planning and we are aware that many have already shared these with Leaders and other members.

**Further steps**

32. The Finance Policy team has recently appointed a third Senior Advisor whose role will be to work with member authorities to improve the way we reflect their concerns about financial sustainability into LGA policy.
33. This will also give us the capacity to do more work on some of the 'softer' and more difficult to measure aspects of the problem which include:
- 33.1. The quality of financial strategy and planning.
  - 33.2. Financial governance – turning plans into actions.
  - 33.3. Financial monitoring – checking that plans deliver financial benefits.
  - 33.4. Risk management – dealing with the uncertainties of innovation.
  - 33.5. Debt and treasury management – ensuring these costs are controlled.
  - 33.6. Internal controls and audit – preventing monetary losses and waste.
  - 33.7. Organisational capacity - does the authority have the people it needs?
  - 33.8. Leadership – creating a vision a turning it into reality.
  - 33.9. Local factors – history, culture, geography, demographics etc.

**Improvement Programme**

34. The improvement work with local authorities has moved into issues of financial sustainability as members Councils have increasingly identified this as one of their key challenges. More peer challenges, for example, have adopted a financial management theme.
35. The most recent 'publicity flyer' for the LGA's productivity and improvement offer as it relates to finance is attached at **Appendix C.**
36. In addition to the Future Funding Outlook and spidergrams, it includes;
- 36.1. Corporate peer challenges adopting a financial theme.
  - 36.2. Financial health checks.
  - 36.3. A budget challenge with members, led by a member peer.
  - 36.4. Support and development in financial skills for Members.

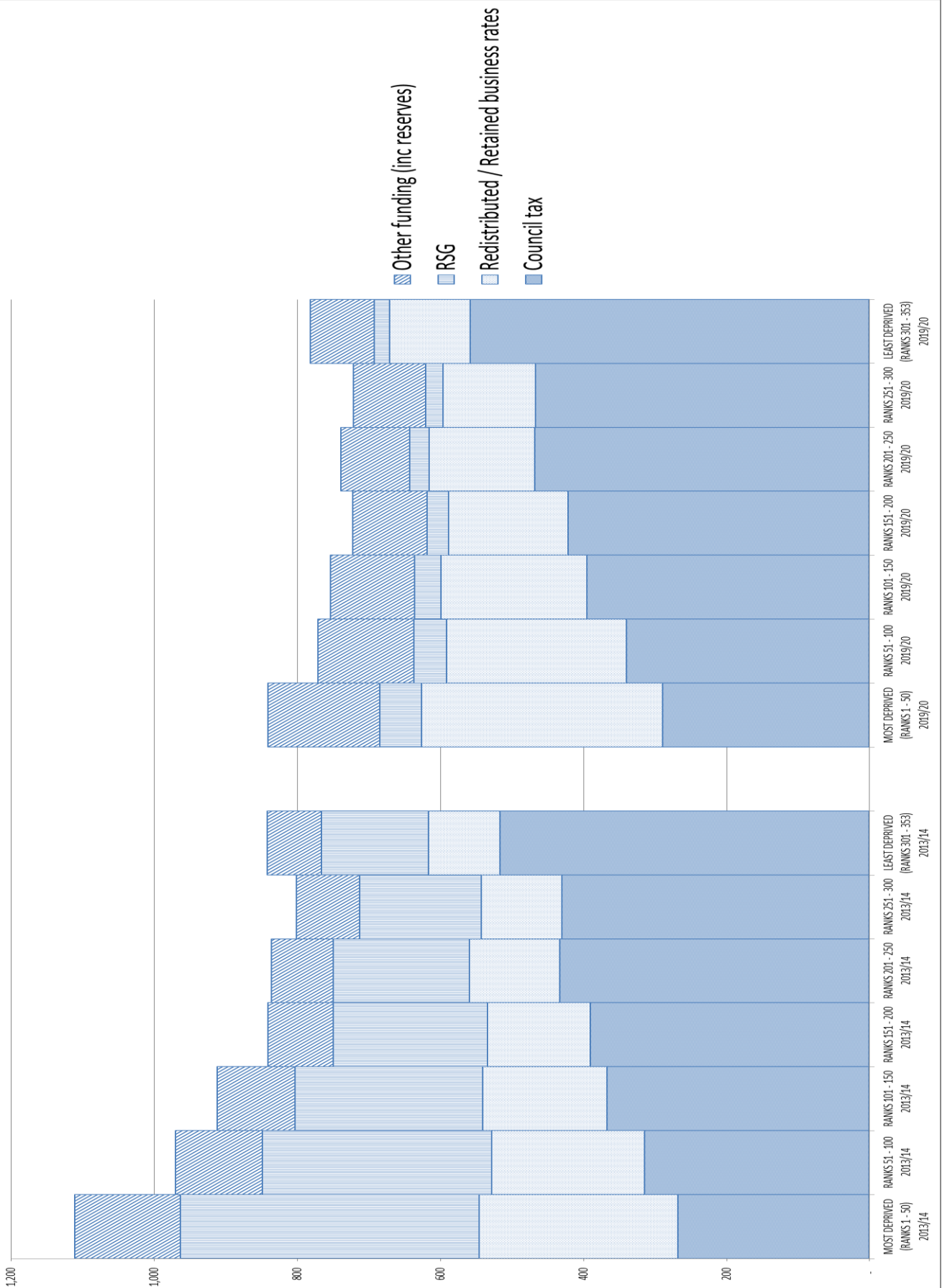
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- 36.5. Productivity work with Councils.
- 36.6. The series of online offers including LG Inform, K-Hub and the YouChoose budget-making tool.

**Summary**

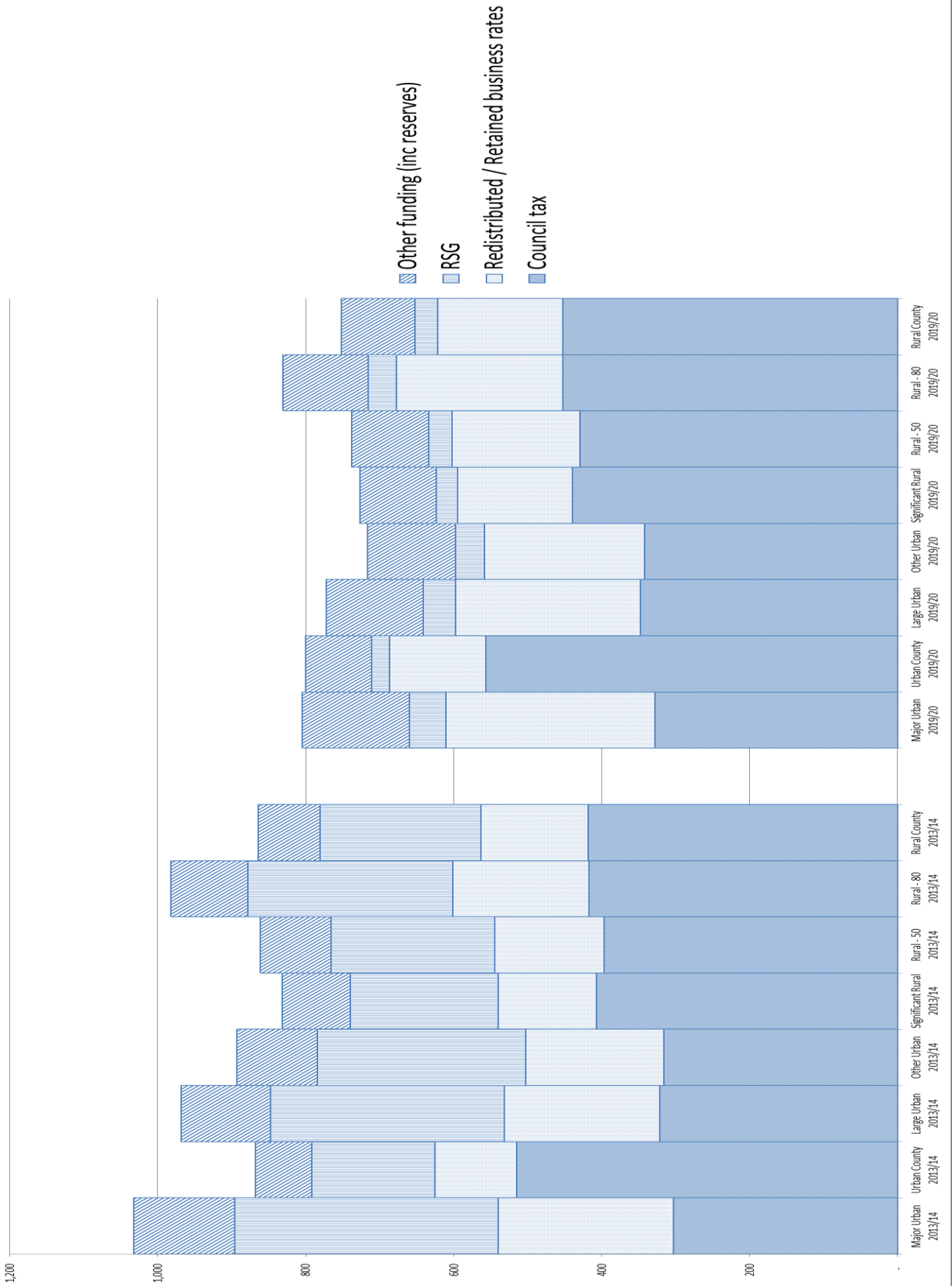
- 37. The LGA is working across Directorates to deliver a quality, co-ordinated programme of activities to address financial sustainability which includes:
  - 37.1. Lobbying and campaigning work.
  - 37.2. Analytical work, resulting in the Future Funding Outlook and spider diagram tools.
  - 37.3. Productivity and improvement work with member authorities.
- 38. Members views are invited on how this can usefully be developed to deliver best value for the membership.

**Breakdown of Per Capita Funding by deprivation - 2013/14 and 2019/20**



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**Breakdown of Per Capita Funding by rurality- 2013/14 and 2019/20**



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**Appendix B - Spider Diagram Explanation**

The charts identify eight numerical indicators which appear to say something about an authority's financial position. Four of these are intended to indicate information on an authority's present financial position and four reflect on its potential future.

There are clearly many indicators that could have been used. The ones chosen for the model are designed to be relatively easily available and to be broadly complimentary to each other.

The 'present' indicators identify the relative state of the authority's finances as they stand at the moment. This is based on published data from the 2011/12 accounts and use of reserves in the last published budget. Authorities with strong indicators relating to their present position will have more capacity to respond to the costs of delivering cuts than those who do not.

The 'future' indicators are based on the LGA's Future Funding Outlook model and also capture information on recent trends in taxbase growth and levels of grant dependency. Authorities with a weak future score are those that will face a tough passage in the medium term.

All the indicators are mapped onto a 'spider' diagram which produces a high-impact visual representation of the indicators, with the Future indicators on the left of the diagram and Present indicators on the right. The metrics are shown as a ranking out of 353, with lower rankings indicating stronger financial resilience. A large shaded area on the chart therefore indicates an authority with more indicators at the lower end.

In addition there are slide-rule charts for each indicator showing how the authority compares across quartiles and a table which summarises the authority's data.

The factors used are as follows:

<b>Future Indicators</b>		
F1 Future Funding Outlook	Proportion of forecast spend which is covered by forecast income in 2019/20 according to the LGA Future Funding Outlook model released in July 2013.	<p>The purpose of this indicator is to measure the medium-term prospects for authorities relative to each other based on a forecast of spending against a forecast of funding.</p> <p>A full description of the Future Funding Outlook and the assumptions included within it is available on the LGA website. It is believed to be the most sophisticated and detailed modelling available of the likely impact of government cuts at both national and local authority level.</p>

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<p>F2 Welfare reform</p>	<p>Proportion of working age households claiming benefit</p>	<p>Welfare reform is not fully reflected in the FFO. This indicator assumes that authorities where benefit claimants live will see more pressure than those where they currently do not. It is arguable that the impact of welfare reform will be to encourage claimants to move from current high density areas to low density areas. There is no easy way of modelling this.</p> <p>The indicator used here is from CESI analysis of the impact of welfare benefits reform conducted for the LGA and represents the proportion of working households in an area which are in receipt of benefit.</p>
<p>F3 Tax buoyancy – Business Rates</p>	<p>Percentage increase in business rates taxbase from 2002 to 2012</p>	<p>This measure how much the area's business rates taxbase has grown in the last ten years. This is a measure of relative economic growth in the recent past and the assumption is that this is a momentum indicator – recent growth is more likely to continue where it is already taking place. In contrast, an area where there has been little economic growth is less likely to see a sudden growth spurt. Since this is a relative measure it does not matter if growth in general has slowed down as long as it is taking place in more or less the same places. Authorities with high business growth will receive a financial boost from locally retained business rates income.</p> <p>There is a risk that this indicator may be affected by large single developments such as new shopping centres or power stations, especially in smaller authorities.</p>

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F4 Tax buoyancy-Council Tax	Percentage increase in Council Tax base from 2009 to 2012	The principle behind this measure is similar to the business rates buoyancy measure and the logic is the same. Authorities with Council Tax growth will receive a boost from increase in the Council tax base and also from New Homes Bonus. Unfortunately full data does not seem to be available over a longer period.
<b>Present</b>		
P1 Working capital	Working capital (current assets less current liabilities) as a % of Net Revenue Expenditure (NRE)	This measures the extent to which an authority could cover existing expenditure from working capital if necessary. Authorities with strongly positive indicators would have little difficulty liquidating sufficient assets to continue to operate in the event of a cash flow crisis; authorities with negative indicators may have to borrow to carry on, incurring additional costs.
P2 Net worth or 'Equity'	Net assets (total assets less total liabilities) as a % of NRE	<p>This is a measure of the relationship between net assets (equivalent to total reserves) and expenditure.</p> <p>An organisation with a negative net worth is technically insolvent, as it could not sell its assets in order to pay off its liabilities. This is less meaningful for public bodies, which would normally have the luxury of planning to pay for liabilities over a long period of time free of challenge from creditors. On the other hand, public bodies are also usually not in a position to sell their operational assets.</p> <p>However the Net Worth indicator does differentiate those authorities which over time have a high level of liabilities to fund and limited assets from which to do so and these authorities are likely to incur additional financing costs in the years ahead.</p>

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P3 Level of unringfenced reserves	Unringfenced reserves as a % of Net Revenue Expenditure (NRE)	This measures the period over which an authority could continue to operate without grant or tax income by utilising reserves. Reserves, of course, are set aside against risks and there is no way of measuring relative risk. There is a danger that unringfenced reserves includes reserves set aside against risks that have a high likelihood of crystallising.
P4 Use of reserves	Net use of reserves 2010/11 to 2013/14	This is an indicator of whether unringfenced reserves have been used or supplemented over the last four years – roughly an electoral cycle. This is after taking account of capital expenditure charged to revenue, which is a one-off expenditure which should be matched to one-off use of funding.



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**Appendix C – Draft flyer on the LGA’s financial improvement offer**

**A guide to our sector-led improvement offer for finance**

The Local Government Association (LGA) works with councils to promote, support and improve local government.

In the current financial climate councils are increasingly looking for good practice and support to help them manage their overall finances. This can range from achieving productivity or efficiency savings through to ways of helping them engage with their local communities to prioritise how they spend their reduced resources.

The LGA wants to ensure that we respond to the growing need for support in this area and we too have re-prioritised some of our improvement offers as a result. Our support relies on making use of expertise in the sector, both member and officer peers, and therefore we need your help to ensure that what we deliver is of a high quality.

In addition, we want to work with all councils to obtain the best financial settlement possible for the sector.

**Corporate peer challenge**

We offer support to councils to help you review and transform services, improve performance and deal with reputation issues.

Our free-of-charge corporate peer challenge is flexible and tailored to a council’s individual needs but they all have core components which include looking at the financial planning and resilience of a council. The flexibility of our offer means that if a council would like the peer challenge team to look in more depth at its financial position we can assemble the correct team to do this.

This is very much a forward-looking activity and could include consideration of:

- Financial issues and challenges.
- Modeling funding for the future.
- Strategic choices for future shape, size and functions.
- Overall approaches/options to service design and delivery.
- Transition and transformation plans.

**Financial health check**

For councils who are looking for an in-depth technical assessment and analysis of their finances we can offer a financial health check.

The work is led by technical experts and delivered by an experienced finance director or consultant. Key elements of the work lead to a report providing:

- An overall view of a council's current financial standing.
- An appraisal of any significant resource pressures - a summary of other financial challenges which are likely to impact in the near future.

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- A view of the appropriateness of the steps the council is taking to tackle their financial issues.
- A set of recommendations on how to tackle any identified issues and in what order.

This is a targeted offer delivered over three days onsite, a further day for preparation and another two to produce the written report and any follow-up work. The cost of the health check is £3,900 plus expenses.

### **Budget challenge**

Our budget challenge is a facilitated discussion, led by a member peer, working with the cabinet, or equivalent, offering political advice/guidance on budget options and issues.

Typically the budget challenge is a facilitated and interactive process which would look at:

- Prioritisation and decision-making.
- Budget process.
- Savings options.
- Reserves and provisions.
- Comparative costs.
- record of overspends/underspends by service.
- Fees and charges.
- Back office costs.
- Short and medium term financial strategies.

The budget challenge has a relatively short-term focus, looking mainly at the next 12 to 18 months. Given its breadth, it can be offered during the course of the financial year not just at pre-budget time.

The challenge is delivered over a day, plus one day preparation and a further day's follow-up, i.e. three days in total costing £900 plus expenses.

### **Productivity and efficiency**

Our productivity programme's support to councils changes each year, but currently includes:

- 'Productivity expert' programme – confidential external advice to support and challenge councils' service transformation plans.
- National map of shared services – a re-launched compendium and map showing that at least 337 councils across the country are engaged in 325 shared service arrangements resulting in £278 million of efficiency savings.
- Capital and asset rationalisation – three waves of the programme to date have supported 32 authorities covering around 40 per cent of the country.

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- Capital and Asset Pathfinders (CAP) – having already demonstrated significant results in rationalising estates in 2013/14 we are supporting a further 12 authorities, supported by the Cabinet Office.
- Economic growth advisers – offering bespoke advice and support to local authorities to help them deliver economic growth in their area.

### **Supporting and developing councillors**

We provide free or subsidised support to assist in the development of political leaders, and help councillors undertake their leadership roles.

Our programme for the first time includes a tailored Leadership Academy aimed at finance portfolio holders.

More generally our member peer support offer includes support for finance portfolio holders from an experienced pool of member peers.

### **LG Inform and LG inform Plus**

LG Inform presents you with up-to-date published data about your local area and the performance of your council. With access to over 1,000 individual items of published data for England, LG Inform provides:

- easy access to the most relevant, up-to-date published data.
- the ability to compare one council with another locally, regionally, or nationally.
- high-quality online and offline reporting, including charts, maps, tables and reports.
- the ability to create and share reports, instantly updating these when new data is published.
- a customisable home page, giving you a quick snapshot of your key data.

Our subscription service LG Inform Plus is where you can find ward-level data.

[www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform](http://www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform)

### **YouChoose**

• Research shows that residents like to be involved in budget-making decisions. Our 'YouChoose' tool provides an 'off the shelf' solution to help you with budget consultation.

[www.local.gov.uk/researchyouchoose-tool](http://www.local.gov.uk/researchyouchoose-tool)

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**Future funding model**

Our 'Future funding model' sets out the impact, on the available resources of English local government, of funding cuts and unavoidable growth pressure.

The model for 2013 largely confirms the findings of the 2012 modelling.

The funding gap is growing at around £2.1 billion a year, adding up to £14.4 billion by the end of the decade. It is created by a combination of funding cuts and spending pressure.

We have sent the model to all leaders and chief executives, and will keep it updated.

**Local Partnerships**

Local Partnerships is a jointly owned company by the LGA and HM Treasury and helps save you money.

Areas of work and service delivery that Local Partnerships can help with include:

- asset rationalisation – making sure the assets you own and use are delivering what you need.
- PFI efficiency savings – for a full review of your contractual arrangements that will save you money.
- Strategic options appraisal – what is the best way forwards for you, in house, arms length, contracted out?
- Social investment – facilitate networks, advice on fund development, supporting new investment models.
- RE:FIT energy savings – guaranteed money saving on your energy bills for your property assets.
- Assurance reviews – a toolkit you can use that ensure you have the latest advise, thinking and analysis.

[www.localpartnerships.org.uk](http://www.localpartnerships.org.uk)

**Keeping in touch**

We provide a range of free online information bulletins and a daily news headlines service, emailed direct to councillors and officers. By subscribing, you can keep up-to-date with our finance and improvement work, plus current legislation, government announcements and consultation.

[www.local.gov.uk/ebulletins](http://www.local.gov.uk/ebulletins)

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**How do I find out more or contact the LGA?**

Our offer to councils is being refreshed all the time in response to what you tell us you need. To find out more about our services or to discuss any support you may need, please contact your principal adviser.

**North West**

Gill Taylor  
Telephone: 07789 512173  
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