Written evidence submitted by the Institute for Government [FSR 022]

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Local Government Finance and the 2019 Spending Review
Submission to the House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee from the Institute for Government

Summary

- Funding for councils has been reduced very significantly in recent years. On average, councils had 28.6% less in real terms to spend in 2017/18 compared with 2010/11.
- Councils have responded to this by improving efficiency and focusing spending on statutory services. But they have also reduced services, and our analysis shows warning signs about the scope, quality, and sustainability of social care and neighbourhood services.
- There are two serious shortcomings with the Government’s current approach to funding for councils: it does not collect and use data and insight about local government spending and activity to make well-informed and consistent decisions; and its approach to resource allocation is disjointed and does not provide the certainty which councils need to plan effectively.
- If continued Brexit uncertainty means there is only a limited one-year spending settlement, continued uncertainty about medium term funding will be very damaging for councils’ ability to plan their resources and activity.
- If there is a three-year spending review along the lines proposed in the Spring Statement, the Treasury should make sure plans for council spending are based on a strong understanding, based on evidence, of demand pressures and the impact of changes in funding on councils’ ability to provide services. Both analysis and decisions need to be based on a unified view across government, not disjointed discussions with individual departments.

About the Institute for Government

1. The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective. We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government. We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking, to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.

2. Our regular Performance Tracker report goes beyond the question of how much money is spent on public services and explores what the Government and the public are getting for that money. It draws on data about nine public services, including adult social care, children’s services, council neighbourhood services and schools to analyse how efficiently public money is turned into services that people use, and how this has changed over time.

3. In September 2018, we published a report with proposals on how the 2019 Spending Review should be run, which argued that the Government must use the review to make clear the future role of local government and the funding needed for it. A further report is in preparation, for publication in early summer, on the Treasury’s management of results from spending, in which the financial and performance relationship between local and central government will be a main theme.

* By neighbourhood services, we mean the (council) transport, housing, cultural, regulatory and planning services that affect the environment in which people live – excluding children’s social care and adult social care.
4. This submission sets out evidence and findings from the Institute’s work on the first, second and fourth of the topics in the Inquiry’s terms of reference. We have not carried out research on the third topic, the assessment of funding needs.

5. The following evidence draws primarily on our two published reports, *Performance Tracker*, and *The 2019 Spending Review: How to run it well*. Where relevant, we also draw on interviews with council officials and local politicians from different councils (including urban/rural, county/city, and unitary/county). We undertook these interviews to better understand the financial and performance relationship between local and central government, for our forthcoming report on the Treasury’s management of results from spending (paragraph 3).

### Contact

6. Please contact Martin Wheatley, Senior Fellow, with any questions about this submission (martin.wheatley@instituteforgovernment.org.uk, 020 7747 0455).

### Changes to local government funding and services

**What lessons can be learned from past changes to local government funding in England, the current financial situation of councils, and how this has affected their ability to deliver services.**

#### Changes in funding and councils’ current financial situation

7. Since 2010, the Government has progressively reduced its grant support for local government, by an estimated 49.1% in real terms from 2010/11 to 2017/18. Taking council tax revenue into account, this has brought about a 28.6% real-terms reduction in spending power across the whole sector.\(^3\) However, the impact has been uneven: the median reduction in the spending power of metropolitan authorities has been 33.9% in real terms over this period, compared with 22.1% for county councils.\(^4\)

8. Over the same period, the Government has been moving towards increasing the proportion of business rates retained by councils, with the intention of 75% being retained from 2020/21.\(^5\)

9. Councils are now more reliant on locally-raised revenues: in 2016/17, 40.4%\(^6\) of English council spending was raised locally, mainly from council tax and business rates – up from 25.2% in 2010/11.\(^7\)

10. During the period covered by the 2010 Spending Review, councils increased their financial reserves – putting money aside for more difficult times. However, since 2015/16, reserves have fallen by 5%. There has been an increase in ‘unplanned withdrawals’ – where local authorities use reserves without budgeting to or use more reserves than they budgeted to. Unplanned withdrawals have increased from £114m (2010/11) to £658m (2016/17).\(^8\) The recent drawing down of reserves is probably due to rising demand for services and uncertainty about future funding. One council finance director, for example, has told our researchers that using reserves was one of the only ways their council felt able to plan for the long term and counter uncertainty over future funding.\(^9\)

11. Following the 2015 Spending Review, the rate of reduction in spending power has slowed. In the Spending Review announcement, the Government projected a 0.4% cut in council spending power between 2015/16 and 2019/20.\(^10\) However, the settlement has not proved sustainable, with 11 significant sets of funding changes in the period which has followed, primarily for adult social care.\(^11\) So, in practice, the Government ended up increasing council core spending power 3.8% between 2015/16 and 2019/20.\(^12\) A council’s finance director described the repeated funding changes as a “rigmarole”\(^13\) and the council’s Deputy Leader could not predict whether the annual settlement would bring “feast or famine.”\(^14\) The constant uncertainty – and the fact that central government...
often informs councils of their funding allocations late in the financial year – disrupts financial planning. One council’s executive member for finance explained how the late announcement of winter pressures money meant that the council could not plan its workforce properly and had to resort to hiring agency staff, even though agency staff are considerably more expensive than permanent staff. So, even if some councils’ core spending power has increased, they are not necessarily able to plan or spend their funding effectively.

Impact on services

12. The impact of lower spending power on councils’ activities has played out in three main ways. It has led to: improvements in efficiency; prioritising certain kinds of spending; and cuts to some services.

13. In terms of efficiency, there is evidence that, to some extent, councils have maintained the quality of the services they provide despite spending cuts:

- Residents’ satisfaction with waste collection, libraries, and road maintenance declined only slightly between September 2012 and October 2018 despite large spending cuts;\(^\text{16}\)
- People who use social care remain as satisfied as before. The number of social care users who say they are satisfied has remained between 90% and 91% since 2009/10;\(^\text{17}\)
- Professionally qualified food standards and hygiene staff are undertaking more inspections and audits per person;\(^\text{18}\)
- Libraries are being run with fewer paid staff: there were 4.6 full-time paid staff per library in 2009/10, which declined to 3.8 in 2016/17.\(^\text{19}\)

14. One way in which councils have been able to maintain services while reducing paid staff is to make more use of volunteers. Between 2009/10 and 2016/17, the number of full-time equivalent library staff declined by 34%, whilst the number of library volunteers increased by 171%\(^\text{20}\). This, however, carries the risk that councils depend on volunteers who may not always be there. One council officer noted that “if there’s a volunteers’ strike, we [would] have a problem [running services].”\(^\text{21}\)

15. In terms of prioritisation, there is evidence that councils have focused spending on statutory care services. Between 2010/11 and 2016/17, spending on children’s social care increased (3.2%), adult social care was cut moderately (-3.3%), whereas other services were cut more sharply (highways and transport, -37.1%; environment and regulatory, -16.9%). Council spending is increasingly concentrated on care services. Such spending accounted for 54.4% of total service spend in 2016/17 compared with 45.3% in 2010/11.\(^\text{22}\)

16. Within children’s services and adult social care, councils have prioritised spending on acute care services. Day-to-day spending on children’s social care (such as protection, care, and services for disabled children) has increased by almost 16% since 2009/10 whereas spending on wider children’s services (such as youth work and Sure Start youth centres) has fallen by 56%. One council finance director said they had cut spending on services which are designed to prevent addressing later, costlier, demand, such as mental health services, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Another council finance director told us that these preventative measures “go first” when they have to cut spending because they are not statutory, and their impact is not immediately observable.\(^\text{25}\)
17. In terms of service cuts:

- Total library opening hours, excluding mobile libraries, declined between 2009/10 and 2016/17: the number of libraries open 30 hours or longer each week decreased by 13%, while the number of libraries open less than 29 hours a week increased by 3%;\(^{27}\)

- The number of adults receiving long-term, publicly-funded social care packages fell by 27% between 2009/10 and 2013/14;\(^ {28}\)

- The timeliness of reviews for children on child protection plans has declined. 91% of children on child protection plans had their reviews carried out within the required timescales in 2017/18, compared to 97% in 2009/10.\(^ {29}\)

18. Councils have become more efficient since 2010, and the Government has increased councils’ core spending power since 2015 (see paragraph 11). But councils will find it difficult to make further efficiencies in their services.

19. In neighbourhood services – the transport, housing, cultural, regulatory and planning services that affect the environment in which people live – lack of data impedes our assessment of whether local authorities have made efficiencies, and whether they can be pushed further. There are, however, several warning signs that efficiencies cannot be pushed further in some services:

- The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which is responsible for consumer protection, has told the National Audit Office that it believes trading standards are a “high-risk area in the medium term” due to “local reductions going too far”;\(^ {30}\)

- The National Audit Office has argued that some authorities’ cuts to routine road maintenance, such as maintaining drainage and gullies, risk long-term deterioration of roads;\(^ {31}\)

- The Asphalt Industry Alliance estimates that the share of roads in ‘poor condition’ has increased over the past two years, and public satisfaction with road maintenance fell from 46% to 32% between September 2012 and June 2018.\(^ {32}\)

20. There are clearer warning signs that children’s services are under strain. In addition to the decreasing timeliness of child protection plan reviews (paragraph 17), the number of children going back onto a child protection plan increased from 6,000 to 14,000 between 2009/10 and 2017/18.\(^ {33}\) This is a concerning trend: it raises the question of whether more social workers are missing relevant issues or proposing inappropriate remedies the first time a child is placed on a child protection plan. 19% of children starting child protection plans in 2017/18 were on a plan for the second or subsequent time, compared to 13% in 2009/10.\(^ {34}\)

21. The number of children’s social workers from agencies – an indicator that councils cannot recruit or retain enough permanent social workers – rose from 3250 to 5360 between September 2013 and September 2018\(^ {35}\) (though the agency rate – the percentage of all social workers employed on agency contracts – declined 0.5 percentage points between September 2016 and September 2018).

22. Adult social care is the service where further spending cuts risk a decline in scope or quality. There are three big warning signs that councils are already struggling to maintain the scope and quality of adult social care services they currently provide:

- Social care staff vacancy and turnover rates are increasing. This suggests that providers are increasingly struggling to recruit and retain enough staff – even though real-terms hourly
pay for independent care workers rose between September 2012 and February 2018 (following the introduction of the National Living Wage). The percentage of vacancies in adult social care increased from 6.4% to 8.6% between 2012/13 and 2017/18, and the turnover rate—the number of leavers as a percentage of the total number of directly employed adult social care staff in a given year—increased from 23.1% to 30.7% between 2012/13 and 2017/18.

- Private providers in the adult social care market look increasingly financially fragile. In November 2017, the Care Quality Commission estimated that local authorities were paying approximately 10% below the total cost of care home places. To date, the CQC estimates that care home closures increased from 260 in the first half of 2013, to 380 in the first six months of 2016. In homecare, the United Kingdom Homecare Association estimated that the average hourly price that English councils paid for homecare was £16.19 in 2018—up from £14.58 in 2016—but below the “minimum sustainable hourly price” for homecare companies to remain in business, which they estimate as £18.01.

- Unpaid care has risen since 2010. If adults in need cannot access publicly funded care, they can self-fund, rely on unpaid care from family or friends—or go without—left with “unmet need”. We do not know whether self-funders or unmet need have increased, but unpaid has increased—suggesting that adults in need are now more reliant on informal care. The Office for National Statistics estimates that the number of people receiving unpaid continuous care in the UK—168 hours a week—grew 14.3% between 2009/10 and 2014/15. Across the UK, there was a 16.4% increase in hours of unpaid care between 2009/10 and 2013/14, from 7.3bn to 8.5bn. Since then, hours of unpaid care have declined but remain above 2009/10 levels—at 7.9bn in 2016/17.

### The current local government funding system

The efficiency, fitness for purpose and sustainability of the current system for funding local government (central government funding, council tax, business rates retention and other income); how it could be improved, including options for widening the available sources of funding; and what lessons can be learned from other jurisdictions.

23. Central government’s approach to funding local government is undermined by two serious weaknesses:

- It is “flying blind”: it does not collect and use data and insight about local government spending and activity to make well-informed and consistent decisions;
- Its approach to resource allocation is disjointed and does not provide the certainty which councils need to plan effectively.

**“Flying blind”**

24. In our report on the Spending Review, we pointed out that, since 2010, the Treasury has largely retreated from considering the results of spending, performance and efficiency. The Government’s planning for council finance and activity is one of the clearest examples of this tendency. The reductions in grant for councils since 2010 have been a significant component of the reductions in spending which the government has achieved. But they have been made without the Government having a clear view, at the time decisions were made, or subsequently, of what their consequences would be. In part, this is because decisions about council spending and activity are taken by 13 different government departments, with little if any evidence of a clear strategy across government as a whole. The consequences of “flying blind” in this way have been increasingly apparent in service performance, to the extent it can be judged from the data, and the repeated emergency injections of cash which the Government has been forced to make.
25. This is consistent with the finding in our annual Performance Tracker that government does not systematically assess results: “Some of this data may be held in pockets of government... But the figures are not aggregated and analysed nationally and in many cases locally collected data will not be directly comparable... Without this, it [government] cannot know how much more efficient austerity has made public services, whether there is more room for improvement, or whether services are now at risk of a sharp deterioration in quality.”

26. Departments responsible for different policy areas analyse demand for the individual services which they cover. For example, the Department for Health and Social Care, analyses demand and scope for efficiency in adult social care to generate an estimate of how much money councils need to deliver adult social care services, at the scope and quality the Government wants to see. MHCLG then collates this information from different departments to calculate its overall estimate of the resource – day-to-day – funding which local government requires.

27. This process – different departments analysing the demand for specific services and MHCLG collating the information together – has not resulted in central government understanding how different services and levels of spending interact on the ground. This was a very strong theme from virtually all of our interviews outside Whitehall. As one council official put it “it just doesn’t feel like government are joining up the dots. It’s left to local authorities to join up the knitting.” Another said “there is no understanding in central government of operational reality. Different silos just lob things over the fence” into local government and other front-line services without understanding what is already happening there. The National Audit Office has said that DfE’s understanding of why demand is increasing is “analytically limited [and], not comprehensive and contains no prioritisation of factors.”

There is also weak understanding about how spending and policy decisions across the whole of government affect demand for council services. For example, a council officer in an education role argued that changes in poverty, mental ill-health, and housing and welfare policies have contributed to the rise in children’s social care and child protection caseloads. One council noted, that MHCLG “dole out bits of cash” to help councils find short-term solutions for rough sleeping whilst simultaneously “taking large chunks of money out” of services which often support people on the precipice of homelessness.

28. This is partly because of the abolition, after 2010, of institutions which provided national government with data and insight, the Audit Commission and the Government regional offices. While local leaders’ views of these institutions are by no means uncritical, they say their abolition undermined the Government’s ability to understand value for money and performance within the sector and in central government, and the local contexts in which policies are implemented. A council Chief Executive described the removal of Regional Offices as “a big loss” and argued that the Audit Commission would probably have prevented the financial collapse of Northamptonshire County Council. Instead, central government’s knowledge of local government is “shocking” and “lacks understanding of the local fine weave.” A council finance director attributed this, in part, to the fact that “civil servants are policy-based, not locality-based.” To improve the situation, a council Leader suggested that central government “needs to get out more.”

Central government decision-making

29. An important finding of our current research on how the Treasury manages spending and results is that councils’ ability to make good plans is frequently undermined by lack, or late, presentation of Government plans, and consequent lack of certainty. Many council officers told us that late revisions to the supposedly-fixed local government financial settlement, and ongoing uncertainties, for
example about business rates retention, impeded their financial planning. One council finance director explained that uncertainty over whether they would be selected as a pilot council for business rates retention meant that they were “plan[ing] in a vacuum”. They particularly struggled to spend money allocated within a single fiscal year – such as the recent potholes fund – effectively. A council head of research said it was “almost impossible” to spend a ringfenced grant for highways maintenance in a single financial year wisely.

30. Central government also allocates funding to councils through competitive processes in which councils submit bids and departments assess which will receive central grant funding. Our current research is revealing significant concern in the local government sector that this method of distribution is used far too much and inappropriately – from grants to help community groups manage parks, to help councils boost “community-led services”, and repeated annual grants to address potholes.

Too often departments set unclear or arbitrary criteria for their decisions. Council leaders told us that they deployed substantial resources to “play the government’s game” and create “sexy bids” to fulfil the departments’ funding criteria. These processes incentivise councils to bid for funding which must be spent on activities which may not be best suited to local priorities.

31. 2019/20 is the final year of the period covered by the 2015 Spending Review and the four-year local government settlement announced in early 2016. This means that there is not even an indicative basis for councils’ financial planning in 2020/21 and beyond, a situation which a council’s finance director described as a “funding cliff-edge.” The uncertainty is increased because the Government has not yet taken decisions on several issues which will affect councils’ medium-term planning:

- How business rates retention will work for 2020/21 onwards;
- How the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will replace the European Structural and Investment Fund after Brexit;
- The Fair funding review;
- The future of specific programmes including the Better Care Fund and Troubled Families;
- The future funding of social care (following the repeated postponement of the planned Green Paper)

A council finance director explained that “this is the most uncertainty we have ever faced.” The council has been forced to plan for a range of funding scenarios, but this has “a material impact.” Another finance director emphasised that the lack of funding clarity beyond 2020 drives “sub-optimal decision-making.” Our research has shown the depth of concern in the sector that this uncertainty hampers effective financial planning.

Local Government funding in the 2019 Spending Review

The approach the Government should take to local government funding as part of the 2019 Spending Review, what the key features of that settlement should be, and what the potential merits are of new or alternative approaches to the provision of funding within the review.

32. At the time of writing, the Government’s plans for the 2019 Spending Review remain unclear, because of continued uncertainty about the timing and nature of the UK’s departure from the EU. In the Spring Statement, the Chancellor said that there would be spending review covering the three years beginning 2020/21, starting before the Summer Recess and concluding in the Budget. On 12 April, he was reported as saying that continuing uncertainty “could throw off course a planned multi-
year budget for government departments due late this year.” If it is not possible to carry out a spending review of along the lines suggested in the Spring Statement, the Government will presumably only carry out a limited exercise to set budgets for 2020/21 only. Continued uncertainty about medium term funding will be very damaging for councils’ ability to plan their resources and activity.

33. If, on the other hand, there is a three-year spending review, the Government has given some encouraging indications of its intention to address shortcomings in the process. In the Spring Statement, the Chancellor spoke of “a renewed focus on delivering high quality outcomes” – signalling that there would be more attention to results than there has been in recent reviews. The Treasury has published its Public Value Framework, building on Sir Michael Barber’s 2017 review, documenting its methodology for ensuring effective results are achieved from spending, with a strong emphasis on knowledge and evidence. The Director General Public Spending has also said it wants to pay more attention to cross-cutting issues: “trying to break out from the dreaded Whitehall silos.”

34. The Treasury should apply these principles – a focus on results, using knowledge and evidence, and looking across government as whole – to planning for local government over the spending review period. If it does so, it should reduce the risk that the spending review settlement results in unintended consequences for local public services and the need to intervene repeatedly with top-up funding. As we suggested in our report on the spending review, it is vital that the Treasury treats local government as an important cross-government issue, rather than letting the future funding of the sector emerge as a disjointed set of decisions from its bilateral discussions with MHCLG, DHSC, DfE and the other departments whose spending and policies affect it.

35. The Treasury should make sure it draws together good information about future demand for council services. The data available to us suggests significant upward pressure, which the financial settlement needs to address credibly:

- Demand for state-funded adult social care (assuming no reform of the existing system) will rise. The Personal Social Services Research Unit – whom the Department of Health of Social Care commission to forecast demand – project that the number of over-65s eligible and in need of social care will rise 20% between 2015 and 2025, from 363,000 to 436,000. The number of working age adults in need of state-funded care – who typically have physical or learning disabilities – is also forecast to rise. In 2017/18, working age adults made up 48% of public spending on adult social care. The Lancaster Centre for Disability Research project that the number of adults with a critical or substantial physical disability will rise 24% between 2015 and 2024, and the number of adults with a critical or substantial learning disability, both of who would typically qualify for state-funded social care – will rise 21% between 2015 and 2024.

- There are many factors that influence demand on children’s social care – from risk-averse behaviour among professionals, to the availability of early intervention services, to child poverty rates – but the way these interact is unclear. That makes it very hard to estimate how demand for children’s social care will change in the coming years, although there is no reason to believe it will fall. Councils will struggle to meet this demand through greater efficiencies. Any attempts to get social workers to do more for less are unlikely to work. The number of social worker vacancies, and scale of turnover, is growing, indicating that attempts to find greater efficiencies through increasing workloads would worsen
recruitment and retention problems. Councils may be able to deliver services more efficiently by investing in schemes to reduce demand, but there is limited evidence on which schemes work. It is unclear how the Government expects local authorities to manage demand for children’s social care in the immediate future.

- Demand for other council services is likely to rise in line with population. The Government believes that demand for most locally-provided services depends primarily on the number of people in a given council. However, this is clearly not true of many: road maintenance varies based on traffic volume and weather conditions, food inspections vary according to the number of food businesses, and waste collection depends on how much people throw away. But given the complexity assessing service-level indicators would introduce, it is reasonable to assume that demand for other local government services will increase in line with population growth (and so demand will increase 3% between 2019/20 and 2024/25).

36. Decision-making in the spending review also needs to be based on a strong understanding of the impact of decisions across the whole of government on demand for council services and councils’ ability to carry out their responsibilities, avoiding unintended consequences of the kind we described in paragraph 27 above.

37. To ensure that discussion across departments about council spending and activity is effective, the Treasury also needs to make sure it is informed by gathering evidence and insight from the sector itself. Our spending review research revealed that leaders outside central government perceive that such engagement has too often been lacking up to now. It should involve people in leadership positions in local government and external experts, to understand the current pressures and constraints on the sector and how to strengthen plans for the next spending review period.

April 2019
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