

Council Finances Investigation

Analysis of the financial health of councils and where cuts are happening

Headline: [Is Surrey the next council in crisis?](#)

Publish date: 7 February 2018

Headline: [Councils on the brink as half plan spending cuts within children's services](#)

Publish date: 7 February 2018

Headline: [County councils in crisis: three more named as showing signs of financial distress](#)

Publish date: 8 March 2018

Headline: [Worcestershire buried report raising "urgent" concern over finances](#)

Publish date: 16 April 2018

This document is part of the Bureau Local [Council Finances open resource folder](#).

When using this data in a story or project, please credit and link to the [The Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#). Feel free to contact us at bureaulocal@tbij.com with any questions.

This document contains the following sections

- [Overview](#)
- [Understanding the data](#)
- [What to look for](#)
- [Additional resources](#)

Overview

Local authorities across the country are under unprecedented strain due to years of funding reductions from central government, uncertainty about future funding and increased demand for services.

Yet increasingly, local spending and cuts proposed to services in council budget documents sees relatively little reporting or public scrutiny. In particular, 'draft' or proposed budgets are rarely seen by the public despite the fact that they are the blueprint for what the council aims to add or cut in the coming year. Reporting on draft budgets allows for the public to know about cuts and changes in spending before they happen.

You can read our blog on [why we launched this investigation](#) and another on why we [hosted a five-city hack day](#) to dig into this issue.

Ahead of our hack day (a meetup for reporters and the public to dig into the issue), we also hosted a roundtable with 15 experts in order to scope out the breadth and depth of the problem, including people from councils such as Peterborough and Leicestershire, campaign

groups like the Women's Budget Group and Disabled People Against Cuts, and networks like County Councils Network and The New Local Government Network.

One attendee said 2018 is a "tipping point" for councils that have so far been able to avoid frontline cuts to most services. Their insights helped us shape the day and you can [read the notes here](#).

Building on these conversations, we analysed 150 draft council budgets - those that had published their proposed plans by the end of Jan 2018 - and found they collectively required £1.6 billion in spending cuts to balance their budgets in 2018/19. One in three of these councils planned to use reserves to plug the gap in their finances - a collective total of £325 million.

We also found that out of the councils responsible for funding social care, half of them would be cutting children's services and adult social care.

Cuts include the closure of children's centres, the ceasing of funding to services used by vulnerable children and cuts in spending on special educational needs transport.

It also includes reducing provision for disabled adults, changing the levels at which they allow vulnerable adults to access care, and increasing the administrative fees they are asking people to pay. All of this has the potential to negatively impact some of the country's most vulnerable people.

Below, we have provided the series of datasets we built to do this analysis - never compiled before - on council spending.

We hope people will dig into this data and report on the issues important to them. Additionally, we hope people take the opportunity to build tools, games, visualisations and videos in order to encourage public engagement.

Understanding the data

[Access the data here](#)

150 council budget proposals data

The Bureau Local has read the draft 2018/19 budgets for 150 councils and recorded the comparable figures relating to their spending, cuts and reserves. We have noted when a council says that they are proposing to make cuts in the areas of 'children's social care', 'adult social care' and 'public health'. We have also included some relevant historical information in order to provide context.

- Access our [main dataset 'Council Finances council budgets draft 18-19' here](#)
- Access a [reporting recipe \(guide\) on how to dig into council finances](#)
- Access a [reporting recipe \(guide\) on how to dig into service-level cuts](#) made to 'children's social care', 'adult social care' and 'public health'.

Historical data

Concurrent to this work, the Bureau Local has also built a dataset of historical local authority spending by pulling public files into one dataset for those who want to dig into data overtime.

- [Council Finances historical council budgets 13-18](#)

What to look for

Below are some ways you can tell stories with this data. You can also see what projects were worked on at our hackday events and find some useful datasets in the [Budget Hack project repository](#).

Council budgets

1. **Can you explain the financial challenges councils face?** There is rising demand for services but cuts to funds and councils are trying to balance the budget. Can you convey this information to everyday members of the public? *A good challenge for videographers, designers, etc
2. **Make the invisible, visible!** The public health, children's and elderly services can be less visible than say, bin collection and street cleaning. How to you make these services seen? How do you put a human face to these issues?
3. **Can some tech-minded people help us figure out how to make it easier to pull together draft budgets?** Bureau Local reporter Gareth Davies has spent hours and hours of time pulling this together as it isn't accessible or transparent. Can you build something to make it easier? Can you visualise the transparency issues?

Adult social care

4. We know that rural areas with older populations may be hit hardest by cuts (explored in this report from [Rural England](#)) - you could try mapping demographic data for each council against the cuts. You could weight the cuts against the proportion of the area who are over 65, for example. Or you could do the same with new [dementia cases](#), which are broken down by area. Are areas with rising numbers of dementia sufferers cutting their funding?
5. Look into the draft budgets and check if the council has raised an '[adult social care precept](#)' - this allows them to raise council taxes to pay for this specifically. Are they raising taxes and still cutting spending? [E.g. Solihull](#)
6. Look in draft budgets and council minutes - are they raising the administrative fees they charge for processing social care claims? [E.g. Redbridge](#)
7. Other than Total Adult Social Care - can you see how the other categories of social care compare, e.g. look at funding for learning disabilities or mental health support, these categories can be found by downloading the dataset and filtering on column F

Additional Resources

The Bureau Local's work has culminated in these national stories:

- [Is Surrey the next council in crisis?](#)
- [Councils on the brink as half plan spending cuts within children's services](#)
- [County councils in crisis: three more named as showing signs of financial distress](#)
- [Worcestershire buried report raising "urgent" concern over finances](#)

Our reporting recipes below act as a how-to guide to the stories above but can also be used to dig into stories not yet told:

- [Understanding local council draft budgets](#)
- [Checking your council's financial health](#)
- [Checking your council's children's services spending](#)
- [Checking your council's service-level cuts](#)
- [Regional story leads and budget schedule](#)
- [Understanding council financial resilience reviews](#)

****Note about the data****

****URGENT update on the historical data 7 February 2018****

We have discovered that the reserves data published by the government, and used in our historical spending spreadsheet, contains significant errors.

The data we used is exactly as published by DCLG [here](#) but our factchecking process has uncovered that some of the figures are significantly misleading.

For example, it lists numerous councils as having nothing in their general reserves as of 2017/18. Checking these councils reveals this is not correct.

For example, we contacted Derby and they said this was the result of 'human error' which had previously gone unnoticed. The figure should be £8.764m.

So if you plan to publish any of these figures, or stories based around calculations involving them (i.e. about a fall in reserves) these figures they must be checked with each council. The following overview and series of datasets have been produced by the [Bureau Local](#).

The data sheets will be locked as 'view only' but you will be able to create your own copy by clicking 'file' and selecting 'make a copy' or 'download as'.

Please see the Read Me tab in the data sheets for detailed information about the datasets - including the source of the data.

Our data is an accurate record of what was published by each council on its website at the time but any figure you use needs to be checked before publication in case anything has changed since that point.

Equally, the information was recorded from 'draft' budgets which have yet to be approved. This means they should be described as proposals, plans or using equivalent terminology. They are due to be ratified at meetings later in February and March. See the schedule for details.