

MHCLG Pilot Survey on Capital Data

Over the Christmas and New Year period, Spelthorne participated in a pilot exercise with the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to inform the shaping of a new MHCLG data survey intended to capture data about local authorities' commercial assets. This is part of the response of MHCLG to the Public Accounts Committee Report which was critical of the extent to which they were monitoring activity in this field. Spelthorne was one of 15 councils invited to participate, and one of four Surrey councils involved.

The survey is a little backward looking in that it is focusing on position as at end of 2019/20. There are questions about balance sheet asset values, level of income generated, contingencies etc broken down across different asset categories.

We completed the draft survey by 8 January and fed back suggestions on clarity of questions and questions which appeared to be omitted, for example whilst pilot survey asked about arrangements for contingency for drops in capital value of assets it did not ask about provision to mitigate impact drops in rental income. We then participated in a constructive workshop with the other pilot councils and MHCLG colleagues. One outcome of the discussion in the workshop was the clear message to MHCLG that mitigate risk of income loss was more important to councils as long term holders of the assets than mitigate short term fluctuations in balance sheet values, and that a number of the councils had similar approaches to ourselves with respect to set up and use of sinking funds. As a result MHCLG has added in a question in the national survey on income risk mitigation.

In the workshop councils were invited to comment on the timing of asking councils nationally to undertake the return. Colleagues highlighted the pressures finance staff across all councils are dealing with as a result of additional workload arising from COVID-19. MHCLG agreed to issue the national survey to all councils, reflecting the amendments made following the survey and workshop session, with a deadline of end of March. As a result of our experience of completing the pilot we have largely completed the survey with just a bit of refinement to be made. This was a positive example of MHCLG seeking to engage with councils and take on board their feedback. Once we have finalised the return officers would be happy to circulate a copy.