

HOW SCENARIOS CAN SUPPORT COUNCILS TO RESPOND TO COVID AND BUILD BACK BETTER

The months and potentially years following Covid will involve unprecedented levels of uncertainty and continual change. As well as new service models and ways of working, councils also need new approaches to learning, planning and decision-making.

Scenario planning is a tried-and-tested tool to support decision-making in this environment. Social Finance has developed a unique approach to scenario planning that is designed to help Councils operate in the new normal.

Our approach engages your team to think creatively and expansively about possible futures for your council and locality over the coming 12-24 months. And using scenarios as a cornerstone, it supports you to develop new approaches that are more responsive to the unfolding situation.

We propose running our short scenario planning process with your senior team. Over three sessions (c. two to three weeks) with a group of diverse participants this will: consider the range of impacts of Covid on community needs; tease out key uncertainties; co-develop scenarios that are most relevant to your locality, and which will make the biggest difference to your short- and long-term decision-making; and explore the implications for internal ways of working and capabilities, services, and your relationships with local partners.

We are already working with two councils and a national council network – including a People Directorate, Children’s Services Department, and local growth group – and have capacity to run a small number of similar processes with other councils or council networks.

Our [website](#) has more information and please contact tom.davies@socialfinance.org.uk to discuss any of the ideas in this note or how we can support your Covid response more widely.

Scenario planning

Local government has a long history of and significant expertise in planning and strategy, but many of the familiar approaches and tools are now not fit for purpose. Councils need to:

- Manage significant uncertainty. It’s no longer possible to tacitly assume what the future will look like and make decisions on this basis
- Be able to pivot ways of working, services, and partner relationships to prepare for and meet the requirements of different phases of the response
- Communicate in an engaging way about what you are doing to respond to Covid

Scenario planning is designed to meet these challenges. It was a key part of the South African post-apartheid transition, has been used for decades to understand the impact of different climate futures, and is used by the Singaporean and UK governments for strategic planning. Many multinationals are now using scenarios to underpin their Covid response strategies.

“One of the premises of scenario thinking is that the future is not predetermined and cannot be predicted, which means, therefore, that the choices we make can influence what happens. In a situation where people feel swept along by overwhelming, inevitable currents, this is an empowering world view.” (Adam Kahane, Reos Partners, [Mont Fleur](#) 1991)



Using scenarios within local government

We have developed a two-to-three-week process to work alongside a council team (this could be a service team or directorate, at a leadership level, or with external partners) to construct scenarios and embed them into ongoing processes. It is based on existing methodologies but adapted to the specific needs of councils and remote working.

The process is designed to be engaging and give teams a space away from the operations of the Covid response, but it also aims to provide practical, tangible value:

Short term	Gain a more rich, shared understanding of complex and changed local systems Check assumptions and enable teams to imagine futures that are radically different Inform 'start, stop, continue' decisions about services & ways of working Identify immediate actions as social restrictions lift (e.g. research to understand granular community needs and the different kind of support they will need) Provide a structure for communicating forward plans simply and effectively
Medium term	Evaluate existing Local Plans and other strategies, and set new objectives Build contingency into future plans to mitigate major uncertainties Map learning and innovation and look beyond the short term to build back better
Ongoing	Build scenarios into more iterative approaches to learning, planning, and transformation

How we can support you

- Three 90-minute working sessions with c. 10 participants from across a council team
- These working sessions will discuss in detail: the impact of Covid on communities and changes/innovation that have already happened; identify key uncertainties; and create detailed scenarios and reflect on their implications for the team
- Social Finance will then present back findings to the team (or smaller sub-groups as relevant) to support creation of action plans, reviews of existing strategies, and mapping of key upcoming decisions etc.
- These follow-up sessions will also consider changes to the team's ongoing processes for learning, planning, and transformation in light of Covid, informed by the OODA loop methodology (Orient, Observe, Decide, Act) and other innovation resources

Social Finance will facilitate sessions, write up discussion, and produce sharable outputs. Domain experts from across the organisation can join sessions depending on focus (e.g. social care, homelessness, DV). The methodology is flexible to council teams' capacity and availability.

More information

We have published blogs in the [MJ](#) and [apolitical](#), and our [website](#) provides more information about the methodology, how it can work with council teams, and findings from processes we have run so far. Get in touch with tom.davies@socialfinance.org.uk.