

Combined Assurance Status Report



West Lindsey District Council



Assurance January 2021

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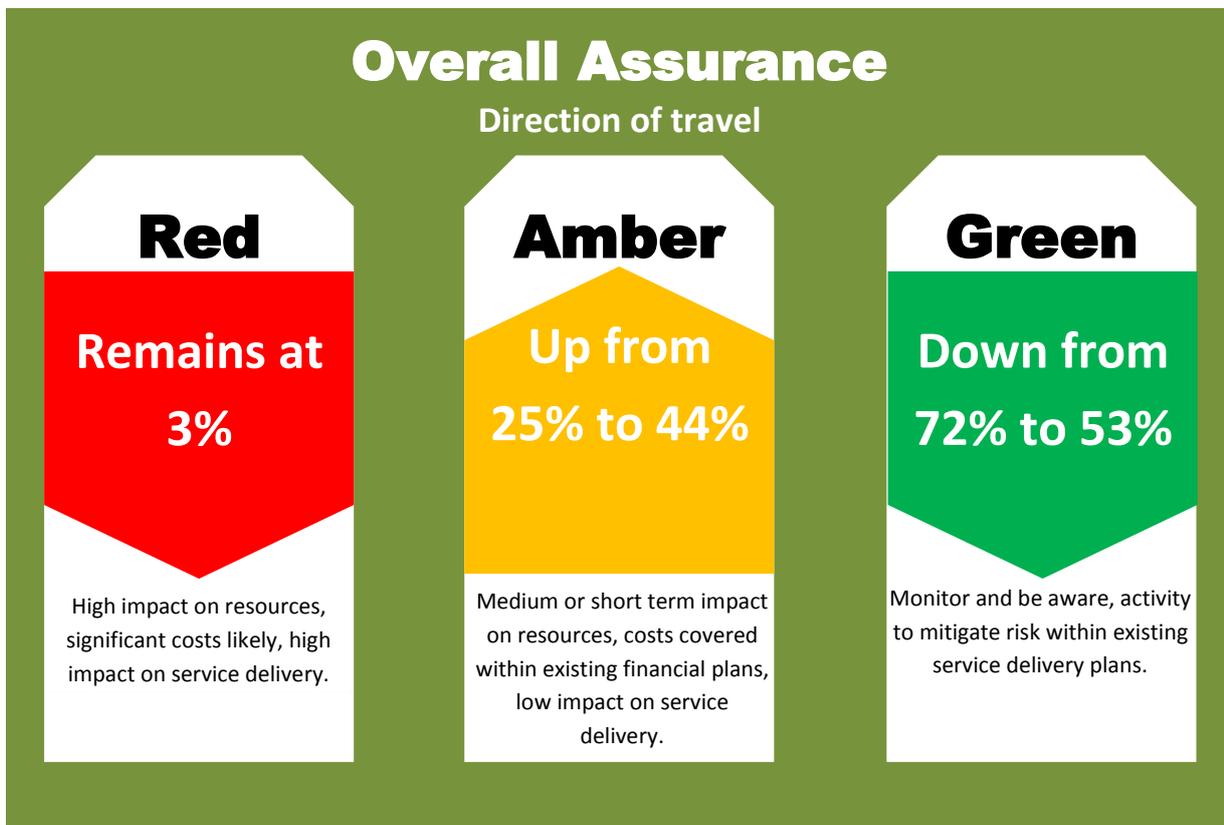
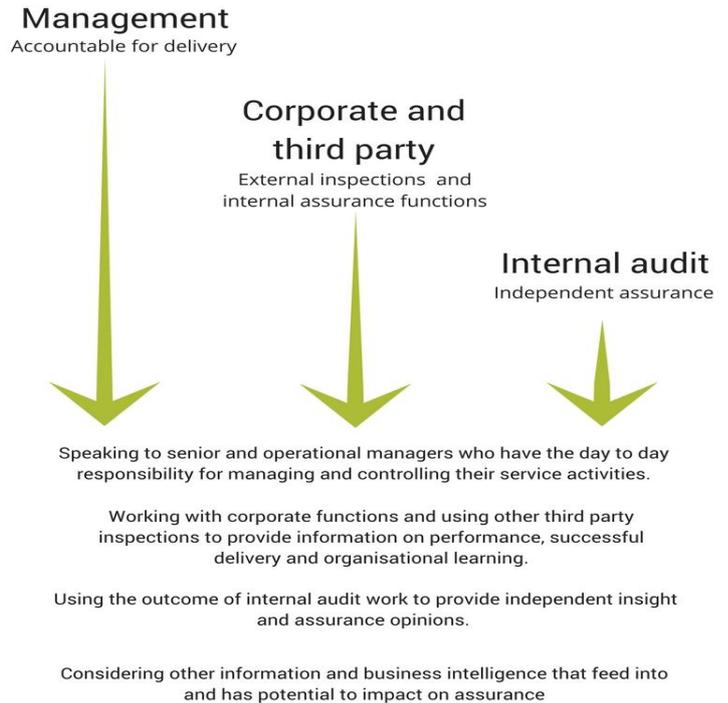
Overview of Assurance

Combined assurance is a structured means of identifying and mapping the main sources and types of assurance in the Council and coordinating them to best effect.

It enhances risk management by providing an effective and efficient framework of sufficient, regular and reliable evidence of assurance on organisational stewardship and management of major risks to the Council's success.

We do this using the three lines of defence model.

How do we assure ourselves about how the council is run?



Summary

We thank Assurance Lincolnshire for producing the Council's latest Combined Assurance Report and also the Council's Team Managers for providing their input. Despite having to adopt different working methods due to the pandemic, all parties have worked in a collaborative and timely manner. The report is something that we value. It is extremely beneficial in highlighting aspects of Council business that are operating well, while also identifying other areas that require greater focus and/or some level of intervention. The findings represent a comprehensive and accurate view of our assurance position across our services, critical systems, governance processes, ICT arrangements, key projects, partnerships and risk analysis.

The impact of Covid19 over the last 12 months has challenged the Council in many ways. However, the response has been very effective, with work re-prioritised across many service areas to enable resources and capacity to be directed to support those residents and businesses across the District that have been most impacted. This support includes the distribution of over £19m of grant aid to businesses; ensuring businesses understand and follow Covid-secure working practices and processing additional numbers of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims and associated reliefs. The Council was also able to quickly implement virtual Council meetings and amend decision-making protocols.

Almost overnight, the vast majority of staff were able to work remotely and they have adapted to this in a positive manner and have been fully supported by the Council, which recognises the issues faced by many officers in juggling, for example, caring/schooling responsibilities with work commitments. Two staff surveys have been completed during this period. The results of both provided high levels of satisfaction with the support and understanding shown by the Council.

The three levels of assurance model has used to provide assurance that operations are operating

as effectively as can be expected and key risks are managed appropriately. Perhaps inevitably, a number service areas have been adversely impacted as a result of additional pressures and/or resources being diverted elsewhere.

Land Charges is an area that has experienced fluctuations in performance over recent years. A number of interventions have been undertaken but improvements have not been sustained. We must now commit to a more thorough review of the service and a plan is being devised to realise long-standing improvements.

As witnessed nationally, the Council's leisure and visitor economy related services have also been impacted. Recovery plans are in place to be implemented once conditions allow and these will be monitored closely. Also, a number of revenue streams have reduced significantly including car parking fees, council tax and business rate collection rates and income from markets. All will be kept under review.

A number of areas have, or are experiencing, capacity issues including street cleansing, planning enforcement and building control; while areas including community services, health and safety and, business continuity/emergency planning are attempting to gauge the level of demand they will face as recovery takes hold.

Across all areas of concern the emphasis will be to ensure that the adverse impacts they have experienced are Covid-related and not systemic.

Despite these challenges, the Council has progressed on a number of fronts. It received positive feedback following the Peer Review held in January 2020; the new Crematorium has completed its first 12 months of operations and it won a national award. The new Market Rasen leisure facility was completed and opened on time; work has started on site for a new Waste Depot and a senior management structure was implemented. Work has also progressed on developing the Council's next Carbon Management Plan and a Sustainability, Climate Change and Environment Strategy.

Strategic Risk

Good risk management is part of the way we work. It is about taking the right risks when making decisions or where we need to encourage innovation in times of major change – balancing risk, quality, cost and affordability. This put us in a stronger position to deliver our goals and provide excellent services. Our Strategic Risk Register is regularly reviewed and our risks are effectively managed. Oversight is provided by the Governance & Audit Committee which reviews the strategic risks on a six-monthly basis.

Risk	Actions for Improvement	Current risk rating	Target risk rating
Health and Wellbeing of the District's residents does not improve	To implement a new business area for Homes and Communities and recruit to the required structure. Review the need for a Strategic Health Partnership.	9	6
Inadequate support is provided for vulnerable groups and communities	P3 project to launch to assist vulnerable communities and also improve local housing stock	9	6
Inability to raise local educational attainment and skills levels	Measure effectiveness of existing actions and draw learning Deliver against West Lindsey Employment & Skills Strategy and Delivery Plan. Development of redundancy support programme to form part of WLESP delivery plan	8	8
The local economy does not grow sufficiently	Planning for Growth initiative with Greater Lincs Review of planning policies in general and the review of the Local Plan in particular Maintain watching brief on further support for businesses and ensure capacity in place to deliver effectively	9	6
The local housing market and the Council's housing related services do not meet demand	Review the need for strategic capacity within the service Development of a Homes and Community Strategy	9	6
Insufficient action taken to create a cleaner and safe district	Produce Environment and Sustainability Strategy Build and opening of new waste depot Implement schools educational programme re recycling etc	8	4
Inability to set a sustainable balanced budget	N/A	8	8
The quality of services do not meet customer expectations	Implement CRM and ERP systems Continual development of P&D reporting	8	8
Inability to maintain critical services and deal with emergency events	Refresher training for appropriate officers Ensure effective handover to new LRF adviser	8	8

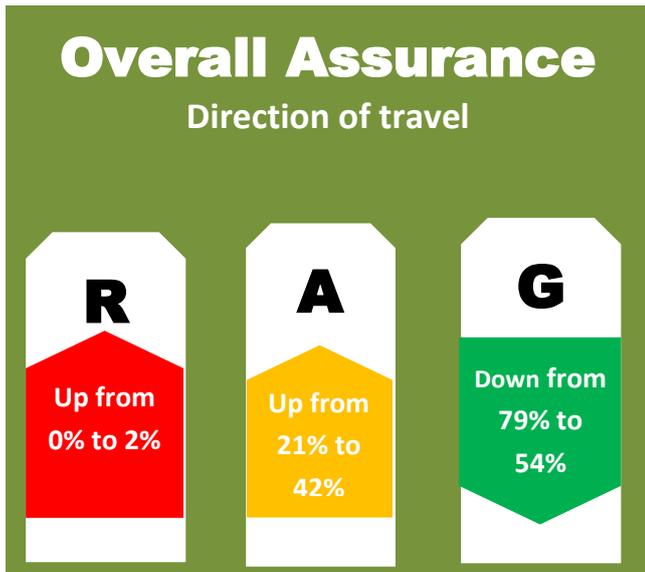
Key Messages

Risk	Actions for Improvement	Current risk rating	Target risk rating
Failure to comply with legislation including Health and Safety matters	Deliver new Waste Services depot to provide safer working environment	8	8
ICT Security and Information Governance arrangements are in ineffective	Deliver against 10 year infrastructure development plan Ensure the timely implementation of the succession plan for the Data Protection Officer and ensure sufficient support is provided to the new incumbent.	12	8
Inability for the Council's governance to support quality decision making	G&A Cttee to work on action plan following survey Review of report writing with a focus on recommendations to be completed	6	6
Key	Risk		
Red	High impact on resources, significant costs likely, high impact on service delivery		
Amber	Medium or short term impact on resources, cost covered within existing financial plans, low impact on service delivery		
Green	Monitor and be aware , activity to mitigate the risk within existing service delivery plans / management arrangements		

Key Messages

Transactional Services

Objectives – Transactional services refer to the agreed set of services and functions run by the Council. Each service area should have clarity of its purpose, an understanding of their stakeholders and clear processes for delivery and managing performance.



Critical Activities	
Red	Amber
Gainsborough Market	Street Cleansing
	Commercial Waste
	Trinity Arts
	Tourism
	Complaints
	Street lighting
	Lea Field Crematorium
	Wellbeing Contract
	Communities at Risk
	Property & Estate Management (Strategic & Operational)
	Car Parking
	Building Control
	Local Land Charges

	Carbon Management Plan
	Community Broadband
	West Lindsey Lottery
	Community Services
	Regulatory Services H&S
	Planning Enforcement
	Development Management

The table above sets out the transactional services that have either been impacted by Covid19, or require attention for separate reasons. The number of services falling into this category has increased over the year.

Gainsborough Market has been rated as ‘red’ as there has been a lack of growth. The operation of the Market has been a long-standing issue and events of the last year have exacerbated the problem. To improve matters, a project is underway with a procured contractor to increase footfall by adding new growth initiatives, e.g. continental and any other style markets, publicity, etc. The decline in footfall however mirrors what is a national trend.

In Operational Services, both Street Cleansing and Commercial Waste require attention. The former, while performing well, has experienced staffing issues due to Covid19. With regard to Commercial Waste, this service must take account of emerging risks around moving depot and separate paper/card collections.

Leisure and Tourism have been hit hard over the last 12 months. Trinity Arts Centre has remained closed but has secured Culture Recovery Fund and Arts Council grant funding to support the cost of closure and planned reopening. Events to commemorate Mayflower 400 were mostly cancelled or moved on-line and staff were allocated to other priority areas of work. It is hoped however, that when recovery gathers pace, Mayflower events can be re-

Key Messages

visited and the District can harness the new-found enthusiasm for the outdoors and the environment and exploit its rurality and proximity to the Lincolnshire Wolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

It has been recognised that the Council's Customer Experience Officer requires support to add resilience to the work. This will be pursued. The Council has embarked on a project of replacing street lighting with LED lights. However, this has stalled as it has proven difficult to secure a contractor to undertake the remainder of the work. This work is important both to help to reduce carbon emissions and reduce costs.

Lea Fields Crematorium has been a success in its first year. Income is in line with projections and it won an APSE award. It is prudent though to maintain a close watch on performance against the business case expectations and to also keep abreast of updates in legislation and industry guidance.

The Wellbeing Contract requires the close attention of the partnership, as the service has witnessed an increase in demand over the last 12 months. Similarly, work must be completed to implement a number of remaining actions identified via a recent audit into Communities at Risk, to ensure such communities receive the assistance they require.

Capacity issues have arisen within Property & Estate Management (Strategic & Operational) with vacancies to be filled. A Strategic Asset Management Strategy is to be developed and a backlog of maintenance recording has accrued which needs to be addressed. In addition, improved compliance management is an area of focus.

Issues relating to Car Parks, Building Control and Local Land Charges were documented within the summary. The Council is not alone in experiencing a significant drop in car parking income as a result of periods of lockdown. Although the performance of the Building

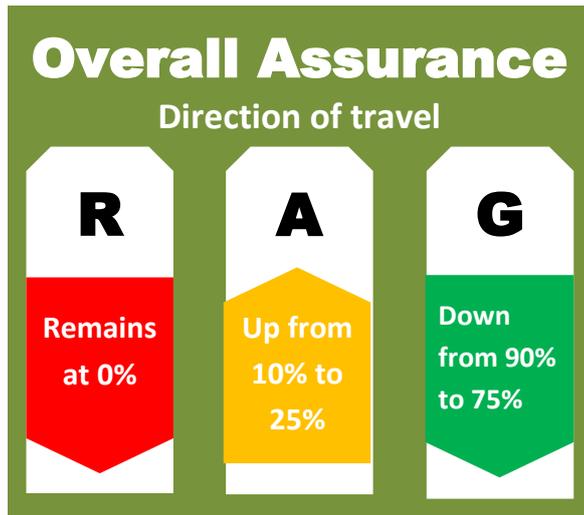
Control service has remained robust, there is a level of risk around Covid19 and ongoing lack of resilience within the service due to staffing issues, with reliance placed on the use of agency staff. An ongoing project is in place with neighbouring authorities to consider a shared service or a separate company.

Issues related to an increased workload, and an antiquated system have led to poor performance being recorded by Local Land Charges. Additionally, mutings are on-going nationally about the transfer of part of the service to the Land Registry. This uncertainty has not helped matters. However, moves are afoot to address issues with a project to digitise many of the currently paper-based records.

Key Messages

Governance

Objectives – This section includes areas such as corporate governance, risk management, partnerships, information governance, procurement and contract management, Human Resources, project management and Member and Democratic Services.



Critical Activities
Amber
Business Continuity & Emergency Planning
Safeguarding
Performance Management
Procurement
Contract Management

In spite of the recent pressures placed on the Council’s governance arrangements, the findings of the report show that the vast majority of our governance elements have continued to operate effectively.

It is worth stating that following the first national lockdown in March 2020, in a very short period of time the Council wrote new protocols to support the holding of virtual Council meetings, amended its delegated decision making powers, trained and supported officers and Members in the new arrangements and the changes were quickly implemented. Consequently, Council meetings have been held on a virtual basis and key decisions continue to be made.

Areas that have withstood the challenges include: Member development; Members have

continued to receive training (arranged virtually), risk management, corporate health and safety (where work has been prioritised to create a Covid-safe working environment for those officers that do attend the office), Democratic Services, the management of partnerships and projects, information governance (with attention paid on reminding staff working remotely of the importance of data security) and equalities and diversity (which saw the approval of a new, three year policy in February 2020.)

Areas that are deemed to require closer attention are addressed thus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, stress has been placed on the Council’s business continuity and emergency planning arrangements, with resilience tested as a result of the pandemic. The future outlook remains uncertain, therefore on-going review of the effectiveness of processes will be key.

Safeguarding matters nationally have received attention during the past 12 months. The Council recognises the need to maintain absolute focus on this area to prevent harm from occurring wherever possible.

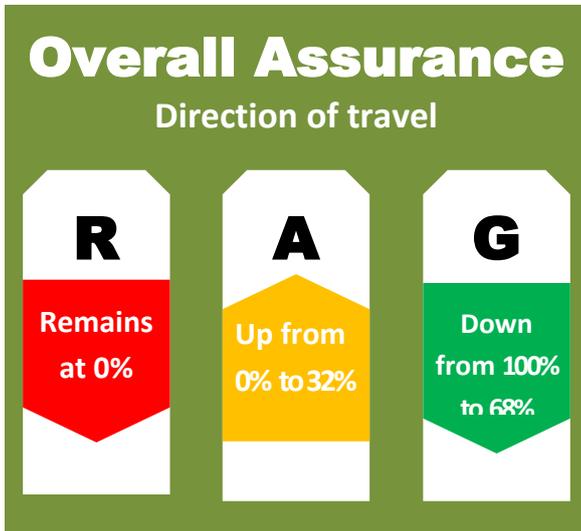
With the advent of the inclusion of performance management within the new Enterprise Resource Platform, it is key that this project is implemented effectively. This will result in performance management continuing to add value to the Council.

Last year’s report raised procurement as an issue. Action to remedy, in the form of a survey of service users, analysis of findings and actions to rectify, have been delayed due to other priorities. However, at the time of writing, the survey has been completed and analysis is underway. With regard to contract management, a good overview of all contracts has been reported, but some training on supplier management is required. This will form part of an overall procurement/contracts training package for staff which it is anticipated will incorporate remedies identified via the analysis of the procurement survey.

Key Messages

Resources

Objectives – This aspect relates to the functions that support the running of the Council and ensure compliance with policies and set procedures



Critical Activities
Amber
Council Tax
NNDR
Income collection and receipting
Value Added Tax
Insurance
Grants Received

Again, the impact of the pandemic is evident across this aspect of the Council’s functions. These include arrangements overseeing Council Tax, National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), Housing Benefits, financial management controls and the governance of grants. Over 2/3rds of all activity however, has continued to perform strongly over the last 12 months.

Despite additional demand placed on Housing Benefits and Council Tax Support, coupled with capacity issues, the service has continued to perform well. Similarly counter-fraud arrangements remain robust. Treasury Management is extremely effective, as evidenced by an audit finding of full assurance

during 2020. The distribution of grants is deemed to be effective with good oversight and assurance that compliance with the conditions of acceptance are adhered to.

Arrangements to oversee commercial activity are robust. A new Commercial Performance Board is in place and the Finance Team have input into new business plans and options appraisals. The Council’s financial resilience model has been developed and includes appropriate financial ratios and routine oversight and reporting, including review of earmarked reserves.

Areas to address, that have been rated as ‘amber’ in nature are set out in the accompanying table. These include Council Tax, where collection rates and the capacity within the service have been affected by Covid19.

Administration of National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) is currently undertaken by LiNK via a contract. This arrangement has been extended, however greater emphasis is required on managing key aspects of the contract. Therefore monthly liaison meetings and performance reporting will be undertaken.

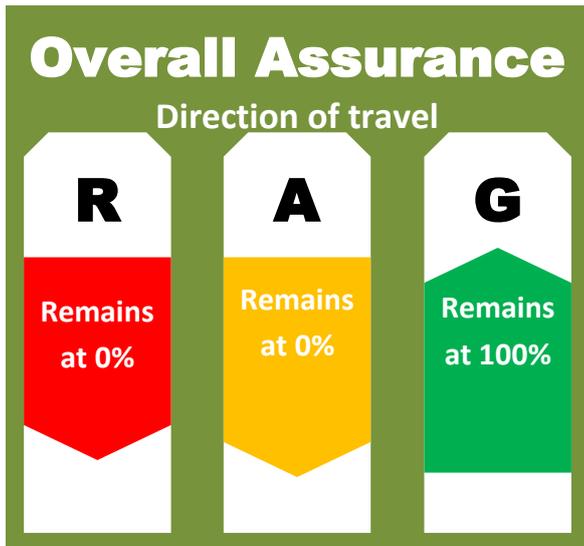
While there are no issues concerning the process of income collection and receipting, a more supportive approach to debtors has been adopted and usual enforcement measures such as court action have been postponed which has had an impact on recovery rates. This will be reviewed over the next 12 months. All deadlines for VAT matters have been met using on-line portals, however concern has been raised related to the resources required to administer this function.

Similarly, with regard to Insurance there are issues related to the level of staff resources, resilience and succession plans which will be investigated further. With respect to Grants Received, this generates a large volume of work in terms of monitoring conditions and completing returns. A new officer is training, so this function presently requires senior officer support.

Key Messages

ICT

Objectives – The ICT aspect of the report focuses on governance arrangements within the service, the infrastructure, day to day operations, projects, compliance and applications and systems.



The report has found that, as was the case last year, all aspects of the ICT Service have operated effectively over the last year. This has been critical in enabling the Council to function during the pandemic. It has enabled staff to work from home/remotely, enabled Council and other work related meetings to be held virtually and securely and addressed the home ICT equipment needs that some staff have had.

An important aspect of the service’s work has been ensuring that the security of data and information remains a key priority; particularly with regard to the current circumstances that staff are working under. Staff and Members alike are regularly reminded of this.

The shared ICT Partnership with North Kesteven District Council continues to operate well. Work is progressing against the 10 year infrastructure development plan with the ICT

Board and ICT Partnership Board retaining oversight.

The Council’s Corporate Information Governance Group (CIGG) continues to operate effectively. It oversees information governance related matters; looks for trends within reported breaches and draws up arrangements for on-going communication and awareness messages and also staff training. All relevant breaches are reported to the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO); however none have been reported during the year that required further involvement on their part. A new contract has been secured to ensure a further three years of information governance related training and awareness packages for staff and Members.

The Council received the findings of an audit into Cyber Security during 2020. This provided substantial assurance on such matters, commenting that the arrangements for managing Cyber Security risk are good, particularly at an operational level.

Two key systems have been procured for implementation. A new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System and an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system. These are major investments for the Council, intended to improve service delivery and increase efficiency. Roll-out and implementation is planned over the next few years so a keen eye will be kept on the delivery of these projects.

Key Messages

Emerging Risks

Objectives – It is impingent on all managers to undertake effective risk management and attempt to minimise the impact of any risks should they materialise. Looking ahead and horizon scanning to identify any emerging risks is a pre-requisite and it is encouraging that this activity is undertaken across the Council. During the exercise a number of emerging risks were identified and discussed, many of which are linked to the current situation.

Breathing Space legislation: These regulations are formally referred to as the Debt Respite Scheme and relate to Council Tax arrears. They are due to become law in May 2021 but as yet no finalised Government guidance is available.

Digimail project: Concerns around change management, timeline for implementation and experience of chosen provider.

Change in Building Control Regulations: Impact of a change in regulations following the Grenfell disaster have to be fully assessed.

Gainsborough Town Centre - Lindsey Centre Re-development (Potential): Impact of Covid19 means initial plans are likely to change. Report with Management Team on future direction.

Main office repurposing: Early stages of consideration.

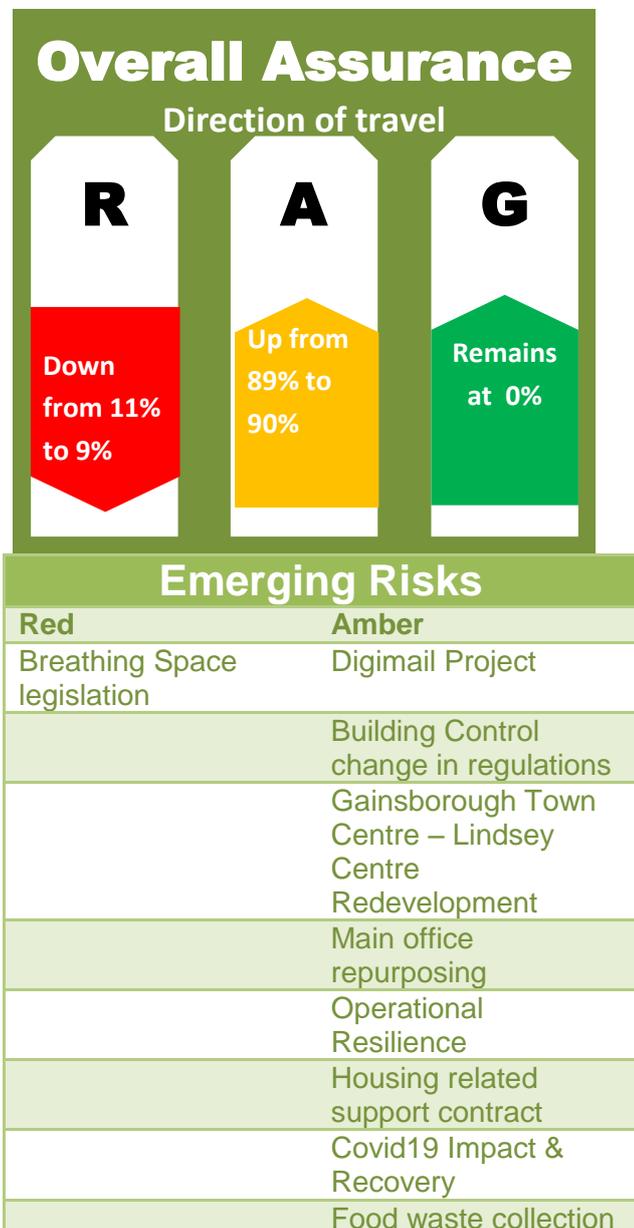
Operational resilience: High volume of changes across the Council in 2021 including new projects, new system implementations and continued adapting to new ways of working and implementing changes to legislation.

Operational capacity, adequate skill sets and service resilience to be considered in each area.

Housing related support contract: Uncertainties around the impact of changes to eligibility criteria which means some people will no longer have access to support.

Covid19 impact and recovery: Council is very supportive of staff and good initiatives in place eg staff groups, training. Services continue to embed processes for day to day support, recognising mental health and wellbeing. Concerns around increased workloads for managers

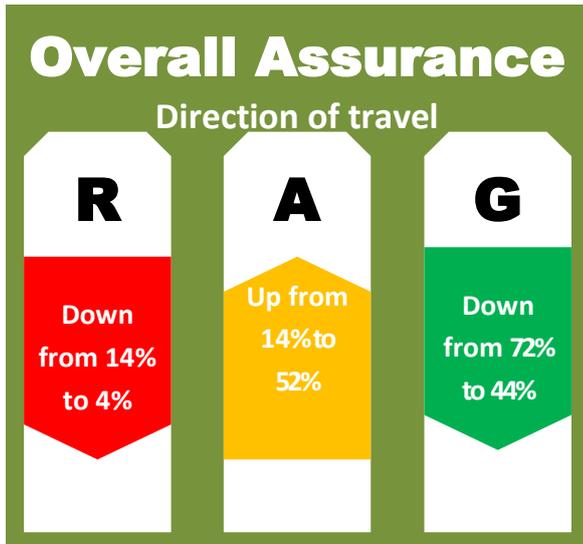
Food waste collection: Introduction of separate paper and food waste collections is an objective of the Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy. Have to assess impact.



Key Messages

Key Projects

Objectives – During the Combined Assurance mapping exercise, project management was deemed to be working effectively across the Council.



A number of key projects were discussed during the collation of material for the report and are set out in the accompanying table (below). They reflect the breadth of work the Council is presently involved in.

Test and Trace: The volume of applications, evidence required and timescales to make payments add pressure to team.

Housing Benefit Document Management System conversion: Staff training on new system ongoing.

Lea Fields Crematorium – Creation of Strewing area: This project is at Stage 2 and is at Commercial Board in November 2020.

Customer Services Out of Hours provision: Some concerns around delivery.

Customer Relationship Management System: New system with impact on staff in terms of training and input into the project.

Local Land Charges service transfer to HM Land Registry: Early stages with scoping underway and timescales led by HM Land Registry.

Enterprise Resource Planning system: Large project and development starts January 2021. Implementation scheduled for November 21. Managed and monitored by ICT Board but number of risks associated with project and unknown impacts on some services.

5/7 Market Place refurbishment: Business case is developing.

Carbon reduction/energy saving projects: LED Parish Lighting project has failed to attract suitable contractor. New pipeline of projects to be allocated through Climate Change programme.

Leisure (Construction Project): Market Rasen Leisure Centre Project in 12 month defect period.

Change 4 Lincs: Fairly new partnership, some staffing issues in terms of brand new service with inexperienced staff and learning, all remotely from home.

Viable Housing solution: To be delivered by partner through grant funding agreement.

RAF Scampton Community: Normalisation Strategy due to be created in 2021-2022 setting out actions to support the community during decommissioning of RAF Scampton. Current activity is overseen through internal working group meetings and partnership meetings with key stakeholders.

Growth & Regeneration projects: Large volume of projects.

Key Messages

Key Projects	
Red	Amber
Test and Trace	Housing Benefit Document Management System conversion
	Lea Fields Crematorium – Creation of Strewing area
	Customer Services Out of Hours provision
	Customer Relationship Management System
	Local Land Charges service transfer to HM Land Registry
	Enterprise Resource Planning system
	5/7 Market Place refurbishment
	Carbon reduction/energy saving projects
	Leisure (Construction Project)
	Change 4 Lincs
	Viable Housing solution
	RAF Scampton Community
	Growth & Regeneration projects

Key Messages

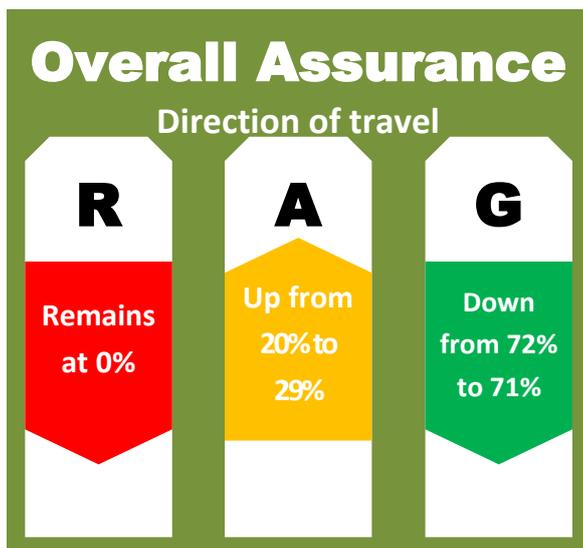
Key Partnerships

Objectives – The Council recognises that effective partnership working is key to the achievement of many of its goals and desired outcomes. In that regard it is essential that any partnerships entered into, or are currently in operation, deliver and their on-going relevance and effectiveness are continually evaluated.

Lincolnshire Waste Partnership: Eight partners continue to work well together and are rolling out other improvements, e.g. separate card, paper and food waste.

Muse – the growth programme: Bi-annual review of potential projects for agreement through Land Property and Growth.

The remaining partnerships were rated as being fully effective.



All key partnerships are recorded and updated on a central register. This provides an accurate record at any given time of such arrangements. Lead officers are required to regularly evaluate the health and on-going relevance of the partnerships they are involved in.

Within this exercise the Council’s key strategic partnerships were reviewed to assess their effectiveness. Two, set out below, were rated as amber in nature:

Critical Activities	
Red	Amber
	Lincolnshire Waste Partnership
	Muse – the growth programme

Partnerships	
Title	Comment
Employment and Skills Partnership	Terms of reference in place and a delivery plan approved by Members. Regular reporting through P&D narrative and annual reporting back to Members.
WL/NK ICT Partnership	There is an ICT Board and a Partnership Board in place, which meets regularly and has oversight for key projects across the shared service
Central Lincs Local Plan	Managed through Central Lincolnshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee with members appointed from WLDC. Central Lincolnshire Strategic Group for Chief Execs and lead officers set direction with Heads of Planning tasked with delivery
North Notts and Lincs Community Rail Partnership	Partnership has terms of reference and appropriate governance for management and decision making