Tasmanian Audit Office

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Local Government Underlying Result Calculation (revised June 2020)[1]

In many Australian jurisdictions councils are now required, or strongly encouraged, to report results for a number of sustainability performance indicators. There is a reasonable level of consistency across jurisdictions, though there are differences in methods of calculation for some measures. This is certainly the case with the underlying (operating) result ratio.

This guidance is aimed at assisting Tasmanian councils in calculating their underlying result and associated ratio for financial statement disclosure purposes. While it may differ from the approach taken in other states, to enhance comparability within Tasmania, it is important underlying result is consistently determined.

The intent of the underlying result is to show the outcome of a council's normal or usual day to day operations. It is intended to remove extraneous factors that could create volatility and therefore make it difficult for users to understand the outcome of a council's normal operations. It is an important indicator of financial sustainability which seeks to answer the following question:

> *Can we continue the sort of revenue and expenditure patterns of recent years while* maintaining *the levels of service expected by the community?*[2]

The definition of **Underlying Surplus** in the *Local Government (Management Indicators) Order* 2014, "*is …an amount that is the recurrent income (not including income received specifically for new or upgraded assets, physical resources received free of charge or other income of a capital nature) of a council for a financial year less the recurrent expenses of the council for the financial year.*"

Some of the key elements of the above can be defined as follows:

- Recurrent – the term recurrent is a commonly used term by government entities to refer to transactions for all purposes except those of a capital nature. It includes operational expenditure such as wages and salaries or purchases of goods and services; and revenue from operations, including operating grants and subsidies. Whilst the term 'recurrent' generally refers to items occurring or appearing repeatedly or periodically, for the

[1] This guidance replaces that previously issued in June 2017.

[2] SA LGA 'Financial Sustainability' Information Paper No 1 – *Financial Sustainability* - Revised January 2012

purposes of determining underlying result, ‘recurrent’ income or expenditure includes operational transactions that may occur once or infrequently.

- New or upgraded assets – specific purpose (or tied) funding related to construction of new or replacement or enhancement of existing assets.
- Physical resources received free of charge – assets transferred or contributed to council for little or no compensation, examples include subdivision assets, vested assets such as those transferred from State government.
- Other income of a capital nature – all other capital funding related to non-financial assets, such as specific purpose (or tied) funding for replacement of existing assets including Roads to Recovery funding (R2R).

Income of a capital nature is defined as:

> *“Amounts received from transactions with external parties that do not form part of the council’s operating business activities and are in connection with non-financial assets.”*[3]

Treatment of Roads to Recovery funding

R2R funding is designed to ensure that local government authorities do not substitute R2R funding for their own funding. It is intended to enable councils to undertake road work additional to what they could undertake using their own funds[4].

While R2R funding may recur from year to year, it is not intended to be part of council’s normal operations, even though some councils may see it this way. Moreover, in the majority of cases R2R funding is used for capital works, usually the replacement of existing assets, and therefore is captured by the definition of income of a capital nature. In rare circumstances, R2R funding may be received for operational purposes.

Irrespective of the purpose, councils still need to be mindful that R2R funding will need to be recognised upon receipt in the Statement of Comprehensive Income. This is because the actual funding arrangements for the program, do not meet the recognition requirements to defer revenue under AASB 1058 *Income for Not-for-Profit Entities*.

For underlying result purposes though, as R2R funding is generally capital in nature, it would generally be excluded from recurrent income.

Examples of exclusions from underlying result

The following items would usually be excluded from **recurrent revenue**:

- Insurance claim or reimbursement of expenditure received as they relate to assets or operating costs previously incurred/disposed/written-off and excluded from operating expenses.
- Reimbursement of costs under the Natural Disaster Relief to Local Government Policy.

[3] DILGP Queensland ……
[4] Programme Procedures for the Roads to Recovery Programme – June 2015

- Money received from the sale of land for unpaid rates that is not claimed by the owner of the land within 3 years of the sale.
- Donations or bequests that are subject to restrictions on the use of funds or are one-off in nature and significant in dollar terms.
- Gains from one-off disposal of surplus assets or discontinued operations.
- Commonwealth Financial Assistance Grants received in advance (while not capital, advance payments which are significant can distort or misrepresent the result).

The following items would be excluded from **recurrent expenditure**:

- Asset revaluation decrements (or reversal of previous decrements).
- Disposal/write-off of assets as a result of natural disaster or other unforeseen event (e.g. flood damage).
- Were clearly identifiable, additional operating costs associated with significant natural disasters or other unusual events, including fraud and fire.
- Disposal/write-off of assets for abnormal reasons (if external funding is received for the replacement of the asset then this would indicate that it is abnormal in nature).
- Payments or provision in relation to a redundancy program.
- Major impairment write-downs.
- Clean-up costs after a natural disaster which resulted in the activation of the Natural Disaster Relief to Local Government Policy.
- Losses from one-off disposal of surplus assets or discontinued operations.

Examples of transactions which may not repeat but relate to the operations of councils, or specific operational decisions of councils, and therefore included in the underlying result calculation

- Changes to existing decommissioning, rehabilitation, restoration or similar provisions.
- Financial support, subsidies, grants and programs to individuals, organisations, businesses or industry.

Financial statement users and preparers are reminded that no one indicator should be viewed in isolation.

No guidance can account for every situation that may arise. The overarching principle in this case is that non-operational and capital related transactions or those over which council had little control should be excluded from the underlying result calculation.

To avoid any issues potentially impacting the outcome of the financial audit, councils are urged to discuss any items that need further consideration with their respective audit team.

Impact of COVID-19

As noted above, the intent of the underlying result is to show the outcome of a council's normal or usual day to day operations. As such, the calculation excludes extraneous factors that could create volatility and therefore make it difficult for users to understand the outcome of a council's normal operations.

It may be prudent for councils to factor into their forecasts and budgets allowances for such extraneous factors or non-recurring events which are becoming more frequent, albeit the nature of each may differ. For example, a council may be subject to floods, fire and a pandemic in successive years. To counter the effect of such events on their finances, councils may aim to achieve small underlying surpluses rather than a breakeven underlying result.

As COVID-19 represents such an extraneous factor, the following items would usually be excluded from revenue or expenditure:

Revenue:

- State or Commonwealth funding received related to COVID-19.
- Insurance claim or reimbursements related to COVID-19.

Expenditure:

- Additional costs directly attributable to impacts of COVID-19.
- Expenditure in the provision of financial support, subsidies, grants and programs to individuals, organisations, businesses or industry that can be directly attributed to COVID-19.
- Debt forgiveness, relief or remissions provided that can be directly attributed to COVID-19.

Revenue or costs foregone

Some councils may have revenue or costs foregone attributable to COVID-19 where there is no underlying transaction recorded in their financial system. For these, the underlying result should not be adjusted, although councils may disclosure the nature of these items in the financial statements. Examples of revenues or costs foregone for which the underlying result is not adjusted include:

- Rate increases of zero % or a lower percentage than would have occurred pre-COVID-19.
- Fees or charges that were not charged or charged at a lower rate than would have been charged pre-COVID-19.
- Lower salary costs due to less staff or due to reductions in hours, reduced overtime or salary levels.