

Is there something I should know?

Making the most of your information
to improve services
Local government summary
July 2009



The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

Summary

Most councils could and should improve their information

- Good information helps councils to improve the quality of their services, find savings and manage risks.
- Councils recognise the importance of good information, and 94 per cent say that information has become an increased strategic priority.
- Exemplar councils have the right culture, people and standards to provide good information, but most councils do not, and so are missing opportunities to improve services and save money.

Councils recognise that decisions that affect the cost, quality and effectiveness of public services are not driven by robust information

- Members say they receive lengthy reports but still do not have the relevant information they need. Senior officers are frustrated that powerful data are unexploited.
- Less than 5 per cent of councils have excellent data quality and many acknowledge that their data quality problems are fundamental in nature.
- Almost 80 per cent of councils say a lack of in-depth analysis is a major problem.

Problems can be overcome without spending more by good management and learning from exemplar councils

- Councils do not need to spend more and should instead deploy existing resources more wisely. Thirty-six per cent of analysts' time is spent on routine performance reporting, while only 15 per cent is spent on value added analysis.
- This need not be expensive. A high quality intelligence or information unit can be provided with under 0.2 per cent of a council's expenditure. And the best performing intelligence units are not the most expensive.
- Decision makers need to become more demanding, and analysts more valued.
- Two-thirds of councils say members struggle to understand information, and half say that senior officers do, yet half of councils provide no formal training in this area and almost a quarter provide no support at all.
- Sixty-five per cent of councils still face problems sharing data with external partners. Many councils say their staff do not understand the Data Protection Act, which means opportunities to reduce waste and duplication are often missed.

Recommendations

Councils should:

- use the self-assessment framework from this study to understand where they need to improve, and the toolkit to help drive those improvements;
- develop an environment where decision makers demand relevant, high quality, well presented information;
- ensure a two-way, robust dialogue between decision makers and information providers;
- invest time in recruiting, training and retaining skilled staff;
- foster a culture of professionalism in the research, intelligence and information functions, and encourage membership of professional bodies; and
- ensure, through their national representatives and professional bodies,ⁱ that there is a national structure for research, intelligence and information functions comprising:
 - a clear competency framework to help councils improve the skills base and overall performance of research, intelligence and information units;
 - coherent and consistent national support networks that have a high profile with councils;
 - networking and good practice sharing opportunities; and
 - a voice for research, intelligence and information functions in local government.

i Including: the Local Government Association (LGA) family; Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA); the British Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (BURISA); the Local Authority Research Council Initiative (LARCI); and the Central and Local Information Partnership (CLIP).

The Audit Commission will:

- publish a self-assessment framework and toolkit to help councils improve;
- assess councils on the information available to support decision making in use of resources key line of enquiry (KLOE) 2.2 and publish the results;ⁱ and
- update guidance for KLOE 2.2 to reflect the findings from this study.

i KLOE 2.2 – Does the organisation produce relevant and reliable data and information to support decision making and manage performance?

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We welcome your feedback. If you have any comments on this report, are intending to implement any of the recommendations, or are planning to follow up any of the case studies, please email: nationalstudies@audit-commission.gov.uk



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