

Is there something I should know?

Have you got the information you need to make the decision?

A checklist for members and senior officers

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.

Checklist for members and senior officers

This checklist will help you get the information you need

1 This checklist is designed to help members and senior officers consider, when you receive papers for a decision, whether you have the information you need. If you are not able to answer important questions, you should challenge officers to provide the information you need.

Do you demand relevant, high quality and well-presented information?

2 Many councils struggle to unlock the power of information to improve decision making. Members and senior officers recognise that they lack the information they need to make decisions. Common problems include:

- frustration with lengthy reports that do not present information in a concise and easily accessible way;
- a concern that inaccurate or out of date information drives key decisions; and
- a lack of relevant, contextual information, that adds richness to, and helps people understand, the raw data.

In the Know: Using Information to Make Better Decisions (Ref. 1) defined good information as relevant information, of sufficient quality for the decision at hand, presented in a way the decision maker will understand. Relevance, quality and presentation (RQP) are key characteristics for useful information.

3 *Is There Something I Should Know* (Ref. 2) identified that decision makers need to become more demanding about the information they receive. Those providing you with information need to understand:

- the issue you are addressing; and
- how the information they provide will be used to make judgements about the issue.

4 Effective dialogue between those who need the information and those who supply it can ensure that the information supplied meets the needs of those using it in their decision making, if it takes place sufficiently in advance to enable officers to assemble it.

5 As well as this checklist, the Audit Commission has developed guides to illustrate what RQP information means for eight decisions and to help senior decision makers to specify it. These are available on the Audit Commission's website, at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow. Case studies showing how councils have specified and used the right information are also available on the Commission's website.

Characteristics of good information	Checklist
Relevant	■ What issue needs a decision? ✓
	■ What are the available options? ✓
	Achieving objectives
	■ What policy or service objectives does the decision relate to? ✓
	■ What are the current levels of performance? ✓
	■ What impact will each option have on: ✓
	– the organisation's objectives?
	– performance indicators and targets?
	■ How does our performance compare with our ambitions, and with other organisations? ✓
	Costs
	■ What is the current cost? ✓
	■ What is each option expected to cost, in the coming year and in the longer term? ✓
	■ How much does it cost in other organisations? ✓
	■ What income might be generated to offset costs? ✓
	Public opinion
	■ What are the public's views of the current situation and proposed changes? ✓
	■ What impact are changes expected to have on public satisfaction? ✓
	Aggregating information
	■ What area or neighbourhood does the decision cover? Does the information provided cover that area only? ✓
	■ What are the trends over time in performance and costs? ✓
	■ Does the information come from different sources? Does it include information from partners? ⁱ ✓

ⁱ Using a range of information from different sources, and sharing information, will generate a fuller picture.

Checklist for members and senior officers

Characteristics of good information	Checklist	
High quality	■ Is an assessment made of the accuracy of the data presented? ⁱ	✓
	■ Do you know whether you can rely on the information?	✓
	■ Are forecasts, projections or estimates presented where actual data is not available?	✓
	■ What assessment is made of the accuracy of any forecasts? ⁱⁱ	✓
	■ What assumptions are made in any forecasts? How have they been validated? Is it clear how sensitive the forecast is to different assumptions?	✓
	■ Do you know how well founded any projections or estimates are?	✓
	■ Do you know how recent the data are? ⁱⁱⁱ	✓
	■ Are the data recent enough to cover the impact of previous initiatives?	✓
	■ Does the data cover the right time period?	✓
Well presented	■ Can you clearly see a summary of the options, their contribution to the objectives, costs and impact on users and the public opinion?	✓
	■ What elements of the information could you do without? ^{iv}	✓
	■ Is the information easy to understand? Can you interpret what the key messages are?	✓
	■ Would a different way of presenting help you interpret the information? ^v	✓
	■ Can you interpret the messages from charts and tables in ten seconds?	✓

- i** Data should be sufficiently accurate for the intended purpose. Highly accurate data are often neither cost-effective nor possible for many decisions.
- ii** Information that depends on assumptions, such as forecasts, will rarely be very accurate. Their value lies in being accurate enough, the best estimate given the constraints, to guide decision making.
- iii** While real-time information may help users and managers make real-time choices, judgements of performance and decisions on strategy typically require information analysed over a longer time period and set in context.
- iv** Have you told the information provider?
- v** Messages based on numerical information can be conveyed very powerfully in charts. However, good presentation for one set of users will not be good presentation for all users. While many people absorb numerical information well from a chart, others prefer tables. Likewise, while some prefer prose, others prefer diagrams or pictures. Do those supplying you with information know your preferences?

References

- 1 Audit Commission, *In the Know: Using Information to Make Better Decisions – A Discussion Paper*, Audit Commission, February 2008.
- 2 Audit Commission, *Is There Something I Should Know?*, Audit Commission, July 2009.

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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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