

# Is there something I should know?

Seeking the views of officers and members for the  
self assessment

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## Helping you seek the views of officers and members to answer questions in the self assessment

To exploit the power of information councils need to combine the three elements of culture, people and standards identified in the national report.<sup>i</sup> The report is supported by a self assessment framework that will help councils establish whether they are under developed, developing or well developed in each of the three key areas of culture, people and standards.

This tool will help councils gather the evidence needed to answer some of the questions in the self assessment (Table 1).

Table 1: **Seeking the views of officers and members to gather evidence for the self assessment**

<b>Aspects of the self assessment to explore in semi-structured interviews</b>	
<b>Culture</b> A culture that values and exploits the power of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Commitment from members to an evidence based culture.</li><li>■ Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information.</li></ul>
<b>People</b> Expert, professional, well trained people, working in effective ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Good interpretation skills.</li><li>■ Attractive jobs for analysts.</li></ul>
<b>Standards</b> Good data quality and information shared effectively with partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Information valued throughout the council, with consistently high standards applied at all levels.</li></ul>

Source: Audit Commission

<sup>i</sup> The national report is available on our website, at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/istheresomething](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/istheresomething)

### Using the interview schedule

To use the tool, councils will need to appoint an interviewer who is skilled in conducting semi structured interviews and who will also be able to form a balanced judgement for the self assessment, based on the evidence collected.

There are two interview schedules available:

- senior officers and elected members (decision makers); and
- analysts and researchers (information providers).

The interview schedules are not prescriptive. Interviewers should adapt the schedule of questions as appropriate, including adding questions on other areas of the self assessment if they would find that helpful.

### Other tools to help you improve

After conducting the self assessment, councils will have established whether there are areas where they are under developed or developing. Web based improvement tools are available to help councils improve in each of the three areas.

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Table 2: **The tools and information to help you improve<sup>i</sup>**

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<b>Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Guide and checklist for members on Relevance, Quality, Presentation information.</li><li>■ Case studies.</li><li>■ Decision making guides.</li></ul>
<b>People</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Diaries for analysts.</li><li>■ Resource mapping tool.</li><li>■ Case studies.</li><li>■ Links to training and advice.</li></ul>
<b>Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Data quality standards.</li><li>■ Case studies.</li><li>■ Links to training and advice.</li></ul>

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*Source: Audit Commission*

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<sup>i</sup> All tools and resources are web based and are available at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/istheresomething](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/istheresomething)

## Interviews with senior officers and members (decision makers)

### **Culture – Commitment from members to an evidence based culture**

- Is your strategic and financial planning underpinned by relevant, good quality information?
- What type of information supports strategic and financial planning?
- Does this information cover:
  - cost;
  - performance;
  - impact on service levels; and
  - impact on the public?
- What information currently forms the basis for service planning?
- Does the information that supports service planning come from a range of sources?
- What external information supports service planning?
- How do you currently identify scope for further efficiencies?
- What information helps inform decisions on efficiencies?
- How do you ensure that the information that supports both strategic and service planning is robust?
- What barriers do you face in making further improvements to the information you receive?
- What changes would you like to see to bring about further improvements in the quality and relevance of the information you receive?
- What should the next steps be in making these changes and who will be the key people to drive this forward?

### **Culture – Creating a collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to better information**

- Do you and your peers challenge each other to ensure you have been provided with a clear, unbiased strategic evidence base?
- How do you ensure this challenge takes place?
- Do you currently have an open, constructive dialogue with your information providers about the information you need?
- How do you create an environment where this two-way dialogue happens?
- Do you regularly challenge information providers in order to ensure that you have received information that is relevant, of sufficient quality and well presented?
- How does this challenge take place?
- Do you collaborate with information providers to jointly ensure that information is specified well?
- How does this collaboration work in practice?

- How do you specify the information you require to make key decisions? For example:
  - formal meetings with officers and information providers;
  - ad hoc informal discussions;
  - written specification; or
  - using best practice from others
- Why do you specify information in this way? For example, is this historical or have processes developed more recently?

**People – Interpretation skills, training and support**

- Is the information you receive easy to understand?
- What would make the information you receive easier to understand?
- Do you feel you have the skills to interpret the information that you receive?
- Do you think other elected members and senior officers in your council have the skills needed to interpret the information you receive?
- Does your council provide training or support to help members improve their interpretation skills?
- What training or support has been provided? For example:
  - mentoring in own council;
  - shadowing in other councils;
  - formal training course or programme;
  - continuous professional development;
  - regional support (for example regional observatories); or
  - national organisations (for example, IDeA, LGA, LARIA).
- Which of these has been the most effective and why?
- What hasn't worked so well and why?
- What improvements would you like to see to the support for members and senior officers?

**Standards – Information valued throughout the council, with consistently high standards applied at all levels**

- Do you always get the information you really need?
- What information would like to receive that you currently lack?
- Is the information for management meetings or cabinet meetings distilled down to the relevant information for key decisions being taken?
- Is the data and analysis for these meetings always relevant, of good quality and presented well?
- In what ways can the relevance, quality and presentation of data and analysis be improved?

## Interviews with analysts and researchers (information providers)

### Culture – Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information

- Do members and senior officers provide you with a clear specification of the information they need to make decisions?
- How is information you are asked to produce currently specified? For example:
  - formal meetings with members and senior officers;
  - ad hoc informal discussions;
  - written specification; or
  - using best practice from others.
- What methods of specifying information work best for you?
- How do you think specification could be improved?
- Do you understand the context in which information is being sought?
- What would help provide you with more context?
- Do you feel confident to challenge the specifications you are given?
- What helps you challenge specifications?
- Is there an open and constructive two-way dialogue with senior decision makers on the information that is needed for decision making?
- What helps facilitate a two-way dialogue?
- Do you receive feedback from decision makers on how useful the information you provided was in making the decisions?
- How is feedback best received?
- Can you give decision makers feedback when information is poorly specified or specified well?
- What helps you provide feedback?

### People – Attractive jobs for analysts

- Do you feel your time is spent on things that will make the biggest difference?
- Are there any areas of research or analysis that you think would add value for decision makers that you don't currently conduct?
- Why is this analysis not currently conducted?
- Is your current job fulfilling?
- Do you think your job stretches you and makes good use of your skills?
- What training and support do you receive?
- Are you a member of a professional body? For example, LARIA, CLIP or BURISA?
- Do you feel you have sufficient opportunity for career development?
- If not, why not?
- How can your professional and career development be further supported?

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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](mailto:nationalstudies@audit-commission.gov.uk)



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