

Is there something I should know?

Self-assessment framework

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.

Does your council make the most of the information it holds?

Many councils struggle to unlock the power of information to improve decision making. The reasons for this lie in the three strands of culture, people and standards identified in the national report.ⁱⁱ

Table 1: **Councils need to combine culture, people and standards in order to excel**

This means	
Culture A culture that values and exploits the power of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Commitment from members to an evidence based culture. ■ Information used by members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies. ■ Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information.
People Expert, professional, well trained people, working in effective ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good interpretation skills. ■ Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making. ■ Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff. ■ Attractive jobs.
Standards Good data quality and information shared effectively with partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Standards maintained through a common competency framework. ■ Excellent data quality. ■ Established data-sharing protocols.

Source: *Audit Commission*

This self-assessment framework will help councils understand where they have problems and take action to implement appropriate solutions.

Completing the self-assessment framework

This self-assessment framework is based on the culture, people and standards model in Table 1. It should be completed by senior officers in the council who are able to take a strategic view on how the council is performing, and who are also able to make a self-assessment on where weaknesses and risks lie.

ii The national report is available on the website:
www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow

The framework will help you:

- assess how well you are using information in your own organisation;
- understand where your biggest risks lie;
- obtain an assessment of your progress on the improvement journey; and
- identify the improvement tools that will be most relevant to your council.

The framework consists of three sections: culture, people and standards. Each section comprises a series of questions that will help you assess how developed your council is.

The step-by-step guide below will help you complete the framework.

Step 1	<p>The descriptor</p> <p>Consider the descriptor of a well-developed council in the first column.</p> <p>For example, a council with a well-developed information culture should have commitment from members to an evidence-based culture.</p>
Step 2	<p>The questions</p> <p>Address the series of questions in the framework about that specific area.</p> <p>For example, against the above descriptor, the framework asks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Do members routinely demand relevant, high-quality, well-presented information?■ Do members regularly challenge senior officers and analysts on the information they receive?
Step 3	<p>The evidence</p> <p>To help you answer those questions the framework suggests a range of evidence that you may want to draw on.</p> <p>The evidence is not exhaustive. There may be more evidence available locally that will help you.</p>
Step 4	<p>The self-assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Having considered the questions and evidence available, you will need to reach one conclusion, in the round, on whether your council is under-developed, developing or well developed against each of the descriptors.■ Finally, having worked through the descriptors in each section, you will need to come to one overall, final conclusion on how developed your council is in each of the three areas – culture, people and standards.

The standards to apply

In deciding whether your council is underdeveloped, developing or well developed, you should apply the following standards:

- underdeveloped – little or no evidence in support of the challenge;
- developing – some evidence in support of the challenge; or
- well developed – good evidence in support of the challenge.

The framework does not stipulate exact descriptions of each level of performance. Councils should self-assess in terms of where they want their organisation to be, rather than measure themselves against a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all framework.

The tools for improvement

If you have identified any areas as underdeveloped or developing, then you should use the appropriate tools to drive improvement in that area.

Table 2: **The tools and information to help you improve**ⁱ

Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Key lines of enquiry (KLOE) 2.2 assessments. ■ Guide and checklist for members on relevance, quality and presentation (RQP) information. ■ Case studies. ■ Decision-making guides.
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Diaries for analysts. ■ Resource mapping tool. ■ Case studies. ■ Links to training and advice.
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Data quality standards. ■ Case studies. ■ Links to training and advice.

Source: Audit Commission

ⁱⁱ All tools and resources are web based and are available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow

Comparing your progress with other councils

Using the self-assessment will also enable you to benchmark your progress against other councils. Most councils have started to create cultures where information is treated as a priority. However, the majority need to be better at developing their people and establishing high standards.ⁱ Gaining insight into whether your council is underdeveloped, developing or well developed in each of the three areas will enable you to assess how you compare.

Figure 1: **Most councils are at the start of the improvement journeyⁱ**



Overall improvement journey made by the 15 councils visited in fieldwork

- Under developed
- Developing
- Well developed

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork, 2009

ⁱⁱ This is not the same as the use of resources in the KLOE 2.2 assessments. These views were formed by evidence from fieldwork and most recent comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) and data quality scores.

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment	Tools for improvement
<p>A collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a challenging and constructive two-way dialogue between decision makers and information providers? Do information providers and decision makers jointly ensure information is specified well? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views of members and senior decision makers. Views of analysts.ⁱ Good standard of specification. 	<p>Under-developed.</p> <p>Developing.</p> <p>Well developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision-making guides. Case studies – culture. Semi-structured interview schedule.
Overall culture assessment				
✓				
Underdeveloped				
Developing				
Well developed				

ii Views of members, officers and analysts can be gathered through semi-structured interviews. A schedule of interview questions are available on our website: www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow

People – Self-assessment

Are your staff expert, professional, well-trained people who work in effective ways?ⁱ

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment ✓	Tools for improvement
<p>Senior decision makers with good interpretation skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do your senior decision makers receive training in interpretation? ■ Do decision makers receive other support or mentoring? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Training programme for members and senior officers. ■ Internal mentoring options in place. ■ External shadowing opportunities available. ■ Member and officer views. 	<p>Under-developed.</p> <p>Developing.</p> <p>Well developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Links to training and advice. ■ Case studies – people. ■ Semi-structured interview schedule.

ⁱⁱ This section makes reference to analysts. District councils may not have staff employed specifically as analysts; staff may perform this role as part of a wider job description. In district councils you should interpret ‘analyst’ as staff who perform this type of function as a significant part of their current job role.

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment	Tools for improvement
<p>Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do your analysts spend sufficient time highlighting the most relevant and valuable information for your council? ■ Is there a clear distinction between the analytical roles and systems in your corporate centre and directorates, and has unnecessary duplication been stripped out? ■ Can you quantify your total spend on analysis across the corporate centre, directorates and work contracted out? ■ Can you assess the impact that your analytical resource has on the outcomes your council achieves? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A breakdown of how analysts spend their time. ■ Analysis of staffing levels and costs across the council in the research and analysis functions. ■ Analysis of the cost of externally contracted research and analysis. ■ Comparative data on the costs and structures of the analytical function in other similar councils. ■ KLOE 2.2 assessments. 	<p>Under-developed.</p> <p>Developing.</p> <p>Well developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Analysts' diaries. ■ Resource mapping tool. ■ Case studies – people.


People – Self-assessment

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment	Tools for improvement
<p>Recruitment, retention and development of skilled analytical staff.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do you recruit skilled staff? ■ Do you have ways of motivating, developing and retaining your skilled staff? ■ Are your analysts trained and supported? ■ Are your analysts members of professional bodies? ■ Do you have a programme of continuous professional development in line with a professional code of conduct? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recruitment policy. ■ Analysis of previous recruitment campaigns. ■ HR data on skills gaps and membership of professional bodies. ■ Retention policy, including analysis of opportunities for personal and career development. 	<p>Under-developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Case studies – people. ■ Links to training and advice.
			<p>Developing.</p>	
			<p>Well developed.</p>	

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment	Tools for improvement
<p>Attractive jobs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do your analysts have jobs with sufficient variety, autonomy, challenge and stretch? ■ Do your analysts have scope for continuous professional and career development? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Analyst views. ■ Job descriptions. ■ Personal development plans. 	<p>Under-developed.</p> <p>Developing.</p> <p>Well developed.</p>	<p>✓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Case studies – people. ■ Semi-structured interview schedule.
<p>Overall people assessment</p>				
<p>Underdeveloped</p>				
<p>Developing</p>				
<p>Well developed</p>				

Standards — Self-assessment

Do you have good data quality and do you share information effectively with external partners?

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment 	Tools for improvement
<p>Information valued throughout the council, with consistently high standards applied at all levels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do all staff throughout your organisation understand their own personal responsibility for ensuring data is captured in a timely, consistent and accurate way? ■ Is information for management meetings and cabinet presented well and distilled down to the key issues for the decisions being taken? ■ Is data and analysis always relevant, of good quality and presented well? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Organisational values. ■ Strategic / corporate objectives. ■ Competency framework. ■ Staff survey. ■ Minutes and papers of council, cabinet and management meetings. ■ Views of senior decision makers. 	<p>Under-developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Case studies – standards. ■ Checklist and guide for members. ■ KLOE 2.2 results. ■ Decision-making guides. 	
		<p>Developing.</p>		
		<p>Well developed.</p>		

Standards — Self-assessment

Well-developed councils have	Challenge yourself	Evidence	Self-assessment	Tools for improvement
Established data-sharing protocols.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is information shared appropriately internally across directorates and the corporate centre? ■ Are you sharing data effectively with external partners? ■ Do you have robust data-sharing protocols? ■ Do people understand the principles of the Data Protection Act, and what is possible and what is prohibited? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Internal information-sharing protocols. ■ External data sharing protocols. ■ Training on Data Protection Act. ■ Views of partners. 	<p>Under-developed.</p> <p>Developing.</p> <p>Well developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Links to advice. ■ Case studies – standards.
Overall standards assessment				
Underdeveloped				
Developing				
Well developed				

If you require a copy of this document in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call: **0844 798 7070**

If you require a printed copy of this document, please call: 0800 50 20 30 or email: ac-orders@audit-commission.gov.uk
This document is available on our website.

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission

1st Floor
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London
SW1P 4HQ

Telephone: 0844 798 1212
Fax: 0844 798 2945
Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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



Audit Commission

1st Floor
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London
SW1P 4HQ

Telephone: **0844 798 1212**
Fax: 0844 798 2945
Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk