

Public services

Summary

February 2008

In the know

Using information to make better decisions:
a discussion paper

When decision makers use information well, local public services improve.

- The quality and cost of our local public services depend upon the decisions that many people make: users make choices; professionals exercise judgement; managers prioritise; and politicians allocate resources.
- Using information well in decision making leads to better local public services. Examples vary from reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training to increasing the number of ambulances reaching incidents quickly; improvements include reducing fly-posting by 90 per cent, and increasing library membership by 58 per cent.
- Two-thirds of 3 and 4 star councils use information well, but only a tenth of 1 and 2 star councils do.

Information needs to be relevant for the decision at hand.

- Different decisions require different information, and judging what information is relevant for a decision is not easy.
- Performance indicators alone will not be adequate for important decisions.
- Aggregating information (for example over geography or time), using a range of information from different sources, and sharing information, will generate a fuller picture.

Good quality data are the foundation of good quality information.

- Data should be captured once and used numerous times.
- Data should be sufficiently accurate for the intended purpose. Highly accurate data are often neither cost-effective nor possible for many decisions.
- Decision makers need to judge how quickly and frequently they need information. Some information may need to be updated and available immediately, in real-time, but for many political, financial and strategic issues, understanding trends over time is more important than immediacy.

The way information is presented is important for accurate interpretation.

- Relevant, good quality, information will not help decision makers if they cannot understand it.
- How information is presented, and what story it helps to tell, can affect the decisions based upon it.
- The way information is presented, therefore, needs to be tailored for both the audience and the decision at hand.

Using information well requires decision makers and analysts to have particular skills.

- Decision makers need to be able to identify the information they need and to interpret it accurately.
- Those providing information need strong analytical and presentation skills.
- Evidence suggests that these skills are in short supply.

People need to think carefully about the information they use whenever they make decisions.

- Those who make important decisions about local public services should demand better and clearer information.
- Public bodies need to evaluate whether their information is fit for purpose and used to best effect.
- Relevance, quality and presentation, summarised as RQP, are the key characteristics for useful information.

This paper will be followed by further research by the Audit Commission to provide practical help to those seeking to improve the way they use information.

Checklist for managers of public services

Does my organisation have the relevant information it needs?

- How do we know that senior decision makers have the information they need? How do they judge what information is needed? Are we getting better or worse at providing it?
- Can we make decisions that affect local areas based on information about those areas?
- Do our papers for decisions contain a range of information, for example, on costs, trends, comparators, public opinion, as well as performance indicators and targets?
- Do we share data safely and productively within our organisation and with our partners?

Is my organisation's information based on good quality data?

- For recent important decisions, how confident are we about the quality of the data underlying the information?
- How do we decide how accurate and timely information needs to be?

Is my organisation's information well presented?

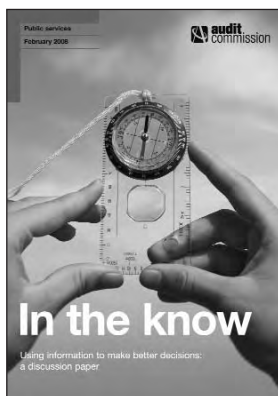
- Is information presented in a way that senior decision makers find easy to understand and interpret?
- How could we improve the presentation? Do senior decision makers provide helpful feedback to those presenting information?

Does my organisation have sufficient skills?

- How skilled are senior decision makers in interpreting information? How could we help them to improve?
- Do we have any skill shortages in analysing or presenting information? How are we addressing them?

How far does my organisation evaluate its information?

- How often do we evaluate whether we have the right information and use it to best effect? What have we learned?



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