Data and digital policy

Summary

1.   This paper proposes an agenda for Local Government Group activity on data and digital policy and practice, and a formal programme managed approach with political oversight and guidance.

2.   The rapidly developing world of data and digital policy and practice has wide implications for local government and offers new opportunities. The use of robust data and digital technology will be key features in a new approach to self regulation and in councils' work to significantly reduce costs. Citizens will increasingly use data and other information to hold local government and other partner bodies to account, and expect action in response to problems and issues that they identify.

3.   The Local Government Group is well placed to help shape this agenda and to exploit these opportunities. This paper outlines the benefits and proposed next steps.

Recommendations

Board consideration and agreement is sought for:

- The key objectives and activity for the Local Government Group outlined in paragraphs 3 and 4.
- The proposal to create a Task Group of the Improvement Board to have oversight of this work and the terms of reference **attached** at Appendix 1.

Action
If agreed, we will proceed as set out in paragraphs 4, and 6 with a first meeting of the Group in early autumn.

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Data and digital policy

Background

1. Good quality data and information underpin effective policy and practice. The pace of change in data use and information technology is accelerating. Councils are looking to exploit the opportunities whilst guarding reputation in managing risks, for example in handling personal data. This matters to the Local Government Group because:

    *   There is an opportunity to reduce the resources tied up in expensive and complex data collection and reporting systems to central government. The aim should be to offer local data in ways that allows anyone (government, citizens or other interested parties) to draw data without imposing additional burdens. To achieve this requires some transitional design work to make it a reality.

    *   In a period of public sector resource constraint, councils need to exploit all avenues to improve effectiveness and reduce cost. For example, shifting to web enabled and increasingly 'shared' services, better identifying and understanding individual needs, and enabling cross organisational working (as demonstrated in Total Place).

    *   Improving data and analytic capacity is a key component of the local government National Productivity Programme.

    *   The thrust of policy is for accessible and user friendly data to achieve transparency;

    *   Realising sector-led improvement requires data to trigger offers of early support and avert government intervention.

2. There is much excellent sector practice and innovation in councils, however good practice is not embedded or universal so there is scope to further exploit new approaches and uses of data and information. Also, the sector needs stronger national and regional leadership and co-ordination: our institutions are fragmented. We suggest the following **key objectives** for Local Government Group sector support:

    a) Ensuring that councils can harness advances in technology and approaches to data and the use of the internet.

b) Creating stronger and corporate sector capacity to collect, access and best use data: the sector is striving to achieve this, but there is scope to help develop cost effective and widely accessible means to achieve this.

c) Improving accountability and transparency to deliver genuine benefit: government is driving this; we need to affordably and sensibly achieve this in ways that add real value for business and citizen.

d) Developing opportunities to help people and businesses help themselves, web enabled services are typically cheaper and available 24 hours a day, (reflecting Amazon or internet banking) and have wide application, whilst recognising that some have no internet access or a bank account.

e) Developing cost effective ways for local government and partners to collect share and use data: a technical matter but something that local government needs to take a stronger lead.

f) Freeing up data sharing, for example, for place based initiatives whilst protecting personal data and managing access to such personal data when needed. This is complex with unconnected policies and initiatives spanning data protection and the Information Commissioner; identity 'management; 'Tell us once' (a single citizen 'log in' to public services); guidelines, and new developments in secure IT for transmission and exchange of data across the public services.

g) Getting the best out of national policy: through lobbying and representation, for example in the recent move to revise the Ordnance Survey business model.

Current Local Government Group Activity in Response

3. Our current activity that includes:

a) Improving data and the capability to analyse it is a key component of the local government sector National Productivity Programme.

b) A potential post CAA sector owned performance and efficiency data base in partnership with CIPFA that would be available free of charge, and therefore help avoid a proliferation of sector solutions and consequent duplication.

c) Support for better local information systems, and an interactive knowledge hub to encourage innovation and creative exchange of ideas.

d) Support for councils in meeting data protection requirements and secure personal data exchange measures with other parts of the public sector.

e) A programme to identify and develop practical and affordable support to councils and their partners to better share local data with citizens in ways that add public value.

f) Securing what national sources of data (e.g. Census 2011) local government needs, and to minimise burdens from central government initiatives.

g) An emerging coalition of sector activity and organizations in this area.

Where next?

4.   We recommend developing the work identified above around:

- **A sector agreed data and digital policy framework** to drive activity; and

- **A 'standards applied at source' approach:** the current data revolution begins to offer flexible formats to enable multiple uses at low cost. If the sector adopted such standards collectively and for web presentation for all relevant public data, it would meet requirements for transparency, accountability and freedom of information.

Governance

5.   Currently sector (not just Group) governance for this is complex:

a) Internally, we have a senior officer oversight of Group activity and ensuring alignment with Business Plan priorities.

b) Local Government Improvement and Development support the Local Government Delivery Council which combines senior officer representation from the sector with similar from central government;

c) Various IT oriented specialist 'councils' that mirror central government arrangements with good relations with central government but poor visibility or accountability within the sector.

d) A similarly fragmented structure of specialist data and information groups - including a moribund Central Local Information Partnership, and a Location Council that has cross public sector oversight of geographic information services, but again little real influence; and

e) Little political accountability, oversight or visibility.

6.   We propose:

a) Stronger Local Government Group political oversight, supported by senior officers, through a Task Group of the Improvement Board, and involvement of Local Government Improvement and Development member peers with expertise/interest in this area of work.

b) A stronger advisory role for the Local Government Delivery Council;

c) A shared service approach to bring the local government information technology and data communities into closer partnership with the Group.

Financial Implications

7.   For 2010/11, this work will be delivered through existing resources. After that, agreed activity will be designed to reflect decisions on the overall structure and resources available to the LG Group. We are not committing resources beyond March 2011 at this stage. However, we suggest that future uncertainties should not block essential work in responding to the rapidly emerging agenda during 2010/11.

Implications for Wales

8.   We work closely with Welsh colleagues on aspects of this agenda and are in conversation about the extent to which they would like to further develop that joint approach.

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Terms of Reference for an Improvement Board Task Group for Data and Digital Policy and Practice

The Task Group will report to the Improvement Board but lead on:

1.   Local Government Group data and digital policy to ensure appropriate sector leadership and get the best from national policy in the interests of local government.

2.   The Local Government Group 'offer' to the sector on digital and data development as a component of improvement activity, to include support for:

a. Building stronger and corporate sector capacity to handle and use data, and to boost sector analytic skills and capacity in this area.

b. Establishing sector performance data needs in a post CAA era and establishing how best to provide the data.

c. Improving accountability and transparency in ways that deliver genuine benefit.

d. Exploiting opportunities and savings through digital services.

e. Developing cost effective ways for local government and partners to collect share and use data.

f. Guarding sector reputation in collecting and using personal data.