

Taking the Lead: self regulation and improvement in local government

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report updates the Board on progress since the last meeting; invites members' views on the development of LG Inform (about which there will be a full presentation) and the next steps on the Single Data List.

Recommendations

That the Board:

1. Offer guidance on the development of LG Inform
2. Confirm the key messages about the next phase of work on the Single Data List, attached at **Appendix A**.

Action

Officers to pursue the development of LG Inform in the light of members' views and promote to Departmental officials the suggested key messages to guide the next phase of work on the Single Data List.

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Background

1. Following publication of “Taking the Lead” the Board agreed at its last meeting that the next steps would be to:
 - 1.1 Work with the sector to develop and deliver the key tools that underpin the approach and encourage wide take up in the sector;
 - 1.2 Monitor take up of the approach and tools and evaluate progress;
 - 1.3 Continue to lobby Government to reduce the burden of data reporting to Government and the Inspectorates;
 - 1.4 Influence the future arrangements for audit in a way that supports the Group’s approach to self regulation and improvement.
2. This report updates the Board about progress and invites members’ views on the development of LG Inform and the next stages of the work on the Single Data List. There is a separate item on the agenda that deals with the future of local public audit.

Developing and promoting the tools

3. Following its publication during February, “Taking the Lead” was circulated widely within the sector and sent to selected parliamentarians, Departmental officials and stakeholders. The proposals also featured as a key part of the Improvement and Innovation Conference on 22 March.
4. Further media and promotional work is planned including:
 - 4.1 Promoting the 5 free days member peer support to councils that change political control as a result of the May elections – with letters to Council Leaders and Heads of Democratic Services and a feature in **first** in May
 - 4.2 Promotional work around the launch of LG Inform towards the end of June/early July
 - 4.3 A high profile within the LG Group Annual Conference at the end of June including a specific “Taking the Lead” workshop for Leaders and Chief Executives
 - 4.4 A series of free events around the country in July to promote the LG Group’s integrated offer around Self regulation, Knowledge Hub and LG Inform, and Productivity. These events will be aimed at senior members and directors – with a further series of events aimed specifically at Leaders and Chief Executives in the Autumn.

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Local Government Group Inform (LG Inform):

5. When responding to and commenting on the draft “Taking the Lead” proposals, there was a clear demand amongst council members and officers to be able to compare performance with other councils and areas.
6. LG Inform responds to this demand. It is an online service allowing councils to access key data that is useful to them and, where they choose, to compare data at both high level and more detailed, service-specific levels, to help build the evidence needed to make informed decisions, reduce costs and improve services. It involves working with councils to agree a core set of metrics around cost efficiency/productivity, outcome and achievement and citizen satisfaction that will be available for councils to collect, publish and use for comparative purposes.
7. The first stage of the LG Inform service will be operating from end June/early July. In Autumn 2011, LG Inform will move to the new LG Group Knowledge Hub. This will enhance the service by offering wider interactive services: such as the ability to create virtual groups bringing together interested people in councils around particular topics or problems; and quick, easy access to relevant resources; or forums to share analysis, raise issues and offer mutual learning between councils.
8. There will be a full presentation explaining how LG Inform is developing and inviting members to offer guidance on next steps and in particular how it can be shaped to be of greatest benefit to Council Leaders and senior members.

Single Data List

9. Following publication and consultation on a provisional list, DCLG published the final list of Departments' data requirements for 2011-12 on Thursday 14 April. This provides a single, comprehensive list of the data that central government needs from local authorities. It comprises a total of 142 different data collections. A copy is available here
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation/tacklingburdens/databurdens/>
10. Everything that local authorities should expect to provide to central departments in 2011-12 is on the list. Councils will not have to provide anything that is not on the list unless extra funding is provided.
11. The finalised list was not as greatly reduced as either we or the sector had hoped, given the Secretary of State's commitment in October. Given the tight timescale, Departments have been considering the “quick wins” identified by the

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LGA/Challenge Group as the first priority for removal or review, along with all the other comments received on those items.

12. However there is a commitment to continue the process of reducing and reviewing the list. When publishing the list Eric Pickles MP Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government said

“With council spending power coming down this year it is right that we reduce the time they spend working to Whitehall, which is why we’re committed to shrinking the list even further”.

13. DCLG will be continuing to work with Departments to review and reduce the list of data collections over the next few months with a view to publishing a final list for 2012/2013 in the Autumn. This will include data collected by bodies that are part of government but not ministerial departments – i.e. 'arm's length bodies' or 'independent public bodies' e.g. the inspectorates. A draft list of their collections was published on the DCLG website for consultation on Thursday 14 April.
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation/tacklingburdens/nextstepslist/> This currently amounts to an additional 43 data collections.
14. In terms of securing a reduction in data burdens across Government Eric Pickles MP agreed with the LG Group proposal for a more fundamental discussion about the implications of the localism and transparency agenda for what it is appropriate to report nationally and locally. DCLG facilitated a discussion between Departmental Director Generals and Chief Executives aimed at developing and agreeing a set of general principles which Departments would apply when reviewing their data requirements over the next few months. The key sector messages during the discussions are **attached at Appendix A**, which members are invited to confirm.
15. And in terms of process, CLG have established a cross Government/sector Task and Finish Group drawing together representatives from key Departments and from the sector to ensure a coordinated approach across Government. (Somerset CC, Harrow and Barnsley are represented on this Group). Some individual departments (DH and DfE) have already initiated “zero based” reviews of their own data collections. The LG Group will continue to work with councils and the sector-owned Challenge Group to provide a strong sector input to this exercise.

Adult Social Care Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework

16. Following consultation, Department of Health has published a new outcomes framework for adult social care. The framework involves 13 high level outcomes across 4 domains that are intended to set a strategic national direction which local organisations can use in accordance with their own local priorities.

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“.....the Framework is not a national performance management tool. Government will not seek to set targets or manage the performance of councils in relation to any of the measures in the framework. Performance management, where it continues, will be a local responsibility for councils to determine, in partnership with other organisations and the people they serve”. (para 1.14)

17. In terms of strengthening local accountability the framework proposes – in addition to the publication of outcome data - a new scheme of “local accounts” (or self assessment). These are intended as a means by which councils can report back to citizens and consumers on performance in adult social care and a practical expression of the wider sector self regulatory proposals. In addition Department of Health has also initiated a zero based review of data demands on local government – which will feed into the single data list.

Children’s services

18. Although Government has announced its intention to abolish Ofsted’s annual rating of councils’ children’s services this will require legislative change. In the meantime Ofsted remains under a statutory duty to annually assess the quality of children’s services for each council – and it has recently published the assessment framework for 2011.

19. The overall assessment continues to be derived from performance in three broad “blocks”. Performance in Block A (findings from regular and on-going inspection of services, settings and institutions) and Block B (findings from safeguarding and looked after children services inspections, children in need, evaluations of serious case reviews, etc) have the most impact on the overall performance assessment. Performance in Block C (impact indicators and other published data) is used to supplement and inform Blocks A and B. For 2011 changes have been made to Block C to reflect the abolition of the National Indicator Set and the introduction of new impact indicators through the Departmental Business Planning process.

20. Key dates for 2011 are

- 23 September: draft assessment letters sent to councils
- 17 October: final date for submission of appeals to Ofsted
- 8 November: publication of children’s services assessment.

Conclusion and next steps

21. Officers are continuing to deliver “Taking the Lead” along the lines agreed at the last meeting (see para 1, above) and the Board will be updated regularly on progress.

Financial Implications

22. There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

Appendix A

Key sector messages about the next phase of Government Departments' work to review of data requirements of local government.

The Single Data List needs to reflect both the transition to a new set of accountability arrangements that places much greater emphasis on local accountability and to acknowledge that councils simply no longer have the capacity to respond to the current level of Government data demands.

Data returns are capable of being analysed in three broad categories of **purpose**

- supporting international obligations and departmental accountability to Parliament – which we accept is legitimate
- the administration of funding or for national statistical purposes – some of which we may agree is necessary and helpful
- local accountability. We do not believe it is appropriate for Government to mandate how councils are to be held to account locally for the services they deliver. This is essentially a local matter. Through the LG Group Inform service we are working with councils to agree a core set of metrics around cost efficiency and productivity, outcome and achievement and citizen satisfaction that will be available for all councils to collect, publish and use for comparative purposes.

And in terms of the principles governing the **practicalities** around what and how Government collects data we suggest that

- There needs to be greater clarity and challenge around what is being collected, for whom and for what purpose
- Government should seek to minimise the burden through practical means such as consolidating returns, sharing data intelligently across Government departments to reduce the frequency of collections, considering the timing of requests and adopting sampling rather than universal coverage.
- The scope of the exercise should be broadened to capture how it is we understand performance in a place – including the contributions of other local public sector partners and the private sector – and then as a consequence how we can minimise the potential for overlap and duplication in terms of the data requested from different local partners
- The emphasis should be on collecting outcome data wherever possible. The Single Data list appears to signal a continuation of measuring inputs and outputs which might be of interest to Whitehall officials but would not support transparency for the public

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Finally the Government needs to put in place a clear process for dealing with **new requests** for data items which are likely to result from existing and new policy initiatives underway across Government. This process should involve some key criteria against which all requests from across Whitehall should be considered through a single robust gateway involving the sector.

And in all of this it will be important that there is a sense of shared endeavour and mutual agreement about data reporting and its place within a new approach to accountability which builds on an understanding of the data that councils already collect for their own purposes.