

Update on LG Inform

Purpose of report

For decision.

Summary

Steady progress is being made on the build of the new LG Inform, and the launch remains on track for the revised timeline of Spring 2013. The Board is asked to consider the principle and timeline for the following:

1. making LG Inform open to the public; and
2. publishing local, previously unpublished, data to the public.

Recommendations

That the Board:

1. note the progress of the new version of LG Inform;
2. agree that LG Inform should be made open to the public in Summer 2013, thereby giving authorities time to update their websites to make use of it; and
3. agree that data collected directly from councils into LG Inform should be published in principle, after a suitable period.

Action

Officers to take forward in line with the Board's direction.

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Update on LG Inform

Background

1. LG Inform is the on-line data and benchmarking service developed by the LGA, as part of its support for councils. This free, online service allows anyone in councils and fire and rescue services to access and compare both contextual and performance data for their local area, covering around 1,000 individual items. Users can view data or pre-written reports, and create their own reports, using the most up to date published information.
2. The prototype was launched in Summer 2011, with a view to testing the principles of such a service, and getting feedback from councils about desired design and functions. In Spring 2012, the LGA commissioned Reading Room to develop the new version of LG Inform, taking on board the views and comments we had received from users of the prototype.

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3. At present, more than 90 per cent of councils have someone registered to access the LG Inform prototype, with a total of more than 1,700 users. However, we anticipate usage increasing rapidly once the new version of LG Inform is launched in the spring, which will be a better looking and better performing tool.
4. Steady progress is being made on the build of new LG Inform, and the launch remains on track for the revised timeline of Spring 2013. We are expecting to take delivery of the new tool in January, and begin a period of rigorous user testing.
5. Alongside work on the online tool, the LGA Research and Information Team is also working with a number of regional groups of authorities to develop the 'benchmarking club' function of LG Inform. This will allow authorities to agree a set of data items they all want to collect, either more frequently than collected by central government or because they are not currently collected centrally at all. LG Inform will give those authorities the ability to submit the data, and then compare with others who have also submitted data. The groups we are working with are performance networks in the North West and East Midlands. We are also discussing with London Councils the scope for convergence between their Local Authority Performance Solution (LAPS) tool and LG Inform at some point in the future.
6. We are also developing a communication plan to announce and promote the new version of LG Inform over the coming year, to encourage widespread take-up and use of the tool and the benchmarking amongst both officers and councillors.

7. The Board is asked to note the progress of the new version of LG Inform, and comment where appropriate.

Opening LG Inform to the Public

8. With the focus on transparency and the desire to increase local accountability, it has always been anticipated that LG Inform will eventually be made open to the public, as well as to councils and fire and rescue services. The majority of data within LG Inform is already public, albeit found across a large number of mainly central government websites, and in a format that is not easy for the public to view. From discussions with councils during specification and build of the new system, this element has become more important.
9. The new version of LG Inform is being developed to have a public (unregistered user) interface, as well as allowing councils to sign in to their own area where they can personalise their view, as well as build their own reports and view reports shared with them by others.
10. It is anticipated that the public will be able to access the data held in LG Inform in three ways:
 - 10.1. by visiting their council website, where the council will have embedded charts and tables that they created within LG Inform into their web pages (and the user does not leave the council web page);
 - 10.2. by visiting their council website, where the council will have inserted a web link to LG Inform (and the user will be taken to LG Inform where they can view data for their area); and
 - 10.3. by going directly to LG Inform.
11. Our intention has always been to encourage councils to make use of one of the first two methods, as we believe that residents will go to their council's own website to view information about its performance. This has the added bonus of the council being able to write a commentary around the charts or tables, in order to help the resident understand the information or explain possible reasons for notable performance. Should councils not take advantage of one of the first two methods, the public will still be able to access information about their authority area directly from LG Inform.
12. However, councils are likely to require some time to prepare if they want to use one of the first two methods. Depending on how they present the data from LG Inform, they will need to consider which data they want to use to demonstrate their performance, build a report or charts using that data, write a commentary or explanation to accompany the data, and modify their council websites.

13. Although it is possible that LG Inform could be made available to the public at the same time as it is made available to councils, our recommendation is that it should be opened later in the year in order to give councils time to prepare.
14. The Board is asked to agree the following:
 - 14.1. the principle that the published data held within LG Inform should be made available to the public; and
 - 14.2. that, should the principle be agreed, LG Inform will be made available to the public in Summer 2013, thereby giving authorities time to prepare for it using their own websites.

Opening Locally Collected Data to the Public

15. As mentioned above, following the launch of the new version of LG Inform, we will be developing the 'benchmarking club' element. We are planning to start collecting performance data directly from councils and sharing this between them via LG Inform on a regular basis. This new data will be of two types. First, we will collect 'provisional data' that is also submitted to central government but takes a long time before it is returned to the sector for benchmarking. Secondly, we will collect 'local data', where authorities have agreed to collect and share it on a comparable basis, as it is not collected centrally anywhere else, either for benchmarking or transparency purposes.
16. Once we have collected this data, and shared it between authorities, the question is then whether this data should be made available to the public along with the other data in LG Inform.
17. We are aware that, once we have received the data, it could become subject to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request which would require us to disclose it publicly. There is also an argument that such data should be made open anyway, although equally we may not want premature disclosure.
18. Having looked into this in more detail, we believe that we will not be required to publish the 'provisional data', since it will be published by central government following a quality assurance process – at which point we will make that data available in LG Inform. Because of this, we believe we will be exempt from any FOI request.
19. However, only the LGA will hold the 'local data'. In this case, we believe the best option is to commit to publish the data (to the public) via LG Inform following a period of restricted access. This period of restricted access will be determined on an individual data item basis, prior to data being collected, but will not exceed a year from the date of submission. This delay is to allow authorities the opportunity to submit data, review it once it has gone through quality assurance procedures within the LGA and then to

effectively manage the release of this information in a useable format for the public, rather than simply publishing raw data files. We believe that this commitment will also exempt us from having to respond directly to any FOI request. We are currently checking with the Information Commissioner's Office whether our understanding is correct, and hope to have an answer by the date of the Board meeting.

20. It is likely that some authorities will be put off from participating in the benchmarking club on the basis that we will be committing to publication, albeit up to a year after submission. However, this will avoid premature disclosure on the basis of a FOI request, and be in keeping with our commitment to open data.
21. The Board is asked to agree the principle that data collected directly from councils as part of the benchmarking club should be published, after a suitable period to allow for quality assurance and review.

Financial Implications

22. There are only small financial implications from these decisions, since the publication of the data would be through LG Inform and therefore any costs would be picked up from the limited contingency funding available in the programme budget.