Data Sharing and Data Standards

Purpose

For direction.

Summary

The LGA's agreed policy on local authorities publishing data, outside of specific data returns to government, is that it should be published in any way they choose. This paper discusses the growing view across central government of more and more data being published in a standard format, and asks board members to consider how the local government sector should respond.

Recommendations

Improvement and Innovation Board members are invited to discuss and agree the LGA's policy on local authorities publishing data, outside of specific data returns to government.

Action
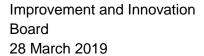
Officers to pursue in light of members' guidance.

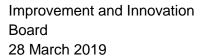|	
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Data Sharing and Data Standards

Background

1. Local government is one of the most transparent parts of the public sector. For data alone, LGA research in 2011 showed that the average single-tier authority was required to report 43,000 different types of information to central government each year (for those data collections listed on the Single Data List). On top of that local authorities publish:

    1.1 Agendas and reports of all meetings as part of the Local Government (Access to Information Act) 1985;

    1.2 Data as part of the Local Government (Transparency Requirements) Regulations 2015, including: expenditure over £500, procurement information, grants to voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations, senior salaries, the pay multiple, local land assets, social housing asset value, parking accounts and parking spaces and fraud;

    1.3 data in response to additional requests to provide it 'voluntarily' to central government; and

    1.4 local data, because they think it may be useful to their residents and businesses.

2. Whilst the data collected for central government tends to use a standard form and guidance, and is therefore published in the same format from every council, that is often not the case for other data. For example:

    2.1 Until recently, information about the availability of brownfield land sites for development has always been published in different ways by different authorities, arguably making it more difficult for developers to consume and understand the information across the country or even between neighbouring areas.

    2.2 The Local Government Transparency Code mandates authorities to publish their information on individual items of expenditure over £500, but this is done differently by each authority, meaning that the original objective to allow an analysis of how money is spent, is very limited (whereas if all authorities' data could be easily combined, it would be possible to conduct such analysis as spend by the sector on different organisations and comparable spend in other authorities).

    2.3 Local authorities' own internal systems often hold data in different formats or with different identifiers, even information about the same individual, which means that linking up the data from these systems to gain insight for local decision-making is very difficult.
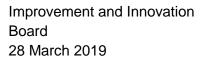
3. Increasingly, local authorities are also being asked to share data, either with each other or with public sector partners. Having key data held in systems (or output from them) in a standard format makes it significantly more easy to share and combine data. For example:

    3.1 Local authorities are being asked to link their social care clients' data with health data, and a standard identifier such as the Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN) in both parties' databases would massively simplify the undertaking.

4. Whilst there are clear benefits of having some data standardised (and this is the case for government data returns), for data outside this the LGA's line has always been that local authorities should be free to run their own systems and publish information in any way they choose. There is nearly always burden when councils are asked to change their systems in some way, or even to output information in a standard format, and we would not want to encourage government departments to mandate lots of new data requirements for reporting in a standardised way.

Growing importance of data

5. There is a growing recognition across the public sector that data and data sharing are the foundation for organisational change, transformation and joined up working. Having key information available to a fixed standard massively assists with this. For example, increasingly councils like Essex County Council and London Borough of Camden are demonstrating the benefits of linking data from their internal systems (and, in some cases, from local partners' systems) through use of standard data like the UPRN.

6. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) recently launched a standard for publishing the availability of brownfield land sites for development, which has resulted in a register of that data across all authorities. The ability to combine the data, because it is produced in the same way, provides additional value. In this case it is to developers who want to look at the availability of land at a national or regional level. Notably MHCLG commissioned an expert to <u>work with authorities</u> to develop the standard, and <u>funded local authorities</u> to deal with the burden of adjusting their systems to be able to provide it in the new way. Local authorities were encouraged by MHCLG to adopt the standard, and so it has not been mandated (although legislation was also introduced so that the Secretary of State may mandate it if needed).

7. In the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), the Secretary of State has called for technology and data integration as one of his three priorities for the health and care system. The data integration is only possible if both parts can link using some element of standardised data, and so he has focused on data standards and interoperability.

8. Finally, the National Audit Office (NAO) has recently announced it is conducting a study on 'Data Sharing in Government' which will look at the landscape of data sharing across
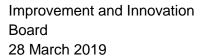
government, and include identifying where data is shared well, the benefits that departments have seen through sharing data, the barriers to data sharing and the long-standing problems that need addressing. Although the focus is on central government, we think it is highly likely to touch on the current work with the sector to link health and social care data. NAO plan to publish in May 2019.

9. Although there is a growing recognition of how linking data can lead to benefits, both for councils themselves and for a wider audience, there is a significant cost to authorities of doing this. It often requires the systems located within individual services to be changed, which is often chargeable by system suppliers, and large amounts of human resource to amend or add to the data held. Even where they can see the benefits, authorities may not always have the resources to do this.

A policy line for data sharing and data standards

10. Since officers and members increasingly find themselves in meetings with government departments discussing these issues, it would be helpful to review the LGA's policy line.

11. Improvement and Innovation Board members are invited to consider whether our current line, that local authorities should be free to run their own systems and publish information in any way they choose, should remain as it is; or whether they wish to modify or change it.

12. There is an argument that, where there is an obvious benefit to authorities, it is likely that they will choose to publish the data in a standard format anyway without direction from central government. However, we are aware that, even where a benefits case can be made, the up-front costs of getting the data into a standardised format can be prohibitive. For example:

12.1. Some early findings from research that the Care and Health Improvement Team have commissioned to look at interoperability of systems and data standards within health and care show that, even where councils want to share data better and want system suppliers to make developments that allow this, they are being charged large amounts for it.

12.2. The LGA's own work on publishing data about local services to a standard, to help develop tools to tackle loneliness, has already shown that there are costs to getting the data in order.

13. An alternative policy could include one or more of the following elements:

13.1 On occasion, some key data may be identified by government departments which would benefit communities or businesses if local authorities published it in a standardised format – or that would be useful to local government itself in a standardised format.
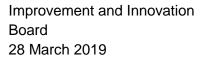
13.2 Any such standard be developed in consultation with local authorities and build on any existing work conducted by local government (in many cases, the LGA's work on information standards and the data tools we have developed for councils already would be a good starting point).

13.3 The burden of introducing a new standard for data should be fully funded, in line with the Single Data List requirement (this is a current process which requires government departments to assess the burden of new data collections which are required and recompense councils for that for up to three years, but this does not automatically apply to data that is published locally rather than by central government).

13.4 If a new data collection burden with a standard format is introduced, another burden should be removed. If authorities do less, they are better able to provide higher quality (standardised) data.

13.5 Outside of the occasional request for standardised data, local authorities should be free to run their own systems and publish information in any way they choose.

14. A third option could be that the LGA's policy remains unchanged, unless government has clearly decided to require local authorities to publish data in a standardised format despite our lobbying, in which case one or more of the elements in paragraph 13 should apply. This is likely to be the case for health and social care, where government is currently pursuing 'directions' to require authorities to make data available to a specified format in order to integrate care and health data.

15. Members may also want to consider carrying out a consultation with the sector to look at the pros and cons of these alternatives.

Implications for Wales

16. The data policy line will also apply to any work we do in Wales, since there are some data requirements that cover England and Wales (for example, the linking of health and care data). However, the Transparency Code and the Single Data List do not apply in Wales.

17. LGA officers have good links with the Welsh Local Government Data Unit, and this paper has been shared with them for information.

Financial implications

18. There are no financial implications for the LGA.

Next steps

19. Improvement and Innovation Board members are invited to discuss and agree the LGA's policy on local authorities publishing data, outside of specific data returns to government:

    19.1.   Option 1: an unchanged policy which is that, outside of data returns to government, all data published by local authorities should be published in any way they choose.

    19.2.   Option 2: a new policy that recognises, in some circumstances, local authorities can be requested to publish data in a specific format, in which case some conditions apply.

    19.3.   Option 3: a policy that, outside of data returns to government, all data published by local authorities should be published in any way they choose; but expands to recognise that, where lobbying fails to achieve this, some conditions should apply

20. Officers will act on the decision of members.