

LG Inform: Update and Future Plan

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

This report provides an update on LG Inform and outlines our plan to explore a future development. Members of the Improvement and Innovation Board (IIB) are requested to note the proposed plan.

Recommendations

That IIB members note the update on LG Inform and the proposed plan for future development.

Actions

Officers will deliver the LG Inform programme in 2021/22.

Contact officer: Juliet Whitworth / Ian Carbutt
Position: Research and Information Manager/Programme Manager – LG Inform
Phone no: 020-7664 3287 / 07799-038403
Email: juliet.whitworth@local.gov.uk / ian.carbutt@local.gov.uk

LG Inform: Update and Future Plan

Background

1. LG Inform is an online tool providing up-to-date data about councils and fire and rescue authorities. The database provides benchmarking data on a range of service areas and themes, enabling councils to review and compare performance with other authorities; and it is also available generally to the public as part of our support to help local government with transparency and accountability.

Update

2. Since April, officers in the Research Team have developed a series of COVID-19 and other reports, plus added in a significant amount of data to support authorities, that have been well-used by all accessing the site.
3. As a result, LG Inform has been well-used and is supporting our members:
 - 98% of all English local authorities are registered with LG Inform, with a total number of 3,560 registered users.
 - Prior to April 2020, LG Inform typically had 20,000 to 25,000 hits per month. But since the pandemic, LG Inform is now averaging 154,000 hits per month: reaching a peak in July at 222,000 hits.
 - Overall, since 1 April, LG Inform experienced a nine-fold increase in activity, with a total number of page views in excess of 1.2m up to 30 November.
 - On 4 December LG Inform reached the landmark of 3m page views.
4. Generating new, topic-focussed reports and adding in new data items has always been a good way to get local authorities involved and to use LG Inform. This is our current focus. Forthcoming reports include one on waste, one on homelessness, and one on climate change.
5. Recently:
 - 5.1. LG Inform's own report-writing capability has been used to create 12 detailed COVID-19 reports showing the impact of the pandemic on local areas across England. The scope of these reports covers key data for a local authority such as the number of cases, case rate, weekly deaths, care homes, vulnerable groups and workforce benchmarking.
 - 5.2. Since 1 April, these COVID-19 reports have been accessed 700,000 times.
 - 5.3. The case tracker 'area view' report has been the most popular, with 450,000 views.
 - 5.4. Our new report, detailing measures of financial hardship and economic vulnerability for an authority, has been downloaded 1,250 times since mid-September.

- 5.5. Other data items added include updates to population estimates and Universal Credit (the latter has also been added at ward-level to LG Inform Plus, our complementary tool that is available to authorities with a subscription).

Proposal

6. In 2021/22, we intend to continue with a focus on creating ready-made reports that bring people to LG Inform; and alongside this, promoting LG Inform more effectively.
7. Notwithstanding the above successes, we have the ambition to keep LG Inform on the leading edge of technology and ensure it continues to meet the changing needs of our audience.
8. Making access even easier to both officers and councillor groups continues to be a key programme objective at the forefront of our minds, and we are looking for ways to improve access to the data held within LG Inform.
9. There are two important considerations:
 - 9.1. Containing over 7,500 metrics, finding the right metric easily, particularly for those not well versed in the data available to local government, can be a challenge.
 - 9.2. Also, we have to recognise differing user preference and that there are a number of different ways users may wish to access IT generally, and the LG Inform platform specifically.
10. Our analytics show an increasing movement away from 'desktop' usage, to the use of more portable devices such as iPads/tablets to access LG Inform. Between December 2018 and December 2020, we have captured the following statistics on user access:
 - Internet Explorer/Edge usage has fallen from 25% of users to 8%.
 - Whilst Safari (used on iPads) has increased from 19% to 34%.
 - Even Chrome usage has fallen from 58% to 38%.
11. We know increased usage of hand-held devices is a long-term societal trend. We also know that increasing numbers of councillors are using tablets or other mobile devices for their council work. Therefore, we propose to respond to this trend and promote the wider use of LG Inform by establishing a new way of users accessing it: an **LG Inform app**.
12. To do this, we propose to develop a specification for the LG Inform app, having conducted some field research across our sector. This will include all authorities of all type, officers and members alike, plus a technology review. Input from the private sector will also be sought. We would target this review in Q1 of 2021-22 and aim to build a proof of concept and then the full app during the rest of the financial year.

13. We anticipate the LG Inform app will probably:

- Need to be a much simplified, 'cut down', version of the main LG Inform application.
- Focus on a minimised number of actions or 'user journeys'; and deliver quick results e.g. rapid search/retrieval of data or scan for outlying data above the expected norm.
- Take into account and incorporate local government services/directorates and/or member portfolios and briefs: these groupings could provide a set of 'filters' to generate, for example, the top 10-20 results on key metrics associated with that 'filter'.
- Ensure the visualisations are accessible and appealing.

14. To deliver this new interface we will need to build upon our current technological infrastructure so that a 'mobile platform' can be established to host and service the new LG Inform app.

15. This will be a two-stage process, with the review and a proof of concept forming the first stage. The second stage will proceed subject to positive results from stage one.

Equalities Implications

16. LG Inform already provides councils with data and reports to give them an understanding of local demographics, to support council decision-making. For example, as well as census data on basic demographics, it includes reports on the Indices of Deprivation, cohesion and integration, the impacts of welfare reform and, most recently, financial hardship and economic vulnerability. In the coming year we will explore with councils whether there is other data or reports which would help their equalities work.

Implications for Wales

17. There are no implications for Wales. LG Inform contains data only for English councils. Data Cymru (the Welsh local government data unit) runs a data benchmarking system for Welsh authorities, and we are in regular contact with them.

Financial implications

18. The overall investment will come from MCHLG grant; the programme will require an increase to cover the cost of developing the LG Inform app in 2021/22.

19. The review in Q1 of 2021/22 will deliver an outline specification, plan and costing to guide the implementation phase of the LG Inform app. Both will occur in the same financial year.

Next steps

20. Members of IIB are asked to note the update on LG Inform and the proposed plan for future development; and to give any comments or feedback to steer the work for 2021/22.

21. Subject to the board members' comments, officers will then deliver the proposed programme for 2020/21. Specifically, in relation to the immediate next steps for the LG Inform app, they will:
 - Identify the user groups to take part in the review process.
 - Define the user and technology review approach and process.
 - Agree the required outputs.
 - Develop a project plan to guide delivery.
 - Complete the review.
 - Subject to a positive review, proceed to a pilot/proof of concept phase.