

LG Inform Update

Purpose of Report

For information.

Is this report confidential? No

Summary

Following discussion at the Board Meeting on 13 October, this report provides an update on LG Inform, the LGA's data and benchmarking tool, and outlines our plans for the future.

LGA Plan Theme: Data and digital

Recommendation

That the Board notes the update on LG Inform and offer any comments they may have.

Contact details:

Contact officer: Juliet Whitworth / Alex Rigge

Position: Head of Research and Information / Programme Manager – LG Inform

Phone no: 020 7664 3287 / 07796 376 354

Email: juliet.whitworth@local.gov.uk / alex.rigge@local.gov.uk

LG Inform Update

Background

1. [LG Inform](#) is an online tool providing up-to-date key performance, contextual and financial data for 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 (such as CIPFA nearest neighbours); it is also available to the public, as part of our support to help local government with transparency and accountability.
2. LG Inform is well-used, mature and responsive to our members:
 - 97 per cent of all English local authorities are registered with LG Inform with more than 4,250 registered users, a 10 per cent increase since 1 April 2023. Over 60 per cent of local authorities signed in to LG Inform in the last 30 days.
 - LG Inform contains 12,500 metrics, a figure that has increased steadily over time. Recent examples include data related to mortgage and landlord possessions and the Business Register and Employment Survey. In June 2023 the tool reached the landmark of 5.5 million page views since its inception.
3. Since the height of COVID-19, total page views have declined somewhat as users have returned to more typical patterns; but the platform still remains more popular than prior to the pandemic, with an average of 45,000 views a month this year. Page views as a measure of success has seen further change since the introduction, across the industry, of Google Analytics 4. This replaced the long-standing industry standard Universal Analytics, which has been retired. This new analytics system has the advantage of more robust removal of 'bot' traffic, which means we have much higher levels of confidence in the figures. However, it also means we have seen a further drop in page views. We remain confident in the use of the platform, with growth in registered users of 10 per cent this year.
4. We are considering the future of page views as a key performance indicator for reporting to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), since it is based on gathering 'cookies' from visitors and because:
 - Increasingly measures based on 'cookies' are less useful than in the past. GDPR law requires explicit consent to opt into cookies, and this rightly protects privacy but can skew results depending on how many, and who, decides to accept. Some estimate up to 25 per cent opt out, with differences both regionally and with socio-economic patterns.

- Although this doesn't discount page views as a measure, it does suggest we may wish to supplement it more formally with other measures, several of which we are already using to inform ourselves. For example, number of users, percentage of local authorities registered, proportion of authorities logged in over the last 60 days, total number of metrics or number of metrics with data updated/added.
5. Since the launch of the Office for Local Government's (Oflog) Data Explorer, officers in the Research and Information Team have been working closely with the sector to dovetail LG Inform functionality. We continue discussions with government to ensure developments complement each other as far as we can, avoiding duplication where it could become possible. Our own [LG Inform report of Oflog's recent proposed metrics](#) helped the sector visualise the suggested data items, reflect on them and respond to the recent consultation. We received positive uptake from the sector.
 6. Communication, awareness and marketing has been a consistent challenge throughout the history of the LG Inform programme, noting limited resource in these areas, turnover of council staff and elected members.
 7. Finally, there are some myths about LG Inform that we are trying to bust, which we feel may be negatively impacting on how central government views the tool. We repeatedly hear the following claims about the tool:
 - LG Inform is not available to the public (it is – ninety-nine per cent of the data and reports are visible to the public)
 - The LGA 'fixes' the data, or undertakes 'processes' before publishing it (we don't – it's a key principle of LG Inform that the data should match what a council would find on the website of the data publisher, so they can completely trust it)
 - The data is not kept up to date (it is – we have a target of updating LG Inform within five working days of it being put on the data publisher's website and, in reality, we update it much quicker than this).

Proposal

8. To address our current challenges, we propose:
 - Development of an app to further remove barriers to use, and to allow better advocacy by members. Following the Board endorsement of December 2020, the development of an app was specifically turned down for funding by DLUHC. Instead, we have focussed on improving how the browser version functions on mobile devices. Although the improvements were well received, app development remains an area we consider a good opportunity,

particularly to improve the ease of access to the wealth of data on LG Inform and increase awareness for councillors.

- A targeted communications campaign increasing the channels used and promoting our existing material. We are considering a sequence of how-to-use short videos to create additional promotion, help and support material. We have noted a significant demand on the short videos created to show 'how to use' our Application Programming Interface (API) functionality.
- To strengthen the sector voice in our programme by re-establishing a strategic user group.

9. We continue to be of the view that an LG Inform app would need to be:

- a much simplified, 'cut down', version of the main LG Inform application.
- focused on a minimised number of actions or 'user journeys'.
- able to deliver quick results e.g. rapid search/retrieval of data or scan for outlying data above/below the expected norm.
- categorised by 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'.
- including visualisations that are accessible and appealing.

10. Finally, we propose to continue generating new, topic-focussed reports and adding in new data items. This has always been a good way to get local authorities involved, bringing in interest and encouraging use of LG Inform. Recent new and updated reports include waste, climate change, housing and transport.

Implications for Wales

11. There are no implications for Wales. LG Inform contains data only for English councils, because Welsh authorities have a tool provided by Data Cymru.

Financial implications

12. Communication and user group development will be delivered through the existing DLUHC grant for 2023/24.

13. Bids received for similar short 'how to' videos were between £25,000 - £250,000 depending on scope and quality. We estimate our budget would be lower end of the range.

14. Given DLUHC's reluctance to fund an LG Inform app in recent years, the overall investment for the app will need to be funded from other budgets, potentially split over financial years. The possibility of this is under consideration currently.
15. Costs related to developing an application will need to take place, since previous estimates were some years ago, with initial estimates at £100,000-£140,000.

Equalities implications

16. LG Inform 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 financial hardship and economic vulnerability. As such, it supports authorities to understand inequalities in their area.

Next steps

17. LG Inform is a successful programme but remains ambitious to keep the tool on the leading edge of technology and ensure it continues to meet the changing needs of our audience.
18. Subject to the board members' comments, officers will then deliver the proposed programme and will:
 - identify funding for the LG Inform app
 - if successful, conduct a review of user needs and technology for an app and develop a prototype or set of wire frames and, if successful, a full app during the next financial year
 - continue with a focus on creating ready-made reports that bring people to LG Inform; and, alongside this, promoting LG Inform more effectively
 - commence a targeted communications campaign
 - establish a strategic user group.