

Office for Local Government (Oflog) 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 the Office for Local Government (Oflog) since then.

LGA Plan Theme: *Strengthening our Voice*

Recommendation(s)

That the Board

- 1. Note the update on Oflog and offer any comments they may have.**
- 2. Agree to delegate to Lead Members approval of the LGA's response to the inquiry by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee into Oflog.**

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Background

1. Oflog was first mooted in the [Levelling Up White Paper](#), launched in February 2022, and is intended to provide 'authoritative and accessible data and analysis about the performance of local government and support its improvement'. It exists as an office of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), with a stated ambition of starting small and being developed iteratively, and eventually becoming independent.
2. Although slow to start, since the launch of their [Local Authority Data Explorer](#) and a [policy paper](#) in the summer, Oflog officials have been clearer about its rationale and their approach to setting it up, including its scope and future functions. Since the end of the summer, they have indicated they are working on the following six areas:
 - adding new themes to the local authority data explorer
 - running best practice webinars for the sector, using the local authority data explorer to identify good-performing authorities for others to learn from
 - exploring data capacity and capability in the sector
 - rationalising data sets
 - undertaking thematic reviews
 - using the data to inform early warning conversations with the sector.

Consultation

3. At the end of October, the then interim chief executive, Josh Goodman, wrote to all council chief executives (and copied in Lead Members at the LGA). In his letter he outlined the next steps for Oflog, but also shared a list of 26 proposed metrics to be added to the Local Authority Data Explorer and launched a consultation on them.
4. In response, the LGA created an [LG Inform report of the metrics](#), to help local authorities visualise the data in order to be able to comment on them in a meaningful way (please note, you need to sign in to view the report since the metrics are draft and so we have not made the report public at this point). In addition, we discussed the metrics with authorities and within the organisation, and fed back our [own response to the consultation](#).

Meetings with politicians

5. There have also been two meetings between our politicians and DLUHC/Oflog politicians and officials.
6. On 31 October, Lee Rowley (then Minister for Local Government), Lord Morse and Josh Goodman met with political leaders from LGA, as well as chairs from DCN, CCN, UCN, London Councils and SIGOMA. Conversations were around avoiding duplication with the existing LGA programme of work and wanting to collaborate. The Minister indicated he will no longer be part of these meetings, as a nod towards the eventual independence of Oflog. Subsequently, an invitation has been sent by Lord Morse to the Chair, Group Leaders, the Chair of Improvement and Innovation Board, Chairs of London Councils, DCN, CCN, SIGOMA, UCN, Key Cities Group, Core Cities Group and the M10 to join an Oflog Political Advisory Group. The Group is designed to be a channel for Oflog to regularly consult and receive feedback from political leaders in the local government sector on the development of Oflog.
7. More recently, on 5 December, Cllr Shaun Davies met with Lord Morse and Josh Goodman. Cllr Davies noted that the LGA wants to work with Oflog to ensure it adds value to the sector, to avoid duplication and any increase in cost/burden to councils. It was agreed that officers will work together to further clarify and communicate the respective roles of the LGA and Oflog.

Areas of focus

8. Out of the six areas listed in paragraph two, which Oflog identified they wished to take forward, they appear to be leading with three. Aside from adding more themes/metrics to the Local Authority Data Explorer (as described in the 'Consultation' section above), the remaining two are:
 - running best practice webinars with the sector and
 - using the data to inform early warning conversations with the sector.
9. LGA officers continue to meet fortnightly with Oflog officials but, more recently, two additional meetings have taken place in which LGA officers shared their knowledge and experience of running best practice webinars/panels. There was also some exploration of Oflog's thinking about early warning conversations and how they might avoid overlap with LGA corporate peer challenges.

Areas of concern

10. The LGA can see that there are ways in which Oflog could add real value to the local government sector and the wider public, for example, enabling local authorities to access useful data currently unavailable to them about other parts

of the public sector and/or not published at local authority level, and the dissemination of good practice informed by analysis of data.

11. However, we feel it is essential that Oflog works with existing systems and expertise already within the LGA, avoiding duplication and ensuring complementarity, in order to deliver best value.
12. Our areas of concern remain:
 - **The Local Authority Data Explorer**
Although Oflog consulted with the sector in advance of the finalisation and publication of the second set of metrics, in the future we would welcome the opportunity to be involved in selecting the metrics on the list, rather than simply responding to a pre-selected list. In addition, Oflog continues to avoid making use of LG Inform. As well as some data being out of date, we also believe that the LG Inform presentation of data is easier to understand. The creation of a new infrastructure where a robust tool already exists appears to be poor value for money to the taxpayer.
 - **Lack of clarity about how Oflog's scope fits with the current sector-led improvement work the LGA leads**
In particular, the proposed early warning conversations appear to be similar to peer challenges. Activity currently underway by Oflog, to recruit (and pay) peers for its early warning conversations runs the risk of reducing capacity in the sector to undertake the wider sector-led improvement activity which DLUHC has commissioned the LGA to undertake.

Next steps

13. As noted, officers have already shared advice and experience with Oflog on how to run effective best practice webinars/panels. Oflog are running the first two before Christmas, so officers and officials are likely to meet in the new year to review them.
14. LGA officers are preparing a draft narrative on the respective roles of Oflog and LGA in relation to sector support work, for discussion with Oflog.
15. Meanwhile Oflog will be pressing on with development of their early warning conversation visits. We expect to discuss with officials in the coming weeks and months how to ensure that Oflog and the LGA's activity is complementary and not duplicative. This could include discussions on:
 - how to avoid Oflog and the LGA approaching the same council at the same time

- how Oflog might approach councils which have not engaged with sector-led improvement.
16. Given Oflog remains an ongoing project, LGA officers and political leaders will continue to work with government to ensure the sector's voice informs future decisions about the body.
 17. Finally, on 24 November, the [Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee launched a new inquiry into Oflog](#). Officers will be submitting evidence for this in due course, for the deadline of 9 January 2024. The Board is asked to agree to delegate approval of the LGA's response to the Committee to Lead Members.

Implications for Wales

18. Oflog has an English-only remit, but we will continue to share information with Welsh Councils and the WLGA as appropriate.

Financial implications

19. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. However, in the short term, resources have had to be prioritised across the LGA to ensure the LGA can represent the sector on this issue. If there are on-going resource implications for the LGA as a result of the work on Oflog, these will be considered by the LGA Board.

Equalities implications

20. The LGA is committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) standards. These standards are factored in across all of our engagement activity.

Next steps

21. LGA officers will continue to engage regularly with officials and highlight the importance of co-producing Oflog with the sector, providing briefings for meetings with officials and politicians where necessary.
22. Following agreement from the Board, officers with progress working on a submission for the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry into Oflog with approval of the LGA's response to the Committee delegated to Lead Members.