

WIRRAL COUNCIL

AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

25 NOVEMBER 2009

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

“IS THERE SOMETHING I SHOULD KNOW? MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR INFORMATION TO IMPROVE SERVICES” - AUDIT COMMISSION LOCAL GOVERNMENT NATIONAL REPORT (July 2009)

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The local government national report by the Audit Commission “Is there something I should know? Making the most of your information to improve services”, published in July 2009, considers whether Councils are equipped to improve their information. It also says that decision makers must be more demanding in obtaining the information they need to make decisions.
- 1.2 The report finds that almost 80 per cent of Members report a lack of in-depth analysis as a major problem and that their analysts (officers/researchers/consultants) spend around twice as much time on producing routine reports as on value-added analysis.
- 1.3 Findings show that Members complain that they receive lengthy reports that lack the information they need. Less than five per cent of councils have excellent quality data and 65 per cent face problems sharing data externally.
- 1.4 The report puts forward a number of recommendations, supported by web based “toolkits” for Councils to use in order to improve information for decision making.

2. KEY DETAILS FROM THE REPORT

- 2.1 The report begins with the premise that giving decision makers the information they need will help Councils make savings while improving services. This is all the more critical in recessionary times and some solutions have little or no extra cost. It goes on to suggest that it is important that Councils have the right information now because many of the decisions that they need to make in the years ahead will be harder than usual. It is stated that many Councils risk making poor decisions because their information is inaccurate, irrelevant or incomplete.
- 2.2 From research and fieldwork carried out for the report, Members and senior officers recognise that they lack the information they need to make decisions with common problems including:
 - frustration with lengthy reports that do not present information in a concise and easily accessible way;
 - a concern that inaccurate or out-of-date information drives key decisions; and
 - a lack of relevant, contextual information, that adds richness to, and helps people understand, the raw data.

2.3 To equip themselves with the information that will support good decisions, Councils need to develop:

- (i) A culture - that values and exploits the power of information:
 - Commitment from Members to an evidence based culture. .
 - Information used by Members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies.
 - Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information.
- (ii) People – who are expert, professional, well trained people, working in effective ways:
 - Good interpretation skills.
 - Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making.
 - Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff.
 - Attractive jobs.
- (iii) Standards – including good data quality and information shared effectively with partners:
 - Standards maintained through a common competency framework.
 - Excellent data quality.
 - Established data-sharing protocols.

2.4 It is suggested that many Councils struggle to unlock the power of information to improve decision making. The reasons for this lie in the three strands of culture, people and standards. The table below sets out the most common problems found under each of these strands.

	Councils should demonstrate	The most common problems
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment from Members to an evidence based culture. • Information used by Members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies. • Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision makers do not demand relevant, high quality, well presented information. There is not two-way dialogue between decision makers and information providers.
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good interpretation skills. • Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making. • Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff. • Attractive jobs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members and senior officers struggle to understand the information they receive. • Analysts spend more time on routine tasks than on identifying and highlighting the salient facts. • Analysts are not expert and receive insufficient training and support.
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards maintained through a common competency framework. • Excellent data quality. • Established data-sharing protocols. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data is too often inaccurate and not fit for purpose. • Data only rarely shared with external partners.

- 2.5 In order to address these issues the report suggests that these problems can be overcome without spending more but by good management and learning from exemplar Councils:
- Councils do not need to spend more and should instead deploy existing resources more wisely. Thirty-six per cent of analysts' time is spent on routine performance reporting, while only 15 per cent is spent on value added analysis.
 - This need not be expensive. A high quality intelligence or information unit can be provided with under 0.2 per cent of expenditure. The best performing intelligence units are not the most expensive.
 - Decision makers need to become more demanding, and analysts more valued.
 - Two-thirds of Councils say Members struggle to understand information, and half say that senior officers do, yet half of Councils provide no formal training in this area and almost a quarter provide no support at all.
 - Sixty-five per cent of Councils still face problems sharing data with external partners. Many Councils say their staff do not understand the Data Protection Act, which means opportunities to reduce waste and duplication are often missed.
- 2.6 The Audit Commission is providing tools to help Councillors demand better information, and to help councils improve the information they provide to decision makers. It will also assess Councils on the information available to support decision making in Use of Resources as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment.

3. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REPORT

- 3.1 The report states that Councils should:
- use the self-assessment framework from the study to understand where they need to improve, and the toolkit to help drive those improvements;
 - develop an environment where decision makers demand relevant, high quality, well presented information;
 - ensure a two-way, robust dialogue between decision makers and information providers;
 - invest time in recruiting, training and retaining skilled staff;
 - foster a culture of professionalism in the research, intelligence and information functions, and encourage membership of professional bodies;
 - ensure, through their national representatives and professional bodies,(including: the Local Government Association (LGA); Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA); the British Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (BURISA); the Local Authority Research Council Initiative (LARCI); and the Central and Local Information Partnership (CLIP) that there is a national structure for research, intelligence and information functions comprising:
 - a clear competency framework to help Councils improve the skills base and overall performance of research, intelligence and information units;
 - coherent and consistent national support networks that have a high profile with Councils;
 - networking and good practice sharing opportunities; and
 - a voice for research, intelligence and information functions in local government.

3.2 The support from The Audit Commission will be to:

- publish a self-assessment framework and toolkit to help Councils improve;
- assess Councils on the information available to support decision making in Use of Resources key line of enquiry (KLOE) 2.2 (Does the organisation produce relevant and reliable data and information to support decision making and manage performance?) and publish the results;
- update guidance for KLOE 2.2 to reflect the findings from this study.

4. IMPACT ON WIRRAL COUNCIL

4.1 Clearly there is a great deal in the report that requires further thought and consideration. Research and intelligence is gathered and analysed in all departments of the Council. In the light of this Audit Commission report it will be necessary to review the way the Council works. This will be assessed using the practical tools available from the Audit Commission supporting the report:

- A self assessment checklist
- Resources for elected Members
- Analyst diary
- Resource Mapping Tool
- Decision Making Guides
- Links to training and support

4.2 Officers will work together corporately to understand any information deficits; but ultimately, it is Councillors and decision-makers in the Council who need to decide for themselves what information they need. Accordingly, it is envisaged, that this work will involve workshops with Members and senior officers to ensure Wirral has the right culture, people and standards to produce relevant, quality, well presented information upon which to make decisions.

5. FINANCIAL AND STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

5.1 At this stage no financial implications have been identified. The outcome of the review of the way Wirral Council manages its information may impact on the staffing structure of the Council but may also lead to smarter decision making, thus producing financial savings.

6. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

8. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

9. **COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

10. **PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

11. **LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 There are no particular implications for any Members or wards arising out of this report.

12. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1 “Is There Something I Should Know? Making the Most of Your Information to Improve Services” - Audit Commission Local Government National Report (July 2009)

13. **RECOMMENDATION**

13.1 That the report be noted.

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DIRECTOR OF FINANCE