

# Is there something I should know?

Making the most of your information  
to improve services

Local government national report  
July 2009



**The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.**

**Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.**

**As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.**

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# Preface, summary and recommendations

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**Your human resources data are months out of date. You can't be sure how many staff are employed by your organisation nor do you have an accurate cost of your pay bill.**

## **Preface**

### **Is any of this familiar?**

- Your management data show a significant dip in performance in one of your services. There are no analyses explaining the reasons for the dip or what it would cost to put right.
- There is a sudden overspend on a service budget. There is no supporting analysis of why this has occurred or a plan for rectifying the problems.
- Your organisation has several customer databases – none of which interact. The duplication is wasting money, causing confusion and contributing to poor customer service.
- Your human resources data are months out of date. You can't be sure how many staff are employed by your organisation nor do you have an accurate cost of your pay bill.
- Sickness absence in your council has been higher than the national average for some time. There is no analysis of the primary reasons for this and no information on what this is costing your organisation.
- You are presented with a proposal for a new two-year local partnership initiative that will require substantial funding from the council. There is no information on how success will be measured, what it will cost or how value for money will be assessed.
- Your papers for a routine management team meeting arrive and are three inches thick. Ninety-five per cent of the information in the papers is not used in the meeting.

### **When did you last take a decision without the information you really needed?**

This report is for chief executives, senior officers and lead members in councils. It encourages you to be more demanding about the information you seek and use when making decisions. It also suggests ways to improve the quality of your information, and the quality of your decision making.

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## Preface, summary and recommendations

Better information makes for better decisions and therefore better and cheaper services. Councils know this, but few extract value from the information they already hold. This report illustrates, with examples, how councils across the country have learned to do so. It is supported by a self-assessment framework for councils and an extensive toolkit that will help you make better informed decisions.

This report does not cover information for citizens, the psychology of good decision making or the IT infrastructure that supports good information use. Rather, it focuses on how councils can make better decisions by making the most of information they have or can readily gather.

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## Summary

### **Most councils could and should improve their information**

- Good information helps councils to improve the quality of their services, find savings and manage risks.
- Councils recognise the importance of good information, and 94 per cent say that information has become an increased strategic priority.
- Exemplar councils have the right culture, people and standards to provide good information, but most councils do not, and so are missing opportunities to improve services and save money.

### **Councils recognise that decisions that affect the cost, quality and effectiveness of public services are not driven by robust information**

- Members say they receive lengthy reports but still do not have the relevant information they need. Senior officers are frustrated that powerful data are unexploited.
- Less than 5 per cent of councils have excellent data quality and many acknowledge that their data quality problems are fundamental in nature.
- Almost 80 per cent of councils say a lack of in-depth analysis is a major problem.

### **Problems can be overcome without spending more 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 a council's expenditure. And the best performing intelligence units are not the most expensive.
- Decision makers need to become more demanding, and analysts more valued.

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## Preface, summary and recommendations

- 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.

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## Recommendations

### Councils should:

- use the self-assessment framework from this 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; and
- ensure, through their national representatives and professional bodies,<sup>i</sup> 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.

### The Audit Commission will:

- 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 and publish the results;<sup>ii</sup> and
- update guidance for KLOE 2.2 to reflect the findings from this study.

<sup>i</sup> Including: the Local Government Association (LGA) family; 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).

<sup>ii</sup> KLOE 2.2 – Does the organisation produce relevant and reliable data and information to support decision making and manage performance?

# Are you well informed?

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## Are you making the most of the data and information you hold?

**1** Councils need to extract maximum value from the data and information they hold in order to provide good local services, at a reduced cost. In straitened times, information has an even more crucial role to play in driving down costs, while maintaining high standards.

**2** At its best, exploiting information to its full potential leads to excellent services, delivered with maximum efficiency. At its worst, it not only affects the quality and cost of services – it can lead to tragic consequences. When public bodies hold inaccurate, incomplete or out-dated data, avoidable tragedies result from poor decisions.

### Councils know that this a problem

**3** Councils recognise that information they already hold is often unexploited. They accept that further service improvements and savings could be made if existing data were analysed more effectively to inform decisions (Table 1).

Table 1: **Managers of services are frustrated that powerful data are unexploited**

<b>Multiple sources of data and information are not used to check and reinforce each other</b>	Frequency of waste collection	Complaints, enquiries and feedback from community forums could be used to track public opinion. Local data could be analysed to understand local, geographical variations.
	Traffic calming	Good data are available on local casualties. But this could be combined and compared with other data to create a richer picture, including: other traffic data; data from hospitals and the primary care trust; and data from insurance companies.
<b>Datasets are not interrogated effectively</b>	Charging for sports services	The wealth of data held in IT systems on loyalty card holders could be extracted and analysed to help track local preferences, which could be used to inform decisions on how best to deliver local leisure services.
	Charging for town centre car parks	Large electronic datasets are available that could be analysed to calculate a range of information, including daily occupancy rates of car parks.

Source: Audit Commission decision making workshops

## Are you well informed?

4 Members and senior officers recognise that they lack the information they need to make decisions (Table 2). Common problems include:

- 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.

Table 2: **People who make decisions need more relevant, better quality, better presented information**

<b>Reports are too long</b>	<b>‘The reports we get are still too long and members are very busy. If some of the reports could be downsized it would help. We need the relevant things that really matter to help us make the right decisions, as opposed to reams of paper.’</b> <b>Lead member</b>
<b>Inaccurate or out-of-date information</b>	<b>‘It is vital for councillors to make the right business decisions. Like any business, you need quality, up-to-date and meaningful information – without it, we won’t be in a position to make decisions that we have 100 per cent confidence in. There have been issues where six months later we have realised that our decision wasn’t quite right – because it became clear that the information we had hadn’t been accurate at the time.’</b> <b>Lead member</b>
<b>A lack of contextual information</b>	<b>‘I am wary when I receive reports of whether I have a full picture on the potential implications of a decision. Sometimes a decision has not been made because the relevant information was not there.’</b> <b>Lead member</b>

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork

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## This is not a new story

**5** For many years, Audit Commission national studies have reported that councils need better information in order to improve standards and reduce waste. A recurring theme in both past and new research is that councils are failing to use the wealth of intelligence available to them to inform key decisions (Table 3).

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Table 3: **National studies consistently report that councils fail to capitalise on the power of information**

<b><i>Risk and Return (Icelandic banks) 2009</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Local government should use information more wisely, widening the use of information in treasury management and reducing the dependence on external advisors.</li></ul>
<b><i>Room for Improvement (Asset management) 2009</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Only half of councils are assessed by auditors as having sufficient information about their estate.</li><li>■ Only one in five directors of finance say their council has all the information it needs to manage the estate properly.</li></ul>
<b><i>Don't Stop Me Now (Preparing for an ageing population) 2008</i></b>	Councils should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ review their demographic profiles;</li><li>■ understand and engage with their older communities; and</li><li>■ link their local demographic profile and community information to age proof services.</li></ul>

Source: Audit Commission

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## How many councils should improve?

**6** Councils have begun to recognise that information is a valuable business asset. They also appreciate the need to base policy and business plans on evidence, with 96 per cent of councils responding to our survey reporting that information has become an increased strategic priority in recent years. However, while councils have started to recognise the power and value of information, few have taken the steps that enable them to exploit it.

## Are you well informed?

7 Table 4 explains that, to equip themselves with information that will support good decisions, councils need to develop:

- a culture that values and exploits the power of information;
- expert, professional, well trained people, working in effective ways; and
- standards, including good data quality and effective information sharing protocols.

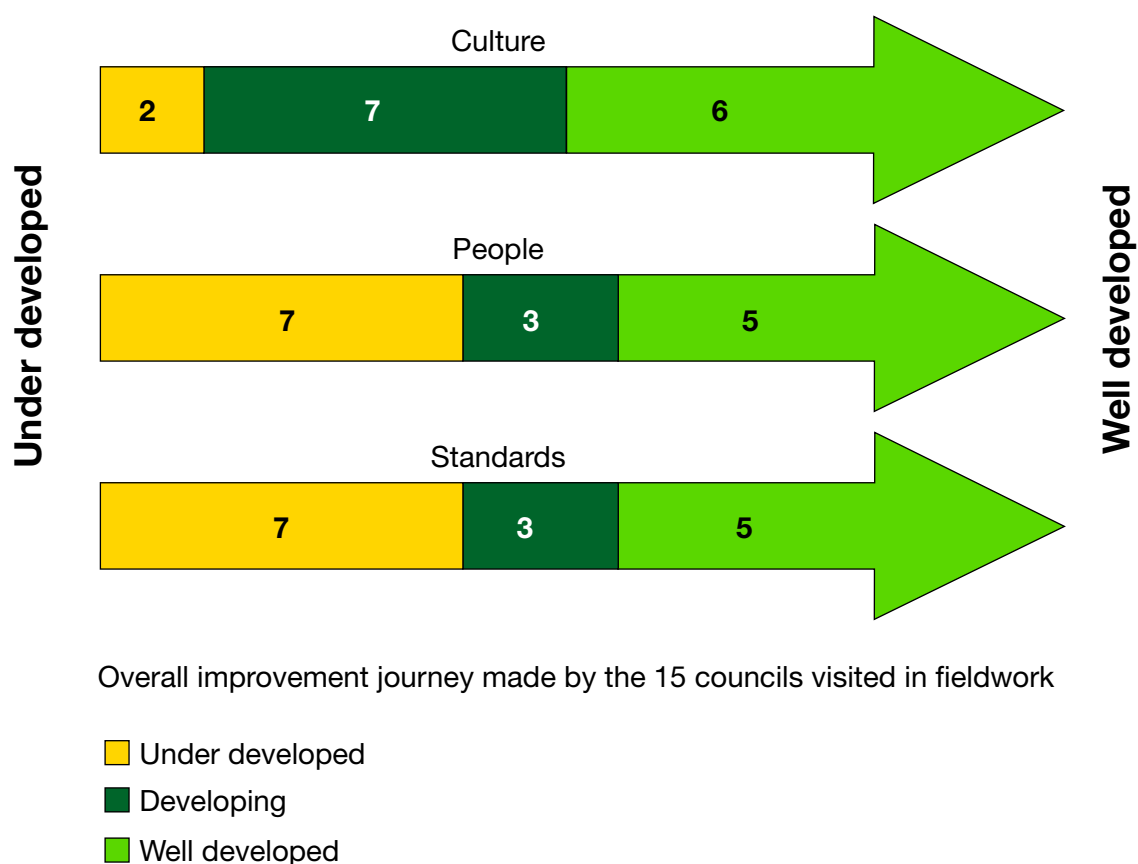
Table 4: **Councils need to combine culture, people and standards in order to excel**

This means	
<b>Culture</b> A culture that values and exploits the power of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Commitment from members to an evidence based culture.</li> <li>■ Information used by members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies.</li> <li>■ Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information.</li> </ul>
<b>People</b> Expert, professional, well trained people, working in effective ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Good interpretation skills.</li> <li>■ Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making.</li> <li>■ Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff.</li> <li>■ Attractive jobs.</li> </ul>
<b>Standards</b> Good data quality and information shared effectively with partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Standards maintained through a common competency framework.</li> <li>■ Excellent data quality.</li> <li>■ Established data-sharing protocols.</li> </ul>

Source: *Audit Commission*

8 Most councils have started to create cultures where information is treated as a priority. However, the majority need to be better at developing their people and establishing high standards (Figure 1).

Figure 1: **Most councils are at the start of the improvement journey<sup>i</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission fieldwork, 2009

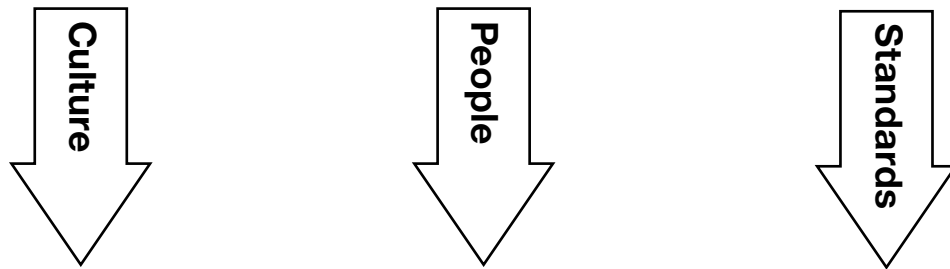
9 And the picture is complex. Some councils are either weak or strong on all three strands. Others have a more complex profile, with a strength in one area and weaknesses in others (Figure 2).

<sup>i</sup> This is not the same as the use of resources KLOE 2.2 assessment. We formed a view on how volunteer councils compared with our emerging picture of good practice under the headings of culture, people and standards. These views were formed by evidence from fieldwork and most recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment and data quality scores.

# Are you well informed?

Figure 2: **A complex picture**

Councils are at a range of stages on the improvement journey<sup>i</sup>



<b>Fieldwork councils</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Developing</b>
	<b>Developing</b>	Under developed	Under developed
	Well developed	Well developed	Well developed
	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Developing</b>
	Well developed	Well developed	Well developed
	<b>Developing</b>	Under developed	Under developed
	Under developed	Under developed	Under developed
	Under developed	Under developed	Under developed
	<b>Developing</b>	Under developed	Under developed
	Well developed	<b>Developing</b>	Well developed
	Well developed	Well developed	<b>Developing</b>
	<b>Developing</b>	Under developed	Under developed
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Source: Audit Commission fieldwork, 2009

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# Too much data, too little information

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## Why are so many councils struggling?

**10** 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. Table 5 sets out the most common problems we found under each of these strands, and this chapter explains the causes of those problems. The self-assessment toolkit will help councils understand where they have problems and find appropriate solutions.

Table 5: **Councils struggle to develop a strong information culture, supported by high standards and the right capacity**

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

Source: Audit Commission

### Do decision makers demand relevant, high quality information?

**11** The people who make decisions need good quality, relevant, well presented information that has already been analysed, and to some extent, interpreted:

**‘There is a balance to be struck between presentation and quality, and also in terms of how comprehensive the information is. If members can’t understand what we present to them then there is no point in the reports.’**

**Chief executive**

**12** If decision makers want relevant information that is of good quality and presented well, councils need to be better at specifying what information they need. They need to explain:

- the issue they are addressing; and
- how the information they seek will be used to make judgements about the issue.

Providing this clarity will help analysts understand why the information is needed.

**13** This requires a two-way dialogue between those who need the information and those who supply it. Robust and rigorous two-way challenge will help ensure that the information supplied meets the needs of those using it in their decision making. The best way to improve data and information is to use it – it soon becomes apparent when it is inadequate or wrong. Then both analysts and decision makers can focus on improving it.

**14** *In the Know* (Ref. 1) defined good information as relevant information, of sufficient quality for the decision at hand, presented in a way the decision maker will understand (Appendix 2):

**‘Information used in decisions must be fit for the specific decision being made. This means it must be relevant and of a sufficient quality for the decision at hand. It also needs to be presented in a way that decision makers will understand, taking account of their personal preferences, skills and available time. Relevance, quality and presentation (RQP) are key characteristics for useful information.’**

### **Case study 1: Relevant, good quality, well presented information in Somerset**

Councillors and senior management in Somerset County Council have demanded better quality and better presented information. Information is now used increasingly intelligently to further the drive to improve performance and efficiency. Clear and transparent information has been developed that is used as a basis for strategic and financial planning. The information tools are used widely across the council and include:

- a value for money (VFM) tool, which is used to assess the effectiveness of each service (Figure 3). The tool maps the quality of service against the cost of that service. The same tool also maps services in relative size in cost terms. The powerful image shows those services which are low cost and high performing and vice versa; and
- activity books for each service. This is a very short summary that presents all key information for that service in one document. The summary includes the VFM profile, expenditure, exception reports and key contacts.

The VFM tool has helped the Council decide where to set its future priorities and has helped it make difficult decisions on spending. The Council dealt with three under-performing areas very differently:

- Trading standards (low cost). The Council decided not to invest in additional resources, because the local Citizens Advice Bureau provided strong alternative support, as did other third sector support groups.

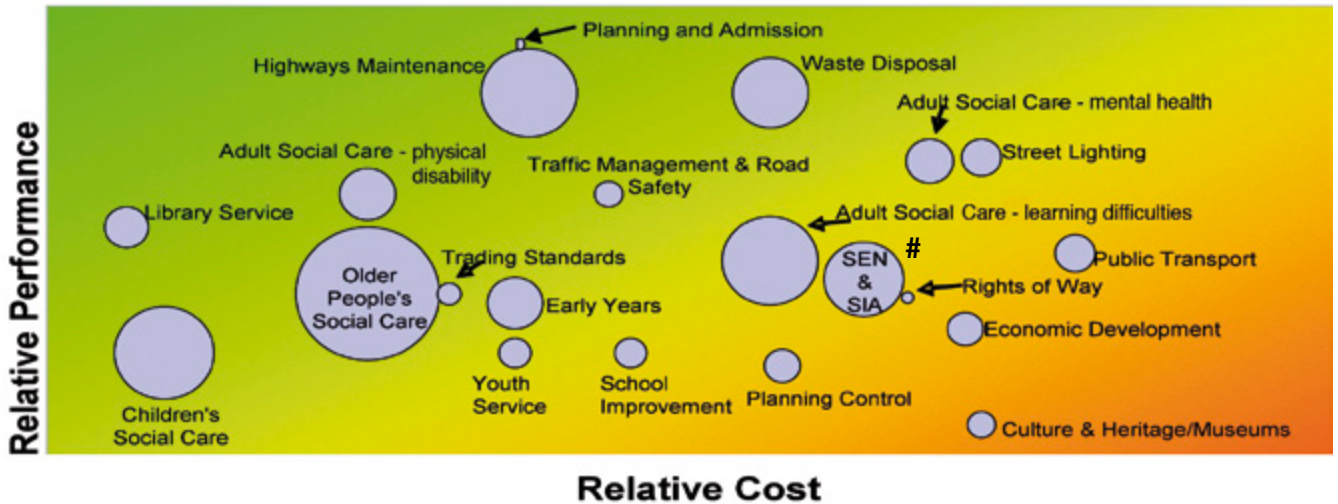
- Economic development (high cost). A range of measures were taken to attract business to the area, including investment in a broadband network. Since the investment, VAT registrations have increased and several large companies have relocated to the area.
- Schools improvement (medium cost). Some investment has been made to improve the service. However, the Council is first conducting analysis to understand the root causes of the problem, and is also seeking to learn from the best performing county councils.

**‘Members brought in pressure for better information on cost and performance. The activity book and VFM tool have evolved from that. Good performance is not good if it is costing much more than we have available. We are finding that, as we become more efficient, we are looking for services we can stop investing as much in. Having those information tools is very important to enable us to do this.’**

**Lead member**

# Too much data, too little information

Figure 3: Relevant, quality, well presented information in Somerset



# SEN - Special educational needs, SIA - Social inclusion and access

Notes:

1. Relative cost and performance compares the cost and performance levels in Somerset with other counties. The bottom right corner of the graph (shaded red) represents a relatively high cost, low performance position; the top left corner (shaded green) a low cost, high performance (and therefore good value for money) position.
2. The size of the circles demonstrate the size of the budget for that service in Somerset.

Source: VFM profile for all services, Somerset County Council, 2007/08

## Do decision makers receive information that they can understand?

**15** Information needs to be interpreted effectively for it to add value to the decision making process. Decision makers therefore need the interpretation skills to be able to understand and challenge the information that is put before them.

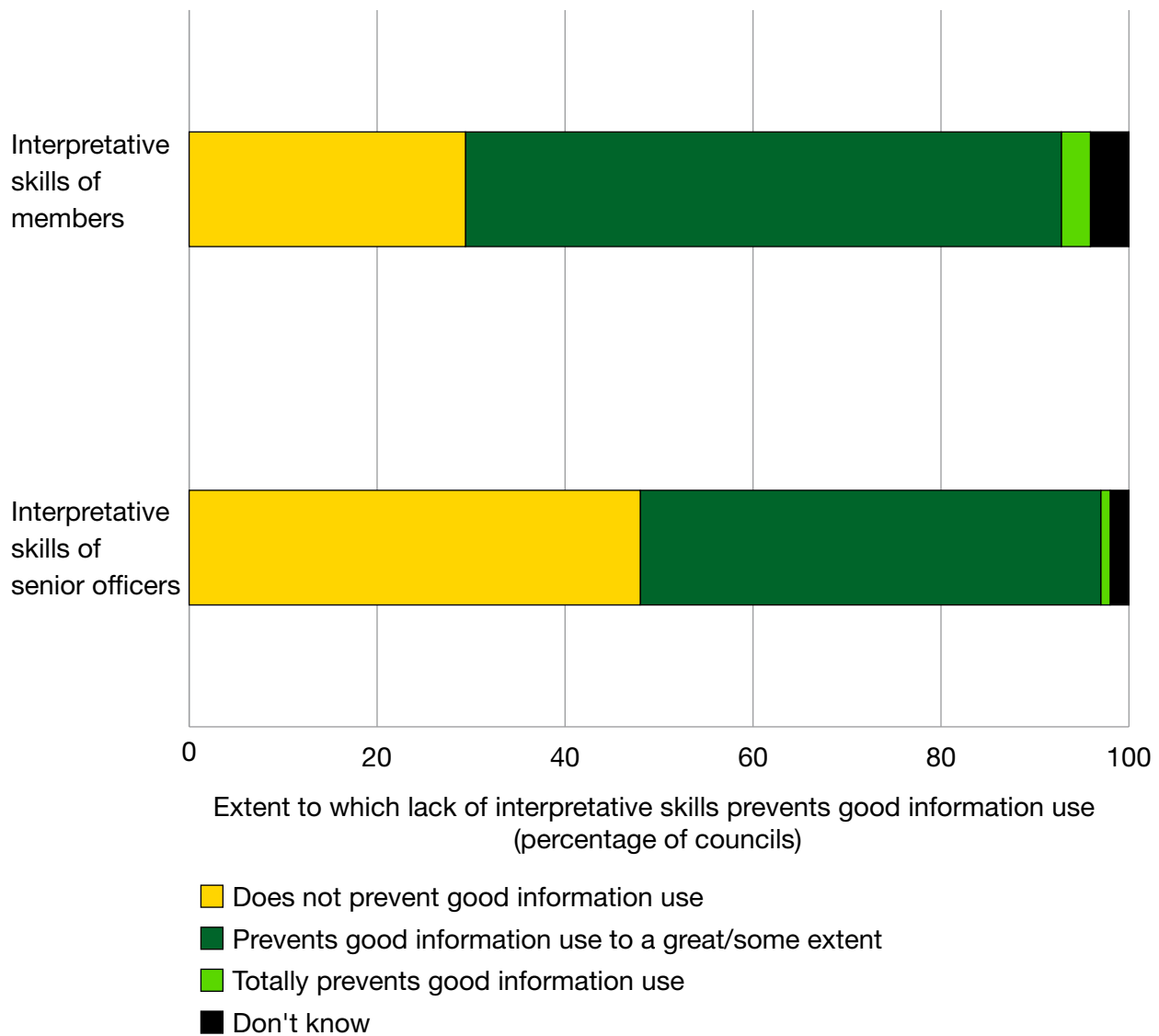
**Two-thirds of councils say members struggle to understand the information they receive, yet half of councils provide no formal training**

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**16** The level of interpretative skill among senior decisions makers varies, and councils acknowledge that a lack of these skills can undermine key decisions (Figure 4).

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Figure 4: **Senior decision makers lack interpretative skills**



Source: Audit Commission survey

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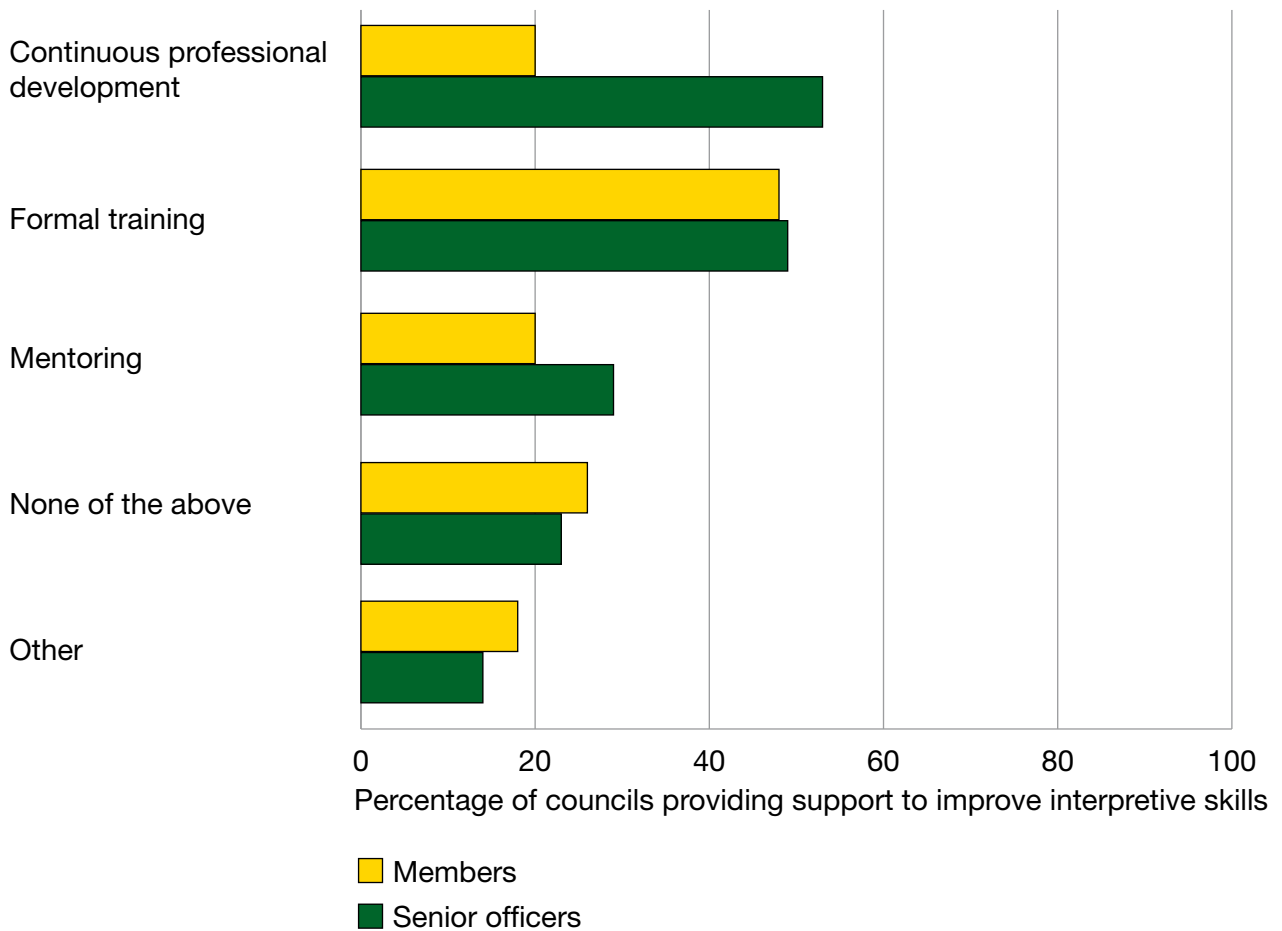
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## Too much data, too little information

**17** Yet despite councils recognising the skills gap in their own organisations, and the impact this has, little training and support is provided. Half of councils provide no formal training in this area and almost a quarter provide no support at all (Figure 5).

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Figure 5: **Limited support is in place for senior decision makers<sup>i</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission survey

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<sup>i</sup> Councils ticked all that applied.

## Case study 2: Training and support in Gateshead

Gateshead Council identified that senior decision makers needed better support, to help them make better decisions. It has invested in a comprehensive support programme for members. This programme is managed internally through the Council's member support and development team.

The support programme includes:

- a members' charter, obtained in 2008;
- personal development plans;
- access to tailored training; and
- a member development support group.

The Council also has a corporate performance management training programme that can be accessed by members, officers and partners. This has been sourced externally from Newcastle Business School. Between December 2007 and June 2009, 370 members, heads of service, supervisors and managers attended the training at a cost of £43,000.

**'The Council undertook a performance management review that was about how we look at performance management across the piece. The performance management training programme has come from that. It is very hands-on and it uses real examples from our business. Improving interpretation skills is part of that practical, hands-on approach to training. We focus on the whole process – rather than just how to interpret a management report. We look at what you are trying to achieve and then following on from that – how you monitor, react and ensure outcomes. Now, most members are comfortable with the information that they get and also in challenging the information that they get.'**

**Member support officer**

## Are your analysts spending their time on the things that will make the biggest difference?

**18** Most councils devote relatively little resource to analytical functions (Chapter 3). And those resources are not used wisely (Figure 6). Very little time is spent on analysis in order to create business intelligence. Instead, the greatest proportion of time is focused on collating routine performance data:

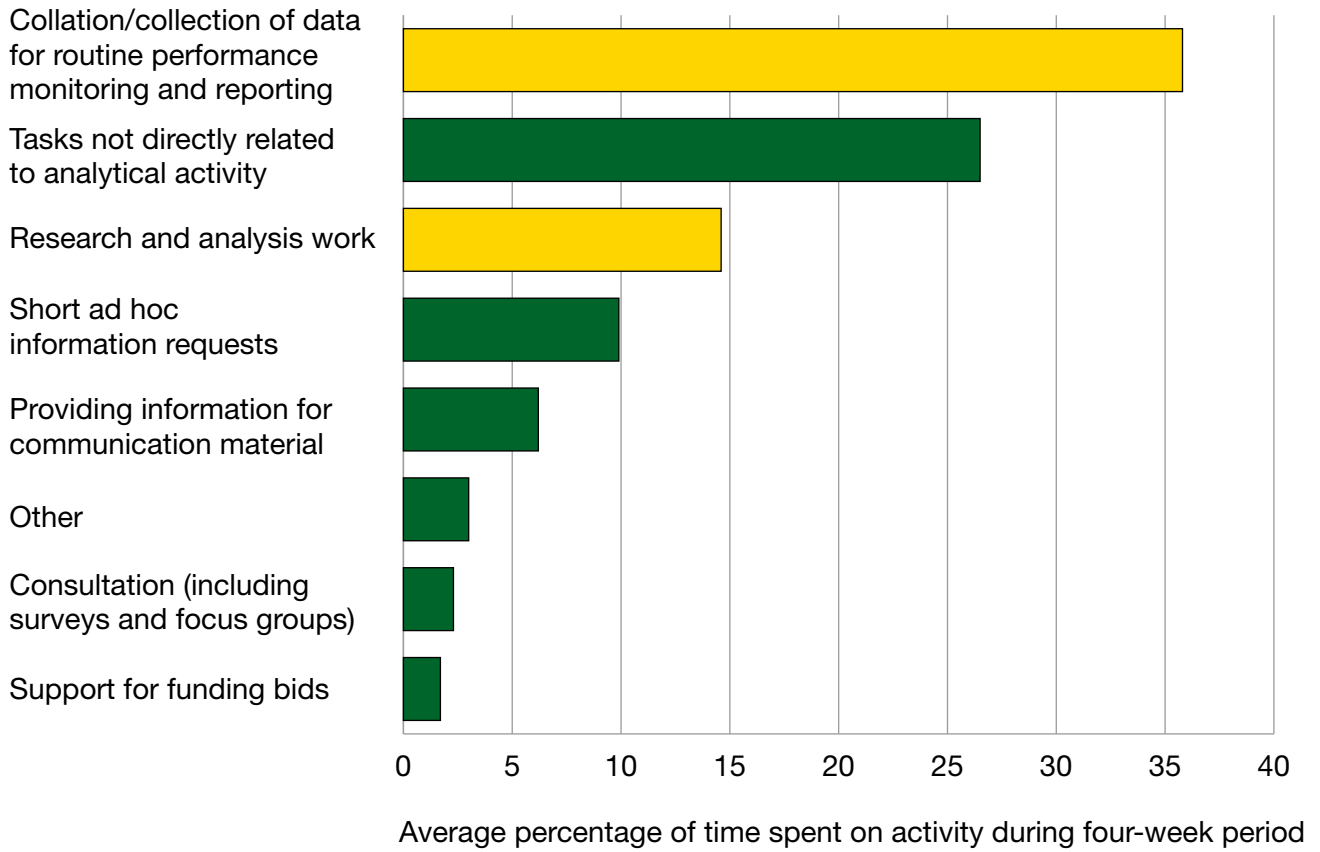
- thirty-six per cent of analytical resource is focused on the collection of routine performance management; and
- only 15 per cent of resource is invested in research and analysis to create sound business intelligence.

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# Too much data, too little information

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Figure 6: **Resources are not used effectively**



Source: *Audit Commission analyst diaries, 2009*

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**19** The lack of time spent on analysis that adds value to decision making processes is a source of frustration to councils, with many recognising that their resources are not used in the most effective way (Table 6).

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Table 6: **Councils are frustrated that analysts are not adding value**

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**‘We did a reducing inequality piece of work – this came out with good conclusions. We paid an external consultant to do this – people in the council found it an amazing piece of work – but all those data were already there. There was no independent research – just cutting numbers differently and making connections. We should have been able to do this ourselves.’**

**Head of partnerships**

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**‘My team is adding value to the performance management system, but there is still too much time spent attempting to churn out reports with insufficient analysis – my team are blocked from conducting analysis by the time spent chasing performance data.’**

**Head of policy**

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**‘We are good at monitoring what we do and drilling down on indicators. We can see which teams are doing what – but we want more on why performance is as it is. We need to know whether there are demographic reasons why an area of business has an overspend or whether there is a problem with the way they run their business.’**

**Performance manager**

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*Source: Audit Commission fieldwork interviews*

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### Case study 3: Effective use of data and sound analysis in Lewisham

Lewisham Council identified a significant delay in re-letting its housing stock. It took an average of 43 days to turn around a property. This was void time when the property was empty and rent was not collected, which meant significant potential income was being lost. The Council was also missing out on the social benefits of getting people re-housed as quickly as possible.

It analysed the causes of the delay by:

- identifying whether there were a few properties that were hard to let, which were increasing the overall average void time;
- assessing the effectiveness of contractors;
- talking to tenants; and
- holding a workshop with all the officers and contractors involved in the re-letting process to identify the barriers in the systems.

The findings from the analysis enabled the council to remove barriers, and as a result:

- the void time was reduced from 43 days to 24 days;
- £250,000 a year was generated in increased rent; and
- local people were re-housed much more quickly.

**‘The analysis we did identified some really basic barriers that were wasting a lot of time, but were really simple to solve. For example, we held a workshop with officers and the other agencies involved, where we discovered a lot of delay was caused by the need to go externally to get keys cut. So we invested in a key cutting machine – and this made a big difference.’**

**Performance and policy lead**

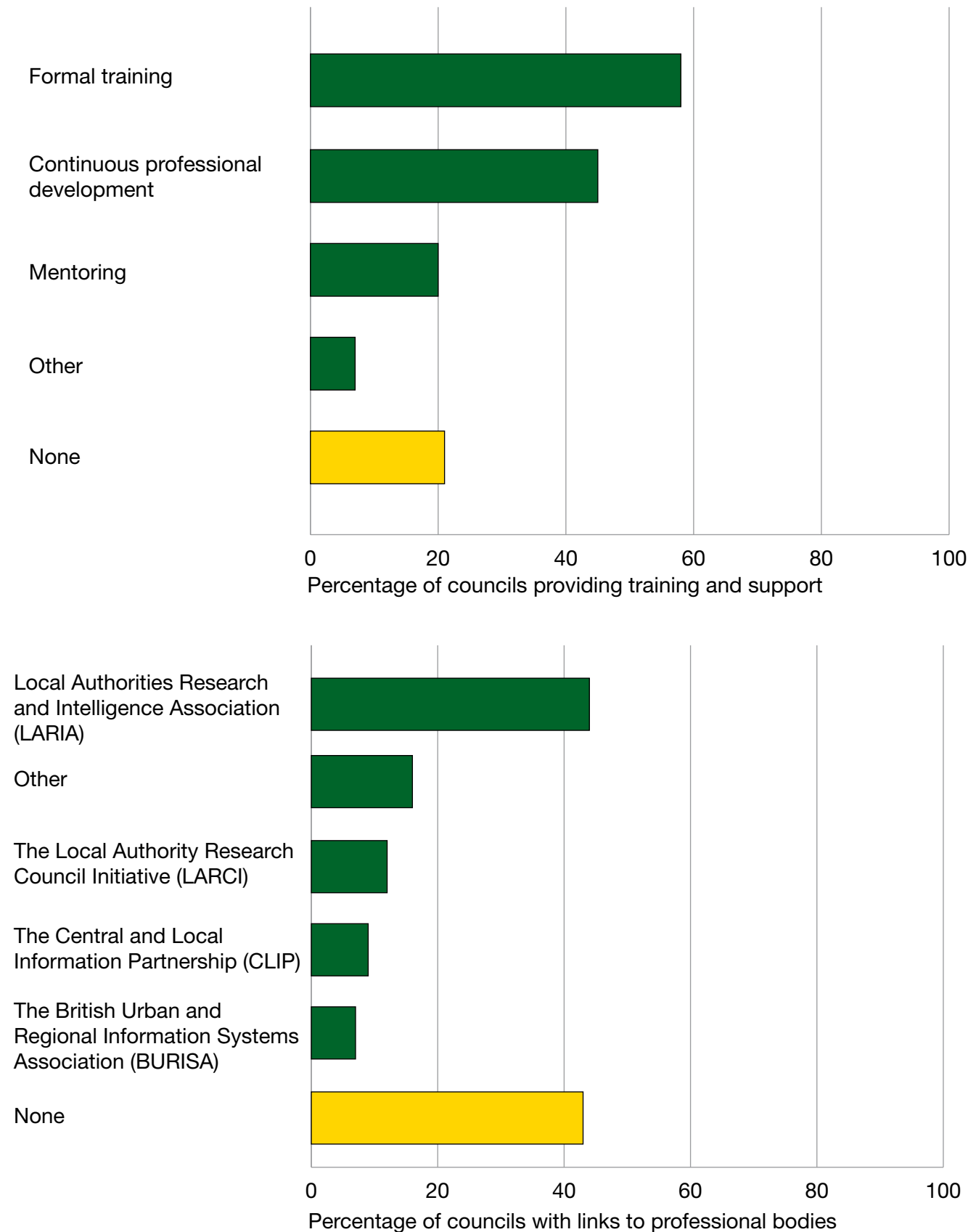
### Are your analysts experts?

**20** Analysts do not always have the expertise needed to create good business intelligence from raw data. Limited training and poor use of national support networks contribute to the lack of expertise in the profession.

**21** Over 20 per cent of analysts receive no support or development at all. And despite the specialist nature of this function, there is limited use of national support networks and patchy membership of professional bodies. Almost half of analysts in councils have no links to professional bodies, which means they are potentially missing out on valuable advice and support (Figure 7).

**21%**  
**of analysts receive no support or development at all, and almost half have no links to professional bodies**

**Figure 7: There is a lack of support for analysts and limited membership of professional bodies**



Source: Audit Commission survey

### Case study 4: Building an expert, professional team in Worcestershire

Worcestershire County Council has a corporate research and intelligence unit that also serves the local district councils and partner organisations. The Council recruits highly educated and expert people to the unit. This has led to some retention problems in the past as skilled people moved onto new, more highly paid, posts elsewhere. The Council learned from this and has ensured that it attracts and retains the best people through:

- improved training;
- more demanding job objectives;
- personal development plans;

- better career progression through succession planning; and
- a higher profile for the team both within the Council, but also with local district councils and partners.

**‘Recruiting people with experience is almost impossible. And combined with that, for years we had very high staff turnover. We had to address and deal with this. We’ve changed our recruitment processes and retained high calibre people through better training and a clear career plan, with more opportunities. This has totally changed things. And the unit spirit has developed.’**

**Head of research and analysis**

### Are your data accurate and fit for purpose?

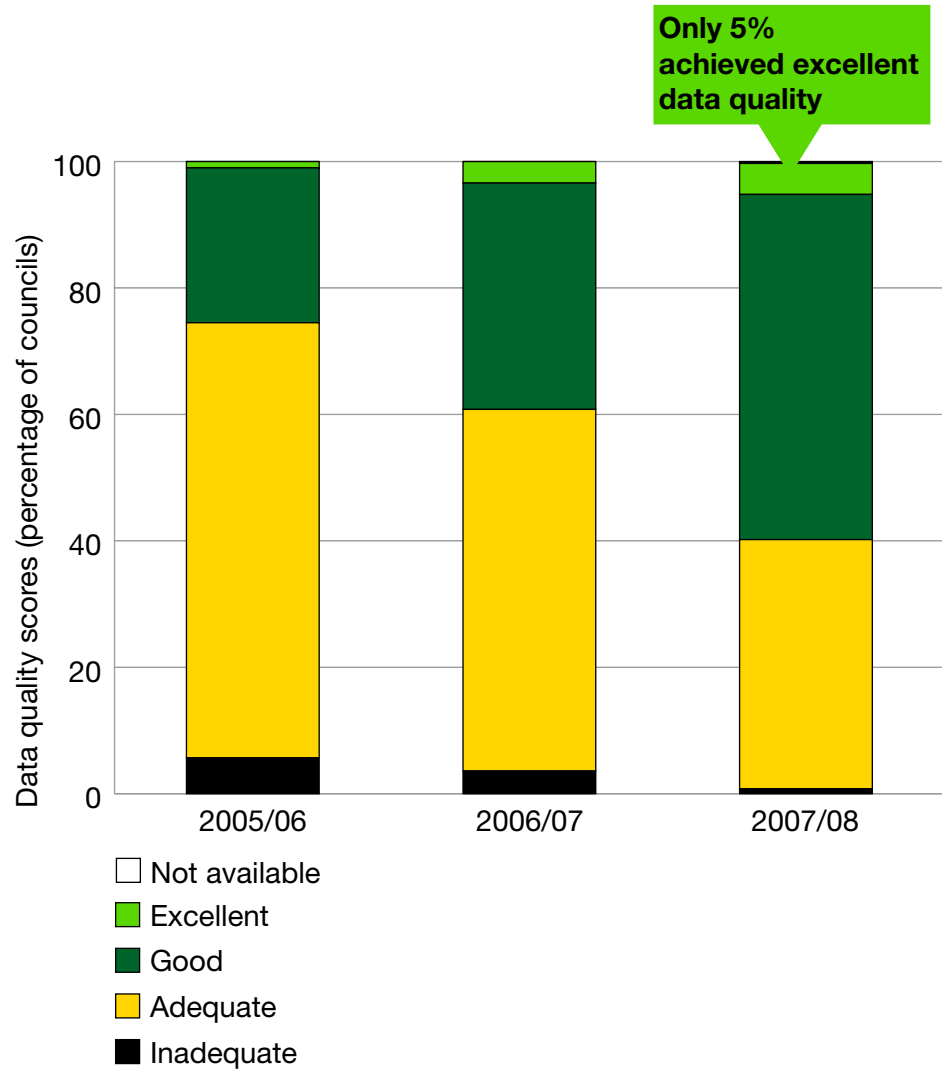
**22** Data quality is an integral foundation for all councils. Poor data quality puts councils at significant risk. Poor data can:

- damage public trust;
- weaken frontline service delivery;
- lead to financial loss and poor value for money;
- leave the vulnerable at risk;
- undermine partnership working; and
- impair the effectiveness of regulation.

**23** The Audit Commission has assessed data quality standards in councils on an annual basis since 2005. Data quality has improved and the majority of councils are now assessed as good. However, despite the improvements few councils are exemplary, with only 5 per cent assessed as excellent (Figure 8). The dimensions of good data quality are described in Appendix 3.

**5%**  
of all councils  
have excellent  
data quality

Figure 8: **Few councils have excellent data quality**



Source: *Audit Commission analysis of data quality audits*

## Too much data, too little information

**24** Many councils acknowledge that their data quality issues are fundamental in nature (Table 7).

Table 7: **Many councils acknowledge that their data quality issues are fundamental in nature**

<b>Duplication and inconsistency</b>	<p><b>‘We have big issues on data quality. If a user of our customer records system can’t find someone then we create another record – as a result one person features 67 times on one system.’</b></p> <p><b>Head of information, unitary council</b></p>
<b>Basic data do not exist</b>	<p><b>‘When you start scratching the surface you can find information is built out of sand. A year ago there were assumptions that were too optimistic – now we have a more realistic idea of where the organisation is. You can’t start the improvement journey until you understand where you are. Some of the basic information hasn’t been there at all – it wasn’t wrong it didn’t actually exist!’</b></p> <p><b>Director, county council</b></p>
<b>Poor system design</b>	<p><b>‘We have 300 people allegedly over 100 years old – this is because the default date of birth is 1900. We could spend ten years on improving data quality!’</b></p> <p><b>Head of information and knowledge, unitary council</b></p>
<b>Inefficiency and confusion</b>	<p><b>‘We need to put structure into the information we have got – which will make us more efficient. At the moment we might have 72 versions of the same file stored in several different systems. And we realise that information is being stored in places other than the core database. If this continues we will make poor decisions because our information will not be accurate, up to date or consistent.’</b></p> <p><b>IT professional, district council</b></p>

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork, 2009

### Case study 5: Ensuring data quality in Lewisham

Following the introduction of the new national indicator set, Lewisham Council created a data quality risk register that enables the Council to measure confidence in its ability to assess performance against the national indicators. The register also enables managers to decide where they need to focus their energies to improve data quality.

**‘We have a data quality risk register – which is a composite set of the national indicators. We have an ongoing dialogue with directorates which helps us measure the confidence we have on the data. Some indicators are green, but 43 are amber because we have concerns about the quality and some are red because we don’t know where we are going to source the data. This has helped us establish the baseline in terms of our confidence and quality. And shows us where we need to focus our energy.’**

**Head of policy and partnerships**

### Are you sharing data well?

- 25** Data need to be shared in order to:
- understand services from a user perspective;
  - understand where waste lies; and
  - minimise duplication.

**26** 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 and so create unnecessary barriers.

**‘Our staff don’t understand what they can and can’t do with information – so they don’t make full use of what they have got. There are some legitimate worries but there are a lot of myths as well. People take a knee-jerk reaction and hide behind the Data Protection Act. They say they are prevented from sharing information but they don’t really know that. They are hiding behind confidentiality.’**

**Knowledge management specialist**

**65%**  
**of councils still face problems sharing data with external partners**

## Too much data, too little information

**27** Further information to help councils understand the situations when data sharing might be possible, and when it probably is not, can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website.<sup>i</sup>

**28** Data sharing problems are most commonly linked to:

- poor local relationships;
- misinterpretation of data protection legislation; and
- problems overcoming different organisational priorities (Table 8).

Table 8: **Data sharing problems prevent services from being delivered well**

<b>Poor relationships</b>	<p><b>'Sharing information can drive improvements for the customer. If we shared more we could get more joint initiatives off the ground. Often separate initiatives have been started because we are not joined up and so duplication has gone on.'</b></p> <p><b>Service manager, district council</b></p>
<b>Misinterpretation of legislation</b>	<p><b>'Information sharing is the biggest barrier – even when agreements and protocols are in place. We are doing a new research project looking at improving poor outcomes for children and their families. Part of that project is about gathering information from other agencies. But we can't get basic data as there are misplaced concerns about confidentiality and data sharing.'</b></p> <p><b>Senior analyst, unitary council</b></p>
<b>Differing organisational priorities</b>	<p><b>'One key partner is notorious. They are reluctant to share information because of the potential impact on the local housing market. They have not been engaging in terms of coming to meetings. If we don't have this basic evidence, fundamental plans could be thrown out.'</b></p> <p><b>Service manager, district council</b></p>

Source: *Audit Commission fieldwork, 2009*

<sup>i</sup> Available at [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)

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### **Case study 6: Sharing data and tackling local problems in Leeds**

Leeds City Council worked with local partners to take decisions on how best to target the annual renewal of street lighting. The Council had higher than average crime rates, which needed to be reduced. The Council shared and analysed data to identify those parts of the City with the highest rates of crime committed on the street, after dark. New street lights were targeted in the areas highlighted through the analysis. Targeting new lighting in this way contributed to a 20 per cent reduction in crime.

**‘The reduction in crime we achieved was much higher than we initially anticipated. This was all achieved because of good data sharing and good analysis – which led to good results. There was no extra cost to the Council, because the programme was going ahead anyway. And the community got a benefit they wouldn’t have got if we hadn’t done the analysis.’**

**Analyst**

# The solutions

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## The solutions are not expensive

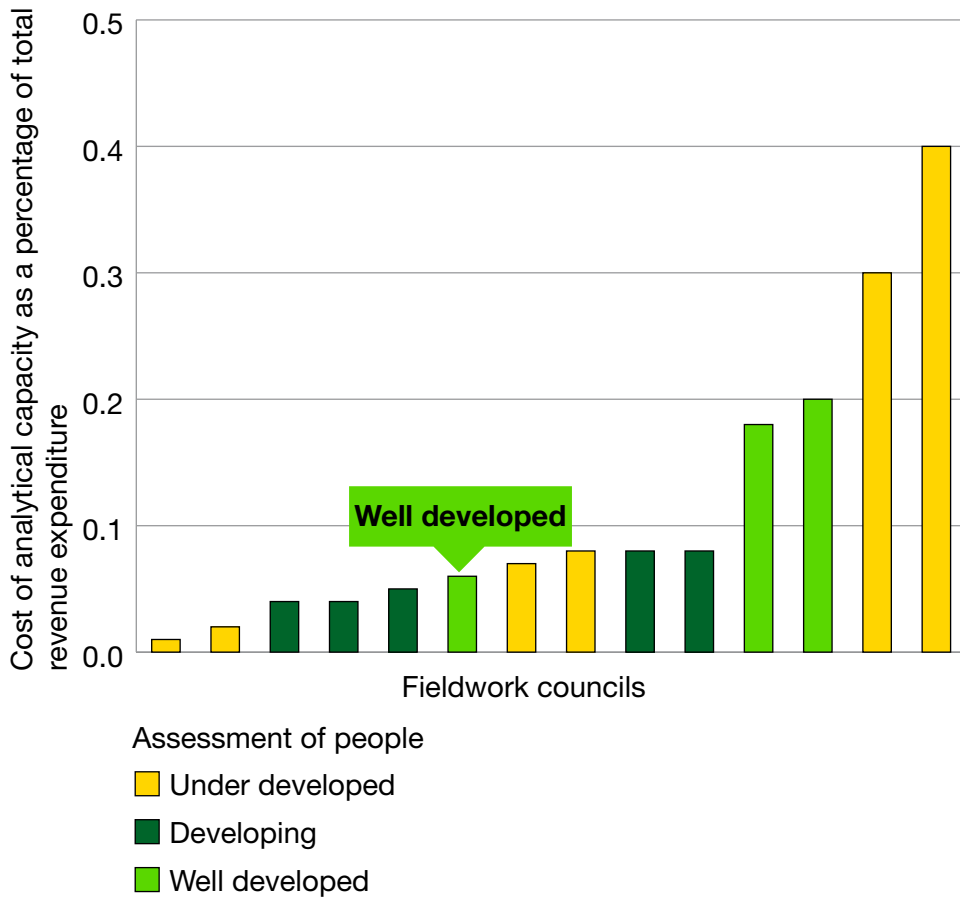
**29** Giving decision makers the information they need does not necessarily involve spending more money. Leadership from the top and ensuring that analytical resources are focused on identifying and highlighting the most salient facts are pivotal. Decision makers need to become more demanding, and analysts more expert and valued.

**30** Improving the information and decision making in a council can be achieved through a sustained focus on developing the culture, people and standards. Table 10 outlines the solutions to the range of problems councils face, and the tools that we provide to help.

**31** Building and sustaining a good culture, supported by an expert team and high standards, need not be expensive. A high quality intelligence or information unit can be provided with under 0.2 per cent of a council's expenditure. And the best performing intelligence units are not the most expensive (Figure 9).

Figure 9: **Cost of analytical resource in councils**

The best performing councils do not have the most expensive intelligence or information units



Source: Audit Commission, 2009

**32** Both central intelligence units and analysts in departments play important roles. How both sets of resources are used is more important than the volume of staff employed or the exact nature and balance of the organisational structure (Table 9).

Table 9: **Three different but effective structures**

<p><b>Worcestershire County Council</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Corporate research and intelligence (R &amp; I) unit of 14 full-time equivalent staff, with a focus on value added research and developing corporate intelligence. The R &amp; I unit serves the County Council, districts and partners.</li> <li>■ A small corporate improvement team of four full-time equivalents with a focus on helping to drive performance improvements from the corporate centre.</li> <li>■ Analytical function in each directorate, each responsible for the quality of its own information and performance improvement. However, each directorate’s analytical function has a close collaborative relationship with the R &amp; I unit and corporate improvement team.</li> </ul> <p><b>‘What makes dealing with R &amp; I easy is that it is a two-way flow. It is not just them asking us for data. We go to them and ask “can you tell us x, y and z?”. We ask them for information a lot. We know we will get stuff quickly and of a very good quality. For example, we had a major project on older people and deprivation and we asked R &amp; I for intelligent analysis to help us identify target areas.’</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Performance manager, adult social care</b></p>
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<b>Lewisham Council</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ A very small corporate team with a central focus on policy and partnerships.</li><li>■ Information and performance is owned by each of the five directorates. A senior performance and policy lead is in post in each directorate to own and lead the information agenda. This approach has broken down silos and facilitated a more corporate approach.</li><li>■ The five senior leads have the same job role and core job objectives. They work cohesively as a group, sharing information and project management.</li></ul> <p><b>‘At this level it works because there is no duplication; we don’t repeat things other people have worked on. There is synergy and coherence. This enables a good sharing of information. Any one policy is not affected by information from only one directorate. We are all informed by key information on all areas. This allows for a good flow of information both up and down the structure. And it gives us coherence in terms of service planning.’</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Head of policy and performance</b></p>
<b>Stockton-on-Tees Council</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Very small corporate improvement and intelligence team, responsible for sharing information and verification of data.</li><li>■ Small performance team in each service grouping.</li><li>■ Responsibility for information and performance improvement embedded into everyone’s job objectives across the whole Council, making it a core and joint responsibility for everyone.</li></ul> <p><b>‘Our competency framework makes information, performance and improvement everybody’s business and we are all measured on it. It is part of your job – whoever you are. Even our refuse collection teams have bought into the need for core standards. In their staff room they have the list of things like missed bins – and they now challenge their colleagues whose performance is less than good. They self manage in this way. It really is top to bottom – good leadership and members holding us to account.’</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Assistant chief executive</b></p>

Source: Audit Commission fieldwork

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## The tools to drive improvement

**33** This report is supported by a web based self-assessment framework that enables councils to benchmark their own position on the improvement journey. Beneath the framework is a web based toolkit that will help councils drive improvements appropriate to their organisation. The tools are designed to help councils implement the solutions to the problems that lie in each of the three key areas (Table 10).

Table 10: The range of problems, the solutions and the tools

	Councils should demonstrate	The range of problems	The solutions	Tools and resources <sup>i</sup>
<b>Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Commitment from members to an evidence based culture.</li> <li>■ Information used by members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies.</li> <li>■ Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ No senior or political commitment to the power and value of information.</li> <li>■ Decision makers do not demand relevant, high quality, well presented information (RQP).</li> <li>■ No two-way dialogue between decision makers and information providers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Ensuring commitment, from politicians and chief executive and senior team.</li> <li>■ Improve decision maker's understanding of RQP.</li> <li>■ Trust and collaboration between those who provide the information and those who make the decisions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ KLOE 2.2 assessments.</li> <li>■ Checklist for members on RQP information.</li> <li>■ Case studies.</li> <li>■ Decision making guides on RQP information.</li> </ul>
<b>People</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Good interpretation skills.</li> <li>■ Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making.</li> <li>■ Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff.</li> <li>■ Attractive jobs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Members and senior officers struggle to understand the information they receive.</li> <li>■ Analysts spend more time on routine tasks than on identifying and highlighting the most salient facts.</li> <li>■ Analysts are not expert and receive insufficient training and support.</li> <li>■ Duplication of roles and systems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Training and development in interpretation.</li> <li>■ Analytical resource focused where it matters.</li> <li>■ Recruitment and retention of skilled staff. Attractive jobs.</li> <li>■ Ensuring the structure for analytical support works.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Diaries for analysts.</li> <li>■ Resource mapping tool.</li> <li>■ Case studies.</li> <li>■ Links to training and advice.</li> </ul>
<b>Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Standards maintained through a common competency framework.</li> <li>■ Excellent data quality.</li> <li>■ Established data-sharing protocols.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Poor governance for data quality.</li> <li>■ Data are too often inaccurate and not fit for purpose.</li> <li>■ Data are too rarely shared with external partners. Little or no awareness of data collected internally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Excellent data quality and governance.</li> <li>■ Robust data-sharing protocols.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Data quality standards.</li> <li>■ Case studies.</li> <li>■ Links to training and advice.</li> </ul>

Source: *Audit Commission, 2009*

<sup>i</sup> All tools and resources are web based and are available at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

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**34** Several of the tools will help senior decision makers to demand the relevant, high quality and well presented information that they need. A checklist sets out the generic questions members should ask about the papers that they receive when asked to make a decision. We have developed web based guides that will assist senior decision makers in specifying fit for purpose information for the following eight decisions:

- reviewing charges for leisure services;
- deciding on the frequency of waste collection;
- agreeing traffic calming measures;
- selecting services to be delivered electronically;
- setting charges for town centre car parks;
- deciding on library opening hours;
- deciding on eligibility for telecare services; and
- deciding on school closures.

**35** All the tools are available on our website, [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow), including case studies of good practice drawn from all our fieldwork sites.

## Conclusion

**36** Now, more than ever, councils need to make good use of resources. Having relevant, high quality and well presented information should be the foundation for this. Few councils have appreciated and exploited information fully. There has never been a better time to do so.

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## Appendix 1 Methodology

Research for this study was carried out between September 2008 and January 2009. The research comprised four key elements:

- Analysis of data from Comprehensive Performance Assessment and data quality assessments. The findings draw on corporate assessments and the final Comprehensive Performance Assessment report published in 2009 (covering all single-tier and unitary councils). And analysis of data quality assessments conducted between 2005 and 2008.
- A combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups with 236 people across 15 councils. The following councils participated in the research:
  - Bolsover District Council;
  - Brighton and Hove City Council;
  - Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council;
  - Leeds Metropolitan Borough Council;
  - London Borough of Lewisham Council;
  - London Borough of Redbridge Council;
  - London Borough of Richmond Council;
  - Northamptonshire County Council;
  - Sedgemoor District Council;
  - Somerset County Council;
  - Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
  - Swindon Borough Council;
  - Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council;
  - Worcestershire County Council; and
  - Wychavon District Council.The Audit Commission thanks the councils that participated in the research.
- Diaries and proformas were used to collect additional data on capacity and costs in seven of our fieldwork sites.
- A web based survey of 388 councils produced a 52 per cent response rate.

Additionally, eight decision making workshops were held with 55 officers and members to explore the concepts in *In The Know* in a practical context. Each workshop focused on a specific decision that councils need to take and identified what good information means in the context of that decision. The findings from the workshops have been developed into guides that will assist senior decision makers in specifying fit for purpose information for the decisions.

Natalie Penrose and Alastair Evans project managed this study, supported by Elly Watson and Amie Brown. Neal Harris and Phillipa Lynch provided support at some of the field visits. Paul Barlow and Dhanwant Rai managed the decision making workshops and developed the decision making guides. Chloe Schneider provided administrative support. Simon Mahony and John Kirkpatrick were respectively the head of studies and director for this study.

The external advisory group for this study is set out in the table opposite.

Who	Organisation
Jonathan Evans	Local Government Association
Robert Rutherford and Rachel Moreton	Department of Communities and Local Government
Tom Smith	Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion
Dave Wright, Phillip Virgo, Jim Norton and Dave Waltho	EURIM – The Information Alliance
Adrian Barker	Improvement and Development Agency
Andy Davis	Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association

The Commission thanks all those who were involved. However, the views expressed in this report are those of the Audit Commission alone.

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## Appendix 2 Good information and data quality

*In the Know* (Ref. 1) describes relevant, high quality and well presented information (Table 11).

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Table 11: **Good information – relevant, high quality and presented well**

<b>Relevance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Different decisions require different information, and judging what information is relevant for a decision is not easy.</li><li>■ Performance indicators alone will not be adequate for important decisions.</li><li>■ Aggregating information (for example over geography or time), using a range of information from different sources, and sharing information, will generate a fuller picture.</li></ul>
<b>Quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Data should be captured once and used numerous times.</li><li>■ Data should be sufficiently accurate for the intended purpose. Highly accurate data are often neither cost-effective nor possible for many decisions.</li><li>■ Decision makers need to judge how quickly and frequently they need information. Some information may need to be updated and available immediately, in real-time, but for many political, financial and strategic issues, understanding trends over time is more important than immediacy.</li></ul>
<b>Presentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Relevant, good quality, information will not help decision makers if they cannot understand it.</li><li>■ How information is presented, and what story it helps to tell, can affect the decisions based upon it.</li><li>■ The way information is presented, therefore, needs to be tailored for both the audience and the decision at hand.</li></ul>

Source: *Audit Commission*

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*Improving Information to Support Decision Making: Standards for Better Data Quality* (Ref. 2) describes the six dimensions of good quality data (Table 12).

Table 12: **The six dimensions of good quality data**

<b>Accuracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Captured once.</li> <li>■ Captured as close to point of activity as possible.</li> <li>■ Balanced with the importance with the uses for the data; and the costs and efforts of collection.</li> </ul>
<b>Validity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Recorded and used in compliance with relevant requirements.</li> <li>■ Where proxy data are used bodies must consider how well these data satisfy the intended purposes.</li> </ul>
<b>Reliability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Data should reflect stable and consistent data collection processes.</li> </ul>
<b>Timeliness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Data should be captured as quickly as possible after the event or activity.</li> <li>■ Data must be available quickly and frequently enough to support information needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Relevance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Data captured should be relevant to the purposes for which they are used.</li> </ul>
<b>Completeness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Data requirements should be clearly specified based in the information needs of the body.</li> </ul>

*Source: Audit Commission*

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## Appendix 3 References

**1** Audit Commission, *In the Know: Using Information to Make Better Decisions – A Discussion Paper*, Audit Commission, February 2008.

**2** Audit Commission, *Improving Information to Support Decision Making: Standards for Better Data Quality*, Audit Commission, March 2007.

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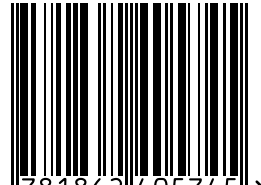
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