



Research Summary

August 2009

Is there something I should know?

The Audit Commission's recipe for building an evidence-based culture in local strategic partnerships.

This month, the Audit Commission released a paper, entitled *Is there something I should know*, focused on helping local areas to use intelligence effectively to deliver outcomes. The report is based on detailed case studies across 15 local authorities and discusses the pitfalls and solutions commonly experienced in intelligence working. This document summarises the main points of the Audit Commission report. It also outlines Sandwell's experiences of these issues and where it has already attempted to solve these problems. In general, Sandwell seems to be better placed than most authorities in its use of local intelligence, but there remain some significant challenges on our horizon. These challenges are spread across all three of the key drivers identified by the Audit Commission, and readers are invited to use this document to assess whether needs and responsibilities are currently being addressed adequately.

The three areas which authorities need to address:

Councils need to combine culture, people and standards in order to excel

This means

Culture

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.

People

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.

Standards

Good data quality and information shared effectively with partners

- Standards maintained through a common competency framework.
- Excellent data quality.
- Established data-sharing protocols.

Source: Audit Commission

Key Self-Assessment Questions

- Do our decision makers demand relevant, high quality information?
- Do our decision makers recognise the value of intelligence?
- Do our decision makers receive information that they can understand and which they can use?
- Are our analysts spending time on the things that will make the biggest difference?
- Are our analysts experts?
- Is our data accurate and fit for purpose?

Report Findings:

Overall

- Most councils recognise the importance of good intelligence use and 94% said information was an increased strategic priority. However, most authorities admitted that they were missing opportunities in developing the right culture, people or standards and were therefore missing significant opportunities to improve services and manage risks.
- Most councils recognised that decisions are not generally driven by robust intelligence, even though there were aspirations to operate in an evidence-based culture. The Audit Commission analysis classifies fewer than 5% of councils as demonstrating 'excellent' data use. Sandwell is provisionally rated as 'good/adequate' at present.

Culture

- 80% of authorities said that the lack of in-depth analysis is a major problem. Sandwell has recognised this too, and has commissioned the Fresh Look programme to mobilise analytical resources across the partnership to explore the most important issues in depth.
- Problems can be overcome without spending more money- the Audit Commission estimates that under 0.2% of an authority's overall spend is sufficient to provide excellent service. Sandwell is currently reviewing future spend on core research support and the necessary structures needed to provide the right kind of intelligence where it is needed most.
- Changing the culture amongst *decision makers* to communicate information needs more effectively ensures that analysis is carried out appropriately. Sandwell is still at an early stage in this process- a better dialogue between senior managers and councillors on the one hand and analysts on the other needs to be developed. This process is currently being developed through the relationship between SIG and Partnership Performance Group (PPG), but there is room for further improvement and smarter, more transparent two-way communication between decision makers and analysts.

People

- Using well-trained analysts to *analyse*, rather than routinely report or perform data processing tasks will greatly improve efficiency. Sandwell has recently set up a Strategic Intelligence Group (SIG) to ensure that these data-processing efficiencies are a key driver for the ongoing development of the partnership local intelligence system, *Sandwell Trends*.
- Building capacity amongst members and senior managers through training and better engagement with analysts is essential. Plans have been made to engage cabinet and scrutiny members in an intelligence training session. This training could be rolled out to

other members and senior managers. The recent creation of the Partnership Research and Intelligence Champion role, occupied by Cllr. Simon Hackett is a positive step towards analysts working with members in a more pro-active way.

Standards

- Solid data sharing arrangements between partners should be pursued vigorously. Data sharing protocols have been developed through the ICT steering group, and will be regularly reviewed by SIG. The sharing of financial information between partners has been identified as a risk, however.

Summary

- Most councils are classed by the Audit Commission as *under-developed* or *developing* on intelligence use. Sandwell is certainly better placed than most authorities in terms of its response to the intelligence agenda, particularly on two of the three key strands concerning *people* and *standards*. Intelligence *culture* is perhaps less well developed in Sandwell (see table on p4), but as listed overleaf, Sandwell is taking steps to improve in all three areas.
- The table overleaf provides a summary of recommendations and Sandwell's responses.

Action

To discuss any of the issues raised in this note, or to make us aware of your own research and intelligence needs, please contact Andrew Turvey on xt 3012, or Research Sandwell's general number, xt 3057.

Further Reading

[Is there something I should know?](#) Full report from the Audit Commission

[Delivering Local Intelligence](#). Sandwell's consultation document for developing the local intelligence system.

[In the Know](#). 2008 Audit Commission report on intelligence use

[Supporting local information and research: Understanding demand and improving capacity](#). 2009 DCLG report

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

	Councils should demonstrate	Common problems	Audit Commission suggested solutions	What Sandwell is currently doing	What Sandwell could do next
Culture	<p>Commitment from members to an evidence based culture</p> <p>Information used by members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies</p> <p>Collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information</p>	<p>Decision makers do not demand relevant, high quality, well presented information.</p> <p>There is not two-way dialogue between decision makers and information providers</p>	<p>Ensuring commitment from politicians and chief executive and senior team</p> <p>Improve decision maker's understanding of RQP</p> <p>Trust and collaboration between those who provide the information and those who make the decisions</p>	<p>Training session for cabinet and scrutiny members</p> <p>Using PPG and SIG to focus key intelligence work and develop reporting tiers (e.g. through the Fresh Look programme)</p> <p>VfM scorecards- quarterly reporting to TMT & performance board</p> <p>Developing customer intelligence analytical work linked to core analytical capacity</p> <p>Partnership Research and Intelligence champion role created.</p>	<p>Greater involvement of analysts in key decision-making forums</p> <p>Develop capacity amongst decision makers for understanding and demanding timely and focused intelligence, using LIS as catalyst</p> <p>Develop easy-to-use tools for service managers and councillors to analyse intelligence directly, supported by training and experts</p> <p>Continue to develop varied methods of succinct reporting and analysis, suited to needs of user</p>
People	<p>Good interpretation skills</p> <p>Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making</p> <p>Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff</p> <p>Attractive jobs</p>	<p>Members and senior officers struggle to understand the information they receive</p> <p>Analysts spend more time on routine tasks than on identifying and highlighting the salient facts</p> <p>Analysts are not expert and receive insufficient training and support</p> <p>Duplication of roles and systems</p>	<p>Training and development in interpretation</p> <p>Analytical resource focused where it matters</p> <p>Recruitment and retention of skilled staff</p> <p>Attractive analyst jobs</p> <p>Ensuring the structure for analytical support works</p>	<p>Training session for cabinet and scrutiny members</p> <p>Analytical resources more focused and more efficient through creation of SIG to harmonise effort across Partnership</p> <p>Development of LIS to automate much of the procedural work of core and outposted analysts, freeing up analytical time</p> <p>Core research team currently maintains well-trained thematic experts with analytical experts also placed within themes and partner organisations</p>	<p>Extend training to all members and senior officers through the corporate development programme</p> <p>Engage in a thorough review of intelligence functions across Partnership, using Audit Commission self-assessment toolkit.</p>
Standards	<p>Standards maintained through a common competency framework</p> <p>Excellent data quality</p> <p>Established data-sharing protocols</p>	<p>Data are too often inaccurate and not fit for purpose</p> <p>Data only rarely shared with external partners</p>	<p>Excellent data quality and governance</p> <p>Robust data-sharing protocols</p>	<p>Data quality strategy to support KLOE 2.2, led by performance development.</p> <p>Data quality reviewed as process for adding information to LIS.</p> <p>Information sharing protocol developed championed at partnership level by SIG</p>	<p>Use LIS to free up some capacity for analysts to improve data quality held on Sandwell's systems.</p> <p>Develop user-focused standards for data retention at source, independently of ICT considerations</p> <p>Promote culture of data sharing as the norm, rather than as exception</p>

Adapted from Audit Commission (2009)

Glossary: **RQP** Relevance, Quality & Presentation; **SIG** Strategic Intelligence Group; **PPG** Partnership Performance Group; **LIS** Local Intelligence System; **KLOE** Key Line of Enquiry; **VfM** Value for Money; **TMT** Thematic Management Team; **Fresh Look** a programme of in-depth analysis focusing on improving a clearly defined set of outcomes.