DELIVERING LOCAL INTELLIGENCE

In the current climate of information proliferation, it is necessary to develop more intelligent tools to help us navigate through the rich sphere of information and analysis available to us. Acting for the Local Strategic Partnership and Sandwell Council, Research Sandwell have been tasked to develop an interactive website to assist in the timely delivery of information and analysis to a wide range of audiences including council officers, members, the public and partner organisations. The following document sets out the drivers for developing local intelligence strategies, the benefits of doing so, and a proposed method of achieving a local intelligence system. We would very much welcome your views on the system and the processes we are suggesting will deliver it.

The Context

Several recent government documents set out the importance of using local intelligence to deliver services and improve opportunities for people at a local level. The Audit Commission has produced a document, *In the Know*, which sets out several important principles concerning use of intelligence, many of which will be used to carry out the new Comprehensive Area Assessments. In particular, the Audit Commission state that local assessments will hinge more and more on the quality and use of local information. The Department for Communities and Local Government has also commissioned a report by Paul Foley, *Local Intelligence Systems: A Review of Their Role, Characteristics and Benefits*, which provides a valuable overview of the experiences of authorities that have already invested heavily in intelligence systems. The following document draws heavily on these two papers to demonstrate how such a system might work for Sandwell.

It is worth noting that Sandwell already has a partially complete local intelligence system in the shape of the Research Sandwell website (**www.researchsandwell.org.uk**), which has already begun to organise data and analysis across all of the thematic areas of the LSP. However, the existing website still subscribes to a provider and passive receiver model, in which information is merely bestowed upon the user. In order for capacity to be properly built throughout the council, its partners and its citizens, we need to move to a model in which all users own the data and the analytical tools, and can therefore determine for themselves what intelligence they see, in what format it is delivered and how they use it. To this extent, we are proposing that we set up a new website specifically geared around the needs and intentions of the user.

> "We are drowning in information, but thirsting for intelligence."
> *Natalie Penrose, Senior Manager, Audit Commission*

**The need for co-ordination of local intelligence**

At present, Sandwell has a very large number of information repositories in which a large amount of information is stored for operational use, but which is not being used to inform strategic decision making. One of the drivers for attempting to co-ordinate this information is that of the upcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment, for which Sandwell MBC and its strategic partners will be assessed on not only their ability to understand their local area, but also upon the structures it has invested in to ensure that intelligence is available to those who need it in an appropriate, useful, timely and reliable manner. This level of co-ordination is currently not as well developed in Sandwell as we would like, and indeed, the level of infomation use and sharing across the LSP has been identified as a major risk in the corporate Risk Management Action Plan.

Whilst a number of ad-hoc data sharing arrangements are beginning to take shape, there is still no single central trustworthy source for information which all can use and rely on. For example, an inter-agency discussion over a single issue, such as the number of affordable homes in the borough, can yield as many as four or five different figures, each of which may have some statistical merit, but none of which can instantly and obviously be recognised as being the definitive number for the borough. A co-ordinated system which acts as a focal point for these discussions could quickly and easily yield a consensual definition which can then be used by everybody. Development of a single-portal LIS would significantly reduce the threat of the risks associated with poor LSP information use.

Another key requirement for local authorities is the Duty to Involve, including the duty to consult and the duty to inform. A fully-developed local intelligence system would support each of these strands, incorporating the existing consultation database to support local consultation activity, and also providing a public portal for accessing strategic information about socio-economic groups and geographical areas within the borough.

A third reason for investing in a local intelligence model is the expected reduction in research investment in the immediate future. Projects which require often intense analytical support for set-up and running will not be supported in the same way under the current funding regime. Therefore, it is expected that those leading regeneration project areas and on developing funding bid applications, for example, will need to move to a self-serve model where the information and tools are available to allow knowledge to be tailored by the user to meet the user's own needs. This will also help to build intelligence capacity across the LSP, an ambition which is one of the Audit Commission's key recommendations for a successful area.

A fourth reason for pursuing this approach is that in formalising strategic data usage across the board, more of the existing resources of central and peripheral research functions can be turned to analysis of information, rather than the mere processing of it. This again, needs to be a key goal for Sandwell MBC and partners in the coming years.

Percentage of councils demonstrating good information use
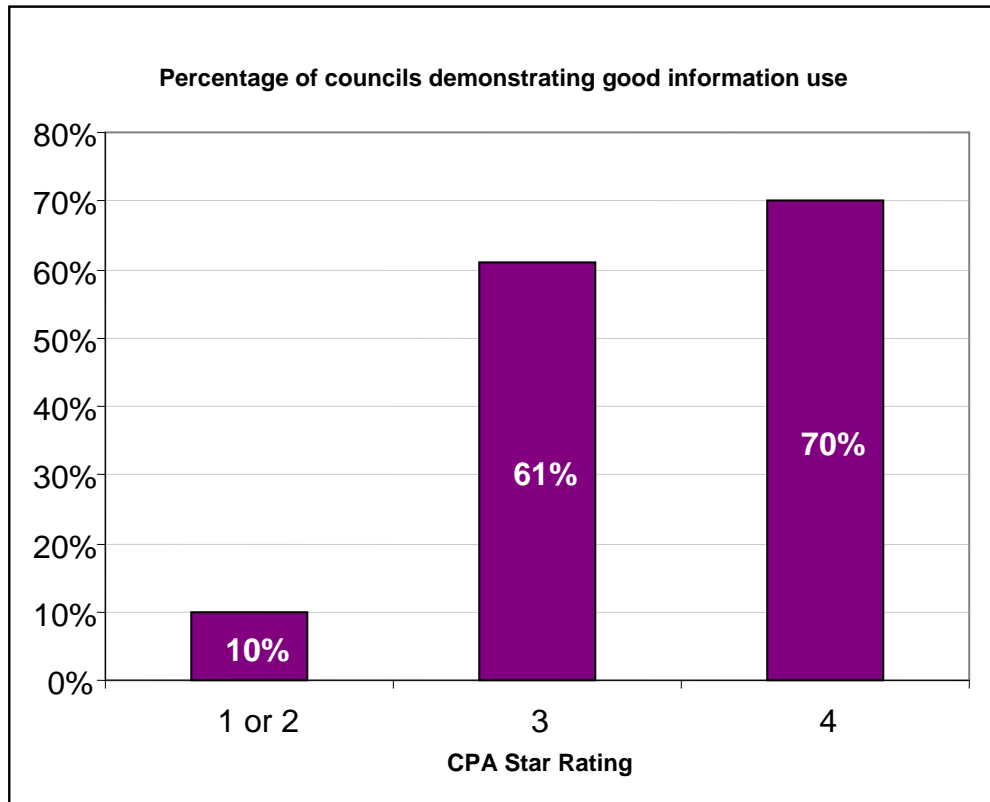
Source: Audit Commission analysis of corporate assessments from December 2005 to June 2007

The Principles of Operation

The new system should operate according to the following principles:

- The system should provide data and the tools for users to manipulate that data to suit their needs. It should also provide analysis of that information with which to help guide users through the complex landscape of information available to them.

- The data gathered for presentation and manipulation should be collected at the most detailed level possible in order that information can be effectively combined with other sources and to allow the dynamic creation of geographical boundaries to suit the needs of a diverse range of users (for example, the police, the voluntary sector, local community groups, regeneration areas and so on).

- Although data may be collected at the lowest geographical level and for individual people or families, it is important to point out that it will not be disclosed at any level which can identify individuals, small groups or households. Rather, analysis will focus on small geographical areas or groups of people.

- Officers, members and the public will own the data which they submit to the site. A steering group will be established, whose role will be to oversee the development of the system and to ensure the smooth running of it, the utility and timeliness of the analyses and data and that legal and data protection requirements are met.

- Operationally, the system will support the principle of Capture Once, Use Numerous Times (or COUNT): each set of information will have one owner, and therefore once that

data is uploaded, everyone can use the same universally recognised source, rather than relying on a multitude of analyses which can be in circulation for any one set of data, and which often result in confusion.

- The system will act as a catalyst for reviewing data quality throughout the LSP. In order to be useful, the information entered into the system must meet certain criteria for accuracy, reliability and completeness. This is an approach that will help to address the Council's responsibilities around the Key Line of Enquiry on Data Quality, an important part of the CAA.

- The system will be a living system in that acquisition and delivery of information and the tools to deliver intelligence from that information will change and adapt to suit the changing needs and demands of its users. For example, new geographical boundaries are regularly created in Sandwell, and the system should be capable of creating output for new boundaries as a matter of course.

- The system will link data from a variety of local and national sources. It will be able to communicate with Performance Plus, with similar systems in the PCT, with national systems, such as the website for the Office for National Statistics and "the Hub," the central government data warehouse for the national indicator set. Where direct communication is not possible, procedures will be set up to regularly upload information from these sources.

- Data will be relevant, timely and useful.

- Analyses of information will be provided according to a schedule drawn up in consultation with users. Whilst Research Sandwell will contribute significantly to these analyses, it is expected that the majority of analysis will come from other professionals.

> *"The commitment of senior management to research is strongly correlated with performance."*
> *DCLG, Supporting Local Information and Research: Understanding Demand and Improving Capacity (2008)*

The Proposed Website
The proposed features of the website are:

- A data warehouse in which fine-grained data is stored on a secure database, adhering to data quality standards.

- Facilities to allow authorised users to update and upload their own data.

- Data links between the LIS and: Sandwell's Performance Plus system; operational systems such as Capita One and SWIFT; other intelligence systems such as Black Country Knowledge and West Midlands Regional Observatory.

- Tools to allow the manipulation of the stored data on-line, including: mapping tools; charting tools; tables and summary information. These will allow the user to explore data by geography, by demographic group, by business type or combinations of factors (for example, White schoolchildren living in Wednesbury).

- Tools also to allow comparison between Sandwell and other key areas of interest, whether they be statistical neighbours, other Black Country boroughs, or regional and national comparators.

- A programme of briefing notes and reports covering a range of themes at varying levels of breadth and depth.

- A programme of technical notes on methodology, best research practice, statistics and the like.

- A forum for the discussion of thematic and strategic issues and for discussing research methods.

- User-centred and topic-centred homepages. For example, there might be a launch page for data and analysis around each national indicator which allows viewing of performance, targets, disaggregated information and other relevant associated data and analysis. Some of this content may link directly to the other systems concerned, such as Performance Plus.

- Appropriate data security measures.

> "The Local Information System is now seen as a critical backbone to the decision-making process."
> *Wendy Pontin, Norfolk Data Observatory.*

The benefits

- A common evidence base
- Open and transparent government
- Improved response to CAA assessments
- More effective targeting of resources
- Maximises use and dissemination of locally held data
- Better evidence-based policy
- Quicker responses to change, better sensitivity to need
- Builds capacity for interpretation and policy making across the Partnership
- A more self-aware organisation
- A more informed and empowered citizenry

The structures around the system

- A steering group drawn from senior managers, strategic partners and professionals dealing with data quality who can respond to feedback, develop strategy and direction and decide upon priorities. This group will also lead on pinning progress to emergent data quality and information sharing strategies.

- A working group for each of the major components of the system: a) data collection and processing, b) systems design, c) user interface design, d) systems integration. These groups will be drawn together from a wide range of council and LSP services and functions, depending on the work that needs to be done.

- A project manager to ensure that the system is progressing according to timetable and, more importantly, meets the needs of its users and the criteria set out by the steering group.

- A citizen and voluntary sector user group to ensure that the needs of the public are being met.

- Over the long term, user groups will be created to look at ways in which the system can be continually improved and developed.

> "After human resources, property and money, information is the fourth estate of a local authority. Its capital value is included in calculations for our Gross National Product."
> *Lee Hemsworth, Head of Information and Knowledge Management, Leeds City Council*

Consultation Questions

In order to ensure that this large and ambitious project is developed in an appropriate direction, it is essential that we seek the views of all potential users of the system. To this end, we have developed a series of questions to form the basis of the initial consultation exercise. Whilst we welcome responses to these questions in particular, we would be keen to hear from users on any aspect of this programme.

Question 1: Do you agree that there is a need for a way of managing co-ordinated intelligence as set out in this document? If so, why? If not, why not?

Question 2: Do you agree with the principles of operation as set out above? Would you add anything else, or remove any of the points?

Question 3: Do you agree with the proposals for the features of the website? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Question 4: What kind of tasks would you like to use a local intelligence system to support? Are there any special features of tools such as mapping, tables or graphs that you find particularly useful?

Question 5: Would you be happy to upload any of your data to the system as it is currently proposed? Are there any particular requirements you might have in order to facilitate this process?

Question 6: Do you have any views on the suitability of the proposed structures to support the development of the system?

Question 7: Thinking about briefing notes or other in-depth analysis which might be produced, are there any specific issues you would like to see deeper discussions or publications on?

Question 8: Do you make use of the current **www.researchsandwell.org.uk** website? If so, what are your impressions about what works and what does not?

Question 9: Do you have any other comments or observations which you would like to raise about this proposal?

In order to respond to these questions, please visit our consultation page at :
www.researchsandwell.org.uk/research/navigation/lis_consult.asp

Or, email your answers to: **researchsandwell@sandwell.gov.uk**.

Or alternatively, please get in touch with the team by telephone on 0121 569 3057 and mention the LIS consultation.

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Andrew Turvey,
Principal Research Officer
Research Sandwell
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www.researchsandwell.org.uk