

Case Study

Harlow Council: Using LG Inform

Harlow Council is using the Local Government Association's (LGA) benchmarking data service, LG Inform, to collate and present information more efficiently. In time this will help members and officers make faster, better-informed decisions about the council's financial and other performance. The initiative is saving officer time and council resources and will ultimately help the public to access information more easily, informing their views on local services and issues.

The challenge

Analysing data and creating reports have historically been very time consuming. Harlow analyses its cost and performance data each year, examining the council's expenditure against performance across a range of key performance indicators which are benchmarked against similar authorities. This report provides valuable information for members and officers which informs spending priorities and other key decisions.

In the past, compiling this report involved contacting six similar authorities and asking them for financial and performance information. This would be analysed and presented through bespoke charts, graphs and tables. Working across different councils in this way took a lot of officer time. The methodology would be different in different councils, either in terms of what data was collected or how it was presented.

LG Inform

Harlow was among an initial group of 'learning councils' leading and piloting LG Inform. This online tool brings together a range of performance data from councils and fire authorities alongside contextual and financial information. Users can make comparisons with other authorities, groups of authorities and construct reports.

Katrina Davies, Policy and Performance Project Officer, has taken a lead role in piloting and using LG Inform at Harlow Council. With colleagues, she decided to test whether the tool could be used to compile the annual value for money analysis. “This is something that previously involved a few months of work as we had to contact other authorities and download data from government websites, then analyse and chart it all before finally copying the results into Word and providing a narrative for the report.”

Katrina’s team changed their report’s content slightly as LG Inform doesn’t yet have all the out-turn data the team had previously used. For example, their report drew down to a high level of detail for certain budgets, such as transport and highways. LG Inform doesn’t yet have this level of detail but there are plans to incorporate it in the future. For now, the Harlow team were happy to add extra information from other locations. The data can be accessed from other places, such as the Department for Communities and Local Government, but the Harlow team found this was not always presented in an easily accessible or consistent format. For example, it can be hard to search for information unless you know the national indicator number. “The search facility on LG Inform is a lot smarter, so if you are looking for levels of household waste, you can search under ‘recycling’ or ‘waste’ and find the information.”

A speedy process

The main advantage of LG Inform is speed. A report that used to take three months and drew on substantial officer input from seven councils now takes just a few days. The basic report was prepared in a day; a few days were spent adding extra information and context.

Katrina says: “The whole experience was very positive. Not all the metrics we had used previously were available but the search tool suggested others with similar key words. I could find all the information I needed, chart it, tabulate it and add narrative all in one place, then export and share it as a ready-to-go document. The report builder was intuitive, loaded quickly and was a breeze to use. Having the same format and required steps for each component meant I could find what I was looking for and import it quickly with much less chance of data error.

“Similarly, there was no need for manual calculation as LG Inform can provide several different types of output depending on the metric. This saved me lots of time and reduced risks of errors. The fact I could select a multitude of different charts and levels of analysis again saved many weeks of work.”

Information sharing

Harlow has taken the initiative in using the new tool to provide information that is now shared across the council. Katrina says: “One of the problems previously was the methodology differences between councils. LG Inform takes care of that and you can easily find what you need. I look forward to using it to produce more reports in the future.”

Katrina says it is difficult to quantify the cost savings, but LG Inform has already provided “significant savings” in time and resources. Individual council services are using the tailored information to improve their services and deliver them more effectively. For example, in the overall budget setting process the information has helped to identify efficiency savings. It has been used to inform policies on areas such as older people’s services and community cohesion, again leading to service improvement.

Local government has an obligation to be open and transparent, and LG Inform helps to facilitate this as it can now be viewed by the public. Councils can embed reports, along with supporting information, into their websites. In Harlow, local people are now able to gain a more accurate picture of the council’s performance in terms of benchmarking information, which is now regularly reported as part of the published quarterly joint finance and performance report. Harlow believes LG Inform could be a useful tool for citizens who want to find out about the work of their council and compare it to others.

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