Case Study

Breckland and South Holland councils: Using LG Inform Plus to create ward member 'infopacks'

Breckland and South Holland councils used the LG Inform Plus reporting tool to create 'infopack' briefing documents for all councillors, including those who were newly elected. These provided ward level information which gave councillors increased knowledge and enhanced understanding of their area.

Jessica Woodhouse (Corporate Improvement and Performance Team Leader) headed up the council's work in this area although creating the packs was a team effort.

The challenge

The team were keen to provide useful and informative ward level materials which could be presented to councillors during their initial induction at the council. Jessica explains:

"We wanted to make re-elected and newly elected members more aware and provide more knowledge and insight into their ward areas when the member induction took place".

As a newly formed/restructured fully shared function between the two councils, the team was keen to show members how it could support evidence based working and information gathering and provide vital intelligence for use in council decision making. The infopacks helped to demonstrate this in a practical way:

"I think it helped us really get the message across by giving councillors that information (infopacks) at their induction".

Time and resources

The two councils had produced broader information documents for councillors in the past but these were purely on a district wide basis. Prior to using LG Inform Plus the process was lengthy, time consuming and resource intensive and involved detailed interrogation of ONS data spreadsheets.

"Although all the information …is available in the public domain through other means (such as health profiles and ONS) the time savings of collating that information on a ward basis is one of the main benefits of LG Inform Plus."

It was only LG Inform Plus that made it possible for the team to move on to producing infopacks at a ward level at all, from a time and resource perspective:

"Frankly, we wouldn't have progressed this and produced these documents if we hadn't had LG Inform Plus to help us as a tool to do it on a ward by ward basis. The time and resource commitment that would be required to produce these documents with data specific to each ward would have been completely unachievable without a tool to help us do it in that way."

Pack production process

The team used the authorities' new corporate plan (which came into effect just prior to the elections) as a starting point to structure the infopacks. The four corporate priorities focussed around the economy, service provision, community and places and the team considered what it would be helpful for councillors to know at ward level for each of these.

Jessica explains that for councils thinking of producing infopacks:

"I would suggest that they consider the use of themes. That was quite helpful in linking the documents to our corporate plan and basing the information around these….it is important to focus on the information you want to look at or the question you are trying to answer because if you try and use all the data available in LG Inform Plus in a single report it will be overwhelming and people won't be as engaged or interested in it".

Adaptable functionality

The team used a wide range of the functionality available in LG Inform Plus.

The full list of metrics within the standards pages was used to identify the metrics that were available in the system. These were moved onto an Excel sheet then tagged according to which of the four priorities they would sit under.

The text tokens feature gave the team the ability to build one template that would change the content of the text in relation to the wards that were being featured in each particular pack. Jessica explains:

"The ability to create one template and adapt this to any of the wards in both districts using a simple change of a dropdown menu was a main feature…"

The natural neighbourhoods feature was also used. Breckland council was going through a ward review at the same time that the packs were being produced. The election was taking place with the new wards meaning that the new councillors and those that were re-elected had slightly different ward layout boundaries to those they had before. The natural neighbourhoods tool enabled the production of statistics that reflected these new boundaries.
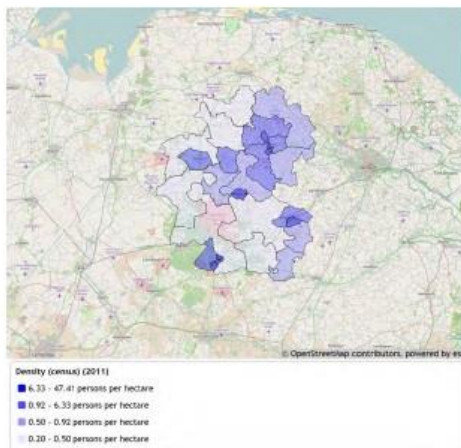
The variety of different charts, graphs and maps available in LG Inform Plus to display information also made the infopacks visually appealing, clear and varied. As Jessica highlights:

"Something we were conscious of is that in some reports the use of the same type of format throughout the whole document can make it less interesting for the reader and having the ability to use bar charts, maps, tables, and pie charts broke the document up more and made it more accessible to the audience".

Figure 1: Infopack page showing population density and household information
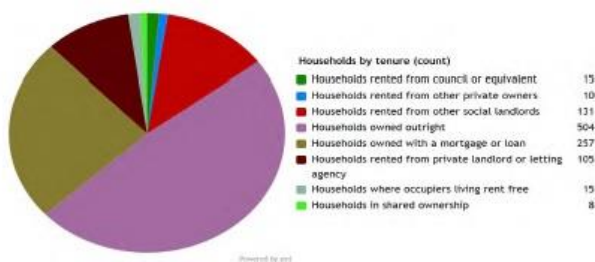

Population Density
Ashill ward has an average of 0.52 persons per hectare, compared to an average 1.00 persons per hectare across the entire Breckland District. Ashill is ranked 20 out of 27 wards in Breckland.

Density (census) (2011)
- 6.33 - 47.41 persons per hectare
- 0.92 - 6.33 persons per hectare
- 0.50 - 0.92 persons per hectare
- 0.20 - 0.50 persons per hectare

Households
Ashill Ward has 1,114 households, compared to Breckland's 58,021 households. The household split by tenure is shown below.

Households by tenure (count)
Households rented from council or equivalent	15
Households rented from other private owners	10
Households rented from other social landlords	131
Households owned outright	504
Households owned with a mortgage or loan	257
Households rented from private landlord or letting agency	105
Households where occupiers living rent free	15
Households in shared ownership	8

The largest number of households live in 'Number of all households - Owned outright' accommodation with 48.2% of the Ward's households. That compares with 37.0% for the District as a whole, 37.2% for Norfolk County and 32.9% for the whole of East of England.

The second largest number of households lives in 'Percentage of all households - Owned with a mortgage or loan' accommodation with 24.6% of the Ward's households. That compares with 31.7% for the District as a whole, 29.7% for Norfolk County and 34.7% for the whole of East of England.

Local Government

Christopher Dean
Breckland District Council

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Positive feedback

The infopacks were well received by councillors, particularly those who were newly elected or who were representing a neighbouring area in which they didn't actually live. Jessica explains:

"It helped them get deeper insights. One councillor found particular benefit in the health information breakdowns and benefitted by seeing the comparison of their ward to the district as a whole. One long standing councillor said a few things (in the pack) surprised him about his area which they knew very well already, which was interesting".

Councillor feedback was largely positive and included the following comments:

" …the information is helpful in answering any residents questions which might arise or in helping with evidence involving case work."

"The ward profile is immensely comprehensive and provides fortunate candidates with a much deeper insight into the area…"

Councillor Lynda Turner, Deputy Leader for Breckland reported: "I have used my pack – the information it contains has been very useful, and we have used much of it to evidence our recent village appraisal..."

Support

The LG Inform Plus team were able to provide vital support when required. In particular Jessica highlights:

"The new wards that the team created for us in LG Inform Plus (using the natural neighbourhoods tool) – without those we wouldn't have been able to produce the Breckland reports at all…"

The team was also able to advise on time saving functionality:

"The other useful piece of advice provided by the team was to review existing reports that were already held in LG Inform Plus and see what other reports people had been creating….with the team's advice I was able to go in and copy the charts and text fields from those reports into ours which saved us doing it from scratch and was a great piece of advice which saved us a lot of time in the report production".

Improvements

Having used much of the LG Inform Plus functionality Jessica fed back comments on the experience of using the software to the LG Inform Plus team and says:

"We are pleased to have seen the engagement that the LG Inform Plus team has had with that process in being receptive to and acting on feedback so there has been good two way working ….providing feedback when you have used a tool like this to do a significant activity to the providers of the software is worthwhile I think to enable continuous development and improvement in the product".

Following Jessica's feedback the LG Inform Plus team have made a number of improvements to the tool. LGA Programme Manager, Tim Adams, explains "There is no substitute for the practical feedback that we receive from users like Jessica and her team who have deployed our online services in real situations. We were really pleased to receive the feedback which has guided our priorities and future development plans".

The Breckland and South Holland feedback sub-divided into four key areas. These areas, along with the improvements that are planned as a result are summarised below:

- **The challenges of displaying a report online within a browser which is equally capable of looking good on the printed page.** Maintaining a word-processing based capability within a browser application on the internet is difficult as browsers have no concept of a printed page; however the LG Inform Plus team are aiming to add more conditional page breaks to reports that are exported to MS Word. When we feel sufficient councils use the more modern .docx Word format, we hope to be able to migrate to this and introduce more sophisticated rules to achieve a better output for the printed page.

- **The need for a better means of discovering what data is held within the database, along with information on their levels of geography, frequency of update, etc.** This is a priority for the team and we are actively working to improve the issue of metrics "discoverability" and to help users easily find what they are looking for from amongst the thousands of types of metric we deliver.

- **The confusion when some metrics are only offered in a limited number of display components such as maps only.** This is a restriction that the LG Inform Plus team have had to

introduce as a result of the limitations of our source metrics data. Official names for areas other than wards (like LSOAs) within local authorities are often quite cryptic and meaningless to people reading reports. If data is only available for these types of area (and not for wards) we have historically only shown the data in maps. This has now changed and we also offer it in tables and are investigating "best fit" methodologies of publishing more data for wards, even if it is not officially published for those areas. We are currently investing "best fit" methodologies of publishing more data for wards, even if it is not officially published for those areas.

- **Report display and download speeds.** As the popularity of the reporting tool has grown, we have had to cope with a bigger load, with an associated impact on speed. However improvements have now been made and report display and download speeds much improved.

Publicity benefits

Another positive benefit for the councils as a result of producing the infopacks was the publicity they generated, putting the message out to councillors and residents that the councils are making decisions based on data and intelligence, and showing the benefits of this. For example:

"There was a fair bit of Twitter chatter going on between the LGA and Councillor Ian Sherwood (Portfolio Holder for the Corporate Improvement and Performance Team) and others."

In addition, pdf copies of the information packs have been published on both council's websites and Freedom of Information requests and queries from journalists can now be referred to these. The public and others can now use the reports to find out information for themselves online which saves council time and resources.

To view the Breckland and South Holland Ward Member infopacks please visit: http://www.breckland.gov.uk/content/ward-information

and: http://www.sholland.gov.uk/council/performance/District+Facts+and+Figures.htm

For more information about LG Inform Plus contact: tim.adams@local.gov.uk

For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio, please contact us on 020 7664 3000. We consider requests on an individual basis.