

Local information Systems: An Overview Guide



Date: 01/08/07



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1 UK Context

The rapid growth in small area statistics availability has been accompanied by a gradual shift towards more evidence-based policy and decision-making across the public sector. There has also been a greater acceptance that some issues can best be addressed by targeting resources at specific areas of need. In England in particular this has led to a rapid rise in the abundance of Local Information Systems (LIS) particularly within local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships. This development has been enthusiastically supported by the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) under the 'neighbourhood renewal' banner. A national research project was funded to identify examples and disseminate best practice – this reported in 2004 and led to a more formal report being published in 2006 (available from www.esd.org.uk/esdtoolkit/Communities/LIS/ContentView.aspx?ContentType=Content-287). An initiative is currently on-going through the CLG Information Management Programme with regular national LIS meetings and a dedicated LIS forum (see link above). CLG's role as a catalyst in this area is re-enforced through its provision of Neighbourhood Renewal Funds (NRF) to those authorities considered in greatest need. In most of these authorities some of this funding has been used for LIS development. To date we estimate that approximately 50 per cent of English top tier authorities now have some form of LIS according to their research. This figure is lower for district level authorities within the UK.

2 Local Information Systems defined

What is a Local Information System (LIS)? Many local authorities and local partnerships now support web based systems to store, analyse and present locally and nationally held datasets down to small area level. Their main focus is to provide a place-focused evidence base for local decision makers to target resources and services. They provide a wide range of statistics and reports allowing users to review the current evidence base and build a picture of localities and neighbourhoods for their area of interest. Partner organisations can share their data effectively thus enabling, potentially for the first time, a wide range of indicators to be made available in a consistent form across the partnership. Information products can be built which combine locally and nationally available data into more meaningful intelligence aimed at specific user groups.

Local information systems are being used to enhance performance at all stages of the policy design, operational delivery and monitoring process (see Figure 1).

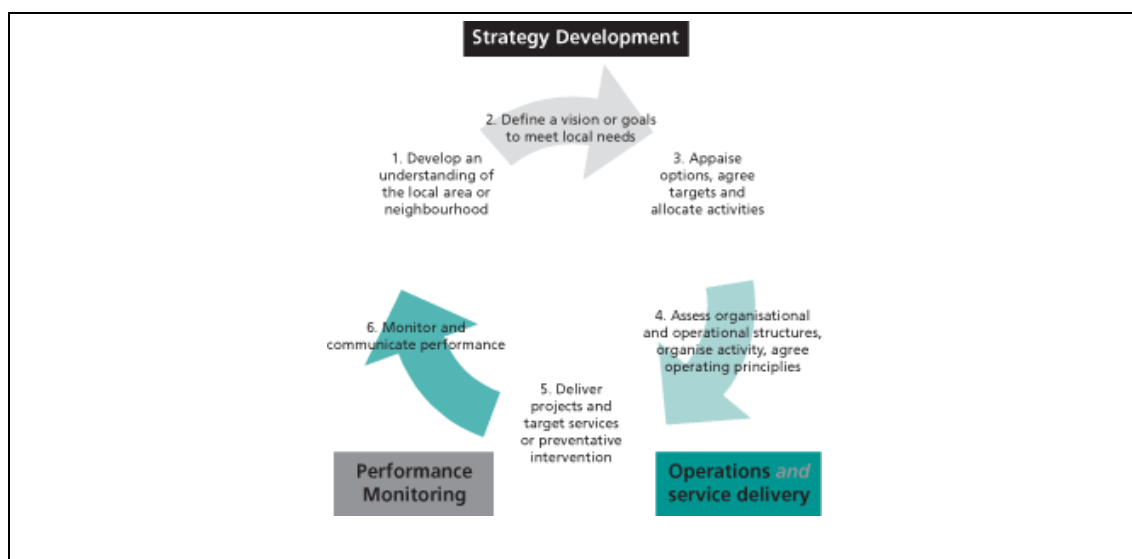


Figure 1: The role of information in the policy design and delivery process

Source: CLG LIS report 2006



3 Key high level benefits

1. Provision of a self-service, partnership wide resource of definitive, trusted facts and figures about places to be used by specialists (analysts, researchers etc) and non-specialists – this reduces the ‘answering simple, everyday questions burden’ for an intelligence unit, leads to better more informed questions when they do arise and overcomes the key problem, highlighted by many, of different depts. and organisations working from different information bases.
2. Enables organisations across a partnership to free up access to a range of key local (and national) data through a single access channel
3. Platform to allow partners to exchange sensitive and non-sensitive data resources in a controlled form
4. Streamlines the widespread activity of place-based reporting, for example ward based area profiles for Councillors
5. Tools and content that put intelligence at the fingertips of many different users for purposes such as (a) strategic planning – a factual evidence base to act as a baseline of outcomes to assess impact of policies and shape new policy design; (b) operational practice such as locality and service planning; and (c) performance audit, monitoring and benchmarking of outcomes down to neighbourhood scales
6. Data management repository for holding geo-demographic classification data now becoming widely used for improved customer segmentation
7. Channel for delivering a range of useful information, including performance indicators, for local areas to external users like students, businesses community groups and citizens – this addresses information gaps or inaccuracies (eg. exaggerated fear of crime) and leads to a more informed and empowered community and therefore stronger local democratic processes

4 Target User Groups

1. Public sector service managers and policy-makers: who need to understand the nature of local communities and the impact of initiatives in order to deliver high quality, customer-focused services.
2. Partnership officers: who require comparable information from partner organisations to support the development of local and sub-regional partnership plans, strategies and targets.
3. Elected members: who would like to be informed about local initiatives and identify how services are performing in their area compared to neighbouring areas.
4. Voluntary and community sector workers: who require local evidence for funding applications and to help them target their services effectively.
5. Businesses: who require a range of demographic and socio-economic information about areas in which they are planning to set up, expand or invest.
6. Citizens: who require information about the area in which they live or are planning to move to.
7. Researchers/analysts: who require a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information for profiling work and the completion of local projects and studies.
8. Students: who require basic information, charts and maps for project work and research.

5 Local Intelligence Services

LIS are usually one component of a set of services built around delivery of shared intelligence. The recent CLG LIS report suggests that the most successful LIS sites are those which are complemented by a range of services. Examples of services that a Shared Intelligence Unit, potentially linked to the partnership rather than a specific organisation, can provide include:



1. Expert telephone 'Help Line' for providing advice on local intelligence and data issues
2. One-to-one face-to-face advice as required
3. Establish protocols and organizational framework for cross-partnership data exchange
4. Processing/cleaning/geo-coding/exchanging data
5. Bureau service for one-off requests for data or outputs (eg. custom maps)
6. Forum for improving understanding of user needs and targeting them with outputs
7. Bespoke analysis / research and report production on key issues
8. Production of regular Policy Briefing reports and annual a 'State of Area' report
9. Production of regular ward profile bulletins for elected members
10. Promotion and training activities including specific sessions for use of the LIS and more general sessions on use/application of local intelligence in decision-making
11. Maintain a wider 'intelligence section' of the observatory
12. Contribute to strategy development and performance reporting as information experts

6 Data

The range of data managed within a LIS can be wide and classified in many different ways. Most common is some form of domain specific classification where indicators are grouped into top level categories like 'Demography', 'Health and Welfare', 'Crime and Community Safety', 'Education and Childrens Services', 'Environment' and 'Economy'. There may also be cross-cutting themes such as 'Performance' and 'Social Disadvantage'. Key government data sources include ONS Neighbourhood Statistics, Dept for Work and Pensions, NOMIS, Audit Commission and several areas of NHS information services. However the value of LIS is their ability to combine national data with local data available from a wide range of internal business systems including those of partners. This local data is often not provided to central government and, even when it is, it tends to be in an aggregated form or only provided infrequently or both.