

North East Lincolnshire Council Data Observatory Business Case

Supplementary comments

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1 Background

The NE Lincolnshire Council business case report provides a useful basis on which investment in LIS technology and services can be justified. Since this report was written other material and guidance has been published which could also supplement this report. The purpose of this document is to provide some supplementary material which could be used by others to build their business case.

2 Supplementary background

One of the key justifications, highlighted by recent work undertaken by CLG that has yet to be published, is the ability to cut the time taken by large numbers of staff when searching for key facts and figures to support their daily work. Making this data easily accessible through a self-service style one-stop-shop is exactly what LIS solutions do. One key argument widely made in the broader area of 'Knowledge Management' (KM) and KM systems is that of more efficient working, in effect 'time saving'. Reducing the amount of time a relatively significant number of staff take to locate definitive facts can lead to quantifiable savings – this is exactly the argument used in the recent CLG work leading to their simple online cost-benefit calculator tool.

LIS can easily be seen occupying a niche space within this wider KM area. LIS tend to have a stronger focus on making 'structured data' widely available while dedicated KM tools (an example being Microsoft's SharePoint application) tend to be more focused around tools for searching and organising unstructured information, primarily documents. Many organisations will already use KM systems, for example a Content Management System (CMS) for managing and organising their online content.

There is lots of useful information around building business cases for KM systems online – try http://www.skyrme.com/updates/u52_f1.htm as a starter. These are often linked to ROI or Return on Investment. As this summary suggests, you can quickly get bogged down in the complexity of defining a business case in these areas and many projects are driven by people who see these developments as generally the way forward to more efficient working and re-inforcing their corporate commitment towards evidence-based decision-making.

We would strongly recommend reading a new report, published on 2nd Jan 2009, "Supporting local information and research" (see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1106248.pdf>). Section 3 is particularly valuable in terms of providing high level context and drivers for improved information management and exchange on which LIS cases are built.

Since the publication of the NE Lincs report, more guidance has been published on the CAA process including the CAA Framework (available from start of February 2009). There is widespread recognition that the new CAA process has a much greater focus on evidence-based processes and monitoring of outcomes – read the Stockport self-evaluation story at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=9393561>. Tom Wraith's presentation at the Birmingham LIS event Evidence (see http://www.instantatlas.com/downloads/CLG_LIS_Event_Jan09.pdf for a write-up), stressed that both quantitative and qualitative form, is going to be critical and they [AC] will be looking for business processes that have evidence at the heart of defining priorities and actions. There is a Key Line of Enquiry specifically around the effective use of data.

We understand that the Audit Commission CAA process will be looking for evidence of effective cross-partnership data sharing and LIS obviously provide an ideal platform for this.

The NE Lincs report does not go into detail about the role a LIS can provide in terms of delivering useful facts and figures to an external audience – citizens, community groups, students, businesses and voluntary sector. ‘Empowering communities’ with improved information is part of the whole agenda behind the Community Empowerment White Paper (see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol>) and discussion paper on a National Framework for greater citizen engagement (see http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/citizen_engagement.pdf) looking at strengthening democratic processes.

There is also a key role for LIS in supporting the Customer Insight agenda in particular in allowing partnerships to securely share geo-demographic and other geo-segmentation based information effectively. This role has been highlighted in a recent presentation with Norfolk Data Observatory – see http://www.laria.gov.uk/content/articles/sms_events_28012009/pdfs/maslen_pontin.pdf.

3 Specific comments on NE Lincs report

There are a number of points that could be added to the NE Lincs Report Section 2 ‘Reasons’ notably:

Section 2.4 mentions the needs of supporting the numerous strategies that local partners are now required to produce using local data derived from local and national sources. Much of this data will be common to many strategies. It does not explicitly mention the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), yet many of our customers are using this process specifically to justify investment for LIS. In some cases PCTs are the primary organisational champion of a new partnership LIS. There is a recorded webinar by Stockport MBC and PCT on use of their LIS for JSNA on www.instantatlas.com/lis. The APHO JSNA pages state “*Data sharing between partners is essential to the success of JSNA.*” – see <http://www.apho.org.uk/resource/view.aspx?RID=53885> for more information.

The figures mentioned in 2.4 could be supplemented with evidence from the CLG research on quantifying the benefits of LIS. This work is due to be published very soon but feedback suggests that the threshold is around 200 end-users after which the benefits of the system will outweigh costs.

Costs have been removed from the NE Lincs report. Like any IT project costs should be considered as ‘Total Cost of Ownership’ (or TCO) over a 3 or even 5 year period. We would suggest that around a LIS an organisational structure is needed to support ‘Local Intelligence Services’ – read our LIS Defined summary for more information about these types of services (http://www.instantatlas.com/downloads/LIS_Defined.pdf). Many LIS solutions are embedded within a corporate Research & Intelligence Unit that already provides such services. This is an ideal organisational setting. If you are planning a LIS that does not offer staff and skills to support it then these costs need to be built in. They are, in our experience, likely to be the most significant costs for the project. Most LIS applications tend to have a dedicated team around them comprising a team leader and, ideally, at least 2 analysts (senior and junior positions).

Costs for an off-the-shelf LIS solution in terms of a technology platform over a 3 year period might equate to approximately £50,000 although there are a number of factors that could increase or decrease this figure, for example the functionality you require in an initial development phase or the degree of integration you might want to link your LIS solution with other backend business systems like Performance Management, GIS or CRM.

Business case for LIS in a County Council

“Our LIS was set up to meet specific requirements..”

Statutory requirements:

- General duty under Planning Act
- Sustainability Appraisal and Annual Monitoring Report for Minerals and Waste Plan
- Local Development Frameworks
- Strategic Housing Market Assessments

Other requirements:

- Local economic assessments
- Sustainable Community Strategy
- Local Area Agreements
- Comprehensive Area Assessments
- Equalities impact assessment

Key Benefits of a LIS

Source: GeoWise LIS Defined Overview report

These are the key benefits which we highlight in our 'LIS Defined' overview report at http://www.instantatlas.com/downloads/LIS_Defined.pdf.

Local information systems are being used to enhance performance at all stages of the policy design, operational delivery and monitoring process:

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 burden for an intelligence unit for 'answering simple, everyday questions' and also leads to better more informed questions when they do arise. It also overcomes the key problem and a significant risk, highlighted by many, of different depts. and organisations working from different information bases.
2. Enables organisations across a partnership to establish a 'common local intelligence platform' to access a wide range of key local (and national) data through a single access channel. This includes the ability to exchange sensitive and non-sensitive data resources in a controlled form.
3. Streamlines the widespread activity of place-based reporting, for example ward based area profiles for Councillors.
4. 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
5. Data management repository for holding geo-demographic classification data now becoming widely used for improved customer segmentation
6. Channel for delivering a range of useful community 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

Key drivers for InstantAtlas investment: an example from an English unitary authority

1 ONS Super Output Area Geography

The development of a statistical geography for publishing (Super Output Areas) has been highly significant with increasing volumes of data now being made available primarily at these levels. However their boundaries are not widely known by users of this data. That makes presentation of this data difficult without use of mapping. To compound matters, each SOA has been provided with a code rather than a recognisable name. A combination of these points mean that when information for SOAs is being presented through traditional methods such as tables, they are meaningless, hard for individuals to relate to, identify with and to locate.

2 Small area-based services

The Council delivers a vast array of small-area based services. These services require data that can help them evaluate the impact that their service is having on the local area. There is therefore a requirement to have easy access to accurate, timely, user-friendly and up-to-date data for small areas that is presented in a meaningful way that can provide both baseline figures and progressive data.

3 Community Strategy

One of the key actions to come out of the 'Community Strategy' is the issue of information sharing amongst strategic partners. Presently there are no data presentation systems/tools in place that can present this data in a meaningful and effective way.

4 Evidence based decision-making

The Council is committed to becoming a more evidence-based decision making organisation. This ethos is reliant upon accurate and timely access to data that is presented in a meaningful way.

5 Regional Partnerships

A common criticism of regional partnerships is that they do not evaluate the impact that their services, policies and strategies are having on local communities. This is mainly due to an absence of an effective reporting tool that allows them to track progress on outcomes over time within small areas.

6 Traditional Data Presentation Tools

Traditionally data has been presented via tables, spreadsheets, charts or graphs. However, these types of data presentation tools are often dull, static complex and meaningless. This often means that data is not fully understood, geographic trends are not recognised and ultimately, the value of the data is not recognised and utilised to its full potential.

7 Nature of the area

The council area comprises of many diverse areas including rural, urban, coastal and industrial. The residents of each area have different needs, concerns and issues. This means the Council cannot offer a 'one solution for all' service. We need access to easily understandable data for small areas, as this can help identify the particular needs of each local community and help develop local services accordingly.

