

Is there something I should know?

Have you got the information you need to make the decision?

Questions for members to ask

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The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

Does your council make the most of the information it holds?

1 Many councils struggle to unlock the power of information to improve decision making. *Is There Something I Should Know?* explains why, by reference to councils' culture, people and standards (Table 1).

2 The questions to ask councils, overleaf, will help members, including those in scrutiny roles, challenge their council to improve. That includes challenging themselves, so some of the questions are self-assessments. A more detailed self-assessment framework is available for councils.ⁱ Case studies of good practice are also available on our website.

Figure 1: **Councils need to combine culture, people and standards in order to excel**

This means	
Culture A culture that values and exploits the power of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Commitment from members to an evidence-based culture ■ Information used by members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies ■ A collaborative, challenging and demanding approach to creating better information
People Expert, professional, well-trained people, working in effective ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good interpretation skills ■ Analytical resource focused on supporting decision making ■ Recruitment, retention and development of skilled staff ■ Attractive jobs
Standards Good data quality and information shared effectively with partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Standards maintained through a common competency framework ■ Excellent data quality ■ Established data-sharing protocols

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ⁱ Available at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow>

Do we have a culture that values and exploits the power of information?

Is there a commitment from members to an evidence-based culture?

- Do I know what information I need to make a decision?
- Do I routinely demand relevant, high quality, well presented information? Do other members?ⁱ
- Do I regularly challenge senior officers and analysts on the information received? Do other members?

Is information used by members and senior officers to drive better services and more efficiencies?

- What information underpins our strategic and financial planning?
- Is service planning based on sound information from a range of sources?
- How has information helped us to make savings? Do we identify scope for further efficiencies from evidence on costs and performance?

Do we all work together to get the right information for decisions?

- Do we discuss the information we need to make decisions with those charged with providing it?
- Do we ask for the right information as a result, and do we get what we ask for?

Are our staff expert, professional, well-trained people who work in effective ways?

Do our senior decision makers have good interpretation skills?

- Have I received training, mentoring or other support on interpreting information? How helpful was this?
- How are we improving the training, mentoring or other support on interpreting information for senior decision makers?

Are we well supported in our decision-making roles?

- How do we ensure we attract, keep and develop good analysts?
- How can we be confident that they are doing the work we need them to do that will best support our decision making?

ⁱ A checklist to help members demand better information is available at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow>

Do we have good data quality and do we share information effectively with external partners?

Is information valued throughout the council, with consistently high standards applied at all levels?

- How do we ensure everyone values information?
- Do I get the information that I need? Does it meet the criteria for good information?ⁱ
- How have we improved the way information for management meetings and cabinet is presented? How can we improve it further?

Do we have excellent data quality?

- How do we know we can trust our data?
- Where are we most at risk from poor quality data? What action are we taking to address these risks?
- Do all staff take personal responsibility for data quality? How do we know?

What data sharing protocols do we have?

- How well is information shared internally across directorates and the corporate centre? How will we know if this is a problem?
- Are we sharing data effectively with external partners? What do our partners think?
- What data sharing protocols do we have? How robust are they?

ⁱ The Audit Commission defines good information as relevant information, of sufficient quality for the decision at hand, presented in a way the decision maker will understand. Relevance, quality and presentation are key characteristics for useful information. A checklist to help members to consider whether you have the information you need to make the decision is available at <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/somethingishouldknow>



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We welcome your feedback. If you have any comments on this report, are intending to implement any of the recommendations, or are planning to follow up any of the case studies, please email: nationalstudies@audit-commission.gov.uk



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