



Office for
Local Government

DRAFT FOR
CONSULTATION

Office for Local Government (Oflog) Corporate Plan – 2024 to 2027

February 2024



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Introduction

■ Purpose of this Corporate Plan

Since our launch in July 2023, we have been in discussion with a wide range of sector colleagues about what they think Oflog should do, should not do, how and how not. Those conversations have been invaluable in shaping our plans.

This Corporate Plan covers the period 2024 to 2027. It shows how we will deliver the remit given to us by the Secretary of State in his [letter of 15 February 2024](#).

■ The purpose of Oflog

Local authorities impact every citizen's life. They are generally highly impressive organisations, but there are sometimes exceptions. It is in everyone's interests that we help make local government perform as well as possible. Everybody benefits from local authorities' services, and council taxpayers deserve for their tax bills to be kept down and spent wisely.

After 2010, the government moved away from central oversight of local government performance, towards a system of localism and sector-led improvement. The government, and we, remain committed to those principles. The stripping away of some of the excesses of central oversight pre-2010 was, and remains, welcome in our view. But in recent years we have seen three gaps in the current system.

First: it is currently too difficult for most people to find and interpret data on how well a particular local authority is performing relative to its peers. This prevents local citizens, local media and local civil society being armed to ask the right, probing questions of their authority. It also means that local authorities themselves often do not know where they most need to improve, or which other authorities they could best learn from. Oflog will therefore **inform**: increasing understanding about data on the performance of local authorities.

Second: we have seen a small but significant number of cases of serious failure of leadership, governance or culture in local authorities. Some of these could have been avoided if the problems had been identified and addressed at an earlier stage. Oflog will therefore **warn**: helping to identify authorities at risk of serious failure who have not already raised the alarm themselves.

Third: local authorities have told us that they worry they are missing opportunities for organisational improvement. In particular, many say that they spend less time than they would like learning from other authorities, and that they are not making the best possible use of data to manage their authority. Oflog will therefore provide **support** to help local authorities with organisational improvement.

— What Oflog will not do

We are acutely conscious that now is a challenging time for local government, with many sector leaders concerned about their ability to meet increasing service demands and calling for more funding from and join-up within central government. Oflog will only succeed if we recognise that context in designing our offer. But it is also important to be clear what Oflog will not do.

Oflog does not have a mandate to lobby central government, Parliament or political parties on how Government should change policy on the expectations, regulation or funding of local government.

Oflog will not arbitrate in disagreements between a local authority and government about levels of funding for individual authorities.

Unlike the Audit Commission, Oflog will not conduct routine inspections, nor issue summary scores for a local authority.

Oflog does not have powers to intervene in a local authority, in the manner of a regulator. Those powers will remain with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), under the Best Value framework.

Oflog will not make policy to improve the system of external audit of local authorities; that rests with other parts of the system, including DLUHC and the Financial Reporting Council (FRC).

Independence

Many sector colleagues have asked us how Oflog can have the confidence of the sector unless its judgements are independent of ministerial sway. We more than understand that concern. It is why the government committed in the Levelling Up White Paper that Oflog would be independent. For now, we remain part of DLUHC, but ministers have asked us to act with a spirit of independence and have committed not to exercise influence over our outputs (other than approving our recommendations for new metrics). We look forward to Oflog's increasing independence.

Our integrity is assured through the independent oversight of Lord Morse.

Working with others and evolving our plans

Oflog is a very young organisation, and our precise plans are continually evolving as we test, learn and get feedback from colleagues in the sector. Oflog can add the greatest possible value to local government only if we are in continual dialogue with colleagues in the sector about what we should do and not do.

We are also highly conscious that Oflog is an addition to an existing ecosystem of information-sharing, warning, oversight and support. It will only succeed if it works closely with – and dovetails effectively with – the other actors in that ecosystem, including the Local Government Association (LGA), government departments, auditors and regulators.

We are excited to continue to build an organisation that genuinely helps make local government even better.

Lord Morse, Chair (Interim)

Josh Goodman, Chief Executive

Our vision

1. Oflog will help make local government even better. We will increase understanding about the performance of local authorities, warn when authorities are at risk of serious failure, and support local government to improve itself.

Our purpose

2. We seek to strengthen, not replace, the existing systems that support English local government to get better. In particular, we think that a primarily sector-led self-improvement system is the right one and want to make it stronger.
3. We will make it easier for everyone – citizens, civil society, central government and local government itself – to understand how each local authority is performing. Oflog will support local transparency and scrutiny by the media.
4. We will help identify local authorities at risk of serious failure who have not already raised the alarm themselves. If they are not already subject to formal intervention or inspection from DLUHC, we will help identify the type and degree of risk and make recommendations for improvement.
5. We will support local authorities to improve. Over time, we will become a centre of excellence in ‘what works’ in local government. We will identify, celebrate and encourage good practice. We will become a centre of expertise in the use of data in managing local government.
6. In doing all of these, we will work in close partnership with local authorities. Collaboration is central to our ethos.

Our values

7. Our values underpin everything that we do.

- We continually seek innovative ways to make things better – including experiments that may not work.
- We work with agility, proactivity, pragmatism and pace.
- We collaborate with, listen to and learn from each other and the local government sector – remembering always that everything we do is to help the sector not ourselves.
- We act with independence, objectivity and integrity, led by the evidence.
- We create a supportive environment to ensure that all colleagues develop and flourish.

Our strategic objectives 2024 to 2027

8. Oflog’s strategic objectives for this period address the three parts of our vision: inform, warn, and support.

Inform: increase understanding - among citizens, civil society, central government and local government itself - about data on the performance of local authorities

9. It is currently too difficult for most people to find and interpret data on how well a particular local authority is performing relative to its peers. It may be possible for an individual expert to find this out, but only if they are very well versed in finding and manipulating the right data.
10. To tackle this problem, we will conduct user research into which products our various users (citizens, civil society and local government) will find most useful, and how we can maximise their awareness and usage of those products. In parallel, we will build and evolve relevant products.
11. We have begun to develop the Local Authority Data Explorer (herein referred to as the Data Explorer). Both the content and the functionality of the Data Explorer will evolve significantly over this period, and we may add other new products targeted at specific audiences.
12. The Data Explorer is intended to make it easy for a non-expert user to see how data about a particular local authority compares to similar authorities. We want to include data on outcomes, outputs, inputs and – in time – efficiency. We will present all data with clear explanations about its limitations.

13. We are clear that data alone is rarely enough to assess a local authority's performance and often needs context via further investigation, including talking to people who understand the local area. We are making that clear to all users of the Data Explorer, to prevent them over-interpreting the data. In parallel, we will seek to develop new analytical approaches that will help users to interpret the data effectively and help them ask the right questions of local authorities.
14. We will seek to avoid creating new burdens for local authorities, so are presently only using data that is already collected.
15. We will continue to work closely with the local government sector to seek views on every aspect of the Data Explorer as it evolves. We aim that by mid-2025 the Data Explorer will cover all the main services offered by local government and will offer a considerably more exciting and insightful user experience than at present.
16. The Data Explorer, and potentially other products, will include Combined Authorities (CAs) and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs). We will seek new ways to show how the performance of an MCA compares to others.

Warn: help identify local authorities that are at risk of failure but have not raised the alarm themselves

17. We have seen a small but significant number of cases of serious failure of leadership, governance or culture in local authorities. Some of these might have been avoided if the problems had been identified and addressed at an earlier stage.
18. Oflog will create an early warning system to identify local authorities at risk of serious failure who have not already raised the alarm themselves. If the local authority is not already subject to formal intervention or inspection from DLUHC, we will help identify the type and degree of risk and make recommendations for improvement.

19. Our early warning system will have two principal components. The first component will involve desk-based collection and analysis of data and soft intelligence, seeking to identify which local authorities might be at risk. The second component will involve ‘Early Warning Conversations’: discussion with and visits to local authorities identified as potentially at risk.
20. An Early Warning Conversation will involve a team of reviewers with significant experience of leadership and management in local government – typically including a serving or recent Chief Executive, a Section 151 Officer, and the serving or recent Leader of a different local authority. They will review key documentation and interview a range of local authority staff, members and partners, setting out their findings and recommendations in a published report. That report will set out the type and degree of risks to the authority’s leadership, governance and culture, and make recommendations for improvement and support. The factual content of the report will, where possible, be agreed by the local authority.
21. Oflog’s early warning system will complement and work with (not duplicate nor conflict with) other mechanisms for warning and support in the wider local government ecosystem – including external auditors, the LGA’s Corporate Peer Challenges (CPCs), the work of teams in DLUHC and other government departments, and regulators of particular services such as the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ofsted.
22. Oflog’s early warning system will evolve as we grow, experiment and learn from feedback.

Support: support local government to improve performance, productivity, and value for money: championing best practice, improving data capability and rationalising a complex data landscape

23. Local authorities have told us that they worry they are missing opportunities for organisational improvement. In particular, many local authorities say that they spend less time than they would like learning from other authorities, and that they are not making the best possible use of data to manage their authority.

24. Improvement support for local authorities is already offered by a number of organisations, including the LGA. But there is wide consensus in the sector that there is room for plenty more support.
25. In order to establish where Oflog can best add value, we will assess where there is greatest demand for support that is not being met. We will collaborate with other organisations offering support to ensure that we complement rather than duplicate their work.
26. Oflog will provide support of different kinds:
 - We will identify, celebrate and encourage good practice. This will include webinars, research and reports on best practice, and, perhaps, convening communities of practice. We will seek to use the power of data and analysis to identify and share good practice in ways that were not possible in the past. We aspire to become, over time, equivalent to a ‘what works’ centre for local government.
 - We will help local authorities to use data in their management and governance. This may take the form of consultancy-style support, or the provision of off-the-shelf data tools for local authorities to use.
 - We will work with local authorities and with government departments to encourage the release of public sector data that helps local authorities to act as true leaders of places – while reducing burdens where possible (interacting with the Single Data List).

Collaborate: work in association with the local government sector

27. In everything we do, we will collaborate closely with the local government sector to ensure we are adding value. This will include regular advisory groups composed of representatives from and of the sector, complemented by a continual programme of engagement with different combinations of colleagues from all types of local authority.

Operating environment

28. In order to succeed in delivering our vision, purpose and strategic objectives, Oflog must tailor its activity to suit the current operating environment for local government, which we know many are finding challenging.
29. The Covid-19 pandemic, and inflationary pressures affecting both local authorities themselves and their residents, have created particular challenges. Local authorities have described to us the increase in demand they are experiencing for services, both in complexity and volume. This is particularly felt in children's and adult social care. There have also been challenges in recruiting and retaining professionals to deliver some of these services. Alongside this, government has an ambitious levelling up and devolution agenda, where local authorities are key to delivering success.
30. We note the calls made by some in the sector itself for increased join up across central government departments, to avoid different data requirements, competitive bidding processes and multiple funding streams, and to develop strategic policy measures in a way that takes into account the breadth of local government's responsibilities. We are aware that government has taken steps towards reducing burdens, for example through the funding simplification plan.
31. Not all councils have managed to deal with the circumstances facing them. Poorly judged decisions taken at a local level by some individual councils have resulted in a small but increasing number of serious failures of individual local authorities in recent years.
32. Central government has stepped in with use of existing powers such as Best Value Powers, non-statutory and statutory interventions to improve and support the capacity and capability of the sector. But this range of corrective measures has often been enacted at the point of crisis.

Business plan 2024 to 2025

Oflog business plan 2024 to 2025

33. The following sets out the activities we expect to undertake to deliver our purpose and objectives in 2024 to 2025.

Inform: increase understanding - among citizens, civil society, central government and local government itself - about data on the performance of local authorities

34. We will agree and publish more metrics on the Data Explorer, working towards covering all the main services offered by local government by mid-2025. We will also revisit the metrics already on the Data Explorer to see if they should be improved. Before we make any major additions or revision to our metrics, we will always seek the views of the sector.
35. We will continue to improve the functionality of the Data Explorer, aiming to offer a more exciting and insightful user experience.
36. We will conduct user research on how best to support citizens and civil society to better understand and use data to engage with local government performance.
37. The Government has said that it will establish an expert panel to advise the Government on financial sustainability in the sector, and that Oflog, alongside other organisations including the LGA will be a part of that panel.¹
38. We will continue to publish data on Combined Authorities (CAs) and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), which could include metrics agreed for new Trailblazers. We will seek to identify new ways to show how the performance of an MCA compares to others.

¹ The Government has set out, in its remit letter to Oflog, that this panel will: “review councils’ productivity plans covering the transformation of services, opportunities in data and technology, ways to reduce wasteful spend (including through discredited equality, diversity, and inclusion programmes), and barriers to productivity that the Government can alter.”

Warn: help identify local authorities that are at risk of failure but have not raised the alarm themselves

39. We will develop the desk-based component of our new early warning system, and we will start conducting Early Warning Conversations with local authorities who may be at risk of failure but have not raised the alarm themselves.

Support: support local government to improve performance, productivity, and value for money: championing best practice, improving data capability and rationalising a complex data landscape

40. We will establish where Oflog can best add value in providing support to local authorities, by assessing where there is greatest demand for support that is not being met.
41. We will establish the best approach to building the capability to identify, celebrate and encourage good practice. Then we will start to put that approach into practice.
42. We will continue a programme of best practice webinars, in which small groups of local authorities of similar kinds can learn from each other. Every local authority will be invited to at least one of these over the course of the year.
43. We will establish how best to help local authorities use data in their management and governance. This will involve close discussions with authorities about what would help them most.
44. We will form a strategy for how best to work with local authorities and with government departments to encourage the release of public sector data that helps local authorities to act as true leaders of places – while reducing burdens where possible (interacting with the Single Data List).

Collaborate: work in association with the local government sector

45. We will continue a programme of engagement with different combinations of colleagues from all types of local authority and representative bodies. This will include opportunities for every local authority, and representative body, to discuss with us whether Oflog is on the right track. We will continue to hold regular advisory groups composed of representatives from and of the sector.

Accountability and governance

46. Oflog is an office of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and therefore ultimately falls under DLUHC's overall finance, governance and accountability arrangements. The Secretary of State is ultimately responsible for the policy, remit and operations of Oflog, and the DLUHC Permanent Secretary is the Accounting Officer ultimately responsible for its use of public money.
47. Once this Corporate Plan has been agreed by ministers, Oflog will be free to deliver this Plan as it sees fit. Ministers will need to approve the metrics published on the Data Explorer (following recommendations from Oflog), and should have sight of reports before publication, but ministers will not exercise influence over Oflog's outputs, including any reports Oflog publishes on particular local areas.
48. Oflog's Chair, currently Lord Morse, provides an independent voice to and for the organisation.
49. Oflog will establish a Board, consisting of external members appointed by the Secretary of State. They will provide a degree of external scrutiny of the strategy and operations of Oflog.
50. The Department has a senior official sponsor and supporting team within DLUHC's Local Government Group, responsible for day-to-day liaison and general oversight of Oflog's work. This team will also negotiate the budgets allocated to Oflog and monitor how well we are utilising the resources provided to deliver our work.
51. We will publish a retrospective annual report each year, assessing our progress against our stated business objectives for the year and setting out our expenditure against budget for that financial year. The first retrospective annual report will cover the financial year 2024 to 2025. Oflog will also be included in DLUHC's more detailed Annual Report and Accounts.

Strategic risks

52. Oflog considers strategic risks to be uncertain events that could adversely impact our ability to deliver the strategic objectives set out in this corporate plan and thereby to meet our fundamental purpose.
53. We recognise that we have more control over some risks than others, and our control measures are articulated accordingly. Where risks relate to factors in the external operating environment that we do not have direct control over, we will work with our stakeholders to influence and shape thinking through our delivery and expansive engagement programme. Where they relate to internal capacity and capability, we have systems, processes and controls in place that help us to directly manage risks.
54. Strategic risks are reviewed regularly by senior officers in the Oflog Executive Team and will be tested with the Board. The strategic risks considered to be the most significant to the achievement of Oflog's objectives are set out below.

Risk to the delivery of the Corporate Plan	Controls in place
<p>Lack of support and collaboration from the sector</p> <p>Oflog will be less effective if colleagues in the sector do not collaborate with it to help ensure it adds the most value. For example, for Oflog to be as successful as possible, it needs the sector to engage in discussion on the right metrics for our ‘inform’ work; to provide soft intelligence and advise on the right indicators to consider in our ‘warn’ strand; and to help us establish how best to add value through our ‘support’ strand.</p>	<p>Oflog is conducting a continual programme of extensive engagement with different combinations of colleagues from all types of local authority and with representative bodies. This includes opportunities for every local authority, and representative body, to discuss with us whether Oflog is on the right track.</p> <p>We have established regular advisory groups composed of representatives from the sector. We are continuing to ensure and monitor that our staff live by the value (listed above) that: <i>“We collaborate with, listen to and learn from each other and the local government sector – remembering always that everything we do is to help the sector not ourselves.”</i></p>

Risk to the delivery of the Corporate Plan	Controls in place
<p>Changes to the operating environment for the sector</p> <p>Our plans for how to deliver our ‘inform’, ‘warn’ and ‘support’ objectives need to be resilient to – and flexible in response to – changes in the operating environment that local authorities face. Such changes could stem from, for example, changes to the economy, migration, unexpected crises, or changes in central government policy.</p> <p>For example, if more local authorities were to face greater financial strain than at present, that would affect the volume and nature of cases identified by the early warning system, and would alter the types of support that Oflog should provide to local authorities in order to add as much value as possible. It might also affect the capacity of LAs to engage in supporting Oflog to develop.</p>	<p>We undertake horizon scanning activity to identify potential changes to local authorities’ operating environment. We test our plans for delivery of our ‘inform’, ‘warn’ and ‘support’ objectives to establish whether they are resilient to potential or actual changes.</p>

Risk to the delivery of the Corporate Plan	Controls in place
<p>Changes to the overall structure of stewardship and oversight of local government</p> <p>There are a range of actors who oversee and support aspects of local government performance, including regulators such as Ofsted and CQC, the DLUHC stewardship system (encompassing the Best Value Framework) and the sector themselves through the LGA.</p> <p>Oflog’s activities are designed to complement and work alongside other actors. Any substantial change in the form or functions of these organisations may impact Oflog’s ability to deliver its objectives.</p>	<p>We will regularly take stock of the wider regulatory and stewardship environment to ensure Oflog’s work complements rather than duplicates the work of others. To enable this, we will maintain close relationships with other bodies involved in overseeing and supporting the performance of local government.</p>
<p>Oflog resourcing</p> <p>Oflog cannot deliver its strategic objectives if it has insufficient resource (either people or non-pay budget).</p>	<p>We will regularly assess whether our resource is set to be sufficient to meet our objectives.</p>

