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What does the Office for Local Government need to succeed?

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Summary

On 5 July the government launched the new Office for Local Government (Oflog),[1] more than 18 months after it was announced in the *Levelling Up* white paper.[2] The new 'performance body' has the potential to make government at all levels more effective, by making disparate local data more accessible and comparable for policy makers and the public to use.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and the Community's (DLUHC) vision for Oflog recognises this potential. It identifies some real problems that Oflog could help to fix. And its early launch of the Local Authority Data Explorer, a dashboard showing local authorities' performance on a range of metrics, begins to show how Oflog will go about doing so.[3]

But there is a risk that Oflog will be held back by conflicting purposes and competing audiences. By trying simultaneously to provide *central* government with a lever of accountability, while providing *local* government with better data, it might fail to do either. And the body's initial form – as a unit within a Whitehall department – will make it more difficult for Oflog to act with the independence it requires.

This matters because these early decisions on remit and governance often determine whether new public bodies prove successful. Ultimately, form should follow function: purpose should be clarified first, and size, shape and governance should follow accordingly. To that end, responding to DLUHC's plans for Oflog and reflecting on conversations the Institute for Government has held with experts involved and interested in its creation, this short Insight offers the Institute's perspectives on three key questions:

1. What should Oflog do?
2. Does Oflog's form match its function?
3. Where should Oflog go from here?

We argue that Oflog has the greatest potential if it focuses on making data more consistently available, comparable and usable – and, in turn, if it promotes best practice in evidence-based policy making. So the government's focus on these as priorities for the new body is welcome. But trust will be key to its ability to do this – so Oflog will need to avoid the perception of partiality, narrow views of 'good performance' and burdensome Whitehall assessments.

The government is right to recognise that Oflog will be entering a crowded landscape of public bodies with a stake in local data, and that it will need to act independently of its departmental sponsor to gain the trust of its audiences, especially given the poor relations between central and local government in England. So it is vital that Oflog is crystal clear about what it is being asked to do, how it should do that, and what form it will ultimately take.

Our view is that the best way to achieve Oflog's objectives would have been to create it as a new, independent public body, rather than a 'performance body' within a core department. However, we set out in this short paper how it can nevertheless act with as great an operational independence as practically possible in its initial form.

What should Oflog do?

DLUHC intends Oflog "to provide authoritative and accessible data and analysis about the performance of local government". In doing so, the new body is being tasked with serving three audiences:

1. **Local government** – by making data on performance more usable and comparable

2. **Central government** – by improving the understanding and accountability of local government

3. **The public** – by making data on local services more transparent and available.

On one level, these objectives seem to align. All, to some extent, involve the collation and publication of a range of comparable, local data. But these ambitions are broad. On closer inspection, the plans for Oflog contain tensions and risks that need to be mitigated.

In particular, central and local government may prove to have competing and contradictory uses for the data Oflog will report. Local leaders will certainly benefit from more usable data to inform policy making. But Oflog's vague plans to identify failing councils and open 'dialogues' with them will not wholly allay suspicions of the body's intentions to interfere excessively with local authorities' autonomy or administer burdensome assessments. This explains why DLUHC is keen to assert that it is not trying to resurrect the Audit Commission.

Oflog should avoid repeating the mistakes of the Audit Commission

The Audit Commission was established in 1983 to appoint auditors to local authorities, oversee their financial auditing, undertake studies into the value for money of their work, and encourage the sharing of best practice between public bodies.[4,5]

For a time it was relatively successful at doing so. There is evidence that, for example, publishing league table rankings of local authority performance incentivised the worst-performing councils to push for change, even if it failed to incentivise those who were less at risk. Previous IfG research has found that these were "a tool for genuinely driving improvement".[6]

But over the course of the commission's existence, successive governments expanded its remit as additional responsibilities were added one on top of another – a common mistake made with public bodies. It began external audits to parts of the NHS, and its local government inspections expanded through Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs) and, subsequently, Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAAs) – an initiative which aimed to provide information on the performance of all public services in a local area.

The commission's expanded remit became controversial, affecting its relationship with local government. CAAs in particular were seen by some as an overreach of central government power, undermining the democratic legitimacy of local authorities and demanding a burdensome level of council resource.[7] In 2010, the coalition government announced the abolition of the Audit Commission, with the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, describing it as "a creature of the Whitehall state... a top down regulator of local government, micro-managing local services and imposing excessive and questionable red tape".[8]

There are three lessons the government should learn from the history of the Audit Commission and heed in the development of Oflog.

First, Oflog should not manage only a 'scorecard' of local authority performance. This would only ever be of limited use, to limited audiences. Oflog should instead develop tools that can present data flexibly to inform different users' understanding of communities and local services. Plans to build and expand the Data Explorer iteratively are therefore promising, as set out below.

However, its initial objective to collate data in only a narrow range of areas – on adult social care, skills, waste and finance – risks the fate of previous two-dimensional scorecards. Doing so may create too rigid a framework of performance imposed on councils with different populations, priorities and services. Institute for Government research shows that narrow targets incentivise 'gaming' of the system, leading services to ignore non-targeted but nevertheless important issues[9] – and that staff of local services can feel demoralised when denied the flexibility to deploy their judgment of how to achieve the best possible outcomes.[10]

Second, be clear whether Oflog is intended to audit local government, support performance or improve data usability and practice. These are all legitimate functions for central government. But they bring trade-offs and some may prove mutually exclusive. Oflog's role will determine its relationship with local authorities, which will in turn affect what it can achieve. The government has said that Oflog "will not set targets or conduct burdensome area assessments", but there is a potential overlap between the Audit Commission's formal assessments and Oflog's stated plans to track the financial health of councils and spot those at risk of failure. If councils perceive Oflog as overly formal in assessing their performance, and potentially putting them at the bottom of published league tables, they could be disinclined to engage with the new body's wider efforts to improve local data comparability – to the detriment of both parties.

Third, do not expect an army of 'armchair auditors' to use local data to hold councils to account on their own volition, as Cameron and Pickles hoped in vain would happen after abolishing the Audit Commission. These kinds of datasets can be difficult to understand without context and support. If Oflog wants to "empower citizens [by] enabling them to hold local leaders to account", it will need to be proactive in promoting the existence of that data and helping people to use it. And when armchair auditors do engage with the data, it is important that the government consider how those members of the public can make their voices heard. A recent example illustrates

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this difficulty: a member of the public highlighted the state of Woking Council's finances years before it wound up with a funding black hole of £1.2bn, but his attempts to raise the alarm were not heeded.[11]

Separately, but relatedly, there is the question of the financial audit of local authorities, which has struggled with inconsistency and delay in the post-Audit Commission era. Examples of financial mismanagement have not been in short supply in recent years, not least in Slough,[12] Croydon[13] and Thurrock.[14] However, while related, that must remain separate. The government response to the Redmond review on the shortcomings of local audit in 2020[15] is purportedly to create a new body – the Audit, Reporting and Governance Authority (AGRA) –specifically designed to "oversee and regulate the local audit sector".[16] That is sensible, but DLUHC should be careful not conflate the roles of these new bodies.

Oflog should focus on making local data more usable and comparable

Oflog's potential will be best realised if it focuses on making data more consistently, and comparably, available to policy makers and the public. It is promising, then, that DLUHC envisages it "synthesising the data that is currently available, making it more accessible and useful for all users".

This should be Oflog's principal aim because there is a genuine problem to be solved. Good policy is based on good evidence, which means data is vital in its design, decision making, implementation and evaluation. Thankfully, local policy makers are mostly not short of data. There are plenty of relevant datasets collated and, sometimes, published by local authorities, NHS England, police forces, educational institutions, social sector groups and the UK government itself, from the likes of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The problem is that this data is too disparate, disconnected and hard to find.

Oflog's launch paper recognises this: "the data that is available can be challenging for central government, citizens and other local authorities to use". Despite the laudable efforts of existing bodies such as ONS (through its subnational data strategy)[17] and the Local Government Association (LGA), which collates and publishes data on its LG Inform platform,[18] there is still a need to bring more local data together, present that data in an easy-to-use and interactive manner, and help policy makers to use it in decision making and evaluation.

That need was made more acute by the hollowing out of analytical capacity in local authorities, scaling back functions in response to reduced budgets during the 2010s. And it was compounded by a precipitous decline of departmental research capacity in the same time period: between 2007 and 2015 the Department for Communities and Local Government suffered the worst reduction in its research spending, at approximately 75%.[19] Despite various technological innovations in local and central government, the issue of insufficient local data infrastructure has not yet been prioritised in Whitehall. Oflog has the opportunity to do so.

Building and managing the infrastructure into which similar but disparate local datasets can be compiled and presented would therefore be a valuable role for Oflog to play. It would help local government by improving the data available to inform policy making. It would help central government – and the public – by improving the information available on individual localities and services.

The next key question is how the government envisages Oflog contributing to local data infrastructure. There are more centralising, labour-intensive options in which Oflog would directly compile, standardise and publish data. And there are more decentralised options in which Oflog would make and enforce standards for the compilation and sharing of data by local authorities and other public services.

Michael Gove's announcement last week give some indication of the government's intended approach, through Oflog's plans for the Data Explorer. This will "bring together existing data that is often disparate in one place, to publish a clear and coherent picture of performance". Sensibly, Oflog intends to build this Explorer iteratively over time, describing its approach as "publish, expand and improve, publish". This is a good step towards making a currently disparate array of data more accessible – which is certainly needed, with the director of local government finance in DLUHC itself describing the data published by his own department as "baffling".[20]

The initial set of topics that this Explorer will cover is too narrow. But as long as it does, as planned, expand and improve promptly, this has the potential to be of real value to the public and local and national policy makers alike. Particularly interesting is its use of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting's nearest neighbour model to compare councils alongside their statistical neighbours. But there are two important clarifications Oflog should make to its plans for the Data Explorer.

First, it should identify how the Data Explorer differs from what already exists – in particular, the LGA's LG Inform, which DLUHC already funds. Oflog should work in partnership with the LGA to clarify whether it is possible and desirable to incorporate and build upon LG Inform.

Second, Oflog should set out how the Explorer will be usable by each of its designated audiences. Local government and central government will find different data useful at different times. Imagine, for instance, that severe flooding affects a particular region of England: affected councils may well be interested in specific, operational public realm data to understand how their counterparts are responding to the crisis. But, away from the floods, that same data may be of less (or no) interest to local governments elsewhere in the UK, and most of central government too. Similarly, district councils without a direct role in commissioning social care will be less interested in that data than their county and unitary council colleagues. And while central government will be interested in outcome and management data that allow it to make value-for-money judgments, local authorities may find more use for granular operational, and sometimes qualitative, data.[21]

For their part, the public will need easier to access – and then, more digestible – data than that used in policy evaluation by local and central government officials. Oflog will need to put effort into helping interested members of the public use its data if it wants to be of equal use to those outside the public sector. So it is useful that Oflog plans to publish "contextual and explanatory information" alongside its data.

The key test will be whether Oflog can provide adaptable data infrastructure that can be used in different ways by different partners. Despite its name, Oflog should therefore work with the full range of data-owners and policy makers in local areas – in the public, private and social sectors – and should not limit its scope to data held, and services delivered, by councils. Arguably, the new body should think of itself as an office for local data rather than local government.

It should promote best practice on using local data in policy making

Oflog's secondary purpose should be to proactively promote best practice in the use of local data. This would recognise Cameron and Pickles' misguided expectations of armchair auditors picking up the slack left by the Audit Commission.

This could take the form of advice and support to local leaders, toolkits, training and the evaluation of, and opportunity to share, best practice. DLUHC recognises the value of this, or at least wanders towards it, in its plans for Oflog to "celebrate and promote... excellence", although, as currently described, these plans risk trying to boil the ocean. Oflog would do well to focus on best practice examples of using local data in policy making, rather than the best practice in the entirety of local government.

There are good examples of this type of work across government that Oflog could emulate. The ONS attempts to improve data literacy in parliament by providing evidence to relevant select committee inquiries.[22] The LGA runs a 'sector support offer' which provides local authorities with better access to data and support to improve performance,[23] and the What Works centre for local economic growth works to "help to make local growth policy more cost-effective, through better use of evidence and evaluation".[24]

Oflog's convening and promoting function could help local leaders to use data in their decision making more effectively. It could help members of the public to understand their community and its services. And it could help civil servants and parliamentarians to understand and scrutinise public services in all tiers of government. A test that Oflog will need to meet will be its ability to balance responsibilities to make data accessible and assess local government performance with these additional pressures to network, convene and share best practice.

Oflog can also help to improve central government's handling of local data

The government's policy paper recognises that Oflog will need to consider how it handles local government data – and what it asks of councils. It is welcome, for example, to hear that the government does not want Oflog to replicate work that regulators like Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) carry out. That will be appreciated by a local government sector that already expends a lot of resources complying with inspections and requests for more data.

Despite this positive step, Oflog could take a more active role in improving how central government itself handles local data. First, there are local datasets held by Whitehall departments that would be useful for councils' policy making but which currently remain unavailable to local leaders. For example, data related to the social security services of local Jobcentre Plus sites are held by the Department for Work and Pensions and are, in many cases, unavailable to relevant councils even when suitably anonymised.

If Oflog is going to bring together disparate data for local policy makers, that should include data flowing out to local government as well as data flowing into central government. Previous Institute for Government work has recommended that DLUHC provide a 'brokering function', wherein a single point of contact in the department coordinates data requests and connects those applying to the right contact in government.[25] This is certainly a role that Oflog could play.

Second, Oflog should simplify the reporting of data from local to central government. Currently, councils face demands for data from a range of Whitehall departments and public bodies that are sometimes onerous, overly complicated or duplicating information collected elsewhere.[26] In an ideal world, Oflog could act as a single reporting body, streamlining these demands and, in close collaboration with departments, funnelling data in both directions between local and central government. However, as interviewees were keen to emphasise, this would be fiendishly difficult to achieve, as departments each lead on the collection and use of relevant datasets, provide quality assurance, and often seek follow-up and resubmission from local authorities before data is published.

Third, while the government's policy paper stressed that Oflog "will have no formal role" in the Single Data List (SDL) – the catalogue that lists all the data that local government is required to submit to central government – and the Local Government Transparency Code,[27] there are potential benefits to a future role for the body in managing the former. While the SDL was initially welcomed by the LGA as a way of reducing local government's reporting burden,[28] some of its benefit has abated, as local authorities often do not receive data back from central government in a timely or usable manner. In addition, metrics are frequently added to the SDL, but their value similarly wanes over time and needs to be reviewed to ensure that only useful data is collected from local authorities in an appropriate manner.

Oflog could prune datasets that are no longer required and act as a gatekeeper to balance the interests of local and central government when fresh demands are made. It is therefore positive that Oflog envisages reducing "unnecessary duplication and complexity in data requests" as a future function.

Oflog can make local data more transparent

As described above, the Local Authority Data Explorer has the potential to be a helpful step towards making data more comparable and usable. It can also, therefore, help to improve public transparency over these issues. Oflog could look to the coronavirus dashboard,[29] praised by one interviewee as the gold standard of data usability, for an

example of a successful model. That interviewee noted two things in particular about the dashboard. The first was the ability to drill down from national level to much more granular geographies – a feature which they believed would make Oflog more attractive to the public. The second, and more important, element was the government's iterative approach to developing the dashboard. The dashboard was never a static set of metrics, but was instead constantly evolving, as the government responded to feedback from the public about what data it wanted to see.

The government needs to clarify the role it wants Oflog to play in local authority finances

DLUHC have been firm in their position that Oflog will not become the next Audit Commission. That is good: the government is already addressing the question of local government audit through the establishment of AGRA. But that still leaves open the question of Oflog's wider interest in local authority finances. In its newly launched Data Explorer, Oflog is publishing a number of local government finance indicators, including reserves as a percentage of service expenditure; core spending power per dwelling; and total debt as a percentage of core spending power.

This is useful: the financial health of a local authority affects the quality and accessibility of the services it provides.[30] It would be telling only half the story if Oflog published output and outcome metrics without financial context. But there are reasons to be cautious of Oflog's current approach to publishing financial information.

First, the government's announcement made much of Oflog's role in preventing "serious failure" of local authorities by detecting "early warning signs".[31] It is unclear from the policy paper what exactly the government means by "serious failure". The most obvious interpretation is the type of crises seen in councils such as Slough, Croydon, Thurrock and, most recently, Woking,[32] each of which issued a Section 114 notice – essentially alerting the government that they will not be able to balance their budgets – after the failure of debt-financed investments. But Oflog will need to clarify what it considers to constitute failure and, subsequently, what the early warning signs might be.

Oflog will then need to clarify what it will do when it has found a council it thinks is at risk of failure. The policy paper talks of Oflog convening 'dialogues' with at-risk local authorities and sector experts, but there is little clarity on what this will mean or what has prevented these dialogues until now. Take the example of Runnymede and Spelthorne borough councils, which Oflog data flags as holding levels of debt similar to Woking.[33] It has been known for a long time[34] that both councils have large investment portfolios, so Oflog needs to consider how flagging that information in a new way will help.

Second, Oflog's launch paper notes the importance of contextualising the data it will publish, but the early version of the Data Explorer could do more to do so, particularly for the financial metrics it is presenting. That missing context is vital for public understanding. There is no explanation, for example, of how local authorities' relative core spending power has fallen since 2010 following central government's cuts to grant

funding,[35] how demand for statutory services has increased in different authorities,[36] or how those pressures have influenced councils' attitudes to commercial investments[37] within the UK government's own regulatory framework.[38] Nor does the Explorer explain the large backlog in the financial audit of local authorities – improvement in which would arguably more directly alert the government to financial instability,[39] or that there may be legitimate reasons for holding debt on a local authority's balance sheet that does not necessarily imply financial fragility.

A council's financial health is key to understanding the performance of its services, but the government must ensure that it provides a full explanation for the current state of local authorities' finances. Data Explorer does do some of this, by providing a definition of each metric and why it is useful to know. But there is no time series of data incorporated into the Explorer, meaning that it is difficult to know if, for example, how reserves have risen or fallen in a given authority over time. There is also no political context. Funding decisions for local authorities are highly political, in terms of both the amount that central government chooses to provide in grant funding and also in the amount by which a local authority may choose to raise – or not raise – council tax. It could be that Oflog is planning to add this functionality at some point, but for now much of the data is presented context-less.

Does Oflog's form match its functions?

DLUHC has confirmed that, at least initially, Oflog will exist as an office within the department. This was not the only form the body could have taken and this decision will have implications for its effectiveness – and its attitude towards its leadership, governance and workforce.

Oflog would have been better set up as an independent public body
Oflog's aim to make local data more comparable and usable for local government, central government and the public has at least two implications for what should be required of the new body. First, its workforce and leadership will need expert knowledge of local government, local policy making and the use of data. And second, local authorities and other partners will need to be willing to work with Oflog. So Oflog will need to act with integrity and impartiality in its collation and presentation of data and, simply put, councils will need to trust its intentions.

These requirements in turn indicate what form Oflog should take. To act with integrity and impartiality, and to be a trusted partner of local government, Oflog should not be seen to be, as the Audit Commission was by some, a "creature of Whitehall". That means establishing it in such a way that allows it to act independently of DLUHC and/or its secretary of state. Unless Oflog has that independence, there is a risk councils will see it as a stick with which ministers can beat local authorities and, they will argue, undermine local government's democratic legitimacy.

DLUHC recognises this, noting that "it will be important for Oflog to have a degree of separation from government [to be] an authoritative and expert voice". It goes on: "a body that considers the performance of local government – which are ultimately political institutions – should be able to advocate separately from politicians, government and local government itself".

There are a number of ways that independence could be achieved. The most obvious and effective would have been to establish Oflog as a non-departmental public body – such as the UK Statistics Authority. To do so, Oflog would need to meet at least one of the government's 'three tests'* for public bodies' functions:

1. Is this a technical function, which requires external expertise to deliver?

2. Is this a function which needs to be, and be seen to be, delivered with absolute political impartiality?

3. Is this a function that needs to be delivered independently of ministers to establish facts and/or figures with integrity?[40]

DLUHC can make a convincing case that, to fulfil the functions described above, Oflog would at least meet tests 2 and 3. Yet it has been established as a unit within the department, at least initially, and its launch included no detail on any future plans to spin Oflog out into an independent public body. Given the length of time Oflog has already been in development, not granting it institutional independence is a missed opportunity that should be reconsidered.

Oflog can work with de facto independence

However, although Oflog has not been granted full independence, that does not mean that it cannot act impartially as, to an extent, a de facto independent body. There are practical steps it should take to increase its operational independence.

DLUHC has said that the secretary of state will set out Oflog's priorities in an annual remit letter. This should specify the body's operational independence to deliver those priorities. In particular, the conduct of Oflog's chair and chief executive will set a tone for the organisation to follow. If they communicate clearly within government and with its partners that Oflog will act with impartiality as far as possible, that will have an impact.

Governance and workforce are also important. Steering and advisory boards should be used to ensure that executive and political leaders from local and combined authorities have a genuine means by which to influence Oflog's work. Lord Morse and Josh Goodman bring substantial relevant experience to the roles of chair and interim chief executive. But Oflog would also benefit from bringing people with extensive, direct local government experience into other leadership positions.

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* These tests first appeared in the Cabinet Manual published in 2010. For more see: *When Should Public Bodies Exist?: Rewriting the 'three tests' for when government does things at arm's length*, Gill M and Dalton G, Institute for Government 2023, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/public-bodies-tests

The same goes for recruitment to the wider team, who should be tested for an understanding of local government. Alternative staffing models, such as secondments with local authorities so that a proportion of the workforce can be made up of local officials and policy makers on a rolling basis, would also be worth exploring. This would help Oflog gain the skills it needs and act with credibility, and it would build local expertise in participating authorities.

There are examples Oflog can learn from to act with operational independence. The National Infrastructure Commission was created as an executive agency within the Treasury – but despite fears that the Treasury's priorities would supersede its own, it has been able to establish a distinct agenda that distinguishes it from its parent organisation. This was highly contingent on the actions of its leadership.[41] The roles of the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser, and their respective teams, are further examples. These civil servants answer to ministers but they are able to maintain an independent status and authority across Whitehall and beyond, as their work during the pandemic showed.

Finally, the physical location of Oflog matters. The body is less likely to be seen as a creature of Whitehall if its staff are not literally based there. If Oflog were indeed to be spun out into an independent public body, this would likely be avoided, as the default policy is for new bodies to be headquartered outside London.[42] But even now, Oflog should work principally outside London, such as from DLUHC's Wolverhampton site, as part of UK government's wider effort to relocate civil servants.

Where should Oflog go from here?

Michael Gove's announcement at the LGA Conference marks the true start of Oflog's existence, but its success will be determined by what the government does next. Key to that success will be the extent to which DLUHC can truly bring local government on board with its vision for the body. To be fair to the department, its engagement to date with the LGA and local authorities on their plans has been frequent. The policy paper also stresses that "Oflog will not be able to do this on its own and it will need to collaborate with those in the sector".

But to live up to that sentiment, engagement needs to become more genuinely collaborative. Some interviewees expressed frustration, for example, that central government colleagues have worked in relative isolation on the initial set of topics to be measured at a local level, without adequate input from the sector and before more fundamental questions about the body's purpose and remit had been answered jointly.

Now that Oflog is officially established, there is ample infrastructure in place to ensure that its design and creation can be driven more fully in partnership between central and local government, as intended. The government could now consider arrangements to bring representatives of local government and outside data bodies into Oflog, to drive the body's further design.

The window is narrow, and closing, for ministers and senior civil servants to prove they are serious about creating Oflog in partnership with local government.

It is also important that DLUHC learns from what is already being done to improve the availability, usability and comparability of local data. Examples abound, from the LGA's LG Inform discussed above[43] to the ONS' census maps, which have proven similarly useful for visualising the 2021 census results.[44] Further afield, the US-based non-profit Social Progress Imperative seeks to equip communities with data to "tackle urgent global challenges", including through its "social progress index" of comparable data; this is currently being scaled across the UK by a new venture called Impera Analytics.[45] Individual local authorities are taking similar approaches.

Furthermore, at a regional level, efforts such as the Trust for London's 'London poverty profile' are compiling datasets to inform decision making.[46] In the private sector, Mastercard has launched its Inclusive Growth Score, which aims to provide policy makers "with a clear, simple view of social and economic indicators at the neighbourhood level".[47]

The government should not try to reinvent the wheel. It should build on these and similar efforts, avoiding duplication where possible. It is good that DLUHC does not appear cowed by the fact that others are working on the same problem – and that it is clear that Oflog could have a role to play in the existing landscape of local data bodies.[48] The problem of disparate local data has not been cracked and the UK government can make a valuable contribution.

Finally, it is good that government has decided to take a staged and iterative approach to the creation of a 'mature' Oflog. Designing the new body in partnership with local government and outside experts will inevitably mean doing so at a slower pace than DLUHC could achieve working alone. But that is a trade-off worth making because it will improve the chances of Oflog's eventual success.

Conclusion

Oflog has the potential to make government more effective. And DLUHC's vision for the body recognises the real problems of data comparability and usability that Oflog could help to fix. But its initial plans risk falling short of what is required. Oflog's approach to spotting failing councils needs clarification. It should avoid concerning itself with narrow scorecards of council performance, and government should give Oflog the independence it will need to succeed. Michael Gove's July 2023 announcement launched Oflog but it is still in its infancy – the decisions that its leadership subsequently take will be critical to the body's prospects for the years to come.

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