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Improving policy and services through data-driven evidence: The role of the Local Government Management Agency

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Abstract

The use of administrative data to generate evidence that influences policy and operational decisions is increasing. This article examines the role of the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) in strengthening the capacity of the Irish local government sector to generate and apply data-driven evidence in policy development, implementation and service improvement. It focuses on the work of the LGMA Research Unit and Central Data Unit, and on the County and City Management Association Data Working Groups through which administrative, survey and operational data are translated into policy-relevant evidence. Drawing on examples from housing, homelessness, planning, customer service and climate action, the article shows how structured data governance, sectoral expertise and targeted dissemination can support trend analysis, identify regional variation, inform performance monitoring and shape policy responses. It argues that the value of data-led evidence depends not only on the quality of the data, but on the interpretive, institutional and relational processes through which evidence is validated, communicated and brought into policy arenas. The article concludes that combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative research and practitioner

knowledge can strengthen evidence-informed policy-making and enhance the contribution of local authorities to national policy and service reform.

Keywords: administrative data, data dashboards, data governance, evidence, evidence dissemination, local government, policy, research.

Introduction

While the role of local authorities can traditionally be regarded as policy takers and implementers, the capacity of the sector to influence and shape policy has increased. As the reliance on evidence-informed policy-making increases, so too does the opportunity for local authorities to generate the required evidence to shape policy. Access to quality evidence along with increased inclusion of sectoral representatives during policy development processes via the County and City Management Association (CCMA), has resulted in policy decisions grounded in evidence generated from local authority data.

Interestingly, within the sector, and probably more broadly within the policy arena, there is an increased regard and demand for data-driven insights as dashboards become more of a currency. Dashboards provide the opportunity to monitor trends and, in some instances, visualise live data. These data need to be reliable and interpreted correctly, produced by professionally skilled staff and topic experts with robust governance in place so that the evidence accurately depicts service engagement and policy impacts, and stands up to scrutiny.

This paper looks at how the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) has supported the sector's representative group, the CCMA, as well as the staff across local government, to increase their capacity to generate and utilise data-driven evidence to influence policy development and implementation.

Background and context

The LGMA is a state agency of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) that is funded primarily by local authorities. It has approximately 200 employees and provides a range of professional services to local authorities, including management of key shared services and national offices, and critically, support of the CCMA. The CCMA comprises the chief executives of the local authorities as well as the assistant chief executives of Dublin City Council and, as a network, it functions as the representative voice of

the local government sector. It has established eight policy committees through which the members engage with policy stakeholders.¹ The CCMA committees, which meet monthly and report to the full CCMA, are serviced directly by LGMA staff. They are also supported by the research and data units of the LGMA, which combined have fourteen core staff members.

The Local Government Management Agency and its role in data generation and utilisation

The *LGMA Corporate Plan 2026–2030* identifies research and data as being one of the organisation's eight key activities, aiming to 'work with our stakeholders to identify emerging issues, using research and data-driven insights to support decision making and policy development' (LGMA, 2026, p. 7).

The LGMA Research Unit was established in 2018, has four full-time core staff and takes on students and contractors as needed to support its work. It is responsible for supporting the work of the CCMA policy committees through the generation of evidence to help inform policy development as well as the implementation and operationalisation of policy decisions. Since its inception, it has placed a strong emphasis on utilising administrative data to understand the status of operations, assess the impact of policy implementation, and inform future policy development. It developed the business case that led to the establishment of the LGMA Central Data Unit, a unit of ten core staff who have the capacity to gather and manage data at scale, and generate requested data visualisations for use by the sector.² In addition to the provision of data analysis services, the Central Data Unit is also responsible for the sector's data strategy.

The Research Unit project manages CCMA data working groups (DWGs) that are established by the CCMA policy committees.³ As detailed in Figure 1, five DWGs have been established that focus on housing, planning, climate action, customer services and waste.

¹ Each CCMA committee has three chief executives, one assistant chief executive and eight directors of service.

² Dashboards are currently restricted to sectoral actors, but technical solutions are being explored to facilitate public-facing versions in 2027.

³ The DWG is made up of a minimum of eight directors of service who represent a cross-section of local authorities. Each DWG is chaired by a member of the relevant CCMA committee, who reports back on the progress of the group each month.

Figure 1: County and City Management Association policy committees and data working groups, 2026

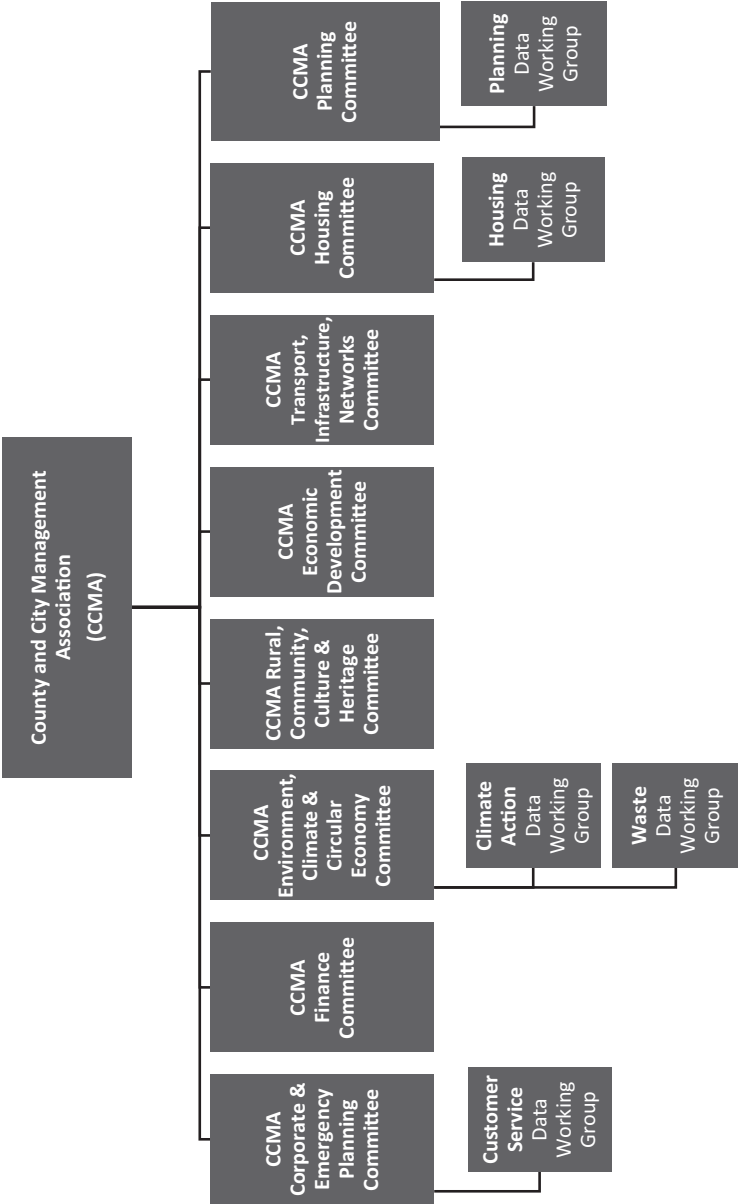
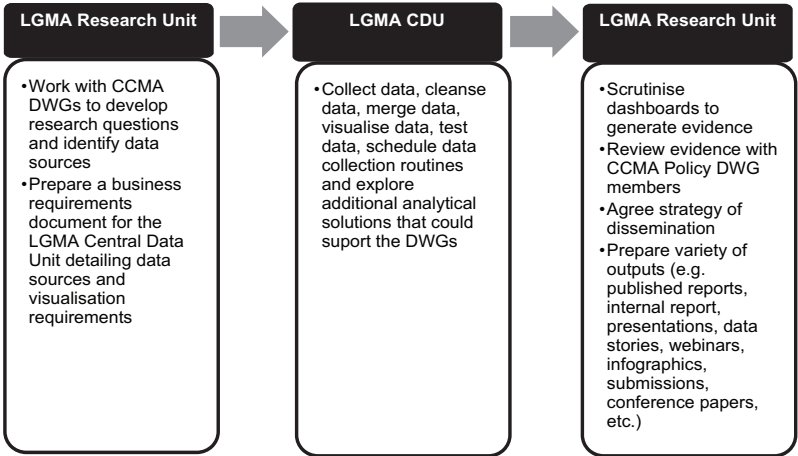


Figure 2 identifies the steps involved in converting data into evidence. The process begins when the Research Unit establishes the DWG at the request of the relevant CCMA committee and works with the members to identify (i) the policy questions that need to be answered, and (ii) the data to be used to address those questions. The Research Unit then details the data visualisation requirements for the Central Data Unit and the dashboards are developed. The Research Unit scrutinises the dashboards, extracting key findings that have policy or operational relevance and presents them to the DWGs. It complements the work with additional research as required (i.e. focus groups, case studies, literature reviews, etc.) and makes linkages between findings emerging from different policy areas. Critically, the Research Unit works with the DWGs to develop dissemination strategies which identify stakeholders, and the type of output that will most effectively result in the evidence being heard. Ultimately, the objective is to get the right information in front of the right people at the right time to effectively impact decision-making.

**Figure 2: County and City Management Association (CCMA)
evidence generation process flow**



Abbreviations: DWG = data working group, LGMA = Local Government Management Agency.

Policy areas of the data working groups

Combined, six policy areas are currently being explored by DWGs, rightsizing, homelessness, planning applications, customer service, climate action key performance indicators (KPIs), and waste management for the CCMA committees. The level of data standardisation and ease of data extraction are key determinants of how difficult or not it is to collect, combine and visualise the data. While a key objective is to compile data to provide national statistics and insights, the process ensures each local authority can also access dashboards to review their own local data.

All DWGs have dashboards in place with the exception of the Waste DWG, as it has only recently been established and is developing a waste policy and data mapping report so that all data sources are identified and considered. The business requirements document for the Central Data Unit is scheduled to be completed by the Research Unit in the fourth quarter of 2026.

Housing data

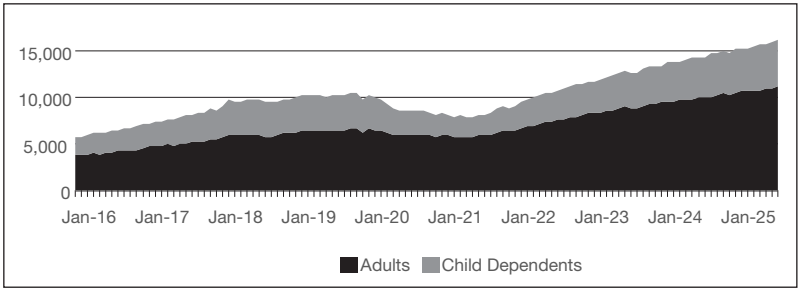
The Housing DWG and the Research Unit are working very closely with the CCMA Housing Committee to look at two policy areas, *rightsizing* and *homelessness*. The data used for rightsizing is gathered directly from local authorities and considers the location and type of property across the social housing stock, occupancy levels relative to the national housing stock, and the age profile of tenants. These features combine to allow each local authority to review their local data within dashboards to determine where demand for rightsizing projects may be located. The Research Unit liaises with Age Friendly Ireland's shared service based in Meath County Council to support its work and to maximise the use of the dashboard by local authorities. The data is combined with Central Statistics Office (CSO) data on general housing occupancy, that was gathered by the national statistics agency during the 2022 census, and the results illustrate very high levels of occupancy and efficient use of social housing relative to the national housing stock.

The homelessness dataset is recognised internationally as exemplary as it captures data across the entire process of engagement from all stakeholders funded by the state. While the Dublin Region Homeless Executive has a research unit in place that has been carrying out analysis of its data for many years, for the first time, the

LGMA/CCMA have produced national analysis that demonstrates the significant differences in service user profile, access to housing and throughput rates between regions.

The homeless dashboards developed by the Central Data Unit facilitate a level of analysis by the Research Unit that has not been possible through the regular reporting function of the homeless IT system. A range of dashboard variables and filters can be activated, allowing cross-tabulations that answer multiple questions at the press of a button. As illustrated in Figure 3, tracking simple trends in publicly available data, the gradual growth in family homelessness up to the pandemic is evident, as the number of dependents relative to adults increases over time. During the pandemic, there was a significant drop in the number of families presenting but this increased again after the pandemic. Through analysis of visualised microdata, it is possible to ascertain that the percentage of single people relative to families post-pandemic, does not drop to pre-pandemic levels. Outside the Dublin region this can be tracked to a reduction in access to properties that accept housing assistance payments. Engagement with those local authorities allows the issue to be identified as the number of small private landlords who are leaving the market, who are not being replaced by institutional landlords outside the major urban areas.

Figure 3: Individuals using emergency accommodation each month, January 2016–January 2025



The CCMA and LGMA Research Unit representatives have presented new evidence relating to the homeless population to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Housing at the invitation of the DHLGH. The capacity to provide detailed and nuanced analysis facilitates the development of policy responses that are tailored to address the unique issues impacting different regions. In 2026, the LGMA

Research Unit will publish reports to complement the Dublin region reports that will provide analysis of activity nationally and regionally, as well as an international comparison of service engagement patterns.

Planning

The Planning DWG was set up by the CCMA Planning Committee and is focused on planning permission (PP) data in order to visualise the throughput of applications received, refused or granted over time. To date, the data on PPs granted has been visualised. This data is collected from local authorities, reviewed and verified each month by the CSO, to meet the national requirement to submit data for Eurostat's Building Permit Index.⁴ Once published, the CSO submits the data to the LGMA for visualisation. However, the lack of standardised data within existing planning systems for PP received and refused means that it cannot be visualised without extensive verification. Given this, a key focus of the Planning DWG has been the establishment of a partnership with the DHLGH and the CSO, in consultation with the Office of the Planning Regulator, in which a schedule has been identified and agreed for the CSO to extend its data collection and verification process across all categories. In parallel, the DWG is overseeing the modification of existing planning systems to improve data alignment so that the full range of data on planning applications can be illustrated in time.

However, the PP Granted Dashboard provides very useful insights as it details the number of applications granted by category, size and the number of units in each application. The data facilitates an exploration of variances that emerge in the trend data, as well as a review of variations in the number and type of PPs being granted across local authorities.

For example, the data show that during the pandemic after an initial drop in the number of applications granted in the second quarter of 2020, there was a surge in applications for the following eight quarters meaning figures for 2020 were lower than average and those for 2021 and 2022 were higher than average, as can be seen in Table 1. The surge was driven by an increase in applications for dwellings rather than other categories of application, with dwellings increasing from 60 per cent of all applications in 2020 to 65 per cent of applications in 2021 and 2022, as detailed in Table 2.

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Building_permit_index_overview

Table 1: Number of planning applications by category, 2020–2025

All planning applications granted	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
Agricultural	1,467	1,492	911	981	946	1,283	7,080
Civil engineering	2,142	2,420	1,974	2,277	1,948	2,514	13,275
Commercial	1,462	1,593	1,469	1,456	1,471	1,431	8,882
Dwellings	15,346	21,081	17,614	15,303	16,151	17,953	103,448
Government, health and education	855	840	678	700	701	796	4,570
Industrial	567	542	542	534	550	561	3,296
Social use	349	432	313	461	417	484	2,456
Other	3,361	4,099	3,733	3,516	3,599	4,552	22,860
Total	25,549	32,499	27,234	25,228	25,783	29,574	165,867

Table 2: Percentage of planning applications by category, 2020–2025

All planning applications granted	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
Agricultural	6%	5%	3%	4%	4%	4%	4%
Civil engineering	8%	7%	7%	9%	8%	9%	8%
Commercial	6%	5%	5%	6%	6%	5%	5%
Dwellings	60%	65%	65%	61%	63%	61%	62%
Government, health and education	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Industrial	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Social use	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%
Other	13%	13%	14%	14%	14%	15%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

However, within the dwellings category, the increase was mostly for single dwellings rather than applications to build multiple dwellings. Table 3 shows that single dwellings increased from 14,311 in 2020 to 20,099 in 2021 and 16,705 in 2022 before dropping back down to 14,273 in 2023. Dwelling applications can relate to a new build or modification of an existing house (e.g. extensions, alterations or conversions), and in 2021, the increase was driven by a mix of applications granted for new single dwellings as well as extensions, alterations and conversions, but in 2022, only new single dwellings were at a higher-than-average number as extensions, alterations and conversions had dropped to normal levels.

**Table 3: Planning permissions granted for one-off housing,
2020–2025**

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
New builds	5,642	7,867	7,264	5,361	5,234	5,496
Extensions	8,669	12,232	9,441	8,912	9,732	11,277
Total	14,311	20,099	16,705	14,273	14,966	16,773

Customer service

The Customer Service DWG reports into the CCMA Corporate and Emergency Planning Committee and engages with the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC)⁵ to monitor and evaluate the public’s experience of engaging with local authorities. The NOAC designated responsibility for the collection of customer service data to the LGMA’s Research Unit in 2021, and has partnered in the development of a strong mixed methods approach to generating trend data. This partnership has ensured that real change has been affected on foot of feedback from the public. This research consists of an annual survey of over 2,000 people as well as focus groups which explore specific elements of the customer service experience each year. The Research Unit produces annual customer service reports (Morris et al., 2025a,b), works with the DWG to develop recommendations to address the issues raised, and disseminates findings through a very wide array of channels and outputs. The NOAC evaluates and monitors progress on the implementation of the recommendations across the sector through local authority scrutiny visits, thus ensuring that findings have been acted upon.

The data findings are presented to all CCMA policy committees, as customer service is seen to be a critical element in relation to the delivery of all services, and not just an issue that corporate departments deal with. A webinar is also hosted for all directors of service in local government, and a detailed presentation is made to local authority communications staff at the annual local communications conference.

⁵ The National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) is the national independent oversight body for the local government sector in Ireland. It was established in July 2014 under the Local Government Reform Act 2014 to provide independent oversight of the local government sector.

The six areas that are monitored via the survey are:

- levels of awareness about local authority services;
- levels of service engagement with key services;
- satisfaction levels with service delivery;
- channels of service engagement used by the public;
- information channels accessed by the public;
- sentiment about local authority services delivery in relation to communications, service design and innovation and quality of service delivery.

The data is broken down by age, region and gender allowing a nuanced understanding of what works where and for whom. The trends over time yield very useful information, particularly for local authority communications staff.

Findings being used across the sector to inform service design and communications strategies include trends in channels used by the public to engage with services or source information. Table 4 shows the increase in people using online services, stable engagement via email over the past six years, while phone and in-person engagements have dropped in 2026.

Table 4: Channels used by the public to engage with local authorities

Channels used for service engagement	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Over the phone	24%	24%	25%	24%	24%	18%
In-person	14%	21%	24%	24%	23%	19%
Online	–	28%	31%	28%	28%	33%
Email	24%	24%	24%	24%	25%	23%

Website engagement has declined gradually since 2023 as a channel of engagement as evidenced in Figure 4, but dropped more noticeable as a channel of information, although communications staff point out that artificial intelligence is taking data from the website to feed to people searching the web, thus reducing the number landing on their pages, but not the requirement for the website pages to exist.

The alternative sources of information detailed in Table 5 show the public’s increased reliance on social media channels as well local radio and newspapers as a source of information.

Figure 4: Local authority website usage – service engagement and information source

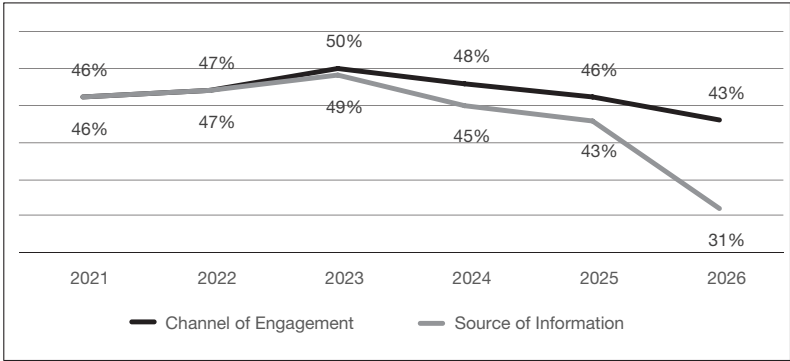


Table 5: Channels used by the public for information

Sources of information	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Facebook	19%	19%	17%	20%	28%
Instagram	4%	6%	5%	7%	13%
WhatsApp	–	–	–	–	6%
TikTok	–	–	–	–	5%
Local newspapers	30%	30%	21%	25%	33%
Local radio	15%	16%	12%	15%	30%

Table 6 shows that reliance on local radio and in particular local newspapers as a source of information is important to people outside the Dublin region, information that communications staff working in these local authorities use to target audiences.

Table 6: Percentage of people using local newspapers and local radio as a source of information in each region

Sources of information	Total	Dublin region	Rest of Leinster	Munster	Connacht/ Ulster
N=	1,957	566	525	523	343
Local newspapers	33%	22%	35%	38%	41%
Local radio	30%	15%	28%	41%	40%

Climate action

The Climate Action KPI Data Working Group reports into the CCMA Environment, Climate, and Circular Economy Committee.

The Research Unit works in partnership with the local authority Climate Action Regional Office Mid-East Coordinator to support this group. The DWG plays a critical role in identifying and tracking KPIs relating to mitigation, adaptation, and behavioural change as well as producing the annual KPI reports (O'Donoghue Hynes et al., 2025a,b). The trend data produced enables the sector to track progress over time and identify areas that may need to be addressed.

One focus of the indicators relates to tracking the establishment and operations of multifunctional teams under a 'mainstreaming' heading, as best practice advocates against siloing of climate action, and embedding responsibilities for addressing climate change across all organisational functions and services. Close monitoring and scrutiny of KPI progress under this heading ensured all teams were in place and operating effectively in 2024 when each local authority was required to produce and publish its climate action plan. Separately, tracking recruitment of dedicated staffing over the years highlighted difficulties experienced by local authorities in sourcing qualified staff for the temporary roles, strengthening the case of the sector to advocate for permanent posts.

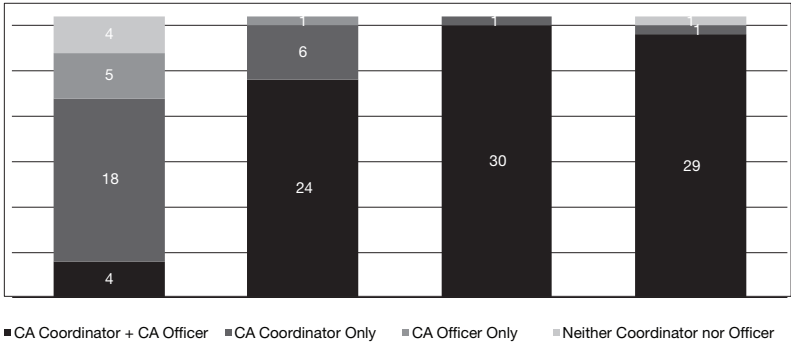
Another area highlighted through data analysis over time was the inconsistent approach taken to activating severe weather response plans. While all local authorities were effectively managing their responses locally, some local authorities adopted a 'business-as-usual' approach when responding to some severe weather events (e.g. gritting icy roads), while others activated their plans for all weather events. As a consequence of reporting these different approaches, a working group has been established to develop protocols and training to standardise responses across all local authorities.

Climate action is another area where there has been effective engagement with the NOAC. The commission is responsible for oversight of the sector and produces an annual local government performance indicators report (NOAC, 2025). These performance indicators are used by a wide variety of stakeholders to track the sector's progress across multiple areas of work, particularly the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The NOAC has incorporated three of the Climate Action KPI DWG's ten indicators into its suite of indicators. These include trends in relation to the number of climate action staff in place (which has highlighted issues relating to retention challenges due to temporary contracts) as detailed in Figure 5, the number of local authorities with climate action teams illustrated in Figure 6, an indicator that is used to

track the involvement of multiple departments in delivering climate actions, and data relating to the social housing retrofit programme as outlined in Table 7.

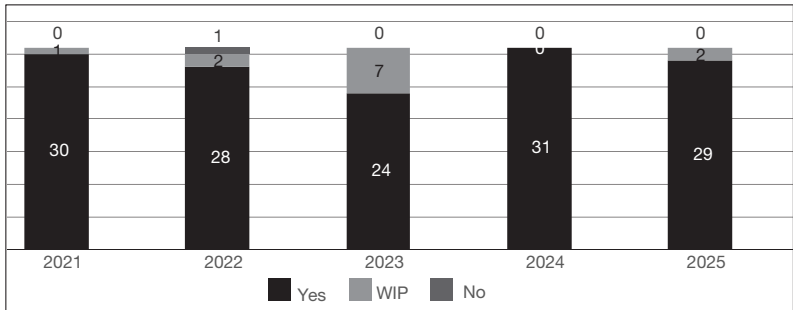
The CCMA Environment, Climate & Circular Economy Committee has not limited itself to acting upon KPI findings. The committee has established a communications working group to respond to findings in the customer service research that showed a surprising low level of awareness about the sector’s role in addressing climate change.

Figure 5: Number of local authorities with climate action staff at year end (2022–2025) – Indicator used by the National Oversight and Audit Commission



Abbreviation: CA = climate action.

Figure 6: Number of local authorities with climate action teams at year end (2022–2025) – Indicator used by the National Oversight and Audit Commission



Abbreviation: WIP = work in progress.

**Table 7: Social housing retrofit outputs and energy savings
(2022–5) – Indicator used by the National Oversight and Audit
Commission**

	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
Social houses retrofitted	2,283	2,445	2,634	2,671	10,033
With BER B2 or above	2,011 (88%)	2,315 (95%)	2,461 (93%)	2,639 (99%)	9,426 (94%)
With BER cost optimal	248 (11%)	111 (5%)	162 (6%)	32 (1%)	553 (6%)
Heat pumps installed	1,554 (68%)	2,200 (90%)	2,393 (91%)	2,446 (92%)	8,593 (86%)
Energy saving per annum (MWh/yr)	29,954	35,663	37,712	37,704	141,033
Carbon savings per annum (tCO₂/yr)	8,600	10,376	10,360	10,263	39,599

Abbreviation: BER = building energy rating.

Conclusion

While the LGMA’s Research Unit has been generating research-informed evidence for several years, the deliberate focus on utilising data is relatively recent. The Central Data Unit was established as a pilot in 2021, and the sector agreed to make it permanent within the LGMA in 2026, which will oversee its expansion over the coming year. The first DWG was established in 2022, and there are now four fully operational, a fifth in its infancy, and plans for several more to be developed as the Research Unit expands. The first detailed dashboards emerged in 2023 enabling the Research Unit to begin extracting evidence, allowing them to complement their traditional research outputs (i.e. case studies, surveys, literature reviews, qualitative studies, evaluations, etc.) with a wider array of outputs such as webinars, presentations, submissions, infographics, data stories, and access to dashboards for a more diverse and influential audience.

Even within that short time period, the evidence generated has made a significant impact. It has been used to allow local authorities target demand for services (rightsizing and homelessness), while also detailing regional variances in service demands (homelessness, planning and climate action) and service engagement (customer service). The detailed trend data have illustrated how major events

like the pandemic, have impacted levels of services engagement and how these have differed across regions and subpopulations (homelessness, planning and customer services). Data have been adopted by the NOAC to enhance its performance monitoring, prompting the development of standardised protocols and training across local authorities (climate action) as well as standardised reporting mechanisms (planning), and resulted in the establishment of working groups to increase awareness of the work being done in the sector (climate action). As time goes on, the range of data that will be explored will grow and the policy areas being impacted will expand, which will benefit many stakeholders, not just the local government sector.

Experience working with the compilation of administrative data for many years has revealed that it can be inadvertently mismanaged or misinterpreted, while appearing unbiased and factual. The LGMA Research Unit has placed a heavy emphasis on establishing strong governance structures to support strong management and accurate interpretation of the data (i.e. DWG members with extensive subject expertise and data knowledge as well as detailed documented data rules that are rigorously tested by the Central Data Unit). The LGMA has also invested in research and data specialists who have developed processes that stress test the data and the findings to ensure they are accurate, robust and can stand up to scrutiny.

Another important learning is that the policy process is not linear, but iterative, and many actors can have a role to play in formally and informally influencing it. Local authorities are involved in the delivery of over 1,000 different services that are funded by up to 30 different government departments and agencies. Officials often engage directly with senior local authority staff in relation to the delivery of various projects and programmes, and the real-world knowledge those officials bring back into their government departments is often used to inform future design or reform of policies. This is a space where anecdotal evidence could dominate if evidence is not readily available. Therefore, the Research Unit invests as much time in disseminating findings to senior managers across the sector as it does the CCMA representatives who are formally engaging in policy development.

Generating data insights is the start of the process, but as much, if not more, time needs to be spent getting the information out into the policy sphere. Human relationships continue to be key to successful engagements; therefore, networking remains critical. A task not to be underestimated in terms of time and resources.

Finally, while the role of data grows, traditional evidence sources remain as important as ever. It is for this reason that the LGMA continues to undertake qualitative research that explores the views and experiences of stakeholders, and considers what experiences have worked elsewhere. In fact, it is through combining both sources that synergies can emerge, and richer insights are generated.

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