



Digital Birmingham and Birmingham Science City welcome the Making Open Data Real consultation. We have worked on open data initiatives in our city for some years. These include the Timely information for Citizens and Civic Dashboard projects.

We recognise that in order to realise the many benefits that open government data offers we need to see a scaling up of the amount of public sector information which is released as open data, and its consistency. The consultation provides many useful proposals to ensure this.

Instead of attempting to answer all of the questions posed in the consultation we have the following comments to make about the issues raised by them.

Charging for Open Data

Within the consultation there is a definition given of open data that includes the possibility that it may be 'available', but charged for. We would like to see an adoption of the principles of open government data as being "complete, primary, timely, accessible, able to be processed by machines, non-discriminatory, non-proprietary and license-free."

One reason for this is that government organisations collect data regardless of whether they charge for it. The emphasis on publication ought to be on storing that data in systems that allow easy publication to the web rather than punishing people for requesting data from systems not fit for doing so.

We believe that there are wider public benefits to be had from the open publication of public sector information. There is a cost to the public sector in administering the current agreements and payments which would largely disappear if the data was made available free of charge. This includes internal recharging.

However, we also recognise this will have an uneven effect on finances across the public sector. For instance, traded funds would lose income while the benefits of increased economic activity would come in through general taxation to the Treasury. Similarly, there are functions in local government that would lose income on data they currently charge for. That would need to be balanced out in some way.

We note that the Measuring European Public Sector Resources report estimated that the annual value of "the overall market for public sector information in the European Union plus Norway is €26.1 billion with an upper boundary of €47.8 billion". Such potential economic value and the tax revenues it would bring should be considered as a counterbalance to more short-term and localised cost concerns.

Not all uses of open data will be for commercial gain and making it freely available means anybody can use it. This also stimulates economic activity as more people and organisations will do things with it than if they had to pay to look at it first. This could play an important role in further developing the creative economy.

At a regional level, the release of open data by public sector organisations has piqued the interest of those digital media firms (and even some 'traditional' media firms) who recognise

that creative content creation can start with inventive uses of open data. In one sense raw data can act as a condition for stimulating economic growth in the creative industries in the same way that subsidised studio or incubation spaces have in the past.

Who should be covered by open data legislation

We would like to see the requirement to publish open data extended to all bodies, both governmental and non-governmental, which provide public services. We agree with the consultation that “information about aspects unrelated to the delivery of their public service function” should not be subject to open data requirements.

The Open Public Services White Paper and such legislation as the Health and Social Care Bill and the Localism Bill propose the opening of provision of public services to a wider range of providers. We think it is important to extend open data requirements to these providers, as well as to organisations which currently provide services to the public sector through, for example PFI, joint ventures, outsourced and commissioned services.

There is a significant risk that if this is not done we will become more secretive and opaque rather than open and transparent, as desired by the government.

There is not necessarily an awareness from commissioners of the need to include data requirements in existing contracts with external providers for performance and management needs. There needs to be some instruction from government about how it expects commissioners to write both this and open data into these new service arrangements at the procurement stage.

Opportunities of Open Data

The categorisation of potential benefits is not particularly clear. We think that they can be broadly and more clearly classified in the following categories:

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- Democratic - Informing the public/media to stimulate discussion and stimulate behaviour change
- Efficiency – driving public service improvement
- Economic - Creating growth by stimulating SME's to generate new products and services, developing skills for employees of the future

There is sometimes an overlap when discussing individual datasets and the ways in which they are re-purposed, but we believe this is more easily understandable than the categories provided in the consultation

Meaningful Open Data

In addition to the discussion in the consultation we believe that data should be published with as much context as is practicable. Such things as, when was the data collected, how often is it updated, why was it collected, what do the data custodians use it for, all of these help to make sense of a dataset. We believe that better, more helpful descriptions will mean that the value of the data will be better realised.

Innovation with Open Data

There is a role for government in stimulating demand for open data. This has already been the case with such competitions as Show Us a Better Way and the numerous hack days that have been organised across the country.

Such events are good at raising awareness of the possibilities of open data. They seldom produce an application which then becomes a commercial product.

We are proud to have been involved in the Nesta – Make It Local programme where we developed the Birmingham Civic Dashboard. Longer term competitions such as Make It Local can help to start the development of a marketplace for information services as described in the consultation.

Public sector organisations could start to see their open data as being a platform on which they encourage others to build services. The work of <http://data.gov.uk> is a useful starting point.

In the future we think that cities such as Birmingham will host our data on cloud services. From there we will be able to build applications and visualisations to present our view of our city and invite comment upon that.

Additionally, open data will give others the ability to build other services which might incorporate open data from other public sector services or across local authorities. There is a role, possibly short term, for helping the developers of such services to understand our data in order to build such services.