

Making Open Data Real – Response from Open Data Manchester and the Open Data Cities programme.

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The benefits of adopting open data for the purposes of transparency and accountability have been well documented, but open data is not just about transparency and accountability. We live in a modern technologised society and we need to give people the tools to navigate through our modern data driven environment, whether it be access to transit data, gritting routes or 'infrastructural' data such as mapping, hydrology or weather.

We strongly argue for an open by default position with exemption being justified due to security or privacy. This is key as it is virtually impossible to predict what the utility of every dataset will be. It is obvious that certain 'high value' (Those that are perceived to improve 'quality of life' decisions) datasets will be adopted and used relatively quickly, but some will get used seldomly and many not at all - this doesn't discount their value, as data has to be seen in the broader context of knowledge and future conditions may make certain datasets more relevant.

It is also important that any body that delivers service on behalf of the public is also required to be open. For example Manchester is straight jacketed by a fragmented public transport system that has 40+ bus operators all supposedly in competition. Crossing the city may take multiple tickets from multiple operators. There is no motivation for operators to release information as to their fare structures although it has long been identified that having a transparent fare structure enables people to budget, plan and use public transport with confidence. At the moment you can only find out a fare by stepping on to the bus or ringing the operator directly. Although some bus operators do see the value of opening up this information, in meetings concern has been raised by certain operators about wholesale release of data allowing other operators to undercut prices - which is the idea of a deregulated system and local councilors being able to see how much they charge - which goes against the idea of delivering public service and being accountable.

There is a case that Land Property Registry data be made available. Speaking to Local Authority colleagues there is an issue regarding the tackling of housing benefit fraud where claimants might have property in another borough and the potential of combating certain money laundering activities - It might also effectively tackled the abuse of second home allowances by MPs before it became a major issue.

We need to encourage a transition to a more intelligent and aware data policy. This cannot be done in one fell swoop but needs to inform procurement, so when IT systems are upgraded the ability to express data openly from a system would be specified. The adoption of common data release schedules is to be encouraged, especially where you have metropolitan counties such as Greater Manchester. Our colleagues at Trafford MBC, who we were in partnership with, in developing DataGM identified this as an important way to get cross authority collaboration on dataset release.

There is a very important benefit from having common data release schedules. At present it is very difficult for developers and digital businesses to make certain open data based applications beyond proof of concept due to the market for open data applications and services being nascent. Common schedules allow development of products that can quickly find a critical market mass, this in turn validates the demand side argument for data.

The public sector is logically the biggest user of its own data but data that is closed and siloed is often dumb data. We hear countless examples of dumb data policy: where local authority officials can't find the data that they require – so creating an environment for ad hoc duplication and standards, in Greater Manchester this is estimated to cost many millions of pounds of lost personnel hours, and where local authorities might be operating multiple – up to 30 in some – GIS systems all with their own licensing agreements and interoperability issues.

There has to be an adoption of common standards and these have to be non-proprietary, open and extensible. Although there is certain resistance to the adoption of Linked Data, mostly due to people not fully understanding the concept and need, with the explosion of data enabled devices, the need for computers to interpret complex data environments is becoming more important. Government has to be a major player in this space it also has to be intelligent in how it ensures compliance. Open and extensible formats offer a certain amount of future proofing over proprietary formats

A concern that we hold, especially in light of participating in the EU smart city programme, is that within the UK there doesn't seem to be much appreciation that open data is an enabler of Smart City and other technologies. Common technological frameworks that allow the development of city-based services across territories are being developed, building larger potential markets for products. What might be unviable in one territory might be viable at scale.

Future technological developments such as the Internet of Things might be hampered if there is pressure to license and charge for certain 'infrastructure' datasets. Certain IoT devices have to be aware of where they are and how they are functioning in relation to public infrastructure and data.

We strongly feel that we are coming to a point where we see a transition to Government as a platform. This will enable development of services from both within the public sector and outside. Open Data could be seen as evidence of a healthy functioning platform based structure, where the boundaries and interactions between citizen, government and business are porous, diffuse and bidirectional.

Access to information is key to the re-enfranchisement. Open Data has the potential to create a more equitable environment for participation. Although it would be naive to believe that opening up data will automatically create a data aware citizenry, it only needs a few people who have the skills to mediate information in their communities to raise awareness and participation.

We believe that for Open Data to become sustainable we need to be able to not only encourage the supply side but that of the demand side for data as well. Where market failure occurs or where there is nascent development of a sector, there is a need to stimulate activity to drive awareness, create services and applications and develop a base layer from which further development can be derived. Innovation challenges and focused development days are two of the things that can help drive this. There needs to be support for initiatives such as Open Data Manchester, Open Data Sheffield, Open Data Brighton and now Open Data Hull. Often, as in the case of Open Data Manchester and the Open Data Cities project from which it was derived, there is no resource support from the public sector and this is unsustainable.

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