

Giuseppe Sollazzo

My name is Giuseppe Sollazzo and I work as a Senior Systems Analyst at St. George's, University of London, dealing with projects both as a consumer and a producer of Open Data. In one previous job, I was dealing with clinical data bases so I would say I developed a certain feeling for issues around the topic of this consultation both from a technical and policy-based perspective.

An enhanced right to data

I believe this is the crucial point of the consultation: the Government and the Open Data community needs to work side by side in developing a culture that foster openness in data. The consultation asks specifically what can be done to ensure that Open Data standards are embedded in new ICT contracts and I think three important points need to be made:

- 1) independent consultants/advisors need to be taken on board of new ICT projects when the tendering process is started; such consultants need to be recognised leaders of the Open Data community and their presence should ensure the project has enough drive in its Open Data aspects.
- 2) Open Source solutions need to be favoured over proprietary software. There are Open Source alternatives to virtually any software package. Should not this be available, a project should be initiated to develop such a solution in-house with an Open Source licence. Albeit not always free, Open Source solutions will offer a standard solution for a lower price, and will create possibilities for resource-sharing and business creation.
- 3) ICT procurement needs to be made easier. Current focus of ICT procurement in the public sector is mostly on the financial stability of the contractor. I argue it should rather be on reliability and effectiveness of the solution proposed. Concentrating the focus on financial stability is a serious mistake, mainly caused by the fact that contractors will develop proprietary solutions; a bankruptcy becomes a terrible risk because of the closedness of the solution; because no other company would be able to take it where the former contractor left; hence the need of strict financial requirements in the tenders. I object to this. In my view, relaxing the financial requirements and moving the focus to the quality of the solution, its openness, its capability to create an ecosystem and be shared, its compatibility with open standards, will improve the overall effectiveness of any ICT solution. Moreover, should the main contractor go bankrupt, someone else will be able to take their place, provided the solution was developed according in the way I envision: consequently, no need for strict financial requirements.

Setting Open Data Standards

As I have already stressed in the previous paragraph, the Government will need to change its rules of access to ICT procurement. Refocusing the attention to openness, standards, ability to re-share the software, is the way to go to start setting a new model in the Open Data area. Web standards can be used and they can represent an example to follow to create new data standards. Community recognised leader can help in this process.

Corporate and personal responsibility

It is absolutely important that common sense rules are established and make into law. The goal of this is not to slow operations down, but to ensure that the right to data mentioned earlier on is actually enforced.

The consultation asks explicitly how to ensure the commitment to Open Data by public sector bodies. I believe that, despite many people feeling that the Government should "stay away", there is a strong need for smart, effective regulation in this area. Think about the Data Protection and the Freedom of Information Act. Current legislation requires many public bodies to deal with data-sensitive operations, and most do so by having a Data Protection Officer and a Freedom of Information Officer. I believe that an Open Data Officer should operate in conjunctions with these two, and that this would not require many more resources than already allocated. The Open Data Officer should drive the publication of data, and inspire the institution they work for to embrace the Open Data culture.

The Government should devolve its regulatory powers in this area to an independent authority to be established to deal with such regulatory issues. I envision the creation of Ofdata on the model of Ofcom for communication and Ofsted for education.

Meaningful Open Data

A lot of discussions have been going on about the issue of data quality. Surely, the whole community aims for data to be informative, high-quality, meaningful and complete. Unfortunately, especially at the beginning of the process, this is hard to reach.

I think that lack of quality should never be a reason for publication to be withheld: where data is available, it should be published. However, I also believe that quality is important and that is why the Government should publish datasets in conjunction with a statistical analysis and independent review (maybe run by the authority I introduced in the previous paragraph) that assesses the quality of the dataset. This should serve two goals: firstly, it would allow open data consumers to deal with error and interpretation of data; secondly, it would help the open data producer to investigate problems in the process leading to the publication and setting goals in its open data strategy.

The final outcome of this publish-and-assess procedure would be a refined publication process that informs the consumers and the public about what to expect. Setting a frequency of update should be part of this process. Polishing the data should not: data should always be made available as it is, and if deemed low quality it should be improved at the next iteration.

There are questions about how to prioritise the publication of data. I believe that in this respect, and without missing the requirements of the FoIA, the only prioritisation strategy should be requests numbers: the more a dataset the public requests, the higher priority it should be given in being published, improved, updated.

Government sets the example

I think the Government is doing already a good job with this Open Data consultations, and I hope it will be able to take the lessons learnt and develop legislation accordingly.

Unfortunately, in many areas of the public sector there is still a "no-culture" responsible for data not to be released, Freedom of Information requests going unanswered, and general hostility towards transparency. I have heard a FoI officer commenting "this is stuff for nerds, we don't need to satisfy this kind of need" to Open Data requests. This is a terrible cultural problem preventing a lot of good to be done.

I believe that the Government should set the example by reviewing and refining its internal procedures for the release of data and responding to FoI requests in a more simple, compassionate way, stressing collaboration with the requestor rather than antagonism.

Moreover, it should be the Government's mission to organise workshops and meetings with Open Data stakeholders in the public sector, to try and create a deeper perception of the issues around Open Data and its benefits. Being on <http://data.gov.uk> should be standard for

any public sector institution, and represent an assessment of their engagement with the public.

Innovation with Open Data

The Government can stimulate innovation in the use of Open Data in some very simple way. Surely it can speed up awards and access to funding to individuals and enterprises willing to build applications, services, and businesses around Open Data. This should apply to both for-profit and not-for-profit ventures, and have as only discriminating factor the received social benefit to their communities or to the wider public.

The most important action the Government can take to stimulate innovation is, however, simplification of bureaucracy. Making Company Law requirements easier to satisfy, as we have already discussed for ICT procurement, is vital to bring ideas to life quickly. Limiting legal liability for non-profit ventures is also a big step ahead. Funding and organising "hackathons", barcamps, unconferences, and any other kind of sponsored moment where developers, policy makers, charities, volunteers can work together, is also a very interesting way of pushing innovation and making it happen.

Open data offers an amazing opportunity of creating "improvement-by-knowledge". Informed choice, real time analysis, accurate facts, can all be part of a new way of intending democracy and innovation, and the UK can lead the way if its leaders will be able to understand the community and provide it with the appropriate rules that make its tools work and the results happen. This way, we will have a situation where services can be discussed and improved, and public bodies can have a chance to adjust their strategy; where citizens can develop their ideas, change the way they vote, take their leaders to account; and, as a result, communities can work together, and society can be improved.