

Making Open Data Real: A public consultation

St Albans City and District Council welcomes a framework which will support councils to easily and uniformly publish data about their services for local residents. St Albans City and District Council is already going some way towards meeting the requirements outlined in the consultation such as making available on-line the webcasts of council meetings for the last 6 months and all papers for meetings since 2001. However, we welcome the further opportunities to improve our interaction with our residents, businesses and community groups presented in this consultation.

General Principles

1. Do the definitions of the key terms go far enough or too far?

The definitions outlined in the consultation paper are clear and provide a good template to extend data publication to other council services in the future.

One area we feel should be included is the systematic use of metadata. This is information which explains the context of the data e.g. definition, source, version etc. This should be routinely published with any data and a template of the format for metadata could be created to ensure the widest comparability.

2. Where a decision is being taken about whether to make a dataset open, what tests should be applied?

We firmly believe that all data relevant to council services should be published. We do however feel that service specific data should be made available with relevant context and benchmarking to ensure readers are in a better position to understand and interpret this data.

Largely the decision on which datasets should be open should be made locally and consider the type of information local people, businesses and other groups need, in-line with the localism agenda. To support this decision we would propose creating a data champion role, i.e. a designated local councillor such as the relevant Portfolio Holder, charged with representing local people's requirements.

3. If the costs to publish or release data are not judged to represent value for money, to what extent should the requestor be required to pay for public services data, and under what circumstances?

Our view is that where the cost to publish or release data does not deliver value for money this cost should be passed on to the requestor at cost only, such as with Freedom of Information requests.

Councils are operating within tight financial constraints and supporting the delivery of data which does not provide value for money could represent an unfair cost to the tax payer.

Factors to consider in assessing value for money would be where data does not have a wide use or is very specific.

4. How do we get the right balance in relation to the range of organisations (providers of public services) our policy proposals apply to? What threshold would be appropriate to determine the range of public services in scope and what key criteria should inform this?

We see that any service which is paid for by tax payers should be within the scope of this policy.

The range of organisations delivering public services is set to increase in light of the localism agenda and the Open Public Services White Paper. Potentially the Open Data policy proposals could apply to all of these organisations. However, this could represent a serious barrier for smaller organisations and community groups and the impact needs to be given full consideration before deciding to implement widely.

5. What would be appropriate mechanisms to encourage or ensure publication of data by public service providers?

It is important to create an environment that supports the potential risks of releasing data and has organisational benefits for councils. Past experience of media investigation and mis-information, resulting in significant amounts of time and cost to the tax payer to sort out, has made councils generally risk adverse about data publication.

There is a wide range of data that is already requested by Government from local authorities, as part of the Single Data List. As a member of the Department for Communities and Local Government's Challenge Group we are well aware of the work the Department has undertaken to reduce the burden on local authorities. However, currently a significant amount of information is collected by Central Government and is not published for a considerable time afterwards.

To ensure transparency across all of Government, there is no reason why these data collections cannot instead be published on individual council's websites (such as a datastore like the GLA's <http://data.london.gov.uk/>). The relevant Department could then create web crawlers to collect and collate this information, ensuring that this data is equally accessible to residents and government departments alike.

An Enhanced Right to Data

1. How would we establish a stronger presumption in favour of publication than that which currently exists?

St Albans City and District Council, like many other councils, is supporting the publishing of suitable data. However, a barrier to progressing the production

of open data more widely is the uncertainty about how best to go about it. The production of worked examples and templates, along with pilot councils leading by example, would help encourage other local authorities to follow.

Additional scrutiny and local pressure could be provided through a data champion, a local councillor such as the Portfolio Holder who would represent the data interests of local residents and businesses and could ensure the correct data is provided in a timely manner to satisfy local requirements.

2. Is providing an independent body, such as the Information Commissioner, with enhanced powers and scope the most effective option for safeguarding a right to access and a right to data?

An overarching independent body would add a layer of bureaucracy and would require significant further legislation in order for it to carry out its remit fully. We do not believe this would effectively ensure the production of data to fulfil local requirements. The empowerment of the local level democratic process would be a more effective, less bureaucratic and less resource intensive approach.

3. Are existing safeguards to protect personal data and privacy measures adequate to regulate the Open Data agenda?

Yes, we believe they are adequate. There is, however, a general presumption to publish as soon as possible which needs to be balanced against these safeguards. This needs to be recognised in Open Data policy.

There is also an issue of combined datasets potentially identifying individuals. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) have had similar issues at local levels with Census data and have developed sophisticated systems to ensure this does not occur. Guidance based on the ONS approach could be produced to develop local level expertise to ensure safeguards are continued.

4. What might the resource implications of an enhanced right to data be for those bodies within its scope? How do we ensure that any additional burden is proportionate to this aim?

Councils hold extensive amounts of data but rarely in combined systems. The additional burden of cleaning and publishing data in suitable formats would be significant. This would be particularly an issue for smaller councils who generally do not have staff with relevant technical skills to support applying the approach across the council.

The process of publishing and having a public facing central location for this such as a datastore, however, does provide a resource that is currently not widely available across councils. We see this as a potential benefit to officers and have experienced this within St Albans City and District Council following the webcasting of Council meetings.

5. How will we ensure that Open Data standards are embedded in new ICT contracts?

The most efficient mode to delivering open data would be to develop integrated systems to deliver open data within ICT systems. Within St Albans City and District Council there is a variety of systems used to hold data. We would need to incorporate the requirement to support integration into these systems within new contracts; the full delivery of this would take an estimated 10 years.

Setting Open Data Standards

1. What is the best way to achieve compliance on high and common standards to allow usability and interoperability?

The Codes of Practice, produced by the LGA in association with other bodies, have been very useful to ensure common standards for all tiers of local government and could provide a route for encouraging compliance. We would recommend piloting the Code of Practice with a few councils to test its value and to give a robust challenge.

This Code of Practice format could also guide application developers to encourage them to published data in a common format.

2. Is there a role for government to establish consistent standards for collecting user experience across public services?

Generally, we feel that in the spirit of localism, councils should be left to define how they deliver for their localities. There is a strong requirement, at least in the short term, that data should be published on issues that are of high priority locally. A common approach will not be relevant to all councils.

3. Should we consider a scheme for accreditation of information intermediaries, and if so how might that best work?

Local authorities have direct contact with their residents, businesses and organisations so it is unlikely an information intermediary would be required in the majority of cases.

Corporate and personal responsibility

1. How would we ensure that public service providers in their day to day decision-making honour a commitment to Open Data, while respecting privacy and security considerations.

An increased focus on the publication of data rather than the presumption of non-disclosure would address hesitancy by the public service providers in publication of data day to day. In our experience local government legal departments have limited capacity to help ensure the safeguarding of

individuals privacy on a wide scale. Ensuring that local authorities only collect the information they need to deliver services would help reduce the amount of personal data held and therefore improve the confidence of councils to publish data.

Local authorities need to ensure they have clear, consistent and robust information management and data security systems are in place. This would then provide confidence in their approach to open data.

2. What could personal responsibility at Board-level do to ensure the right to data is being met include? Should the same person be responsible for ensuring that personal data is properly protected and that privacy issues are met?

We would envisage having a lead officer for both the open data and protecting privacy. This role would include ensuring that the Council has a clear policy and procedures in place to support this, giving a robust review and challenge to how data is provided and addressing any issues raised by members of the public, businesses etc. This could be handled through our existing complaints procedure.

This could be further strengthened by having a designated cabinet councillor with responsibility to ensure publication of the right to data is being met, who would provide a voice for residents and others. There could also be separate scrutiny through the existing committee process to ensure the protection of personal data and the appropriateness of data being published.

3. Would we need to have a sanctions framework to enforce a right to data?

The preferred approach would be to provide suitable support and local scrutiny. We do however feel that there is a need to clarify the relationships with the current Freedom of Information legislation as there is potential duplication.

4. What other sectors would benefit from having a dedicated Sector Transparency Board?

The Public Sector Transparency Board has been valuable in providing an overarching set of principles for the sector and relevant practical examples. As mentioned earlier in our response, the increasing range of non-public sector organisations delivering public services would also require specific support to fulfil their transparency requirements.

Meaningful Open Data

1. How should public services make use of data inventories? What is the optimal way to develop and operate this?

Inventories provide a central place to ensure councils understand the information they hold and also help make transparent what levels of data are available for individuals to request under a potential right to data. Inventories can also be used as a first step to understanding what possible Data Protection issues there may be with regard to each dataset.

Again, clarity is sought between this scheme and the publication scheme which forms part of the Freedom of Information legislation.

2. How should data be prioritised for inclusion in an inventory? How is value to be established?

Value should be assigned from local need, set by local representatives e.g. district councillors in the case of a district council.

3. In what areas would you expect government to collect and publish data routinely?

The Single Data List i.e. information central government requires from an organisation to provide it with for legal evidence or policy development, is a good starting point for the type of data that should be collected. We would expect central government to follow the same rules as outlined to other levels of government and provide a central inventory and to publish data routinely.

4. What data is collected “unnecessarily”? How should these datasets be identified? Should collection be stopped?

The ‘reducing the burden’ aim of the Single Data List seeks to remove unnecessary data collections required by government departments. Locally, this is harder to govern as data is collected widely and often repetitively rather than used coherently. The production of a data inventory along with promoting good practice by leading authorities could assist other authorities to reduce the local data burden.

5. Should the data that government releases always be of high quality? How do we define quality? To what extent should public service providers “polish” the data they publish, if at all?

The right balance between timeliness and accuracy/context is dependent on the audience. As a local authority we feel our responsibility to provide accurate data outweighs the speed of publication.

Government sets the example

- 1. How should government approach the release of existing data for policy and research purposes: should this be held in a central portal or held on departmental portals?**

The segregation of work between government departments is not widely understood. To best ensure the availability of data it should be held in a central portal, such as <http://data.gov.uk>, with a central search function, which would also allow easy cross linking between datasets.

- 2. What factors should inform prioritisation of datasets for publication, at national, local or sector level?**

These should be aligned to current government priorities and those of greatest public interest e.g. health, crime etc. and local priorities and issues of importance to residents.

- 3. Which is more important: for government to prioritise publishing a broader set of data, or existing data at a more detailed level?**

This depends on the specific area and the audience. Local authorities benefit from data published at the detailed level, but the public is generally interested in their own location rather than prescribed authority areas. A good example of where data has been published in a useable local format is the crime data from the Police (<http://www.police.uk/>) where functionality is added through a postcode search while there is also publication of the raw data to support developer re-use.

Innovation with Open Data

- 1. Is there a role for government to stimulate innovation in the use of Open Data? If so, what is the best way to achieve this?**

Yes, there is a role to stimulate innovation, but first there is a need to get the basic process in place. Innovation will follow consistency in production and quality of the data. During the short time since publication of expenses data there are already examples where it has been re-used by developers to fulfil public interest e.g. www.openlylocal.com and www.theyworkforyou.com.