

Open data consultation

Introduction

This document has been developed in response to the Cabinet's Office public consultation on open data by The Involve Foundation (Registered Charity No – 1130568).

About Involve

Involve are experts in public engagement, participation and dialogue. We carry out research and deliver training to inspire citizens, communities and institutions to run and take part in high-quality public participation processes, consultations and community engagement. We believe passionately in a democracy where citizens are empowered to take and influence the decisions that affect their lives.

Background

Involve welcome the emphasis the government is currently placing on open data and transparency. Over the years we have developed our thinking, produced pieces of research and contributed to discussion on the topic of open data. Involve sees great potential in the transparency agenda for having a great impact on increasing and improving citizen involvement in decision making. We are pleased with the efforts of the Cabinet Office to take this agenda to the next level.

Involve supports the vision that open data is central to putting power in the hands of individuals and local communities to enable people to choose what sort of service they want and find the best provider to meet their needs. Our research into open government indicators for the OECDⁱ identifies the direct benefits for citizens, media and civil society: simply giving citizens the information and power to influence change around them can have a profound impact on how they perceive themselves and their role in the community, with knock-on effects for the rest of society. A more informed and empowered public can contribute to more cohesive community relations, more active and trusting citizens and more effective public services. Accessibility and responsiveness measures can lead to better decisions and risk management, which in turn leads to more effective services and enhanced social welfare. Better access to information can also bring about a more active media, which in turn leads to better informed voters and politicians who are forced to be more accountable.

There are some great examples (for example, those put forward in the Annex of the consultation paper) of where open data mechanisms have improved public service delivery. However, the paper rightly states that at present, the reality for citizens is that getting access to meaningful data about their public services can still be difficult and sometimes impossible.

Creating open data and working more transparently can play a transformative role for the way government and society work. In our submission we highlight **three issues** cutting across the consultation questions that the government needs to take into account to drive real change in the relationship between citizen and government.

Involve would like to highlight the importance of:

- Ensuring accessible and meaningful open data
- The need for a robust accountability mechanisms
- Embedding a culture that supports open data

Please find our response to the consultation themed according to these issues below.

Ensuring accessible and meaningful open data

As the consultation paper highlights, the publication of raw data can have a number of positive benefits and is important for making government transparent. However, open data does not come without its challenges and dangers.

Most members of the public will find it hard to understand and interpret raw data. Our Pathways through Participation researchⁱⁱ highlights the need for citizens to have the resources (including time, skills and confidence), as well as opportunities, to participate. It is unlikely that the majority of citizens will have the required resources (and some will not have the internet access) necessary to mine or understand the data.

The public will therefore rely on others to undertake this for them. While some people will represent the data authentically, others will likely skew and misrepresent data to support a cause or make a story. It will be difficult for citizens to distinguish between the two.

Therefore, it is important that tools are provided for ordinary citizens to interrogate the data in a way that makes more sense to them and provides a proper context. Another way of contextualising data for citizens could be to train frontline staff about data, helping them to facilitate conversations with citizens and act as a feedback loop to the council to assess how they react to the data, if they are misinterpreting it and where they have genuine concerns.ⁱⁱⁱ The opening up of data will hopefully reduce the burden of FoI requests, these resources could be used to help citizens access and interpret the data themselves.

Another danger is that uncontextualised and/or misrepresented data could lead to a situation where the public sees only one element of the picture. Without a broader infrastructure of engagement people will not understand the trade-offs that have to be made in making decisions about where resources are placed and cannot be expected to understand the relative worth of different activities or programmes in relation to their costs. For example, while data on the cost of existing programmes or items of expenditure will be obvious, the cost of alternatives (including doing nothing) will not be.

It is important to acknowledge that there are also limits to what quantitative data can tell you about the quality of a service. As Albert Einstein pointed out, 'Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted'. But there is a danger that open data could lead to perverse incentives for policy makers and practitioners where the contrary becomes true, creating a similar effect to that of targets (e.g. the infamous stories of patients being left in ambulances to meet A&E waiting time targets).^{iv}

Building in a robust accountability mechanism

The consultation paper rightly recognises the potential of open data for enabling accountability, but this is dependent upon the right data being collected and published in the right way, and the public having trust that this is the case. Data is not neutral; what is collected, how it is collected, what is published, how it is published, what is presented and how it is presented will affect the way that the data, services and government are perceived by the public. Therefore, in order to secure the public's trust, this system needs to be transparent and include some neutral oversight.

We recommend adopting a citizen led evaluation and accountability process. We see time and again that given space and a well designed process citizens are able to engage constructively. This could operate as follows:

1. A group of citizens could be brought together with experts and policy makers to develop the principles and values that should underpin open data and its release.
2. The principles developed by this group would then be used to design the approach and guidelines for open data in government departments and public bodies.
3. Groups of citizens would undertake regular spot checks of how government is doing, based on the agreed principles, to make suggestions for improvement and to publicly highlight where government is getting it wrong.

This could be opened up to a wider group of citizens through online engagement (crowd sourcing). Ultimately, this could lead to citizen led evaluation based on the mutually developed indicators for open government.

Suggestions for implementation

The extent to which the proposals for embedding culture of openness and transparency in public services will ultimately present the envisaged benefits (to citizens) depends on the implementation. To truly embed this culture of openness, the government needs to devote sufficient efforts and resources. We particularly feel this should be in the following areas:

1. Supporting civil servants

A transformation to a culture of transparency will bring challenges for civil servants who have been used to working within a more closed culture. They will need to be supported in this transition by, for example, making it part of human resources policy and providing opportunities for learning. Ideally, training in the day to-day implementation of transparency and accessibility should be an integrated element of civil servants' in-service training programmes. Successful implementation in our view means moving beyond the law and rules to truly embedding transparency into structures and culture of the public sector.

2. Feedback loop

The long-term sustainability of open government relies on a robust oversight and enforcement structure.^v We would like to stress the importance of ongoing review and measuring of outcomes and impact of open data. There should be a mechanism that ensures feedback that is received from citizens, for example concerns about how the data is being presented or cases of innovative use of open data should be fed back into the implementation and used to improve the system.

3. Moving from informing to empowering

Open data is at the informing end of the public engagement spectrum, but it potentially provides the tools for citizens to play a greater role in decision-making processes and designing public services. Policy makers and practitioners need to be supported to see this not only as a one-way street for providing citizens with information, but as a two way street where information, experience and ideas can flow into government. This could happen in a couple of ways:

1. From people developing new tools and approaches to government data which can be adopted by policy makers and practitioners.
2. By feeding citizens experiences of services and knowledge of local context into the decision making process, along with data, evidence and political understanding, to co-design new services and make better decisions.

Closing remarks

Opening up data holds great potential for empowering citizens and transforming the relation between citizen and state. Increased access to information means the public and stakeholders can interrogate public policy on their own terms and use this to make choices, address concerns and perhaps even improve services.

However, how the government approaches the process of opening up data is critical. What data is published and what not, how it is published, when it is published, the time series it covers and the way it is presented are all choices that will have consequences for the way the public perceive governance and government. Government should recognise this, and be aware of the consequences this has for how the data is interpreted. Lack of clarity regarding this could have serious impact on the trust citizens have in government and in data that is published.

Involve believes that to avoid this, the mechanisms for opening data should be built and monitored in deliberation with citizens in order to bring a level of neutral oversight and trust into the process of opening up data.

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ⁱ Burall, S. Gavelin, K. Wilson, R. (2009) Open Government: beyond static measures A paper produced by Involve for the OECD

<http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Open-Government-beyond-static-measures.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Brodie, E., Hughes, T. Jochum, V. Miller, S. Ockenden, N. Warburton, D. (September 2011) Pathways through participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship?

http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Pathways-Through-Participation-final-report_Final_20110913.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Burall, S. (2011) Off-cuts or sausages? The Big Society needs information and open data

<http://www.involve.org.uk/off-cuts-or-sausages-the-big-society-needs-information-and-open-data/>

^{iv} Cockcroft, L (2008) A&E patients 'left in ambulances for hours', The Telegraph,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1579010/AandE-patients-left-in-ambulances-for-hours.html>

^v Neuman, L. (2009) Enforcement Models: Content and context (As referenced in: Burall, S. Gavelin, K. Wilson, R. (2009) Open Government: beyond static measures A paper produced by Involve for the OECD

<http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Open-Government-beyond-static-measures.pdf>)