

GAIL RAMSTER RESPONSE (VIA E-MAIL)

Open Data Consultation

I would like to submit my comments on the 2 Open Data Consultations.

I am commenting as a researcher at the Royal College of Art Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design. I have been investigating and using local government open data for the past 15 months in order to design improvements to the provision of a public service for both the public and providers. The service I have been working on is public toilets, provided by district and borough councils.

I see 3 problems with open data, reflected in the two consultation documents.

- Charging for the most useful data.
- Not providing the right data.
- Government not doing more with the data.

Charging for the most useful data

The data that the government are considering charging for is some of the most useful - Ordnance Survey, Met Office etc..

One of the main justifications for the government in promoting Open Data, along with transparency, is the economic benefits that could arise if those outside of government could access data and make useful things. Taking the successful example of transport data, the economic benefits to the developer (money from apps) is nothing compared to the economic benefits to the public (get places faster and more efficiently due to better transport information).

I have been looking for ways to help people to find toilets that meet their needs. At it's most basic level, this requires information on where toilets are, when they're open and who they are accessible to.

Most public toilets are provided by councils. I have been contacting councils to ask that they publish their information as 'open data' in order to build an open dataset for the UK's public toilets. This could then be used with other datasets and integrate into useful services.

Many councils have struggled to provide this data because of the way that Ordnance Survey controls their data. The most useful location data for a public toilet is Lat/Long co-ordinates. However councils license their maps (GIS) from OS. OS already show public toilets on their maps, and therefore the council is not allowed to extract that data from the GIS and publish it as open data.

This is regardless of the fact that the Lat/Long is only part of the necessary data for a public toilet dataset. To be useful it also needs opening hours, accessibility etc.. Even though the councils know where their toilets are (indeed, put them there in the first place, and on occasion, informed OS of this fact) the councils have to re-map their toilets in an alternative

mapping system (OS Open Data, OpenStreetMap, Google Maps) and get the data from 'local knowledge' or from locating the toilets using their own GPS device, just to publish information openly that they already have.

OS licensing is still creating barriers to councils to do something with open data that would improve a council service and be of benefit to the public.

- The PDC should open up Ordnance Survey so that everyone has access to essential location information to which they can add value.

Whilst there is a cost to a government department in collecting and publishing some data, this does not automatically mean that the person requesting the data should pay for it.

Consideration must be given to the potential value added by the person using the data, to both the public and, by improving a public service, to the service provider.

Not providing the right data.

Too much emphasis is still put on publishing existing data in the hope that people will use it, rather than publishing data that people want to use. Many useful services could be improved if there was data about them, particularly at local government level.

Whilst transparency datasets have value for analysis and scrutiny, there is a lack of datasets that would be constant use to the public surround day-to-day services (transport, toilets, rubbish collections, weather, utility bills, library use). Even more datasets are of value to user groups who have specific needs and who are often excluded by basic service design, for example, people with disabilities.

Many of these day-to-day services will be affected directly or in-directly by charging for basic geographical data like Ordnance Survey. Some of these services suffer from not having 'data' about them (toilets, rubbish collections).

- Provide more datasets about public services..

..even if this means investing time and money to create the data in the first place. For local government data, each data type should be provided in line with a format so that different council data can be more easily combined and reused. However, the standard must work with and allow for different council databases and systems, so that councils can pull data as much as possible from the systems that they already have in place. In the case of location data, this means pulling data from GIS and making it open, without infringing the Ordnance Survey licence.

Government not doing more with the data.

The open data community will use useful data in order to create services of value to the public. However government organisations could also be using this data to design better public services through better information design. The Crime Map is one example of the Government providing an interface as well as a dataset.

If organisations, such as councils, can provide data about their services efficiently from their databases, why can they not also communicate this data through effective information design

for the benefit of their residents? This could mean using the data for public maps, or using diagrams to show how effectively the council is operating, or creating interactive services for the public to look up information and feedback.

For example, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, as part of their National Continence Management Strategy, created a map of 15000 publicly accessible toilets in Australia. They did not do this by using a government dataset of public toilets, because, like the UK Government, there wasn't one.

Firstly they had to encourage all the local councils plus other organisations to provide the data. Once the data was collected they had a useful online toilet finder and journey planner for the general public, in particular those with continence concerns. Then, having created a useful service, they also published the data as an open dataset for others to use.

- Sometimes the starting point is not the dataset.

Sometimes the starting point is (and indeed should be) a need to improve a public service. There is too much focus from the government on publishing existing data in the hope that people will use it. More government data work needs to focus on how public services can be improved through design. In many instances this may mean that investment has to be made in collecting and creating new data. If it does, then by all means, make it open.