

Cambridge City Council response to 'Making Open Data Real' consultation

1. An enhanced right to data

Cambridge City Council strongly supports the principle of making data held by local authorities and other public sector organisations as open and transparent as possible. The Council believes that increasing access to data improves accountability, encourages citizens to participate in local democracy and helps them to influence and shape services. If all local authorities make relevant data available, it will also enable the Council to benchmark its performance against other authorities and use this information to help drive up standards.

As part of its publication scheme, Cambridge City Council has already made a wide range of information and data available to the public via its website, including information about: how it makes decisions; the services it provides; key policies and procedures; procurement and financial information; and public registers maintained by the council¹. The Council is currently actively exploring what further data can be made available in order to increase openness and transparency around how the council operates and the information that it holds. However, given that there may be significant resource implications associated with making some information and data available, the Council believes that it is important to prioritise the release of data that is of most interest to residents.

The proposal to raise the cost limit for FOI requests in order to increase the amount of data released by public service organisations is of particular concern. Responding to FOI requests already places a significant administrative burden on local authorities. Raising the cost limit would mean that further administrative resources would need to be deployed in responding to such requests, many of which are for the provision, collation and analysis of information which is of use only to the requester and is not of value more widely. In our view this resource would be better utilised in making information pro-actively available. As the consultation document rightly recognises, if more data is publicly available this will ultimately lead to fewer requests for information under the FoIA, although it will take a while for the benefits to be felt and local authorities will still have to respond to a steady flow of requests in the interim.

2. Setting Open Data Standards

¹ More information on Cambridge City Council's Publication Scheme is available at: <http://www.cambridge.gov.uk/ccm/content/council-and-democracy/how-the-council-works/freedom-of-information/publication-scheme.en>

Cambridge City Council believes that it would be helpful if, as suggested in the consultation document, the Government publishes guidance on minimum standards for the publication of data, which could be followed by a process of continuous improvement by local authorities. It would also be helpful if a prioritised list of data sets could be identified in consultation with local authorities. This approach would ensure that there is consistency and even progress across local authorities, which would enable councils to benchmark performance, local residents to compare the performance of their local Council with others, and third parties to use the data across more than one locality. It would also allow Councils to develop a structured approach to moving towards Open Data aspirations, rather than expecting local authorities to move immediately from a position of limited data publication to completely open access.

The incremental approach outlined above would not be consistent with the suggestion in the consultation document that local authorities should publish all available data immediately, rather than seeking to improve data that is of low quality before publication. Low quality data is unlikely to assist local residents in holding local authorities to account, as it may be difficult to understand or interpret and could give a partial or inaccurate picture of Council services and performance. Where data is of low quality, it would seem more sensible for the Council to invest the necessary time and resources to improve the data to the point where it is valid and meaningful.

If the data is to be used for purposes of comparison and benchmarking, there is a need to ensure that local authorities and public service organisations all publish the same information in comparable formats. The data would also need to be made available in an open format so that users do not need proprietary software to read it. This would allow data from many sources to be brought together to create more powerful datasets and tools. Publishing in open formats could be encouraged through common national standards and bringing the data together at data.gov.uk.

Cambridge City Council does not feel that in a localist, 'post-bureaucratic age' Government should institute an 'Open Data' monitoring and compliance process, as this would place an unnecessary reporting burden on local authorities. If punitive measures were adopted towards Councils that were deemed to be failing to meet the standards, this could disadvantage smaller local authorities, which have limited resources available for responding to information requests and making information pro-actively available. It should be recognised that such authorities may need longer lead in times to meet any common standards.

3. Meaningful Open Data

Cambridge City Council agrees with the principle that both Government and public service organisations should not collect data that is of little or no value and should focus resources on collecting data that is meaningful. Since the abandonment of the national performance management framework, including Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA), Local Area Agreements (LAA) and the associated National Indicator set, the Council has focussed on collecting data which enables it to measure how effectively services are performing and how satisfied local residents are with the services provided by the Council.

We agree that developing and publishing data 'inventories' is one way of making data provided by local authorities more accessible to local residents, because such inventories would provide local residents with clear information on all data that is available. However, there will clearly be a resource cost associated with maintaining such databases, so it is important that any Government standards on data inventories do not impose overly bureaucratic solutions on local authorities.