



## **Making Open Data Real consultation – response from Urban Forum October 2011**

### **About Urban Forum**

Urban Forum is a national charity, with over 900 members from local community groups across England. We support voluntary and community sector organisations to carry out social action and influence what happens in their area, and in advocating for members through our research and policy work.

We are a member-led organisation and we are committed to supporting local people to improve their communities and tackle deprivation and inequality.

### **Basis of our response**

Our response to this consultation draws on recent research we conducted with Race Online 2012 into community groups' use of ICT and social media<sup>1</sup> and discussions with members and other stakeholders on the potential use of open data within the voluntary and community sector to achieve improved local outcomes.

The technical, and at times inaccessible, content of the Making Open Data Real document has been a barrier to us responding more comprehensively to the consultation. Whilst Urban Forum has an organisational interest in open data and supporting our members to engage with it, we are not data specialists and so our response is limited to aspects of the document that are most obviously relevant to voluntary and community organisations. However we believe that to make open data *real*, it needs to be made accessible, relevant and practical to a wider audience than the consultation document appears to be aimed at.

### **Introduction**

It is our view that open data offers considerable potential benefit for voluntary and community organisations and the communities which they work in. These include strengthening the accountability of the state to be more responsive to citizens' needs and ambitions, to enable local people to play a greater role in the design, delivery and review of services and in improving the transparency and accountability of charities to their beneficiaries.

However there are a number of substantial challenges that need to be addressed in order to realise this potential. They include the current lack of capacity of VCS groups to use open data and a lack of awareness of practical ways in which open data can improve local outcomes and contribute to the aims of civil society. Another substantial challenge is the need to ensure that the open data agenda is not informed solely by data professionals and those already using open data. Unless the

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<sup>1</sup> *Community 2.0*, Urban Forum and Race Online 2012 (March 2011)

development of open data is informed by the views, needs and ambition of communities and VCS organisations who are not open data specialists, it will not become widely used and make little difference to the lives of citizens.

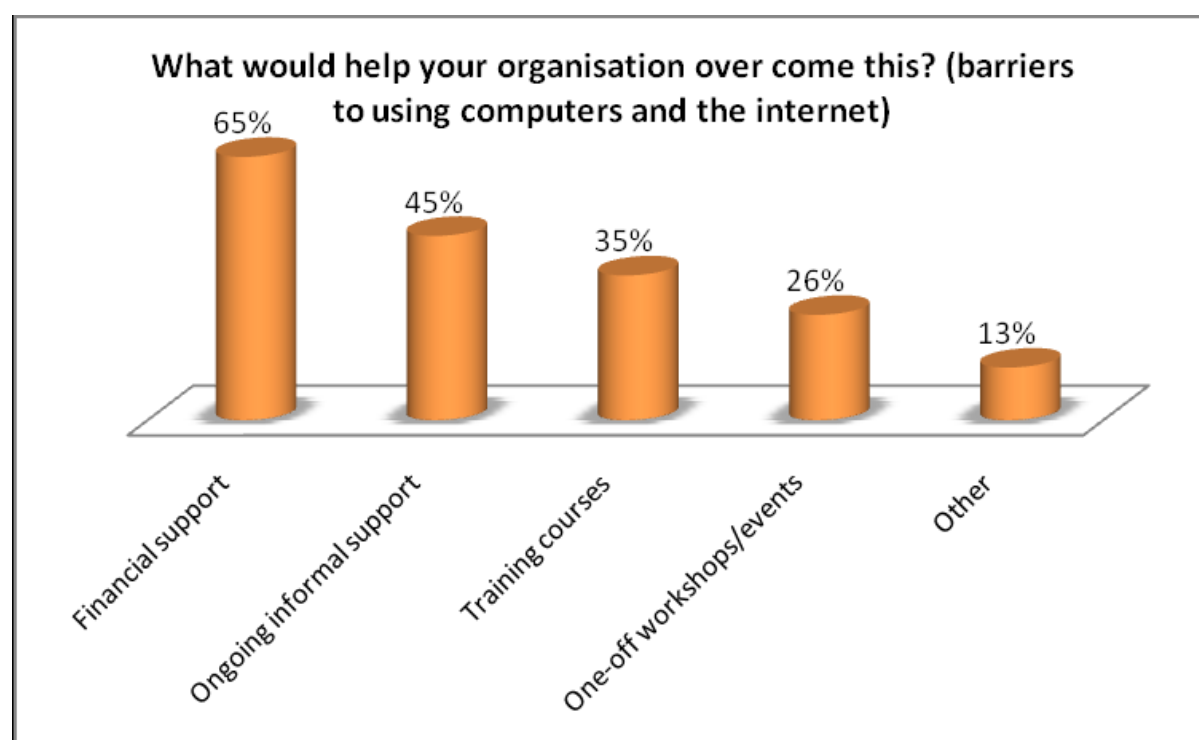
### **Capacity and skills to make use of Open Data**

It is important to recognise the position from which we are starting in order to support innovation and strengthen the use of open data. Our members within the community sector face considerable challenges in making effective use of ICT that are a prerequisite for making practical use of open data.

Recent research we have conducted, consistent with other evidence from the VCS, has found that over half (58%) of community organisations believe they lack the necessary skills to use ICT and the internet effectively. One quarter of groups believe that ICT and the internet are widely used by their beneficiaries (service users).

The government's ambition to support the widespread use of open data to hold the state to account, improve choice, productivity, quality and outcomes is severely compromised by the lack of capacity and skills among local groups and citizens. Unless more practical support is given to support capacity building within VCS, the potential for open data to transform public services and deliver improved outcomes is unlikely to benefit the most vulnerable and excluded within society.

Our research highlights a variety of support needs that would enable community organisations to overcome barriers to using ICT and the internet effectively. These include financial support, informal advice, training and events (see figure 1 below).



**Figure 1 [source: Community 2.0, Urban Forum & Race Online 2012, March 2011]**

## **Opportunities and challenges**

Making information and datasets that the state (and those commissioned by the state) holds available to the public, is intended to strengthen the transparency and accountability of the state to citizens. This is potentially a very empowering development, but it is by no means a given that transparency will inevitably empower citizens. Data is extremely useful, but only if we are able to use it properly. Simply making data available can actually be counter-productive, disempowering people that are swamped with information that is complicated and difficult to make sense of.

Professional analysts, social geographers and academics are able to use data in sophisticated ways to understand the true picture and subtle nuances that can only be understood by manipulating and overlaying different datasets. For the lay-person, without technical skills and expertise, it is practically impossible to use the data in meaningful ways to truly hold the state to account. This problem of how 'information overload' can be extremely disempowering was highlighted in the government's Treasury Spending Challenge<sup>2</sup>, which invited people to contribute ideas to save public money. Over 100,000 suggestions were submitted and members of the public were then asked to vote for the ideas they liked, but without any way of filtering or navigating the ideas to make sense of them. The potential for 'crowd sourcing' ideas and encouraging public participation in spending decisions is significant, but without the tools to make sense of the information presented to people, the impact is severely diminished. Furthermore, most of the data that is becoming available through outlets such as data.gov.uk is provided in complex technical data formats and the explanation that describes the data is inaccessible and jargon-laden.

In order to make use of the opportunities that open data presents, citizens will need tools to help them filter, manipulate and present the information to build up a picture of what is happening in their communities. The way data is presented is also important in order to engage and empower citizens. We welcome the progress being made – outside of government – in data visualisation in order to provide a more friendly and understandable presentation of data. However there is still a considerable way to go in enabling public service providers from all sectors to improve the presentation of data and government ought to provide leadership on this in its own practice.

Local authorities and other public bodies need, in the current climate of austerity, to ensure that their services are responsive and efficient to citizens' needs. The use of intelligence and data – and feedback from local people - will be critical to managing spending cuts in a sensitive and equitable way. We acknowledge the increasing number of tools and platforms that are being developed to help the public sector to analyse data in order to improve efficiency. For example, Dr Foster Intelligence's work with the NHS to convert health data to useful decision support tools that help

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<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend\\_spendingchallenge.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_spendingchallenge.htm)

hospital managers or health commissioners to analyse the data and decide what actions they should take. Some effort is also going in to improving the use of internet technology to provide information and otherwise engage with the public online. However, far less progress has been made in developing data tools that are citizen-focused, despite significant potential benefits for this to citizens and public bodies. Previous efforts to achieve this, such as the neighbourhood statistics website<sup>3</sup> and the Audit Commission's Oneplace website<sup>4</sup>, may serve the needs of people working in public policy, but do not adequately serve the needs and interests of citizen or VCS organisations.

Initial efforts by government to open public data on government spending – notably the publication of 100,000s of items of government spending – have highlighted the importance of context. Whilst there might be valuable information in amongst the vast list of items of spending which are in the public interest, that amount of data is only likely to be trawled by data specialists and those who are paid to interrogate it. For non data-specialists it is practically impossible to interrogate the data meaningfully in order to make use of it. For example, knowing that the Cabinet Office spent £26,000 on a consultant to provide a 'difficult conversations' workshop<sup>5</sup> provides no context to assess whether that was good value for money or not.

### **The quality and availability of open data**

Whilst it is difficult to assess the latent open data needs of community organisations in a very immature market, we see no particular needs of the VCS in relation to the quality of open data that fall outside of general open data principles. Nonetheless it is worth reaffirming the importance of consistency across public bodies and organisations commissioned to deliver services by public bodies, standard formats (machine readable and for 'human' access) and the need for comprehensive metadata. In ensuring consistency across the open data requirements for different providers there will need also to be a principle of proportionality with respect to smaller providers and VCS services providers.

We believe that the Right to Data ought to ensure free access to all public data without restricting the scope or volume of use, unless there is a clear and proven reason not to do so. We strongly support the presumption that data be published unless reasons for an exception plainly exist. We believe it is essential for charities and citizens to be able to challenge any decision not to publish data if they have grounds to believe the stated reason for withholding publication is unjustified. Commitments to open data must not be allowed to be stymied by a lack of coherence and consistency across government departments, and their sponsored public bodies. Open data must be integrated into the work of all government

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://oneplace.audit-commission.gov.uk/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> See: [http://www.pressassociation.com/component/pafeeds/2010/11/19/government\\_spending\\_data\\_released?camefrom=home%20](http://www.pressassociation.com/component/pafeeds/2010/11/19/government_spending_data_released?camefrom=home%20)

departments as part of the effort to transform the relationship between citizens and the state.

For example, open data has the potential to significantly impede or enhance the impact of Community Rights, Neighbourhood Planning and other provision in the Localism Bill to give local people control over services and development in their communities. Publishing the Land Registry data would be a major step forward and an effective way to help make the application of open data practical for voluntary and community organisations. We strongly recommend the government open Land Registry data at the earliest opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst we welcome the government's aims and commitment to open data, unless significant effort is made to support communities and VCS organisations to make full use of it, it is likely to be counter-productive.

Awareness and capability of the VCS to use open data is low, although the potential impact is high. Considerable effort must therefore be made to work with the small number of organisations within the VCS that are engaged with the open data agenda to raise awareness within the sector and to support and strengthen its use.

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**27/10/11**