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Paul Carter Leader of the Council

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28 September 2010

Dear *Eric*,

RE: LOCAL PUBLIC DATA PANEL DRAFT GUIDANCE

As you know Kent County Council (KCC) is fully behind the transparency agenda in local government. We have recently placed online the full remuneration and expenses details of our chief officers and will soon be posting the same details of our senior managers. We have started publishing invoices over £500, and all will be made available for Kent residents to examine online before the year ends. I am sure you will appreciate that with a £2.4 billion budget this is a very significant exercise for KCC, but excellent progress is being made.

However, I want to bring to your attention the draft guidance produced by the Local Public Data Panel on invoice publication for local authorities. This guidance is far too prescriptive, will increase costs for local authorities and will make published data more difficult for local residents to understand. In short, it completely misses the point about what the transparency agenda is about and what localism means in practice.

Some of the requirements set out in the draft guidance are prescriptive but merely inconvenient, such as the requirement to place data on standard web address of www.nameofcouncil.gov.uk/opendata, and being required to provide all data from April 2010 retrospectively whereas previously the commitment was to publish all new expenditure.

However, some of the requirements are more concerning:

- Firstly the choice of file format for data as .CSV rather than the more user friendly Excel format (which is available as standard on home computers). CSV files cannot have commas in the data (e.g. to separate out thousands 1,000,000.00 shows as 1000000.00). This makes CSV files very difficult to read. CSV files are most commonly used on when there is a requirement to merge large amounts of data into a single 'meta' dataset.
- The guidance requires a significant increase in the number of columns of data from 6 to up to 15 making data handling for the public very difficult as the spreadsheets will be very large, making the pages much wider than a normal page width and unprintable on most home printers.

- The guidance sets out a range of data that should be redacted as opposed to excluded from publication. Redaction however is extremely expensive, as it requires manual review and oversight of each piece of data (some 400,000 invoices per annum in KCC case) and does not allow for automation. It is far more practical, and cheaper, to have a small list of exclusions as opposed to a generic policy of redaction.
- The guidance sets out some desirable requirements that are expected to become mandatory in due course. Of these desirable elements, two would be expensive for KCC as we would be required to 'buy in' data for VAT registration number and ProClass code. It is not at all clear why local residents would need this information as standard.

In short, this guidance makes the transparency programme look increasingly like an accounting exercise for central government. Inevitably if the details of this draft guidance are confirmed, we will have to establish two different reporting systems, one to comply with central government prescription, and the other in a format that provides information in a useable form to our local residents.

I know you understand that duplication of effort and resource on this scale increases our costs at a time when we can ill afford it.

Other local authority leaders will undoubtedly be writing to you in a similar vein, and I have no doubt that this is Whitehall taking the opportunity to 'gold plate' regulations around a policy in order to maximise the benefit for civil servants as opposed to those who should be the real beneficiaries, our local residents.

I am sure you will be able remind the Local Public Data Panel, whoever they are, of the real purpose of transparency.

Regards,
Yours sincerely,



Paul Carter
Leader of Kent County Council

P.S. We support the agenda - its how we go about it in the most cost effective manner.



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Baroness Hanham CBE
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Dear Paul,

05 NOV 2010

LOCAL PUBLIC DATA PANEL DRAFT GUIDANCE

Thank you for your letter of 28 September to the Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP which has been passed to me as transparency falls within my Ministerial responsibilities and thank you for bringing your views to our attention. I apologise for the delay in replying.

The Panel's guidance is for comment and we will forward yours on to them though views can also be placed direct on their blog at this link data.gov.uk/blog/local-spending-data-guidance. I will also ask for an urgent explanation regarding the choice of file format. It is essential that there is clear comparability of information and a standard format will help with that – I will write further as soon as I have the explanation.

You are probably also aware that the Local Government Association has published a draft practitioners' guide, you can read and comment on it at this link <http://lgtransparency.readandcomment.com/>. These are intended to help local authorities navigate transparency in a way most appropriate to local residents.

I welcome your support for the transparency agenda in local government, a vital element of the government's ambitions on the Big Society and decentralisation, and I am glad to know of the progress you are making with this.

With kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Baroness Hanham CBE".

BARONESS HANHAM CBE