

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Open Data User Group (ODUG) is an independent advisory body appointed by the Chair of the Group and the Minister for the Cabinet Office. It receives some administrative support from staff in the Cabinet Office, but speaks independently.
- 1.2. While this is an agreed collective response from ODUG, some individuals, or their employing organisations, may hold different views and may submit separate comments to the Response.
- 1.3. ODUG broadly welcomes the proposed changes in the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.
- 1.4. However ODUG has some reservations about the balance of areas considered in the code. Two in particular stand out:
firstly the requirement to release data on parking whilst ignoring many of the data areas where the data user community has requested that Local Authority data be made available; and secondly the pressure on local government to release geospatial data as Open Data which is frequently restricted because of third party licensing requirements.
- 1.5. ODUG believes that the code could go further, and support could be provided, to reduce the cost to local government of releasing organisational and expenditure data as Open Data.
- 1.6. ODUG also believes that while data inventories are important, many Local Authorities will lack the resource necessary to compile or maintain them at present and it agrees that the publication of inventories should not be mandated by the Transparency Code at present.

2. Copies of contracts and tenders over £500

- 2.1. ODUG believes it is in the interest of local economic development and of transparency for expenditure information for contracts over £500 to be made available as Open Data.
- 2.2. To make this data truly useful it is important to develop both standardised registers of suppliers, including information about where the work specified in a contract is actually carried out, and standard classifications of contract tasks, in order to make comparisons over time and between Local Authorities possible.
- 2.3. It is also often unclear where a contract is divided into phases, or there is regular invoicing for part delivery of work under a contract, what the size of the entire contract is. Some contracts can be broken into chunks below the £500 threshold, while in totality exceeding it, and disappear from the records.
- 2.4. ODUG believes that if this data is to be mandated better central coordination is required of the way in which local government is expected to fulfil this mandate.
- 2.5. ODUG strongly agrees that contracts for the generation or supply of data should normally be framed in such a way as to make the data available as Open Data once supplied. Local Authorities that have procured aerial photography, for example, have often found suppliers very willing to provide the data on that basis, which guarantees the best value for local residents and tax payers.

3. Star rating and the form in which data is made available by local government for re-use

- 3.1. ODUG is committed to a general policy of “raw- data now” which ensures that data is released as early as possible and release is not delayed to enable the data to be refined for re-use.
- 3.2. However, ODUG wishes to encourage good practice and would encourage local government to pursue the journey toward 5* data. ODUG does not see this as the principal issue.

- 3.3. Local government should move towards designing information systems in such a way that data used internally is also 'exposed' to potential external users, usually through an API. This has the advantage, over time that no additional work is required to 'release' or 'publish' data as a separate activity from the public task that generated it. Such an approach is mandated in highly efficient and competitive organisations such as Amazon and, probably Google. Moving from a 'publishing' model to an 'exposing' model will reap dividends both internally and externally for local government.

4. Local Land and Property Data

- 4.1. ODUG considers the current situation where the release of geospatial information, in particular land and property information, by local government is hindered, or prevented, by the holders of third party commercial rights in data from which the local government data may have been inferred, derived or abstracted, entirely unsatisfactory.
- 4.2. If it is reasonable to press local government to procure new data on the basis that it will be openly available, it must surely make sense to re-negotiate the relationship with existing suppliers to make that possible too.
- 4.3. In relation to land, property, street, street furniture and public right of way information, the restrictions so far imposed by Ordnance Survey and, in some cases, Royal Mail on local government's ability to disseminate information openly have serious consequences.
- 4.4. ODUG does not believe that inventories of land and property, in which local government has an interest, presented solely as a textual address and a single coordinate, as a representative point and which are subject to third party licensing restrictions is satisfactory either for local government itself or for potential re-users of the information.
- 4.5. ODUG also notes that the geographical features that best describe land and property, land parcel boundaries and building footprints, are infrequently used by Local Authorities because of the licensing restrictions. For example, property parcels, not defined on Ordnance Survey Maps, are separately captured by Her Majesty's Land Registry, some Local Authorities and, possibly also the Valuation Office Agency. Despite the separate capture 'derived' data regulations still allow Ordnance Survey to refuse release of this data without payment. This is a wasteful process, not in the public interest and prevents local government from sharing data effectively with partners, developers, investors and citizens.
- 4.6. The restrictions on how local government generated UPRNs (Unique Property Reference Numbers) can be indexed by address, location and spatial feature has limited their usefulness in a serious way, this needs to be overcome.
- 4.7. ODUG notes that in order to facilitate the delivery of the Olympics, it was necessary and effective to allow all Olympic Partners to share geospatial data derived from OS mapping or captured specifically for the games, for the duration of the event. ODUG believes that that data sharing exercise should provide a model for the open release of geospatial data, without restrictions, by Local Authorities in future. For that to be possible it is important that an alternative income stream is identified and enabled for Ordnance Survey. This could be possible, in collaboration with local government, if Ordnance Survey was compensated by those who generate change on the ground that necessitates re-mapping, rather than by those who seek to use geospatial data.
- 4.8. ODUG notes that the recording and effective management of £220 billion worth of assets is being restricted to preserve an income stream in the very low £10s of millions per annum, the additional revenue that would be required to allow more data derived from Ordnance Survey maps to be released as Open Data. This appears to make little economic sense.

5. Controlled on and off street parking spaces

- 5.1. ODUG welcomes the release of all Open Data but questions why the code has not addressed the data sets identified by potential users as having the potential to generate wider economic value to the economy.
- 5.2. The onus on Local Authorities to publish the numbers of, and the revenue from, parking spaces appears to be driven by concern over the potential abuse of parking charges as an additional revenue stream.
- 5.3. However, in-vehicle navigation technology is developing rapidly, with car manufacturers keen to provide car parking space finding systems as well as automated parking aids. Such innovations can reduce congestion, CO2 emissions and the waste of citizens' valuable time.
- 5.4. Such systems would be greatly assisted by mapping parking spaces, and identifying those where the occupancy of the space is electronically monitored and can be shared in real time. Local Authorities that seek to develop or deploy "smart city" technology will be considering facilitating such systems, which would be greatly enhanced if a standardised way of exchanging parking space information was adopted with an open standard.
- 5.5. Opening up geospatial data, without cumbersome third-party licensing restrictions, alongside parking data would facilitate third-party innovation in this area.

6. Senior staff pay and organograms

- 6.1. The concern in the code with salaries and organizational structures is more closely associated with the government's Transparency and Accountability agendas rather than Open Data. ODUG has no strong views on this.
- 6.2. However if organograms and salaries are mandated from all organizations it would make sense to have a single data model across local government and a classification of roles, rather than relying on locally adopted titles, as at present.
- 6.3. Organograms also need to be kept current to be of real use.

7. Local Authorities and Open Data

- 7.1. We note that only a minority of authorities responded to the consultation. We fear that the Data Transparency and Open Data agendas are currently perceived by many authorities as expensive distractions from the difficult task of delivering services in the face of swingeing cuts in funding.
- 7.2. We understand that many Local Authorities see no advantage in creating Open Data to stimulate economic activity which will only very indirectly effect, their own revenue or may not affect it at all. To have to use resources to enable others to scrutinise their activities, or to make money from their data, is not a perceived as compelling driver by local government. A cultural change, with some local incentives, is necessary to help them embrace the wider economic benefits.
- 7.3. If local government could see how a more liberal approach to the release and availability of land and property data enabled them to dispose more effectively of surplus assets, to derive an income from their estate, or to drive up business rates receipts which could be retained, they would be more enthusiastic about adopting the code.
- 7.4. Similarly if the publication of contracts tenders and expenditure enabled Local Authorities to demonstrate their commitment to local procurement and to show which areas benefitted they would also be more enthusiastic.
- 7.5. As the code stands much of it will appear as yet another costly regulatory device to scrutinise local government. It is very important that this pessimistic view should be dispelled.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1. ODUG welcomes the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency, however ODUG feel that the code does not go far enough to identify and exemplify the advantages to citizens and to local government itself of adopting the recommended practices.
- 8.2. The balance of areas within the code should be redressed to take into account economic benefits of open data in addition to current political concerns.
- 8.3. Contracts of over £500 should be made open in a way that standardises the information to allow meaningful comparisons to be made.
- 8.4. The capture and release of data through APIs should be encouraged to maximise internal and external reuse.
- 8.5. Land and property, and parking information that is properly owned by local authorities should be made available, even if this requires contractual terms from Ordnance Survey and Royal Mail to be addressed.
- 8.6. The publication of staff organograms and salaries will require additional work in order to be truly useful.
- 8.7. Considerable effort will be required to ensure that local authorities are able to see the economic, cultural and political benefit of open data and transparency.