

Single Data List

What is the Single Data List?

On 13 October 2010, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced that the National Indicator set would be abolished, and that a plan to reduce data reporting burdens on local authorities would be brought in to replace it. This “Single Data List” (“SDL”) would provide, in one place, a list of data requirements that central government would in future make on local government and some departmental arms-length bodies.

From April 2008, the National Indicator (NI)⁽¹⁾ set, Local Area Agreements and the Comprehensive Area Assessment was a key way that government performance managed local government. The Coalition Government has since scrapped these initiatives.

Although no longer part of any central government performance management regime, some of the original 198 NIs will continue to be included in the SDL. The key difference is that the data will be collected for government use, rather than for performance management or audit of local authorities and their partners.

The SDL reflects the Government’s transparency, decentralisation and localism agendas. It is heralded as a means of freeing local authorities and other public bodies from data reporting burdens. It is sponsored and led by the Department for Communities and Local Government (“DCLG”).

The draft SDL was published on 17 December 2010, alongside a consultation which ran until 4 February. The government have not yet released or formally responded to the consultation responses.

What is its purpose?

The objectives of the SDL are:

- To be a clear, definitive list of data that Government needs from local authorities
- To help reduce data burdens on local authorities
- To be open for scrutiny, challenge and regular review

Furthermore, the Government states that the list will:

- Help government reduce the number of datasets required by first cataloguing them
- Facilitate transparency by making it easier for the public to access data about their areas

It was announced on 15 October 2010 that the National Indicator (NI) regime would be brought to an end. Some SDL data requirements include ex-NI datasets, but these will be for government use and not a performance management requirement for local authorities.

The SDL does not prohibit local authorities from continuing to collect these or other datasets for their own use.

(1) Originally 198 indicators strong, up to 35 would be selected by local authorities and their public sector partners as a way of identifying issues and measuring improvements in their area through Local Area Agreements (and where applicable, Multi- Area Agreements)

What does it contain?

The SDL outlines the Government's data requirements across several themes:

- For Departmental Indicators, to enable central government to be held to account by the public (20 indicators, of which 6 are new)⁽²⁾
- To protect the national interest, where local accountability is insufficient (55 indicators, of which 8 are new and 4 under review)
- For aggregation into national level statistics (19 indicators)
- To fulfil legal obligations under European/International law and directives (6 indicators)
- To be made public by all local authorities to support local accountability (17 indicators, of which 1 is new and 6 under review)
- To support effective administration of funding (45 indicators, of which 3 are new)

The draft SDL requires local authorities to report 162 indicators, with 463 'data topics' making up those indicators. For example:

Indicator	Data topics making up that indicator
Civil Parking Enforcement Survey	Penalty charge notices issued
	Penalty charge notices cancelled
	Immobilisation/removal of vehicles before action following a warrant of execution

A further 7 indicators and 9 'data topics' have been included and are the reporting responsibility of departmental arms-length bodies. At the moment the SDL only contains data required by government departments and DCLG arms-length bodies. It is the Government's intention to expand the list to include other departmental arms-length bodies but this will not be ready for the final 2011-12 version of the list being published in March⁽³⁾.

Although a reduced overall burden, the SDL still represents a significant reporting responsibility for local authorities. Not all authorities will be required to report on all indicators. The draft SDL contains details on reporting responsibilities under the following headings:

- Administering authorities for the Local Government Pension Scheme (1 indicator)
- All local authorities (29 indicators)
- Billing and major precepting authorities (1 indicator)
- Billing authorities (6 indicators)
- Fire and Rescue authorities (4 indicators)
- Licensing authorities (1 indicator)
- A sample of authorities (3 indicators)
- Unitary authorities and counties (63 indicators)
- Unitary authorities and districts (45 indicators)
- 'Other' (5 indicators, specifically *Thames Gateway Programme, Imports of products of animal origin from third countries, the Concessionary Travel Survey, Major transport scheme spend, and Local Sustainable Transport Fund*)

⁽²⁾ "New" in this context means either an entirely new data burden, an aggregation of previous burdens, or an amendment to a previous burden.

⁽³⁾ DCLG website, Data Burdens Q and A, 4 February: <http://bit.ly/dFxFqG>

It is likely that all authorities will be required to provide data under several headings.

At the time of writing, several new indicators have been referred to in the draft SDL but not fully defined. This will change as the draft develops, and represents current government thinking on transparency: to publish information as soon as possible.⁽⁴⁾

The latest version of the draft including a search facility and change log, is available at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation/tacklingburdens/databurdens>

Indicators currently under review

- Annual Monitoring Report: Core Output Indicators
- Fire and Rescue Service non-financial annual returns
- CORE (Continuous Recording) of lettings and sales by local authorities
- National Register of Social Housing (NROSH)
- Emissions from Local Authority own estate and operations (former National Indicator 185)
- Missing from Care and Home
- Register of deaf or hard of hearing people (SSDA910)
- Grant Funded Services (GFS1) return
- Personal Social Services Staffing (SSDS001) return
- Youth Justice Management Information System (YJMIS)

When will it come into force?

The final SDL will be published during March 2011 and come into force in April. The SDL will be reviewed annually.

The Single Data List Challenge Group

The Challenge Group was set up in December 2010 by DCLG to ensure a local government sector input into development of the SDL. Membership of the group is drawn from a cross-section of local authorities.⁽⁵⁾

The Group has carried out two key tasks in support of the SDL consultation:

1. Five principles have been established, designed to help the government develop and maintain the SDL.

- Minimising burdens
- Creating a common language
- Encouraging clarity of purpose
- Promoting local accountability
- Promoting outcomes

2. Providing detailed initial feedback to Government

The Challenge Group did not believe that the consultation period was long enough, or that the period between the consultation deadline and start date of the SDL would allow the government to make best use of consultation responses, or the Challenge Group's input.

⁽⁴⁾ South West Observatory Policy Briefing on Open Data, January 2011: <http://bit.ly/e3ldK7>

⁽⁵⁾ Hampshire and Somerset County Councils, Leicester and Manchester City Councils, St. Albans District Council and London Borough of Wandsworth

More detail on the Challenge Group's makeup and role can be found at: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelId=16879222> and their full response to the SDL consultation can be found at <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/tio/16919472>. Their Community of Practice can be found at: <http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/landing-home.do?id=9155642>

The Consultation

The consultation ran from 17 December 2010 until 4 February 2011.

What is the SWO position on the SDL?

SWO supports a single accessible list of data requirements and recommends that this data will be made available under the government's open data principles so organisations can make use of it for analysis and intelligence purposes.

SWO make three further points:

- 1.** Does the list encompass the entire central government data need, and what additional requirements are likely to arise when all the data needs of departmental arms-length bodies are factored in? SWO is concerned that the value of having a single list will be negated by it being overwhelmingly long.
- 2.** Where data is of value it should be collected: removing a requirement should not be made purely on a desire to reduce overall reporting burden. However, at this stage the list doesn't streamline the burden of data reporting requirements – it remains extensive. Instead the SDL should be fully reviewed with input from local authorities to ensure it is genuinely covering the key needs of central government departments.
- 3.** There are concerns over data integrity issues without audit requirements. Without a requirement to report data to a standard, reliable methodology then performance management, benchmarking and any other use of the data will be impossible, either by central government, local government, or local people.

What did the Local Government Association (“LGA”) say?

The LGA expressed concern that the SDL would be ready in time for the April 2011 start date, that local authorities would not be ready either, and that the SDL was still too long. The LGA recommended that instead of hurrying the review and implementation process, the government should publish a comprehensive but much-reduced list of data demands and embark on a thorough review in advance of an April 2012 implementation date.⁽⁶⁾

The LGA criticisms of the draft SDL fall into three categories:

1. The limited scale of reductions in data burdens

The LGA calculated that whilst 45 data items or collections had been removed, 18 new ones were being proposed, and that the costs of meeting the requirements in the draft SDL would still be prohibitive and made worse by current financial challenges.

2. The SDL was not a comprehensive list of what was “in” and what was “out” and it did not contain enough information for local authorities to respond

The Government had already acknowledged that the list was not complete, and that it would develop over time.

(6) LGA consultation response, LGA website, February 2011: <http://bit.ly/f8WYnD>

However, the LGA did comment that it was difficult to understand how the SDL would link with the wider review of government data including transparency elements of Departmental Business Plans, reviews in other government departments, and what the data needs of new policy initiatives would be.

3. The consultation period was not long enough

This LGA expressed the view that a review of this size and reach could not be completed satisfactorily within the timeframes set by the Government. Furthermore, the consultation period coincided with budget-setting periods and organisational reviews owing to funding reductions; as a result they would not be able to contribute fully to the review. By comparison, engagement with local authorities during the creation of the National Indicator set took more than a year but *“still felt rushed.”*⁽⁷⁾

Despite its criticisms, the LGA supports the principle of reducing data burdens for local authorities, and supports the principles of the Single Data List Challenge Group.

What did other consultation responses say?

A sample of individual local authority responses to the consultation showed that support for reducing burdens is widely supported, but also that several additional returns ought to be included ⁽⁸⁾ as well as removal of others. ⁽⁹⁾

This is likely to lead in some cases to local authorities choosing to collect additional datasets for their own performance management uses. This is not a new phenomenon. In previous years when Best Value Performance Indicators and National Indicators have been removed, some local authorities have chosen to continue collecting the data as a local performance indicator.

Links

DCLG draft Single Data List and supporting documentation:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation/tacklingburdens/databurdens>

LGA website for Single Data List

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=16879222>

Single Data List Challenge Group – response to consultation:

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/tio/16919472>

Single Data List Community of Practice

<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/landing-home.do?id=9155642>

South West Observatory Policy Briefing on Open Data:

<http://www.swo.org.uk/resources/briefing-notes>

(7) LGA website, LGA Consultation response, 15 February 2011: <http://bit.ly/f8WYnD>

(8) Colchester Borough Council website, 7 February 2011: <http://bit.ly/h98je9>

(9) Warwickshire County Council website, 4 February 2011: <http://bit.ly/e59xX1>