

# Open Data Update August 2011

## Introduction

Open data and transparent government are key themes behind the government's drive to create a more accountable public sector and support economic growth through innovation.

In order to deliver its Programme for Government, the Coalition has embarked on several initiatives relating to open data. Known as the Transparency Programme, it was created to realise four key government objectives:<sup>(1)</sup>

- Online disclosure of all central government spending and contracts over £25,000.
- Creation of a new 'right to data' so that government-held datasets can be requested and used by the public, and then published on a regular basis.
- A requirement for all councils to publish items of spending above £500.
- Ensure that all data published by public bodies is published in an open and standardised format, so that it can be used easily and with minimal cost by third parties.

This briefing paper gives an update on policy and delivery since our first Open Data Briefing Paper which was published in January and can be found at: [www.swo.org.uk/resources/briefing-notes](http://www.swo.org.uk/resources/briefing-notes)

## News

### Open Public Services White Paper<sup>(2)</sup>

This White Paper covers a wide range of issues relating to access and accountability in the public sector. Although a White Paper does not create any regulatory or statutory requirements, it does outline the government's general viewpoint and in this case is likely to lead to new legislation, regulations and guidance.

Key elements of the White Paper relating to open data policy include:

- A pledge to ensure that key data about public services is placed in the public domain in an accessible form. Doing this is expected to help people make informed choices and hold service providers to account.
- Making Aggregate GP clinical data available in a standardised format that patients can understand. Patients should then be able to see how their GP practice compares with others.
- A promise that data collected by government is easily available to the public so that people can make informed choices about the services they use.
- A requirement on all parts of the public sector to publish information on performance and user satisfaction. The government will consult on what sort of information should be made available, how it should be presented and if it should be standardised.
- A public right to request service performance and funding data where it is not being published. This is already being put in place by government departments but is also be enshrined in the Protection of Freedoms Bill.

(1) Coalition Programme for Government. Cabinet Office May 2010  
[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/coalition-documents](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/coalition-documents) (accessed 18/7/11)

(2) Open Public Services White Paper: Cabinet Office July 2011  
[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/open-public-services-white-paper](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/open-public-services-white-paper) (accessed 18/7/11)

- The new Government Digital Service<sup>(3)</sup> will coordinate digital activity across central government. It will develop a digital marketplace and open up government data, including interfaces to allow access to data.

The White Paper can be read at:

[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/open-public-services-white-paper](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/open-public-services-white-paper)

### **Local Authority Expenditure over £500**

All local authorities but one<sup>(4)</sup> are now publishing expenditure over £500. This information can be accessed on the [direct.gov](http://direct.gov) website and also via

[www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/transparency/localgovernmentexpenditure](http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/transparency/localgovernmentexpenditure)

## Update on the Transparency Programme

### **Update on Programme Objectives**

The **objectives of the Transparency Programme** have not changed since January 2011.

### **The Transparency Board**

The Transparency Board has met four times more since January; on **8 February, 2 March, 19 May** and **8 June**. The Board discussed a variety of issues, including:

- The transport sector (8 February)
- The Transparency and Privacy Review (2 March)
- Developing the [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk) website (19 May)
- Lessons learnt from release of street level crime data (19 May)
- Open business platforms (19 May)
- The Transparency Strategy (19 May)
- Local Public Data Panel (8 June)
- Public Sector Mapping Agreement (8 June)

### **Public Data Transparency Principles**

The Draft Principles have not been updated on the [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk) website since September 2010.

They can be read at [http://data.gov.uk/wiki/Public\\_Data\\_Principles](http://data.gov.uk/wiki/Public_Data_Principles)

The following principle continues to cause concern amongst the data user community:

**“Public data will be timely and fine grained – Data will be released as quickly as possible after its collection and in as fine a detail as is possible. Speed may mean that the first release may have inaccuracies; more accurate versions will be released when available.”<sup>(5)</sup>**

There are risks attached to early release of incomplete, inaccurate or misleading data, however recent discussions by the Transparency Board have suggested that *“data quality need only be appropriate for the user.”*

**(3)** The Government Digital Service was created when Directgov was merged with the Cabinet Office Digital Delivery and Digital Engagement teams

**(4)** Nottingham City Council have stated that they will only publish these figures if it becomes a legal requirement. More information including an explanation of their decision can be found at:

<http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=13875>

**(5)** Public Data Transparency Principles. Cabinet Office September 2010

[http://data.gov.uk/wiki/Public\\_Data\\_Principles](http://data.gov.uk/wiki/Public_Data_Principles) (accessed 14/7/11)

## Update on the Public Data Corporation<sup>(6)</sup>

The three aims for the Public Data Corporation were outlined at the [Transparency Board meeting of 2 March 2011](#):

1. Provide a more consistent approach towards access to and accessibility of public sector information, making more data free at the point of use where appropriate, and to do so by ensuring value for taxpayer's money.
2. Create a centre of excellence to drive further efficiencies in the public sector.
3. Facilitate or create a vehicle that can attract private investment.

After discussion, the Transparency Board summarised their points as follows<sup>(7)</sup>:

- The creation of a strong empowered regulator for the Public Data Corporation [is] critically important. Getting this right would help ensure that other structures worked effectively.
- ...data quality did not need to be 'gold-plated' but that it should be appropriate for the user.
- There [is] a need for a long-term consistent policy framework for data, particularly for the kind considered for the Public Data Corporation.

## The Government's Transparency Website

The government's transparency website can be found on <http://data.gov.uk> which includes access to data at a post-code level, examples of good practice in data use, and opportunities to comment or make suggestions. It also includes information on:

- Departmental Business Plans
- Government spending over £25,000
- Jobs and salaries of senior Whitehall personnel
- Information on hospitality and gifts received by Ministers including who they are meeting with
- Cross-government performance data
- Major government contracts

The website is not fully populated however it is hoped that it will eventually become a key point of contact for anyone wishing to understand or monitor the activity of government departments.

The transparency website is also available at <http://transparency.number10.gov.uk> but in *beta* with limited functionality.

## Communities of Practice<sup>(8)</sup>

Several communities of practice were set up to facilitate discussion and information sharing on all aspects of open and linked data, transparency and publishing of local public information, and related topics. Chiefly among them are the [Local Open Data Community](#) and [Unlocking the Potential of Your Information Assets](#) community (registration may be required).

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1 August 2011

(6) Public Data Corporation Website. HM Government February 2011.  
<http://pdcengagement.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/pdc/> (accessed 18/7/11)

(7) Transparency Board meeting. Cabinet Office 2 March 2011.  
<http://data.gov.uk/blog/transparency-board-minutes-2nd-march-2011> (accessed 18/7/11)

(8) Communities of Practice Website. Local Government Improvement and Development July 2011  
<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk> (accessed 14/7/11)