



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report for January 2010 (England) – Public data

In June 2009 the UK Government appointed Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the world wide web, to examine how to reengineer the public services “so that government information is accessible and useful for the widest possible group of people”. The approach follows that of US president Barack Obama and his data.gov initiative of last May. Berners-Lee headed a panel of experts including Professor Nigel Shadbolt, professor of artificial intelligence at the University of Southampton and now head of the government’s Local Public Data Panel. Their recommendations have led to the creation of the data.gov.uk website, which is a starting point in the debate on which centrally-held datasets should be made publicly available. Though the site is in beta stage, the government hopes that it will be developed to provide more mashups (cross-application of two different sources of data) eg. an interactive map of educational attainment locally. Developers will also be able to submit requests to the site for assistance in developing mobile applications (apps).

In addition, the Department for Communities and Local Government also announced that it was consulting on opening up Ordnance Survey (OS) datasets for free. This would enable greater use of mapping, boundary and postcode data for digital applications of public benefit. Though higher specification data products would retain existing charging mechanisms, an OS Free product service would be developed using Creative Commons-type licensing to enable lower end data to be free for re-use. It is understood that the OS had long resisted such moves but Berners-Lee was successful in persuading it to drop its opposition. One account in a recent publication claims it is only because of Berners-Lee’s ‘star power’ as the inventor of the internet that officials had dropped their opposition to releasing government data for public use.

There is however also an element of competitiveness in the race to release government data. The Greater London Authority has also announced its London Datastore (data.london.gov.uk) in early January. Launched by London Mayor Boris Johnson, the site went live on 29 January and contains 200 datasets available for free use by both the public and software developers. The current 200 datasets are grouped by theme:

- Business and Economy (eg. Borough Employment Projections)
- Crime and Community Safety (eg. Deliberate Fire Incidents)
- Demographics (eg. NI registrations of Overseas Nationals)
- Employment and Skills (eg. Claimant Count Model Output)

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- Health (eg. Road Injuries and Deaths)
- Housing (eg. Planning Approvals by Borough)
- Planning (eg. Demographic Projections)
- Sport (eg. Physically Active Children)
- Transparency (eg. Mayor's Office Expenses)
- Transport (eg. Road Injuries and Deaths)
- Young People (eg. Teenage Conceptions)

In addition to the raw data now available, the GLA announced a £200,000 Developers' Fund for companies or individuals who are able to develop new ideas to use the data for public benefit via facebook or mobile phone apps, modeled on the Apps for Democracy project in the US. The London Datastore itself is modeled on the City of San Francisco's datasf.org site. As with the data.gov.uk site, additional datasets will be added as the site develops. Data which would infringe privacy legislation or contractual confidentiality will not be released however.

This new culture of openness in Whitehall is also shown by the decision to enhance the information made available in Local Spending Reports. Currently the reports exist as hard to navigate Excel spreadsheets hosted on the department's website, but will from next summer be published online and in a user-friendly format. The reports detail total public spending in each local authority area, but to enable local councils and people to examine them more rigorously (including evidence of potential duplication or waste) the revamped format will include:

- more up to date information
- greater detail on spending by quangos including Learning and Skills Councils, the Homes and Communities Agency
- more comprehensive details of grant payments from central to local government
- enhanced regional data
- web links taking users direct to relevant sources of additional information including the new Oneplace website which features detail of all comprehensive area assessments

It is hoped that the new system will follow the lead of the Total Place pilots in 13 local authority areas, which has provided for the mapping of total public sector spend in each area across various themes. This will enable local authorities and local people to gauge the effectiveness of public spending in their area. The new Local Public Spending Reports will be loaded onto the Places Database from this summer. The Places Database (www.places.communities.gov.uk) already holds 600 datasets by local authority area, enabling people to view local statistics such as crime or education provision by locality. The department is also working to improve cross-functionality for local citizens between the Places Database and the Oneplace website provided by the Audit Commission. Ultimately it is hoped that local citizens will be able to access user-friendly comprehensive data via map for public service spending and performance in their area in the very near future.

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