



Information, Information, Information: Improving access to information for local areas

Tom Shakespeare, Research Fellow

Summary

This research note by Localis examines ways to create a more effective 'freedom of information' for local areas by looking at both how public bodies such as local authorities can release more information, but also how the data itself can be improved to make it more amenable to the public and to those who wish to manipulate it in new and meaningful ways. The **first chapter** sets the background for the current information climate in the UK. The **second chapter** explores in more depth the extent to which the informational relationship between central government, local government and individuals needs reforming, and goes on to suggest that despite the undoubted successes of informational freedom in the UK, there is still room for significant improvement. The **third chapter** looks in depth at how to break down informational barriers between the different levels of government and individuals by exploring successful relationships with data at home and abroad. It also looks at examples of the data itself, and potential ways by which it can be improved and taken forward. The **fourth chapter** looks solely at the barriers to a greater freedom of information in the UK, which then ties into the **final chapter**, which sets out the conclusions and policy recommendations.

The key findings are:

- There are strong and persuasive arguments, based on examples from at home and abroad that increasing citizens' access to information about their local area improves the economy, accountability, engagement and trust in public bodies
- There is a public demand for more information in the UK, and simultaneously, an increasing political disengagement and mistrust.
- Data collected at the local level often varies in quality, quantity and timing across Councils. Data release needs to be standardised to enable comparisons between different areas, whilst at the same time ensuring the individuality of each area and the idiosyncrasies of the information
- All relevant information (including financial and performance) which is already collected should be standardised and released as and when it is produced across all Councils, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so—including burdens on physical and financial resources
- Councils should also release any other information which is derived based on the interests of the local area
- Information should be released at as granular a level as possible, and financial incentives need to be made for people to capitalise on the information and convert it into more meaningful forms
- All Freedom of Information requests should be collected and centrally released to the public to enable easy access to information, whilst ensuring that contextual information is maintained.

1. Background

Why data is important – Access to government records and information is an essential requirement for modern government. Access facilitates public knowledge, discussion and grass-roots accountability. It provides an important guard against abuses, mismanagement and corruption. It can also be beneficial to governments themselves – openness and transparency in the decision making process can assist in developing citizen trust in government actions and in maintaining a healthy civil and democratic society. It can also drive up standards and improve the economy. Freedom of Information (Fol) is now widely considered to be a human right.

Examples of benefits of access to information – There are numerous examples worldwide of where, in the hands of the individual, access to more information has really improved the lives of the majority. In Thailand for example, one young lady, after her child was refused entry into their nearby school, made a Fol request for the information of other entrants and found that the school was positively discriminating against poor children. As a result, the Council of State issued an order that all schools accept pupils solely on merit. In the US, the Fol Act helped to uncover human-rights abuses



at Guantanamo Bay. And in New Zealand, the Commission that led to the adoption of the 1982 Official Information Act found that "greater freedom of information narrows the differences of opinion, increases the effectiveness of policies adopted and strengthens public confidence in the system."

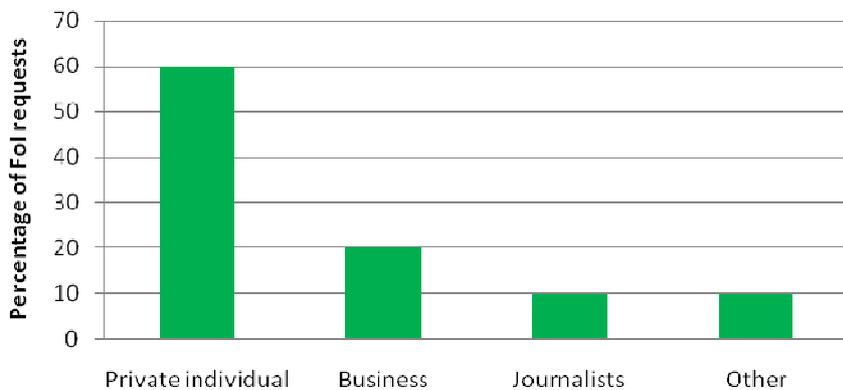
Social change happens when people have access to information. In the 15th century the Gutenberg Press gave people unprecedented access to printed works, and later became a major factor fuelling the Renaissance, the Reformation, the scientific revolution, and helped give rise to mass literacy. More recently, the internet has revolutionised the way we do business, interact and learn. In the private sector, information and data has become an industry in its own right, and no progressive business can make decisions without first having access to all relevant information. In business, there is money to be made by restricting information from the public; but in the public sector it fosters a power imbalance.

Information Dissemination –In the UK, only half of residents feel that their local authority keeps them well informed about local services and the benefits provided. The public's perception of how well they are informed lies at the heart of the current separation between government and individuals. In another poll by Ipsos Mori of people in London, almost half thought that local authorities ran the police service and local hospitals. This confusion over responsibility can easily manifest itself as a widespread public political disengagement. The problem therefore can be viewed in two ways: either the political system is too complicated to understand, or information is not disseminated adequately to a significant proportion of people. **Whilst people feel ill-informed about their local Council, there is at the same time a large demand for information from the public as 60% of FoI requests to local authorities come from private individuals (see graph 1).** In one piece of qualitative research into the public perception of the Council, it was noted that "improved communication would help to establish greater trust between residents and council". But how is information currently communicated?

Local authority data release legislation – There are currently two main avenues through which information is communicated to the public in the UK: the Freedom of Information Act, and the performance assessment regime. The UK Freedom of Information Act was adopted on 30th November 2000 and came into effect in 2005 after years of campaigning. It requires people to apply for information, which is then released after a period of up to 20 days. It applies to over 100,000 public authorities who between them have received a vast number of requests. In 2007, central government received almost 33,000 requests, and it is estimated that there are up to 60,000 requests made to local government every year.

Local authority performance reporting, following on from the 2006 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' and recent 'Communities in Control' White Papers, is currently in a state of flux. The recent policy initiatives for reporting local

Graph 1: Freedom of information requests to local authorities⁴



authority performance have been: the Best Value Regime, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), both of which have now been phased out, and now the move towards Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAAs), Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs), Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and the introduction of Multi-Area Agreements. At the heart of the new performance regime is the 198 strong national indicator set (NIS) which includes factual information and perceptual data. Local authorities have a statutory duty to report on their LAA, which



includes targets for up to 35 locally selected indicators chosen from the NIS. The Audit Commission reports on the CPA, which takes into account most of the indicators. As part of, but separate from their performance reporting, all Councils also have a statutory duty to report their financial information before the end of September every year. They are also already obliged to supply information to the secretary of state on a quarterly basis, which is then aggregated and released. So some would argue that enough information is already in the public domain.

Progress or not – The current move towards a more locally-tailored performance assessment follows on from the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) brought in by the Conservatives in the 1980s, the 'Best-Value' system brought in by the Blair government which comprised over 1200 indicators of the late '90s, through to the seemingly less bureaucratic CAAs and LAAs that are now emerging. All of these approaches, including elements of the LAA and CAA frameworks are about central inspection of local government performance, and not about providing information to local people. If one is serious about providing accountability at the local level, this presumption needs to be reversed, and issues such as the quality, quantity and relevance of the national indicator set need to be addressed, as well as the frequency of reporting and the adequacy and quantity of the information released. This is also true of the publication of financial accounts. Given the fact that international financial reporting standards (IFRS) are due to be applied to local government, there is clearly scope to improve the release of more standardised financial information at the local level. Indeed, there is a great deal of scope to release a lot more of all kinds of information at the local level, without unnecessarily burdening local authorities.

The FoI Act has widely been seen as an important step in the right direction to a wider access to information and much information is already collected on Council performance, but there is still a great deal of room for improvement whilst there is a presumption of government ownership of data. **With debacles such as the MPs expenses row to question the adequacy of the Freedom of Information Act, combined with the failure of the current local government performance framework to inform citizens about what they want to know - it begs the question: Whose data is it anyway?**

2. Whose data is it anyway?

Citizen's data – To some extent the Freedom of Information Act rightly recognises that information does not belong to government at all. Yet the relationship between government, people and information, as reflected in the current performance and assessment framework, needs to change. Under the current system, only the most determined minority have access to much of the information collected about the performance and actions of (local) government. People should not have to systematically apply for information, but should expect that it is released as standard on a regular basis. But is there any sign that this will happen?

The Communities in Control white paper – In the Government's recent white paper entitled 'Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power', there was a degree of recognition that information is indeed a key component of the current climate of powerlessness, especially in the most deprived areas. The paper's key proposals were:

- To reduce digital exclusion through their 'Digital Equality Action Plan'
- To report to local areas on crime information through a 'Policing Pledge' in the forthcoming Green Paper, and to report crimes on a monthly basis
- To further open up elements of the community repository called the 'Places Database' in Autumn 2008
- To work with local authorities to help them release more data
- To start a 'Digital Mentor Scheme' to help people develop websites etc in deprived areas
- To encourage more local media

Empowerment is information – Yet this is not enough. In an independent review for the Government entitled 'The Power of Information', Mayo and Steinberg argue that there are "significant social and economic benefits to sharing as much information as possible". In short, the Government's proposals in papers such as 'Communities in Control' do not sufficiently recognise the fact that information fundamentally underpins both empowerment and the economy. Genuine individual empowerment requires the recognition of two things. Firstly, it is precisely in the diversity between people, places and services that allows for change and development. And secondly, people must have access to as many 'tools' as possible to recognise the differences and make a positive change. This means a significant change in our access rights to information.



Intelligent management of data release – Of course we are not suggesting that absolutely all information should be in the hands of the public – there needs to be an intelligent management of people's personal data as well as a consideration of local and national security issues. This is already covered by existing legislation, but there is some potential for improvement. There also needs to be an intelligent management of the volume of data released. The first priority should be that all information which is already collected for other governmental bodies is released unless there is a good reason not to do so. For any other information, it would make sense to prioritise what information is necessary to citizens, and work with existing legislation to ensure that authorities are not over burdened by any extra work, but at the same time ensure a progressive approach to information release.

Summary– Clearly, the UK needs a more advanced relationship with its information. But care needs to be taken to ensure that the relationship does not become another top-down diktat. According to a study carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government, when consultation is carried out only because of a statutory requirement or management directive, it often fails to be effective. Rather, authorities should begin with information which they are already obliged to collect, and then release all other information based on the priorities of the local area. With more information being intelligently released to the public, over the long-term there will also potentially be less need for the expensive costs associated with the FoI appeals process, thus saving the tax-payer money (see chapter 4).

3. Getting information to where it matters

Broad consensus around the world– The number of countries with some form of access rights to Government information is growing all the time. However, most countries have a number of exemptions and clauses relating to, for example, the protection of national security and international relations, personal privacy, commercial confidentiality, law enforcement and public order, information received in confidence, and internal discussions. Most countries also have legislation to protect the identity of individual citizens and to maintain their 'national secrets'.

Public engagement with information is in its infancy in the UK, both at the national and local levels. However, due to the diverse nature and a degree of autonomy at the local level, there are also some examples of good practice. The remainder of this chapter will examine this best practice both at home and abroad, and uncover some unexpected results from the release of that information. It will then explore the data itself and briefly examine ways to take this data forward in the future.

The relationship with data outside England

FOI around the world – There are various different approaches to information legislation throughout the world. For example, in Albania there are no exceptions to the law of withholding information. Documents can only be withheld if laws on data protection or classified information conflicts with their release. Some countries such as Argentina must respond to requests in under 10 days. In Armenia, each of the public bodies must appoint an official who is responsible for the law. **In many countries there is a legal obligation for public authorities to create a website to publish any data they uncover.** In South Africa, individuals have the right to request information stored on them from private organisations and even by individuals, and in most cases they have the right to amend that information. There is scope to increase these rights in the UK. In Belize, there is a 'test for harm' on sensitive documents which is the flip-side to the UK's 'public interest test'. **In short, there are a plethora of different and better approaches to information release across over 80 countries.**

How local authorities report information outside England – Section 13 of the Local Government in Scotland Act imposes a general duty on each local authority 'to make arrangements for the reporting to the public of the outcome of the performance of its functions'. However, it was found that although councils are obliged to publish information on their performance, too often the type of information produced can be difficult to understand and does not match what the public wants to know. In the United States, the Government and Performance Results Act (GPRA) requires all federal agencies to develop their own long-term strategic plans with outcome related goals, and to develop plans for and report on annual performance. In Canada, public sector agencies are encouraged to use a government-produced guide as the foundation for public performance reports, which should be 'an evolutionary process that builds on research, experimentation, practical experience and consensus'. Although an important first step, legislation alone is not enough to foster a better relationship with data; it also requires someone to take the initiative to use it to engage the public more effectively.

Crime mapping in the US – The decentralised nature of information reporting in the United States has been both a help and a hindrance. On the one hand, it has allowed innovative new approaches to emerge in some states, but at



the same time has led to a lack of central oversight and hence delays in dealing with requests. One area where a number of states have been particularly advanced is in their uptake of crime mapping, with initiatives in New York and by social entrepreneurs throughout the country. Some of these initiatives are driven by police departments themselves, others have police departments as members (such as Crimereports.com) and others such as 'Everyblock.com' and 'Spotcrime.com' get their data by trawling through all sorts of information to produce their maps. According to the director of CrimeReports.com, "Multiple police departments have, as a result of our publicly available crime mapping tools, shifted resources to specific areas". He goes on to say that **"One of the major unexpected results was the drop in calls for information. Most departments expect their call volume to escalate as a result of their participation, but the opposite is actually true"**. The oft-cited example of the success of crime reduction is New York where they used a multi-layered approach to solving crime. As part of this approach, crime data is released to the public at postcode level on a weekly basis. Yet in some areas, crime is reported at a more granular level even more frequently. We conducted several interviews of customers of one member-funded crime mapping initiative in the US, and found some fairly interesting facts:

- When asked why they did not just produce their own maps, Police Authorities said that it was cheaper not to do so. Most pay only \$200 a month to plot their crime statistics on the website
- Most information was normally uploaded after only two days rather than released every month as a series of statistics
- Because police have control over the information they upload, there are no data protection issues
- Most police authorities still produce their own in-house maps for their own purposes

Lessons for the UK – Following the Home Office's statement that the Government will roll out crime mapping to all police authorities in the UK, there are a number of lessons which can be drawn from the US experience. The Government's current rhetoric suggests that police authorities themselves will run their own online maps. There are advantages and disadvantages to different methods of crime mapping, but it is important that whatever approach is taken, consideration needs to be made so that the wider-world can capitalise on the released information and reproduce it in a forms which they see fit. **Although we welcome the Government's realisation of the benefits of crime-mapping, we see it as only the tip of the iceberg, and it should be only part of a much wider programme of information release.**

The relationship with data in England

Introduction- Many public authorities and independent bodies in the UK have already embarked on innovative and mature approaches to engaging the public with the data they collect. There are varying degrees of success in achieving a proper public engagement, as nationally, still only half of people felt that their local council kept them well informed. But there have been some notable exceptions, and a number of interesting national initiatives which provide a good platform upon which to build. This section will focus on these successes based upon **the core features of a good relationship with data: accountability, engagement, trust and the right to be informed.**

Council's recognition of the rights to information – A number of Councils throughout the UK already have a liberal approach to information release. Essex, Worcestershire, Elmbridge, Kent, Devon and Hampshire Councils have been highlighted as having good approaches to freeing up data. Devon CC for example allows re-use of its copyright protected material in any format without requiring specific permission, and Elmbridge BC uses online public sector information click-use licence to authorise the re-use of the material it produces. Some Councils also collect and release more information than other Councils. For example, Salisbury District Council (among others) publishes its monthly missed waste collections to the public. Other schemes such as the 'Scores on the Doors' initiative in a number of London Boroughs has helped authorities to publish restaurant hygiene standards to the public. In terms of releasing financial performance information, all Councils have a statutory duty to report their accounts annually, but some are better than others at releasing more than the required information. For example, a number of Councils release their medium term financial plans on their website. But it would make sense to also release any information which is already submitted to government, plus items of expenditure which would potentially be of public interest. It is also important that reports are produced in a format which makes them easily comparable to other Councils. **Although data release on its own is the most important first step to fostering a greater public engagement, masses of dry data alone does not help people to take an active interest in their local area.**

Performance indicators and engagement- Similarly, performance indicators in their current form appear only to be adding to the mass of dry and irrelevant information. **Overwhelmingly, people currently judge their Council's**



performance based on their personal experiences with a number of specific services and general perceptions based on word of mouth. But performance assessment need not be limited to this. With a reformed National Indicator set, combined with the initiative of Councils and recognition of the need for the dissemination of more information, much more can be done without the need for more resources. The information Councils release need not be limited to performance indicators either. **Local authorities should make a much more comprehensive assessment of what information is of interest to local people. This could include information on missed waste collections; restaurant hygiene standards; nearby road works; and the breakdown of various aspects of Council expenditure.**

Online initiatives – Most local authorities publish their corporate performance information on their website. However, according to a study carried out on behalf of DCLG, **less than 50% of most categories by which Council websites were judged were 'good' or 'very good'** (see graph 2). Information is often not well signposted, nor displayed in any user friendly form. A few Councils produce maps showing some of the services provided in the area, but fewer produce maps showing data at the ward level, and even fewer produce maps of pin-point data at the street level. The following examples collected from various bodies are initiatives which have the potential to actively involve people in the work of the Council. They demonstrate a progressive, bottom-up and emergent relationship with data:

Innovative approaches to raw information usage. One innovative approach to data use that we came across used census data to collect the names of people and convert them, based on that name into an ethnic group, and then add it as a layer onto a map containing numerous other layers. This approach demonstrates that when you have masses of low level data, it can be aggregated, modified and can become a powerful tool for local people.

Multi-layered maps. There are a few good examples of where different layers of information have been laid over each other to give an overall picture of a local area. A number of Councils and web entrepreneurs already use these techniques through either Google Maps or their own mapping techniques to put pin-point data over low level shape files, including crime, demographics and educational performance amongst others. This approach is useful when you want to view one layer with numerous layers of pin-point data on top. For example, you could view the number of crimes by ward with the number of CCTV cameras on top. More recent work has shown the potential to map information using more than one layer of shape files by effectively varying the opacity of each layer. A UCL project called 'Maptube.com' is a free resource for viewing, sharing, mixing and mashing maps online, and represents another potential way forward where, similar to Wikipedia, people can add or edit existing maps. The potential benefits of the ability to view all sorts of information on one map are enormous. However, there are currently issues with the frequency with which data is uploaded onto Council's websites, and the uptake of almost all local councils to use such maps.

Incident Reporting. Several Councils and one website have initiated the dialogue by encouraging incident reporting using online maps. Some approaches focus on incidents of anti-social behaviour, and others include more general problems such as blocked drains and holes in the road. Some even allow you to see where previous incidents have been reported and dealt with. This is a good method of maintaining a dialogue, and also of keeping a public record of incidents without the Council having to trawl through masses of incidents should a FoI request be made for such information.

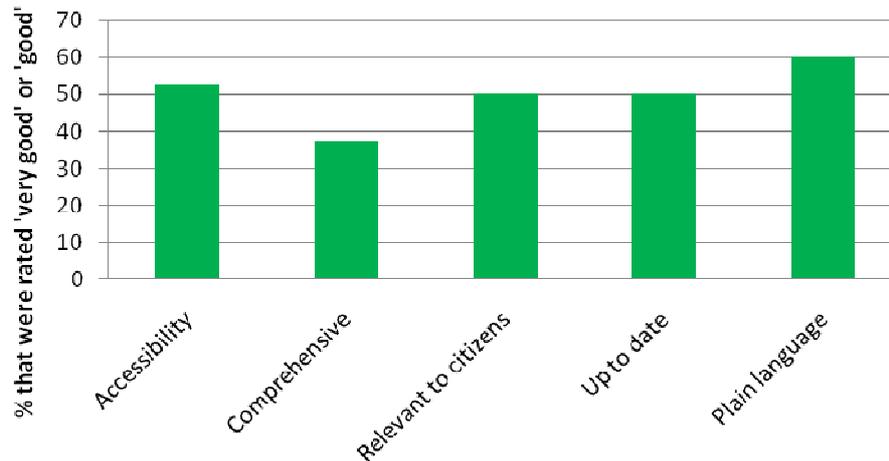
E-petitions. These are a good way of adding to the numerous methods available for determining the priorities of people in the local area. One website already has the facility to petition central government, and there is no reason why this cannot also be used by local government too. It clearly demonstrates both to the public, and to government, what the priorities of an area are according to its citizens and does not require a third party to interpret and release the information.

Central Government. The Office for Public Sector Information (OPSI) has recently launched a website to petition for specific data sets, which is a positive step forward towards releasing more information. The Government has also launched a 'Show us a better way' competition which aims to encourage people to submit ways for Government to make better use of public information.

Crime mapping – As we have seen from the US, the public availability of crime maps has had noticeable results. In the UK, the situation is somewhat different. Crime data is usually distributed to the public at ward level and at varying time intervals. Geographic Information System (GIS) crime mapping is in extensive use within police authorities, and is publically available at ward level in a number of areas. The positive effects of crime mapping within police



Graph 2: How local authority websites rated for performance information for citizens



authorities has been widely reported, and numerous studies have been carried out into some of the more successful ones. For example, the 'community safety online mapping system' (COSMOS) was used in Birmingham to map crime indicators and social perceptions. The results were correlated and it allowed a targeted approach to the specific crime indicators for specific localities, thus reducing the public's perception of crime in their area by up to 10%. The results were also made public using the same COSMOS engine on the website 'Myneighbourhood.info', which shows quite granular data at a sub-ward level. West Yorkshire and West Midlands police forces have also received a great deal of publicity recently with their versions of crime maps. However, there is still a way to go, and mapping is only one small part of a need to change our relationship with information.

A look at the data and beyond

Summary - Data release on its own is an important first step, but is not entirely sufficient. It also requires consideration of a whole host of other factors including: how to engage the public with the information; how to increase the volume of information released without over-burdening the authority; how to standardise the information in a way which still reflects the individuality of each local area, and; how to improve the capacity of public bodies to deliver an increased volume of information. At the moment, most local authorities do not release the majority of information that they collect unless it forms part of their performance reports. Clearly, this needs to change, and all information which is already collected should be released as standard unless there is a good reason not to do so. And where this is the case, there should be an intelligent management of the priorities.

What data is of most value – Priorities should be decided at the local level by citizens. However, a DCLG survey gives a flavour of the information that mattered most to people. This includes council expenditure, local services and community based facilities, education, progress on key targets, regeneration initiatives and community safety (policing) and there was a strong feeling that this information should be provided on an area or neighbourhood basis. Ultimately though, the Council should determine what information is of most interest to local areas through whatever means they see fit bearing in mind the presumption that they should publish data collected unless there is a good reason not to do so.

Data format and quality – There are a number of issues with regards to the quality and format of the data which need to be considered. Firstly, where relevant, data should be collected with some form of GIS system or postcode, so that it is as granular as possible. Secondly, there should be some form of standardisation across public bodies which carry out the same or similar tasks. For example, the collection of social care data has traditionally varied significantly from area to area, and there is a need amongst mapping entrepreneurs for some form of standardisation, which should be determined through consultation with the LGA. Thirdly, it would make sense to create a centrally accessible store for all information which has been released under FoI, so as to make it simple for individuals to access the information they require. And finally, there needs to be provision for those who don't have



access to the internet, or are IT illiterate, to have access to the same information that everybody else does. This was rightly recognised in the recent 'Communities in Control' government report, and is a step forward.

Software – There are currently many innovative approaches to using information available. However, in order to move things forward, it would make sense to foster a greater dialogue between those who are able to do creative new things with the raw data, and those who are originally responsible for collecting that data. A number of mapping entrepreneurs that we have spoken to have each created their own codes for converting file types (eg from Postcode to shape and corresponding positioning files), and often these need not be duplicated. Consideration needs to be made into a more effective system for sharing software that people have created to enable them to build on the success of others. Councils should liaise with other councils and mapping entrepreneurs to ensure that mapping codes are exchanged and best practice is spread amongst different areas.

Partnership working – There are several examples of partnership working which have allowed public authorities to actively release information. One example is the BSafe Partnership in Bolton which unites the significant public bodies in the area with the aim of reducing crime and the use of drugs. The partnership has seen a 35% reduction in reported crime since 2003-4 and has used mapping as one of its techniques.

4. Barriers to a greater freedom of information

Legislative and institutional barriers – There are a number of outdated barriers to disseminating more information to the public, including rules which state that local government reporting must be done using magazines or newspapers. This has been a barrier to some Councils such as Kent CC, who have begun reporting information through their own TV channel. The Data Protection Act (DPA) is often cited as a reason why data cannot be released. However, the DPA is not the main barrier to freedom of information but rather in the current presumption of Government ownership of information. The experience from other countries highlights what might, in the UK, appear to be some form of institutional resistance, possibly borne out of years of government legislation and central intervention. One Councillor we interviewed said:

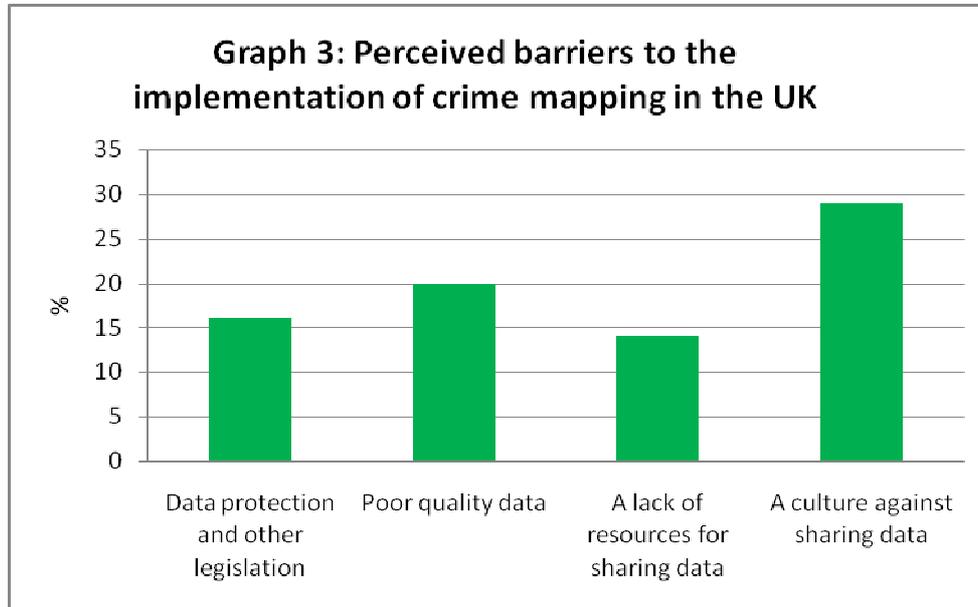
"It is not possible to release all data to the public proactively as this would require a large amount of resources and it is believed that it would also lead to the public being subjected to information overload."

Apparent public apathy – This appears to be a common attitude amongst a significant number of Councillors that we spoke to. Some Councillors also suggest that a greater freedom of information has made Councils even more risk averse. Whilst the issue of resources is one worth exploring, the argument that people can be subjected to an 'information overload' and risk culture is slightly more complicated. Our experience has been that given the greater access to information, the wider world can be perfectly capable of shaping it into forms which are far more meaningful to the public. The real issue is that there is far too little dialogue between government and citizens, and within the public sector generally; a dialogue that is facilitated by access to more useful information. At the 2004 National Community Safety Network Conference in Cardiff, 98% of delegates thought that although crime mapping was 'useful', there were a number of barriers to capitalising on the tools available. It is particularly interesting to note that **29% of people thought that there was a culture against sharing** (see graph 3). Although careful communication between local government and the public is vital to address mistrust and political disengagement, it has been suggested that to some people, more sophisticated communications may 'simply be seen as evidence of more sophisticated spin; reaffirming their suspicions, even if not necessarily deepening their mistrust'. That is why Councils must focus on engaging the public through new techniques and by releasing all collected information at as low a spatial level as possible. The focus should then be on the emergent techniques for displaying their performance in a meaningful way.

Use of resources – The lack of resources for increasing the volume of information could potentially be a significant barrier. In a survey of English Council leaders, almost 90% thought that they would release more information if they had more resources. Councils currently receive around 60,000 FoI requests annually, at a cost of £8 million to the taxpayer, which works out at about £133 per request or £19,000 per authority, and central government receives a total of 33,000 (2007 figure) requests a year at a cost of around £24.4 million (£740 per request). Clearly the costs are substantial. Looking only at local government, it would be possible to reduce these costs if the information released was more tailored to suit the needs of individuals as FoI requests would be reduced. There are savings to be made too by reducing the number of duplicated requests to a Council by publishing requests online. There is also the potential to reduce the costs associated with the appeals process if duplicated appeals across Councils were



removed. By using the national indicator set as the basis for information release, almost all of these problems can be alleviated, and this provides a foundation upon which to build.



Risk aversion – The culture of risk aversion in local authorities is prevalent and it is suggested that this would only increase if more information was available for public scrutiny. However, we believe that local authorities can overcome this culture by managing their risks appropriately, by spreading their financial risks and driving innovations through an understanding of Council workers' and citizens' motivations.

Standardisation and data quality – Much of local authority data is currently collected in a variety of ways and is neither standardised nor is it always of good quality. One person we contacted spoke of the social care data that was collected by adjacent local authorities as being 'substantially different in quantity, quality and usability for GIS mapping'. The intrinsic value of quality data both for the public and Government is enormous. It is important that where possible, data is collected in a standardised way, but this should not mean that they are restricted by a heavily bureaucratic system which does not take into account the individuality of each area. One way to get around the issue of standardisation is to begin with something similar to the national indicator set (NIS), which already has strict guidelines. However, there are a few problems which need to be ironed out of this too.

The National Indicator set – The current National Indicator Set is a slimmed down representation of over 20 years of central inspection. Therefore the focus of the indicator set needs to be shifted and slimmed down to reflect only the interests of local people and councils. We support the LGA's response to the National Indicator Set, which points to the fact that there are 55 indicators measuring only 15 things, and that the burden of collection needs to be reduced where possible. They also note that only 22% of the current indicators are predominantly free of problems. At the time of writing there are 19 indicators which have never been selected by any local authority over all LAAs, and could be immediately removed or modified. We would also suggest that a number of indicators are too aggregated to be meaningful and therefore should be reformed or cut. On the other hand, there are also things which are currently omitted from the indicator set and are of clear interest to local people. **There needs to be a balance between information which measures cross-council performance and also information which is of interest to citizens. The National Indicator set in its present form does not provide this balance sufficiently.**



5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The issues discussed in this report are by no means limited to the local level, and in many ways the issues at the local level are synonymous with those at the national level. Our key aims in this report have been: to demonstrate the benefits of releasing more information; to argue that there is a need for data standardisation to enable comparisons between different areas, without imposing unnecessary legislation; to persuade local authorities that releasing data at as granular a level as possible is beneficial to communities; to increase the frequency of data release; to encourage the use of information by social entrepreneurs for the benefit of the community; to improve local accountability; to improve accessibility to information which is already released; and to devolve as much of the council performance framework to citizens as possible.

The following recommendations are aimed at addressing these specific points and reverse the presumption that people should apply for information from local government.

Recommendation 1: Release all information which local authorities are already obliged to collect by central government bodies and departments, as and when it is requested, unless the resource requirement to do so is too large. If that is the case, the Council should prioritise which information is most important using Recommendations 2, and 3, seek new funding, and consider outsourcing the publication to external bodies

Recommendation 2: Review the National indicator set, and look to remove unnecessary or irrelevant indicators based only on the demands of local areas. Review on a frequent basis to check whether the indicator reflects local needs. Consider renaming the indicator set to reflect the change in focus of its purpose (possibly something like the 'Local Data Set'). Standardise the format of the information released through consultation with the LGA or another cross organisational body. Then publically release all the reformed information based on the locally selected priorities on an agreed standardised minimum release time, spatial level and format for each piece of information. Where possible, data should be suitable for GIS mapping, ie it needs to be disaggregated.

Recommendation 3: Top up these priorities by selecting a number of pieces of information which are seen as beneficial to the local economy and which are of use to local residents, which are not necessarily included in the indicator set. These should be determined by the Council through whatever means they see fit. Each year this information should be reviewed, updated and increased based on what is of most interest to the public. 'Public interest' could be determined through a number of means. For example: by consulting the public; searching the 'store' of FoI requests for most popular requests or frequent views (see recommendation 4); or by assessing in which areas a local Council is failing and therefore what other information would be of use in tackling these problems. Any information which becomes increasingly common across all councils should come to replace less common information in the 'Local Data Set' and would become standardised across the country (see figure 1).

Recommendation 4: Release all local financial information on the Council website on a quarterly basis, or whenever the Secretary of State requests it. They should operate within international financial reporting standards to allow comparisons across councils. They should also include an itemised list of expenditure over an agreed amount. We recommend that £10,000 would sufficiently capture those items of expenditure which would be of most interest to people. Accounts should be easily signposted on Council websites.

Recommendation 5: Create a publically available store for all freedom of information requests and clearances for all public bodies operating at the local level, ensuring that context is clear. It should be easily available and signposted. Public authorities should aim to update the common requests as regularly as possible. If it is too difficult to explain context, then the request should be abstracted, and if there is a demand to know more about the request then clear information should be provided about who to contact to find out more.

Recommendation 6: Regularly review the forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) to ensure that it meets the criteria of informing citizens about meaningful components of their Council's performance based on outcomes and not processes.

Recommendation 7: Create financial incentives for anyone who wants to use the data or information in a useful and meaningful way: either through mapping tools, or some other demonstrably beneficial methods or applications to engage local people.

Figure 1: A devolved model of increased information release at the local level

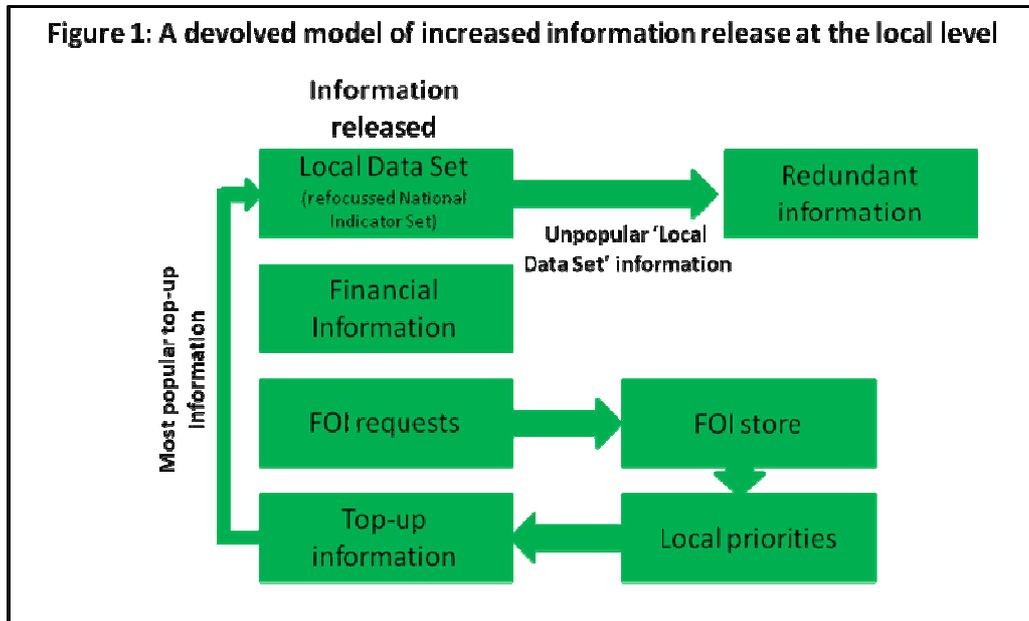


Figure 1 shows the process for recommendations 1 to 4. It demonstrates a model which would:

- Increase the volume of information released at the local level without increasing the need for significant resources
- Release information which people want including financial information, performance etc whilst ensuring cross council performance measures remain
- Ensure gate keeping within the local data set
- Allow bottom-up and horizontal accountability to emerge
- Standardise the majority of information whilst allowing an element of localised data
- Gradually reduce freedom of information requests thus saving taxpayers money
- Allow local areas to select an element of information which is most important to them which could then potentially emerge into a standardised indicator if it becomes common
- Allow members of the public to access all freedom of information requests through the FOI store



6. References and Endnotes

1. BANISAR (2006), FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT RECORDS AROUND THE WORLD, THE FREEDOMINFO.ORG GLOBAL SURVEY
2. BANISAR (2006), FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT RECORDS AROUND THE WORLD, THE FREEDOMINFO.ORG GLOBAL SURVEY
3. Poll (2006-7) taken from Communities in Control White Paper, DCLG, 2008
4. Ipsos Mori Poll taken from London Councils Magazine 2008
5. Graph taken from Frontier Economics (2006), Independent Review of the impact of the Freedom of Information Act
6. Perceptions of local government in England, 2006, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
7. Or whenever it is requested – See Local Government Act 1988
8. See for example, the LGA response on National Indicator set, December 2007
9. Public authorities may refuse to release information if it fits into one of three classes of exemptions - absolute exemption, qualified class exemption and a government prejudice to withhold information on certain specified interests. A 'public-interest test' applies to the latter two. The Information Commissioner is responsible for applying the 'public-interest test' as well as overseeing and enforcing the Act. The Information Tribunal is responsible for dealing with any appeals made against the Information Commissioner, and appeals against the Tribunal's decisions are made to the High Court of Justice. Ministers also have the power to overrule any decisions made by the Commissioner. The Department of Justice is in charge of implementing and monitoring the Act for central government. In 2004, the DCA set up a controversial Access Information Clearing House for assisting central government departments' responses to sensitive and complex requests. One or more exemptions were applied to 6,715 requests in 2007. The most commonly applied exemptions were under sections 30 ("investigations and proceedings conducted by public authorities"), 40 ("relating to personal information"), and 41 ("information provided in confidence").
10. Mayo, E and Steinberg, T (2007), The Power of Information: An independent review. London: Cabinet Office. Retrieved from <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/reports>
11. Perceptions of local government in England, 2008, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
12. Such as Poland and Estonia
13. Largely taken from Perceptions of local government in England, 2008, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
14. Scottish Consumer Council (2004) in Perceptions of local government in England, 2008, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
15. Perceptions of local government in England, 2008, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
16. DCLG (2008): Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power white paper
17. Perceptions of local government in England, 2008, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
18. Reproduced using data from Perceptions of local government in England, 2008, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government
19. See for example – Nottingham 'Nomad'
20. See www.maptube.org for example
21. See www.mysociety.org for example
22. See for example, Hampshire, Birmingham, West Yorkshire and Lancashire Police
23. For example, Chainey, S.P., Tompson, L. (Eds.) (2008). Crime Mapping Case Studies: Practice and Research. London: Wiley.
24. See <http://www.showusabetterway.co.uk/call/ideas/index.html> for examples of what people want
25. DCLG, 2008, 'Reporting Performance information to citizens'
26. see <http://www.boltonbsafe.org.uk/>
27. A 2005 review by the DCA identified 210 pieces of legislation that limit the disclosure of information. 27 of these cannot be eliminated because they are either obligations under international treaties or were adopted after the FOIA. However, there are approximately 130 amendable pieces of legislation which are still barriers to national FoI.
28. See http://www.jdi.ucl.ac.uk/crime_mapping/mapping_cdrp/index.php
29. ODPM (September 2005) *Meta-Evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda: Progress Report on Accountability in Local Government*. Authors, Ashworth R. and Skelcher Centre for Local & Regional Government Research, Cardiff Business School and Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham
30. Frontier Economics (2006), Independent Review of the impact of the Freedom of Information Act
31. Frontier Economics (2006), Independent Review of the impact of the Freedom of Information Act
32. Without the appeals costs associated with the Tribunal, Information Commissioner and Clearing house, the average cost to deal with a FoI request is 36% less (see graph 4) Calculated by removing associated follow-up costs (tribunal, information commissioner and clearing house costs) using data collected by Frontier Economics (2006).
33. LGA Response to the National Indicator set, December 2007