



Big Ideas

SPIKES CAVELL: TRANSPARENT COUNCILS "Providing Understandable Information to Aid Public Accountability"

Summary of policy

Inspired by our new Government's firmly held belief that 'throwing open the doors of public bodies will help to deliver better value for money in public spending', we're working hard to make it straightforward and cost-effective for public bodies across the UK to do exactly that.

However, to mean anything, transparency has to be meaningful. And in our view meaningful visibility of public sector spending implies a view of what is spent, on what and with whom that is accurate, of relevance and of value to the intended audience – residents and local businesses. We also believe that it is important to ensure that spend data is cleansed, standardised, classified, enriched and aggregated so that any public body can be meaningfully and reliably compared to any other public body.

This means going much further than the provision of a raw list of payments above a threshold value. Raw transactional data is a place to start (and there are of course a small minority of people for whom this is preferred) but from the general public's perspective it isn't 'user friendly' and nor is it considered particularly accessible, relevant or valuable. As it also involves a significant amount of time, money and effort to redact personal data prior to publishing the raw list of payments, it has the potential to be burdensome at a time of significant cuts in public expenditure.

Powered by Spikes Cavell, spotlightspend is an innovative online platform that was designed from the outset to deliver meaningful visibility of public sector spending on goods and services for residents and local businesses with minimal effort or expense on the part of the public body. spotlightspend is much more than a web application; it's a supported programme that includes the people, process, data and technology necessary for any public body to confidently publish their spend information online quickly,

easily and in a standardised and comparable way.

What are the benefits?

"The spotlightspend tool is a great resource to hold us to account, but it's also a really effective way for residents and local businesses to see how much we have spent on what – not least because they can propose better and more cost effective solutions," said **Councillor Liam Maxwell, Lead Member for Policy and Performance at the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead**. "Transparency lets residents understand what we're doing on their behalf with their money. It opens up government to more people and invites their contribution. In the widest sense, this can only be better for our government and for our communities – informed local choice is extremely powerful."

"We offer a wide range of services to local citizens, and some residents may not be aware of exactly what is involved in providing these, so we've signed up to present our spending figures in a clear and open way using the spotlightspend platform," said **Councillor Andrew Hodges, Lead Councillor for Finance and Resources for Guildford Borough Council**. "The coalition government recently said it would like all councils to supply this information online, and we are pleased to be the first council in Surrey, and the second in the country to do so. One of the core values of the Council is that our work will be publicly accountable and presented with openness and transparency. spotlightspend is an excellent way of helping us to deliver this."

Mary Orton, CEO, Waverley Borough Council, said, "Publishing the information in this easy to use format demonstrates Waverley's focus on openness and value for money. Waverley was one of the first councils in the country to open up its decision-making process to the public by webcasting meetings and we are proud to be one of the first to publish how we spend our money."

Can it be easily adopted?

Without doubt it is an initiative that can be easily adopted by local councils or any other public body - the service was designed from the outset to be adopted easily, quickly and with minimal burden on the local authority. The following local authorities have already gone live (all within 3 weeks of the formal announcements from Department of Communities & Local Government)

- o Guildford Borough Council
- o Mole Valley District Council
- o Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead
- o Spelthorne Borough Council
- o Waverley Borough Council
- o Vale of White Horse District Council

A further 30 local authorities have already committed to the platform and are at various stages of publication/going live. We are presently on track to have around 25% of Spikes Cavell's 720 public sector customers live on the platform by early Autumn.

What difficulties did the project face?

Having spent the past seven years building solid relationships with the public sector and establishing Spikes Cavell as a 'trusted partner', we have been able to progress the development with the involvement of a number of innovative and far sighted local authority customers. That active engagement has meant that there have been relatively few difficulties that we have encountered in implementing the spotlightspend service.

We have had to spend a little more time and effort than we had originally anticipated introducing the service at different levels of the organisation (three internal presentations have not been uncommon), but we've reduced the communication burden by running a rolling programme of webinars and wherever possible, securing a slot on the agenda of group customer meetings that were scheduled.

Concerns have been raised about the appropriateness of the £500 threshold, but this has been accepted as being what it is, so, in that sense, is not a difficulty.

Concerns have also been raised about the amount of time, money and effort that will be necessary in order to redact personal data prior to publishing the raw list of payments. We have overcome this obstacle by adapting our standard process sufficiently to ensure that redaction occurs automatically as part of the service.

What are the financial implications to councils?

Spikes Cavell has spent the past seven years focussed on supporting the public sector in their drive to deliver cash savings, collaborate more effectively and transform the procurement of goods and services.

A critical element of that activity has been to develop methods, techniques, tools, reference datasets and infrastructure that enables rapid and cost effective cleansing, standardisation and enrichment of 'raw spend data', to support decision making by the professional procurer.

The content for 'spotlightspend' is derived as a bi-product of that activity and although significant effort goes into preparing the datasets that underpin the service, we have elected to offer the basic spotlightspend service (including the redaction of individual names) as a free service to 'active' Spikes Cavell customers with the requisite Observatory subscription.

What is the evidence of success?

"The decision to make councils publish all items of spending above £500 could have a significant effect: Windsor & Maidenhead Council's decision to do this online has helped it to reduce council tax by 4 per cent from April, the biggest single cut by a local authority." said **Councillor Liam Maxwell, Lead Member for Policy and Performance at the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.**

"Transparency is not just about telling people what we're doing, it's also about inviting them to be part of our decision-making process. This invigorates local democracy and saves money. To give you an example, when we started publishing our energy usage in real-time on the net we reduced usage by 15% overnight. That saved our residents money and meant we met our 10:10 targets in one go." said Councillor Liam Maxwell, Lead Member for Policy and Performance at the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

What advice would you give to councils?

Carpe diem, particularly as the spotlightspend service can be implemented quickly and at modest, or no cost. It is very clear that this is a policy that is being enthusiastically embraced by the leadership of the government and early adopters are generating positive media coverage both nationally and locally.

For more information

For more information on Spikes Cavell and their 'spotlightsonspend' project, please visit <http://www.spotlightsonspend.org.uk/> and <http://www.spikescavell.net/>. To learn more about Spikes Cavell, or discuss their work, please contact Luke Spikes, CEO, Spikes Cavell, Email: luke.spikes@spikescavell.net, or Hayley Wienszczak, Director Marketing & Business Development, Spikes Cavell Email: hayley.wienszczak@spikescavell.net.

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LOCALIS RESEARCH LIMITED
10 Storey's Gate, Westminster, SW1P 3AY
T: 0207 340 2660
F: 0207 222 5859
E: info@localis.org.uk