

Mr Andy Street CBE
West Midlands Combined Authority
16 Summer Lane
Birmingham
B19 3SD

19 May 2017

Dear Mr Street,

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society and professional body for statisticians and data analysts, with over 8000 members around the world. One of our strategic goals is for data to be used effectively in the public interest, so that policy formulation and decision-making are informed by evidence for the good of society.

At the beginning of your tenure as Mayor of the West Midlands I would like to take this opportunity to briefly outline aspects of the Society's thinking that we believe your plans for the area should address. Data is needed to deal with many of the challenges faced in local authorities from housing availability to transport network improvements.

We are writing to ask for your commitment to the following:

- Supporting greater data sharing for local government's data analytics needs
- Releasing open data to the public and support its re-use
- Ensuring local data standards accord with the UK Code of Practice for Official Statistics, which is vital for ensuring public trust.

Champion data in support of your agenda

[Case-studies](#)¹ of data-driven local government initiatives show that data analytics aids the public sector to provide better and more cost-effective public services. Local councils described by the Cabinet Office as 'Open Data Champions' have aided the UK to become a world leader in open data, by providing the public with easy-to-use, web-based portals. We are pleased that Birmingham City Council has been awarded the 'Open Data Champion' title and we would like to see more of West Midland's councils be awarded this title by releasing more open data-sets.

With the growth of 'big data' and digital technology, the future economy will be a data economy. By opening data to the public, councils can promote data literacy and help create stronger skills for the future.

Smart cities and regions need to mobilise support both centrally and locally for better data to support skills, growth, and productivity. We recommend that one of your early actions as Mayor should be to strengthen links with data providers in the Office for National Statistics, in central government departments and the 'What Works' centres, to support the data analytics and data sharing necessary to deliver your agenda. We urge you to form leadership that supports decentralised data developments: for example, Birmingham City Council has a Cabinet Member for Transparency,

¹ See e.g. Nesta [https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/wise_council_summary.pdf]



Openness and Equality who is responsible for releasing council data to the public and developing technology-focused initiatives

Ensure that local data standards accord with the Statistics Code of Practice

A lack of public understanding of how data is produced can undermine new, local initiatives. Statistics produced by public bodies need to be trusted and reliable. The [Code of Practice for Official Statistics²](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/archive/assessment/code-of-practice/code-of-practice-for-official-statistics.pdf) from the independent UK Statistics Authority is an invaluable tool for political leaders in achieving this. For example, the Greater London Authority London Datastore advertises its accordance with the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice, and Sadiq Khan has pledged that City Hall will sign up to the Code in full. The Code is vital to ensure that political arguments and solutions are built on objective and honest data. Adherence to the Code should also give citizens confidence that privacy, data protection and commercially sensitive data are being safeguarded.

At the RSS, we believe that good use of data is key for effective decision making, strengthening trust and driving prosperity. The changes we recommend do not rely on large amounts of resources but would make real change to the way in which public services are delivered. Bringing data to the forefront in crucial policy areas will be paramount to bringing about a higher quality of life for those in the West Midlands.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues above, please get in touch using the details at the top of this letter. I look forward to hearing from you. Please note that we will publicise this letter on Thursday the 25th of May when we hope you will have had a chance to read it.

Best wishes,



Hetan Shah
Executive Director

² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/archive/assessment/code-of-practice/code-of-practice-for-official-statistics.pdf>