Increasing access to local data

Data to strengthen democracy and trust

Our democracy relies on the quality of data in the public domain, and the public’s trust in it.
Increasing access to local data

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1. Summary

The public should have greater access to good-quality local data, and leadership nationally and locally on this issue is needed. As cases are made for further devolution of policy-making within the UK, sight of all the data that matters for this is needed as much as ever. Examples from across the country show how social care has benefitted in many ways from internal data sharing between council services, from easier tracking of children in need to reducing the length of care workers’ shifts. Displaying the effectiveness of government, via proof of spending on services and their subsequent output, helps to inform the electorate. Regional and small area statistics are also needed to understand and improve the economy, and a lack of local data is a weakness for business and policy decisions.

The quality of data and statistics to address local policy agendas needs to improve. On too many important issues, official and national statistics are most informative at the national level, and their quality degrades sharply or they do not exist with regard to local and regional issues. Greater access to good-quality local data is not going to happen by itself. Although capture of administrative data for official statistics is now better assured by legislation, strong prioritisation from the top is needed to ensure national statistics serve the purpose of local decision making, and that reasonable costs of improvement are covered. If local data is not addressed as a priority for national statistics, we will see less access to local data, and insufficient information for policy-making.

People should be able to see all the important data about their area in one place, from wide-reaching challenges such as housing costs, air pollution and employment to localised concerns such as noise pollution. Websites such as www.police.uk, www.datashine.org.uk and Local Government Inform make it easier to navigate information on certain topics, and the relative ease of finding crime and accident data has shown that local communities are interested when data is relevant to them. This needs to be combined, however, with strong central backing for regional and local data, supported by services, businesses and government sharing the administrative data that are required.

Despite recent increases in the number of data and statistics that are reported openly, the accessibility of open data is poor by some measures, with almost half ranked as unavailable on the data.gov.uk website. To be most effective, open data releases should be guided by impartial, independent and universal statistical standards, which include releasing data in forms that enable analysis and re-use. Local and combined authority leaders can help by signing up to the UK Statistics Authority’s Code of Practice, and by informing and upholding its standards.
2. **People need to be able to see data about their area**

*Strongly prioritise local data, with consistent access to the small area statistics that already exist.*

Official and impartial statistics about people’s own local area are too often unavailable or difficult to access, presenting a major weakness both to local policy making and to democracy as people struggle to identify their area in the national picture. Geographical inequality is widely spoken of, but we need national, regional and local statistics to assess and solve problems.

It is well recognised that good-quality regional and local statistics are necessary to understand and improve the economy. Evidence to Sir Charles Bean’s *Independent Review of Economic Statistics* in 2016 described the lack of effective sub-national statistics as ‘absolutely lamentable’ and acknowledged that ‘getting a picture of the current performance of city and other economies [is] very difficult’. Lack of access to information for local areas was prominently cited in a national review of policy-making for neighbourhood renewal more than fifteen years ago, and major actions, investment and improvements followed this review, however access to good-quality local statistics that do exist has not been well maintained via ‘legacy’ sites.

For example, internet users increasingly expect to find information about an area by entering a postcode. This was established by the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) Neighbourhood Statistics Service (NeSS), which was founded in 2001 to help people find small area statistics. When the NeSS website was closed in May 2017, no direct replacement was offered or consulted upon, and the alternative online platforms that users were directed to were not equipped with a postcode search. Encouragingly, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) business plan for 2016 to 2020 sets out to "provide a modern platform for the dissemination of sub-national and small area statistics in support of emerging policy needs around devolution across the UK and within England (2016/17)". Access to such statistics needs to be consistent.

The design and provision of sub-national statistics could be further improved by way of legislation in Part 5, chapter 7 of the Digital Economy Act 2017, which provided the ONS a new power to require administrative data from companies and from charities for official statistical purposes. Local statistics should be prioritised across the ONS and digital government, both to support innovation in data sources, and to ensure a wider public benefit from the wealth of local data that already exists.
3. **Support for open data drives new data releases**

A central strategy is needed to make open data available from local authorities, with coverage of reasonable costs.

Despite notable shortcomings such as the ease of finding detailed census information, the UK remains number one in the world for open data according to the Web Foundation, and exciting advances have been made by local authorities releasing open data. In 2015, the then-Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude, announced 16 Open Data Champions apparently chosen for their innovative responses to the demand for open data. Since 2015, councils such as Salford and St Helens have made similar achievements (though they don’t have the same recognition). Open data that enables third-parties to get involved in local government services is vital in some cases: research from the University of Birmingham has shown city-wide, low-cost temperature sensors could cut road gritting costs.

However, the data access facilitated by local authorities varies widely across the country. Data.gov.uk provides an ‘openness score’ from zero to five (open format such as csv, and links to other data), which awards almost half of datasets an openness score of zero, meaning that the publisher has not provided a direct link to a data file in a format that data.gov.uk can process. Other examples that may render data inaccessible typically involve (1) datasets located throughout a council website instead of being collected together (2) descriptive statistics unaccompanied by raw data and (3) datasets available in formats which do not allow copying and editing (e.g. PDF). The majority of councils also only provide the minimum open data required under the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, which is only a step towards rendering local authorities truly transparent.

To avoid an ineffectual patchwork of open data initiatives, central government needs to strongly prioritise data that are crucial for innovation, economic benefit, improvement of public services and transparency. A detailed plan for this is needed which could involve the ONS, the Government Digital Service, and the Department for Communities and Local Government, and be delivered through requirements such as the single data list by which data from local authorities are centrally required and made public. Alongside requiring a plan for greater access to local data, central government should provide adequate funding to all local authorities to cover reasonable costs of any expansion to their collection and submission of data.

Presentation of statistics and data on local government websites can also be strengthened. Providers in local governments should know that although producing descriptive statistics is one way of engaging the public, it can alternatively lead to spin and rejection of critical evidence. It is important that providers of open data, including local and combined authorities, sign up to and reflect the standards of the Statistics Code of Practice which is produced by the independent UK Statistics Authority. This includes a pledge to ‘ensure that official statistics are disseminated in forms that enable and encourage analysis and re-use’. Although local authorities are not typically producing official statistics, they should be able to use the standards in the Code to inform their own standards of data release. Access to the underlying datasets in
and of itself does not tackle problems with statistical quality, public trust and understanding, but they provide the opportunity to confirm or challenge statistics in the public interest.

4. People need to be engaged with local data

Regular, representative research should be undertaken to improve how data and statistics are presented to people.

As we have raised in our Data Manifesto\(^1\), everyone needs to be able to handle and interpret data to benefit their studies, engage in democracy and to make better decisions at work and at home. Although we expect this skills shortage to be addressed in large part by our education system, open data programmes show that we do not have to wait for skills to be widespread for people to benefit. Local and combined authority websites can address a wide variety of needs, including data for education, politics, the media, local government, companies and public services. User groups that might offer a mixture of data training, drop-in sessions and discussions (e.g. Leeds Council’s Data Mill North\(^2\)) help to ensure links can be made to local communities. Local datastores such as Bath:Hacked\(^3\) can also encourage more people to be involved in the sharing and creation of data as well as its use.

The RSS is keen that data skills should develop, but users also need to be supported in how the data is presented to them. There are therefore many demands on the providers of data to ensure that skilled users can interpret data correctly. The RSS celebrates excellence in the production and communication of statistics with annual ‘excellence awards’\(^4\). Users’ requirements have to be addressed by producers, so we recommend that producers such as the ONS should undertake regular, representative research to identify outstanding questions for statistics to answer, and to improve how data and statistics are presented to users.

Endnotes


9 Prof. Henry Overman, quoted p. 48 in Bean C. (2016) Ibid.

http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9947/1/National_strategy_for_neighbourhood_renewal_-_Policy_Action_Team_audit.pdf

11 ‘Goodbye to old friends and hello to the new’ [webpage], ONS Digital Blog for the @ONSdigitalteam, 19 April 2017.


15 Open Data Barometer / World Wide Web Foundation (2016) [webpage]


http://guidance.data.gov.uk/five_stars_of_oppeness.html


20 Royal Statistical Society (2016) ‘Education and skills for the data economy’ [webpage].
http://www.rss.org.uk/RSS/Influencing_Change/Data_manifesto/Education_and_skills_for_the_data_economy/RSS/Influencing_Change/Data_democracy_sub/Education_and_skills_for_the_data_economy.aspx

21 Data Mill North [webpage]. https://datamillnorth.org/

22 Bath: Hacked! [webpage]. https://www.bathhacked.org/


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This document is one of a series of notes to support our policy positions as summarised in the Royal Statistical Society’s Data Manifesto, and was published in June 2017.

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