

Data for open government

The Royal Statistical Society's data manifesto (www.rss.org.uk/manifesto) calls on the UK government to recognise the value of data and the importance that we, as a country, have the capability to use it. The manifesto highlights the importance of data and statistics for better policy making, to strengthen democracy and trust, and as a driver of prosperity. Open government should rely upon good quality data and statistics, and the role of key stakeholders to produce and use data should be taken into account. We would also recommend the following specific calls identified in our manifesto for their relevance to wider agendas for open government.

Evidence must be taken seriously in policy formulation and evaluation.

Making policy when resources are tight is difficult but this only makes it more important that choices should take into account the probable quantified consequences of alternatives. There should be further investment in investigating what policy works, including through the 'What Works' centres. Government should publish the data and evidence that underpin any new policies it announces, and should also commit to regular and long term evaluation of policies. When we lack the data to inform choices between options in important policy areas, we should invest in getting it. Politicians, policy-makers and other professionals working in public services should be given basic training in data handling and statistics to ensure they avoid making poor decisions which adversely affect citizens.

We should progress more quickly on opening up government data.

We look to the government to ensure that addressing and geospatial data are available as open data, as these are core reference data on which society depends. The same standards for open data should be upheld across public services such as schools and hospitals, by private sector contractors as well as providers in the public sector. Bodies that are newly privatised should be put under contract to maintain and publish core reference data as open data, and privacy safeguards should be built into any sharing of personal data at the outset. The Office for National Statistics and the wider Government Statistical Service must be given adequate resources to develop new ways of making data easily accessible to business and policy-makers, educational institutions and civil society. Citizens should have greater access to good quality local data. The availability of crime and accident data has shown how local communities are engaged when data provided is relevant to them.

Government statistical releases should be prized as politically neutral evidence.

The government should end the practice of pre-release access, whereby some people in government see statistics before the public. A [new report by NatCen for the UK Statistics Authority](#) (PDF) shows the UK public in support of this, with 71 per cent thinking that official statistics should be made equally available to everybody at the same time. Subsequent to release,



ministers and public officials should handle data with integrity, in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministerial Code.

Why is your idea important?

We have already noted above widespread public support for ending pre-release access. Our other calls are also important to make good on principles previously set out in government. The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) inquiry on Statistics and Open Data reflects on the wider benefits, that "today there are unparalleled opportunities to harvest unused knowledge that otherwise goes to waste, which can be used to empower citizens, to improve public services, and to benefit the economy and society as a whole." Government will need to continue to commit to make progress.

For example, as echoed in our data manifesto's call for "bodies that are newly privatised [to] be put under contract to maintain and publish core reference data as open data", PASC identified the sale of the Postcode Address File as a loss to the economy, due to its value as core reference data. They recommended that "companies contracting with the Government to provide contracted or outsourced goods and services should be required to make all data open on the same terms as the sponsoring department." The government's response accepts their recommendation in principle and notes it is in keeping with the OGP National Action Plan to enhance the scope, breadth and usability of published contractual data. Ongoing attention will be needed to this in the next parliament.

Response submitted on behalf of the Royal Statistical Society by the Policy & Research Manager, 26 February 2015

