Response to the Inquiry into the Office for Local Government

January 2024

This is a joint response from [mySociety](#) and the [Centre for Public Data](#) to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee's [Inquiry](#) on the Office for Local Government (Oflog).

About us

1. mySociety is a charity building open, digital solutions to help repower democracy, in the UK and around the world. We are behind UK civic services like [TheyWorkForYou](#), [WriteToThem](#), and [WhatDoTheyKnow](#). Our climate programme works with [Climate Emergency UK](#) on [Council Climate Scorecards](#), and supports the wider climate sector with tools like [CAPE](#) and the [Local Intelligence Hub](#).

2. The Centre for Public Data is a non-partisan, non-profit research and advocacy organisation that works to improve data-related provisions in policy and legislation.

3. We are happy to discuss any of these issues further: policy@mysociety.org or contact@centreforpublicdata.org.

Response to questions

What problem is Oflog seeking to resolve? What, for example, can Oflog contribute to data and local government that is not already being done by bodies such as the LGA?

4. One major problem that Oflog could use its position to solve is 'fragmented data' published by local authorities.

5. A number of regulations require local authorities to publish data - e.g. the [Local Government Transparency Code](#) of 2015 sets out the minimum data that local authorities should publish, including data on how money is spent, the use of assets, decision-making, and issues important to local people.

6. Currently, this data is published by each local authority on its own website, in lots of different formats and unpredictable locations, because the Code does not define a data standard (an approach ensuring consistent data publication across local authorities). This makes it time-consuming and expensive to 'aggregate' - to join together into one database.

7. For example, if you wanted to understand national trends in how money is spent by English local authorities, you would need to search all 333 council websites every month, and import each spreadsheet into a central database, ensuring that every dataset is

formatted in the same way, before performing any analysis to uncover trends. This is too expensive for almost anyone to do in practice.

8. As a result, companies, journalists and researchers who could benefit from using this information cannot do so. They cannot look for all the payments made to a particular company, they cannot analyse overall trends, and they cannot republish the data in a way that is easy for the public to examine, which was the stated purpose of the Transparency Code.

9. We think Oflog could help fix this problem, and ensure that this and future data publishing initiatives across local authorities do not result in fragmented data.

10. We suggest that wherever local authorities are required to publish data in future, Oflog could help by:

   a. Coordinating a collaborative, but mandatory, data standard - the rules on what the data should contain and the technical format in which it is published.

   b. Maintaining an online central repository of the data, or the location of the published data (e.g. a list of URL endpoints), so that data users can find it easily.

   c. Making it easier for local authorities to publish data, by providing tools to support publication and validation, and a contact point for publishers and users to resolve problems.

11. Without these basics in place, decentralised data publishing initiatives will continue to create fragmented data - costing taxpayers' money to publish, but rarely being used in practice. Our report, ['Unlocking the value of fragmented public data'](#), contains further information.

12. A [recent report](#) by the Local Mission Zero Network (which convenes local and regional authorities, community groups and other stakeholders) supported our recommendations.

13. This role is not already being performed by another body. For example, the LGA's voluntary data standards are not comprehensive or universally adopted. At the beginning of 2023, only a third of councils were publishing any data at all on the LGA central repository.

How should Oflog engage with local authorities and other stakeholders?

14. Oflog should engage collaboratively with data users and local government to ensure user needs and local expertise are reflected in decisions taken on data. Our work on fragmented data has found that data standards are most successful when developed in collaboration with stakeholders.

15. To support engagement and reduce burdens, our research suggests that Oflog should also provide tools that support buy-in by local authorities. These could include:

   a. Simple publication support tools (such as an Excel template) to help organisations publish data in a standard form

b. Lightweight data validation tools to help publishers check they are meeting standards

c. A contact point to answer questions from publishers and users, the ability to chase unsubmitted or invalid data, and maintenance of the tools and repository.

16. Where appropriate, Oflog could also provide public search tools, dashboards, or tailored insights for local authorities, to give them a clear reward for standardising their data. The experience of [London City Hall](#) which worked with London authorities to bring together planning datasets and provide a new search interface for planning applications across the city, suggests such benefits can be helpful for increasing buy-in.

What data should Oflog collect and why?

17. As above, we suggest Oflog could help collect the datasets published under the Local Government Transparency Code, and our experience suggests the following data is particularly in demand:
a. Local authority expenditure over £500
b. Procurement information, including tenders and contracts
c. Local authority land and building asset information.

18. Oflog could also help reduce the fragmentation of important data published by local authorities under other regulations. Some prominent examples include fragmented data published by local authorities on:
a. Local rights of way (the 'Definitive Map')
b. Licensing applications
c. Anti-social behaviour powers.

19. We are not sure if there exists a definitive list of all data that local authorities have a statutory requirement to publish (e.g. the [Single Data List](#) records all and only the data they must supply to central government), but we suggest Oflog could usefully research and publish one.

20. Additionally, on climate data specifically, mySociety's research suggests there are three types of data that local authorities could usefully collect and publish, and Oflog could take a role to coordinate this:
a. To understand local authority emissions: Structured data on councils' scope 1-3 emissions. These scope 1 (direct operational), scope 2 (indirect from supplied electricity & heat) and scope 3 (supply chain & other indirect) emissions should be broken down by source and by year. Reporting templates for this are already in use for local authorities in [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#).
b. To understand the effect on the area: Broader data about the local authority's influence and activities in their wider local area, including organisational plans and

targets; details of carbon saving projects; and risk assessments and action plans for climate adaptation.

    c. To understand development, setbacks and changes: Context and reflections from the public body on their own progress and future plans.

21. For more information on climate data, see mySociety's report of 2023, '[What local climate data do we need?](#)'.

How can the Government ensure Oflog collects data as efficiently as possible?

22. As above, we suggest Oflog should act as a 'data convener' for local government. This means it would help set data standards and have the powers to enforce them, to demand and support data publication, and to enable data to be brought together to maximise its potential.

23. The problem underlying much data fragmentation is that local authorities are locked into third-party systems with suppliers who are keen to maintain control over public data and who may charge large sums for authorities to change data formats or processes.

24. In the longer term, we therefore suggest that Oflog could also take a role in addressing local government technology procurement. As per the [Local Digital Declaration](#), local authorities should adopt the Government's [technology code of practice](#) to ensure that all future procurement will put authorities in control of their data, use open standards where they exist and contribute to their creation where they do not.

Could Oflog support cross-departmental approaches to policy solutions and initiatives?

25. Tackling local authority data fragmentation would support cross-departmental policy solutions, by ensuring that better data is available for a variety of cross-departmental uses.

26. Data fragmentation also occurs across other public bodies and companies that the government requires to publish data. If Oflog can successfully tackle fragmentation across local government, its approach could inform a wider government approach to help unlock the potential of many other datasets.

How will Oflog support central Government's understanding of local areas and the challenges communities face?

27. To understand what is happening where, central government needs joined-up, accurate and standardised data from across local government. Tackling data fragmentation would support this.

28. Tackling data fragmentation also lowers the bar for third parties to create tools and analysis to inform government decision-making and understanding. Currently many organisations do not have the resources required to create a national-level picture, which limits innovation. For example, the Council Climate Scorecards project, which assesses how local authorities are tackling climate change, already informs analysis by the Committee on Climate Change[1], but would be considerably more efficient to run with less fragmented local data.

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[1] Page 101,
https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Progress-Report-Reducing-emissions-in-Wales.pdf