Response to the consultation on the Office for Local Government's draft Corporate Plan

March 2024

This is a joint response from mySociety and the Centre for Public Data to the consultation on the Office for Local Government's (Oflog's) draft Corporate Plan.

About us

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.

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.

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

Response to questions

Q10 Do you think anything is missing from these activities (going beyond what Oflog is already proposing)?

Yes.

Oflog's 'Inform' objective is about increasing citizens' and the Government's understanding of data on local government performance. We are happy to see that Oflog plan to address this important issue: both of our organisations aim to increase transparency about government performance.

However, we would like to emphasise the important role that journalists and civil society groups play in informing citizens and the Government about local government performance. As part of its 'Inform' objective, Oflog must facilitate these groups to produce their own

analyses of local government data. We therefore suggest that Oflog add two things to its 'Inform' activities:

1. Include data users and republishers in its user research, as well as dashboard end users

2. Add a strategic objective about tackling 'data fragmentation' in local government data.

1. Oflog should include data users and republishers in its user research

The planned activities under 'Inform' include extensive user research, which we welcome. However, we think that Oflog should talk to a broader range of users than it may currently have on its radar. Oflog's Corporate Plan only explicitly mentions consulting citizens, civil society, and local government.

We strongly encourage Oflog to ensure that its 'civil society' consultees include data users and data republishers:

- **Data users -** these are groups like academics, data journalists, companies, and technical citizen users, who use local authority data to generate insights into performance.
- **Data republishers** - these are groups who use local data to build services to inform citizens. For example, not-for-profits [Climate Emergency UK](#) and [mySociety](#) created the [Climate Scorecards](#) to inform citizens about their local authority's performance at meeting net zero; and startup [LivedIn](#) worked with the [National Custom and Self Build Association](#) to aggregate local self-build registers to [track the performance](#) of local authorities at delivering their legal obligations to provide self-build plots.

These users play a key role in monitoring and improving the performance of local authorities, but they are not explicitly mentioned in Oflog's current plan.

By consulting data users and republishers in its user research, Oflog could better factor these groups' needs into its plans for new data products. This would help it achieve the 'Inform' objective.

2. Oflog should add tackling 'data fragmentation' to its strategic objectives

A major challenge these users face - and that Oflog itself will face as it develops - is 'data fragmentation' across local authorities. We think this is a sufficiently large problem that Oflog should include tackling it under its 'Inform' objective.

Local authorities are required by regulations to publish important information, such as all their spending over £500. These regulations typically do not define a 'data standard' - consistent data publication across local authorities. So currently, each local authority publishes this data on its own website, in unpredictable formats and locations. This makes it time-consuming and expensive to join together.

So if a researcher wanted to understand trends in how money is spent by English local authorities, for example, they would have 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.

This problem occurs across a range of datasets, which limits the Government's, civil society's, and citizens' understanding of local government performance. Researchers cannot analyse trends, and or republish the data to inform the public.

Oflog is the natural choice to fix this problem. It can ensure that this and future data publishing initiatives across local authorities do not result in fragmented data.

Without this, Oflog's ability to achieve its 'Inform' objective will be restricted by the difficulty that journalists and researchers have in reusing local authority data to tell important stories. Decentralised data publishing initiatives will continue to create fragmented data - costing taxpayers' money to publish, but rarely being used in practice.

This role is not already being performed by another body. For example, the Local Government Association's (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.

Our report, ['Unlocking the value of fragmented public data'](), contains more on why this matters, and how Oflog can tackle the problem.