Local Government Open Data Incentive Scheme

Organisation and sector:
- Local Government sector in England led by the Local Government Association
- 90 participating local authorities committed 209 datasets under the scheme
- Release of open data programme 2014/15 managed by the Open Data User Group and funded by Cabinet Office

Description of project:
The local government open data incentive scheme was established as a pilot to publish local government data to consistent open format to create a national view of the data. Publishing data openly and to a consistent quality, provenance and format could then be monitored to determine its use by the sector and its re-use and re-purposing by open data consumers

Local authorities were encouraged for a small incentive to publish data to three demand led themes as follows:
- Public conveniences (toilets)
- Planning applications
- Premises licences for alcohol and light entertainment venues

Challenge/opportunity:
Local Authorities hold important data that can contribute to social and economic growth if this data could be released nationally to common standards; yet much of the data are fragmented, inconsistent and not published on data.gov.uk. The project was based on a demand led approach through the open data community. It used three sample data themes that could have value if re-used in aggregation, with the confidence of its data structure, quality, reliability and sustainability being assured. The scheme also worked with sector specialists to develop schemas and a data framework with the intent to bring these fragmented data into a consistent format and central location so that they can be acquired freely and easily and repurposed by data entrepreneurs and other consumers. In addition, the provision of a central data management process and technical support channel within the scheme has provided a life-line and encouraged many local authorities that hitherto have been cautious or unsure of the processes of publishing data openly. Many new organisations have taken the plunge to participate with the benefit of peer support and centralised technical and operational support to help them.

Aims and objectives of the project:
The project involved:
- Consultation with open data consumers and local authorities on the choice of data themes to be published drawn from an extensive list of data within local government.
- Consultation with sector experts and data standards networks to develop three central schemas that can encourage wider use and re-purposing.
- Development of an online data administration system at http://incentive.opendata.esd.org.uk/submissions that can guide data publishers through the various stages of project involvement and also be accessible by the general public.
- Consultation with the Open Data Institute (ODI) and data.gov.uk (DGU) on processes for self-certification of open data provenance and central registration of data inventories to conventions being encouraged within the UK public sector.
- Formation of an online open data community forum on the Knowledge Hub for interaction and learning between participants

- Provision of a technical user support team to provide advice and to validate published submissions against the required data specification.
- Regional launch events in three venues across the country.
- Provision of grant incentives to participating local authorities upon publication to requirements as follows
    - one data theme - £2000
    - two data themes - £4000
    - three data themes - £7000.

Delivery:

The project was designed in three stages
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Set-up stage:

This involved a detailed technical specification being drawn-up at http://www.local.gov.uk/lginformplus. The resulting admin system was entirely open and presented the status and key communications for every participating local authority at http://incentive.opendata.esd.org.uk/submissions.

Special online informational pages about the scheme, along with guidance and schema definitions in various human and digital formats were hosted on the LGA's Open Data Pages here: http://incentive.opendata.esd.org.uk/

Launch and promotion:

The scheme was launched officially in July 2014 with three regional events in London (1-Jul-2014), Bristol (3-Jul-2014), Leeds (15-Jul-2014).

Main data management:

A five stage process was developed to manage and monitor the progress of each data set through the scheme from all participating councils. Grant funding was committed to each successful applicant until the upper funding limit of the total grant of £550,000 was reached. Progression from each stage was recorded in the online open administration system for anyone to monitor progress.

Beneficiaries

Local Authorities (Data Publishers)

The local government sector has traditionally not been a significant data publisher. Moreover, the impact of austerity measures in recent years has created a significant decline in digital expertise and data management capacity – particularly in District Councils. As a consequence, the decision to launch this project was risky (since there was strong evidence of receiving luke-warm support from anecdotal connversations at data management events and networks). Many councils feel they do not have the knowhow or capacity to publish data of this form. They have concerns about its quality and some councils have consciously decided to publish only mandated data at this time.
However, a follow-up survey of the 111 authorities that had originally registered for the scheme indicated that eighty three per cent strongly or tend to agree that the exercise of publishing data is of benefit to their organisation.

Benefits:

Many District Councils lack confidence in the intricacies of open data publishing – particularly all the supporting activities such as using common identifiers, links to ODI data certificates, data registers on data.gov.uk, etc. This project was able to guide them through the stages and has made a major boost to confidence; enough to encourage more and similar open publishing in the future.

The creation of online discussion forums and exchanges of view on Knowledge Hub and Twitter has further enhanced the confidence building in the sector and officers have been able to make contact with others in similar organisations all grappling with similar problems and sometimes difficult corporate silo systems.

The sharing of expertise and data scripts between councils all using the same or similar corporate commercial data management tools has begun to become a reality from this project. This places increasing pressure on suppliers to support the sector as a whole and for councils to make savings by developing solutions once, for widespread sharing and re-use.

Some councils have reported the emergence of flaws identified in their internal data which have encouraged corrections and cleaning prior to publishing. Some councils (see later) have found data problems sufficient to cause them to withdraw from the scheme in order to spend more time in refining internal policies and data practices.

Challenges
Some councils reported that participation in the scheme had highlighted significant flaws in their data management practices. These included the following:
- Data governance is not effectively defined. Lead participants highlighted the lack of clarity on data ownership with no individual officer accepting responsibility for a data-stream.
- Locally stored data content did not meet this project's schema needs. Much content in some organisations was held over several systems and data quality was raised as a serious issue. Gone away users, multiple users with same codes, etc.
- Some councils withdrew from the project as a result of the above, but this evidence has instigated a root and branch overhaul of data management practices to encourage more consistency across departments and work stream.
- The restrictive practices of silo ownership within councils were highlighted in some cases and there was confusion as to who was actually responsible for meeting the schema requirements set by the scheme.
- The lack of internal data publishing protocols hindered some councils. On the plus side, several councils reported the emergence of tools such as the Redbridge DataShare platform and those from open source and commercial suppliers was seen as a substantial benefit.
- One Council that withdrew because of many of the above restrictions quoted *"Just seeing your approach has helped us a great deal - and whilst I think it is a shame we're not yet up to scratch - if there are future opportunities for engagement with the LGA on DQM or sharing - we do definitely want to be on board - even to learn from others best practice."*
- A number of councils withdrew later in the programme once they understood the demands of the programme, along with the capacity of staffing and expertise required. Some thought the demands were too great for the funding on offer whilst others explained that they had lost key staff through austerity between initial application and data delivery stages.

- One pioneering open data council decided not to participate as they suggested that the standard schemas proposed in this scheme for Planning and Licensing differed from theirs. They considered that our proposed fields to be published are not necessarily the fields they wish to publish to their customers.

Data Consumers

Benefits

Data consumers can have the confidence of data consistency and its provenance when drawn from across the local government sector in a facilitated and coordinated way.

Mandated instructions to the data providers to use ODI data certification and data.gov.uk and the LGA open data pages for data registration provides data consumers with an up-to-date position of data availability, ongoing update commitments and robust data referencing.

The emergence of data harvesters and of data aggregators arising from these data sets has been exciting and we have detected interest and trial use of the LGA's work in this area to illustrate what is possible exists on the LGA open data pages at http://aggregator.opendata.esd.org.uk/

This project has been an excellent exercise in determining the potential for future public sector open data publishing and has benefited from the contributions in process design from the private sector and from data entrepreneurs as well as from local government information officers.

The open nature of the project's online administrator system (with public spreadsheet download capability) at http://incentive.opendata.esd.org.uk/submissions has been well recognised and congratulated. We have had no procedural or policy enquiries from private organisations or individuals.

The British Public Toilet Map is using the data from the aggregator and as published on data.gov.uk to update their map data from local authorities. This has saved them to collate data from local authorities individually and provided them all in a standardised format.

Hampshire County Council and the Department of Local Government and Community have made use of the standardised planning data and harvest them from local authorities to directly input them into their hubs (see Hampshire hub, surrey hub and opendata communities).

Central Coordinators – Open Data Institute / data.gov.uk / Open Data User Group / UK commerce

Benefits

The reassurance that the local government sector is being encouraged to work together to publish open data to a consistent style, quality and location should not be under-estimated. Over 350 councils in England all collect similar business data in different ways and on different systems to support their day to day operations.

A number of online tools have been developed through other funding sources which have drawn greatly on the lessons learned from technical interaction in this project.

Central bodies have benefited significantly from the *luxury* of this project having funding to support a technical review stage to the published data before final acceptance. The benefits of data being correct, conformant and consistent is sensible and reassuring. However, this review process proved to be demanding on the project team and has provided a series of unexpected events that are summarised in the disbenefits below.

Challenges
The project team found it necessary to invest a substantial level of scrutiny and workload needed to validate the early versions of published data submissions. Quite a series of common and obvious mistakes were made by many. We published a summary of top mistakes made to the entire scheme participants here: http://e-sd.org/F9j3P

It has also been a significant surprise at the number of iterations that most councils have taken to submit data to a conformant quality. The technical team has found it necessary to refer submissions back with error lists for review and correction.   As a consequence, councils will publish data with best intents but our evidence suggests that most will be flawed and unchecked. We predict frustration by the open data community who will be delayed and compromised as they become the de facto validation channel. The LGA's online data validator tools at http://validator.opendata.esd.org.uk/ and those offered by organisations like the ODI will help but these activities require funding and will rarely accommodate every aspect of published open data.

Further information
- Programme Manager: Tim Adams, Local Government Association. tim.adams@local.gov.uk
- Documentation, guidance and data: http://incentive.opendata.esd.org.uk
- Open data incentive scheme user survey report: http://e-sd.org/FYPmk
- Open Data User Group Blog: http://data.gov.uk/blog/small-step-localgiant-leap-open-data