# THE OPEN DATA GUIDE

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Socrata

# Socrata

# FOREWORD
from Kevin Merritt

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Governments all over the world are under pressure to do more with less, and to keep pace with innovation across society. Regardless of where they are based, common challenges include:

- Dwindling budgets
- Increasing demands on services
- Rising citizen expectations that government will match digital services provided by the private sector
- Eroding confidence in the public sector
- Dampening citizen engagement in activities that are essential to the civic process
- Outdated technical infrastructure

Looking forward, a **McKinsey report** predicts that data-driven governments around the world have the potential to free up to $1 trillion annually in economic value through operational efficiency and improved performance.

Many government leaders are beginning to rise to this challenge of digital government leadership, which relies on data as a natural resource to fuel data-driven decisions. Leaders like Theo Blackwell in Camden, and Sam Mowbray in West Sussex represent great examples of public sector representatives embracing the digital and data revolution. Where others see challenge, these innovators see opportunity, and where others remain closed, they are committed to the benefits of an 'open data first' policy.

Here at Socrata, we are delighted to be playing a leading role in the open data movement, supporting local authority leaders like Theo and Sam as they unlock value in their organisations. The benefits from embracing open data initiatives can be numerous including; encouraging greater community engagement, facilitating improved performance management, supporting data-driven decision-making, and allowing local tech developers to use the data for commercial applications.

We are proud that the UK is our first overseas office, and that we already have a number of innovative local authorities using our solution for the benefit of their communities. Furthermore, we look forward to supporting all of you as we progress along the open data path together.

Kevin Merritt
*Founder and CEO*

# THE CONTEXT

We live in increasingly challenging times: our local governments must support larger and aging populations, while operating with greater financial uncertainty. Local governments can no longer do the things they have always done. Open data represents a unique opportunity for public sector bodies to apply innovative thinking to a resource we already have in abundance — the artifacts of decades of computerization of the core processes of providing local government services. In data we can find new solutions to today's challenges.

" Some governments are also having a hard time keeping up with technology-driven citizen mobilization because they lack state-of-the-art information infrastructure that encompasses cloud data management systems, open data platforms, mobile applications, predictive analysis models, online voting and consumer-friendly visualization techniques. The net effect of all this is that democratic government organizations on just about every continent are straining to keep up with the innovative progress that society is making, and, as a result, they're losing relevancy and legitimacy."

— **Kevin Merritt,**
*Techcrunch, March 16, 2015*

Open data represents a key opportunity we can all embrace. But what is open data and how can we use it to support our goals?

This short guide shines a light on open data, describes what it is and outlines some of the key benefits for local authorities embracing it. It also assists planners, strategists, data and knowledge-management experts and others in local authorities around the UK who can benefit from using open data to improve the lives of their residents.

# INTRODUCTION TO OPEN DATA

## What is Open Data?

The **Open Data Institute** defines open data as 'data that anyone can access, use and share'. They go on to describe good open data as data that;

· Can be linked to, so that it can be easily shared and talked about

· Is available in a standard, structured format, so that it can be easily processed

· has guaranteed availability and consistency over time, so that others can rely on it

· Is traceable, through any processing, right back to where it originates, so others can work out whether to trust it

We focus on a more practical definition of open data, that describes its use in local government or the broader public sector. Our focus is on open data in the context of  local authorities use of data to improve government efficiency and the lives of local people. We define open data simply as:

*"Making data that belongs to the public broadly accessible and usable by humans and machines, free of any constraints".*

We like this definition because it is as important to eliminate technological and usability barriers as it is to remove legal barriers, such as distribution and copyright restrictions.

Why? Because the goal of open data is to take this valuable resource we call data, out of government database silos where it sits idle, or at best underutilized, and put it into the hands of people who can unlock its value.

## Culture of Openness

Open data is a by-product of a leadership strategy that embraces openness, and one in which greater transparency, public accountability and wider community engagement are key tenets. Open government is about a commitment to hold public meetings; to release public information in all its forms, if not proactively at least in a timely fashion; and to engage the wider public in it's decision-making. It also functions as an essential instrument for a better democratic process, as well as a means to place valuable information in the public domain which can then be used to fuel innovation and to build a stronger economy. It is also about having a mindset that goes beyond 'just transparency', instilling a data-driven culture and an increased focus on data-driven decision making as a basis to overcome the many challenges outlined by Merritt in his foreword to this guide.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY CODE (2014)

The local government transparency code was issued in 2014 to meet the government's desire to 'place more power into citizens' hands, to increase democratic accountability, and to make it easier for local people to contribute to the local decision making process and to help shape public services.'

The code commences by outlining the government's view of data describing how:

*"The Government believes that in principle all data held and managed by local authorities should be made available to local people unless there are specific sensitivities ( eg. protecting vulnerable people or commercial and operational considerations) to doing so. It encourages local authorities to see data as a valuable resource not only to themselves, but also their partners and local people."*

The code, which applies to England only, outlines which local authorities are covered under the code, the information which should be published (both as a minimum as well as a recommendation) and the frequency. Some key guidelines include the desires:

- To publish data in a timely manner (as soon as possible after production)
- To support transparency and accountability
- To release in a way that allows the public, developers and the media to use it
- To ensure its availability is promoted so that residents know how to access it and how it can be used

What data needs to be published?

The code outlines a list of datasets that need to be published both as a minimum, and as a recommendation (incl frequency):

- Expenditure exceeding £500
- Procurement information
- Details of all land and building assets
- Grants to voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations
- An organisation chart (and senior salaries)
- Trade union facility time information
- Parking account (and spaces)
- Fraud
- Waste Contracts

In terms of the method of publication the code prescribes how:

*"Public data should be published in a format and under a licence that allows open re-use, including for commercial and research activities, in order to maximise value to the public".*

The code concludes by defining a 'five step' journey to a fully open format:

☆ Available on the web (whatever format) but with an open license

☆☆ As for one star plus available as machine - readable structured data ( eg. Excel)

☆☆☆ As for two star plus use a non - proprietary format (eg. CSV and XML)

☆☆☆☆ All of the above plus open standards WWW Consortium (eg. RDF & SPARLQL21)

☆☆☆☆ All the above plus links an organisation's data to others' data to provide context

In summary, the local government transparency code outlines in clear detail the obligations of local authorities in terms of open data. However, there is a crucial nuance here. Transparency on it's own is a necessity but is only a starting point. What is really needed is a more transformative approach which seeks to empower our leaders to fix more of society's ills. While the code is a step in the right direction, much more is needed to help our leaders meet their wider objectives, to fulfill their missions, to govern better, and to include increasingly-skeptical residents in the democratic process. The data centric view of the world that open data delivers can be a catalyst for much broader changes, which is why our leaders should embrace it in its entirety.

**What are the key benefits of embracing open data?**

# BENEFITS OF OPEN DATA

An open data first policy and programme will deliver multiple benefits for local authorities:

**1. More Effective Democratic Process**

Make all your financial data, like budgets, taxes, and expenditures, available online in a usable way. By embracing open data and publishing data sets, you are creating a more effective democratic process with greater transparency and accountability as natural outcomes.

**2. Stronger Community Engagement**

Opening up data sets, allows the wider community to engage with the council. Participants can range from IT developers looking to build applications on top of the data (which they can look to commercialise) through to citizens keen to participate in their local communities (where residents can support the council with their key aims).

**3. Better Data-Driven Decision Making**

Shifting focus towards a more data centric view of the world, helps ensure that decisions are more informed and based on hard data. Again it reflects the fact that an open data approach ensures that data is used effectively and as a means to support internal decision making.

**4. Outcomes Driven Policy / Improved Performance Management**

Councils can set goals, which reflect their priorities, which can then be shared in the public domain. Performance management dashboards bring a visualisation layer (can be traffic light based) making it easy for both managers and the wider to public to monitor performance.

**5. Economic Growth/ Leverage your Ecosystem for Innovation**

Open data can be used to support entrepreneurship and innovation in the local community. By fostering a sustainable app ecosystem it is possible to build a vibrant developer community around your data, with hackathons and meetups representing some examples of the types of events being run.

**6. Reduction in Administration**

As more datasets are made available, it is likely that some of the typical inbound queries colleagues receive will be answered within the data. Encouraging local residents to engage with the data, will reduce the burden on front line staff over time. By eliminating paper-based reports and replacing them with interactive, online reports additional admin savings will accrue. Similarly, shifting to the proactive disclosure of frequently requested public information of any kind, can significantly reduce staff time and costs spent on admin.

**7. Facilitate Stronger Internal Collaboration**

Eliminating data silos and encouraging internal collaboration will drive wider benefits. Convening departments to pool their data to create information resources that support common goals in health, education, and social services, such as reduced childhood obesity and improved early childhood education will ensure a more holistic approach is undertaken.

**Sold on the benefits?**

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# TRANSITIONING TO OPEN DATA

Successful open data programmes should include:

**1. Executive Sponsorship**

Moving towards a more open culture ideally needs to come from the top. Establishing early buy in helps ensure the process gains momentum.

**2. Stakeholder Engagement**

Open data affects almost every department in a local authority, and the various heads will have different requirements depending on their roles. Having a clear picture of the different roles each department plays and the benefits open data will bring to them will help ensure effective communication and coordination.

**3. An Engaged Organisation**

A successful open data initiative is a team effort. Gaining early buy-in across the organisation is essential. Some colleagues may have reservations about the implications arising from greater transparency and accountability. Understanding and respecting their concerns is important. However, you will see the highest levels of participation when you have buy-in from colleagues, not just their compliance. Buy-in comes when you can show them how they can use the open data platform to:

- Deliver data and information that supports their existing programmes
- Manage and publish their own performance data
- Save time and money
- Share their data with other departments and partners with which they collaborate
- Increase engagement with their constituents

**4. Open Data Policy**

An official open data policy is one of the most effective ways to obtain organisational support and to drive transformational change with your open data initiative. Open data policies can take a number of different forms but at the very least should consider;

- The primary goals of the open data initiative
- The data sets to include
- The designated roles of specific stakeholders

Read more about **Open Data Policies**.

**5. Which Data to Publish?**

Start by aligning the data release schedule with your goals. This gives the project purpose, discipline, and measurability. The following list represents some key considerations to get started:

- Identify the data that supports strategic goals
- Adapt open data goals to local context
- Start with the data already on the Council's site
- Analyze site traffic to see which data is in most demand
- Analyze freedom of information (FOI) and public information requests to understand the data people want
- Request feedback from residents
- Interview colleagues to get a sense as to which data they recommend you share
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Copy what works from other open data pioneers

**6. Launch**

The benefit of starting quickly, getting feedback and improving in near real time cannot be overstated and include:

- See what datasets excite, motivate, inform and inspire your residents
- Test the technology, try out several different approaches, discover what's possible. Socialize the new platform with leadership, colleagues, and the local community
- Challenge your community to use real, live data, to build visualisations, and maps
- When you launch a pilot site in beta status, you can be more nimble, set up the right expectations internally and in the local community, and give your collaborators the freedom to experiment with new ideas. This can be liberating experience since a quest for perfection can impede rapid progress

**What open data initiatives have been successful in the UK to date?**



# UK CASE STUDY 1—BATH

In late 2013, the Bath and North East Somerset Council reached out to Bath-area developers at a local coworking space. From those first conversations, a public-private collaboration, called Bath: Hacked, was born.

*"The magic is we had two willing parties from the get go,"* recalls local software developer and Bath: Hacked organizer, Richard Speigal. *"The local authority clearly had a positive attitude about open data. And the developer community was committed and interested in making data available. Everyone was willing to get stuck in and get their hands dirty to make this happen."*

Both parties recognized having the council drive an open data program would be a more complicated and time-consuming route. By allowing the developer community to lead the creation of the open data program, the council could leverage the coders' insight and speed. After that initial event, Bath: Hacked met with the team from Socrata. *"When Socrata showed us what they could do, our eyes just about popped,"*

"In March, we had nothing. We met Socrata in mid-June and by August 14th, the datastore was up and running. That turnaround time stirred positive interest and support from the council and helped us start thinking about what to do next with open data."

**— Richard Speigal**

recollects Speigal. *"The datastore they've built for us has solved so many problems and gotten the community really excited by all the possibilities. If this process had been driven by council, it would have been much more complicated, but Socrata made everything go quickly and easily."*

The speed with which Socrata was able to provide something meaningful in a short time also caught the eye of Speigal.

Enthusiasm for the new platform led Bath: Hacked participants to ask for additional datasets to be liberated. The council has since moved quickly to accommodate requests for the release of car parking availability, housing prices, crime statistics, historical maps, and other data the community has found useful.

Jon Poole, Research & Intelligence Manager at the Council describes the initiative from the council's perspective:

*"There is something special happening here,"* he adds. *"We've saved the government money [by building an open data platform at virtually no cost to the council], we helped the local community to take ownership of local problems, and we've proved that open data isn't just a big city game."*

Poole concludes, *"The proudest bit is that the council doesn't have a datastore. The council contributes to it, but it is everyone's. This data truly belongs to the citizens of Bath and North East Somerset."*



# UK CASE STUDY 2—WEST SUSSEX

West Sussex is another county council that have embraced open data, and have begun to experiment with the opportunities this affords them. When they launched the Socrata platform in the summer of 2014, accountability to local residents was the county's biggest priority. Being transparent about where taxes were spent and the effectiveness of programmes were important goals for the council, particularly with a reduced budget for public spending.

But the effects of instituting publically viewable performance data went far beyond this initial intent: the very culture and conversations of the council transformed, as did the council's goal- and budget-setting process, and meetings in general. For Samantha Mowbray, the head of policy and communications at the West Sussex council, one of the biggest benefits has been the *"more open and honest conversations about performance."*

### Changes to Culture and Conversation

When it came to performance, green used to be the only result that counted in West Sussex (under a traffic light system). And not surprisingly, goals were set that allowed departments to achieve green consistently. Mowbray comments, *"People weren't particularly stretching"* when it came to establishing targets.

Because when every goal is green, the most likely reason is that benchmarks are overly generous. Council Leader Goldsmith comments *"By the nature of the type of information that's in there, not everything will be green and we're certainly not in the business of inventing easy targets so that we can have a dashboard that's filled entirely with green indicators."*

When success isn't reduced to a binary—green is good; anything else is problematic—a more subtle and fact-based conversation can take place. Mowbray found that after Socrata was deployed, the dashboard led to *"a willingness to be honest about how we're performing."* People could explain the reasons behind performance, from why it's below the target to what's being done to improve it? This opened the door to setting reasonable goals, and to being frank about the budget and investments necessary to achieve benchmarks.

## Putting Performance First

With the heightened visibility of performance—freed from filed-away PDF's seen mainly at meetings—its importance has increased. Now, Mowbray feels performance is on an equal footing with the budget.

*"Previously,"* Mowbray says, *"we were more interested in total spend, rather than what we got for that spend. We're now having far more rounded conversations about performance and money. Rather than being driven by the cash, we're driven by what we want to achieve with it."*

From start to finish, the budgeting and goal setting process transformed with the dashboard available as a resource. Rather than having the budget set early in the year, and performance goals determined and distributed mid-year, the performance dashboard allow what the council wants to achieve to lead the conversation. *"We're looking at what we're spending in terms of what we want to achieve, rather than just looking at what we've spent in years past,"* comments Mowbray, and *"it's a far more sophisticated discussion to have than the one we used to have".*

## A Motivational Tool

The West Sussex **performance dashboard** targets three key strategic areas:

1. Giving Children the Best Start in Life
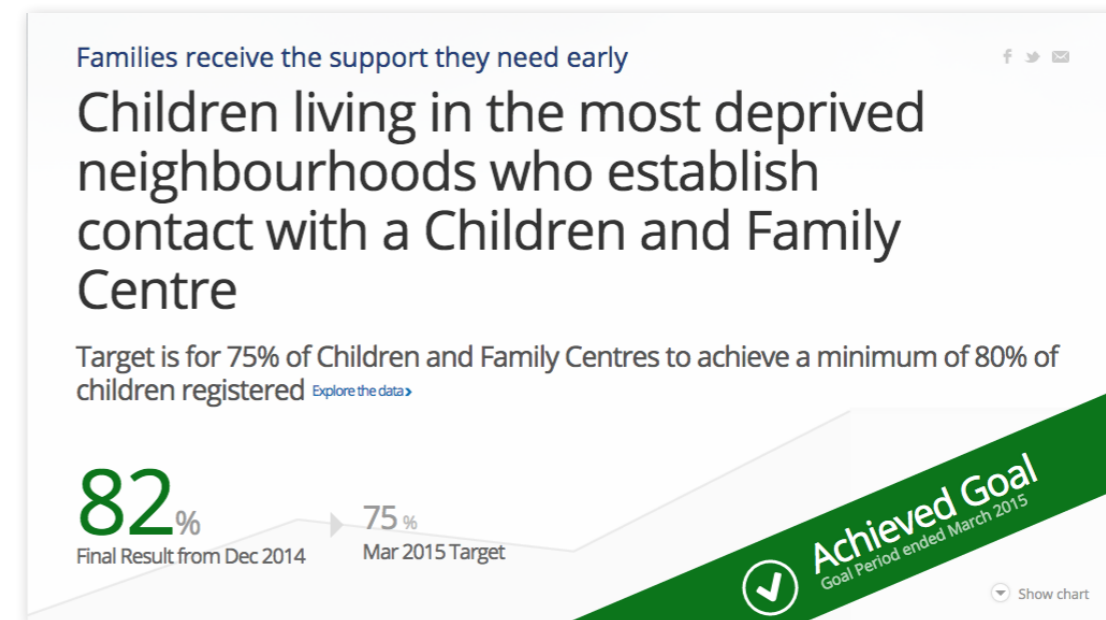2. Championing the Economy
3. Supporting Independence in Later Life

This rich data can not only be visualised but it enables the wider community have ways to connect, give feedback, and to offer suggestions for better performance. Since launch, there have been a million hits to the site: *"Just the fact that you have the confidence to put it out there and that you've being open and transparent about what you do really drives your reputation,"* she comments.

But what's perhaps most striking is the dashboard's impact on staff, where it's become something of an internal communications tool, popularizing both the council's vision and what's being done to deliver the vision. As nearly anyone who has made a New Year's resolution is aware, it's easy to forget or disregard goals. With the performance dashboard, goals are too visible to be neglected. *"You can so easily see the vision and what we're trying to achieve,"* Mowbray says, *"rather than needing to look it up in a dusty performance report."*

The effect bleeds into meetings, too. No longer is the data months old, with a feeling of irrelevance. Now, it's a matter of checking the reports just prior to the meeting. And, no longer are massive printouts prepared prior to meetings—it's a savings in terms of paper, staff time, and printing costs.

*"Moving from paper to digital and giving residents the opportunity to see our performance at the same time opens our accountability."*

— **Louise Goldsmith**
*West Sussex County Council Leader.*



Families receive the support they need early

**Children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods who establish contact with a Children and Family Centre**

Target is for 75% of Children and Family Centres to achieve a minimum of 80% of children registered  Explore the data ›

**82**%
Final Result from Dec 2014

**75**%
Mar 2015 Target

Achieved Goal
Goal Period ended March 2015

Show chart

## West Sussex's Path to Performance Data

One word keeps coming up in conversation with Mowbray: bravery. Revealing performance may be laudable, and result in positive feedback from the press and public, but it can also feel vulnerable, especially when targets aren't achieved. Even now, there's an ongoing dialogue about the value of explaining metrics that are marked as needing improvement, rather than just removing them from the site.

Mowbray is uniquely placed to assess what makes the difference for overcoming internal resistance. She credits the "leadership style" of Louise Goldsmith, who pushed transparency consistently, and made it clear that all data, even in areas that need improvement, should be visible. And of course, the positive response from the press and public is also a tremendous encouraging force.

But for Mowbray, it's even more interesting to think about can be done next with the performance data. *"I can see exactly how you'd use the data to engage the public in those very difficult conversations"* including discussions about prioritizing what to achieve with limited resources.

*"In March, we had nothing. We met Socrata in mid-June and by August 14th, the datastore was up and running. That turnaround time stirred positive interest and support from the council and helped us start thinking about what to do next with open data."*

— **Louise Goldsmith**
*West Sussex County Council leader.*

# KEY RESOURCES

**Socrata** UK Open Data Guide (2015)

**Organizations and Events**
**Leading open data organizations in the UK:**

· **Bath Hacked**

· **Data.Gov.UK**

· **Local Government Association**

· **New Local Government Network**

· **Open Data Challenge Series (NESTA)**

· **Open Data Institute**

· **Open Data User Group**

· **Open Knowledge Foundation**

· **Shakespeare Review (2013)**

· **Transparency and Open Data**

· **UK Local Digital**

· **Young Rewired State**

**Additional Resources:**

· **Beyond Transparency: Open Data and the Future of Civic Innovation**

· **Local Government Transparency Code (2014)**

· **Local Transparency Guidelines**

# ABOUT SOCRATA

Socrata helps over 250 governments in dozens of countries worldwide to improve transparency, provide better service to local residents, and to facilitate data-driven decision- making, including the European Commission, London Borough of Camden, Bristol City Council, Surrey County Council, and others. Socrata is based in Seattle with offices in London and Washington D.C.

## Contact

To learn more about how Socrata can help you with your open data goals contact us today:

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