

Rt Hon Francis Maude MP  
Minister for the Cabinet Office

10<sup>th</sup> October, 2010

Dear Francis

## **TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN DATA: PROGRESS**

At the next meeting of the Transparency Board Tom Steinberg will be leading a discussion on priorities for the next 6 months. In support of this I thought it would be helpful to review progress as against the letter I sent you on 14 June (attached for ease of reference) - just before the Transparency Board met for the first time:

### Policy and Culture

- (1) A key principle is that the release of data should be driven by what people want. Supporting the public's "Right to Data" will be important if this principle is to hold. We have gained an understanding of where the Freedom of Information Act can be improved and you are pursuing amending legislation in the Freedom Bill. It will be important to ensure that this legislation is supported by very clear and directive instructions to public bodies, both by formal guidance under the Act and by repeated communication by Ministers and others. This communication can begin quickly - in advance of legislation - for central government.
- (2) There is a wider presumption again embodied in the Public Data Principles - this is that making data available without being asked should be the presumption for truly transparent government. Progress against the Prime Minister's commitments has been good (see below), but the papers for the last Transparency Board showed how little **other** data is being spontaneously released by departments. It is noticeable that where Departments have made good individual progress on the Transparency agenda (such as Cabinet Office, CLG and DCMS) it has been very much at the insistence of the individual Minister in charge. We need to step up our education and challenge, and we should consider how we enthuse individual Ministers (and Permanent Secretaries).
- (3) We have agreed clear principles for public sector transparency and tests against which individual public bodies can be judged. We have published our 'public data principles' and we now have to ensure that these drive behaviour across government. As you have said we change culture by changing behaviour.

### **Intelligence, Agents, Multimedia Group**

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- (4) In my letter of June 14<sup>th</sup> I spoke of the need for a settled model for "public task" in the provision of information. This is work underway for example in the context of the 'information trading funds'. The proposal for a "Public Data Corporation" creates the risk that a large holder of data in the private sector will be even harder to regulate for overall economic benefit than the existing Trading Funds have been. But it also opens the opportunity to insist on, and fund, a settled "public task" as part of the settlement needed to create the Corporation.

### Data Publication

- (5) Good progress has been made on the first round of delivery of the commitments in the Prime Minister's letter. Delivery has consumed much energy within the Cabinet Office team – not least because these datasets run right across government. You and the Prime Minister rightly emphasised that the first round should be pushed through quickly without letting "the best become the enemy of the good". Most of the results would score "2 Stars" on the 5-point scale which Tim Berners-Lee and I have been using generally:

- ★ Put your data on the Web (any format)
- ★★ Make it available as structured data (e.g. Excel, CSV, instead of PDF)
- ★★★ Use open, standard formats (e.g. XML, RDF)
- ★★★★ Use URLs to identify things (so people and machines can point at your data)
- ★★★★★ Link your data to other people's data

So 2-Stars is a very good start, it will be important therefore not to regard these commitments simply as "done". A key priority for the next few months must be to agree the standards and programmes to ensure that the data is released regularly, more automatically and in the "open and standardised" formats to which the Government is committed. Now that there are people using the data it will be important to involve them in determining how the data can be improved.

- (6) We have solicited the public's views on data they would like to see released. In my June letter I noted the need to establish "a constant flow from the greater stock of more run of the mill information, including management, performance, regulatory, service, historical and comparative data....transport, weather, environment etc. all of which allows the building of some really useful end-user applications." We have seen a patchy response by Departments up to this point. We must step up the pressure to release much more data across government.
- (7) The Local Public Data Panel at the Department of Communities and Local Government is now strongly aligned with the work of the Transparency Board. The panel, which I Chair has been advising local authorities on the publication of spending data and has provided input to consultations on police and health data. We need to consider how this approach can be extended to other parts of the public sector.
- (8) We still need a general strategy to ensure that transparency principles are extended to those who operate public services on a franchised, regulated or subsidised basis. This links to the Government's efficiency and "Big Society" agendas.

## The Transparency Environment

- (9) The development and consolidation of data.gov.uk as the single online point of access for all UK public service datasets has continued – albeit fairly slowly. We still need to be on the lookout for duplicate initiatives planned in individual sectors or agencies – talk of centralising all data returns in the last Health White Paper being a case in point. Data.gov.uk itself was originally designed for developers, and is deliberately spartan in the way that audience appreciate. However there is now a wider interest in government data and its visualisation, and we need a programme of work within data.gov.uk to increase its usability and utility to the new audience.
- (10) There is still no reliable inventory of what data government actually holds. So we still cannot measure the extent to which Government as a whole, or individual departments, are releasing their data. Moreover the public do not know what data they could request through the "Right to Data".
- (11) There has been real success in the development of licences and supporting policies to ensure that data released by all public bodies can be easily and freely re-used. The Open Government Licence is a real achievement. We need to ensure its adoption across the public sector, not just in central government.
- (12) There is more we can do to engage with the communities of developers and of 'information entrepreneurs' to ensure applications and value flow from the data released. We need to see a programme of engagement, including not just the popular "Hackdays" but greater willingness by data owners within Government to work with people using their data (the Treasury seminar for users of the COINS data was productive and well received).
- (13) We must promote and support the development and application of open, linked data standards for public data. In this we must develop appropriate skills in the public services. Linked data represents the most useful form of machine-readable open data. Once public data is published in this way it is much cheaper, efficient and simpler for people and organisations to use and exploit it. There are significant efficiencies to be made within Government itself by using linked data standards: the data released so far shows the lack of consistency and re-usability that exists at the moment. A simple example is the lack of a common unique identifier for each supplier across government – a symptom of the lack of a joined-up approach to procurement, which you have already exposed separately. Another example is the lack of a unique identifier and record for each civil service post – where linked data thinking would support the Government's wider efficiency agenda.
- (14) Publishing data about the same subject release in a standard format and using consistent definitions is crucial. Whether departments or agencies, local authorities or police forces – providing advice here can really help the standards stick. We also need to ensure that there is full external participation in setting these standards – an area where the Local Public Data Panel helped on local government spending transparency.

Best regards



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