

Focus on Local Statistics: Inform and Engage

by Tom Smith

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Central, regional and local government bodies are currently collecting and maintaining a wider range of local service and demographic information and statistics than ever before.

Although this data is generally used primarily for strategic purposes, government organisations should not miss other potentially valuable uses relating to the e-government and freedom of information agendas. The act of making such information available, interesting and useful to local groups and individual citizens can help public bodies enter into informed debate about the future of local services and communities.

Behind the current raft of area-based public sector strategies and audits lies a strong drive towards public organisations making better use of the detailed information now available across a wide range of social and economic themes. The government has provided many of the driving forces for this new information agenda, with for example statutory requirements for regular crime audits, and the linking of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding to detailed neighbourhood level strategies.

The government has also provided a helping hand by releasing some of its own information: ever since the Office for National Statistics (ONS) made the 2001 Census freely available (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/>), there has been an explosion in Census use across local government and local partnerships to help initiate, target and evaluate local programmes. Building on this, the ONS Neighbourhood Statistics programme has developed a "one-stop" service providing detailed small area statistics across the country (<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/>) primarily aimed at regeneration professionals but again freely available to all users.

So where does this tie-in with the e-government agenda?

The e-government focus to date has rightly been in making government services more accessible to the public, answering the question: "what can government do for me?" However, combined with the Freedom of Information Act there is now a wider commitment to giving the public more open access to government information, so the question becomes: "what is happening in my area, and what are you doing about it?"

The drive towards making better strategic use of information by local government can and should tie-in with providing better public access to information. And local government can benefit from this convergence, taking advantage of a real opportunity to build in community engagement.

One concrete way that some local government partnerships have started to tie these two agendas together is through the creation of Data Observatories, online sources of detailed information and statistics across the local area. These are an effective way to share information and analysis across different agencies working together in partnership, but are also a potentially important information source for public and community groups. Local data observatories can also be highly targeted to areas of particular interest to local groups, for example providing answers to individual queries raised under the Freedom of Information act.

In Worcestershire, the Joined Up Information System JUIS (<http://www.juis.org.uk/>) is a powerful demonstration of the value of effective working partnerships across the county. The majority of the information held is publicly accessible, except where there are issues of sensitivity and data confidentiality. David Onions, principal Research and Partnership Officer at Worcestershire's Research and Intelligence Unit, says: "JUIS is not simply a system or IT tool - it is much more about building relationships between local partnerships and organisations, underpinned by an improved information base."

In Brighton and Hove, the city council's Citystats service (<http://www.citystats.org/>) is the result of strong partnership between the local public sector agencies and the local New Deal for Communities project (<http://www.eb4u.co.uk/>), initiated by Louise Hulton, demographer at the council. Users can look at detailed maps of crime rates across the area, find out locations of services such as GPs and schools, and compare levels of deprivation across the city.

Information is also provided as summary reports, and it is here that local groups are feeding back into the process - "following requests from local resident groups, Citystats has developed reports covering locally defined communities," says Gwendolyn Brandon of the Brighton and Hove City Council Research and Consultation team. Developments in progress include more detailed reports covering specific areas of interest to local community groups, and also linking to external research carried out by local groups based on the Citystats information. "There is no problem in making most of the data public once we have made it safe for sharing; we want people to use the information so the more people that access it the better," she says.

Projects such as these demonstrate clearly that central and local government need to think about detailed area information on two levels.

First, as a strategic tool which can help planning at both local and national level, with information such as the Indices of Deprivation and Census used to allocate funding, and target and evaluate programmes.

And second, as a tool for engaging the public and local groups in the spirit of open access to government. This means thinking of the public and local groups as key audiences for strategic information and analysis, and providing detailed local area information in accessible, useful and interesting formats. The result can only be increased public engagement with government.

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Notes:

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- Tom Smith is Director of Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI). OCSI, a spin-out company from the Oxford University team behind the Indices of Deprivation 2004, was set up to help Local Government and Local Strategic Partnerships make better use of local information and statistics.
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