Local Government Association

Towards a consistent form of publishing elections data – *second consultation*

Consultation on an initiative to develop a revised strategy of best practice and a data standard for publishing election results consistently across the English Local Government with the potential for wider application and take-up.

This consultation will close on 14-October-2016

Date   8-Aug-2016

Version 1

Contents

Version history

Version/Date	Page/section	Comment
0.0 5-Aug-2016	all	First cut – Tim Adams LGA
1.0 8-Aug-2016	all	Review by Programme Manager, Transparency, LGA & open data advisers

Introduction

The Local Government Association (LGA) has committed to lead a programme to work towards more consistent publishing of elections data in future years, working with key stakeholders, data publishers and other data consumers.

Although there is no statutory requirement to do so, local authorities generally publish local and national election results on their web sites once those results have been provided to them by the relevant returning officer. There is no guidance or common practice to publish such data in any particular style, format or web location other than the statutory requirement placed on the returning officer to give public notice of the name(s) of the elected candidate(s) (and the fact that they were duly elected), the total number of votes given to each candidate in a contested election and details of the rejected ballot papers as shown in the statement of rejected ballot papers.

Whilst this approach allows scrutiny and review by individuals who discover the local published web pages, the work to locate such information automatically on a larger scale and then to collate data from every local authority to create a national overview is difficult, labour intensive, time consuming and often error prone. Substantial savings and ease of data discovery and reuse is possible if electoral administration departments can be encouraged to publish their data to a simple consistent form which can be read by humans and machines. In May 2016, the Government published its revised National Action Plan for Open Government 2016-2018[1] and Commitment No. 7 proposes a move towards consistent publishing of elections data to facilitate improved citizen engagement, take-up and innovative re-use by analysts and app developers.

The work currently underway is not seeking to resolve all issues and aspirations immediately. Similar initiatives on this subject area have been started on several occasions over the last decade and all have failed – largely due to the complexities of many types of elections, diverse and often inflexible legacy processes that are traditionally paper based, views and expectations from many stakeholders which are wide-ranging, differing and often conflicting and low levels of resources and funding within local government. To make progress, it is intended that this initiative will move in phases, building progress in stages and not seeking to resolve all expectations in a first attempt.

To this end, the initiative seeks:

- To focus first on elections which are undertaken with "first past the post" process. This can include local elections with multiple councillors representing a parish or ward but will not include proportional representation or referenda.
- Not to create substantial extra burden on local government electoral services departments – particularly by avoiding extending the types and quantity of candidate information that are published. It seeks merely to release what is already published but in a consistent machine readable digital form.
- Not to cease any existing forms of data publishing that are currently undertaken by returning officers – either the statutory requirements or the additional discretionary channels that are in use.

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[1] National Action Plan for Open Government -https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-open-government-national-action-plan-2016-18/uk-open-government-national-action-plan-2016-18

- To engage with English local authorities as a matter of priority but to be open to the involvement of electoral managers from other nations in the United Kingdom if they wish to become involved.
- To follow the best practice for information standards publishing as encouraged in local government by Cabinet Office, iStandUK and the Local Government Association.

Key stakeholders who are lending their support & guidance

- Association of Electoral Administrators
- Democracy Club
- Democracy Counts
- Democratic Audit UK, London School of Economics
- Department of Information Services, House of Commons
- Electoral Commission
- Government Digital Service (GDS), Cabinet Office
- Halarose Limited
- iDox Group
- Local Government Association
- Open Data Institute
- Plymouth University School of Government (Faculty of Business)
- xPress Software Solutions

Background

Between March and May 2016, a proposed data schema based upon simple comma separated values (csv) best practice and adopting existing local government standards was created as an initial example for publishing data simply and consistently across all publishing electoral services departments. Additionally, key stakeholders were approached and invited to participate in the initiative and offer refinement, support and guidance to this work.

A first stage consultation [2] was opened in March 2016 and this ran through to early May 2016. The consultation was promoted through social media, news items in publications by the LGA, Association of Electoral Administrators, Open Data Institute and the Knowledge Hub. The timing of this first round was not ideal since key local authority officers were heavily engaged in local elections and the later EU referendum. Nonetheless a substantial number[3] of helpful refinements and suggestions were raised and many were incorporated into a revised version of the schema specification.

Subsequent to this, a meeting of key suppliers and stakeholder representatives met in July to consider

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[2] The first consultation document that took place between March and May 2016 is online at http://e-sd.org/9fLFV

[3] Key responses and observations arising from the first round consultation are available online: Overview summary of many comments at http://e-sd.org/fmcAY. Detailed response from Association of Electoral Administrators: http://e-sd.org/WyVdu. Detailed response from Southern Branch AEA: http://e-sd.org/a98sn.

the specification further and to start to consider what technology changes might be possible to implement outcomes that conform to the standard and minimise burden on the data publishers. From this meeting, a revised specification was published and this is now available for viewing on line here: http://e-sd.org/vgTJ3

Other documents have set out more details on the proposed publishing process, the vision, risks and barriers. To assist here, we summarise key aspects of the proposed publishing strategy in the Appendix.

The Consultation

We now seek the views from data publishers, consumers and any other interested parties on the current proposal for data content to be published. ***The consultation will close on 14th October 2016.***

Please consider the proposed data content and digital csv specification for proposed elections data that is published here http://e-sd.org/vgTJ3

Also take account of the strategy already in use for open data publishing in local government set out in the appendix to this document. Give us your views, whilst being conscious of the limitations that we are seeking to constrain in early adoption of this initiative.

You can make your responses via a number of channels from the list below, though we encourage and prefer the Knowledge Hub since we are keen for open consultation and would like everyone to see what others are saying. If you opt to respond to the other channels below, we reserve the right to transfer these on to the Knowledge Hub so that others may see your views – unless you expressly state in your communication that you wish this to remain private.

Channels to make your views and comments known:

1. Local Government's Knowledge Hub at https://khub.net/ [Note discussions and responses to this consultation are taking place on the forum in the "Local Open Data Community" knowledge group here: https://khub.net/group/localopendatacommunity/forum/-/message_boards/message/26336391

2. Email to transparency@local.gov.uk

3. In writing to
   Dr Tim Adams
   Research & Information
   Local Government Association
   Smith Square
   London SW1P 3HZ

In the consultation, we are particularly keen to hear from you on any of the following topic areas.

   A) Does the data specification meet the requirements for publishing election results?

   B) Where do you suggest that changes MUST be made?

   C) Do you foresee any barriers for publishing the election results in the <u>format</u> suggested?

   D) Do you have any suggestions for improving the data content or process?

E) Is the guidance clear and understandable?

F) How can the guidance be improved?

G) Do you have any advice on the best way to ensure involvement and take-up?

H) Can you articulate the benefits that might accrue to you from this intiitaive?

Appendix

Guiding principles

1. The standards development process and the data publishing strategy will follow the guidelines already in use in local government from Cabinet Office, iStandUK and the LGA

2. The initiative is voluntary. We do hope for loyal support and involvement from as many election services departments in local authorities though nothing is mandated. We hope that traction will gain pace as more and more data become available and we look to data consumer groups to lobby for data and to develop innovative re-uses and feedback on benefits.

3. We are focusing in the first instance on England though Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can participate if they wish. The LGA has no mandate to impact or coordinate the work of local government in other nations.

4. We are seeking to keep added burdens to all parties to a minimum. We are not seeking to collect new or substantially more data content than is being published currently.

5. We are not proposing any change to the current data publishing practices in place by local authorities for their online elections information. We seek that this new consistent csv digital output be released and published in parallel with current practices

6. We encourage publishers to follow the guidelines provided by the LGA for the publishing of all open data (including the Transparency Code data) and summarised at the end of this appendix.

7. The key to a successful outcome will be if suppliers of Electoral Management Systems (EMS) are able to extend their systems' capabilities to output data as an additional option that conforms to the schema specification. The project team is in conversation with four key suppliers: Halarose, iDox, Democracy Counts, xPress Software Solutions. If there are other systems developers we should be including, please let us know.

8. First iterations of the data schema will only support "first past the post elections" and (hopefully) parish and town council elections where multiple candidates can be elected for a single electoral area.

9. In line with other local government open data schemas, we intend to include data properties that support linkage of elections data to other data sources through the adoption of uniform resource identifiers (URI).

10. The key to re-use and take-up is the publication of timely data. The timescales for release of data in this form will remain under the control of each returning officer. We do encourage local procedural changes where necessary to add results to the EMS systems for timely publication if the initiative is to deliver benefits.

11. We are not proposing the publication of historic data in the first instance, though trials will be undertaken with supportive local authorities to assess the workload that will be necessary to achieve this.

12. We envisage the outcomes of this initiative contributing to two core challenges.

a. Publishing the data (without elections results) in advance of the election will provide details of election areas being contested and candidates standing. This will provide consumers with advance knowledge of the forthcoming election.

b. Updating the published data after the election with the remaining results fields completed. This will provide consumers with the election outcome.

13. Electoral Services Departments have full control of their published data about their areas. If they require to update content at a later date after publishing, they can do so and can reflect this has happened by updating the publication date.

Proposed process for data publication, easy discovery and re-use

Initial trials will be constrained to local authorities in England unless early indications suggest strong support from the wider United Kingdom. Publication of elections results to a consistent style and specification requires consideration of two aspects:

- a *process* to support easy **discovery** of the data by consumers and further reuse
- the *specification and format* of the published data to ensure consistency at every source location thereby supporting easy aggregation and analysis by consumers.

We propose the implementation of best practice guidance for the data publication process that is drawn from other open data publishing practices in local government. These are set out in the LGA open data pages at http://opendata.esd.org.uk/.   A recent series of online eLearning modules and associated webinars[4] were provided by the Open Data Institute and the Local Government Association for further background knowledge.

We are not advocating an official, central data base of combined election results.

We advocate councils to control, own and upkeep their elections results data locally and to publish them in the ways they do currently, but to also place online digital copies of the results in conformance with this schema.

Data format

What data formats are to be used?   We propose results data to be published openly under this initiative, which must be made freely available in a tabular comma separated variables (CSV) format. The data format should comply with a schema which defines the content of each data column (also known as a field). The schema is designed according to the following criteria.

- Provide the essential data fields that are required to interpret election results by human or by machine readable forms
- Make it simple for councils to publish open data and use tried practices which already make good use of this approach

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[4] eLearning modules on open data publishing in Local Government - http://about.esd.org.uk/news/data-publishing-and-data-standards-elearning-modules-local-government

- Enable data users to interpret data and aggregate them from across councils in England
- Include linkages in the data to other sources of definition (such as the names of the constituency being contested, the name of political affiliations, and the names of publishing entities) through the use or recommended sources of URIs – uniform resource identifiers – so that data can be more easily analysed, combined and compared across England.

Licensing

It is proposed that local authorities publish these data against a standard open government licence (OGL)[5].

It is recommended that local authorities self-certify their dataset(s) with the Open Data Institute under the open data certificate[6]– at least at the most basic level as a minimum – to inform data consumers of the data's provenance, publisher, commitment to maintain updates, etc.

It is proposed that local authorities will publish their results data in any location of their own choosing – we would anticipate this probably being a section of the council's own web-site. Once published, these data should be registered as being available in a central public sector data hub so that data consumers know where to go to find the data. The central data hubs being recommended are data.gov.uk[7] and the LGA open data pages[8]. These hubs will provide the first point of contact for data consumers who wish to discover what data is available online and where they are located. It is for data consumers or other entrepreneurs to develop tools to aggregate the distributed local files into anything that represents other combined geographical areas – including a national data set.

The LGA intends to expand its current open data publishing tools to include an elections results data validator to pre-check conformance against the agreed schema prior to publication. Support for the new elections results schema within the validator will appear on the open data validator tool [9] as developments and take-up of this initiative progresses.

Data publishers will also be able to find the values for pre-determined fields from existing tools. For example, URI identities can be found in the URI search tool [10] provided in the LGA open data pages.

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[5] Open Government Licence http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/

[6] ODI Open Data certificate https://certificates.theodi.org/en/

[7] Data.gov.uk central public sector data hub https://data.gov.uk/

[8] LGA open data tools, guidance and discovery resources http://opendata.esd.org.uk/

[9] LGA open data publishing validation tool http://validator.opendata.esd.org.uk/

[10] LGA open data URI search tool http://uris.opendata.esd.org.uk/

For more information please contact

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