**Notes from meeting on Election Results Schema**

**Local Government Association, London. 27th July 2016.**

**Present**

Angela Holden (AEA),

Jeremy Foster (Cabinet Office),

Juliet Whitworth (LGA)

Martyn Harris (iDox Group)

Mike Thacker (esd)

Nick Crump (Xpress Software Solutions),

Phil Thompson (Electoral Commission),

Simon Verdon (Democracy Counts)

Sym Roe (Democracy Club)

William Quinton (Halarose)

**The process**

Use cases are needed to establish the process and the importance (or not) of fast results.

If an EMS is not used to generate results document/web pages, the results may not be keyed in the EMS at all. Most are input although not straight after declaration. It is recognised, however, that a move towards online, digitally-consistent publication strategy will require some Electoral Services Departments to change their practices and ensure digital entry of results into the systems in a timely manner.

Suggestions were made that it might be good to relieve the burden on officers in other ways, e.g. by making better use of the electronic data as an alternative to other manual tasks. Form K is required to be submitted within 14 days of the election, but this is largely concerned with postal votes. This is a helpful consideration but ought not to be seen as essential to make progress of the results schema initiative.

Electoral Commission Performance Standards define good practice. The electoral services sector might consider working towards changes to accommodate capture of electronic data and performance monitoring could be recorded there.

The biggest impediment to results capture by third parties, like Democracy Club, is not knowing the address at which results are published. Steps towards gathering results (and statements of persons nominated) are:

* Publish the web address at which data is given for each councils
* Each EMS provides an electronic feed/download that can be accessed at the above addresses - at this stage third parties can process outputs from different EMSs into a standard format
* Standardise use of codes, made URIs where possible/sensible used by the EMSs
* Migrate to outputting in a standard schema format

There needs to be a “publish” button for an officer to say candidates are finalised and can be published as data AND, after declaration of results, to say the same about results.

The data publishing process gaining significant momentum in English local government is being promoted within this initiative. This requires registering of the availability and location of published data in (at least) the two key data hubs which are: data.gov.uk and the LGA open data pages. From these, it is straightforward to compile a national list of published results data, their schema of choice and data location. It remains to be examined whether this data publishing and registering is undertaken by local authority officers (returning officers or their IT support) or by those pioneering EMS systems that seek to oversee these tasks as an added user benefit to minimise additional burden.

**General**

URIs should be published and maintained by the “owning” body, so it is desirable for ones for political parties to come from the Electoral Commission. The LGA team and the Electoral Commission have agreed to meet to progress best strategy. The LGA is able to support a proxy service to Electoral Commission should this be considered necessary.

The challenge posed by this initiative is large due to the complexities of many types of elections, diverse and often antiquated legacy processes that are traditionally paper based, wide-range, differing and strong views from many stakeholders and low levels of resources and funding. Several attempts from various groups to make progress have failed over the past decade – usually for conflicts in the above list. To try to make progress here, we proposed a staged piecemeal development path to prove each stage and then move forward together. Initially this initiative is aimed at England, though Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are welcome to participate as they become able and if there is interest to support our staged progress. The schema is intended to support key types of election that operate “first past the post” polls and for which we have a readymade source of official digital sources of administrative geography and civil voting area ontologies and local government service types. Early trials will be aimed at English Local Authority elections for ward councillors. In the longer term, the schema needs to be more widely suitable (egg for parishes, for Scotland) to gain recognition as a true national standard. It will only be suitable for “first past the post” elections, not for proportional representation or for referenda in the early stages.

There is a proposal (from Sym) to attach the data as metadata to PDFs of results documents generated by EMSs. However, such metadata would not be available if documents were created or manipulated in Word before publishing.

**Schema fields**

A comprehensive discussion on some of the more detailed content of the schema was held. These will be updated into a new version of the schema guidance specification and will form the basis of a second consultation to begin soon and be concluded by mid-October.

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| --- | --- |
| **Field name** | **Comments from the meeting** |
| PublicationDate | Make it clear that this is the date results are published (may be seen as the ExtractDate), not the date of the election or necessarily the declaration. We need a means of knowing if entries have been changed. Is this date changed if any row is updated? |
| OrganisationURI | We need a URI set that will be suitable for all UK local authorities. Sym advises that GOV.UK is planning publishing something suitable. |
| OrganisationLabel |  |
| ServiceTypeURI |  |
| ServiceTypeLabel |  |
| ElectionDate\* |  |
| TypeofElection\* | This should be an encoded list (probably not a URI set). It only changes with legislation. Angela has sent Tim some extra types |
| ElectedBodyURI\* | From the same list as for publishing organisation. May not be suitable for some elections, like town council. |
| ElectedBodyLabel |  |
| ConstituencyURI\* | Call this “ElectoralArea” URI to the GSS code of the area |
| ConstituencyLabel |  |
| CandidateSurname | Remove the need to capitalise. This just applies to the printing of ballot papers and forenames also are capitalised on a ballot paper where more than one candidate has the same surname. |
| CandidateForenames |  |
| CommonlyUsedSurname |  |
| CommonlyUsedForenames |  |
| PoliticalPartyURI | The absence of a URI indicates an independent candidate.  |
| PoliticalPartyLabel |  |
| AlternatePoliticalLabel | Blank where the main label is used. Angela advised that officers need to check that the label is one of the twelve official alternative labels. It would therefore help everyone if the Electoral Commission had unique identifiers / URIs for all labels and indicated which were current. These identifiers can be used in the schema. Mike can review this with Phil. |
| VotesWon | We are only dealing with first past the post, so first and second preferences need not be accommodated. |
| Elected |  |
| VotesCast | If this is zero and elected is true, that indicates the candidate was elected unopposed. |
| SizeofElectorate | Rename as “EligibleElectorate” |
| Rejected-Invalid-Votes | Make each of the five categories a separate field. Call these “BallotsRejected...” to make it clear that it is ballots rejected during the count and not postal votes that never made it into the final numbers (but are described in Form K). |
| PercentageTurnout | Keep this and make it clear that this is the percentage as read out. The actual figure may change, e.g. if the EligibleElectorate figure is revised. |
| InfoURL |  |
| ElectoralDept |  |
| ContactEmail |  |
| ContactTel |  |
| Notes | Remove this.  |

\* These four fields uniquely identify an election:

* ElectionDate
* TypeofElection
* ElectedBody
* ElectoralArea

It is suggested that data consumers can read each of the four fields above and concatenate them into a unique reference for precisely defining data for every election that is supported by this initiative.

This is [Democracy Club’s election id system](https://democracyclub.org.uk/projects/election-ids/reference/) which they would like to see adopted. The main features are that it's not centralised (they are not the only people who can create an ID) and that it's readable by a human.

It was proposed that we explore holding a URI for the Party logo (as printed on ballot papers) in the same way as proposed above for AlternatePoliticalLabel. Both of fields these allow an accurate historical record of what was presented to votes and may ease the burden on administrators.

**Next steps**

It is intended that this initiative moves forward with caution as there are many expectations and differing demands from a wide range if stakeholders. In the first instance, it was always intended that we work with English local authorities and their EMS suppliers to run trials on the specification, the publishing process and the re-use by data consumers. Further, take-up will be voluntary and additional burdens kept as light as possible so we are not intending to propose collections of additional properties from those already collected and published in present forms. The lessons learned will be invaluable and can form the basis or a wider, more formal standards development process later if needs be.

Sym proposed that we review the [process/criteria used by the Government Standards Board](https://standards.data.gov.uk/) for developing a longer term standard. Local Government already has a well-established standards development process that is overseen by [iStandUK](http://istanduk.org/) – local government’s eStandards Body. Currently we are progressing against the guidelines set out by this framework, which will includes an open consultation to take account of all stakeholders’ needs and aspirations.

Post meeting note: After discussion with the programme manager, the proposed timetable for next steps is as follows:

1. Circulate these notes to meeting participants and secure feedback
2. Revise the schema specification in the light of this meeting
3. Open up a second consultation to complete by mid-October to reaffirm support for the specification and secure any refinements.
4. In parallel, work to identify solutions to the availability of administrative geography and civil voting area ontologies in URI form for parishes, town councils, etc.
5. In parallel, work with Electoral Commission to develop an online searchable/callable URI source for its data base of political affiliations.
6. In parallel, work with EMS suppliers to gain their support and requirements/suggestions on how to
	1. Enhance their system export capabilities to create a csv file conformant to the data specification emerging (essential)
	2. Discuss how they might add value to their Electoral Services customers by pre-populating the database with the proposed URI fields (optional, though without this the EMS staff and their IT support teams will be responsible and this was the LGA’s initial assumptions, though LGA can help too)
	3. Seek responses from each EMS individually on their proposed strategy and requirements from us and others to make this happen
7. Towards year-end we would like to aim for early implementations and we will work with supportive councils and EMS suppliers to try back-dating early election data into the new form. In passing, Leeds has already placed its 2016 local elections data into the current schema’s version – see the 2016 data link here: <http://datasets.opendata.esd.org.uk/details?datasetId=41423>
8. Based on successes, we will start a preparatory campaign to secure wider take-up and significant use in the May 2017 local elections.

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