



Gaps in government data

Five things the UK Government should publish

Gavin Freeguard

High-quality government data is important for both government effectiveness, and for holding it to account.

The UK has made a lot of progress on government data in recent years. But problems remain.

This paper, drawing on years of working with government data, identifies five important gaps in the data that government gathers or publishes, and says how these gaps should be filled.

The quality of government data matters. We have long argued that it is important for:

- **Government effectiveness:** Government needs high-quality data to understand how it is working. This enables it to judge whether its policies are making a difference, and how to provide better public services. High-quality data allows government to measure its own performance, and improve it.
- **Accountability:** Open data on government and its performance allows Parliament, the media and the public to understand government and hold it accountable for its actions.

Businesses and people can also use open data to innovate. One example is the transport apps which use bus GPS data to predict arrival and journey times.

The UK has made a lot of progress on government data in recent years. More data is available than ever before. The UK ranks highly in international comparisons of the openness of government data. But problems remain. Some relate to the way data is published – often late, or in a form that is hard to use or to compare. Others are outright failures on the part of government to record or publish data which would be of immense value to many people dealing with government.

The forthcoming National Data Strategy is an opportunity for the Government to begin to tackle some of the big outstanding questions about government data, including how it should be structured, published and used.¹ These are questions which we will address elsewhere.

Below we identify five important gaps in the data that government gathers or publishes, and say how these gaps should be filled.

1. A list of all the datasets that government departments are responsible for producing

Government departments should be required to publish and update a comprehensive list of the datasets for which they are responsible. This would help people understand what data is available and where the gaps are.

2. More comprehensible data on government spending, including better annual accounts from government departments

The case for improving the presentation of data in annual reports and accounts was well made in the House of Commons' Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's (PACAC's) 2017 report, *Accounting for Democracy*.² PACAC said that government departments' annual reports and accounts are often "badly written and difficult to understand or follow", and that it is "almost impossible" to find out what is being spent on particular public services.

Departments should ensure that their annual reports and accounts present their spending by policy or service, in a way that means something to the public. For instance, spending on mental health services should be brought together in one place rather than scattered between different budget lines such as 'NHS England net expenditure' and 'NHS Providers net expenditure'. The data in reports and accounts should be presented in a way that is consistent between years; parliamentary analysts complain that, too often, when a new minister comes into office, data is reorganised to reflect his or her new priorities (such as the 'Green economy').³ Such reorganisation can destroy the ability to make comparisons with previous years. Any unavoidable changes in categorisation should be clearly explained, as should the difference between planned spending and reality. Baselines should be consistent.

In short, government departments should design annual reports with the reader in mind, to help those outside government make sense of the information they contain and allow meaningful comparisons with the past and across departments.

Government efforts to publish better public finance data should extend beyond better annual reports. In particular, government should ensure that forecasts are supported by details of the models and assumptions upon which they are based. To take a contemporary example, the forecast of the likely impact of Brexit on the economy that the Government has committed to publish before Parliament votes on any withdrawal deal should include details of its underlying modelling and assumptions.⁴

3. Better outsourcing data

Government spent £277bn procuring goods, works and services from third parties in 2016/17, but we still know too little about what it is spending, with whom, to what effect. Government could manage contracts more effectively if it could link tenders, contracts and spending; those outside government could bring greater insight and better hold government to account if such data were published. But as the Institute for Government has previously argued, and as our forthcoming report will show, there are serious problems with the available data.⁵ The report will recommend that government makes a number of improvements to its collection and presentation of data on outsourcing. These include:

- **A list of all government suppliers**

A list of government suppliers, with unique open identifiers (such as company and charity numbers), would make it much easier to work out exactly who holds and benefits from government contracts. This is something the Government committed itself to in its anti-corruption strategy (published in December 2017).⁶

- **A list of all public sector contracts**

A National Audit Office report into the collapse of the public sector contractor Carillion found that the Cabinet Office had a workable list of the company's central government

contracts.⁷ But in order to work out the entire likely impact of the company's collapse it had to ask Carillion itself about the extent of its contracts with the wider public sector. Having a list of all public sector contracts would help government better understand the outsourcing landscape in general and be especially useful should other suppliers run into trouble.

4. More comprehensive performance data on public services

If there are problems with understanding where public money is being spent, it is even more difficult to understand the impact of that spending, including how well public services are performing. The Institute's *Performance Tracker* uses data to understand what has happened to public services since 2010. It has found there are many basic output measures for which no data is currently published.⁸

Asking the Government to publish performance data on public services isn't just about it providing the public with the data needed to judge the impact of policy choices and how well services are doing. This is precisely the sort of data that government should be using to inform its own planning and spending.

Difficulties in collecting and collating data have been exacerbated by the outsourcing of many public services, which are not subject to the same transparency rules as those run directly by the state. The Information Commissioner has said that the public should be entitled to the same level of transparency about public services regardless of whether they are being provided by the public or private sector.⁹ The Institute for Government has long called for better data on how providers are performing as vital for efficient use of taxpayers' money and better contract management.¹⁰

Below are a few examples of public service performance data that should be available, as an illustration of the sort of data that is often missing across public services.

Better data on police activity – for example, police incidents that do not involve crime

It is difficult to quantify pressures on the police. Crime surveys are beset by uncertainties; crime rate variations may owe more to changes in reporting than to actual trends, and surveying victims means 'victimless' crimes like drug possession are missed. Officials suggest that much police time is spent providing public reassurance or dealing with 'non-crime' incidents such as those relating to mental health issues, but these are not recorded and so don't show up in the data.

Data on GP consultations – including their number and length

The number and length of GP consultations are important indicators of how much demand there is for doctors and how their workload is changing, but there has been no routine nationally-collected data on GP activity since 2008.

More data on neighbourhood services – for example, more comprehensive information on the quality of local authority roads

Central government needs better data on the quality of local government services: as long as it sets the overall spending envelope, it needs to understand the impact of the size of that envelope on performance.

Asking for data on the quality of the 80% of local authority roads that aren't currently in need of maintenance might seem like a highly technical point. But this data is a vital 'leading indicator' – a possible early warning signal if the overall quality of roads is getting worse. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when budgets are squeezed, councils tend to prioritise visible services. Indeed, the share of heavily-used A, B and C roads in need of maintenance has declined since 2010, while the share of lesser-used unclassified roads (usually local residential roads) in need of maintenance has slightly increased.¹¹ Without data on the other 80% of roads, government is not able to judge whether local authority road investment has been prudent, or has led to an overall deterioration in road quality.

5. Better data on the public sector workforce

A government that has the right data about the composition and diversity of and change in its own workforce should be in a better position to manage it effectively. Better data is needed in particular in two areas:

- **Turnover.** Staff turnover in the civil service has long been regarded as a problem across Whitehall. The implementation of policies and institutional memory suffer when staff move around too often. Recent figures suggest that the Department for Exiting the European Union has a *quarterly* staff turnover rate of 9% – the same as the annual rate for the civil service.¹² But how departments define turnover varies and they do not collect good data on how staff move around within the civil service. There should be more regular publication of the numbers moving within departments, moving between departments and leaving government altogether. Turnover data for staff working in public services would also be useful.
- **Socio-economic data on the civil service.** Socio-economic data can provide an important measure of diversity, revealing whether people from all backgrounds can rise equally easily through the civil service. But little data is currently collected – only the Fast Stream publishes anything. The 2017 civil service diversity and inclusion strategy refers to efforts since 2016 to find a suitable measure of socio-economic diversity.¹³ The strategy includes a pledge to benchmark 'SEB [socio-economic background] diversity' within the civil service and compare the civil service with other employers, by 2020. The civil service should start publishing what data it has.

Conclusion

Filling these gaps would give us a government more in command of data about itself and the services it runs, helping it make better decisions and improve its effectiveness. It would also allow those of us outside government to better hold it to account.

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**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
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