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INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

The benefits of transparency

Why being more open is good for government

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About this report

Many people outside government talk about the benefits of transparency in opening up the work of government to the public, but there is much less discussion of how transparency can benefit government itself. Based on seven case studies, this report focuses on how taking a more transparent approach can help government achieve its objectives.

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Contents

Summary

Advocates of transparency, whether NGOs, think tanks or members of the public, tend to frame the benefits of government publishing more information from the position of achieving a better-informed public. Far less common is discussion of how transparency affects those inside government – ministers, special advisers, civil servants and other public sector workers – and how it can be used to their benefit. That is the focus of this report.

Some government information will, of course, rarely, if ever, be made public – certain national security information or personal data, for example. But in this report we identify several benefits of transparency that we believe help government achieve its objectives or improve its processes.

The counter-argument: why governments can be wary of transparency

While transparency campaigners outside government will always be of the view that more government information and data should be made public, for those inside government this approach inevitably has downsides that are important to understand when discussing any moves towards greater transparency. Advocates must recognise the real disadvantages for those inside government:

Transparency can be burdensome – collecting, preparing and publishing data can take time away from other priorities, both when it is first collected and when it needs updating. It can feel pointless – if organisations publish poor quality data, it will be used less and will not appease those calling for more transparency, but it will still take time and effort.

And transparency can be politically damaging – if poor performance in government, or unethical behaviour, is revealed by transparency publications, this can create difficulties for ministers, senior officials or other public sector leaders. This political damage can lead to perverse incentives – whereby ministers and officials try to reduce the amount of discussion that is recorded, in order to minimise transparency.

The benefits of transparency to government

Based on seven case studies, including Transport for London's (TfL) open data, Scottish public appointments and MPs' expenses (see Annex), this report explores the many ways taking a more transparent approach can benefit government, including by:

Delivering greater value for money – publishing tenders for contracts allows greater competition, driving down prices for government. And publishing information on government grants allows government and other funders to work together to maximise their impact.

Improving performance and efficiency – by publishing more information, government can anticipate problems and improve the performance of key public services. The publication of NHS waiting times in 2006, for example, was instrumental in helping the Labour government achieve its target for reduced waiting times two years later.

Improving accountability – information from government allows parliament, the media and the public to hold government to account, both for the performance of public services and for the behaviour of individuals and organisations.

Supporting innovation – there are many organisations in the public and private sectors that can make use of government data to provide new services and develop new products, some of which will be of use to government itself and some will have wider users, which it should encourage. Government may not always be able to anticipate how its data will be used but that should not stop it publishing it.

Practical steps to improve transparency in government

These benefits are not uniform across different forms of government information and the benefits of publishing or not will always have to be weighed on a case-by-case basis. But while there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are some reliable and proven steps for government organisations to take to help make the most of the benefits outlined above.

- Departments should establish what data and information they hold about their core priorities, what they publish and what could be publishable in future.
- Departments should improve civil servants' capacity for taking a more transparent approach.
- Departments should learn lessons from outside Whitehall, including from foreign governments and local government.
- Government should identify potential users of information and work with them to ensure that what government publishes is as useful as possible.
- Departmental transparency teams should support their colleagues to embed the work of transparency into their everyday processes.
- Ministers should sustain their focus on transparency over the long term.
- Permanent secretaries should take responsibility for their department's performance on transparency.
- Departmental transparency champions should focus on building a culture of transparency across government.

This will not be easy. Even with ministerial leadership, improving the transparency of government is hard work: it comes with an upfront cost in both civil servants' time and money. But it is crucial for government to make the most of the benefits that transparency presents. It will become even more important in the future – as more and more government business is based on insights from data analysis and decisions are driven by algorithms – for government to show its working.

Introduction

Many people outside government talk about the benefits of transparency in opening up the work of government to the public. This is certainly important, but there is far less focus, generally, on how being more transparent can actually help government itself to achieve its objectives. While the benefits to researchers, journalists and the wider public are important, this report focuses on how being more transparent can help government itself.

With an election due this calendar year, 2024 is an opportunity to reset the government's approach to transparency. While commitments to greater transparency can be appealing to opposition politicians, they can be less so to those leading government. But there are many ways in which transparency helps government get things done. In this paper we consider how the government after the next election can make the most of transparency to achieve its objectives.

Throughout this paper, we consider a wide range of government information under the heading of transparency. The government has itself described transparency as meaning that "the public is easily able to locate, understand and use information about government activities".[1] This information can include:

- Records of its activities, such as ministers' meetings
- Records of public spending, including contracts for goods or services that the government intends to procure
- Documents and regulation about its processes, like guidance to civil servants on the use of artificial intelligence
- Measures of service performance, such as visa processing
- Data collected in support of areas of government responsibility, like Environment Agency flood mapping
- Elements of its decision making, such as the statistics and other evidence used in policy submissions, or the models and algorithms used to guide decisions.

This broad definition of transparency explicitly includes data collected by departments during the course of their activities. The 'open by default' approach to publishing government data and allowing others to use it is an important aspect of transparent government, developed by the Open Data Charter group (of which the UK government is a member).[2]

However, we believe that transparency goes wider than the important goal of publishing data – it is about making the effort to provide information in a usable way to relevant audiences, to show the workings of government.

The UK government has been a champion of transparency, but its performance has floundered recently

Since 2010, the UK government has paid varying amounts of attention to transparency. When he became prime minister, David (now Lord) Cameron stated that his government would "be one of the most open and transparent in the world".[3] A key part of this was the 'central government corporate transparency commitments', under which government departments would regularly publish a range of previously unavailable information, including who ministers meet, how much departments are spending through government procurement cards (used for low-value transactions) and salary information for the highest-ranking civil servants. This work has been co-ordinated by a central team in the Cabinet Office, which in recent times has appointed 'transparency champions' to support departments in meeting their commitments.

The creation of one consolidated website for all of government – GOV.UK – allowed the government to put information in one place and open up access to data. However, this did not always make it easy to find government information and data – not least because some datasets were, and still are, released on a separate website – data.gov.uk – while other releases appeared on the main site.

Technological change and the championing of open standards also made it easier for the government to provide more information about what it is doing, while certain crises created momentum to change how things work. Following floods in 2013, for example, Defra and its related bodies began working on bringing together and opening up access to its datasets, and more recently the coronavirus pandemic led to the creation of the Covid-19 dashboard, which brought together more than 200 health metrics, from the number of positive tests to the rate of vaccination.[4]

The UK was also a founding member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an international organisation set up in 2011 to champion openness and transparency in governments around the world.[5] The UK has remained a leader in certain OGP priority areas, including registers of beneficial ownership[6] (which assumed a particular importance after the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and transparency on aid spending.[7] The government's leadership on these international issues has bolstered the UK's reputation in global transparency circles.

These important steps built on previous improvements like the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act and Environmental Information Regulations by taking a more proactive approach to transparency.[8] However, despite these successes, in recent years the UK government's commitment to transparency has seemed to waver. Freedom of information is regularly criticised by former ministers – including by Tony Blair, the prime minister who championed it, for being weaponised by journalists to criticise government rather than being used by the average person[9] – and the proportion of FoI requests rejected by departments continues to climb.[10]

The UK has been under procedural review by the OGP since 2021 for failing to deliver its 2018–20 action plan on time and for working poorly with civil society groups when developing the two subsequent plans.[11] The UK fell to 24th place in the OECD's most recent open data rankings, down from third place in 2014, in part due to a failure to promote re-use of government data.[12]

At the same time, recent political scandals have also driven home the importance of transparency for tackling poor behaviour in government. From 'partygate' to Cameron's lobbying on behalf of Greensill to concerns over procurement practices during the pandemic, a key theme of many of the government's biggest scandals in recent years was a lack of transparency and a persistent perception that the government was trying to cover up embarrassing episodes to avoid accountability.

The next 12 months are an opportunity to improve transparency in government

This and other factors have led to the question of transparency in government rising in salience in the last few years. During the pandemic, the government did well to publish its health-related data, but the need for quick purchasing of PPE meant that the process was not as transparent as it should have been, and the ongoing inquiry has shown how a lack of transparency around ministers' WhatsApp messages can undermine the government's accountability for its decisions.

Ahead of the election this year, both the Conservatives and Labour are setting out their position on transparency. In July 2023 the government published a set of proposals explaining how it will improve ethical standards in government, which included various commitments to become more transparent. This was supplemented in December 2023 by new guidance – proactively published by government for the first time – setting out how it would improve the quality and timeliness of transparency releases about ministers' and senior officials' meetings, travel and other activities.[13]

The opposition is also considering how to improve the transparency of government, should it enter office after the next election: in a speech to the Institute for Government about Labour's proposed Ethics and Integrity Commission in July 2023, Angela Rayner spoke about the need to publish information about lobbying and for government to be more transparent about the process by which it investigates breaches of the ministerial code.

In this context, it is worth considering how this and any future government can make the most use of transparency. There are real benefits to be reaped. While it can help show that a government is 'cleaner' or more trustworthy than its predecessors or opponents, greater transparency can also – perhaps more cynically – help administrations 'get ahead' of bad news stories and give them a chance to shape the narrative.

But beyond managing narrative and reputation, transparency can also help government achieve its core objectives. As the minister responsible for the new guidance on ministerial transparency releases, Alex Burghart, said in a statement when it was published: "Transparency is crucial to delivering value for money, cutting waste and inefficiency, and ensuring every pound of taxpayers' money is spent in the best possible way."[14]

Those who want government to be more transparent must make the case for the importance of transparency to good government, while also recognising the challenges that ministers and civil servants face in taking forward this agenda.

That is what this paper seeks to do: assess the ways in which transparency can be beneficial to government, rather than at best an administrative burden or a tool for directing public attention, and at worst a stick to beat it with.

There are limits, though. Being transparent does not mean that government must publish all the information that it holds – effective government will require that some things remain private, like personal data, national security information and, in some cases, certain aspects of the policy making process (though government does sometimes overly rely on these exemptions). And transparency takes many forms, reflecting the diversity of information that government holds and produces – from commercial data to written reports.

Beyond specific forms of information, we hope to encourage those inside government to consider the wider benefits of adopting a proactive attitude of openness and transparency. In this respect, transparency is more than just an end in itself – it also entails making sure that information is accessible and easy to use.

Downsides, benefits and recommendations

This paper contains three main sections. First, we consider some of the counter-arguments and downsides of transparency for government and why ministers and officials may be reluctant to make more information publicly available. Second, we look at the different ways in which taking a transparent approach can be beneficial to government – noting that different examples of transparency will have different rationale, from improving scrutiny, to deterring potential corruption, to delivering value for money. And finally, we set out clear recommendations for decision makers in government – ministers and officials – to tackle the downsides and maximise the benefits, to make the most of transparency.

Our analysis is supported by seven case studies, which illustrate the downsides and upsides of transparency – these are referred to throughout the paper and can be found in the Annex.

Understanding the counter-argument: why governments can be wary of transparency

Many advocates for government transparency see only upsides. The argument goes that in a democratic society, the workings of government being open is inherently a good thing that should be the default. This may be the case for those outside government, but for those inside – whether ministers, civil servants or wider public sector staff – there are clear downsides that discourage people from seeking to be more transparent. Some of these can be managed, others may be outweighed by the benefits of transparency – but it is important to understand why many in government (and their supporters) do not support a move towards greater transparency.

Transparency can be burdensome

Making information transparent can involve big initial costs – in terms of both budgets and time, with civil servants diverted from other departmental priorities. New platforms may need to be developed before publication, like Contracts Finder, the government's central portal for advertising contracting opportunities (see case study 5).

Disparate datasets may need to be collated, often for the first time. Defra's commitment to publish 8,000 datasets within 12 months (see case study 4), for instance, involved bringing together data from its various public bodies and reformatting it so it could be accessible using different forms of software.

The project built upon the department's existing work, such as its open data strategy,[15] and also included building a model to understand how different organisations in the Defra group approached open data, to provide the right guidance for each organisation.[16] A core team of around 10 staff worked on this full-time, supported by officials in other teams and agencies.

These initial costs may lessen over time, and may have broader benefits for the work of the department, but ongoing trade-offs remain. Civil servants need to update the data and ensure timely publication. Licensing fees will have to be foregone where data was previously released on a commercial basis. The Environment Agency had to forego around £6 million in licensing revenue a year after publishing its data under open licences.[17]

And on the political level, special advisers are diverted from other priorities to review sometimes complex Freedom of Information responses. Government can design its processes to limit the burden of transparency – but there will always be some resource needed to make information publicly available. That resource can be particularly difficult to access in a context of urgent competing priorities and limited time and staff resources.

These burdens can make transparency feel pointless

Valuable transparency efforts can be undermined where these burdens contribute to a loss of momentum within departments and transparency disappears from the agenda. In other instances, departments publish data that is of poor quality, difficult to access, or released too late to be of any use. The National Audit Office (NAO) has noted that basic procurement information was missing for 6% of contracts on the Contracts Finder database, making it less useful when analysing commercial approaches across government.[18] In 2021 the Institute for Government criticised some departments' corporate transparency returns (see case study 3) for being overly vague: for example, John Glen, then the Treasury minister for financial services, held 39 meetings during January to March 2020 to discuss "financial services", with no other details given.[19] Few would claim that this adds much to the public's understanding of government work.

Transparency can, therefore, become a mere 'box-ticking' exercise. A cycle is established in which ministers set transparency targets, but resource shortages or poor compliance mean that the information produced is neither timely nor usable. This cycle risks being worsened where civil servants assume that a minister's inclination is for reduced transparency and modify their own behaviour in an attempt to align themselves with their principal's preferences.

The failure to take a systematic or strategic approach can also contribute to information overload, where transparency is actually hindered by the volume and rate of releases. The European Data Portal has highlighted that numerical targets can cause teams to make available data that is easily published but not heavily used within the organisations.[20] Without clear ownership of published data, and responsibility for making it usable and keeping it up to date, good intentions can quickly wither.

The government also has a tendency to publish whole series of transparency releases simultaneously, on a day identified because it works for the government's media 'grid' rather than because it provides useful information. While many releases are planned to monthly, quarterly or annual timescales, 'take out the trash day', when the government releases a whole host of transparency data that might generate negative stories on the last day before a parliamentary recess, has become a regular fixture in the Westminster calendar. On 25 July 2023, for instance, the government rushed out a whole host of crime statistics, departmental accounts, transparency registers and consultation responses.[21] This approach downgrades the value of the transparency that the government does undertake, and reduces the incentives on government to do more.

Transparency can be politically damaging...

Greater transparency does not come without political risk, whether because government publishes information explicitly about the activities of ministers and other senior leaders, or because data releases reveal performance issues in government. Registers of ministerial meetings, gifts and Freedom of Information requests are regularly combed over by journalists and the opposition, both for stories and for political advantage. It is not unusual, or unreasonable, for ministers to worry about

the impact of departmental transparency efforts on their careers or the reputation of their party. This is particularly relevant given that the benefits of scrutiny may accrue in the long term, by encouraging performance or propriety improvements in the wider system, rather than to the ministers in post who are accountable for the activity noted in the published information.

Equally, where transparency efforts fail to properly contextualise information, they may corrode public trust – as the civil society group mySociety has acknowledged, data without nuance may fail to provide a meaningful assessment of how a politician is performing.[22] The publication of MPs' expenses claims (case study 2), for instance, has led to criticism from many quarters. Local newspapers regularly rank members of parliament according to the expenses they claim, without making any distinction between the varying expenses members might face or acknowledging that almost all expenses are used to employ staff and fund their work in constituency and parliamentary offices.[23] Regrettably, some evidence exists to suggest that female MPs are disproportionately likely to be the target of such criticism.[24] As a result, MPs may choose to underclaim their expenses, incurring personal cost for the services they provide their constituents.[25]

Overall, the risk to individual politicians of increasing transparency is clear. As Stephen Bush has written in the *Financial Times*:

> **"Politicians are right to believe that better and more transparent data will mean having to deal with awkward questions."**[26]

... and can lead to perverse incentives

The perceived 'threat' of transparency may lead ministers and officials to adopt poor working practices, particularly where they are concerned about the confidentiality of their discussions.[27] Henry Hill, of Conservative Home, has written about the 'observer effect' and how the introduction of cameras in the House of Commons has changed how MPs behave in parliament,[28] as well as how the introduction of Freedom of Information legislation may have encouraged ministers and officials to commit less to paper. This is not a new concern – journalists were prohibited from taking notes in the Commons until 1783 and had to report on debates from memory.[29]

But this can lead to aspects of policy development going unrecorded. The exact extent of this 'chilling effect' is still not fully understood, although it may be more prevalent among senior leaders of organisations.[30] Robert Hazell, Ben Worthy and Mark Glover have found that at least some of the diminished record-keeping since the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act has resulted from other, unrelated developments, like less formal office culture and the rise of digital communication. A limited chilling effect among specific groups of civil servants who had been affected by high-profile transparency cases was balanced by better record-keeping among others.[31] Worthy has also noted that civil servants will limit their record keeping if they think this is what they are expected to do.[32]

Nonetheless, there are some clear recent examples of active poor practice, when ministers and officials have chosen to use particular forms of communication that are more difficult to include in transparency reports. For example, ministers may choose to hold meetings with external interests in informal settings, or without the input of their private offices to circumvent reporting requirements. As foreign secretary, Boris Johnson met the former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev without officials at a weekend-long party in Italy.[33] And as a recent Institute report noted, a greater volume of government business is now transacted via WhatsApp. In the context of the ongoing Covid inquiry, this has raised questions about whether users have been trying to circumvent transparency requirements.[34] The use of 'disappearing messages' – at the level of both ministers and senior officials – is a particularly egregious example.

There are some clear downsides to transparency, then, both for individuals and the working of government generally – and even the most ardent advocates would agree that transparency measures leading to politicians actively recording *less*, not more, is self-defeating. It has also been argued that recent initiatives have, at least to a degree, failed to produce higher levels of public trust in government. Hazell, Worthy and Glover, for instance, found that the Freedom of Information Act has done little to improve trust in government and expectations it would do so were "naïve and over-optimistic".[35]

But that does not mean that these downsides offset the positives that accrue to government from collecting and publishing information in a timely, usable way. The next section of this paper considers those positive aspects in more detail.

How transparency can be helpful for government

The benefits of transparency to those outside government are relatively clear – as are the downsides to those inside government. However, the benefits to government of making its information available publicly are not necessarily as obvious. In this section we consider the main ways in which transparency benefits government – whether directly, by improving the way government spends money and delivers services, or indirectly, through external scrutiny or by enabling innovation. Of course, these benefits will not apply evenly across different types of information, and in some cases may be outweighed by some of the downsides we identified in the previous section, but they provide a way to assess whether to make information available.

Value for money

Greater transparency can deliver savings by allowing public sector organisations to make better-informed decisions about their spending. Publishing expenditure data helps government to understand where and how different parts of the public sector spend money, and so allocate funds more efficiently to get better value for money.

Publishing more procurement data can increase choice for government while pushing down the prices at which it purchases goods and services. International evidence suggests that publishing more information about contracts can increase competition, as bidding firms have a better understanding of the opportunities available and what contracting authorities' are looking for (and at what price). Contracts with multiple bidders tend to be cheaper than 'single bid' contracts, and have a lower likelihood of favouring a certain provider's price requests.

Public sector organisations can use this greater competition to improve their understanding of the market's capacity and the range of providers available. A 2017 study into procurement contracts estimated that publishing additional contract information could make tendering 0.14–0.25% cheaper,[36] a significant potential saving in the context of the UK's large public sector procurement bill (which amounted to £288 billion in 2022/23).[37]

The Crown Commercial Service (CCS) has also drawn on publicly available contract information to understand spending across central government contracts and suppliers, informing its redesign of insurance framework agreements.[38] By aggregating this information, government is able to more easily identify areas of shared need and improve its contract management. To an extent, this information could be held internally within central government – but there are specific benefits to making spending data publicly available. Much procurement spending, for instance, is undertaken by the devolved governments and local authorities. Ensuring that procurement data (case study 5) encompasses spending by – and is available to – the entire public sector, will allow for even greater join-up of public expenditure decisions. In this way, smaller contracting authorities such as local councils could benefit from economies of scale by procuring on behalf of health partners, for example.[39]

Similarly, clarity about cross-government spending means that individual public sector organisations can improve their understanding of how their money may be spent. The government's commitment to a single platform for contracts aims to help public authorities assess the performance of suppliers that have provided goods and services to other parts of the public sector. As part of the consultation for the Procurement Act 2023, a clear majority of respondents supported the proposal to make past supplier performance easier for contracting authorities to consider (83%) – with many citing the need for a clear mechanism to consistently measure past performance.[40] With greater transparency, local councils may be able to direct their spending towards firms with a better track record of delivering on time and within budget.

And as we found when looking at the experience of open grant making (case study 7), open data can help organisations inside and outside government better co-ordinate spending. Publishing data in line with the 360Giving standard allows grant makers – including central government departments, other public sector organisations and charitable trusts – to understand what projects are being funded by other organisations. In part, this reduces duplication of funding: grant makers may see a greater marginal benefit by funding organisations that have not previously received grants. The Open Data Institute (ODI) estimated that the 360Giving data standard reduced duplicated funding by over £10bn across all grant making bodies since its introduction.[41] It also enables opportunities for the government to maximise the impact of its spending by collaborating with relevant private funders.

More broadly, publishing information also makes it easier to share data across the public sector, meaning other organisations do not need to create their own versions of data and can use it to inform their work. This can reduce administrative burdens and costs by reducing duplication of data collection and analysis.

Performance and efficiency

Collating and publishing government data can also help improve the performance of government services, through the monitoring of key metrics and by increasing access to data across government. Having a better understanding of a problem or of demand for services better equips public organisations to design their services in a more efficient way.

One way of doing this is by collating performance metrics – Francis Maude told the Institute in 2014 that transparency facilitates comparisons between different parts of the state, so

> **"you can see where savings are possible and you can drive up standards".**[42]

In the case of Scottish public appointments (case study 6), the ethics commissioner in Scotland collects and publishes data on the average time taken for each stage of the appointments process. The Scottish government and the ethics commissioner are consequently able to evaluate how effectively the appointments system is working, understand the causes behind delays and make improvements at the relevant stage of the process.

The whole process generally tends to be completed faster (around 9–12 weeks between applications closing and candidates being informed) than for the UK government (21 weeks between applications closing and the successful candidate being announced), where data on the appointment process is not regularly published.

If designed well, transparent metrics allow ministers to hold their departments to account too, which can help increase the effectiveness of performance targets. As the Institute has previously found, "it is publishing performance against targets, rather than just targets themselves, that appears to drive improvement" in public services.[43] After the publication of NHS diagnostic waiting times in 2006, for instance, waits for diagnostic treatments fell rapidly to meet the government's target in 2008 – public and media scrutiny helped drive activity within government and the NHS.

Likewise, the regular publication of schools' attainment data means that those outside government can judge the work of the Department for Education and others involved in the education system – public access to data supports and encourages focus from ministers and civil servants on key issues. In addition, transparently released data – discussed in the media and in parliament – may be more likely to come to the attention of ministers and senior officials than opaque internal statistics, which risk being lost in the 'noise' of departmental output.

With better access to data, organisations may be able to prevent problems from arising in the future: the Environment Agency's publication of flood-related data (case study 4), for instance, meant that the agency was able to work with Ordnance Survey to more easily undertake flood modelling work.[44] Previously, organisations even within the Defra group had been required to comply with licensing restrictions to use each others' data in some cases. Removing these barriers to data access saves these organisations money, while enabling quicker responses to floods and a more advanced understanding of the effects of flooding in the UK.

The reciprocal data sharing arranged by Transport for London (TfL) (case study 1) shows how transparency can facilitate access to data that public sector organisations would not otherwise hold. In return for publishing the information it holds about transport network use, TfL receives from software organisations data on areas that fall beyond its remit, such as crowd-sourced traffic data. This data partnership means that TfL can undertake analysis about broader transport patterns in London and so improve its services.

More broadly, transparency can also ensure that outside experts are better informed about the workings of government and can provide relevant and up-to-date advice to government by drawing on publicly available data.

Accountability

The publication of transparent government data also allows for greater accountability, which can in turn help drive improvements in performance. Parliament and the public can more easily scrutinise the work of both individuals and organisations when they have access to reliable information on which to base their evaluations. As the levelling up secretary, Michael Gove, said when his department published a round of statistics on cladding work: "I am pleased that we are now able to publish all remediation data in one place. That will allow you to hold us to account more easily."[45]

Public debate on sewage pollution has, for instance, been informed by the Environment Agency's own datasets. The agency annually publishes data provided by the water industry on sewage pollution caused by storm overflows. This publication is a statutory duty under the Environment Act 2021 and allows the agency to hold poor performers to account for frequent spills.[46] It also means that key stakeholders and members of the public are able to put extra momentum behind the agency's efforts: in March 2023, the BBC used this data to produce an interactive map of sewage spills from storm overflows and a tool for members of the public to look up discharges in their area.[47] Transparent data allows for public discourse to be evidence-driven.

Likewise, transparent public appointments data collated by the Scottish Ethical Standards Commissioner provides valuable insight into both applicant satisfaction rates and the diversity of public appointees. This data has been used by MSPs to appraise the public appointments process and scrutinise the progress of the Scottish government against its diversity targets.[48] Increases in the diversity of appointees – such as the proportion of female appointees increasing from less than a third in 2007/08 to more than half by 2017 – must be seen in the context of this greater transparency.[49] Effective scrutiny is facilitated by transparent data.

Transparency can also help towards maintaining propriety across government, as the prospect of scrutiny can deter fraud and corruption. There is no clearer example of this than the parliamentary expenses scandal (case study 2): greater transparency led to a wholesale shift in attitudes towards the proper use of public funds. Similarly, the implementation of open contracting (case study 5) has strengthened safeguards against corrupt practices within government procurement.[50] The NAO notes that this transparency is vital,

> **"both to deter fraud and corruption and to stimulate whistleblower and public reports to identify when it does occur".**[51]

It criticised the government's approach to Covid procurement, arguing that a failure to publish open contracts made it impossible to know whether "government has adequately mitigated the increased risks arising from emergency procurement".[52] Transparency allows taxpayers to exercise their right to scrutinise the spending of public funds.

Perceptions of corruption in the UK have worsened in recent years.[53] As Lord Evans, former chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), told the Institute: "The UK can act against corruption internationally by leading by example at home."[54]

Transparency is a vital tool in re-establishing trust where perceptions of government propriety have been undermined. Recent government commitments to improve and centralise the publication of ministerial transparency returns (case study 3) reflect this, and the government's commitment in December 2023 to improve the quality control of these publications is a welcome step. These commitments represent an attempt to assuage public concern about inappropriate ministerial meetings, such as unrecorded meetings with lobbyists. If successfully enacted, these reforms could go some way towards resetting perceptions of ministerial behaviour.

Innovation

The release of government data for public use can also encourage innovation outside government, potentially reducing costs to the public purse and contributing to economic growth. While there are often initial costs to these transparency initiatives, these are frequently outweighed by both the cost savings generated in later years and the proceeds of increased economic growth. David Cameron noted in a speech to the Open Government Partnership in 2013 that "the more data we make available, the more businesses that can grow, and the greater success our economy will be".[55]

TfL data released to the public from 2007 onwards (case study 1) has enabled app developers to build products that improve the experience of travellers by providing more information on service levels and saving them time. These developers can now rely upon more than 80 feeds of information, from train times to bus delays. Deloitte estimated that TfL open data directly supported more than 500 jobs in 2017, with two fifths of Londoners using apps powered by TfL data, generating more than £130 million in economic value through time savings.[56] One such app, Citymapper, is now a successful British export, having expanded to more than 100 cities.

Government does not need to publish data only in cases where it anticipates a direct use, and the government is not always good at understanding how its data is being used by external organisations. Often data may be used in ways unforeseen by decision makers. Alistair Darling, the former secretary of state for transport, stressed this point when discussing the roll-out of Transport Direct – a government-sponsored journey planner – arguing that

> **"you don't know how it's going to evolve... [but if data] doesn't need to be private, make it public".**[57]

Businesses have used Defra's data in a variety of innovative ways, such as identifying waste streams that could be used as low-carbon materials for infrastructure projects.[58]

Additionally, government can use its convening power to facilitate further innovation, unlocking data otherwise inaccessible to the private sector. Professor Frank Kelly, former chief scientific adviser at the Department for Transport, likened Transport Direct to a "battering ram" on behalf of the private sector: only government could collate such disparate data from across the public sector on such a large scale, including persuading otherwise reluctant stakeholders to undertake transparent data publication.[59] This then allowed private sector firms to take the data and come up with innovative products and services. Likewise, TfL has organised 'hackathon' events, bringing together a range of developers, allowing them to collaborate and share ideas.

Transparency can open up access to government for a far wider range of stakeholders and service providers. The NAO has suggested that, done well, open contracting can make the public procurement process more accessible for SMEs, particularly through digital platforms like Contracts Finder.[60] This can, in turn, lead to greater innovation in the public sector as SMEs bring new approaches to existing government services. For instance, the NAO highlighted improvements to the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency's hazard perception test that followed from the award of a contract to an SME, which used digitally generated people to expand the range of video test scenarios.[61]

Innovation that results from greater transparency can ultimately remove the need for the public sector to perform particular functions entirely, reducing costs to taxpayers. This supplements the savings generated by increased efficiency and value for money in the public sector itself. Transport Direct offers a case in point: the ultimate success of DfT's data initiatives was that the service closed entirely in 2014, having been replaced by a competitive ecosystem of private sector apps. Similarly, Deloitte estimated that TfL saves around £1m a year from reduced demand for TfL campaigns and services, as far fewer travellers seek information through the in-house contact centre.[62]

These benefits are not uniform across different forms of government information and the benefits of publishing or not will always have to be weighed on a case-by-case basis; there will always be some data that should not be made public. Nonetheless, considering the different ways transparency can help government achieve its objectives – even if those objectives are not those of the team or organisation that collates or publishes the data – can help government think about whether or not it can make a case for providing information (and whether or not it should be willing to experiment with publication).

But simply putting information into the ether is not enough. The way information is disseminated, and distributed, also shapes the balance between costs and benefits. In the final part of this paper, we make recommendations as to how government can see greater advantages from transparency.

Practical steps to improve transparency in government

Government does not automatically benefit from the upsides of greater transparency. By carefully choosing what information to publish, releasing it in the right way and following through on transparency initiatives, government can maximise the benefits and minimise the costs. At the same time, each part of government will need to take its own approach – there is no one-size-fits-all way of doing things.

Ministers, senior officials and leaders of public bodies should consider whether they can seize the opportunities outlined above by taking a more transparent approach to the workings of their organisations. Of course, some information (for example, personal details, information related to national security, or certain interim work informing policy proposals) should not routinely be made public. But government holds a large amount of information around its core priorities, including, for example, about the performance of key services, public spending and the activities of members of the government. Ministers and officials should consider whether making such information public would help deliver greater value for money, performance, accountability or stimulate innovation.

This approach has implications for ministers and civil servants alike, beyond those working in data and digital functions. In this section we set out practical steps that government can take to embed this approach and thereby maximise the opportunities of transparency.

Before publishing: laying the groundwork for transparency

Departments should establish what data and information they hold about their core priorities, what they publish and what could be publishable in future. Taking a strategic approach to publishing data and information, rather than reacting to external requests, will improve its use within government and give greater agency to ministers and departments. Departments should work up an organisational plan for which information and datasets will be published regularly, and which will require ministerial sign-off. This will help smooth the process of increasing transparency. This includes the information that underpins decision making, but also transparent metrics that ministers can use to direct the priorities of their departments and ensure that civil servants remain accountable to ministers and ministers to the public. DLUHC, for instance, publishes regular data on the removal of building cladding, underscoring this as a ministerial priority and maintaining momentum across the public sector.[63]

Departments should improve **civil servants' capacity for taking a more transparent approach**. Government should ultimately integrate transparency into its everyday processes, to limit the additional resource required. But those working in data modelling and information management should be given the support they need to prepare data for release – and, more broadly, government should ensure that communications officials have the necessary skills to describe data, and policy officials can clearly justify how they have drawn on information for decision making.

Departments should **learn lessons from outside Whitehall**. Civil servants already take useful lessons from the approaches of international partners: the public procurement green paper cited the positive experiences of Ukraine and South Korea when making the case for a transparent digital procurement strategy.[64] The Cabinet Office has an important co-ordinating role to play in formalising this process of continual review.

Valuable lessons can be learnt from the experience of local authorities too. Digital databases like the Local Government Association's LG Inform mean that transparency data can be compared in a meaningful way across authorities – a model that could prove useful in breaking down barriers across Whitehall.

Publication: making information available

The way information is published affects how far government can maximise the benefits of its wider use. Ultimately, the rewards of transparency can only come if information is used and engaged with. **Government should identify potential users of information**: different types of information will attract varying audiences, inside and outside government. And these groups will use government information in different ways. Departmental teams, government agencies and other public sector organisations can draw on information to improve the design of their services, or to allocate resources more efficiently. Businesses might combine government data with their own information to develop new and innovative products and services. Publishing information can also open government up to other individuals and organisations that might be able to provide useful input – such as by delivering contracts or offering external scrutiny.

The government **should work closely with these users of transparency information to ensure it is as useful as possible for them**. Understanding how information might be used allows government to publish it in the most useful way. This will help avoid what the Cabinet Office described as "lots of data, little insight".[65] Officials aiming to make information public should work with potential users to understand when, and how often, it should be published; what format for publication may be most accessible; and what level of detail is necessary.

Holders of information can make use of existing resources – whether by looking at current government platforms, external benchmarks such as open data standards, or the UK Statistics Authority's code of practice – to reduce the cost of publication and improve the likelihood that the information will be accessible for users. Being open with users about the difficulties in publishing more information will also help build these relationships. The work of the Cabinet Office with the UK Open Government Network – resulting in the UK's latest National Action Plan for Open Government – is a good example of this joint working.[66] This is, of course, an ongoing process: publishing feedback from users will help other parts of government improve too.

Based on this understanding, **departmental transparency teams should issue clear guidance** to those releasing information to ensure that they understand the appropriate standards for frequency, accessibility and quality of publication. The Cabinet Office's recently updated guidance about how details of ministerial meetings

should be published is a good example – setting out reporting periods, what information should be included, how officials should format and present the data and examples of high-quality returns.[67] Publishing 'service levels' sets clear expectations of officials and allows users to understand when and how information will be provided.

After publication: following through on transparency

Many of the initial burdens of making information publicly available can be offset by future benefits – provided that government keeps up transparency efforts in the long term. **Ministers and their advisers should sustain their focus on transparency.** Political direction can be useful for developing, and maintaining, a culture of transparency in government. The prime minister and ministers in the Cabinet Office should more proactively hold secretaries of state accountable for upholding transparency standards in their departments.

Permanent secretaries should take responsibility for their department's releases, so that transparency is not just a box-ticking exercise that involves costs without seeing any benefits. Ultimately, this means that the permanent secretary of each department should ensure that teams throughout the department are focused on meeting clearly defined transparency commitments.

Departmental transparency teams should monitor the quality, timeliness and accessibility of information and investigate cases where teams consistently fall short of their expectations. With support from the Cabinet Office's central transparency team where necessary, they should advise poorly performing teams about how they can improve their transparency publications. This does not mean layering on extra bureaucracy – government should make use of digital tools to embed transparency into their everyday working practices. Government should learn from the Information Commissioner's Office's 'practice recommendations', which suggest concrete actions for departments to take to meet the Freedom of Information code of practice.

There is also a role for **departmental 'transparency champions'** in ensuring a culture of transparency across government, among civil servants, ministers and special advisers. Departmental leadership teams should work with them to embed transparency in the department's day-to-day work and long-term strategy – they may learn from the example of the FCDO, which has designated a member of its board as a 'sponsor' to "provide strategic leadership for transparency".[68] The central transparency team should **collate examples of best practice** and share them with departmental transparency champions to showcase the potential opportunities created by transparency.

Conclusion

Transparency is often difficult for government – publishing information takes time and resources and can attract uncomfortable scrutiny. But it has clear benefits: more information can allow different parts of government to improve their spending decisions, and drive accountability from both inside and outside government. Information can also be used by public sector organisations and businesses to improve existing products and services and develop new ones.

With an election due within the year, the next government has an opportunity to make the most of these benefits. Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer should commit to **taking a more transparent approach to the workings of their government**. That does not mean that everything should be published – but government should properly assess the risks and opportunities created by releasing information, and should explore how those risks can be mitigated.

The decision to publish contracts (case study 5) – at central and local government levels – to generate greater competition among providers of services to government shows how "embedding transparency throughout UK public procurement"[69] can lead to positive results. Similarly, the Defra experience (case study 4) of collating and publishing data from a range of departmental bodies enabled better work by providing information from Defra and its associated public bodies in a more streamlined manner.

Tackling the often understandable hesitation around transparency will require **working with potential users of information to understand how best to publish it**. That does not mean trying to anticipate every possible use of data, but it does mean thinking about how data could be used and ensuring that publications meet the needs of users. This would help transparency become more of a positive tool for building partnerships, rather than something that leaders are sceptical about because of the potential for 'gotcha' journalism and external criticism.

Once these standards are set, government should **ensure that departments maintain a high quality of transparency releases**. The team in the Cabinet Office that oversees the publication of ministerial transparency releases plays an important role in holding other government departments to account for both the quality and timeliness of their publications. Expanding this model – where a central team in the Cabinet Office upholds the quality and regularity of transparency releases – will help government maximise the benefits of transparency.

There is also a role for parliament, which should **hold departments to account on their performance on transparency**. Public and political pressure – as in the case of MPs' expenses, and many other transparency scandals – can force the government to act, and to consider how it can be more transparent. Select committees should hold permanent secretaries accountable for the quality of their department's transparency publications, as the Institute for Government recommended in 2021 in relation to the corporate transparency commitments.

As well as holding departments to account for publishing data on time and to a high quality, select committees, supported by the House of Commons Scrutiny Unit, should more frequently **draw on government data** to better scrutinise departments' performance in key policy areas. This will require members of select committees to think about what data is already available from the department they scrutinise and what other information they would like. They should learn from the good practice of the Public Accounts Committee, which frequently draws on data to assess government performance – and criticises departments where data is of poor quality.[70] If select committees make the most of the information that departments publish and show that they care about its quality, they will help encourage a greater culture of transparency by default.

Owners of government data could take transparency further by working more closely with the users of data to understand how data can be used differently. The Cabinet Office transparency teams and the Central Digital and Data Office should set up a forum to review transparency across government, to assess different departments' approaches and to collate examples of best practice to showcase the potential opportunities created by transparency. Many such examples of innovative uses of data in the public sector have been presented as part of the Institute's regular Data Bites series, while a good recent example is the UK Health Security Agency's new dashboard, launched in December 2023 in response to the demand for transparent health data made evident by the Covid pandemic.

Departments are right to build on their successes and maintain momentum and ministers should champion them when they do. This agenda is important now, but it will become even more crucial in the coming years, as technology develops further and more and more government work relies upon digital processes, machine learning and algorithms. Being able to show the workings and respond to public concerns about accountability will be essential for future governments.

Despite raising difficult questions and creating work for officials, transparency is generally good for government. Making the most of it is not easy and requires sustained leadership. But by taking these steps – changing attitudes towards and processes for transparency – future governments will be able to make the most of the data they hold and show that transparency actually helps government get things done.

Annex: Transparency case studies

1. TfL's open data

Transport for London (TfL) collects a huge amount of data on the routes, schedules and reliability of the transport it provides, as well as the journeys of its users. It has been successful over the past two decades.

What happened?

TfL began publicly releasing data on timetables, delays and the journeys undertaken by its users in 2007. By December 2016 It was releasing more than 80 feeds of (mainly) live information, including on departures, traffic disruption, passenger counts and station facilities, some updated as regularly as every 30 seconds.[71] The type of data published has been continually updated, with new information on electric car charging points and cycle infrastructure added most recently.

This data was intended for app developers, academics and others to study, so it could be used to help Londoners navigate public transport cheaply and quickly, and to better understand the patterns of use on the transport network.

What was the impact?

These goals have been achieved. There are at least 17,000 direct users of the data signed up via TfL's website, and an estimated 42% of Londoners use one of the hundreds of apps powered by TfL's data[72] – apps that had, by 2012, reached around 4 million annual downloads.[73] These apps tell service users about delays or cancellations, and inform them which are the fastest routes from one place to another, usually funded by adverts, links to external partners like Uber or Bolt, or use of the apps' own data to plan private transport offers. As a result, these apps are usually free to download for users.

The initial decision to open up the data was a calculated risk – the business case for releasing the data was not clear, as the potential benefits were hard to model, and the cost of updating and publishing the data stood at around £1m a year when last calculated in 2017.[74] But there is strong evidence that the decision has provided good value for money – albeit mainly from research funded by TfL itself.

Analysis by the consultancy firm Deloitte, commissioned by TfL in 2017, showed annual savings to customers on more efficient and speedy journeys worth around £100m a year.[75] In addition to these benefits to customers, which have partly contributed to consistent year-on-year increases in TfL's customer satisfaction over the decade after open data was released,[76] there have been a number of benefits to TfL itself. It has been able to save money on developing in-house apps to deliver the same services – a cost saving estimated at between £15m and £45m by Becky Hogge, an open data researcher who studied the TfL case.[77] The mayor of London, meanwhile, who primarily funds TfL, has benefited from increased local productivity and tax revenue thanks to the businesses that sprung up to use the TfL data, some of which (like Citymapper) have become successful UK exports.

The same Deloitte paper estimated that companies using the data contribute an additional £12m–£15m in gross value added (GVA) to the London economy each year, and have created 500 high-productivity jobs.

Why did change stick?

Part of the success of this example is because TfL does not just release this data passively but actively works with the users of the data, organising 'hackathon' events to engage with data users and receive feedback on what is and is not working.[78] And it releases data in the form that users want, particularly through the extensive use of APIs (application programming interfaces, enabling users to receive bespoke responses to their queries), which are now available for 75% of TfL datasets.

What can we learn from the TfL case?

This case demonstrates several ways in which transparency can benefit government. An obvious one is financial savings – governments can release data and have the private sector perform services that they might otherwise have to fund. Another obvious benefit is the additional tax revenue generated by any innovation using this data. And transparency in this case also benefits government by generating reciprocal data sharing arrangements, and opportunities to work with outside partners to improve their services. This data on areas that TfL does not itself study – like crowd-sourced traffic data, or data on requests for specific journeys – can help it streamline and adapt its operations to demand.[79]

2. MPs' expenses

The 2009 MPs expenses scandal that erupted after the publication of information on fraudulent or otherwise inappropriate expenses claims led to the resignation of the Speaker of the Commons and several government ministers, and the imprisonment of four MPs. The information came to light through a request under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, which had come into force only a few years earlier, in 2005.

What happened?

Details of MPs' expenses were first requested under the FOI Act in February 2008. Following a court battle, they were leaked first to *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper and later released by parliamentary authorities in mid-2009. An independent audit of MPs' expenses claims, established in 2009 and chaired by Sir Thomas Legg, led to repayments by MPs of more than £1m.[80] Those forced to repay money included the leaders of the three biggest parties at the time.

Whether forced to repay expenses, imprisoned, or merely encouraged to retire, the MPs' expenses scandal had an enormous impact on the careers of many politicians – highlighting the potential power of effective transparency legislation for determining the personnel of government. Some MPs' careers were immediately ended; not least that of Peter Viggers, responsible for the infamous 'duck island' expenses claim, who was asked to step down at the next election by Conservative leader David Cameron the day the story broke.[81]

What was the impact?

The scandal's impact on the structure and operations of parliament is well documented. It led to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) being established in 2009, which came into effect with the 2010 general election. IPSA was made responsible for MPs' expenses, taking control away from the Commons, and from 2011 for determining and paying MPs' salaries.[82] Regular publication of expenses reduced the salience of the issue. The Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, which established IPSA, also made false or misleading expenses claims a criminal offence, while the Wright reforms made far-reaching changes to the power of government over Commons business.[83]

These reforms continue to have a day-to-day impact on transparency and accountability in government. In 2019, for example, Brecon and Radnorshire MP Chris Davies was recalled by his constituents after pleading guilty to two counts of providing false or misleading expenses claims – for which he was referred to the police by IPSA.[84] Both IPSA and the offence in question were introduced in response to the scandal, while the Recall Act 2015 has been linked in the academic literature to the long-term impact of the scandal.[85]

The academic literature also highlights its cultural impact on transparency in Westminster. One recent academic paper interviewed current and former MPs who served in parliament in 2009, several of whom claimed that the scandal's impact on their behaviour and their constituents' attitude had been, in the words of one, "difficult to put to bed".[86] Other research has demonstrated that those MPs most associated with the scandal – whether justly or not – were most likely to leave the Commons at the 2010 general election.[87]

Why did the change happen?

The sheer weight of public and media disapproval, as well as a genuine desire from many in parliament to improve things, made reform of the system inevitable, ensuring that expenses claims and the broader behaviour of MPs would be subject to more scrutiny in future.

The Blair government's willingness to introduce broad, rights-based legislation to increase government transparency, in the form of the FOI Act, also contributed to the uncovering of the scandal. While few would have anticipated this specific use of the legislation, the act gave journalists and transparency campaigners the momentum and the legal basis to bring this information to light.

What can we learn from this?

The expenses scandal demonstrates the importance of transparency as a means to uncover genuine corruption and prevent it happening in future. However, it also demonstrates one criticism of increased transparency – the negative effect on public trust and confidence in the UK's political system that such scandals can engender. Academic evidence suggests the FOI Act, and journalism that makes use of the Act, has generally had a (small) negative impact on trust,[88] while others have noted increase in 'social suspicion' of MPs following the scandal – particularly of female MPs, who were more likely to resign in its wake.[89]

Of course, public distrust of MPs did not begin with the expenses scandal, and plenty of writing in the years since the scandal has argued that its impact on MPs' and electoral behaviour was minimal – beyond, naturally, how MPs use their expenses.[90] But nonetheless, this case demonstrates some of the risks of transparency reforms for effective government, which is not necessarily strengthened if trust in government is harmed. At the same time, by publishing expenses information regularly, parliament has now taken some of the sting out of this form of transparency.

3. Ministerial transparency commitments

In 2010, the new coalition government pledged to "throw open the doors" of government bodies, launching a renewed drive for government transparency.[91] As part of this initiative the prime minister, David Cameron, committed to the publication of ministerial transparency data on a quarterly basis. The ministerial code was updated to mandate the publication of quarterly registers of ministerial gifts, hospitality, travel and meetings.[92] His successor, Theresa May, sought to further this agenda, issuing new guidelines on the publication of transparency data in 2017 so that ministerial releases would always be "in an open and usable format".[93]

Some of this transparency data had been published previously: registers of ministerial gifts had been since 2003, albeit on an annual basis, following a lengthy battle with the Cabinet Office.[94] Some had been released in partial forms elsewhere: ministers were previously obliged to publish details of any hospitality received in the parliamentary registers of interests, but only if this hospitality was worth more than £650 (or £1,000 for ministers in the Lords). Some, however, had never been published before, like the registers of external meetings, and represented a genuine expansion of government transparency.

What was the impact?

Interest in ministerial transparency data among journalists, researchers and the general public remains high, particularly in the context of numerous recent scandals in government, including partygate, Greensill lobbying and others. Attempts have been made to increase the accessibility of the data, including through projects like Transparency International's Open Access UK database, which monitors meetings between ministers and lobbyists.

Nonetheless, progress towards meeting the transparency commitments has not been uniform across government. Registers of ministerial meetings have been subject to particular criticism for the poor quality of information provided, such as vague descriptions or incomplete lists of participants.[95] Similarly, many departments have not maintained a reliable publication schedule, increasingly releasing their returns late, or not at all.[96] Failure to publish accurate returns has left ministers open to criticism.[97]

Why did the change happen?

In the aftermath of the expenses scandal, there was significant pressure on all political parties to open the political world to greater scrutiny. Commitments to greater government transparency featured in the manifestos of both main parties in 2010. The Conservative Party manifesto was particularly detailed in this commitment, including pledges to publish departmental organograms, details of spending over £25,000 and the salaries of senior civil servants.[98]

A decision to strengthen transparency commitments frequently follows ministerial scandals, allowing government to restore its reputation and reset its relationships with external observers. In July 2023, for instance, the government accepted several recommendations from the CSPL, agreeing to introduce new minimum transparency

standards and produce a single database for transparency releases.[99] This report followed revelations of lobbying conducted by David (now Lord) Cameron on behalf of Greensill, which was controversial but did not break any rules, as well as concerns over the propriety of procurement processes during the pandemic.

What can we learn from this?

Transparency initiatives work best when there is clear ministerial support. The speed with which the initial ministerial transparency guidance was published in 2010 can be attributed to the support of the prime minister; the same was true for the further guidance issued in 2017. This ministerial support is most easily achieved in the aftermath of political scandals, and recedes as focus drifts from these. Transparency advocates – both within government and outside – must learn to use these opportunities to shine a light on ministerial conduct.

Commitments alone, however, are insufficient when it comes to transparency. The 2017 guidance worked to standardise practices across government and make transparency publications more usable. But as the CSPL highlighted, there is "effectively no regulatory scrutiny" to ensure that departments meet their ministerial transparency obligations[100] – and indeed, many departments routinely publish transparency data late or not at all, as the Institute has highlighted in this year's *Whitehall Monitor*.[101] Without proper oversight, those responsible for transparency may not follow through on ministerial commitments. Departments also need enough resource to be able to publish transparency returns in a timely manner, with accurate and detailed data. While commitments go some way towards establishing a culture of transparency, this must be underpinned by an ongoing focus on delivery.

4. Defra Open Data Strategy

The Defra Open Data Strategy, first published in 2012, committed the department and its public bodies – the 'Defra group' – to publish and share large quantities of environmental data that had previously been unavailable, inaccessible, or in some cases available under restrictive or paid licence.[102]

What happened?

After a series of high-profile storms and floods in 2014 and 2015, the Environment Agency (EA) decided (under some ministerial pressure) to publish its flooding data openly. A series of datasets were released publicly over the course of three years, many of which had previously been only available under paid licence.

The commitment was extended in 2015, when the then environment secretary Liz Truss announced that the whole of Defra would release at least 8,000 datasets within a year.[103] These datasets included a wide range of datasets from Defra's arm's-length bodies and executive agencies, and eventually formed part of the evolving Defra Data Services Platform, which collates thousands of environmental datasets from across the Defra group.[104] The work involved in releasing this data included assessments of the potential risks of data release, and negotiation with other organisations that contributed to some of the data (like Ordnance Survey) to ensure they were sufficiently compensated for the loss of royalties from the public release of the data.

What was the impact?

According to an interviewee involved in establishing project, the initiative significantly improved efficiency within the Defra group itself. While Defra and its ALBs had previously had to navigate a complicated network of ownership to access datasets, Defra Open Data began to make all relevant data available in one place – both to those within or associated with the department, and those outside it. Many of the datasets made available had been unavailable prior to the 2015 open data commitment, even to teams across the Defra group. Opening up access improved the ability to innovate with data and sped up co-operation with stakeholders by removing the need to work out what data could be shared and how.

Similarly, some Defra group datasets had previously been subject to complicated licensing rules – with organisations within the Defra group sometimes required to comply with licensing requirements to use each other's data, or unable to access it at all. Making this data free to access came at an immediate cost to owners of the data, who were no longer able to profit from commercial data licensing, but an interviewee suggested that long-term efficiency improvements and the elimination of the requirement of a commercial team more than outweighed these concerns.

The publication of data even had a positive effect within organisations. For instance, one interviewee highlighted the impact of releasing data from the LIDAR topology maps, held by the EA, on EA local offices themselves, which could more easily use the data to do flood modelling work.

Finally, the data allowed private sector innovation to happen – for instance, the creation of new consultancies using flooding data to advise infrastructure or housing companies on potential sites. Because the data is completely open (users do not need to register to access it) there is limited data on who has used it and for what. But the decision to openly release flooding data, in particular, was praised by the EU's 2021 Open Data Maturity Report as having had a positive economic effect.[105]

Why did the change happen?

While some open data work was already under way before 2015, the project benefited from greater momentum as it was directly sponsored by Liz Truss as environment secretary and her special advisers, as well as the then permanent secretary of Defra, Clare Moriarty. An interviewee noted that this was unusual for data projects, which had not typically previously been seen as 'big-ticket' ministerial projects.

The success of Defra's open data initiatives also reflect the nature of its data. While other parts of government such as the Food Standards Agency (FSA) have made a similar commitment to open data, it would not be feasible for all government departments and ALBs to commit to open data to a similar extent. This is partly because, unlike many other departments' data, environmental data rarely contains personal or sensitive information. Some other large departments, like the Department for Work and Pensions or the Home Office, would need to ensure there were appropriate redaction processes before taking the same approach to open data. Before the push for open data, the Defra group already shared some data with its stakeholders, meaning the project could build on the existing sharing regime.

What can we learn from the Defra experience?

The Defra Open Data experience reveals the importance of ministerial and senior civil service support for transparency programmes. Clear leadership and vision gave added momentum to the Defra project and ensured that officials shifted from their previous ways of working. And while this work had clear upfront costs, the fact that the long-term benefits for efficiency in the department and its ALBs outweighed these costs should also be reassuring for other departments.

This case study also, however, demonstrates the need for that leadership to be sustained, otherwise progress can stall. We understand that many of the datasets on the Defra Data Services Platform have not been updated for many years now, as the focus on open data has not been replicated in subsequent years. Despite the framework and website being in place for publication, updates have not been prioritised – reducing some of the original benefits of the release. This is partly because the quantity of data provided to meet the original target was so great that it would have been difficult and burdensome to keep it all updated. A more strategic approach, with departments choosing a few key datasets in response to the needs of users, and ministers maintaining continued focus, might have had a better result.

5. Open contracting

Around a third of annual government spending is on procuring goods and services, from stationery to road maintenance to IT contracts. To do this, government departments, local councils, NHS trusts and other public sector bodies sign contracts with companies and charities to deliver a particular good or service.

What happened?

The World Bank Institute along with the Omidyar Network devised a standard way of publishing contract data in 2014, called the Open Contracting Data Standard (OCDS), which is now supported by the Open Contracting Partnership. In its Open Government Partnership (OGP) National Action Plan for 2016–2018, the UK government committed to publishing contracts administered by the UK's central procurement agency, the Crown Commercial Service (CCS), in line with this standard.[106] This information is available on a bespoke platform, called Contracts Finder.[107] Information on higher value contracts has been available through 'Find a Tender' since the UK's departure from the EU.[108]

As Institute for Government work in 2018 showed, however, government procurement data remained of poor quality, with large gaps in information and poor timeliness. The collapse of Carillion, the construction and facilities management company that held dozens of major contracts with government, prompted more effort within government to understand the number, scale and nature of the contracts it held, and improve information sharing between departments, agencies and local government. But much of this information was not released publicly, reducing its impact.

Public and media criticism of procurement during the pandemic – especially the use of the 'VIP procurement lane', which bypassed usual rules, the late publication of many contracts and the large amount of waste from bad emergency procurement – provided a further spur for action, as did the appointment of Lord Agnew as minister in charge of procurement in the Cabinet Office. This resulted in the publication of an ambitious procurement green paper in late 2020,[109] which turned into a slightly less ambitious, but still wide-ranging, Procurement Act in 2023.[110] Among other things, this Act introduces a 'transparency notice' regime, requiring contracting authorities to publish information on an online procurement platform before awarding a contract.

What was the impact?

Open contracting saves the government money, as more public information on contracts pushes up the number of bidders for government contracts, and therefore pushes down prices. International evidence supports this.[111] For instance, a 2017 study of more than 4 million public procurement contracts in 30 European countries found that publishing additional contract information decreased single bidding, and estimated that limited increases to transparency could save €3.6bn–€6.3bn across the EU.[112]

More information on the full range of government contracts also allows government to manage risks better – like the risk of Carillion-style bankruptcies – and to analyse how money is being spent – for instance, the proportion of contracts going to SMEs – and make improvements. Sharing contracting information between departments also means that they can identify areas of shared need and thus procure services more effectively – the CCS used contracts data to identify that several insurance contracts across government were expiring around the same time and so developed a new framework agreement for insurance services.

It also improves accountability and helps prevent potential corruption. For instance, the NAO investigation of pandemic procurement found that when open procurement rules are suspended poor and potentially corrupt behaviour increases.[113] This is because more information on contracts allows journalists, auditors and others to uncover potential links between contracting companies and the politicians and civil servants involved in awarding contracts.

The Procurement Act should magnify these benefits by presenting information on a single central platform, making it easier for suppliers to find contracts and for interested parties to scrutinise spending from planning through to contract expiry.

Why did the change happen?

Again the importance of supportive ministers – Oliver Dowden, paymaster general from 2019 to 2020, and in particular Lord Agnew – was repeatedly stated by those we spoke to as being key to the initiative's success. Lord Agnew pushed the team in charge of open contracting to be ambitious and creative in the build-up to the green paper, and brought a vital resource – ministerial time – to push for change around the rest of government. His choice to pursue legislation, too, made a big difference, prompting more interest in the area and providing a more concrete timetable for change.

Pressure from civil society groups also helped, with organisations like the Open Contracting Partnership and the OGP pushing government to go further, providing tools and solutions to potential problems and raising awareness of models used abroad. This evidence, and the fear that the UK was falling behind other countries (such as Ukraine and South Korea) in this area, made a big difference to winning arguments internally. And it also provided additional ideas of how the UK could change things; for instance, via the inclusion of experts on other countries' public procurement systems on the expert advisory panel involved in drawing up the bill.

Finally, crises – Carillion and Covid – made a big difference, drawing attention to the importance of procurement and how little government knew about how its money was being allocated.

What can we learn from this?

Open contracting delivers clear benefits to government, and that is one of the reasons it has been an area of progress in government transparency in recent years. However, it requires investment – in creating a quality website and interface for contracts to be uploaded and downloaded, decreasing the weight of compliance for public servants and increasing the quality and ease of analysis for those outside government. Government needs to put accountability structures in place to ensure that data is reliably uploaded – the NAO found in 2016 that various contract opportunities were missing from the Contracts Finder platform.[114] This case study also demonstrates the importance of political support and of crises in driving forward progress on transparency. While these have worked to some extent on open contracting, they bring major drawbacks – politicians frequently change, and policy changes only in reaction to crises can be rushed or come too late to solve the problem they are trying to solve. A dedicated, stable team of civil servants working on this agenda helped ensure that it continued to make progress despite the wider political upheaval.

6. Scottish public appointments

The devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland make public appointments to roles in public bodies they sponsor, as the UK government does for reserved and England-only roles. But the Scottish government has routinely been releasing significantly more data on its public appointments than the UK government.

What happened?

Since at least 2020, Scotland's public appointments website, which covers all regulated public appointments by the Scottish government, has included a downloadable spreadsheet that is regularly updated (every few days) listing public appointees and their roles. The data includes the name of the current office holder, the remuneration and working hours involved, and the post's expiry date.[115] The ethics commissioner in Scotland also collects and publishes annual data on satisfaction with the public appointments process and publishes detailed data on how long each stage of the appointments process takes on average, as well as a list of appointments in which ministers have chosen to meet prospective candidates.[116] This additional information is required in the Scottish appointments code, which unlike the UK code gives specific details of the data that should be publicly available.[117]

What was the impact?

This additional publicly available data has two main positive effects. Public information on when incumbents' terms end makes it easier for more candidates to apply for these roles, increasing the competition and quality of applicants. Data on satisfaction, and in particular on delays, allows the Scottish government and the ethics commissioner to assess the efficacy of the system, collect feedback and make improvements; for instance, targeting particularly performing departments with new staff or changes in policy. And the public availability of the data makes it possible for organisations outside government to analyse the nature of appointments.

None of this information is available for UK government appointments. Occasional assessments are made of how long appointments take,[118] and there is a list of regulated appointments, with new appointments usually announced on GOV.UK. But no details on who currently fills each role, or when their term expires, are centrally available, and there is no single source of information on appointees – despite this information being usually held at a departmental level.

Perhaps partly due to the increased quantity and quality of information available, delays seem to be less of a problem in Scotland than for the UK government. In Scotland, data suggests that between 2017 and 2019 the average gap between applications closing and candidates being informed was around 9–12 weeks, rising to 13.5 weeks in 2020 (partly due to Covid disruption). This is significantly shorter than the gap between applications closing and the chosen candidate being announced in the UK, which averaged 21 weeks according to the most recent evidence.

Why did change happen?

Scottish government officials and ministers may be more willing to publish this information because appointments are less controversial in Scotland, partly because they are generally for smaller bodies, and because there is less ministerial discretion in the Scottish system. Political opposition to releasing information on delays or ministerial meetings with candidates, therefore, is likely to have been less of a factor. It is also easier to deliver reforms like this in a smaller system. Scotland only has around 800 public appointments,[119] compared to the over 4,000 UK government appointments.[120]

What can we learn from this?

It is hard, of course, to attribute the lower level of delays solely to the improved transparency in Scotland – the appointments systems work in different ways, with less ministerial discretion in Scotland, and the most high-profile, slow and thorny appointments are handled by the UK government. There is no way to easily separate out the different factors. But it is hard to argue that greater transparency in this case is not an effective use of government resources.

The public release of this data allows government itself and the public to hold to account poor performers, and sheds light on who is making good progress, allowing the sharing of best practice. And the publication of term dates allows more applications, evidence of transparency increasing public participation in government. Furthermore, the information is available at a UK government level, and does not need to be anonymised as the names of appointees should be publicly available.

This demonstrates the possibilities of increased transparency in increasing administrative efficiency, simply because the public know more about government, and can scrutinise it and participate in it (by applying for appointments, for instance) more easily.

7. Open grant making

Every year the UK government gives out billions of pounds in grants, mainly to charities, arm's-length bodies and local government. Rather than purchasing goods or services through procurement processes, grants allow government to fund other organisations to deliver public services. In 2021, these grants accounted for £118bn in spending through around 200,000 individual awards, 13% of total government expenditure.[121]

Before 2020, however, the data on these grants was poor. It was only released via Excel, was difficult to search, and met neither the standards set out by 360Giving – a charity that helps organisations to publish open, standardised grants data – nor the standard for government statistics.

What happened?

In 2021, the Cabinet Office automated some of the data collection and cleaning processes, allowing it to improve the quality of the data, make it comparable year-on-year and increase the volume of awards published.[122] Since then, all central government grants must be published using the 360Giving Data Standard so they are searchable on 360Giving's open database of grants, GrantNav – which also collates grants from other public bodies, local authorities, lottery funders and charitable trusts and foundations.[123] This means that anyone can search the database to see which organisations are being funded by which parts of central government (as well as other funders), and can get a brief overview of what the funding is used for.

What was the impact?

The idea behind open grants data is that it helps funders to make better choices about where to direct their grants and thereby reduces duplication of funding, maximising the value for money funders get. The Open Data Institute (ODI) estimated that by 2021, the 360Giving Data Standard and tools reduced duplicated funding by more than £10bn across all grant making bodies (government, foundations and other organisations).[124] The ODI's report noted that there were specific benefits to government departments of providing open grants data:

> **For example, some government departments that are grant makers do not have access to a structured grant database internally, and use the 360Giving database instead. 360Giving benefits the government and researchers by allowing them to minimise the costs associated with accessing UK grants data as part of their work.**

Publicly available grant information means that different government departments and agencies can learn what related projects are being funded by other public sector bodies, ensure that their funding goes to where it can have most impact and identify ways of working better with other funders. For example, a 360Giving research project used the data to look at the funding available for specialist legal advice, and found that the Ministry of Justice was funding some of the same organisations as other, private funders, opening up the opportunity for greater collaboration.

360Giving also told us that MPs and local authorities have found the database very helpful as it allows them to see what projects and organisations are being funded in their constituencies or local areas, and to work with government and private funders to ensure greater join-up across funding streams.

Why did the change happen?

Open grant making has been prioritised both within and outside government over recent years, with private foundations providing the main financial investment to drive the initiative. Opening up grant making was the first commitment in the UK National Action Plan for Open Government 2019–21,[125] and the government guidance on open grant making states that the 360Giving model provides "better quality data that supports better analysis and understanding of the flow of funds from government and independent funders".[126]

This explicit support for the principle of open grants data has been crucial to its success, as have the tangible nature of the benefits to government itself from better understanding how grant funding is distributed. Similarly, having an external body set up the standard for publishing data makes it easier for government departments to know what standard they have to meet, and gives an external impetus for change. The fact that GrantNav contains data from different funders, not just government, helps maximise the impact of this data.

What can we learn from this?

A commitment to open grants data is important and has changed the approach of government to publishing this information. However, this data is only useful if it is published in a timely, complete manner. The government often publishes data months or years after the spending to which it refers took place, meaning it is less useful as a source of comparison for other grant makers. If government departments were to publish the data more frequently, as many private foundations do, it would be more available to other users and would lead to even greater savings and reduction of duplication.

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