

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Decision Report

Decision Maker:	Cabinet
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Title:	Local Transparency
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Report From:	Chief Executive

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to update Cabinet on the actions being taken to publish more information about the County Council in line with the new Coalition Government's proposals for increasing Local Transparency.
- 1.2 This report proposes the publication of a range of information in advance of the timescales indicated by Government and outlines proposals for further publication over coming months.

2. Contextual information

- 2.1 It is becoming increasingly clear that the Government proposes to move away from public authorities being scrutinised in relation to centrally set targets and intends that...

"The public should be able to hold politicians and public bodies to account over how their hard earned cash is being spent and decisions made on their behalf. They can only do that effectively if they have the information they need at their fingertips."

Communities and Local Government Secretary, Eric Pickles.

- 2.2 The draft structural reform plan published early in the summer by the Government includes proposals to:
 - publish all local authority performance data held by central government, working with the Cabinet Office
 - Publish data on local authorities held by central government departments

- Encourage data use by inviting third parties to create different online analysis
- release datasets held by the Department for Communities and Local Government to make councils and other bodies more accountable
- prepare local authorities for publication, in an open and standardised format, of items of spending, contracts and tenders above £500
- prepare local authorities for publication, in an open and standardised format, of job titles and salaries above SCS Pay Band 1 (£58,200)
- run public awareness campaign to encourage use and put pressure on opaque councils, including public demonstration of transparency of other local authorities.

2.3 The milestones specified in the draft plan are:

- **June 2010** – an online discussion forum on local authority publication of expenditure data launched
- **September 2010** - datasets held by the Department for Communities and Local Government published
- **September 2010** - first sets of local authority performance data held by central government published
- **December 2010** - code of Practice on £500 payments, contracts and tenders published
- **January 2011** - all items of local authority spending, contracts and tenders above £500, and job titles and salaries above SCS Pay Band 1, published in an open and standardised format

3. Open Data

3.1 The Public Sector Transparency Board set up by the Prime Minister has established a set of Public Data Principles. These are designed to help ensure that publication of data is done in a way that is open and freely available to third parties, who can re-use data to hold public bodies to account. These principles include:

- timeliness;
- fine granularity; (i.e. data that is meaningful)
- openness;
- aggregated and anonymised data;
- standardised formats; and
- publication under a standard open licence which allows free re-use (including commercial re-use) of the data for any lawful purpose without additional permission.

3.2 The majority of information that the County Council publishes is in the form of documents, often as reports presented to Council meetings and committees. These are published on Hantsweb as part of the decision making papers. There is however, increasing pressure to publish information where appropriate in spreadsheet format, as “open data” that

can be interrogated, allowing others to draw conclusions from the information.

- 3.3 This will bring some new technical challenges and it is important that not only are we in a position to publish information in an open and accessible format, but are also prepared for consequences such, as an increase in queries and conclusions being drawn from raw data without the benefit of contextual information. What has been learned from experience with Freedom of Information requests is that the original request usually leads to further enquiries.

4. Approach to date

- 4.1 In response to the drive for local transparency a small project team has been set up to consider the requirements for publication and address the technical and administrative implications. The team has focused on no cost, low resource options and identified Council information and data sets that could be published over the short and medium term. A number of risks have been identified, these include:

- the danger of creating a transparency "industry"
- a need for good governance arrangements
- a need to ensure that appropriate contextual information is provided alongside published information to assist with interpretation of the data.
- a range of issues in relation to open data including copyright, protection of personal data, information quality, need for clear standards
- consideration of how follow-up queries should be dealt with.

- 4.2 As part of this work we are looking to develop a clear policy statement outlining the County Council's approach to transparency which is currently well embedded within our processes. This is important as it will help the public understand why certain information may or may not be published. It will also be important for staff to have a framework to guide them in making decisions on the publication of information. The starting point will be to follow the principles of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, in that we recognise that the County Council has a responsibility to provide a right of access to the information that it holds, whilst also recognising that it may not always be appropriate for all information to be made public.

- 4.3 For example in deciding whether to publish information the County Council will need to take into consideration whether it is lawful to release that information and whether the public interest in publishing that information outweighs the public interest in withholding it. It will also be necessary to ensure that information published is included in the existing "Scheme of Publication".

<http://www3.hants.gov.uk/foi-publication-scheme.htm>

5 Immediate Priorities

- 5.1 **Data on spend over £500** - It is estimated that the County Council has around 20,000 transactions a month which would meet the criteria for publication which is a significant amount of data. Draft guidance has now been published covering what information should be published and the format.

<http://data.gov.uk/blog/local-spending-data-guidance>

It will be possible to produce most of the information required although there are some areas where it will not be possible to comply immediately with the guidance. One area of particular concern is the publication of the individual supplier ID. There is evidence to suggest that such information is being used in attempts to defraud other local authorities.

Additionally, there are still some areas that are unclear e.g. in relation to the publication of expenditure by schools. This has been discussed at the Primary and Secondary Heads Resource Meetings and if it is confirmed that this expenditure has to be included then it is proposed to inform schools through the normal schools communications channels.

Although the deadline set by the Government for publication is January 2011 subject to the position on schools being resolved it is proposed that publication should take place as soon as possible following agreement by Cabinet. On this basis the County Council would publish information for the period April to September 2010 by the end of October 2010 and on a monthly basis thereafter.

- 5.2 **Members attendance information** – The County Council has previously given a commitment that it will publish a table of Members' attendance at County Council arranged meetings. Members have been asked to review the information that is currently held in the Members Attendance Database and informed that this will also be published in October. It is recognised that these records do not reflect the full range of duties and responsibilities of a County Councillor and therefore members will also be able to add further information in relation to their role and wide variety of activities on their individual personal web pages.
- 5.3 **Members' Register of Interest, including Gifts and Hospitality received** – It is proposed to publish copies of transcripts of the register of interests that each Member completes. This information is already available for public inspection at the County Council's Headquarters and the intention is that it will now also be published on the County Council's website in October.

- 5.4 It is proposed that all queries in relation to the publication of information be routed through one contact point in the Chief Executive's department. In that way it will be possible to monitor the volume of queries and also learn from the types of questions being asked to enable improvements to be made to the way in which information is published including contextual information.

6 Medium Term Priorities

- 6.1 Beyond the priorities identified above, a number of other areas for potential publication have been identified, these include:

- Job titles and salaries of all staff paid above SCS Pay Band 1 (equivalent to grade J and above)
- Job titles of all other staff
- Details of contracts and tenders – this is a complex area and guidance on what Local Authorities will be required to publish is awaited.

This list is likely to increase due to the County Council's wish to publish more information and also the government's transparency agenda.

- 6.2 In addition to deciding what information should be published, we will need to ensure that:

- processes are in place for reviewing, accepting and publishing data;
- data quality management is in place for any information to be published;
- guidance exists so that people know who is responsible for publication and update
- an appropriate area exists on Hantsweb, with template pages;
- an online storage area is set up for raw data files;

- 6.3 There is likely to be a significant amount of initial effort required to deliver this due to our scale. Once the procedures have been set up, it should be possible to absorb continuing support for the published data into "business as usual" activities. However this is dependent on getting the information management process right in the first place. Arranging an open data area on Hantsweb can be done quickly, though arranging a suitable storage area for raw data may take longer, to ensure that a high demand for our data does not impact on the normal Hantsweb service.

7 Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 7.1 It be agreed as part of the drive for further transparency that the following information be published by the end of October 2010:

- (i) Details of each members attendance at formal meetings
 - (ii) Current members register of Interests and gifts and hospitality received
 - (iii) Details of payments over £500 for the period April to September 2010 and on a monthly basis thereafter
- 7.2 Work continues to enable publication of the following information in line with the timescales set by the Government
- (i) Job titles and salaries for staff at grades J and K information by the end of January 2011
 - (ii) Job titles for all staff at grades A to I by the end of June 2011 – this date is to be clarified but is the target currently being used
 - (iii) Details of tenders and contracts
- 7.3 The County Council's publication scheme is amended as further information is published and a policy statement is produced outlining the County Council's approach to transparency.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:**Links to the Corporate Strategy**

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Maximising well-being:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	

Other Significant Links

Direct links to specific legislation or Government Directives	
<u>Title</u>	<u>Date</u>
Links to the Government's drive for Local Transparency	

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

<u>Document</u>	<u>Location</u>
None	

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equalities Impact Assessment:

1.1 Not applicable

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1 Not applicable

3. Climate Change:

a) How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption?

Not applicable

b) How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts?

Not applicable