

For general release

REPORT TO:	Scrutiny & Overview Committee 20th September 2011
AGENDA ITEM:	8
SUBJECT:	Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Group – Final Report
LEAD OFFICER:	Julie Belvir Director of Democratic & Legal Services
CABINET MEMBER:	n/a
PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:	Councillor Steve Hollands Chairman of the Task & Finish Group

ORIGIN OF ITEM:	At its meeting on 7 th September 2010, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee commissioned a Task & Finish Group to investigate how the Council could promote transparency and accountability.
BRIEF FOR THE COMMITTEE:	To consider the final report of the Task & Finish Group and to approve the recommendations to be made to Cabinet.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 At its meeting on 7th September 2010, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee commissioned a Task & Finish Group to investigate how transparency and accountability could be promoted by Croydon Council. The Working Group was encouraged to consider ways in which the authority could surpass the Government's minimum transparency guidelines with the goal of becoming 'the most open council in the country'. This report presents the Working Group's Final Report and the proposed recommendations to be made to Cabinet.

2. PUBLIC ACCESS TO COUNCIL INFORMATION TASK & FINISH GROUP

- 2.1 Following its commissioning in September 2010, the Task & Finish Group began its work in February 2011 and concluded in August 2011. During the course of its investigations the Group met with a number of witnesses to consider how the Council should approach issues such as Freedom of Information requests, publishing financial data, examples of authorities embracing open data, the role of independent software developers and the perspective of the local press.

- 2.2 The witnesses invited to contribute by the Group included a number of Council officers as well as external representatives from organisations including the Greater London Authority, a software developer company and reporters from the local newspapers. The Working Group wishes to record its thanks to all who contributed to the development of the Final Report and recommendations.
- 2.3 The Final Report is attached at **Appendix A**. In drawing up the recommendations to be made to Cabinet, members of the Working Group have sought to ensure that the need to secure the maximum public benefit for the minimum public expenditure was reflected. The Working Group is therefore confident that any expenditure resulting from its recommendations will ultimately prove to benefit local residents and the Council.
- 2.4 If the Scrutiny & Overview Committee endorses the Group's Final Report and the recommendations contained within it, it is anticipated that it will be considered by Cabinet on 10th October 2011. Should Cabinet approve the recommendations, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee will then receive a report on the progress of their implementation six months after their approval, in line with the agreed procedure for the reviewing of scrutiny recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to:

- i) Consider the Final Report of the Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Group;
- ii) Endorse, amend or reject the recommendations made by the Task & Finish Group before submission to Cabinet.

Appendices

Appendix A – Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Group – Final Report

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

- Task & Finish Working Group Start-Up Document – Public Access to Council Information
- Notes from the meetings of the Task & Finish Group

Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Working Group

Final Report

**A Task & Finish Group commissioned by the
Scrutiny & Overview Committee**

September 2011

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Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Working Group

Final Report

Introduction

“Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government.”

President Barack Obama in an internal memo on his first day in office,
21 January 2009

“it’s your money – so you should know how it’s being spent.”

Prime Minister David Cameron, Birmingham,
6 October 2010

Since its formation, the Coalition Government has placed an emphasis on devolving power to local communities and individuals. As part of this drive, local authorities have been encouraged to share their data and information with the public to allow for greater public scrutiny with increased accountability, involvement and transparency. The Government has also introduced a requirement for local authorities to publish spending data on all expenditure over £500 and the Localism Bill proposes the introduction of a requirement for authorities to produce an annual statement outlining their remuneration policy for chief officers. It is therefore imperative that Croydon Council considers how it can best meet new Government requirements relating to financial transparency and the expectation of wider openness.

The Scrutiny & Overview Committee agreed that the promotion of transparency and accountability is a key element of local democracy, and commissioned the Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Working Group to consider how Government expectations and requirements could be met and surpassed. Rather than looking only at the minimum requirements, the Group’s remit included considering how Croydon Council could go beyond this to become the ‘most open council in the country’.

The Working Group was commissioned by the Scrutiny & Overview Committee at its meeting on 7th September 2010, when the country was feeling the effects of the global recession and the Government had made a commitment to drive down public spending. The Group’s work was therefore guided by the need to secure the maximum public benefit for the minimum public expenditure.

Terms of reference

The membership of the Task & Finish Working Group was as follows:

- Cllr Steve Hollands (Chairman)
- Cllr Jeet Bains
- Cllr Pat Clouder
- Cllr Sean Fitzsimons
- Cllr Clare George-Hilley

At the meeting of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee on 7th September 2010, it was suggested that the Group should focus on the two questions of:

- Does the Croydon public have any appetite to access this information?
- Is published information being presented in a manner that makes it readily available?

At the first meeting of the Working Group, it was agreed that the following subjects would be considered, with the two preceding questions underpinning the members' analysis of each area:

- Freedom of Information requests and the publication of financial data
- Examples of best practice from authorities who already share their data publicly
- Potential uses for Croydon Council's data and practical considerations
- Accessibility of data for the press
- Resource implications of sharing data

The Group's expected outcomes were:

- To understand how the Council meets its duty to respond to Freedom of Information requests
- To promote greater public accessibility to the data held by the Council
- To establish a model whereby the public demand for data can be ascertained
- To suggest methods of sharing data with the public

Having commenced work in February 2011, it was anticipated that the Group's final report would be presented to the first Scrutiny & Overview Committee of the 2011-12 civic year in June 2011. However, in order to ensure that all areas of its work were covered in sufficient detail the Group agreed to prolong the expected timescale to report in September 2011.

Methodology

The Working Group's work was member-led and it conducted its investigations by inviting a number of witnesses to attend meetings and engage in discussions on the topics listed in the Terms of Reference. The Group invited people both from within the Council and from external organisations.

At its first meeting, the Group received an overview of the Council's current work to promote transparency from the Head of Communications. Using this overview, members then identified the areas on which they wanted to focus subsequent meetings and the Working Group made the following observations:

- The redaction process and criteria for financial information was unclear
- Members were keen to understand what level of information was released via Freedom of Information requests and how these were handled
- The Greater London Authority and the London Data Store were recognised as useful examples of how releasing datasets had allowed developers to create beneficial applications (apps) for public use
- The effectiveness and design of the Council's website would be integral to delivering good public access to Council information

At the first meeting the following work programme was agreed:

Meeting two:

- Freedom of Information
 - Witnesses: Head of Legal Services (Corporate) and the Head of Customer Strategy & Development
- The publication of financial data
 - Witness: Head of Corporate Finance

Meeting three:

- Greater London Authority and the publication of datasets
 - Witness: Digital Projects Director, GLA
- Croydon Council's ability to share data
 - Witness: ICT Relationship Manager

Meeting four:

- Potential uses for Croydon Council's data
 - Witnesses: an external software developer and the ICT Service Delivery Manager
- Public and press accessibility to the Council's data
 - Witnesses: representatives from the Croydon Guardian and Croydon Advertiser

Research

The Working Group was also informed by research carried out by the Member Services Manager (Scrutiny). Officers met with a number of colleagues prior to the Group's first meeting to help identify potential witnesses and to gain an appreciation of the issues relating to transparency and accountability. In particular the Working

Group noted the results of the 2008/09 Place Survey that indicated that only 35% of Croydon residents felt informed about public services, and the survey's assertion that there was a direct link between being informed and customer satisfaction levels with public services.

In order to establish Croydon's starting point towards greater transparency, desktop research had revealed that the following examples of data were available on the Council's website within five clicks from the front page:

- Annual Accounts
- Annual Report
- Budget Book 2010-11
- Capital Strategy 2010-30
- Fees and charges
- Payments over £500
- Croydon Area Assessment 2009
- Current contracts

It was however noted that locating such documents was often difficult as users were not clearly signposted to them and locating them required the user to have a pre-existing knowledge of the hierarchical structure of the website. As a result, users were likely to require significantly more than five clicks to locate any data they were looking for. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires all councils to produce a Publication Scheme that outlines which information that council will publish on a regular basis and where this information can be found. Officer research established that Croydon Council's Publication Scheme could also be found within five clicks from the front page of the website, but that a member of the public would find it extremely difficult to locate. To view the Publication Scheme users would need to navigate the following pathway from the front page:

Home > Council and democracy > Data protection and freedom of information > Freedom of information act > Publication scheme

The Publication Scheme lists the range of information published with links to the specific documents. However, at the time of the original research, many of the links were broken (such as the *Register of councillors' financial and other interests* and the *Register of trees*) or did not lead anywhere (such as *Procurement Procedures*). During the course of the Working Group's investigations the Publication Scheme was redesigned and the broken links restored. The Croydon Observatory (www.croydonobservatory.org) was also highlighted to the Group, as well as the fact that much of the data on the site was out of date and not maintained.

Further desktop research identified examples of best practice from authorities such as the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea which had a transparency area on its website that presented the information clearly. Third party websites were also identified, such as openlylocal.com, which monitored the information released by local authorities across the country and authorities' relative transparency.

At the request of the Working Group, the Member Services Manager (Scrutiny) also attended a 'Make it Local' showcase event hosted by NESTA (National Endowment

for Science, Technology and the Arts). The event explored the potential of open data for public services and included case studies of four local authorities that had delivered significant customer benefits through the opening up of their data.

Findings, conclusions and recommendations

Freedom of Information

During the discussion with witnesses at the Working Group's second meeting, it was noted that since 2005 there had been a 40% year on year increase in the number of Freedom of Information (Fol) requests received by the Council. It was also observed that many of the requests came via the 'What Do They Know' website (www.whatdotheyknow.com), which then published the responses received from the Council. The Group therefore questioned why Croydon Council does not publish details of Fol requests and their responses. Members argued that publishing past Fol requests could help to reduce repeat requests and would be significantly more open and transparent. Officers explained that the current capacity of the website prevented this, but that this could potentially change when the new website was launched.

The Group were informed that the Fol legislation allowed certain exemptions to be applied to the release of information. If releasing information would cause commercial prejudice to a third party, then the Fol Act allowed for an exemption to be applied to the requirement to release this information. Before applying such an exemption however a public interest test was required, whereby it was necessary to demonstrate that the public interest in withholding the information outweighed the public interest in its disclosure. Members therefore agreed that as well as publishing Fol enquiries, there should be clear guidance on the website so that members of the public understood the types of information that was not available and why.

Officers highlighted that Croydon Council had in the past been under the supervision of the ICO (Information Commissioner's Office) following complaints of slow responses to Fol requests. The Group therefore welcomed the transfer of responsibility for responding to requests from Legal Services to Customer Services, as part of the implementation of a new Customer Relationship Management system. It was agreed that the new system should seek to provide better monitoring and workflow management to ensure more prompt responses. The Group also noted that there had initially been a cultural resistance to releasing data to respond to Fol requests; however as officers and members became more accustomed to people's rights of access, this resistance had diminished. The Group agreed that efforts would need to be made to overcome any cultural resistance to greater transparency.

Recommendations:

- i) Freedom of Information requests should be published on the Council's website in a format that allows customers to search previous enquiries and their responses in a designated transparency section that is easily found from the homepage.
- ii) Information outlining the public's rights of access to information should also be included on the website in a prominent position to enable users to understand their rights of access.
- iii) The Scrutiny & Overview Committee should receive a report reviewing the Council's performance responding to Fol requests at the April 2012 meeting of the Committee.

The publication of financial data

The Working Group discussed the Council's experiences of publishing data on all expenditure over £500, which it had been doing since January 2011. Members expressed concern that information could be redacted at the discretion of officers (whilst recognising that this was done in line with legislation to protect sensitive information) without any explanation for members of the public trying to view the data. The Group expressed a wish to see a more developed commentary published alongside the data, so that the information was more meaningful for the public. Such a commentary would focus only on factual reporting, such as explaining acronyms or reasons why information has been redacted, and should not attempt to give any political slant on the data. Officers explained that the current system for monitoring and then publishing financial expenditure data was not sophisticated enough to provide any additional comments. Members agreed that because the publishing of financial data was still in its infancy, the public demand should be reviewed once the process was more established to determine whether resources should be allocated towards redesigning the payments system.

The Working Group also considered how other local authorities were meeting the requirements to publish the £500 expenditure data. It was reported that some examples of best practice were emerging, where authorities were seeking to do more than just publish spreadsheets. The London Boroughs of Barnet and Hammersmith & Fulham were cited as positive examples, as they broke the data down by each department and provided a comments box for residents.

Recommendations:

- iv) The level of public interest in the financial expenditure data should be monitored during its first year of publication to ascertain whether there is sufficient demand to justify allocating resources to redesign the payments system to provide more detailed information.
- v) Croydon Council should seek to emulate the examples of best practice displayed by authorities such as the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, the London Boroughs of Barnet and Hammersmith & Fulham and the GLA. Data should be published in the formats required by public demand, rather than just a spreadsheet, to enable residents to easily understand what their money is being spent on.

The Greater London Authority and the London Data Store

The Working Group invited an officer from the Greater London Authority (GLA) that had led on the development of the London Data Store, a web-based collection of raw datasets. The datasets were drawn from a wide range of organisations, including the GLA and GLA Group, some London Boroughs and other organisations such as government departments and health bodies. Launched in January 2010 for an initial cost of £9,000 for the web platform, the London Data Store had two main objectives: to promote transparency and to encourage innovation and software development. With the latter objective in mind, the GLA put out an open call to software developers to seek their input before implementing the Data Store. The GLA works closely with

software developers in a frank and open dialogue. Early on in the development of the Data Store, the GLA hosted a workshop with around 50 developers, who urged that data should be released in any format other than .pdf (ideally .csv) and that the emphasis should be to 'go ugly, early' rather than spend time on presentational features. The developers explained that information could still be 'scraped' from pdfs but as the process took them longer, councils could appear to be obstructive and uncooperative.

The Group noted the experiences of the GLA, especially with regard to overcoming any resistance to sharing data. The Mayor of London's political commitment was important in delivering a culture change whereby transparency was more accepted, but so too was a dedicated officer to work with colleagues on a regular basis. Ensuring a cultural change was also made easier when the released data had been used effectively. For example, there were several apps that tracked the locations of hire bikes and the availability of docking stations. Transport for London (TfL) had undertaken to create such an app, but by releasing the data developers had created it free of charge to TfL. It was therefore recognised that through transparency, Croydon Council could potentially secure innovation at no cost but with significant public benefit. Real-time data on tram locations was cited as one example that could prove useful to residents if developed into an app.

Members recognised that engaging software developers in an open and honest dialogue would be key to fully utilising the potential of public data. The witness highlighted that in general, public sector web developers and programmers did not have the necessary time, resources or skills, but that releasing data meant that the work of the best developers was available. The Working Group also agreed that the Council should engage developers to help identify which datasets would prove useful, rather than assuming what the public wanted. For example, in the experience of the GLA there had been greater public interest in the location of public toilets than there had in corporate performance statistics. The Group supported the GLA's assumption that if data was available through an individual making a Freedom of Information request, then that data should automatically be published and available to all.

It was reported that it had proven difficult for the GLA to secure the proprietary data held by external contractors. For example, companies such as Serco and CapGemini delivered an increasing amount of public services but were not covered by the same transparency requirements as local authorities. Members agreed that as part of the commissioning and contract management of outsourced services, the Council should seek agreement from external contractors to share relevant performance data and a general commitment to transparency.

The Group also invited the ICT Relationship Manager to the same meeting and noted some of the practical considerations of sharing data, such as the time it would take for datasets to be converted to .csv format. Although such a process would not take too long, it was recognised that the data would need to be reviewed to ensure that sensitive data that breached confidentiality was not released, and that officer resources would need to be allocated to do this. The Group also discussed the assumption that the public found the dynamic datasets (such as transport information) the most useful, as it provided real-time information. It was noted that

many of the datasets held by councils were more static, although planning and development control data was highlighted as an exception that many people would find useful. Similarly, the locations and numbers of newly-planted trees had also proven to be of significant public interest in other areas. It was recognised that releasing positive and useful data such as this would help provide a context to some of the more negative coverage that the Council received. The Working Group agreed that if departments were to be required to share data, then councillors should lead by example and publish their allowances, the register of interests and (where available) their meeting attendance. The Group recognised however that the register of interests included some sensitive personal information, such as home addresses or other details pertaining to family members. It was therefore agreed that councillors should have the opportunity to redact certain sensitive information from the register, prior to publication.

Recommendations:

- vi) A dedicated area of the website should be developed to host an improved Publication Scheme, raw datasets and other statistics. Links to this area should be clearly visible on the Council's front page and labelled so that it is clear to the public (for example 'Transparency in the Council')
- vii) Croydon Council should seek to identify which datasets are of most interest by engaging local independent software developers, programmers and other interested members of the open data community in an open and frank dialogue in order to inform the Council's approach to greater transparency.
- viii) Croydon Council should develop greater transparency in all its services, including those delivered by external contractors. Measures to ensure openness should be incorporated into commissioning and contract management, as long as commercial sensitivity is not compromised, and Croydon Council should seek to establish an overarching commitment to transparency from all of its providers.
- ix) Officer resources to prepare data for release should be allocated to ensure that data is published as early as possible, with the publishing of new data incorporated into officer best practice.
- x) Information such as councillor allowances, the register of interests and meeting attendance should be published online where available and not of a sensitive nature. To ensure individuals' privacy, councillors should be given the opportunity to redact information of a personal or sensitive nature from the published register of interests.

Considerations when releasing data

The Working Group invited a software developer from Rewired State and the Council's ICT Service Delivery Manager to discuss the practical considerations of releasing data. The need to release all data, and not just the information that councils thought the public wanted, was reinforced as it was argued that all data had the potential to be useful to a developer. Members discussed the potential costs of preparing the Council's data for release and then maintaining it to ensure continued

relevance. It was highlighted that costs would be difficult to quantify as it would depend upon the state of each dataset prior to release. Some sets could be converted to .csv quickly, while larger sets could require more intensive work. The Group were also reminded of the need to analyse data before release to ensure accuracy and appropriateness for release. One significant consideration would be who carried out the work: Croydon Council had some internal capacity whereas contracting the work to CapGemini or Capita would have greater cost implications. In recognition of the uncertainty involved, the Group therefore agreed that a small-scale pilot project using data from one particular area of the Council should be established.

The Working Group also agreed that a pilot project would be a useful way of demonstrating the potential for the rest of the Council's data and provide a model for future transparency. Members discussed the potential difficulty of locating local software developers, and agreed that utilising the services of an organisation such as Rewired State would be preferable. Rewired State worked as short-term consultants for organisations by arranging 'hack-days' with 10-30 engaged developers who over the course of two days build prototype apps using the Council's data. There were a range of cost options from £12,500 to £30,000 and the Working Group argued that such an approach would be more efficient than the standard government commissioning process and would ensure tangible outcomes. It was also recognised by the Group that having a solid example of the potential benefits of releasing data would help to justify any costs of further data release.

The need to facilitate a cultural change within the authority was also discussed so that publishing data would become part of best practice and habit. Suggestions of how this could be achieved included adopting the GLA's best practice of publishing the raw data contained within reports. For example alongside every report published online there should also be separate downloads containing any data included in the report, such as the raw data for graphs or charts. Amending the committee report template to include an explicit requirement to show how the report satisfied the transparency agenda was also supported. It was felt that such changes would help to make Croydon the 'most open council in the country'. The need for a cultural change within the authority was evidenced by the handling of Fol requests, with members agreeing that officers should actively seek to share as much information as possible, rather than focussing on limiting how much is revealed. The Council's current approach to Fol and its performance was not judged to be sufficiently customer-focussed with too much emphasis on limiting access to information. It was agreed that a behavioural change would benefit from having a central driving force in the form of a Transparency & Accountability Champion, both within Cabinet and the Corporate Management Team (CMT). By labelling designated individuals, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee would then be able to receive regular updates on how the Council was delivering the transparency agenda in the interests of residents and would give accountability a higher profile.

Representatives from the local newspapers were also invited to discuss openness with the Working Group. Written comments from a reporter from the *Croydon Guardian* were received and members noted the disappointment at the time taken to respond to Fol requests. The opportunity to engage in a pre-submission discussion about the Fol's requirements was suggested as a solution to help the process. The Working Group welcomed the suggestion as a constructive improvement and also as

it reflected the members' desire to propagate a culture of openness across the Council. The benefits of publishing past Fol requests on the website with a keyword and date search function was also highlighted to the Group, as was the need to have a dedicated area on the website for data and statistics.

Recommendations:

- xi) A dedicated Transparency & Accountability Champion within the Cabinet and CMT should be assigned responsibility to drive greater openness.
- xii) Ways of making the data contained within committee reports available as separate downloads and amending the committee report template should be considered and assessed for their feasibility.
- xiii) A small-scale pilot project using local developers and datasets from a designated service within the Council should be undertaken to demonstrate the potential benefit and an indication of the cost and resource-requirement of wider data release.

The NESTA 'Make it Local' showcase event

At the request of the Working Group, the Member Services Manager (Scrutiny) attended an event which presented the projects that had received funding from NESTA's 'Make it Local' programme. The four case studies were:

- Sutton Bookshare – A web-based platform allowing people to lend and borrow books from other people in the Borough that also linked to open data from Sutton's libraries so if a user is looking for a book they will have real-time options of obtaining the book from a library, another user or via Amazon.
- Birmingham Civic Dashboard – The City Council worked with a local developer to analyse the data from all Contact Centre enquiries and develop an app that presents the data in a number of ways and allows easy comparisons and monitoring of performance by the public.
- Who owns my neighbourhood? – An initiative by Kirklees Council to make all of its land registry and land ownership data public. Residents can add and discuss information about their area and keep up to date with solutions to local land problems such as fly-tipping.
- FixMyStreet Barnet – The London Borough of Barnet worked with mySociety to link the national FixMyStreet website with Barnet's own reporting processes.

An independent appraisal of the four case studies had established five key learning points:

1. The need to build relationships with local developers and agencies to establish mutual trust.
2. Obtaining data from third party suppliers (contractors) was difficult but essential.
3. Successful uses of data were built around existing audience behaviours (rather than trying to change how people use things). Important to treat people like consumers (they expect it) and to get the language right.
4. Create advocates in the Council and amongst its audience (eg local developers).
5. Release early and often (rather than waiting to release all data at once).

As part of the showcase event, six software developers were given six hours to use some sample data to build a prototype app that would be useful to the local community. The prototypes presented were:

- [MyCommute](#) – using data from Greater Manchester Council, the app gave real-time options for the user to see how long their commute to work would take, depending upon modes of transport. Each search would take account of the next train or bus and combine it with the estimated walk time to the station/bus stop to give a total journey time for each route.
- [Redfoir](#) – using FoI request data an app was built that presented a council's responses visually to highlight recurring themes, average duration of each enquiry and the percentage of satisfactorily completed enquiries.
- [Local Business?](#) – using a council's expenditure over £500 data, an app was built that mapped the location of all of the businesses that the council was paying. Other councils' data could be added to it to allow a comparative analysis of how local providers were.

Members of the Task & Finish Group welcomed the findings of the 'Make it Local' programme, which were broadly complementary to their own findings, and recognised the potential of opening up Croydon Council's data. The Group noted that releasing the data had led to the development of apps that could help residents in their day to day lives (such as the Sutton Bookshare or the prototype MyCommute app) as well as encourage public involvement and scrutiny of services (such as FixMyStreet Barnet or the Local Business? prototype).

Impact of the Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 represents the most significant change in anti-discrimination legislation of the last forty years. It provides a number of stronger protections for individuals but also places a general duty on public authorities such as Croydon Council. The Council is required to publish equality information by 31 July 2011 and then again at least annually. This information includes, but is not limited to:

- Information on the effect that the Council's policies and practises have had on employees, service users and others from the defined protected groups
- The engagement undertaken with people with an interest in equality performance and how they were involved in the determination of objectives
- A breakdown of the race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation and religion or beliefs of the Council's workforce
- Gender pay gap information
- Success rates of job applicants
- Access to services, satisfaction with services and complaints, broken down by protected group, with an indication for reasons of complaints

The Task & Finish Group welcome the new duty for greater transparency and openness in the promotion of equality. Members recognised that the aims of the Equality Act corresponded with their findings with regard to publishing data on performance and finance. It was also noted that the requirement to collect, publish and have regard to information on equality and protected groups would help to foster a culture of openness within the authority, and that it was hoped that this would lead to the development of more open and accessible ways of working.

Final conclusions and principles for an open council

Having considered the issue, the Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Working Group found that, whilst Croydon Council is currently meeting the Government's minimum requirements, more can and should be done. The benefits of greater openness are numerous and potentially far-reaching: as well as promoting increased accountability in the way the Council operates, complete transparency could help to encourage low cost innovation and increase customer satisfaction and engagement with Council services.

As well making procedural changes to improving the handling of Fol requests and the need to improve the website, the Group established a need to facilitate a cultural and behavioural change within Croydon Council. Members were confident that once openness and transparency had become entrenched in officer behaviour, then further improvements to how the authority operates would evolve over time. Fundamental to this was a need for the Council to proactively share information with the public, rather than only being reactive by responding to individual requests. Members of the public have a legal right to information about how their council operates, so to attempt to limit access only makes the authority seem obstructive. The Working Group therefore expects that it will be necessary to incorporate the more transparent ways of working into the Council's Constitution at its next review.

Having reviewed practise within Croydon and elsewhere, the Working Group has established the benefits of releasing data and greater transparency. It therefore makes a number of recommendations to Cabinet that would contribute towards making Croydon 'the most open council in the country'. Members of the Working Group recognise that some of the proposals might require additional resources for the Council, but believe that the community benefit will outweigh any costs incurred. Underpinning these recommendations are three fundamental principles that the Council should embrace:

If the public have a right to information, this information should proactively be provided to them by the Council by default

The format of information published should be defined by public need rather than Council convenience

Officers should seek to share as much information as possible, rather than focussing on limiting how much is revealed

Public Access to Council Information Task & Finish Group – Full Recommendations

- i) Freedom of Information requests should be published on the Council's website in a format that allows customers to search previous enquiries and their responses in a designated transparency section that is easily found from the homepage.
- ii) Information outlining the public's rights of access to information should also be included on the website in a prominent position to enable users to understand their rights of access.
- iii) The Scrutiny & Overview Committee should receive a report reviewing the Council's performance responding to Fol requests at the April 2012 meeting of the Committee.
- iv) The level of public interest in the financial expenditure data should be monitored during its first year of publication to ascertain whether there is sufficient demand to justify allocating resources to redesign the payments system to provide more detailed information.
- v) Croydon Council should seek to emulate the examples of best practice displayed by authorities such as the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, the London Boroughs of Barnet and Hammersmith & Fulham and the GLA. Data should be published in the formats required by public demand, rather than just a spreadsheet, to enable residents to easily understand what their money is being spent on.
- vi) A dedicated area of the website should be developed to host an improved Publication Scheme, raw datasets and other statistics. Links to this area should be clearly visible on the Council's front page and labelled so that it is clear to the public (for example 'Transparency in the Council')
- vii) Croydon Council should seek to identify which datasets are of most interest by engaging local independent software developers, programmers and other interested members of the open data community in an open and frank dialogue in order to inform the Council's approach to greater transparency.
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- ix) Officer resources to prepare data for release should be allocated to ensure that data is published as early as possible, with the publishing of new data incorporated into officer best practice.
- x) Information such as councillor allowances, the register of interests and meeting attendance should be published online where available and not of a

sensitive nature. To ensure individuals' privacy, councillors should be given the opportunity to redact information of a personal or sensitive nature from the published register of interests.

- xi) A dedicated Transparency & Accountability Champion within the Cabinet and CMT should be assigned responsibility to drive greater openness.
- xii) Ways of making the data contained within committee reports available as separate downloads and amending the committee report template should be considered and assessed for their feasibility.
- xiii) A small-scale pilot project using local developers and datasets from a designated service within the Council should be undertaken to demonstrate the potential benefit and an indication of the cost and resource-requirement of wider data release.