

Action needed to maintain councils' momentum in supporting communities through data-driven innovation

The Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (CDEI), the UK government's advisory body on the responsible use of AI and data-driven technology, has published new analysis on the use of data in local government during the COVID-19 crisis. It draws on findings from a forum attended by local authorities across the country, in which they explored changes to data use during the pandemic and discussed barriers to data-driven innovation, as well as new research into public attitudes towards local data use. Key findings include:

- The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the innovative use of data at a local level, with a range of data-driven interventions launched or repurposed during the pandemic. Examples include: the use of the 'VIPER' tool by local authorities in Essex, which has enabled emergency services to share data in real time; Argyll and Bute Council's trial of drone technology to deliver vital medical supplies across its islands; Glasgow City Council's online platform to promote social distancing; and Hackney Council's analysis of internal and external datasets to help them identify residents who are vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Health data has been shared with local authorities in new ways. For example, local authorities have received access to the NHS shielding patients database, allowing authorities to better target support, including food parcels and pharmacy deliveries, to vulnerable individuals.
- Authorities have had more success in changing how they deploy existing datasets than in acquiring or sharing data with central government or local service providers.
- For sustainable adoption, the governance of new technologies needs to be informed by engagement with local citizens to ensure that it is trustworthy. New polling shows that 50% of people want to engage with their local authority on how data is used to make decisions.

Representatives convened by the CDEI expressed concerns that progress would not be sustained, with data use practices reverting to the pre-pandemic status quo. Reasons for this include: uncertainty around whether emergency access to datasets will be repealed; enthusiasm for data-driven interventions among decision-makers waning; fear of misjudging the public mood on what is an acceptable use of data; and reluctance among local authorities to be a "first mover" in what is perceived to be a high risk environment. Local authorities are also grappling with long-standing barriers to data-driven innovation, including skills gaps, poor data quality, lack of legal clarity and funding challenges.

The CDEI warns that progress is unlikely to be made without dedicated action from central and local government. Whilst encouraging, recent steps forward,

such as the publication of the [Local Government Association's guide to predictive analytics](#), and the [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's COVID-19 challenge fund](#), are unlikely to move the needle on their own. Without increased investment and an improvement in data skills, local authorities will struggle to retain and build on recent progress. In its [National Data Strategy](#), the government has outlined an ambition to strengthen skills, improve access to data, and offer greater regulatory clarity, and has committed to working to better support local government in maximising the benefits of data.

While conversations have already started on what practices should be retained post-pandemic, the CDEI's forum pushed thinking further by focusing on the importance of good data governance in enabling trustworthy data use. While responsible data governance was top of mind for data leads, they commented on the difficulty of translating theoretical frameworks into practical steps.

The CDEI has also researched public attitudes towards the use of data in local government, and the results suggest that citizens want a stake in how their data is used. In the representative sample of 2,025 people, conducted with Deltapoll, 50% reported interest in engaging with their local authority on how data is used to make decisions. Levels of understanding around how local authorities use data is extremely varied: 39% said that they did not know if their personal data is being collected or how it is being used.

The results suggest that the public are more comfortable with data collection and use by their local authority if context is provided. When given specific scenarios, such as the use of data to identify children who might be at risk of domestic violence, the proportion of people who felt comfortable was higher than when asked about the collection and use of raw data (e.g. education data). Those polled felt that the greatest benefit of data use would be improvements to their local community (31%). When asked about measures that would enable trust in local council use of data, the two most popular responses were data anonymisation (24%) and strict access and use controls (23%).

The CDEI is now working in partnership with local authorities, including Bristol City Council, to help them maximise the benefits of data and data-driven technologies, by building trustworthy governance that earns the confidence of citizens over the long-term.

Edwina Dunn, Board member for the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, said : "Almost every aspect of local government has required at least temporary reform during the pandemic. Data and data-driven technologies have played an important part in enabling local authorities to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, helping to inform public health measures, protect the most vulnerable in local communities, and keep public services running. With the right support, councils can retain and build on efforts to utilise data effectively, in a way that is in keeping with the expectations of their residents, to provide local services communities can rely on. The CDEI is looking forward to continuing to work with the government, as well as with local authorities and other relevant stakeholders, on this important agenda."

John Whittingdale, Minister of State for Media and Data at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, said: “Local authorities have gone above and beyond in supporting their communities during the pandemic, and data has been at the heart of some key interventions that have helped the most vulnerable. This government is committed to maintaining the high watermark of data use set during the pandemic, and we recognise the opportunities that data presents to drive better delivery of public services. Through our National Data Strategy, we are committed to working with local government partners to better understand the barriers they face in utilising data to its fullest potential, and this report will be a useful input in identifying how to do so effectively.”

Luke Hall, Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, said: “Councils and council workers have been at the forefront of the response to the pandemic, helping to keep their communities safe, while ensuring essential services have continued throughout. From delivering food parcels, medicines and support to clinically extremely vulnerable individuals to housing rough sleepers quickly, the use of data has been critical. Councils have adapted their services from in-person to online, using technology and data to do so lawfully and securely, and I am determined we continue to use everything we have learned to make services better for residents so that local communities keep benefitting from more efficient public services.”

James Jamieson, Chair of the Local Government Association, said: “The use of data is one of many factors that councils may consider as part of their decision-making processes. We’re pleased to be working with the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation to bring together councils from across the country so they can share best practice in this area and be as transparent as possible. The good and ethical use of data will help councils support their communities through the pandemic and into the future.”

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Notes to Editor

- The CDEI was set up in 2018 to advise on the governance of AI and data-driven technology. The Centre is overseen by an independent Board, made up of experts from across industry, civil society, academia and government.
- The report draws together the findings of a forum discussion hosted with data and information governance leads from local authorities, and is supplemented by individual interviews and desk research, as well as new research into public attitudes towards local data use.
- The discussion is one of a series of AI Forums hosted by the CDEI, in which a range of experts are invited to discuss the most pressing issues

relating to data-driven technology.

- The CDEI has been collating examples of novel use-cases of AI and data specifically being used to counter and mitigate the effects of the pandemic in its COVID-19 repository. The CDEI produced a local government edition of this repository, which revealed an eclectic range of interventions by local authorities.
- The CDEI published a report on public sector data sharing in 2020. It involved a detailed analysis of projects where data had been shared between government departments, and with commercial organisations, identifying recurring barriers, and the steps that were taken to address them. The report focused on citizen trust, arguing that it needs to be addressed if we are to maximise the value of data held. It included a framework to drive forward trustworthy data sharing in the public interest. The CDEI is working in partnership with other organisations, including Bristol City Council, to apply, test and revise the framework in different contexts.
- As part of the CDEI's review into bias in algorithmic decision-making, the CDEI considered the use of algorithms in local government. It argued that data-driven tools present opportunities for local government, but cautioned that they should not be considered a silver bullet for funding challenges. Moreover, it found that data infrastructure and data quality were significant barriers to developing and deploying data-driven tools effectively and responsibly, arguing that investment in this area is needed before developing more advanced systems.
- Engaging with the public has been a core component of the CDEI's work since formation. It recently announced that it is stepping up its public engagement efforts to ensure that its advice is grounded in a deep understanding of public attitudes towards data-driven technologies, as well as of the values that citizens want reflected in new models of data governance.
- On behalf of the CDEI, Deltapoll interviewed 2,025 UK adults online between 10th-17th December 2020. The data have been weighted to be representative of the UK adult population as a whole.
- As part of the UK government's consultation on the National Data Strategy, which ran from 9th September 2020-9th December 2020, DCMS consulted on the CDEI's proposed future functions, as well as whether a statutory status would help the CDEI to deliver its remit. DCMS is currently analysing the feedback it received and will publish the outcome in due course.