**Parliamentary roundtable debate
Uncovering the truth
22nd February 2010
Summary of key points**

This summary has four sections:
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> **Section 1 – Chair's opening remarks and key points from speakers**

Philip Dunne MP; Chair
- EURIM is working to raise the profile of the information agenda with parliamentarians.
- Much work has already been done by EURIM, including a focus on identity governance, security by design and the value of information. The Audit Commission has also published on this area, and has recently worked jointly with EURIM.

Steve Bundred; Chief Executive, Audit Commission
- The Audit Commission has already published on the information agenda – and will be publishing more – which indicates the level of interest that the Commission has in this area.
- We live in an information age and technology has led to the wider availability of information. The Conservative Party has already pledged to invite public bodies to publish much more information about their spending, and some local authorities are responding and are already publishing items of expenditure above £500, without primary guidance. But there are issues:
  - data is not always interpreted correctly;
  - the quality of data is not always sufficiently robust to stand greater scrutiny; and
  - decisions are sometime made without the quality of information needed.
- Information can transform the relationship between the public, politicians and managers. And change the behaviour of all three. Information can inform choice – there are good examples in Local Government including choice based lettings, and it can also give

- More information can also lead practitioners to compare themselves with others and change behaviour in that way. When data on cardiac surgery was published it didn't cause the risk averse backlash that many anticipated. The opposite happened. And wider availability of data can help hold public bodies to account. Only one whistleblower is needed to make a big impact and MP expenses is one example that has changed behaviour in this way.
- You need good information to make increasingly difficult decisions – including decisions affecting education, health inequalities and waste. Information needs to be relevant, of good quality and presented well.
  - **Relevan**t; local and timely;
  - **Quality**; the raw data needs to be accurate and complete. In NHS trusts the error rate ranges from 0% to 50%, with 11 per cent as the average; and
  - **Presentation;** masses of data in a pdf file is no good.
- The public needs to be able to trust the information it receives. On the whole the public does not trust government – and it looks to independent sources. The public wants data to be independently verified, which can be expensive. This leads to a debate on how far and in what way data needs to be independently verified. And we need to trust those who seek to interpret the data. The public will want to do some interpretation themselves and others will look to trusted sources.
- To achieve all this we need to change some of the culture that exists in public bodies. How we do so is not so obvious.

Michael Whitehouse; Chief Operating Officer, National Audit Office
- Supportive of Philip and Steve's points. The NAO works closely with the Audit Commission and so you would expect some commonality in messages.
- Information is important in driving accountability and trust. The NAO has revisited its strategy. One theme of the new strategy is informed government. Effective public services are dependent on good quality information.
- Four key points:
  - We have information overload in the public sector. There is a distinction between data and information. Information overload leads to confusion. And there is a lack of clarity on how decision makers should use it. Information must have clarity and purpose. The power of information is in how it is used. People are often confused by contradictory messages and information for the sake of it. You need to think about how it is used. In public services it is about how it is used to drive performance and value for money. Also it means using information to track and measure performance – to enable people managing services to take action quickly.
  - We need to establish a civil service culture that values information more.

- The public lack confidence in data and information. While people's personal experience of a public service may be good collectively there is often a lack of confidence in public services. Often people see or perceive decisions being made irrationally. And there is an issue about the reliability of data.
- Accountability needs to operate at different levels. Too bureaucratic models of accountability can lead to a risk averse culture. The solution is the flow of information to demonstrate how money is spent. The need for process is less important. We need transparent information – so that the public can challenge and have confidence that this challenge will be taken seriously and acted upon.

Jim Norton; Vice President Professionalism, The Chartered Institute for IT and lead on the EURIM Value of Information subgroup
- What information is lost in data? The Audit Commission publications *In the Know* and *Is there something I should know?* were excellent on this subject. More than 70 per cent of public sector organisations have no-one responsible for data quality – but the majority recognise the need to be better.
- Can personal data be genuinely anonymous? I applaud the principles behind data.gov, which builds on good work of Tom Steinberg. But we need to deal with privacy issue properly.
- And good governance is key. We need to treat information as a valuable asset or it will become a toxic liability. This has been echoed by both the NAO and the Audit Commission. All organisations should have information asset registers as a matter of course. Valuing information properly is the first step. And good governance will instil better public confidence. Our interim report on this subject was published in November 2009, and the full report published in next few weeks.

Tony Travers; Director, Greater London Group and The London School of Economics and Political Science
- There is little doubt that data are essential to a democracy. Without trusted information government would have to exist on hunch and guesswork. In the current world we have seen a growth in the number and use of performance indicators. This is making things ever more complex – which will be a theme of the day.
- By far the biggest problem is the issue of trust and lack of trust. Trust has been corroded – and this is often because of the way the data are used. Use of figures as targets leads to adversarial politics. Compared with Britain in the 1950s attitudes to authority are now very different. Figures exist in a world where they are used politically. They need to be accessible and translated. Data is used for different purposes. We need to enable people to make balanced judgements and roll back from targets.
- Is it possible to quantify things that the public want? The NAO, AC and ONS are all most of the way there, they are seen as reasonably objective. And there are NGOs and charities who are also trusted. Then there is the media, they are a major consumer of stats. What is

Philip Dunne MP
- So to what extent can we find simple solutions? And should we use trusted intermediaries? Or is this a dream too far?

Jill Kirby; Director, Centre for Policy Studies
- All data will be contested. Is anything the absolute truth, nothing but the truth? We know it depends on how you assemble and cut it etc. There will never be the absolute truth to enable anyone to decide policy. It is an impossible quest. A lot of data will be contested – and perhaps through politicians the public will be able to trust more. But we will never be able to find the perfect public body. There is no perfect answer – only by constant probing and discussion will the public get a sense of where the answer might be found. The more debate the better.

James Morris; Chief Executive, LOCALIS
- The public are often seen as an abstract concept, who are outside of the debate. We shouldn't be seeking the perfect solution, we should be embracing the complexity and proliferation of sources. And encouraging the way citizens can manipulate data – this is the flipside to the argument.
- This is not about always striving for the perfect information. Interpretation is the key and data will always be contested. We need to engage the range of stakeholders and public. Information belongs to the public. They need to be given the tools to manipulate data – and be brought into the heart of the debate and not left outside the debate.

Amelia Walker; Head of Centre for Service Transformation, LGiU
- Storytelling is critical. And professionals need to be engaged. Data is not neutral. Context is needed. For example, there was a crime spike where I live – this was because 10,000 people were in the park on a particular day and there were arrests. Without the background story the number is meaningless. We need to provide contextual, filtered information. We need stories that the public can understand. And find ways that can happen using new media. The Audit Commission has done tremendous work in shifting to storytelling through Oneplace.

Guy Daines; Director of Policy and Advocacy, Charted Institute of Library and Information Professionals

- I would like to follow up on James Morris' point on the citizen being at the centre of the information debate. We need to look at the skills citizens will need to evaluate the information put before them. To increase accountability we need to increase information literacy skills. My plea is to look at user side.
- CILIP defines Information literacy as knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner.

Rhion Jones; Director, Consultation Institute

- In the past 30 years we have seen a revolution in terms of information and participation. From where we sit in the Consultation Institute we see the purpose of information as a way to inform a dialogue with citizens and stakeholders. What role does it play? In the past 5 years there was a time when almost everything that went wrong on consultation was process. Now we are moving to more problems on content and data. On the post office closures consultation both process and content went wrong, and the public were misled by the information that was made available. Often the row is over the data that is meant to inform the public. And you need participation. South Staffs was a terrible tragedy. But in addition to the mortality figures – there should have been consultative machinery that alerted local people. You have to have trust in data – but you also need data integrated into a process that allows people to question it. The way it is presented is everything.

Joanne Shaw; Chair, NHS Direct

- You need people to package and share information. In Staffordshire the public came away with a sense that they had less confidence in regulators and self assessment. And in this case they believed the data because it gelled with their own views. So we saw a correlation between the public's view on whether something is good or not and the actual data. The relationship is subtle and complex. People trust '*Which?*' magazine because public trust has been built up over time.
- And I agree that people need a process and people need to be able to act as a whistleblower. There is a really important role for the NAO and the Audit Commission to uncover faulty data sets and to drive improvement. On the whole I believe the process of making data available is a tremendous spur to improvement. The decision to make data public on cardiac surgery motivated professionals and drove accuracy and performance.

Dr Jennifer Dixon; Director, The Nuffield Trust

- We published a report on indicators recently. The report compared England to Wales and Scotland. The report attracted lots of headlines and Scotland was unhappy with the comparisons. But the data on which the comparisons were based came from official sources (ONS) and had been in the public domain undisputed for three years. The issues came down to data definitions – and so, how much time and

- A lot of information was around – but it wasn't being used. It has taken external influence to force improvement e.g. Payment by Results. Without these prompts the NHS would not have been focused on collecting and scrutinising data on cost. With this type of external influence professionals eventually start to see the benefit – and data quality improves.

Joanne Shaw; Chair, NHS Direct
- I see a perplexing paradox. In order to sustain the NHS in the current climate you have to enable patients to make decisions and take responsibility. Patients demonstrate that they have appetite for self service. And yet the NHS struggles to provide systems to do this. For example, in urgent care, we don't want people in A&E, when there are more suitable avenues. People need to be able to access care from the most suitable avenue – but we do not give them the info they need to make those decisions.

Philip Virgo; Secretary General, EURIM
- Take the example of professional indemnity insurance, virtually all the politicians will say that information should not be given to the insurance companies. But these companies make their money managing information so it supports risk judgements.

Tony Ellis; Chief Information Officer, London Borough of Brent
- We need to have a professional approach to policing data. My concerns are around the relevance of data. Experian have recently carried out a piece of work which looked at what data they need to make decisions, but found out that the information out there is not what the customer wants. It is also about the context of the data. We have done some work on health and education but we don't have the full picture because we need to know who to compare it to. We need to make judgements and give information that the public will understand. Guidance on data relevance and quality needs to come from on high.

Lucy Parsons; Senior Economics Researcher, REFORM
- Can the public use the data to demand further information that is more reliable and robust?

Peter Wilkinson; Managing Director, Audit Commission
- We need to move to a management information culture, where public service managers routinely use information to manage public services better.
- In the United States they have much higher levels of transparency – information on public spending including salaries is published. And public sector information is used commercially in the US to develop and market new iphone applications; including Offender Locator and Date Check.

- We have universal agreement that transparency is good. But where are the lines drawn? What is appropriate? And what are the public going to do with it? For example, should councils publish details of all salaries paid in excess of £50,000? Should Serious Case Reviews be in the public domain? Do we believe the public should be all seeing and all knowing? If not, where does the line get drawn?

Barbara Hurst; Director, Audit Scotland
- Audit Scotland is doing work on A&E. We were told 'why are you looking at this?' We wanted to know who we are treating that we shouldn't be. It was clear the professionals don't have that management information. So how do you strengthen the role of intermediary? Is it audit that needs strengthening – or is it a need to pick up what information is really needed to manage? What is happening instead is arguments on definitions. Even if data is flawed it can tell us a story.

Martin Ferguson; Head of Policy, SOCITM
- We are doing work looking at the future of public services. There are three options i) reform, reforming and constituting public services; ii) joining up services; iii) innovation. These are important issues in terms of citizens and access to information.
- And we need to look at the role of the third sector. We've not begun to touch on how we engage with them in information terms. And the need to deal with privacy issues. And the opportunities for citizens to be involved in the co-production of services.

Stephen Darvill; Government Relations Director; Logica
- You only get timely and accurate information if the person collecting and using it values it. So you need to talk to the people on the ground. And collect the minimum information needed by the people who will get most value from it.

Thomas Oppe; Data Promotion Manager, Information Commissioner's Office
- We cover FOI and DPA, and we have been looking at the relationship between the two for seven years. The legislation should not be a barrier. It should be an enabling mechanism. And we should share the information that people want to get their hands on. We have a new statutory code of practice on information sharing. From our point of view the DPA should not be a barrier. It is about valuing information – and using it securely and fairly.

Rhion Jones; Director, Consultation Institute
- Data can be selective when it is produced for a specific purpose. For example, when contentious decisions need to be made, such as the closure of fire stations or A&E departments, you will see questions like – *Do you approve of our plans for a 12 fire station strategy?* But there is no information on how many fire stations there currently are or what the impact of closure might be. People cobble together a case from

Dave Waltho; SAS

- The drive to widen access to government data is very welcome as another impetus for the public sector to improve DQ. However, just because access and DQ are hot topics of the moment, doesn't mean that it should be regarded as some kind of panacea. Certainly, if public sector bodies rush to make data available before it is fit for purpose, then this will risk further damaging trust between government and citizens.

- Especially as, only a very small percentage of citizens wish to do their own 'mashing' of raw data. The vast majority simply want easily digestible insight into performance to assess whether they are getting value for money etc. In this respect they are no different from internal business managers and serving those needs requires not just reliable data but analysis and visualisation to turn it into valuable insight.

- For example, within 12 months VOSA transformed their use of information and transformed their performance as a result. To do this they needed to not only improve the quality of their data but to analyse it and disseminate the findings to support the front line. By doing this they were able to reduce vehicle stops by 15% but increase the detection of unlicensed and un-roadworthy vehicles by 32%. At the same time, customer satisfaction increased by 22% and VOSA contributed to the largest post war reduction in deaths and seriously injured on the roads.

- VOSA then made their risk-based analysis of vehicle operators available online and, because the data is both reliable and useful, the industry are now using it to 'self-police' - for example increasing insurance premiums for higher risk operators.

- My point is that, had VOSA simply rushed to publish their data in its original state they are unlikely to have added as much value or now be lauded as the best at what they do throughout Europe.

- The past obsession with compliance and reporting performance has already overshadowed the more urgent and valuable need to use information to actually manage and transform performance. I fear too much focus on simply publishing data online risks compounding this.

- My final plea is to the various auditors and regulators around the table. In recent years, each have individually produced excellent reports on the importance of improved information management in the public sector. However, having identified that public sector bodies are often 'drowning in data but thirsting for insight' due to ad hoc approaches and silo-ed information management, they have largely mirrored that problem with their uncoordinated advice and guidance.

Phillip Virgo; Secretary General, EURIM

- 10% of the population are of no fixed abode. A large part of government spend is focused on this group with high levels of need – but it is hard to track them because identities may change or be

Section 3 - Points from the audience

- Integrity of information systems is ad hoc. This is an important consideration.
- You need to have common information governance standards. In the local government arena you have lots of different people collecting and sharing in different ways, not using common standards.
- You need to put a figure on the trust in data and publish it. You need to analyse level of accuracy.
- Should the debate be focused on whether uncovering the naked truth is better than the well dressed truth? We are all caught up in a 'we must bare all mentality'. Is that right? A key issue is just how valuable will information be when it is handed over and made available to the public. It puts the power of interpretation into the hands of the user. So they can get answers to the questions they have.

Section 4 - Closing remarks from speakers and Chair

Tony Travers
- Is it possible to get good quality, usable data? Are there spheres where we do accept the absolute quality of what is done by institutions? We need to accept that sometimes data is 'good enough'. In the world of official stats, no one argues on stats that have no money attached to them. But when money is allocated to data – data are challenged.

Jim Norton
- Exploring the nature of data – meta data, software applications and quality assurance methods. There are huge error bars on small sums, for example, school league tables. We need to be better at publishing meta data – and the confidence limits that exist on that data. We should be trying to create a professional requirement to act with integrity.

Michael Whitehouse
- I would like to see a public sector where information is used much more effectively, in terms of the way decisions are made. This is related to the degree of trust the citizen has. Parliament has a role – and information needs to be used more rigorously in select committees. We are faced with major challenges, particularly as information is linked to the need to deliver savings.

Steve Bundred
- We think this is an important topic – and we will return to it many times. The issue is not only important but also complex and we have identified a lot more questions than the ones I articulated at the outset. The debate has focused on four areas:
  - The data that public bodies publish is not always relevant for the purposes the public might want to use it.
  - Do we want data in raw form or interpreted – the naked truth or the well dressed truth? On the whole we should want both. Raw data is needed – with an understanding of the limits on confidence. But we also want to understand the context so we can turn it into information and intelligence.
  - The quality of data is related to the use that is made of it. If the people collecting it use it then it is more likely to be accurate. If it is not being used by practitioners or used in decision making then where is the incentive to collect it well?
  - Information and decision making is a subset of the wider debate on better government. What is the catalyst for culture change? Difficult decisions on resources and spending may be one catalyst. And the loss of trust and confidence may be another as we may see greater demand from the public to hold those who spend their taxes to account. I am reasonably optimistic – but we shouldn't under under-estimate scale of challenge.

Philip Dunne MP
- EURIM will be holding a meeting to review the report of points made during the roundtable and discuss next steps. A key area for discussion will be how to brief the Class of 2010, the largest intake of new MPs since 1945, on their opportunity to bring about the changes necessary to ensure that policy proposals and performance are in future based on evidence that will stand up to professional scrutiny and audit.