



The Single Data List and Local Authority Data Burden

Summary

Following the publication of the draft single data list on 7 February, which showed the 162 data returns required by central government from local authorities, the Local Government Association (LGA) worked with councils to undertake a count of the data items within them.

An initial count has identified, for a single tier authority, around 43,000 separate data items, that is, individual fields on a form or cells in a spreadsheet. This is based on one return per authority per year in all cases.

However, this is very likely an underestimate, since a number of the data collections on the single data list require many thousands of returns, depending on the size of the authority: for example, where one return is needed per pupil, per household receiving benefits, per employee, or per service user etc. If this is taken into account, on the basis of a medium-sized unitary authority, the estimated number of data items returned would be 12.6 million.

Introduction

On 13 October 2010, Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), announced the replacement of the National Indicator Set with a single comprehensive list of all the data returns central government expects local government to provide. He said:

"My aim is to make the data requirements we place on local government transparent and to review and reduce this for April 2011. I will involve local government in this review, to help us ensure the list contains only the minimum of central government data needs."

A draft list containing the data collections and surveys that central government will require from local government for 2011/12 was published on 17 December for consultation.

At the end of the consultation period, on 7 February 2011, DCLG published a draft list of the returns that had been identified by that point. This was an extensive list, of some 162 data returns.

Although the Local Government Association (LGA) welcomed the exercise to identify and pull together the returns required by central government, they were concerned when the list showed the full extent of the reporting burden on local authorities. To demonstrate the scale of this burden, the LGA worked with councils to gather all the available returns which were on that list, and undertake a count of the data items within them.

Note that this count is simply an indication of the scale of the data that authorities are required to report. The exercise did not attempt to measure the workload involved in preparing and submitting the returns.

Findings

An initial count identified at least forty-three thousand (43,000) separate data items, that is, individual fields on a form or cells in a spreadsheet. This is based on one return per authority per year in all cases.

A small number of returns account for a significant proportion of the count even when treated as a single return. For example, the WasteDataFlow return (requiring the source and destination of different waste types) can require around seven thousand data items.

The figure above, however, significantly understates the real number of data items that authorities report annually, based as it is on one return per authority per year. In reality, some key data collections:

- require many thousands of returns, depending on the size of the authority, for example, where one return is needed per pupil, per household receiving benefits, per employee, or per service user etc.
- require a set of data items per school on a single return
- are returned more than once per year.

With this in mind, a more realistic number of returns per year, based on the real-life caseload of a medium-sized single tier authority, is 12.6 million. Although note that authorities vary in size and the social mix, so that it is impossible to describe any figure as typical.

Within this, the returns likely to create the largest volume of data items for reporting are:

- 146-00 SHBE Housing Benefit: approximately 5 million fields (on the basis of 298 fields in the return, and a caseload of 17,000).

- 161-00 Key Stage Assessment Data: approximately 1.4 million fields (on the basis of 479 fields and around 3,000 pupils)
- 111-00 School Workforce Census: approximately 400,000 fields (based on collating, validating and reporting a return of 51 fields from each school for around 35,000 staff)
- 159-00 School Census: approximately 4.5 million fields (based on collating, validating and reporting a return of 551 fields from each of around 150 schools at both school and pupil level)
- 113-00 Section 251 school finance returns: approximately 30,000 fields, based on a return of 1,200 fields collected twice a year covering detail for each school
- 135-00 Adult Social Care Survey: approximately 39,000 fields based on 152 fields per respondent, assuming 500 respondents
- 140-00 Carers Survey: approximately 58,000 fields, based on 116 fields per respondent, assuming around 500 respondents
- 098-00 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP): approximately 310,000 (on the basis of 104 fields and around 3,000 pupils)

Technical annex: issues and assumptions

This exercise was conducted with the draft single data list, published by DCLG on 7 February 2011. It is not intended to be an exact count, but an indication of the scale of data returns required by central government from local councils.

To derive a single total figure requires a number of key assumptions about the circumstances of completing the returns and variations in them. In some areas the analysis assumes a 'worst case' (for example, we included a return for council housing, which those authorities that have transferred their housing would not complete), whereas on some forms analysis underestimates the likely situation (further work or different assumptions would result in higher total).

We therefore acknowledge there is some subjective decision-making required to generate such a total. However, we have at all times tried to make only reasonable assumptions, and these are listed below.

There were a small number of returns that were not included in the analysis, either because of difficulties acquiring them within the timeframe of the exercise, or because not all authorities would be required to complete them (for example, the Thames Gateway Programme), or because they were still under development. These include:

164-00	Private Finance Initiative
165-00	Thames Gateway Programme
020-00	Annual Green Belt return
061-00	Fire and rescue service
064-00	Investment management system
055-00	
to 059-00	New DCLG forms
158-00	Public rights of way
065-00	Lettings and sales by local authorities
078-00	Environmental damage
114-00	Special educational needs
118-00	Teacher Pension Service
120-00	Chief finance officer sign off
125-00	Taxi survey
131-00	Major transport scheme
157-00	Speed camera survey

Overall, this exercise was not intended to be an exact count of data items required but, rather, to demonstrate the scale of the reporting data burden that councils face.

Assumptions

The assumptions made for this exercise were as follows:

1. Some returns are currently subject to review or “between versions”: that is, the old one has been withdrawn, and the new one not available – for example, Children’s Centres, special needs. Such returns have not been included.
2. Some returns may be specific to county or district authorities in two tier areas. For the sake of simplicity we assume the analysis is for an English unitary authority. Where returns on the list are for other types of council – for example, returns on behalf of the fire and rescue authority – these have not been included.
3. Some data items are not always needed in some authorities – for example, where housing is no longer an authority function. In these cases we have assumed that the council does still run this service and have included those data items.
4. Some forms may include parts that are pre-populated with data by the issuing agency, or are automatically calculated within a spreadsheet: these are treated the same as other data items as they would need to be checked.
5. The frequency of return (for example, whether it is quarterly or annual) clearly makes a difference to the reporting burden. That frequency information is contained in the DCLG single data list spreadsheet. For the purposes of this exercise to identify total the return is counted once (for the figure of 43,000; and included in the ‘real-life’ figure of 12.6 million).
6. Where a form has routing (for example, if Yes, go to question 2, if No, go to question 5) we have taken the routing that requires the greater number of fields to be completed.
7. For some returns covering a large number of instances, an authority may have a local system for recording data and make automated transfers to the government systems: as with all the large volume returns, this is counted once for the figure of 43,000, but also once in the ‘real-life’ figure of 12.6 million.

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Local Government Group

The Local Government Group is made up of six organisations which support, promote and improve local government.



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