



## NEWS

## Why open data is needed in the battle to address homelessness

Centrepoint needed to send FOIs to more than 300 local authorities in England to access required information

By **Cliff Saran**, Managing Editor

Published: 08 Feb 2024 16:45

During February's [State of Open Con 24 London conference](#), delegates were given a real-world example of the importance of opening up data to tackle the issue of homelessness.

The panel discussion, chaired by the Open Data Institute's (ODI) global head of policy, Resham Kotecha, explored the challenges a London local authority and a charity have faced in getting access to relevant data. The data not only helps in making informed policy decisions, but can also enable the services the charity provides to be more targeted and potentially more effective.

"There's also lots of data sets that are open and perhaps not being used to the best of their ability, or not being publicised in a way that means people are able to access them," he said.

Looking at some of the data challenges involved in supporting homeless people, panellist Alessandro Nicoletti, a researcher at national youth homeless charity Centrepoint, spoke about the different definitions of homelessness that exist. "The immediate idea we have [of homelessness] is someone rough sleeping," he said. "However, there are many more that can actually be considered homeless while not sleeping rough in the streets."

He pointed to data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS), showing that many people are not categorised as homeless as they are not sleeping on the street.

In March 2023, the [ONS's evidence review of "hidden homelessness"](#) in the UK reported it is not currently possible to estimate the true scale of "hidden" homelessness across the UK because of known complexities in reaching this population group.

"Many young people rely on informal networks a lot," said Nicoletti. "They might be sofa-surfing, sleeping at a friend's, going from one house to another house and not really approaching their council or asking for support. However, they're still facing the same challenges. They don't have a roof over their heads and they might be living in poverty."

### Lack of full visibility

The second panel member, Salman Klar, insight and analytics manager at Wandsworth and Richmond Borough council, spoke about the lack of open data needed to have a full understanding of homelessness. "You can't just open data and have it available," he said, adding that there is a cost associated with opening data. "Someone has to analyse it," said Klar. "Someone has to ensure the data complies with legislation; someone has to put it somewhere and deal with the follow-up questions."

Beyond the [technical and governance issues](#), he said: "Opening up information can have political cost. Sometimes public bodies struggle to make information open because they might be worried about what people are going to say when they look at the data."

But a lack of data means decision-making at a local level is being hindered, such as understanding what benefits residents are receiving. "We don't have the full benefits picture because we only have access to housing benefits data," said Klar.

"The biggest one missing is Universal Credit, which is administered by the Department of Work and Pensions. "We actually don't know whether Universal Credit has been turned on or off."

Nicoletti said he has daily conversations with government departments about access to the data Centrepont needs to support young homeless people. "There are many statistics that are published but there are huge gaps, especially when you look at age disaggregation," he explained. "Because we cannot find this data publicly, we have to rely on freedom of information [FOI] requests so we can access information that is held at council level."

This involves sending FOI requests to 309 local authorities in England.

In September 2023, the ODI published the [Cost of living](#) report, which looked at how data can be used to help tackle the crisis. In the report, the ODI noted that young people are usually single and can only access studio or one-bed housing, but there is a shortage of one-bed social housing. The ODI said the government doesn't collect information about social housing based on room size, making it hard to generate a complete picture of availability.

## Read more open data stories

- Artificial intelligence became mainstream in 2023. Advances in [technology and accessibility](#) led to increased awareness and use of AI.
- A [food poverty data report](#) from the Open Data Institute shows black families and the North East of England are suffering the most.

The ODI's paper highlighted Centrepont's data challenges. In the report, it warned there are barriers to data sharing between local and central government, such as those identified by the Department of Housing, Levelling Up and Communities. "These include a lack of resources and a concern about data protection. As central government is usually the provider of official statistics, this makes it hard for local governments to publish data they collect and hold openly," the ODI said.

Given the role of housing associations in providing social housing, the ODI suggested they should be required to meet the same reporting requirements as local authorities to provide a more complete picture of the state of the housing stock in the social rental sector. "Specifically, this would include data on the quality of the housing stock owned by private housing associations," the ODI said.

Discussing the challenges of gathering data on homelessness, Klar said: "Going to 300 or more councils to get information is not efficient." He also said councils do not have the ability to do massive data cleansing.

Last month, Gareth Davies, head of the National Audit Office, used his annual speech to describe data as one of three enablers of productivity in the public sector. "Consistent definitions, standards and, above all, quality are essential if citizens are to see service levels rise and costs fall," he said.

Klar believes that having more open data helps policymakers in the council and support organisations like Centrepont gain a comprehensive understanding of complex issues such as homelessness or poverty. He recognised the need to have the right type of data described in a way that makes it consistent and discoverable. "The more we can open up data, the more we can have ideas on how to solve very, very complex issues," he said.

The theme of the panel discussion was about the benefits to society of opening up data, both at a local and central government level. The ODI also believes that the general public needs to understand the power of open data. "We think it's really important to partner with

organisations so that we can actually get that message across, whether it's policymakers, whether it's community groups, and actually upskilling communities to understand why you should be asking for data to be open and what it can do," said Kotecha.

## ➤ Read more on Data quality management and governance

A powerful case for more open data

Government-led Smart Data Discovery Challenge launched to stoke innovation

By: Cliff Saran

ODI fuel poverty survey shows young adults most hard up

ODI food poverty study shows black families and North East suffering most

By: Brian McKenna

By: Brian McKenna

-ADS BY GOOGLE

### Become an examiner with AQA

Join us: become an examiner in summer 2024 and earn between £500-£1000

AQA

Open

#### Latest TechTarget resources

CIO

SECURITY

NETWORKING

DATA CENTER

DATA MANAGEMENT

#### CIO



##### Amazon weighs in on AI regulation

Amazon supports a risk-based approach to artificial intelligence regulation, which means focusing on regulating harmful uses of ...



##### Top 9 smart contract platforms to consider in 2024

Platform speed, scalability, security and smart contract development support vary widely. Here's how to match features to your ...

[About Us](#)

[Editorial Ethics Policy](#)

[Meet The Editors](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Our Use of Cookies](#)

[Advertisers](#)

[Business Partners](#)

[Media Kit](#)

[Corporate Site](#)

[Contributors](#)

[Reprints](#)

[Answers](#)

[E-Products](#)

[Events](#)

[In Depth](#)

[Guides](#)

[Opinions](#)

[Quizzes](#)

[Photo Stories](#)

[Tips](#)

[Tutorials](#)

[Videos](#)

[Computer Weekly Topics](#)

All Rights Reserved, Copyright 2000 - 2024, TechTarget

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Cookie Preferences](#)

[Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information](#)