

Mark Prisk MP,
Minister for Business and Enterprise,
House of Commons,
London.
SW1A 0AA



14th September 2011

Dear Minister

Sudden and unilateral DfE decision to remove “Pupil Mode of Travel” from the National School Census and it’s implications for the UK Data Services industry

I am writing as Managing Director of both Knowledge Mappers Ltd. and Travel Health Check Ltd. to protest at the very sudden, and very unilateral decision by DfE to remove the collection of “Pupil Mode of Travel” from the National School Census, announced in the ICES technical, e-bulletin of 29th July 2011. I have already written to Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister to register my protest, as it appears that the decision was his to make and force through (attached for your reference). However I am also writing to you separately as the Minister for Business and Enterprise to make you aware of the serious ramifications that this u-turn in government data collection policy has for the whole UK Data Services industry, the wider knowledge economy, SMEs such as ourselves, and the various national, “public good”, data initiatives your government claims to be championing (ref. the Prime Ministers recent speech on the Data.gov website <http://data.gov.uk/about>).

I fully accept that government should not be forced to continue collecting a particular dataset just because they always have. Needs will change, so data collection policy should be periodically reviewed and re-assessed. However the way this has been done by the DfE - forced through by the minister, by-passing the established, well publicised, departmental data management procedures, with only “limited” internal consultation and no external consultation with the end users of the data let alone the Data Services industry, rushed through “on the quiet” with unseemly haste and announced to the world only as a ‘fait accompli’ – is against all your “open, accountable and transparent” government publicly stands for. It also sends out a very “anti-business” warning to data services SMEs such as ourselves, the backbone of the knowledge economy, and sticks two fingers up to our efforts to support national data initiatives such as Data.gov.

Our business is already seriously affected by this decision. We have existing local authority clients who have already commissioned our School Travel Health Check (STHC) service from us right up to 2012-13, how are we to provide them with the service they have paid for if there isn’t any data to analyse? How is this decision going to save them money? We are also currently in talks with the Department of Health to develop the STHC to meet the needs of the Directors of Public Health now coming into local authorities. How are we supposed to grow our business to support the publicly stated government agenda if there is an axe hanging over the core analysis dataset?

I seriously can’t think of another company that is more in tune with your governments stated agenda. Our company is:-

- made up of ex-local authority officers, providing innovative and much-praised products & services back to the local authority community, cheaper than most of them can do “in-house” (if indeed they have technical resources and skills to do it at all) – ***isn't that your model for a reformed public sector?***
- taking government data and adding value to it for “public good” – ***isn't that the stated aims of things like the Data.gov initiative and the UK Location Strategy?***
- doing so in exciting ways that enables complex issues to be quantified, visualised and compared so that they can be more easily tackled by society – ***is this not the backbone of the 'knowledge economy', one of the sectors that is going to drag our country out of recession?***
- providing the evidence-base for better government policy formulation on urgent issues of national importance like climate change, childhood health, provision of schools etc., as well as being the intelligence-base for more efficient, targeted implementation of policy on the ground – ***isn't this going to make for more efficient government, saving us all money in the long term?***
- empowering schools and local communities so they can make decisions and facilitate change at the local level – ***is this not the "Big Society" in action?***
- *empowering young people to take more responsibility for their actions and think more about the implications of the everyday activities and facilities they take for granted – ditto on the "Big Society"!*

The precedent set by the way that this decision has been made and implemented, seriously undermines your governments credibility with the whole data services industry, indeed anybody involved in the "analysis of data for the public good". It's all very well making "public data" available to all unsundry through initiatives like Data.gov, but you need SMEs like us to turn it into useful, easily accessible, information products and services, otherwise it will just languish on the servers as usual. However it makes no business sense for us to use our limited resources doing that if the data gatekeeper can pull the plug on it whenever they want, without any warning, just because an individual minister doesn't like it or understand it.

In short minister, if your “transparent and open” government is going to pull the rug out from underneath a company like us without warning, then what future for the UK knowledge economy? How is the grass roots change you want in society going to be enabled? In light of the serious, anti-business message of contempt that this action by DFE is sending out to the whole data services industry, I would urge you to lobby the School Minister to reconsider his decision. Mode of travel is not collected until the January census so there is still time, at least to have a proper consultation on it so that the decision can be made in a “transparent and open” way.

Yours sincerely,

Angus McDonald
 Managing Director,
 Travel Health Check Ltd.
 Knowledge Mappers Ltd.

PS – With their permission, I enclose a sample pack of some of the STHC output produced for Dorset County Council last year by way of illustration. Further digital resources, including for your own constituency county of Hertfordshire, are available on the STHC website www.sthc.co.uk.

Supporting Information

Note About The STHC And Knowledge Mappers / Travel Health Check Ltd.

From its origins in 2004, the School Travel Health Check (STHC) Service has been continually developed in conjunction with UK local authorities to provide key spatial intelligence information - such as the number of pupils within a realistic walking distance travelling to a school by car - to help achieve more active and sustainable travel to school. It is technically developed and delivered by Knowledge Mappers Ltd. on behalf of Travel Health Check Ltd., a consultancy made up of ex-local authority officers with over 60 collective man-years of experience in the fields of spatial analysis, local authority data and delivering sustainable travel solutions. All are committed to delivering lasting change in the field of active & sustainable travel.

STHC products and services are all about:-

- Tackling the big issues that affect the whole of society – childhood health, daily travel choices and implications for climate change, efficient provision of education and public transport services.
- Facilitating change at the local, grass-roots level, where change has to take place first in order to have any impact at the global level - “Think global, act local”.
- Providing spatial intelligence resources that enable the issues to be quantified, visualised and compared in useful and meaningful ways, on a “like – for – like” basis at multiple geographic levels – from individual school, to LEA, to wider regions and even nationally. Thus the same STHC analysis information can be used:-
 - At strategic level to provide the evidence base for better policy formulation.
 - At operational level to enable meaningful, initial engagement with all LEA schools around the issues, as well as enabling clients to target their limited, human resources on follow-up activities with those schools with the biggest potential for change.
 - At all levels to monitor the progress of change.
- Delivering professionally crafted, appropriately formatted, information resources within the challenging personal data environment.

Both Travel Health Check and Knowledge Mappers are registered with the UK Information Commissioner and successfully delivered the STHC to nearly 30 local authorities in 2009-10. In 2010 they processed over 1.6 million school census pupil mode of travel records from over 4,800 UK schools - some 22% of the LEA controlled schools in England. Furthermore as part of the Governments £560m Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) bidding process in early 2011, another 15 authorities, covering 1m pupils from 3143 schools, identified themselves as wanting to commission the STHC but were unable to do so due to lack of funds.

This unique, innovative and ground-breaking service has been cited by the Chief Medical Officer, the Department for Health, the NHS and the Sustainable Development Commission amongst others as an example of best practice. Further information on the STHC, samples of analysis output data, LEA & School level digital resources, details of 3rd party citations, client testimonials and service benefits, are available on www.sthc.co.uk.

Note About the STHC Spatial Intelligence Resources And How They Are Used

The STHC service involves the spatial analysis of school census pupil mode of travel data on behalf of client authorities to produce a comprehensive suite of intelligence output resources on an annual basis. These resources, which are a mixture of paper and digital spreadsheets, reports, maps, and technical data suitable for further analysis, report results at multiple geographic levels as well as by generic school type (primary, secondary etc.) and individual National Curriculum Year.

The STHC resources are used by officers in client authorities to annually monitor how far pupils are travelling to school, from where and by what means, and to communicate those findings and their implications with colleagues in related service areas. They also enable officers to simultaneously engage with all schools in the LEA in a meaningful and constructive way, with suggestions on what schools can do for themselves to improve the situation. At the same time they identify the schools where there is most potential to effect change in the short term - those with the most number of pupils currently travelling by car from within a realistic walking and cycling distance – so enabling more targeted use of client officers limited time.

STHC resources are also used by the schools themselves as tools for creating and maintaining their School Travel Plan, monitoring the progress of their own walking / cycling initiatives and comparing their overall travel sustainability to other schools and the authority average. As they are based on the schools own, current mode of travel data, the STHC resources can't help but facilitate debate within the school community around the important issues of healthy and sustainable travel. Also they are used as teaching resources in many areas of the curriculum.

Where the in-house capability exists, many authorities do undertake analysis of their own school census mode of travel data themselves and use the results for their own, local purposes - hence the outcry from the local authority community about the DfE decision to remove it from national census. However in our experience the in-house technical resource to do this is usually very limited (if available at all), and not always capable of producing the range of information resources required to send out to all the schools in the authority to facilitate change at grass roots level. In contrast the STHC process is the same for each authority, enabling comparison on a "like – for – like" basis at all geographic levels. We are also geared up to produce resources for schools on an authority wide basis with a turn-around time of a few days as a matter of course.

Relevant URLs

The following urls provide further information on the STHC and the proposed removal of mode of travel from national school census:-

1. Further information about the STHC - For further information on the STHC, samples of analysis output data, LEA & School level digital resources, details of 3rd party citations, client testimonials and service benefits, are available on www.sthc.co.uk.

Note: We have compiled responses from the local authority community about this issue on the "School Census" page of the Download section of the website (see www.sthc.co.uk/SchoolCensus.aspx).

2. DfE announcement to remove mode of travel from school census – contained within e-Bulletin no. 50 of the Information about children, education and schools (ICES), dated 29th July 2011 (see <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/schooladmin/ims/a0063993/information-about-children-education-and-schools-ices-bulletin-formerly-the-dsp-bulletin> and click on link for bulletin 50 on the right hand panel to view the pdf).

3. General DfE announcement about the "Root & branch review of data collections" and wider "Reducing Bureaucracy In schools" initiative dated 23rd May 2011 - see <http://www.education.gov.uk/b0075738/reducing-bureaucracy>

4. Internal Groups within DfE responsible for front line data collection

- **Star Chamber** – see <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/toolsandinitiatives/cuttingburdens/starchamber/a0063720/what-is-the-star-chamber>)
- **Star Chamber Scrutiny Board (SCSB)** – see <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/toolsandinitiatives/cuttingburdens/starchamber/a0063772/star-chamber-scrutiny-board-terms-of-reference>):-
- **Bureaucracy Reference Group** – see <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/toolsandinitiatives/cuttingburdens/b0066552/bureaucracy-reference-group>):-

5. Reaction from local government against the data policy u-turn

- **Modeshift** – The UK Association for local authority professionals involved in the promotion of sustainable and active travel for young people and school communities. They have recently published a briefing paper outlining the facts of the recent DfE decision to drop pupil mode of travel from school census, and what their local authority members can do to lobby for its reversal. A key counter-argument to the DfE assertion that the collection of mode of travel data is a “bureaucratic burden” on schools comes from the results of an extensive consultation carried out by Modeshift earlier this year. Over 1250 schools nationwide responded and the vast majority of these stated that, not only do they not find the collection of this data an undue burden, they are actively using the collection of it as well as data itself as a teaching resource in many different areas of the national curriculum. See www.modeshift.org.uk/news/news.php