

## Best Practices for Developing an Open Data Policy National Resource Network – 311 for Cities

*In May 2016, a city submitted a request through the National Resource Network's [311 for Cities](#) feature inquiring about how to structure a data policy specifically focusing on data management, security, and privacy, primarily, but also storage, terms of use, monetization and data sharing. The following write-up was researched, developed and shared by the Network to provide a summary of key decision points, guiding principles, and city examples.*

### Introduction

Cities around the world are feeling pressure from residents and advocacy groups to become more transparent by releasing data and information to the public domain. Early adopters of this approach have seen benefits, including increased citizen engagement and improved city services.

Whether transitioning to a “default-to-open” approach or selectively releasing discrete data sets over time, it is important for local governments to be clear on what, how, and when data will be released, along with several other important factors like how the data will be managed, ensuring the privacy of residents, and establishing the data’s terms of use. Over the past several years, a field of research has developed looking into and comparing local government open data policies and procedures across the nation. This research points to best practices and sample language, and seeks to help communities learn from each other. Highlights from this research are noted below.

### Key Resources

**National League of Cities:** The National League of Cities website hosts two key features as part of its work in open data: 1) a recently released report called, [City Open Data Policies: Learning by Doing](#); and 2) an [open data portal](#) that includes, among other things, a [listing](#) of all major American cities with open data. The report highlights strategies for cities to take advantage of the opportunities presented by open data and recommends the following as key elements in a successful open data program:

1. Leadership: Political support stands out as one of the key requirements to implementing a successful open data project.
2. Appropriate Legislation: Enacting legislation or formal policies is a crucial step toward ensuring the growth and sustainability of open data portals.
3. Funding: Open data initiatives do not require high levels of funding. It is, however, important that the programs have their own budget line items where resources are specifically allocated.
4. Technical Approach: Leading U.S. cities rely on commercial platforms that facilitate the implementation of open data initiatives, provide technical expertise, and ensure 24/7 customer support, often at a lower cost than providing these services in-house.
5. Stakeholder Involvement: Open data is a two-way process. It is, therefore, essential to encourage participation and engagement among multiple stakeholders including: community members; non-profits; universities; the press; businesses; city departments; and other levels of government. Many cities adopt a flexible, and usually informal, approach to interact with the stakeholders.
6. Measuring Success: Developing evaluation tools should be an integral part of any future open data policies.

The report walks city leaders through key decision points and factors to consider in each of the above categories, and also provides case studies on the U.S. cities of:

- [Chicago](#) (learn more about their [data portal](#) and [city policy](#))
- [Austin](#) ([data portal](#), [resolution](#), and [data manual](#))
- [Seattle](#) ([data portal](#) and [policy](#))
- [Boston](#) ([data portal](#), [overview](#), and [city policy](#))

**Sunlight Foundation:** The [Sunlight Foundation](#) provides several templates and guidelines for cities to draw on when crafting their open data policies. Sunlight describes themselves as “a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that uses the [tools](#) of civic tech, [open data](#), [policy analysis](#) and [journalism](#) to make our government and politics more accountable and transparent to all...Our overarching goal is to achieve changes in the law to require real-time, online transparency for all government information, with a special focus on the political money flow and who tries to influence government and how government responds.”

While Sunlight should be recognized as an unambiguous advocate of very open data, their resources are worthwhile even for cities exploring more modest approaches. Of particular interest might be Sunlight’s [Open Data Policy Guidelines](#), which explore how to determine what data should be public, make data public, and implement open data policy. These 31 steps range from appropriately safeguarding sensitive information to providing advice for data licensing and citation to emphasizing the importance of partnerships. For each of the 31 steps, Sunlight provides examples of language that could be used to enact their recommendations.

In [this September 2013 article](#) posted on the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) website, Sunlight details their history engaging with open data issues and advocacy on the local level (summarized [here](#)) and point to several examples of their work with cities, including New York and San Francisco. They also highlight changes proposed in 2013 to the City of Atlanta’s open meeting laws. Of particular interest might be a [living draft open data executive order](#) and an [open data policy comparison across U.S. cities](#).

Additional Sunlight resources are available on their website and as part of the National Resource Network’s [Resource Library](#) (search for “Sunlight Foundation”).

**Socrata:** Used as a platform for several cities in presenting their open data<sup>1</sup>, Socrata has developed resources for local governments interested in developing and pursuing an open data agenda. As part of its [Open Data Field Guide](#), the company worked collaboratively with several cities, states, and independent organizations to highlight best practices around [goal-setting](#), [team composition](#), [developing open data policy](#), [implementation](#), and [community engagement](#), among others.

The policy section of the Open Data Field Guide outlines the three key areas to consider when developing an open data policy (goals, datasets, and designated roles) and notes the different forms these policies can take (executive orders, non-binding resolutions, internal regulations, and codified laws), along with links to examples of how each has been put into practice.

**City Level Open Data Guidebooks:** Our research turned up several guidebooks published by cities with open data policies, including from the Cities of [Philadelphia](#), [San Francisco](#), and [Austin](#). While these are

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<sup>1</sup> The Network has no experience working with Socrata and this should not be considered an endorsement of their product.

generally designed and published to help city employees make smart and necessary choices about data management across departments, they provide equally helpful advice to other cities interested in starting their own open data programs. For instance, the guidebook from the City of Philadelphia walks readers through key issues when identifying data sets for public release; reviewing data for accuracy; conducting an internal data review; adding metadata; adding terms of use; staging your data for public use; and engaging users in the data community.

**Other Resources:**

- GovLoop has a guide called [The Open Data Playbook for Government](#), which is less focused than some of the reports noted above but does cover the important topics of building a culture of open data, partnering with the private sector, and measuring your return on the open data investment. GovLoop also has a collection of articles, posts, and other documents on open data listed [here](#).
- In partnership with Esri, ICMA [published a case study](#) on the process the City of Charlotte went through to launch its open data efforts. Motivated by the idea that educating citizens to be “smarter” about their community would increase citizen engagement, the city developed a [data portal](#) and [policy](#). From there, they also explored ways to bring the data home for residents through a [Citygram](#) application, which was developed in conjunction with a group of citizen advocates for a more open government. Lastly the case study highlights the establishment of a Smart City Cabinet to “proactively apply innovation, technology, and data to enhance, transform, and improve citizen services.”
- The federal government’s open data portal – [data.gov](#) – has a section dedicated to [open data at the local level](#). While it doesn’t look to have been updated in a year or more, there is helpful background on the types of [app and data challenges](#) local governments can sponsor (including hackathons) and [a repository of local government data](#) for use by residents and others.

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