

# Unlocking Public Sector Information

**Abstract:** Carol Tullo, Director of the Office of Public Sector Information, explains what comprises public sector information and how her office is planning to promote the re-use of such information, to the benefit of the citizens of this country via sophisticated web technologies.

**Keywords:** OPSI; information management

## Introduction

What is Public Sector Information? Enshrined in legislation by the Re-use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2005 (S.I. 2005 No 1515), which implemented the EU Directive on Re-use on July 1, 2005, Europe set itself the strategic goal of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. Estimates had shown the information industry in Europe to be smaller by a factor of five when compared to that of the United States.

Recognising the enormous value of public sector information (PSI) and the contribution it could make to stimulate the development and growth of Europe's information industry, the EU Directive aimed to harmonise the rules for the re-use of PSI.

Many of the initiatives in the UK, for re-using these valuable assets for the greater benefit of all who interact with government and for those public sector bodies that steer the work at central and community level, lead the field. Despite the initial economic drivers for the Directive, the UK is embracing the social networks and opportunities afforded by the new web technologies.

Governments have tended to see the web as a medium for the delivery of documents and content to the citizen. This is the world of Youtube, Myspace, Second Life, Wikis and Facebook. It is the world of "serendipitous re-use" in the words of Sir Tim Berners Lee. It enables greater efficiency of government through more effective information sharing. In public policy terms these are widely varying objectives - what links them is the web and its vast potential to realise broad economic and social gains. Harnessing those possibilities has guided the Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI) to lead on initiatives that are designed to make your information handling lives easier. These are



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exciting times and OPSI relishes its role in shaping the outcomes of the independent Power of Information Review (Mayo and Steinberg 7 June 2007 and the Government Response published on 25 June 2007 see [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/publications/reports/power\\_information/power\\_information\\_response.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/publications/reports/power_information/power_information_response.pdf)). In response to developments in the use and communication of citizen and state generated information on the web, Government should engage in partnership with user-led online communities, not attempt to replicate them; ensure that it fully understands and responds appropriately to changes in the information market; and advise those in government how best to participate in new media. This is a new era of dialogue and the growth in web access and solutions

is fuelling this mixed economy in information provision.

The UK has developed a strong e-Government agenda over the last ten years, initially focussed on providing access to information, and now on delivering services online. This has marked an important shift in the UK Government's thinking to a much broader technology agenda.

This is reflected in a change of language used by government, with "e-Government" being replaced by the vocabulary of shared services and choice. Technology is now seen as a transformer of the business of government. All in government are playing their part in the rationalisation of websites which, with links to the rich content offered by today's search technologies, are less dependant on the structure and search features of individual websites. Authorship and integrity count and all our research and monitoring in OPSI shows that the crest and authority of the site remains an important factor in reassuring the user that he can rely on the data with confidence. In this e-enabled world, the imprimatur of the creator of the content is still vital.

### The Office of Public Sector Information

The Office of Public Sector Information, operating from within The National Archives, is at the heart of information policy in the UK, setting standards, delivering access and encouraging the re-use of public sector information. OPSI, together with Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), has responsibility for the management of much of the UK government's intellectual property. OPSI is also the regulator of public sector information holders for their information trading activities. With information traders, including Ordnance Survey and The Met Office, this is a significant role to enable the user to access the richness of the government's output across diverse areas of operation.

OPSI is also a high profile provider of online services, providing access to legislation and official publications, as well as the London, Belfast and Edinburgh Gazettes, the official journals of the UK government. The latest National Audit Office study shows that the OPSI website ([www.opsi.gov.uk](http://www.opsi.gov.uk)) is amongst the five largest provided by central government in terms of the volume of content and serves a substantial audience in excess of 1 million unique visitors per month. RSS feeds, improved search and pdf formats have all been introduced to meet user demand. Publishing the static content of the Statute Law Database and aligning all legislation services from Government is this year's next milestone.

OPSI merged with The National Archives at the end of October 2006, allowing the Vision - to lead and transform information management in government - to take shape. Now, the full spectrum of information management responsibilities sits within one lead organisation. This brings together Government's thinking for information exploitation and re-use, while addressing the more traditional concerns of records management and long term preservation and retrieval.

### UK solutions

The UK government operates a mixed regime for charging and licensing the re-use of information. Most material published on central government websites can be re-used free of charge under the terms of the Click-Use Licence (see <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/click-use/index.htm>). Since 2001, over 13,000 holders of these online blanket permissions illustrate that information does not recognise geographical boundaries - over 250 each month are taken out and 10 per cent come from outside the UK. Those parts of government which are designated as Trading Funds, such as Ordnance Survey, are required to achieve a return on their investment, and deliver a profit to the taxpayer and not need subsidy. OPSI regulates these information trading activities through the Information Fair Trader Scheme (IFTS see <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/ifts/index.htm>).

The Information Fair Trader Scheme sets and assesses standards for public sector bodies. It requires them to encourage the re-use of information and reach a standard of fairness and transparency.

There are two levels to the Scheme, Full IFTS Accreditation and IFTS Online Assessment:

- Full IFTS Accreditation is the gold standard accreditation scheme. It involves onsite verification and is aimed at major information traders who need to meet a very high standard of compliance with IFTS principles and the Re-use Regulations.
- IFTS Online Assessment is an online assessment tool aimed at all public sector bodies who wish to demonstrate basic compliance with IFTS principles and the Re-use Regulations.

All Crown bodies that have a full licensing delegation from the Controller of HMSO must become IFTS Accredited, although any public sector body may apply. IFTS sets out five principles for licensing the re-use of public sector information, of openness, transparency, fairness, compliance and challenge. Non-Crown bodies, such as local authorities and parts of the National Health Service, are able to set their own policies with respect to charging for the re-use of their information, bound only by the provisions of the Re-use Regulations. The focus of fair trading defines the policy approach to information re-use.

The impact of government's information trading activities was recently assessed by the independent Office of Fair Trading (OFT), which conducted a market study into the Commercial Use of Public Sector Information and supported the extension of IFTS (see <http://www.dti.gov.uk/bbf/competition/market-studies/public-information/page39978.html>) and made a wide ranging set of recommendations to which the Government responded on 25 June 2007.

### Public sector information and the semantic web

To unlock the potential of PSI, organisations need to move beyond their current understanding of the web as a medium for the delivery of documents. Knowing what is available helps shape demand, with tools like the Government's Information Asset Register (IAR). It is a key part of the Government's agenda for freeing up access to official information, but not the only route.

Public bodies collect information as a matter of public task or duty, creating raw information assets. Useful information is produced when combining different information assets. The potential for public sector information to be re-used in useful and interesting ways has grown with the Web. However, making data available and making data reusable are two very different things. A key problem is

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not how the information is captured, but how it is represented and made available on the web.

To investigate these problems more fully OPSI joined with Advanced Knowledge Technologies (AKT), an interdisciplinary research project led by the University of Southampton. Our work with AKT, in a pilot project called AKTive PSI, had two aims:

- To raise awareness about and disseminate the capabilities of Semantic Web technologies among government departments, agencies and local authorities;
- To show what was possible using this technology.

We sought to bring together a wide collection of public sector information assets as possible to experiment with. To do this, a broad selection of public bodies were involved in the project, including Ordnance Survey, The Met Office, The Department for Communities and Local Government, The Office for National Statistics, The Department for Food and Rural Affairs, The Environment Agency and The London Boroughs of Camden and Lewisham. The research outcomes were very exciting for all those who contributed data and one of the main benefits of AKTive PSI was the level of engagement and understanding that was built in government. We were able to share the outcomes of this research work with the EU Commission and with other member states, as part of the European agenda to encourage the re-use of public sector information. This in turn feeds into the review by the Commission in 2008 of implementation.

OPSI is continuing to work with the University of Southampton, to develop awareness of Semantic Web technology. Plans for a publicly available research space using public sector information are well advanced.

### Provide and -enable - our online strategy

The web provides a set of unique opportunities for delivering personalised public services, and enabling others to develop information products or services that government itself does not provide. For OPSI and The National

Archives, two key players in government for online service delivery, the realisation of this potential of the web is our online strategy, “provide and enable”. Not even Google, Amazon or the BBC, seek to do everything on the web, yet the information that Government holds has almost limitless potential. The challenge is to provide online services against a backdrop of endless possibilities at a time of rapid, disruptive and occasionally perplexing change.

The “provide and enable” strategy means choice. Where we choose to provide, we deliver a high quality online service; where we enable, by allowing others to use our information, they provide. Providing means directly producing high quality online services that address the citizen’s needs and expectations. It involves understanding our customers and their expectations of us. However, choosing to enable is recognition that the web affords another possibility. By making information re-usable in flexible ways on the web, the market can drive innovation. All we need to do is to facilitate that to happen by serving our data in a re-usable way. The richness and variety of our information can provide for an almost limitless range of services - far more than we in Government could or should hope to provide.

### What next?

OPSI’s interest in how citizen and Government relate spans our three roles, leading the development of information policy with respect to re-use of public sector information, regulating the public sector’s information trading activities and providing a range of direct online services and content to the user. We will build on that potential - the recognition that not every public service to the citizen needs to be delivered by a public provider – acknowledging that sharing expertise and knowledge is the key to improved and better services for us all.

In the words of Mayo and Steinberg, their vision is “that citizens, consumers and government can create, re-use and distribute information in ways that add maximum value.” We all have our part to play in achieving this goal.

### Biography

Carol Tullo is Director of the Office of Public Sector Information and a Director of The National Archives with responsibility for Information Policy and Services. After a career in law publishing, Carol joined the Cabinet Office in 1997 as Controller of Her Majesty’s Stationery Office and, as Queen’s Printer, is responsible for UK legislation and Crown copyright.