

Esri UK Open “Making Open Data Real Consultation” Response

Executive Summary

As the largest supplier of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the UK, with over 20 years of experience in the UK public sector data market and having consulted widely with our customers and partners, our response to the consultation can be summarised as follows:

- Esri UK supports the presumption in favour of open data.
- Government should publish data in its natural form and leave value-adding activities to the private sector.
- The value of data is often not known until it is published
- The largest barrier to re-using public sector information is finding out what exists. We recommend that all public bodies are called upon to perform a data audit as the first step
- Where appropriate we recommend a geographic approach to publishing data.
- We recommend strengthening the role of CIO in government departments to be accountable for “making open data real”.

Overview

Esri UK welcomes the consultation on “Making Open Data Real: A Public Consultation” and thanks the Cabinet Office for the opportunity to respond. In reviewing the consultation our approach has been to focus our efforts on the specific questions where we can add value. We have organised these into this response which outlines:

- An introduction to Esri UK and its relationship with open data
- Our recommended approach to publishing public data
- A framework for achieving this

Throughout our response we annotate our comments with references to the consultation questions thus: **1.1** (Chapter 1 Question 1)

Introduction

Esri UK is the UK’s leading provider of geographic information system (GIS) technology, helping businesses become more profitable and public service more efficient through a better understanding and analysis of location-based information.

Our public sector customers include Ordnance Survey, The Land Registry, The Met Office, Defra, Department of Health, PCTs, many Local Authorities, Metropolitan Police Service, Ministry of Defence and many other public bodies as well as commercial organisations.

Our technology is often deployed by such organisations to manage the publication of their open data. Geographic visualisation is a powerful mechanism to make open data meaningful and accessible. One example of this is the publication of government investment data in the UK and US:

- Northern Ireland Strategic Investment Board <http://www.esri-ireland.ie/TNS/why-engage-with-us/ReadourCaseStudies1/strategic-investment-board.aspx>

- Economic stimulus and reinvestment in the US
<http://www.esri.com/news/arcuser/0609/files/insight.pdf>

Two local authority examples are:

- Nottingham City Council publishing renewable energy data to target low carbon investment and stimulate the local economy; and
- Westminster City Council using geographic visualisation to better understand local demand for services and to configure service delivery accordingly.

Our recommended approach

Esri UK supports the presumption in favour of open data (1.2, 7.1). That is we believe that all non-personal public data is by default in the public domain subject to some well-known provisos such as where publication would threaten national security, prejudice judicial enquiries etc. These are already covered by existing Freedom of Information exceptions.

We believe the best approach is one where there is a clear distinction between the publication of data in its normal public sector format, and the value-added activities to enhance the quality or productise the data, which we consider is best delivered by the private sector.

We believe the consultation's definitions are perfectly adequate (1.1)

Where there are costs associated with data publication (1.3), we believe that these should be centrally funded.

We would also highlight that it should not be assumed that the publication of data is solely a cost to government. In some circumstances it may actually reduce an organisation's overall costs. Take for an example a government department that maintains many spreadsheets of data but has had no feedback as to the usefulness of these datasets. The act of publication will throw into sharp relief which data sets are, and which are not, of value and use. Over a period of time that organisation can start to rationalise and better manage these data sets leading to overall cost savings (7.4). This could act as a mechanism to encourage publication (1.5)

We recommend that the position of 'open by default' is adopted because the value of data is often unknown until it is published (8.2), and following publication of a data audit that every effort is made to release all datasets. Following release of data, its use can be tracked – even simple measures such as counting the number of downloads provides insight into the usefulness of datasets.

Where appropriate we recommend a geographic approach to publishing data for the following reasons:

- Over 80% of government data is believed to contain a geographic reference
- Maps are becoming increasingly accepted as an intuitive visualisation tool and can bring detailed spreadsheet data to life
- A common geographic reference can be used to integrate disparate data sets e.g. economic and health data from different departments can be overlaid using geographic boundaries as

a common reference. This can then lead to new insights that either data individually could not have provided.

The necessary framework

We also believe that government could provide greater clarity on a framework or method for publishing data and that this would facilitate greater publication (1.5). Esri UK has significant experience of building information portals and of best practice in data sharing, collaboration, publication and dissemination. We would be more than happy to share provide further detail on this.

There is a role for government to stimulate enterprise and markets in the use of open data, but it is very much a minimal, 'light touch' role. The Technology Strategy Board already funds a variety of small scale projects and companies; this should continue but we do not see the need for further intervention. Private capital will invest in good opportunities, but only into a stable environment – it is here that government can help the most by setting a consistent policy around access to data with clear licensing (8.2).

We recognise that there are often significant organisational and cultural barriers to data publication and recommend that the government establishes a stronger presumption in favour of publication, using legislation if necessary (7.1). New ICT contracts and framework agreements will need to have Open Data standards explicitly referenced (7.5)

The largest barrier to obtaining and re-using public sector information is simply finding out what exists. We recommend that all public bodies are called upon to perform a data audit and publish the results as the logical first step. At the very least, this would allow interested users to request the publication of specific datasets. In addition, if the metadata of the audited data was also published, potential data users would be able to understand how the data could be used and its suitability for applications (8.2).

We recommend a 'release early, release often' approach where data is released in its existing form. Consumers of the data will identify any quality or usability issues, which can then be addressed.

We believe the Open Data approach will strengthen the CIO role within government departments. The CIO will become accountable and responsible for the organisation's open data compliance and will become the single point of contact for regulatory bodies, complaint handling and sanctions (8.2, 8.3).

We endorse the Sector Transparency Board approach (8.12) and recommend its extension to the following sectors:

- Environment
- Land, property and estates
- Local government
- Energy
- Health
- Education

Esri UK would be delighted to engage further with the Cabinet Office and to provide further examples of the benefits of the geographic approach to publishing open data.

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