

HM Government, Making Open Data Real: A Public Consultation

Thomson Reuters' Response

Submitted on 27th October 2011

Thomson Reuters welcomes the Government's initiative to promote a culture of openness in public services as laid out in the Consultation, 'Making Open Data Real.' Transparency is one of the three key commitments of the Thomson Reuters Trust Principles that underpin our business and we support the Government's commitment toward greater transparency.

It is our view that governments can generate both economic and societal benefits through effective release of public sector information. We have built significant businesses across the globe using public sector information (PSI) and look forward to ongoing discussions with you on how to realise the growth potential of an open data policy.

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..... (REDACTED AT REQUEST OF ORGANISATION)

We have also noted issues around competition, charging and licensing that could impede that growth.

Additional data sets and Standards

Additional data sets: We agree with Government's view that open data improves outcomes and productivity through informed comparison. Below we have provided two hypothetical business cases, which demonstrate how open data might generate revenue while serving the public good.

BUSINESS CASES REMOVED AT REQUEST OF ORGANISATION

Effective Standards: If Thomson Reuters and others are to make a substantial investment in commercialising new data sets, the Government will need to make a commitment to ensuring that those data sets are complete, consistent and permanent. By completeness, we mean the data should have no gaps or exceptions and current data should be supported by the release of archival data or back-files. There should be consistency in the characteristics and definitions of data fields that are produced and industry must be able to rely on continuity in the supply of the data.

With regards to format, we would ideally want to receive the data in a cloud environment in an xml. format. However, recognising the costs of digitising and publishing data, we acknowledge that there may need to be mechanisms through which the commercial sector may need to bear some of these costs.

Competition

Government's objective should be to publish raw information to industry standards. It is not the role of Government to create commercial services through value-added information; these are more effectively provided by commercial information providers working in an open-market environment. When public sector bodies provide their own value-added commercial services, they distort the market, deter private sector investment and stifle innovation. This is still an emerging market, it needs multiple entrants in a benign environment who can innovate rapidly and afford to fail and fail fast. Without that innovation, Government risks losing not just growth opportunities but the connections, analytics and insight that may be generated by the multiple perspectives of a thriving industry.

While a public-private partnership could be a solution to the costliness of releasing open data, such a partnership would require carefully constructed and rigorously implemented safeguards to avoid a monopoly and ensure a level-playing field.

Charging

It is our view that data within the public task should be available at no cost and without usage restrictions. We acknowledge that the Government may want to recover the marginal cost for publishing non-public task data (e.g. anonymisation and bandwidth), but the charging structure should not discriminate between personal consumption and redistribution. By introducing a flat fee charging system, Government would be able to avoid complicated charging structures with overhead costs associated with measuring and monitoring usage.

Licensing

Consistency is critical to establishing a licensing regime. Based on our own experience, we can see the benefits of centralising licensing activities within one specialized government group. A centralised function would allow the unit to streamline processes for higher efficiency. The most efficient approach to licensing as we see it would be an overarching license agreement with a single set of standard terms and conditions with flexibility to add schedules where necessary. This would allow for a consistent approach.

Public Sector Information Directive

We applaud the UK Government's commitment to this Directive and its effort to take a lead in its implementation.

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