

Response from a business to “Making Open Data Real: A Public Consultation”

As a bookseller specialising in the supply of government information I would like to respond to the problems we are currently facing in the hope that the Transparency Team will be able to address these difficulties.

In your Executive Summary you state 3.3

Much has already been achieved in opening up the public sector, as demonstrated in the two open letters from the Prime Minister on transparency. 6 These covered the opening of finance data, health data, information about public servants, rail timetables, and school performance

Please see my first example of how “information about public servants” has not been achieved.

1. **Civil Service Yearbook** (formerly known as the British Imperial Calendar, which runs from 1809 to 1972, when it became the Civil Service Year Book). The government took the decision to no longer publish this as they felt the information should be free of charge on the internet. The Prime Minister sent a letter on the 31st May 2011 to Cabinet Ministers regarding Transparency:

<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/letter-to-government-departments-on-opening-up-data/>

This clearly states:

- Names, grades, job titles and annual pay rates for most Senior Civil Servants with salaries above £150,000 to be published in June 2010.
- Names, grades, job titles and annual pay rates for most Senior Civil Servants and NDPB officials with salaries higher than the lowest permissible in Pay Band 1 of the Senior Civil Service pay scale to be published from September 2010.
- Organograms for central government departments and agencies that include all staff positions to be published in a common format from October 2010

www.data.gov.uk

was supposed to enable us to publish a new edition of the Civil Service Yearbook. However, Civil Servants did not like the idea of having to make available their name and salary so and were given the choice whether they in fact wished to disclose their name! Please see response from a Government Dept. When questioned:

All Departments followed Cabinet Office guidance in meeting these commitments.

Information disclosed about individuals was in the context of their role as a senior civil servant, and not in a personal context. Names could not be released unless an individual gave consent. This approach was followed by all central government departments and agencies and explains the varying rates of disclosure

Making Open Data real is not happening and now information that has been available by the Government since 1809 – 2009 (200 years) is not appearing, we at Dandy have now contacted 100s of departments and are hoping they will give us the data to enable us to publish a new Civil Service Yearbook.

The consultation states privacy at 6.13 “**Transparency will not be extended at the cost of privacy**” – but this information has always been publicly available!

A second example of public data not being re-useable:

Overseas Trade Statistics – this information has been published by The Stationery Office on behalf of HMRC including OTS1, OTS2, OTSQ, OTSA but now has become web only. When we looked into reproducing this material from www.uktradeinfo.com we were told by HMRC that the data existed and they could provide us with 'data retailers files' to compile the information but:

They are for expert users who can use them to compile bespoke data reports for their own customers by interpreting the 'control' information that accompanies the files. From your comments, I think that you would yourselves need that level of expert assistance to produce the OTS data tables from them, and we would be in no position to provide such support

Government information is being put on the internet for experts to manipulate – what about the students and general public who have been used to receiving print copies clearly laid out of this information?

A final example of how Government data cannot even be accessed:

Army List – Air Force, RAF Retired List – no longer produced in print form - only available on the MOD intranet for Defence Establishment staff only!

To summarise, I note 8.20

8.20 Key to this approach is that public service providers develop new collaborative ways of working with data users, including commercial users – and where necessary actively engage in the market to stimulate demand for data. The premise for growth is that public service providers do not charge users for their data, but that they enable users to gain access to it, so that they can use it as a platform for innovation or enterprise.

The above example clearly shows we cannot gain access to the data to allow us to make commercial use of it! – how can this achieve this:

Public bodies should actively encourage the re-use of their public data – in addition to publishing the data itself, public bodies should provide information and support to enable it to be re-used easily and effectively. The Government should also encourage and assist those using public data to share knowledge and applications, and should work with business to help grow new, innovative uses of data and to generate economic benefit.

Will academic/public libraries still be able to offer users government information or will it disappear into cyberspace? Libraries have held official information since it has been published – I am sure users will not want to have to manipulate data to have to find results they have been accustomed to in printed format – open data would be fine if it is easy to access and re-use – currently this is just not the case.

Donna Ravenhill

Dandy Booksellers Limited