Public Sector News

Jane Inman, Technical Librarian, Environment and Economy, Warwickshire County Council (janeinman@warwickshire.gov.uk)

E-petitions

You will have found it hard to miss the news coverage of the use of the e-petitions website for a vote on road pricing. 1.8million people signed up to support the motion that vehicle tracking and road pricing policy should be scrapped. The activity on this site has probably made more people aware of the availability of government websites than the take-up campaign designed to encourage use of directgov.gov.uk and the linked local authority sites!

E-petitions are available on the 10 Downing Street website at http://petitions.pm.gov.uk Anyone can set up a new petition but there are opposing views about the value of political opinion being measured this way. Writing in *The Independent* Andy McSmith asks if the Internet liberates or undermines democracy. He draws attention to the care taken to ensure everyone who is entitled to vote in an election is registered and can access a polling station and the measures taken to prevent fraud. This contrasts with e-petitions where the digital divide will mean many do not have access to the technology or the skills needed to add their vote. He also suggests that online petitions are a 'lazy form of political activism' compared to marching in the streets for instance.
(The big question: does the Internet liberate or undermine democracy? *Independent* 23 February 2007 Andy McSmith)
http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/article2296801.ece

Cull of government websites

Transformational Government was launched with publication of the Cabinet Office strategy document Transformation government: Enabled by technology (Cabinet Office, CM 6683) in November 2005 and a review of the first year was issued in January. Transformational government: Enabled by technology Annual Report 2006 (Cabinet Office Cm 6790) The report contained news that government websites are to be reviewed and at least 551 websites are to be closed.

I don't think anyone would disagree that there are too many Government websites and certainly the development seems to have been a little haphazard However, concerns have been expressed about the content of the sites which are to be disposed of. Will the content be properly archived for future reference or will it disappear without trace? Concern has also been expressed that some of the small sites developed to back up a particular campaign will have been designed to reach a limited market. It may be appropriate for these to look very different from for instance directgov.uk. An example of this would be the Talk to Frank site which is about drug use and is aimed at young people. (http://www.talktofrank.com)To read the report on transformational government go to http://www.cio.gov.uk/documents/annual_report2006/trans_gov2006.pdf.

Public libraries and online services

Some very interesting figures were published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) in January. They reported an increase of 7.5% in the number of people visiting public libraries over the last five years. Set alongside figures which show a 10% increase in expenditure on electronic resources in 2006 it would seem that the availability of electronic resources contributes to this rise in use. To see more detail of the figures which were produced in association with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council go to http://www.cipfastats.net .

Parliamentary blogs

Blogs are in use in every area of life and have been the subject of a Parliamentary question! The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was asked how much it cost to operate the blog of the Minister for Employment and Welfare Reforms. The cost was given as £1,487 a month since its launch in October and there have been 4,731 visits by 1,987 unique visitors. This makes it a rather expensive operation but it makes quite interesting reading. See for yourself at http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/blog/.

Information for local government

Anyone working in local government will have come across info4local (http://www.info4local.gov.uk) which provides information from Central Government to Local Government. The service was re-launched in January with some refinements. You can now select from sub-categories for some subject areas so that you can tailor the service more accurately to your interests. You can also select by English region and the service alerts you to consultations which are reaching their deadline.

65 government departments, agencies and public bodies contribute to the website, so as well as the alerting service, it provides a useful route into government information related to local government. As far as I can tell the e mail alerting service is not limited to use by those working in local government.

Local authority websites

http://www.socitm.gov.uk
SOCITM, the Society of Information Technology Management, has just published its latest report on local authority websites. Better connected 2007 is the ninth such report, and now gives local authority websites a ranking of 'excellent', 'transactional' or 'standard'. Only one authority, Barking and Dagenham, was graded as 'excellent.' The grade is based on 16 criteria, which basically look at the usefulness, usability and usage of local authority sites. The report shows how use of local-authority websites has grown since the first report was issued and identifies the challenges for the future. These include making the customer journey as smooth as possible and the development of the skills, information and commitment for transferring activity to the web.

UK Cabinet Papers

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk
The National Archives has won a grant of £800,000 to digitise Cabinet papers from 1917-1975. The project is called British Governance in the 20th Century and will cover 500,000 papers all of which are already open as they are over 30 years old. Funding is coming from the Joint Information Systems Committee.

Public Sector News is supplied by ALGIS (The Affiliation of Local Government Information Specialists) which represents information professionals providing information services to local authority staff and elected members. Jane Inman is currently Chair of ALGIS. ALGIS welcomes anyone with an interest in public sector information who feels they would benefit from being part of a community working in the same area. For more information go to http://www.algis.org.uk.