Public Sector News

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Web Continuity

The Standing Committee on Official Publications, which is part of the Information Services Group of CILIP, has for many years expressed its concern about the archiving of public-sector websites. Probably because the emphasis has always been on ensuring current information is available on websites, this area has been rather neglected. But how would you depend on the information on a website, which might now be the only record, if there is no archive? How will researchers of the future be able to track the development of electronic delivery of public services? This is not to mention the huge frustrations we all experience from trying to access information via links that have vanished.

Finally in April 2007, this neglected area attracted ministerial interest, and things have begun to happen. Jack Straw, then leader of the House of Commons, wrote to the Cabinet Minister, Hilary Armstrong, about access to online documents.

It is now common practice for web-based information to be referred to in responses to Parliamentary questions, and research showed that 60% of the links in Hansard to UK Government websites from 1997-2006 were not working. This represents huge gaps in the official record of the work of Parliament.

A solution is now being worked on by the National Archives, and if you want to keep in touch with progress, you can sign up for e-mail alerts at webcontinuity@nationalarchives.gov.uk. The objective of the project is to 'ensure that every Web link works, and that every piece of information cited remains accessible in perpetuity, for the public face of government in the digital world.'

Local Authority website archiving

As part of this project the British Library has responsibility for archiving the websites of local authorities and ensuring similar provision is made for access to that information in the future. Currently they are required to ask permission from local authorities before they can harvest the sites and they are concerned that this may be a stumbling block. There really isn't any reason why local authorities shouldn't give permission, and there are many reasons why they should.

There are in fact a number of benefits for the website owner in having their site archived by the British Library. It means that there will be a permanent historical record of the site, and that the information is preserved in perpetuity at no cost to the local authority. It will be possible to see what information was available at a point in time, which could help to resolve conflicts, and it could help with business continuity.

The British Library is developing mechanisms to ensure the information archived can be accessed in the future as hardware and software change. If you work in a local authority, and

can lobby to ensure that when the letter from the British Library reaches your Chief Executive it is dealt with quickly and permission is granted, that would be a great help.

For further information contact web-archivist@bl.uk

Please look out for *Finding British Official Information. Official publishing in the digital age* Jane Inman and Howard Picton, to be published by Chandos later this year.

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.