

Public Sector News

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Public ideas for public sector websites

The Cabinet Office has run a public competition to identify new ways of using Web technology to provide public services and information, and the winner was a scheme to provide a post code search for recycling facilities.

I was puzzled by this, as I felt sure I had seen just such a service covered on a TV news report. Sure enough, my memory had not failed me, and I found an excellent service on www.recyclenow.com which is 'brought to you by WRAP'.

WRAP is the Waste and Resources Action Programme, and is in fact a government-funded private company, so you might expect those judging the competition to know that the facility was already available nationally.

The competition details are at www.showusabetterway.com, and there is a string of comments pointing out that Recycle Now offers this facility already. It could be improved, as other comments suggest, but it hardly seems to be the most innovative of ideas. The competition was part of the Power of Information Taskforce, which is 'helping government become more open, transparent and effective through better use of published information.'

NHS

There have been plans in central government for some time to rationalise the number of Websites, and to focus citizen information on Direct.gov.uk, and information for the business sector on www.businesslink.gov.uk. In a similar approach, in the NHS a merger has just taken place between the NHS Choices site and NHS Direct. The NHS already has a strong Web brand and presence, and this will consolidate it further. www.nhs.uk

Environment Agency

www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Further rationalising has been happening on the Environment Agency website, where a new site was launched in early December, and is said to be better able to cope with the demands put on the site in times of heavy usage as during times of flooding. The review and re-design of the site reduced the number of pages from 50,000 to 13,000.

Geographical information

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/locationstrategy

Communities and Local Government has published *Place matters: the location strategy for the United Kingdom*. This sets out how local authorities should improve the way they collect geographic information, so that it is easily accessible and can be used to support evidence-based policy making.

Those working in information management will recognise the points of the action plan, which are:

- Know what data we have and avoid duplicating it
- Use common reference data, so we know we are all talking about the same place
- Share the data easily through common technology, standards and business relationships
- Gain the appropriate skills to supports its use

The process will be managed through a Location Council, which is being set up by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

21st Century Lords

Blogging is now a common activity, but you could be forgiven for thinking that the House of Lords might be slower than some parts of society to embrace this technology and use of the Web. Visit www.lordsoftheblog.wordpress.com to see how some at least of the members of the upper house are happily blogging away.

Repeating yourself?

The problems and frustrations of having to repeat your details when contacting central or local government because you are dealing with different departments are known to us all. Help may be at hand. Pilot schemes are being used in some areas of the country to see what can be done to reduce the time spent by citizens giving the same information again and again.

The pilots are running in the North West and the South East, and are designed to enable citizens to tell the government only once when registering a birth or a death. The pilots are being carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions, HM Revenue and Customs, local authorities, the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the Identity and Passport Services. Let's hope this can be made to work, as it would save vast amounts of time and frustration.

Please look out for *Finding British Official Information. Official publishing in the digital age*, by 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>.