
Public Sector News

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Nottingham challenges Government ruling; data transparency

Public spending information

Nottingham City Council is refusing to publish the spending data which the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, required local authorities to publish by the end of 2010. Unlike central government departments who are required to publish details of what they spend above £25,000, local authorities have to make available details of all spending of £500 or more. This means vast amounts of data are being published each month, with the idea being that this will expose extravagance and waste. There is no legal requirement to publish the data, and Nottingham City has said it will only comply once a legal requirement is in place. Armchair auditors are expected to examine the data and hold local authorities to account for what they spend. Having looked at the data for my own authority, I cannot see that there is enough detail to be able to make any sort of judgment on an authority's spending.

Citizen journalists

It may not be possible to judge an authority's performance by its spending data, but being able to understand how an authority is tackling the major budget cuts that we are all facing is important. In an age of blogging and tweeting it is possible for anyone to share information about what is happening at, for instance, a budget-setting council meeting. In some authorities, though, the use of social media tools to communicate the democratic processes more widely have been discouraged.

This led to the Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, writing to all local authorities to encourage them to take a modern approach and allow the use of blogging, tweeting etc. to communicate the decisions being taken by elected members more widely.

Code of recommended practice for local authorities on data transparency

The government launched a consultation into a code of practice for local authorities on data

transparency in February, and this closed on 14 March.

The code is designed to support the government's transparency agenda, and will set out the requirement to publish data and minimum expectations. It defines public data as "the objective, factual, non-personal data on which policy decisions are based, and on which public services are assessed, or which is collected or generated in the course of public service delivery."

The code goes on to set out a minimum list of datasets to be released. Much of what it requires should already be routinely published, such as the constitution, election results, committee minutes, policies, performance, audits and, of course, expenditure over £500 as we have seen above. What may not always be published will be councillors' allowances and expenses (although these may well have been supplied in response to Freedom of Information requests) and salaries of senior staff (those over £58,200). Also to be published are copies of contracts and tenders to businesses and to the voluntary community and social enterprise sector. I suspect this will cause some concerns.

You can view the consultation at www.communities.gov.uk.

And finally... spatial asset information

Communities and Local Government (again!) are looking at publishing details of public sector assets and are aiming to have a demonstrator map on the internet shortly. The idea is to publish details of all public sector assets to encourage better management of them through collaborative working between local authorities and other public sector bodies.

Public Sector News has been supplied by ALGIS in LARIA (The Affiliation of Local Government Information Specialists in the Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association) which represented information professionals providing information services to local authority staff and elected members.

At the LARIA AGM in April ALGIS announced its intention to cease operating. The decision was made for a number of reasons which included the difficulties in the present financial climate of people being able to spend time out of the office to attend events or serve on the committee. LARIA will continue and, if it identifies sufficient demand, will run seminars and events on aspects of information work in local authorities.

For information on LARIA go to www.laria.gov.uk