



The Development and Maintenance Initiative (DMI)

Local Government Circular

Circular 1

Local Government workshops	(Wales 17_01_07) (Manchester 13_02_07)
----------------------------	---

Welcome to the first Local Government DMI circular. This paper provides an overview of the issues affecting the local government sector, and is based upon the discussions which took place at the first workshops.

1.1 Information culture in local government

The local government sector had already established a culture of information provision before the advent of the Freedom of Information Act 2000; for example, the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as incorporated into the Local Government Act 1972) requires meetings, associated reports and background information to be open to the public (although some information is exempt). Information available on inspection is also a key characteristic of local government access routes, as featured in legislation such as the Audit Commission Act 1998.

To a certain extent, publication schemes formalised the process of routine information provision, and many schemes are populated with information that local authorities provide in the normal course of business.

Most large local authorities have designated FOI officers and a centralised procedure for responding to FOIA requests. Many of those represented at the workshops have records management and data protection responsibilities, which will help ensure a consistent approach to the development of model schemes.

Records management is an evolving expertise which is increasingly important within the Local Government sector. The kudos attached to records management by authorities may dictate the resources and capabilities available to them. The Section 46 Code of Practice (Records Management) may have some parallels to the way in which the management of information within publication schemes should be approached.

A practical approach to the requirements of Section 19 is needed to reconcile an authority's legal obligations under the Act with what is actually happening in the local government sector.

The ICO recognises that many local authorities are already doing what they can to achieve best practice in disseminating information, whether this is through publication schemes or wider networks.

Some local authorities use schemes as a starting point for dealing with information requests under the general rights of access. If information is contained within the scheme, it can be routinely provided without the consideration of exemptions. This raises the possibility of the use of schemes as a wider tool in information and request management.

1.2 Environmental information

Environmental Information in respect of the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 is particularly important to local government. As it is not always clear what environmental information is, it can be difficult to include it within schemes. Proactive dissemination of environmental information under the terms of the Regulations is relatively limited.

1.3 Use of websites and information taxonomies

Websites are integral to information delivery across the local government sector. To a certain extent, the prevalence of websites has eroded the need for publication schemes. Nevertheless, the legal requirement to have a scheme in place remains and authorities must provide one in accordance with Section 19.

A scheme is a commitment to the categories of information which will be routinely published; effort should be focused on the content of the scheme and how that can be routinely made available and easily accessed.

If information is available on inspection only, it will not be supported by web access and this should be taken into account within schemes. Additionally, the needs of those without web access, which may include the elderly or disabled, must be considered.

Various taxonomies have been put forward as a starting point for class development including:

- The [Local Government Services List](#) (LGSL)
- The [Local Government Category List](#) (LGCL)
- The [Local Government Classification Scheme](#) (LGCS)

It would be sensible to utilise existing categorisation resources and at the very least, ensure that publication scheme classes can accommodate the various information infrastructures. The ICO will seek opinions on the most effective taxonomy and develop classes as appropriate.

The [Integrated Public Sector Vocabulary \(IPSV\)](#) has been suggested as a starting point for the development of classes, not least because the vocabulary may help to reconcile class headings with terms for use within search engines. IPSV brings together three of the vocabularies which public authorities can use to label information into one taxonomy. IPSV can be used to populate metadata and to categorise information.

As the IPSV classification system is primed towards tagging information with subject metadata it may not lend itself to seamless translation into 'classes' of information. Early indications from the first workshop sessions suggest that the LGCS and LGCL taxonomies may be more appropriate.

Whilst the subject indexing or taxonomy behind classes may be based on existing classification systems, the delivery of the 'scheme' to the end customer should be in a non-technical language which they can engage with.

1.4 Charging for information

Charges for documentation (particularly planning) remains an issue for local government and it would be helpful if the ICO could provide a steer on this. The cost of information is also a critical issue in facilitating access, as schemes should have due regard for the public interest.

Harmonisation of the various charges across local authorities would help to ensure consistency within schemes.

If implemented, the draft fees regulations may impact upon the breadth of information contained in current schemes. Further consideration of this issue may be needed once the Department for Constitutional Affairs have announced whether the changes will be implemented.

1.5 Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMO)

The role of ALMO's and the possible need for separate publication schemes for these organisations needs to be clarified. Similarly, the role of organisations such as safety camera partnerships and regeneration companies has been flagged as a possible issue to consider.

The relationship between local authorities and associated bodies raises questions about the impact that data sharing protocols may have upon schemes.

1.6 Model schemes and mandatory classes

There was broad agreement that greater use of model schemes and the introduction of mandatory classes would help ensure consistency across the sector. Authorities will retain the option of creating a bespoke scheme should they wish to do so.

As a result of the workshops, it is envisaged that three or four model schemes should be considered for the middle-upper tiers of local government, namely:

- Unitary Councils
- District/County Councils
- Borough Councils

Model schemes should be simple to understand, submit and maintain.

The core duties of many authorities will be similar across the various tiers. As such, the development of mandatory classes is attainable.

When considering the differences between the various tiers and the authorities within them, subtleties such as the location of the authority may be relevant. For example, authorities based in coastal regions may have services which differ from those inland. Varying duties such as these should be reflected in the optional classes.

Patterns identifying the topics covered by regular requests may feed into the development of classes

1.7 Further Input

If you have any comments on this circular or anything you would like to contribute to the initiative, please contact Paul Damerill at paul.damerill@ico.gsi.gov.uk

The next Local Government workshops will be held as follows:

- London: 20th April 2007 (first session)
- Manchester : 22nd May 2007
- Northern Ireland: 24th April 2007
- Wales: 16th May 2007