

Draft Local Government Transparency Code

Following Eric Pickles' muscular debut as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, savaging high pay in local government and demanding that all spending above £500 is published, the Government has come forward with more concrete proposals. The '*Code of recommended practice for local authorities on data transparency*' is in draft and out for consultation, and will mark a modest but important change to FOI in the UK. Unlike the Information Commissioner's vague model publication schemes, the code specifies items that the DCLG expects all councils, police and fire authorities and others to publish.

The £500 requirement is formalised, with a clear message to businesses and sole traders that they should expect their payments to be in the public domain. The salaries, job descriptions, responsibilities, budgets and staff numbers of all employees earning above £58200 have to be published, although an opt-out is allowed for the name. Expect a guessing game in the local press for all those who exercise this option. In addition, the code requires the publication of an organisation chart for the organisation, councillor allowances and expenses, contracts, tenders, various policies and performance information, as well as data on the election process.

For many well-run councils, the natural reaction will be "so what?" as much of it will be routinely published or disclosed in response to an FOI request. However, the code includes some other innovations that do represent a shift, and confirm some of the heady rhetoric that came from the Cabinet Office last year. The Code includes some interesting back-door revivals of the much-ignored Re-Use Regulations, including the requirement to produce a data inventory that sounds remarkably like the PSI information asset register. More obviously, it requires information to be accessible for re-use - commercial and research reuse should be automatically free. Data should be machine readable wherever possible. The instinct to publish in closed-format PDFs has to be balanced by the more reusable CSV format, and the Code expects organisations to publish in raw, timely formats wherever they can.

This is not a revolution – in its current form, it's recommended, not required. But it does show that the pro-FOI, pro-Re-Use stance of the coalition is undiminished. It's easy to see the ICO using this initiative to lever more data out of organisations, and must surely prompt a rethink of the bland publication schemes guidance. More importantly, the move towards greater re-use gets a shot in the arm, information activists receive encouragement to make apps and campaigns out of public sector data, and Mr Pickles' army of armchair auditors will have more to scrutinise. The only question is how hard-pressed local authorities will find the resources to get the work done.



ActNow will be including the Code in its FOI courses as it develops. In the meantime, the consultation on the draft code is open until 14 March 2011. More information is available on the DCLG website here:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/codepracticelad/ataconsult>

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