

Chapter 2.10

Accessing Public Sector Environmental Data and Information: Development and Demonstration of a National Portal

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the importance that the Environment Agency places on the provision of information and the key part it plays in achieving environmental goals, an importance that is recognised in a range of national, European and international laws and agreements. The Agency is seeking to ensure that it meets the “letter” and, importantly, the spirit of all relevant legislation. To this end, our vision is environmental information freely available to all – quickly and easily, where and when people want it, and in a format to meet particular needs. The opportunities that present themselves in today’s “Information Age” are exciting and the potential to lever environmental benefit is great. The Agency’s track record in this

field is already considerable, with five years’ experience of providing key environmental datasets through “What’s in Your Backyard?” – a GIS, Internet based national portal (www.environment-agency.gov.uk). This system has been developed and extended to include a pollution inventory, flood plain maps, landfill sites and a range of other data layers. Members of the public can find information from a national level, right down to their local environment: locating areas of interest by postcode or place name, displaying data to a chosen scale, formulating individual queries on the datasets, gaining background on information of interest, and downloading data for their own use off-line. The key components in establishing such services are people, data and technical infrastructure. The Environment Agency’s National

Centre for Environmental Data & Surveillance has developed a conceptual architecture within which these components can be effectively managed and brought to bear on the processes of delivering timely data and information products. This is a challenging task within large administrations where data collection, management and storage are widely distributed both geographically and organisationally. Experience to date has shown the approach to be flexible, reliable and scalable. We have also developed our understanding of why people want information and how they want to access it – and importantly why some people do not see the relevance of environmental information to them. We have therefore formulated a strategy to improve the flexibility and response of the services we provide. This strategy also includes developing highly tailored information services that feed off the same base datasets. The Agency has recently piloted just such a service aimed at residential house purchasers. This is an e-business service accessible by solicitors over the Internet, with individually tailored environmental reports generated and delivered in real time. There is the potential to develop similar tailored services wherever environmental information is, or should be, a key part of business activities and decisions. Future development will therefore not solely be making more information available in an electronic format. Information must be made relevant to particular needs at particular times. Citizens must be made aware of the wider environmental impacts of their consumer choices and the implications to themselves and others. They must also understand the real effect of the environment on their daily lives and why it is in their interest to be interested.

INTRODUCTION

The Environment Agency (the Agency) is the leading public organisation for protecting and improving the environment in England and Wales.

Its duties include regulating industry, maintaining flood defences and water resources, and improving wildlife habitats. The Agency also monitors the environment, and makes the information collected widely available.

This chapter highlights the importance that the Agency places on the provision of environmental information and the key part it plays in achieving environmental goals. The necessity of ensuring that the public has up-to-date environmental information is essential as their power and influence help to achieve sustained environmental improvements. Operating openly is also essential in maintaining the credibility of our regulatory functions, and in enabling fully informed decision-making by regulatory bodies and the public alike.

The Agency's track record in information provision is considerable, as highlighted by its experience in providing key environmental datasets through "What's in Your Backyard?" – a GIS, internet based national portal (www.environment-agency.gov.uk). Our vision for the future is a much wider range of environmental information freely available to all – quickly and easily, where and when people want it, and in formats designed to meet particular needs. This will form the basis for the Agency, other public bodies, business and the general public, being well equipped to make better decisions for the environment. Exciting opportunities for achieving this vision present themselves in today's "Information Age" and the potential to lever environmental benefit is great.

AGENCY'S POLICY FRAMEWORK

The importance of information provision is recognised in a wide range of national and European legislation, and in international agreements, including Public Register laws, the UK Freedom of Information Act and the UN-ECE Convention on "Access to Information, Public

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