

# Public Sector Information

Public Sector Information (PSI) policy matters have become politically high profile. Over 60 UN Member States around the world are actively engaged in implementing such policy. In Europe, this has been shaped by the Environmental Information, Re-Use and INSPIRE Directives. This continues, for example, The European eGovernment Action Plan 2011-2015 includes a commitment to review the Re-Use Directive over the next year.

The drivers for this have been multiple. They include the acceptance (in Western societies at least) that citizens need access to detailed information to hold governments to account (transparency), that new technology applied to easily accessible PSI will improve the range and efficiency of public services, and that jobs will be created by the private sector apps developers.

In Britain, the data.gov.uk initiative supported by two successive Prime Ministers has resulted in 7000 data sets already being made available in re-useable form. The government's PSI team has transformed the licensing arrangements for re-use of UK official information. And - after many years of wrangling - political pressure has at last led to the creation of a national address database free to all public sector bodies.

Geospatial (or geographical) information is at the heart of all this: a large fraction of the 7000 data sets embed location or need it to make sense. This under-pinned the government's agreement to fund the provision of much Ordnance Survey data so it could be used freely by all and by making the most detailed mapping free to public sector bodies (but at a charge to business). Britain is far from unique as the [www.ipsiplatform.eu/news](http://www.ipsiplatform.eu/news) website testifies.

But it would be wrong to believe that policy issues on PSI are 'fixed'. There are still many national variations reflecting other government policies, culture, financial pressures, commercial interests and simplistic concepts. For example, many still see success as a linear model which involves extracting precious data from unwilling bureaucrats and disseminating it via the web to clever young developers. In reality, much government data collection is now out-sourced to third parties and, because of contractual commitments, is sometimes not available for re-use. Co-mingling of data, whereby the government uses private sector data as well as that created internally, is becoming common and often has major licensing complications (leading some organisations to use Open Street Map rather than Google Maps). New technology also has manifest implications for privacy - such as in the detailed street level mapping of British crime incidents (which may influence the value of housing). And commercial firms using PSI - especially if they have to pay for it - are beginning to ask for warranties about the quality of that data.

Our technology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improving public services and fostering transparency. Legal aspects of PSI re-use are however fast becoming even more important. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Geospatial Information.