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

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Abstract

This paper 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 which 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 4 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 scaleable.

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.

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