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Proactive publication of official information

The publication scheme Development and Maintenance Initiative (DMI)

Background

Every public authority subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI) is required to adopt and maintain a publication scheme. A publication scheme is a commitment to routinely and proactively provide information to the public.

In 2005 the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) reviewed the effectiveness of publication schemes. The outcomes of this review highlighted the need to develop and improve the proactive dissemination of public sector information.

The review identified the need for:

- consistent approaches to the inclusion of information
- a requirement for improvements to the maintenance of schemes
- further awareness-raising of the general public regarding information which is readily available and how to access it.

Approval of existing publication schemes

Previously, publication schemes expired four years after the date of approval. We have now decided to extend approval of all existing schemes until December 31st 2008.

DMI Objectives

To encourage and help public authorities to improve and expand publication schemes through:

- proactively disseminating information
- consistently making information available
- providing uncomplicated and swift access to the information they routinely make available

DMI Aims

- to develop a list of core classes for all public sector bodies
- to produce a comprehensive guide specific to each public authority sector
- to progress all sectors towards a culture of maximum release and a structure of model schemes to enable a consistency of core classes across public authorities
- to identify and disseminate good practice in relation to maintaining publication schemes
- to direct and support public authorities to creatively consider how to promote and publish the information they make readily available

How did the ICO achieve these aims?

In the first instance we collected and collated opinions and ideas regarding the content, maintenance and dissemination of publication schemes from professionals, practitioners and users.

Following this initial fact finding numerous workshops were held with sector specific practitioners and representative bodies to develop core classes, maintenance regimes and dissemination methods. Existing networking groups were also invited to provide an input into these discussions.
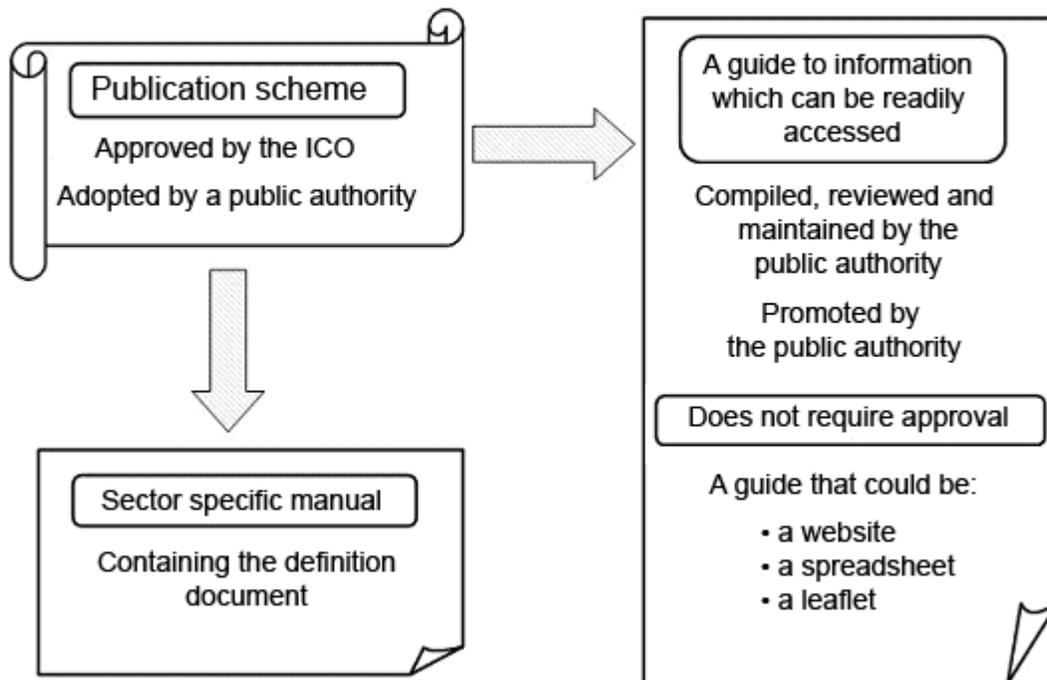
The initiative also enrolled an advisory panel made up of FOI experts and interested parties. This group provided a 'sounding board' for ideas, brought a user perspective to the work as it developed and provided feedback when appropriate.

The new proposed policy

There are three proposed elements to the revised policy on proactive dissemination.

- The publication scheme – a commitment document, approved by the ICO and adopted by a public authority
- The sector specific manual – containing definitions of information covered by the core classes and including good practice guidance
- A means by which the information made routinely available by an authority can be easily identified and accessed

New model publication scheme concept

Publication scheme

Approved by the ICO

Adopted by a public authority

Sector specific manual

Containing the definition document

A guide to information which can be readily accessed

Compiled, reviewed and maintained by the public authority

Promoted by the public authority

Does not require approval

A guide that could be:

- a website
- a spreadsheet
- a leaflet

Part 1 - The publication scheme

This document will be a 'model' scheme applicable to most public authorities. The model has been developed and drafted by the ICO and once finalised will be approved by the Information Commissioner. The approved scheme will be made available to all public authorities from early April 2008 and should be adopted by 31st December 2008.

The draft scheme contains seven classes of information. These are:

- Who we are and what we do
- What we spend and how we spend it
- What our priorities are and how we are doing
- How we make decisions
- Our policies and procedures
- Lists and registers
- The services we offer

N.B. If an authority does not hold any information contained in a particular class it clearly cannot provide it. However, there is no need to delete the class from the model scheme.

The scheme also contains standard paragraphs setting out how the information can be accessed and whether any information contained within the classes is subject to a charge.

The scheme commits the public authority to:

- Proactively publish information (including Environmental Information) which is held by it and contained within each class
- Proactively publish information in line with the access and charging statements
- A means by which the authority can ensure the public are aware of the sorts of information the public authority has committed to make readily available, how they can access this and whether they will have to pay for it. (Generally this will be an authority's existing website)
- Review and update the information (e.g. the website) on a regular basis

N.B. First and foremost the publication scheme represents the commitment that a public authority gives to the ICO to publish information, rather than a guide to information for the public. It is the guide to information (e.g. a website), not the publication scheme, which will be of most use to a member of the public.

Part 2 - The sector specific manual

This will be developed and validated by the ICO and will be specific to a sector (e.g. Central Government) or sub sector (e.g. Primary Care Trust). The manual will contain **definition documents** which will provide examples of information that should be provided if they are held by that authority. However, it will not contain a definitive list. The manual will also include good practice guidance, generic guidance and sector specific guidance. The manuals will be 'living' documents and will be expanded and updated as appropriate.

Part 3 - The means by which information can be easily identified and accessed

This is a guide to information which should be communicated to the public by the public authority. It must identify:

- Information routinely available
- The format/s in which it is available
- Information which can be charged for

This guide does not require approval from the ICO, nor will the ICO be prescriptive about how the information should be presented or promoted. In larger public authorities it will be their website.

The seven classes of information used in the model scheme do not necessarily have to form part of an authority's website. The important consideration is their commitment to routinely providing this information by adopting the scheme. Some variations of how to structure the information have been suggested by workshop delegates:

- Use the 'About us' area of a website to place information contained in the class 'Who we are and what we do.'
- Use the class headings as sections of the website i.e. changing 'About us' to 'Who we are and what we do'
- A gateway on the website, perhaps entitled 'information we routinely make available,' which lists the classes and enables users to drill down to the specific information available.

All of them are equally valid and there will be many more suitable ways to make the information easily identifiable and accessible.

It is also important to understand that not all of the specific information committed to in each class may be routinely available, for instance information held on the authority's intranet or information only held as hard copy. Where this is the case the authority should explain that the information is available and give details of how it can be obtained. If this enables the user to quickly access the information they require then the authority should treat it as a standard customer request.

Feedback

The ICO would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who contacted us with comments and opinions on the draft of the new model publication scheme. Unfortunately the cut-off date for new feedback has now passed.

All comments received will be collated and analysed. Because it is not feasible to reply to each individual comment the ICO will compile a report which will available on our website later in the year.

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