

DUG Conference 2010 – Panel session

Keith Dugmore – closing summary comments

Innovation

We are living at a special time, with information being generated at an unprecedented rate from a range of sources:

- Public bodies
- + Commercial companies – especially customer files and transactions
- + The public – especially through social media

Steve Bond emphasised this with his mention of volume and diversity.

The Web provides a huge storehouse. But Karl Popper's phrase keeps coming back....."The mind is not a bucket". We really do need a focus for portals such as data.gov.uk, with its vital 1st principle: "Public data policy and practice will be clearly driven by the public and businesses who want and use the data, including what data is released when and in what form."

Government's need for information, and the Public Task

There is increasing discussion of the public task. This should be defined by what information is needed by government, rather than seeking to find a role for existing suppliers, such as Ordnance Survey.

John Kay, writing in the Financial Times on 28 September, made a fascinating observation:

"If you were a government department pondering the future of the computer industry in the 1970s, you would naturally have turned to IBM for thoughtful experts and presentations. You would not have consulted Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, who were barely out of school, or Michael Dell, who was barely in it. But IBM did not know the future of the industry. If it had known, it would have tried to prevent it. The interests of the industry and of consumers were not only different from those of the dominant business: they were diametrically opposed."

Having defined the public task, Government might sometimes choose to use external private suppliers – but the information it obtains should be put in the public domain for all to use. This is not the case with the recent Public Services Mapping Agreement.

Government bodies – responding to customers' needs

Existing government bodies need to get closer to all users and potential users (as well as government departments) to understand their needs for information – topics, geographical level, timeliness, etc. Quality is not a binary absolute – a dataset may or may not be useful for a particular purpose. The UKSA assessments should focus on improving metadata, rather than deciding that a dataset passes or fails.

Government should also look outwards for possible new sources of information, such as commercial companies, and social media.

DUG's role

Steve asked me to define the benefit of DUG. I'd suggest "It's a forum for bringing together the users and creators of information (both public agencies and commercial companies) to share their knowledge about current and future potential sources."