

Open Data presentation: John Sheridan, Digital Director & Head of Legislation Services, The National Archives

Camilla von Massenbach:

Here now is John Sheridan, as of this month, he is Digital Director of the National Archives. He will be speaking to us about Open Data.

John Sheridan:

Good afternoon everyone. It is a real pleasure to be here. I have worked for the National Archives for just under ten years and up until a couple of months ago, most of my effort and energies has been to provide high quality free public access.

I have a new role and a new job, which is very exciting. There are two challenges we have as organisation, one is to capture, the digital records of government and the other is to find a way in which we can engage with the information that we have.

I come at this very much with a strong open data ethos and ethic, and as part of our own strategy 'archives inspire' - a strong lead in the value of collaboration around historical sources of information.

Now the Government is pretty keen on Open Data and the previous Government was keen on Open Data before that. And as a civil servant I have the opportunity to work for several open data policy initiatives.

You may be wondering why is the Government thinking this way?

What's in it for the UK?

And there are three benefits, writ large. The first is Open Data, that's data that anybody can access, use and share, anybody can access, use and share, is good, for the economy.

When companies reuse government data, or reuse other sources of data and they make products and services, the economy is better.

It is good for society, many of the things you want to understand about the world or do involves bringing together information from different places and connecting with it.

And open data provides the playing field if you like, on which that wonderful game of collaboration and mixing, and buying and searching in all sorts of data can happen.

So it is a big benefit to society.

And also for the environment too. The department of Environment DEFRA, are releasing 8,000 data sets over the next two years to help people

better understand. They are farmers who want to know what the flood plains looks like and so on.

So, really key benefits from this Open Data in general. Now what's genius here is collaboration,

a world where data is in silos... paywalls is a world of missed opportunities and open data is how we provide a way in which whilst retaining ownership, and the government retains ownership of its open data, together with individuals who make available their information, their intellectual properties.

Through licensing, through having a common thought about how the information is made available the collaboration can happen around the data set or around multiple data sets without ownership having to change.

And it's the opportunity for collaboration within sectors and across sectors that's so exciting about the data being, academia, government. We have the chance to work together in a way that was not really possible, around consistent licensing, that will allow sharing, now the UK government has standard licenses for its information. An open data government license, and it's the thing that national archives hold. So much of our material is, when it is being made openly available, it's made available under the open government license and that license has been designed to be interoperable with some of the other licenses people are using for open data.

So you can easily mix some government data with some other data. The thinking is very much that we want people to exploit and use our data and we want them to do that round interoperable licenses that enable collaboration and make sharing easier.

In my previous job as head of Legislation Services, I had lots of success and one of the problems we had was we didn't even have frankly, enough people, to keep track of all the changes that were happening to legislation and particularly after devolution. So when have more parliaments modifying statute books which change more quickly and we didn't have more people to do the work. So we adopted an Open Data operating model. We figured that if people were reusing our data that would have a stake in helping us improve it.

And we created a programme that had participation outside of government, following particularly editorial practices and processes and with some help, to contribute in maintaining the government legislation database.

And that making something that was better for users but also available for other people to reuse to put into their own systems and develop their own services and off that we have seen a number of interesting types of innovation, different types of both commercial products,

academic, research from that common platform. And in particular we found that companies were willing to invest in the common platform. It guaranteed the success, the longevity and the quality of information we have.

And for me that kind of story of participation and collaboration around open data, unpinned by information that can be shared, is an amazing opportunity. And I am really looking forward to further conversations about how to collaborate in open data in the future and I am really happy and I am sticking around, so if you want to chat to me then over some coffee.