

## OFE Comment 25<sup>th</sup> February 2009

### UK Government Announcement - Open source, Open standards and Re-Use: Government Action Plan

Yesterday the UK Government published its long expected update to its policy on Open Source and Open Standards. As someone who has vocally criticised the UK as being a 'laggard in Europe', I am delighted to see it published and warmly welcome it. I congratulate the CIO's team on its production. A survey to be published shortly by [Public Sector Forums](#) at their conference in April will show that one of the issues holding back Open Source adoption in Local Government was 'lack of central leadership' - this announcement is highly timely.

Being realistic it probably doesn't go as far as some other countries, notably the Netherlands, but it is an enormous step forward. No doubt in seeking to avoid the wailing of those still trying to protect the status quo, it is highly pragmatic and practical in its choice of words. Without doubt the headlines will focus on Open Source but actually there is more of interest in that it has accepted the need to avoid lock-in to proprietary solutions, to recognise that lifetime costs must include exit and transition costs, and to require the use of Open Standards. These are exactly the words and actions that OFE and its members have been campaigning for across Europe, as being essential if we are to take advantage of the innovation and cost advantages available now and in the future. Until now, the issue of lock-in has scarcely been mentioned in UK circles, yet previous OFE analysis has suggested up to 90% of the public sector no longer have freedom of choice over next solutions, because of past decisions made. That was a terrible indictment. This new policy should act as the trigger to review that position. The very suggestion that exit and transition costs have to be included up front in the choice of a solution will put in focus just how much cost is associated with 'mere' upgrades, and new alternatives will have a much more level playing field on which to work.

The requirement 'for solutions to comply with open standards' (for interoperability) is probably the single most important first step that the Government can make if it really means business. Elsewhere in Europe this requirement has been dogged by controversy, either over use in a way that suggests something more than going through a formal standardisation process, or a view on license terms. The EC and governments elsewhere are, however, quite right in using the term to define a degree of openness not just of the process but in its resulting use, freely allowing use of any business model – proprietary or open source. Open Standards provide the glue for interoperability between solutions, proprietary and open source, and rightly form a fundamental plank in any Governments plans.

For OFE, it is good to see yet another endorsement of Open Document Formats(ODF). This is yet another confirmation of support by a national government, joining a long list of others. It also supports the use of 'emerging open versions of previously proprietary standards'. PDF is named, correctly since it is already in widespread use, but incidentally incorrectly lists ISO 19005. This is PDF/A (the existing archiving standard) - I think it should be ISO 32000? More controversially OOXML is listed – since no product has been released supporting it this does seem a little premature?

The overall announcement seeks to achieve a level playing field. The policy is a great first step but achieving a level playing field is more than a set of words.

Lock-in occurs not just by the adherence to Open Standards for interoperability, but a whole set of aspects which cover areas such as availability of commercial support, terms and conditions, availability of drivers etc. Across Europe OFE has been leading work in partnership with another national government to analyse this and suggest practical methods by which such lock-in can be avoided. OFE will of course be delighted to make this information freely available to see how it can be used in the UK.

And this is where it gets really difficult. It is excellent that the Policy is accompanied by an Action Plan. Each of the 10 actions listed are challenging and the real test is how each of them will be realised. None more so than in Procurement. This is where fine words need to be turned into practice, where education of users, purchasing officers and suppliers will be as important as written guidance. What monitoring controls will be put in place? What practical support will be made available, by whom? How will this be implemented in major outsourced contracts? Elsewhere the term 'open procurement' has been coined – this is a good phrase which succinctly describes the objective as well as the tools currently to hand. Today, we talk about Open Standards and Open Source, tomorrow we will be talking about SaaS, cloud computing and the accessibility of personal data.

The UK Government has now declared the policy, the sceptics are already saying 'we have heard it all before', 'its nothing more than a reaction to recent comments from the Conservatives', or 'its a reaction to Treasury pressure to make savings'. Certainly little happened in the way of direct action after the previous Policy statement in 2004. So the ball is firmly back in the court of the CIO John Suffolk on how he is going to achieve it and prove the sceptics wrong.

To turn this Policy into practical positive results we all need to give full support to the next steps. OFE for one, will be offering its full and active support, and with its partners and members believes it has much to offer on the practical side. Let the campaigning stop and lets get on with delivering the results.

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