



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report for April 2011 (Germany) – Linking open data and the use of the internet in community governance in Frankfurt

The 'open data' movement has a lot of support in Germany, although there is much concern about the protection of private data. But demand is increasing to make data held by public organisations available for use by citizens individually, but also by organisations, and possibly also to businesses which could come up with useful ways of utilising the data which are currently unrealisable by the public sector itself.

At the same time, using the internet in reaching out to citizens and the community is becoming ever more popular. On one hand it is part of the e-government agenda, enabling faster contact between citizens and various levels of government, but also encompassing a participatory aspect, namely that citizens can engage better with what's happening locally.

There are already projects in Brandenburg which use the internet to gather reports on particular problem spots or citizen concerns in a local authority; using a traffic-light system to report back on progress (see monthly report October 2010). These projects are local authority-led (supported by the *Land* government), but a recent initiative in Frankfurt is going one step further in combining both the open data approach and the community engagement agenda. The initiative 'Frankfurt gestalten: Bürger machen Stadt' could be loosely translated as 'Shaping Frankfurt – citizens make their city' and was brought to life by an academic and citizen-activist who works with the local advisory council in his district of Frankfurt, with the help of like-minded individuals. The city is divided into 16 districts with their own directly elected advisory council, which advises the city council and the administration on all issues relating to the district and has a small budget of one Euro per resident which can be used for specific measures within the area. This is the most local level of representative democracy in the city and as such the first arena for local concerns, but there are complaints that as a consultative organ, the district advisory council does not have much power, and on the other side, that the level of engagement by residents in the districts with their advisory council is quite low. This initiative therefore is truly at citizen level, aiming first of all to increase interest and engagement in local issues and make people aware of what's going on. To this effect, the website of 'Frankfurt gestalten' offers access to maps and data sets which visualise what kind of topics are frequently discussed and what current issues are. It is possible to search by district advisory council, by topics, and by political grouping and what kind of proposals they are submitting. Meanwhile, it has also buy-in and participation from politicians and officers.

Regarding the open data question though, a start has been made with traffic flow information from the city's traffic department which can now be accessed through the site. In general however, there still seems to be reluctance on the side of the city to make access to data easier – namely in a form that can be further processed by software, and not in PDF-files which seem to be a favourite in many German administrations. The point of open data however is the possibility of doing something with the data so that it becomes more accessible and more useful, and this has not yet been achieved in Frankfurt. Other cities, such as Munich, seem to be more open-minded about it, although German activists cite the examples of US and British cities – such as San Francisco, London and its Open Data Store, and Manchester City - as shining beacons which should be followed.

Currently, 'open data' is also one of the themes discussed in the federal parliament's commission on the internet and the digital society which began its work in May 2010. Consisting of 17 members of the federal parliament, 17 experts and an online participation mechanism through which citizens can contribute and which has been designated as the 18th expert, the commission has been deliberating for a year now and interim reports from the currently four project groups – on net neutrality, copyright, data protection and media literacy – have been agreed. The commission will continue for another year until spring 2012. It is however to be expected that the 'open data' demands will continue to be directed at many other areas of government as well, and it remains to be seen if some German cities can reach equal levels to their international counterparts.

Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLGC or CLAIR.