

**Elliott I (Ian)**

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**From:** Gardner S (Stuart)  
**Sent:** 22 November 2004 09:40  
**To:** Bainbridge I (Ian)  
**Cc:** Grzybowski D (David)  
**Subject:** FW: Public Expenditure and Outputs and Scottish GI Strategy

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Dear Stuart Gardner

I apologise for a delay in replying to your email of 4 November in response to my email to Mr Elvidge of 13 October. I have been heavily involved in many other areas of work. But as the attached correspondence indicates, I continue to point out the central importance of including public expenditure and outputs in Geographical Information Strategies. This directly relates to Mr Andy Kerr's Introduction to your own Draft GI Strategy: "Delivering excellent public services is a key objective". Quite so!

You invited comments on your GI strategy before reporting to the AGI (Scotland) conference on 1 December. This procedure may resemble a "Catch 22" situation because, as explained to our Defra Minister (attached Defra411A) the problem with existing panels of this sort (IGGA and AGI) is that they mainly comprise officials operating at technical levels rather than policy directing levels. Therefore they cannot anticipate what many Departments will recognise as a central policy decision of considerable political significance (attached Defra411A in response to Minister's letter at DefraIN11).

No comparable country has been so successful as the UK in keeping functional and territorial choices distinct - and indeed this is probably the central weakness of center-local policy-making in Britain. And the devolved countries may each find it difficult to innovate in this respect in spite of early resolve in the case of Scotland: (FIAG etc). My email of 13 October to Mr Elvidge noted responses on behalf of Mr McConnell and your Finance Office over many years; responses which recognised the importance of the issue but always noting the systems required were still not in place, would take "several years", etc. And yet I also covered this ground with your present Finance Officer, Mr Aldridge, as early as 1986 when we both then agreed there was no serious technical difficulty. As suggested to Defra, I am sure a useful interdepartmental start could be made on a pilot basis at very marginal expense (Defra11A).

And yet, as I put it to Mr Elvidge, public expenditure and outputs (one fundamental matter common to all Departments' work) is still always rigorously excluded from our official Geographical Information Strategies. So this is a central policy issue and moreover a political and constitutional issue of some importance. I have therefore copied my argument to Defra in England to the Department for Constitutional Affairs (attached DCA411B). This welcomes the level of agreement and the progress being made by Defra but placed with the DCA's English responsibility for our "duty to publish" obligations under FOI legislation.

Finally my letter to PS/Lord Falconer refers to my original comments on the early English FOI White Paper as published by the Westminster Public Administration Committee. I also commented in a similar way on your Scottish FOI proposals but my letter to PS/Lord Falconer refers to specific paragraphs of the former so I attach a copy of that publication (attached FOIWP).

Given the central policy and political aspects of this response I am copying it to Mr Andy Kerr MSP, to Mr Elvidge and to Audit Scotland ...and, for information, to the NAO.

Best regards

Des McConaghy

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----- Original Message -----

**From:** [Stuart.Gardner@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Stuart.Gardner@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)  
**To:** [desmc@btinternet.com](mailto:desmc@btinternet.com)  
**Sent:** Thursday, November 04, 2004 3:27 PM  
**Subject:** RE:GIS Policy

Dear Mr McConaghy,

Thank you for your e-mail of 13 October to Mr Elvidge, in which you raised a query over the absence of public expenditure information from the GIS strategy. The correspondence has been passed to myself for response.

07/12/2005

As you are probably aware, the Scottish Executive launched a draft GI strategy for Scotland on 16 September and is actively seeking comment on the content of this document. We will be reporting back on responses to the GI community on 1st December at the Association for Geographic Information (Scotland) annual conference. The end date for comment is 15 December 2004. We then aim to publish a final strategy and implementation programme in March 2005. Your views would be welcome.

The strategy document can be downloaded from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/government/geography.pdf> or a printed version can be requested from [segis@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:segis@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) as can any comments be directed.

Your are correct to note that public expenditure information is not addressed in the strategy. The use of geographic information has developed at different rates between policy areas and public finance is one of many areas where statistical reporting has had more prominence. The GI strategy seeks to develop a common data infrastructure for the use of spatial and statistical information which would enable spatial methods to be applied to those areas that are currently not presented in this way. We would anticipate that by creating a spatial data infrastructure for Scotland, that we will enable many new relationships between information to be identified, based on their common location.

Regards  
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# House of Commons Public Administration Committee

(Published in HC Public Administration Committee (1998), "Your Right to Know", etc., Third Report of Session 1997-98, HC 398-II (Stationery Office, London))

## Government's proposals for a Freedom of Information Act

**Des McConaghy**

**"The mechanics of dissemination should be part of the principle of any Freedom of Information Act" (1).**  
(J A G Griffith, Emeritus Professor of Public Law, L.S.E)

Freedom of Information legislation is a relatively modern concept and so experience of the longer term impact is still limited. But one emerging lesson is that legislation should always incorporate explicit provision for the dissemination of free information. The obscure workings of British constitutionality make this provision especially important. Omission will limit the legislation's great promise for encouraging informed public participation in government. And omission will continue to widen the gap between the information rich and information poor.

I therefore recommend..

- **a core area of publicly-accessible free information for the whole community**
- **a tailored response to social exclusion and information poverty**
- **Online Britain: a co-ordinated public sector online system serving the above**

My comments expand on these three proposals. I also recommend an urgent official interdepartmental review so that Ministers can form a summary view of, (a) the minimum core area of free information that should be available; and (b), arrangements for co-ordinating the dissemination of this material. This is an advisable step prior to the publication of the FOI Bill's Financial and Explanatory Memorandum. It should help to ensure that basic arrangements for dissemination of free information are established as a principle at the Bill's Second Reading.

### **The Proposals of the White Paper**

1. The White Paper is fertile ground. There is a general hope that government itself will take a pro-active role (para.7.6) and there is an acknowledgement that the public will need "user-friendly guides"- and that "effective training of officials" must follow (para.7.4). "Active disclosure" is specifically emphasised (para.2.17) and there is a promise that the Act will impose duties to make certain information available, broadly on the lines of the last Administration's 1994 "*Code of Practice on Access to Government Information*" (para.2.18).

2. So far so good. But these very generalised aspirations leave all matters of content, timing and dissemination to separate Whitehall departments, to non-Ministerial departments, executive agencies and the myriad of public agencies, quangos and local authorities. Without decrying the many separate "open government" forays already made, including the "Citizen's Charter", an uncoordinated approach will increasingly resemble a "tower of Babel"; - an exceedingly fragmented picture unable to provide a reasonably complete view of public provision in any one area of the country, or a holistic grasp of the overall process of government.

### **Defining the Core Area of Free Information**

3. The legislation will firstly “empower people” by granting right of access and, secondly, make “certain information available as a matter of course” (para.2.5). The bulk and whole emphasis of the White Paper is about granting right of access. Of course this is vital. But my concern is with the duty of making information available. This should be a coherent and co-ordinated interdepartmental effort explaining the whole of the Government’s programme. It should be available free and stimulate “user-friendly” scrutiny, participation and feedback.
4. This is the dynamic, modern and positive way to approach “duties to publish information”. It will revolutionise the “obligation” to “release operational information about how public services are run, how much they cost, targets set, expected standards and results”(para.2.18).
5. The task is to bulwark democratic debate while extending it to all levels of the community. Here Britain faces a special need and a more complex challenge than other countries. We are a unitary state with no written constitution, without formal separation of powers and without guaranteed local powers or local institutions. Parliament’s control over spending remains a constitutional myth, our Upper House is an unelected quango and our local democracy now governs only a fraction of local services. Public service is radically uncoordinated at all levels.
6. The system is obscure. It’s Euro boundaries are blurred. The public needs a clearer map.
7. As one example of this obscurity, Britain is the only European State that provides no free leaflets, brochures or posters to explain the overall workings of government. Of course there are academic volumes - and the Stationery Office markets an Official Handbook at £32. But other countries typically provide free pocket handbooks, in several languages, and simplified diagrams or flow charts explaining their governmental and budgetary process. We do not (2).

**It follows that the core area of free information must cover sufficient ground to reveal the overall process of government and its impact on localities. We must avoid a fortuitous collection of ad hoc information initiatives from bits of the public sector.**

8. The Home Office has made a start in the field of community development. Ministers have begun to consider (with the Community Development Foundation, the Library Association and others) what the core area of free information ought to be (3). This work parallels research by a joint CDF/IBM working party on “the impact of new information technology on local communities and the potential for greater social inclusion”(4).
9. Consequently local community networks, resource centres and local community-based IT projects throughout the country have already been surveyed and consulted. This is immensely valuable work. But the effort has been handicapped in two ways....
  - \* **Partial Information:** the local government and community information projects rarely have access to central government departments and their appointed agencies. But these now control most public action and administer most of the main local “life-chance” services
  - \* **Technical Abstraction:** stimulating access techniques and information systems are developed with insufficient emphasis on content and context. When context is addressed it can prompt theoretical speculation rather than practical awareness of the nuts and bolts of overall public sector decision-making.
10. All these community developments need to find their place within a national framework; a national information system. And that can only happen when we have pushed out a co-

ordinated system of free material explaining what Government is doing, and why, and how it is getting on. I return to this in the final section.

### **Social Exclusion & Information Poverty**

11. Many levels of Britain now feel excluded from the political process. Recently the Industry and Parliamentary Trust launched a programme to try to bridge the wide gap of understanding that now exists between business people and political life. In France we find no similar lack of communication between commercial and political elites. At yet another level, university students in other European states show a good general understanding of government in alarming contrast to our own students.

12. The Citizenship Foundation is one of a number of worthy attempts to interest young people. It makes all the right moves - but one suspects it is sometimes aware of a "Catch 22": the more that is known the less the interest. Professor Bernard Crick's recent "Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship" is another recent initiative speaking to the need to improve learning about citizenship, inside (and outside?) the formal curricula. Such initiatives cry out for the sort of dynamic new information systems that young people relish; interactive systems that open up the actual political process in a clear and intelligible way.

13. Recently the Lord Chancellor summed up the present state of affairs, "The legislative process is a mystery; and (the) only idea of the work of Parliament is bad tempered shouting during Prime Minister's questions"(5). And as a Demos Report put it, "For many young people politics has become something of a dirty word"(6). Everywhere there is alienation.

14. But it is in areas of social deprivation that information poverty and disenchantment are at their most extreme. Although people in these areas may depend on the full range of government services at every turn, there is little interest in a state apparatus that, paradoxically, seems too remote to have relevance to them. The only face of authority is a massive collection of fragmented initiatives and agencies. Just where reliable accountability and community are most needed - nobody has a clear picture of what is going on.

15. The Government's "Social Exclusion Unit" and the new array of Education, Employment and Health Action Zones may yet deliver a more "holistic" response in such areas. If so they and their clients will still need to plug in to a "holistic" information base, a national system that can cross bureaucratic and territorial boundaries and plant experiment and innovation where it really belongs, in mainstream government. Because these people in the "inner city" are not some feckless lot that have chosen social exclusion. They are excluded.

16. They are excluded because among all human deprivations information poverty is the most subtle but also the most crippling. Information poverty is social exclusion. It is the ultimate barrier to betterment. At this level the "Freedom of Information" Act is no magical gateway to democratic choice. On the contrary it best helps those already in the know; the already powerful who have access to the "usual channels", the expertise, the computing power and the resources. Only the most deliberate and pro-active dissemination of free information can possibly redress this imbalance; an imbalance that will otherwise divide the nation.

### **Online Britain: a co-ordinated public sector system**

17. How can this be done? Modern technology triggered the new question marks about the state and now the Government's use of information technology has a key role in finding the answers; and - in Tony Blair's words - "deepening the trust between government and the

governed". The ease with which average citizens should soon be able to participate via a public sector online system is a revolutionary opportunity. But first two important questions...

- how will the Act clarify the scope of operational information which public authorities will have a duty to disseminate without charge (para 2.18)?
- will the Cabinet Office ensure a reasonable co-ordination of disseminated material and online services across Whitehall Departments, and their subservient agencies, and will the Act encourage standardisation when requiring other public bodies to disclose operational information?

18. The White Paper improves on the earlier 1992 "Right to Information Bill" by including the duty to cover operational information. But officials still fight shy of a co-ordinated approach across Whitehall and, since this is crucial for future networking, one should perhaps heed a general warning from David Walker. "The problem with the networks that could link such official bodies is not technical. It is not even financial. It belongs to a way of seeing government through the eyes of officials and civil servants rather than those of the citizen"(7).

19. There is concern, too, that the previous Administration's interest in seeking a market return on official "tradeable" data - continued by the Government (para 2.35) - led to contracts with commercial information providers in matters where public bodies could be said to have a duty to publish. This became a somewhat murky area and the Labour shadow minister had promised a review. I conclude, as above, that there is a prior obligation to clarify all areas of public concern where the public has the right to free access to information (para 2.28 to 2.38).

20. The most urgent requirement is a clear concept of how that whole body of publicly-accessible free information can be accessed to bulwark public participation, reduce cynicism and encourage informed interest in the political process. We must have a model in our mind of one simple brochure of the overall process (paragraph 7 above) guiding annual online coverage of all budgetary, legislative and operational information from each Queen's Speech onwards. We should envisage any citizen accessing any part of that system using state-of-the-art technology. I would be glad of any opportunity to expand on this.

21. Finally, some campaigners have expressed reservations about systems so dedicated to coverage of the Government's programme, objecting that it provides the Administration with unacceptable opportunities for manipulation of public opinion. But there is no other starting point: Government - actual government - is our topic. Fortunately the constitutional package includes a pledge to set up an independent National Statistical Service and although "independence" is not explicitly defined in the Green Paper (8) I hope a Government so dedicated to decentralisation may devolve that function to Parliament as originally intended.

**Des McConaghy 27 February 1998 Tel. 01514276668 email desmc@btinternet.com**

(1) correspondence; J A G Griffith, 10.02.96. (2) I surveyed - SO, ONS, HC, cf. Hansard Society; "It needs to be done"; Professor Phillip Norton, "There is a gap"! (3) correspondence; Minister of State, Home Office, 18.08.97. (4) for example; "The Net Result: Social Inclusion in the Information Society"; Report of the National Working Party on Social Inclusion; IBM/CDF, IBM 1997. (5) Lord Irvine. Speech to the Citizenship Foundation, Law Society; 27.01.98. (6) Helen Wilkinson and Geoff Mulgan. "Freedom's Children", Demos 1995. (7) David Walker. "A Vision of Whitehall on the Net"; Independent 19.08.97. (8) Treasury. "A Matter of Trust" (Consultation Paper on Independent Statistical Service); Stationery Office, February 1998.

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20 November 2004

I understand from David Raraty that you deal with FOI matters at the NAO and so I hope you might like to see the attached paper published by the Public Administration Select Committee following the 1997 White Paper: enclosed.

I am resurrecting this now because it placed “duty to publish” in the widest constitutional setting and suggested a pro-active national approach to a core area of free online information. This could still provide a rational, useful and economical framework for public authorities that now have to gear up to the general task of responding to ad hoc requests for information.

I also attach my current correspondence with the DCA and Defra which very specifically refers to the opportunities that are now provided by Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and to the strange omission of any reference to public expenditure decisions and outputs in our official GI Strategies so far.

I had earlier copied my letter to DCA to Raymond Fawcett (re NAO’s recent work on public participation and social exclusion). But apart from my proposals general relevance to FOI you may feel that Mark Davies would be interested in the e-Government aspect and the suggested use of ICT and GIS.

Des McConaghy

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PS/ The Rt Hon Lord Falconer of Thoroton  
Department for Constitutional Affairs  
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19 November 2004

Dear Sir

I hope Lord Falconer received my letter of 19 October with a copy of my FOI paper, as originally published by the Public Administration Select Committee.

Then on 1 November, I also noted the NAO's continuing interest – and that I had circulated the ODPM's SEU and NRU divisions. However my additional specific proposal to now provide online details of public expenditure in our Geographical Information System has clear benefits for officials and for the public understanding of domestic public spending and outputs across the board.

I now attach a very positive response from Alun Michael at Defra and my reply welcoming Defra's commitment .... and agreeing about the urgent need for an *interdepartmental* policy initiative. It notes why I thought the FOI "duty to publish" was a clear opportunity for this - hence my approach to Lord Falconer.

Perhaps I could also finally refer Lord Falconer to paragraphs 5, 6, 7 and 21 of my original 1998 FOI Paper? An interdepartmental pilot can easily cover the basic features set out and, as earlier pilots have demonstrated, in an extremely attractive way. "The public needs a clearer map." I am copying this to Defra.

**Yours faithfully**

**Des McConaghy**



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13 November 2004

**From the Minister for Rural Affairs and Local Environmental Quality**  
The Rt Hon Alun Michael MP

*Alan Asks,*

Thank you for your letter of 19 October, enclosing a copy of your letter to Lord Falconer on the subject of linking public expenditure and outputs to geographic information.

I agree that such information is necessary for proper accountability but there are complications in respect of some 'factual' information and the existing systems that we inherited are not configured to provide this analysis. I want to have that capacity available to us as quickly as possible and Defra will include this as part of the capabilities that will be implemented in future upgrades of our corporate financial systems. We plan to link together data from our financial systems with geographic information and analysis provided by our Spatial Information Programme (SPIRE).

One example we are currently implementing that addresses the type of query you mention is for funding payments made through the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) to be analysed by Administrative Areas.

I think your point is one for government as a whole since it makes sense for a standard approach to be adopted across government. There is increasing interest in unified approaches to use of geographic information and I have asked my officials to raise your questions at the national GI panel to advise government on GI issues and strategy.

*Yours sincerely*  
*Alun Michael*

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19 November 2004

Many thanks for your letter of 13 November about linking public expenditure and outputs to geographical information systems.

I am glad you agree “such information is necessary for proper accountability”. I also welcome the news this will be included in future upgrades of your Defra corporate financial systems, and that a start has been made with your RPA.

You also agree it makes sense “for a standard approach across government”. Defra is ahead but the benefits to public and departments will be multiplied exponentially once there is a joined up approach. I am quite sure a useful *interdepartmental* start could be made on a pilot basis at marginal expense.

It is good to know you have asked officials to raise this at the national GI panel. I hope that panel will be appointed soon and clearly oriented to policies in the national interest, such as the above. One problem with the existing IGGI panel (and AGI) is they operate at technical rather than policy directing levels and so they cannot anticipate departmental policy to include spending and outputs.

That is why I wrote to Lord Falconer about the “duty to publish” aspects of our FOI legislation. Defra already knows the advantages. But FOI legislation offers all departments an opportunity to use GIS in a similar way; to spell out what is being spent and where – and thus to generally strengthen public accountability.

I am copying this note to Lord Falconer.

**Des McConaghy**