

# Conclusions and recommendations of the National Audit Office

## Open information and utilisation of government information

When performing its public authority duties, central government compiles, for example, location, weather, real property, foodstuff, personal and company data in its registers and other datasets. Public authorities have started opening their datasets to the public by providing links, interfaces and viewing access for their use. Information on the datasets that have been opened can be found, for example, on the Avoindata.fi portal and the authorities' own websites.

The re-use of public sector information creates opportunities, among other things, for new business, the prevention of detrimental social phenomena, and citizens' influence and participation. Both the State of Finland and the European Union aim at achieving such impacts and finance their implementation. It is therefore important to take into account the benefits and costs following from the opening of datasets when decisions are made on the creation, modification, maintenance, opening, and closing down of datasets.

Central government's role as an active promoter of information re-use was not paid appropriate attention to when directive 2003/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on the re-use of public sector information (PSI Directive) was considered implemented through the Act on the Openness of Government Activities. The Act applies to public authorities when they promote openness and a good information management practice, but it does not encourage the re-use of datasets. Nor is attention paid to central government's role as an active promoter of information re-use in the new Information Management Act, approved in the summer of 2019. It is therefore justified to consider whether the authorities have a sufficient incentive to see to the quality of their datasets and make them available to trade and industry, society and citizens. It is left to the responsible authorities' discretion to decide how actively Finland will open datasets, as EU member states are required to do under the PSI Directive.

Many questions related to making datasets available are linked with the comprehensive planning and management of central government's processes and information management. Accordingly, they need to be coordinated by means of goals, resources and processes.

- This calls for uniform management and description of data, secure data processing, and interoperability of information systems and resources. The Information Management Act, approved in the summer of 2019, is the first act that includes provisions on these issues.
- Other government information supporting the use of open information, such as information that is subject to restrictions for use, may also prove to be important for the information user, even though its accuracy and comprehensiveness were compromised.
- The utilisation of datasets is promoted by uniform criteria for the interoperability of the content, specifications and legal aspects.
- The adaptability of the information content can make datasets suitable for shared use to the extent that other authorities, for example, can abandon their own datasets.

- The use of datasets is affected by new kinds of challenges related to information utilisation, such as continuous data provision (24/7) and utilisation of the latest technology.

Planning, implementation and monitoring of effective and efficient utilisation of public authorities' datasets requires comprehensive, comparable, up-to-date and sufficiently accurately described information on the datasets. At present, such information is not available. Since the end of the Open Data Programme 2013–2015, information on the status of the opening of datasets has not been compiled systematically. The count of datasets, on which the follow-up is currently based, does not give a particularly good picture of the relevance and opening status of datasets. This approach does not take into account how the data opened relates to the parent dataset quantitatively and qualitatively, and how the dataset relates to other datasets and their open data. In addition, public authorities have different views on, for example, the purpose, values, strategy, data protection, and financial impacts of government operations. For one authority, responsible operations may mean refraining from opening datasets, whereas for another, it may mean responsibility to provide society with easy access to information capital obtained with public funds, and willingness to improve the quality of the datasets.

The budgeting procedures currently applied in the central government operations and finances do not take sufficient account of the fact that datasets are a significant resource for public services and social functions. The level of appropriations that central government has used and keeps using for the building and maintenance of large datasets is high in relation to the net revenue from the sale of information contained in them. Even small charges collected for the use of datasets have proved to reduce the use of data, and the benefits of the use of data are not limited to financial ones. It is therefore justified to examine the costs and benefits of datasets more broadly than per agency and institution from the perspective of budget balance.

There are many kinds of threats that make risk management and other systematic procedures necessary both when the opening of datasets is planned and implemented and after the opening. The following are examples of such threats:

- Many datasets contain personal data, the processing of which - particularly with new technology - may pose a high risk to an individual's rights and freedom.
- There are security risks involved in the opening of datasets and open data if more detailed information becomes available in the dataset after the decision to open it.
- Misleading information can be made available in a public authority's name with the aim to influence.

Based on a survey made in the audit, nine out of twelve ministries (including the Prime Minister's Office) assessed that the goal set in the Open Data Programme 2013–2015 had been achieved either well or very well in their administrative branch. The goal was to make the most significant public datasets available online by 2020, in machine-readable format, free of charge, under clear terms of use, and observing data protection and other legal restrictions. The opening of datasets has been prevented particularly by the confidentiality of information, the costs caused by the opening, and the risk of losing revenues.

## Recommendations of the National Audit Office

1. The Ministries should introduce a systematic procedure for providing administrative branch-specific information on central government's datasets, their contents, the opening status and plans, the terms for re-use of information referred to in the PSI Directive, and similar relevant issues.
2. The Ministry of Finance should ensure that information on central government datasets, their contents, the opening status and plans, the terms for re-use of information referred to in the PSI Directive, and similar relevant issues are compiled and made available in order to ensure that the information is authentic and easy to find.
3. In the operational and financial planning referred to in Section 12 (1216/2003) of the State Budget Act (423/1988), and the related budget regulations, the Ministry of Finance should introduce procedures for planning the setting up, maintenance and use of central government datasets in a financially appropriate manner, taking into account the benefits and costs for the national economy, society and government.
4. In cooperation with other ministries, the Ministry of Finance should coordinate and develop the central government processes and the shared use of datasets to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the use of central government resources, and to ensure sufficient data protection and information security. The ministries should ensure in their administrative branches that factors promoting the uniform opening and use of datasets are taken into account in legislative and other projects related to data acquisition, provision, retention and use.
5. Guidelines should be prepared under the leadership of the Ministry of Finance on how to convert information to be protected into information that can be opened according to a defined process, in an adequate manner in view of risk management, observing ethical aspects.