Sharing data for better services

In 2010, the cities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area began sharing public data for anyone to use freely. These open datasets, available through a web platform (www.hri.fi), make it possible for citizens to develop applications and follow public decision making.

Why open data?

Helsinki Metropolitan Area consists of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen. Their decision to open up public data through Helsinki Region Infoshare (HRI) was motivated by a desire to better connect with citizens and improve the quality of public services.

The more data available to citizens and stakeholders, the better they can develop informed opinions about, and understand the thinking behind, public decision making. Data can be used in many ways. For example, developers can create applications that make public services more accessible and convenient, and researchers can analyse datasets.

Types and uses for data

The service has so far opened up a good 1,000 different datasets, including data on public transport, public decision making, public service points, maps, statistics and, more recently, detailed statistical data on schools, wellbeing and social services, historical maps, and aerial photos. Geo-coded data is frequently requested.

In 2011, Helsinki City Council adopted an electronic case management system, Ahjo. This means a paperless office for 5,000 city officials and decision makers. All of these documents are available publicly. The interface gives access to agendas and minutes from the city council, city board and various committees. More decision making data will soon be available.

> " Open data helps us to renew our ways of working and our whole society. "
>
> *Tanja Lahti, project manager, City of Helsinki Urban Facts*

cities in action

March 2014

where: Helsinki Metropolitan Area, Finland
what: knowledge society
when: 2010+

An example of an app developed using HRI data is 'Ahjo Explorer', which gives access to all the public decisions concerning the city of Helsinki right to your Windows phone.

Another is 'Blindsquare', designed to help blind people navigate the city. Other apps have been designed around public transport and services for tourists, amongst others.

The advantage of such apps is that they make using public services easier and more accessible for citizens, improving quality of life and satisfaction, having a positive impact on the city, and creating new businesses and jobs.

The development of HRI

HRI was developed by the four cities, in collaboration with the Forum Virium Helsinki and SITRA, the Finnish innovation fund, with financial support from the Finnish ministry of finance.

In 2010-2012, the project concentrated on developing the web platform, including a data catalogue, guidance on opening data and a gallery of applications that can be created with the data. The platform was refined in 2013 and fully functioning by 2014. Its aim is to encourage stakeholders to open up more data and promote the usage of unlocked data sets.

The startup phase cost around €820,000 while the 2013 budget was €270,000. When the project enters the maintenance phase, it is expected to cost around €60,000 a year. Development projects will be financed separately.

Sharing best practices

Opening public data does not necessarily come naturally to public administrations. This was one of the challenges faced in developing HRI. Now, HRI is working to improve understanding of the value of opening public data and encourages member cities to do this as standard practice.

Each member city within HRI has its own contact person who continually monitors and identifies data that could be published. Anyone can give feedback on the data and suggest specific data they would like to see published.

HRI shares its experiences internationally, for example through the EU Open Cities project, in which Helsinki was a partner.

HRI has received extensive recognition both at home and abroad, including winning the European Commission's 2013 prize for innovation in public administration. It was also shortlisted for the 2013 EUROCITIES 'smart governance' award.

HRI has published a guidebook, 'Helsinki Region Infoshare, 2 years of open public data', which tells the story of establishing HRI and the emergence of the open data phenomenon in Finland.

The book is available here: www.hri.fi/2years.

"An open interface to every decision making system in Finnish municipalities would allow Finns to follow the issues discussed and the decisions being made in their own municipalities, for example by using Ahjo Explorer."

Jouni Tiainen, developer of Ahjo Explorer