

Public Sector Remix

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Public Sector Remix Proposes Open Data, Open Standards, Open Source

The public sector in New Zealand is looking at how public agencies around the world have adapted their procurement policies to get better value for the taxpayer. Many countries share the New Zealand Government's priorities: improve public services, lift productivity, and manage costs.

To help achieve this, the Government's procurement reform programme aims to deliver cost savings, build procurement capability and capacity, enhance New Zealand business participation in government procurement, and improve procurement governance.

The New Zealand Open Source Society today announced development of a draft *Public Sector Remix* policy to accelerate adoption of open data, open standards, and free open source software in the public sector. The aim is to align government software procurement practices with wider policy objectives.

The Remix project involves a number of central, regional and local government agencies working together to run trials using free software for common desktop tasks.

The President of the Society, Don Christie, said, "When the participants compared notes about why free software has made limited progress on public sector desktops, they agreed that procurement policies tilt the playing field in favour of proprietary software. The public sector has had a policy for some years to consider free open source software alongside proprietary solutions, but in practice this isn't happening on the desktop."

Current policy assumes that software procurement involves buying a licence from a vendor. "Policy settings shape purchasing behaviours," said Christie. "Free software doesn't fit the Procrustean bed of current policy and taxpayers are missing out on the economic benefits."

The Remix project found overseas governments see using free open source software as a way to save money and improve service. It increases interoperability between systems, reduces supplier dependence, and promotes economic innovation. A study of local authorities in the UK found that 20%–40% of their IT budget goes on licence fees for proprietary software.

"If Treasury wants to make a 30% saving, one option is not to pay any licence fees at all," said Christie.

“Some of the overseas work is truly inspiring,” he said. “Neelie Kroes, European Union Competition Commissioner, says it best. ‘When open alternatives are available, no citizen or company should be forced or encouraged to use a particular company’s technology to access government information. No citizen or company should be forced or encouraged to choose a closed technology over an open one, through a government having made that choice first.’”

The project saw no need to re-invent the wheel. “We picked up the work that countries like Denmark, Holland and the United Kingdom have done and put it into a New Zealand context, aligned with the Government’s objectives,” said Christie. “It delivers what Bill English calls ‘inside out government.’”

Participating agencies propose a 5 point action plan for ensuring that New Zealand Government Agencies actively and fairly assess free open source software alternatives.

“The big emerging idea is that open data standards are not enough,” Christie said. “We need open processes too. This means using free open source software to access and share our data. Productivity gains are not just for government, but for everyone who deals with government.”

To learn more about the *Public Sector Remix* project and the proposed policy, call Don Christie on 0274 707 814.

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