Open Government Case Study: Charities Register

Purpose of agency

The Charities Commission has responsibility under the Charities Act 2005 for registering entities seeking charitable status; monitoring their activities; receiving annual returns; providing good governance and management education and support to the sector; advising the government on charity-related issues; and promoting public trust and confidence in the charity sector.

What high value public data has been released for re-use

Data about NZ registered charities available online for open re-use

The online Charities Register, providing information about over 25,000 registered charities, now offers its data for re-use under a Creative Commons BY licence. Previously it offered single search results, and the Commission regularly received requests for more extensive results. Now it is updated daily and gives details about areas of operation, sector categories, activities, beneficiaries, annual financial position and performance, officers and charities they are associated with.

The public can query and download results online in a CSV text file. Applications can access, query and retrieve machine readable results in XML formats or CSV text files. Neither mode of access requires authentication or subscription (intentionally minimising barriers).

Release rationale

Gives a full description of the charities sector

- Charities Register information is key to public trust and confidence in the charity sector
- the Register information provides a picture of the sector that has never been seen before
- access to the data will enable researchers and others to help the small Commission to support the large sector
- through access to the data, others can help the Commission build a strong and effective charitable sector
- the Register provides an evidence base for government and non-government policy formulation

Risk mitigation

Spam - opening up the data would make (already) publicly available email addresses accessible in bulk. The Commission was concerned about the potentially negative impact this could have on charities and on its own relationship with the sector. It concluded that the positive benefits of opening up the data far outweighed this concern. The Commission mitigated this risk by preparing the charity sector for the possibility of spam. It reminded the sector of its rights under the law, and publicised its options if it received spam email.

Perceived risks about opening up the data outweighed by the positive wider benefits

Data Integrity - the data is provided to the Commission by the charities themselves. The Commission has limited control over its quality, and cannot systematically verify its accuracy. Inaccuracies in the data could affect the reputation of the Commission and the Register, leading to reduced public trust and confidence. The Commission concluded that having the data available in a useful and re-usable format was far more valuable than not making it available at all. It is expected that the quality of data provided by charities will improve as they see benefits flow from its use, and become more aware of the public visibility of their data.

Cost and timeframe

Project completed in under 1 year for just over $100,000

The open data API cost $55,000 (to design and implement). The Advanced Search web interface cost $47,000. The project began with an initial workshop in August 2010, and went live with both the web service and advanced search website on 2 June 2011.

Economic and social impacts

New applications and services use charities data

- Student Job Search – volunteer portal (under construction). When charities sign up with SJS to receive volunteers, the SJS web application will verify the charity is a registered charity
- KulaCauses.com – US based portal enabling the donation of loyalty rewards as cash to charitable causes, opening NZ charities to a global pool of potential donors (currently in beta).
- The Southern Trust - connection to the Register API from their internal application

Core resource for sustainability and risk assessment

- Perpetual Trust Ltd (financial advisors and mentors) can perform a needs analysis of the charity sector to improve its financial resilience.
- Funders and charities can see overlaps and gaps in resources being spent on beneficiaries in any geographical region, or compare regional equity.
- A Dunedin social services advocate used data to analyse and publicise the impact of government funding cuts on the sector

Transparency and democratic impacts

Charities register is an authoritative evidence base

- Families Commission and Ministry of Social Development – information about charities providing care and support for families and children and young people in different regions
- universities and post-graduate students carrying out research on the charitable sector
- news media use data from the Register to verify and add to stories involving registered charities.

Efficiency impacts

Government agencies use charities data in their core service delivery

- Inland Revenue and NZ Police can risk profile across the charitable sector
- additional intelligence for Police cases
- funders can see which charities are operating for which causes, and which has received private or government grants
- Manawatu District Council changed community support staff based on evidence in this data

Charities data supports cross-sector service delivery

- Corrections - Community Service group use data to identify charities to approach
- the New Zealand Third Sector Educational Trust is using the data to understand the charitable sector's need for financial education
- Pareto Fundraising use the data to inform fundraising strategy development