Publication schemes - survey report

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an online survey to gather the experiences of the first group of Scottish public authorities offered the opportunity to adopt the Commissioner's new Model Publication Scheme 2011 (MPS).

Key findings:

- 97% would recommend the MPS to other authorities.

- 37% of authorities are publishing more information than before as a direct result of the MPS – this is predominately information about governance, decision-making, management of resources and procurement.

- The main reasons authorities adopt the MPS are to show that they are adopting best practice and making publication schemes more accessible to the public, rather than ease of adoption or to avoid the Commissioner's approval process.

- Most respondents who had previously created a publication scheme of their own design for their public authority said that it had been less work to adopt the MPS than create a "bespoke" scheme. The MPS had also made it easier, in many cases, to secure internal approval for publication of information.

Introduction and Background

This report presents the findings from an online survey conducted in July 2011 to gather the experiences of Scottish public authorities which had been offered the Commissioner's new Model Publication Scheme 2011 for adoption.

All Scottish public authorities are under a duty[1] to adopt and maintain a publication scheme which has the approval of the Scottish Information Commissioner. The first Scottish publication schemes were approved in 2004 and since then the Commissioner has operated a four year programme so that each year a group of public authority schemes (by sector) are reviewed and renewed. To date, authorities have had the option of adopting a model scheme developed by a representative public sector group or submitting a scheme of their own design (a "bespoke" scheme) for approval.

In early 2011, following a review, the Commissioner introduced a new approach to publication schemes. The aims of the revised approach are to:

- encourage authorities to publish as much information proactively as possible
- reduce the work involved for authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities
- refocus the Commissioner's staff resources to ensure compliance with good practice.

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[1] Section 23 of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002

Key to this revised approach is the Model Publication Scheme (MPS). The Commissioner developed this scheme by drawing together best practice from model publication schemes developed by representative organisations. The MPS has the Commissioner's approval and is supported by accompanying guidance and templates. The MPS is ready for adoption without amendment and authorities have to produce a guide to the information they make available through the scheme. It is essentially both an "off the peg" solution for authorities and a way of creating greater consistency across Scotland's public sector.

The MPS was offered to all authorities that were due to renew their publication schemes this year (those listed in Part 7 of Schedule 1 of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 and publicly owned companies). Therefore this year's tranche of publication scheme adoptees have been piloting the MPS and their experience is informing the Commissioner's approach to publication schemes for the future. This survey collects the views of authorities which had adopted or were in the process of adopting, the MPS in July 2011.

Methodology

The survey was provided on the SurveyMonkey online service. The survey was designed to ensure that only relevant questions were asked of respondents. For example, respondents who had not adopted the MPS were directed to a question about the reasons they had decided against using it, rather than to the full set of survey questions. The questionnaire is attached at Appendix 1 of this report.

An email was sent out to 77 named contacts from public authorities, inviting them to complete a short questionnaire by following a website link.

36 respondents started the survey, with 31 completing the full questionnaire (40% response rate).

The majority (97%) of survey respondents had already adopted, or were adopting, the MPS. Only one respondent did not intend to adopt the MPS (because they felt the MPS was not suitable for the authority).

## Why authorities decided to adopt the MPS

Respondents were asked why their authority had decided to adopt the MPS - by ranking factors in terms of their importance in the decision (1 = Very important, 5 = not important).The following chart shows the factors respondents rated 1 and 2 (1 = very important) in the decision to adopt the MPS:

Most important factors in decision to adopt MPS
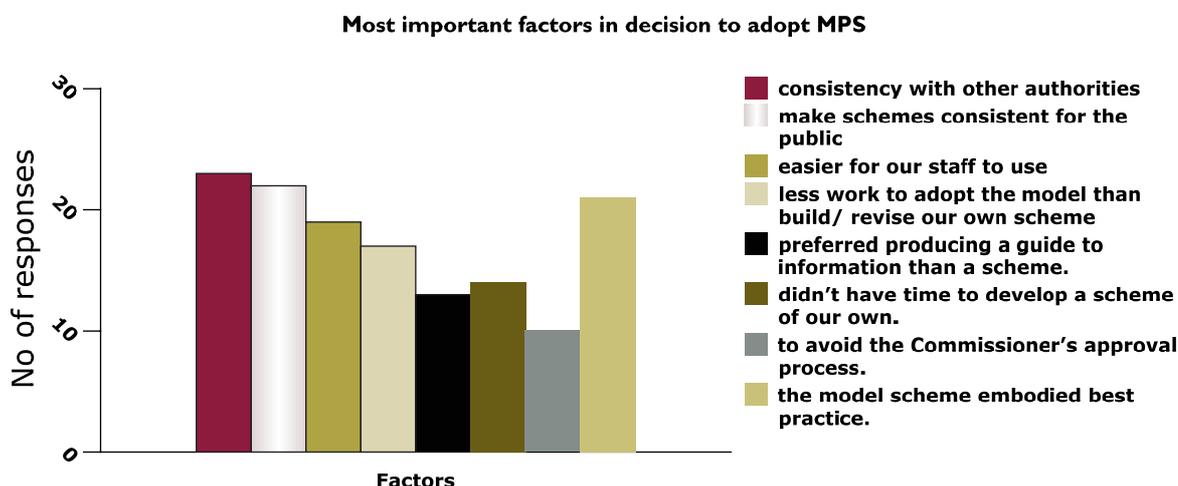
The following chart shows the factors respondents rated 4 and 5 (5 = not important)

Least important factors in decision to adopt MPS
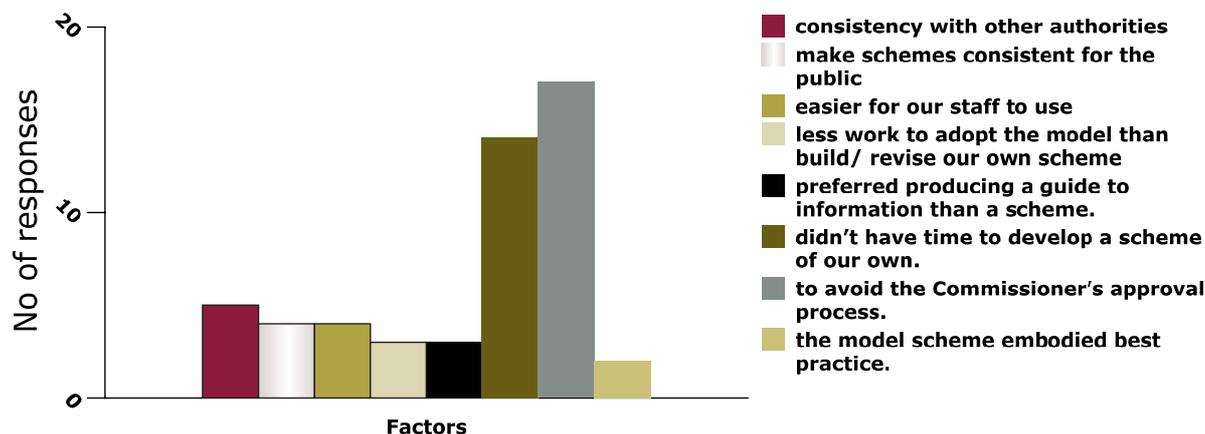
Responses to this question indicate that public authorities are most attracted to the opportunities presented by the MPS to show that they are adopting best practice and making publication schemes more accessible to the public. Their decision to use the MPS is less affected by other features of the MPS, such as ease of adoption or avoiding the Commissioner's approval process.

One respondent commented, "The SIC had completed the bulk of the work and it was far easier (and led to greater transparency) to adopt than create". This suggests that it was important to authorities that the scheme **both** meets high level objectives and is straightforward to use. This view was echoed by many respondents in their comments later in the questionnaire.

Respondents' views were divided on the relative merits of producing a guide to information rather than a publication scheme. This issue would merit further discussion with authorities when the Commissioner begins to monitor guides in the autumn.

Experience of the model scheme

The 24 respondents who had previously created a bespoke publication scheme for their public authority were asked to compare the experience of creating a bespoke scheme with that of adopting the MPS. Their responses are shown in the following chart.

Adopting the model scheme compared with preparing a bespoke scheme

less work: 17 (71%)

don't know: 1 (4%)
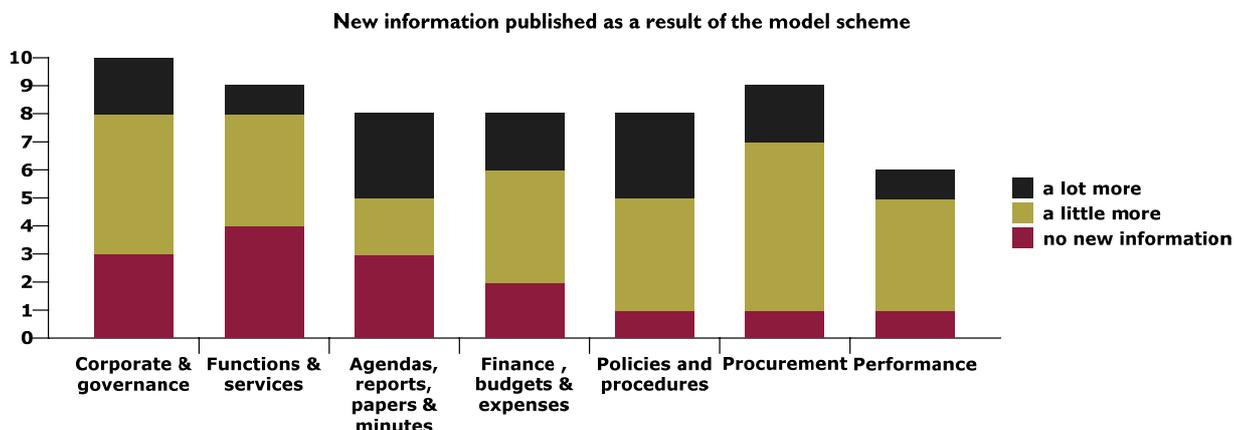
more work: 1 (4%)

about the same: 5 (21%)
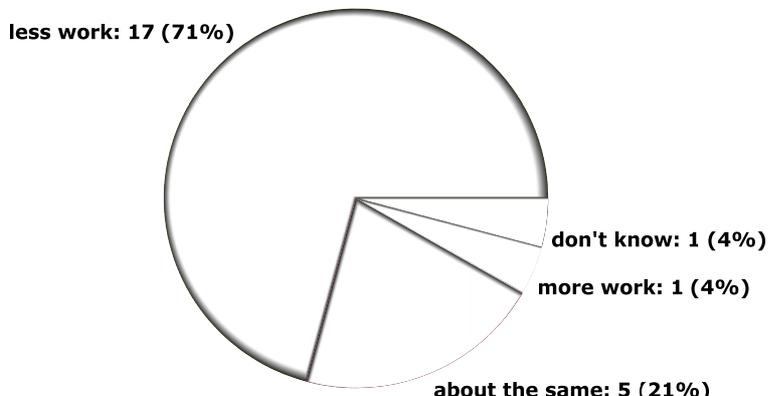
Almost three quarters of respondents had found the work associated with adopting the MPS to be less than creating a bespoke scheme. There were side benefits too: one respondent commented that it was much easier to gain approval from the Management Team than had been the case with a bespoke scheme; another said that although it had been more work, it "enabled us to engage in a more open and accessible fashion which we had been seeking to do for some time."

New information published

63% of respondents said that there had been no change in the amount of information that their authorities publish in order to adopt the MPS, but 11 authorities (37% of all respondents), said their authorities had had to publish more information than before.

Those respondents whose authorities were publishing more information were then asked to say which types of new information were now published that had not been before. The following table sets out their responses:

New information published as a result of the model scheme

Legend:
- a lot more (black)
- a little more (olive)
- no new information (dark red)

This chart, of course, reflects findings from a very small sample. However, it is interesting to note that as a result of the MPS, these authorities are making more information available, in particular in relation to how their organisations are run; how they make decisions; how they manage resources and how they procure goods and services. Eight out of the 11 authorities also said the scheme had made it easier to persuade colleagues to publish the new information, bearing out the earlier comment about Management Team approval. One respondent said "This has been a bugbear for us and the scheme has provided the levers required to get the information on to the web. It is an ongoing process but we have already published more than had been done in the past with regard to governance".

Comments on the MPS materials

When asked for their views about changes required to the MPS following the pilot project, respondents suggested:

- The addition of a section to the introduction to describe the FOI background to the organisation and which abbreviations are used in the document. [This comment is presumed to relate to the template guide to information rather than the MPS itself.]

- Tightening up the wording of the MPS to make clear who "we" and "the authority" are.

The Commissioner's guidance on the MPS provides a list of information he would expect authorities to publish under each of the classes of information, **if they hold it**. All of the respondents who had adopted / were adopting the MPS had used this list to compile their guides to information. 77% said that the list was about right, while 23% thought it was too ambitious or too detailed. Several respondents related tailoring the list for their organisation (as the Commissioner's guidance suggests) as the list included a lot of information that they did not hold. On balance, therefore, it is concluded that the length of the list of types of information should not be significantly altered.

One respondent suggested that the difference between some of the categories could be clarified. Another felt that the guidance could be more explicit about encouraging authorities to publish more information (the list approach might constrain the information that should be released).

Final comments

97% of respondents said they would recommend the MPS to other authorities. Comments included:

"We found the Model useful when developing our Guide. The Model Scheme will also provide a consistent approach and make it easier to access information."

"Best practice model with good guidance about the content required in each class."

"A consistent and very quick approach to producing a scheme."

"Easy to use, easy to adapt, saved time."

"It made the whole process easier and more structured. I am sure it will add value to both authorities (less time having to compile [a scheme] and introduce good practice in what to share) and to users who will be able to look for similar information from a range of authorities."

"It provides a structured step by step guide."

The single respondent who would not recommend the MPS to other authorities said that, apart from shortening the Commissioner's approval process, it neither reduced the amount of work required nor improved on the authority's previous scheme.

One respondent (who works for a large authority) pointed out that it was difficult to draw conclusions about the MPS from the experience of using it for (small) publicly owned companies. This respondent anticipated that a lot more work would be required to ensure a large authority met the MPS than just reviewing it within the existing model scheme for the sector.

Conclusions

The survey results indicate an overwhelmingly positive experience of the MPS by the authorities in the pilot group. 97% of them would recommend the MPS to other authorities.

Authorities adopt the MPS because it shows good practice and makes information more accessible for the public. However, it also has benefits for authorities too in terms of ease of use. The MPS has reduced the work involved for authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities.

The MPS has had a positive impact in increasing the amount of information published proactively by authorities which have adopted it. Therefore the MPS has met the objective to encourage authorities to publish as much information proactively as possible.

The Questionnaire

Introduction

The Scottish Information Commissioner would like to hear your experiences of our new approach to publication schemes – what did we get right; what could we improve?

The survey should take no more than a few minutes of your time.

About your authority's scheme

This section looks at the choice your authority made – bespoke or model scheme

Qu1   Which of the following statements applies to your authority?

- o   We have adopted the Model Publication Scheme 2011 (go to Qu3)
- o   We are in the process of adopting the Model Publication Scheme 2011 (go to Qu3)
- o   We have decided not to adopt the Model Publication Scheme 2011(go to Qu2)

About your authority's choice

Qu2   Why did you decide not to adopt the model scheme?

- o   We didn't know about it (Go to Qu15)
- o   We didn't think it was suitable for the authority (Go to Qu 16)
- o   We thought it would be easier to amend our existing bespoke scheme (Go to Qu 16)
- o   Other (please specify)

Why you adopted the scheme

Qu 3   Please rank each of the following factors in terms of their importance in your decision to adopt the model publication scheme 1= very important, 5 = not important

	1	2	3	4	5
We wanted to be consistent with other public authorities who were adopting the model	o	o	o	o	o
If all authorities use the same model scheme, publication schemes will be more accessible to the public	o	o	o	o	o
We thought it would be easier for our staff to use	o	o	o	o	o
We thought it would be less work to adopt the model than build our own publication scheme from scratch or revise an existing scheme	o	o	o	o	o
We liked the idea of producing a guide to information rather than a scheme	o	o	o	o	o
We didn't have time to develop a scheme of our own	o	o	o	o	o
We wanted to avoid the Commissioner's approval process	o	o	o	o	o

We thought the model scheme embodied best practice   o   o   o   o   o
Other (please specify)

Qu 4   Have you created a bespoke publication scheme for your authority in the past?

- o   Yes (Go to Qu 5)
- o   No (Go to Qu 6)

Your experience of the Model Publication Scheme 2011

Qu 5   Compare the experience of creating a bespoke scheme and adopting the model scheme. Would you say that adopting the Commissioner's new model scheme was:

- o   Less work than creating a bespoke scheme
- o   About the same
- o   More work than creating a bespoke scheme
- o   Don't know

Qu 6   In order to adopt the model scheme did your authority have to change the amount of information that it publishes?

- o   We had to publish more information than before (Go to Qu 7)
- o   No change (Go to Qu 9)
- o   We had to publish less information than before (Go to Qu 9)
- o   Don't know (Go to Qu 9)
           Other (please specify)

New information published

Qu 7   What particular types of new information has your authority published that it didn't before? (select all that apply)

	A lot of new content	A little new content	No new content
Corporate and governance information	o	o	o
Functions and services information	o	o	o
Agendas, reports, papers and minutes of decision-making	o	o	o
Financial statements, budgets, expenses	o	o	o
Resource management policies and procedures	o	o	o
Procurement information, list of contracts	o	o	o
Performance information	o	o	o

Other (please specify)

Qu 8   Did the model scheme influence any efforts you had to make to persuade colleagues to publish the new information?

o   The model made it easier to persuade them
o   The model made it harder to persuade them
o   The model made no difference
o   Don't know
        Comments

Comments on the Model Publication Scheme

Qu 9   this year is a pilot year for the Model Publication Scheme. We've already learned that we need to relax the copyright statement requirement. Is there anything else about the Model Publication Scheme 2011 that you think we need to change?

The Commissioner's guidance

Qu 10 Did you use the Commissioner's guidance?

o   Yes (Go to Qu 12)
o   No (Go to Qu 11)

Reasons for not using the guidance

Qu 11   What is the main reason you didn't use the Commissioner's guidance?

o   I didn't know there was guidance (Go to Qu 15)
o   It was too detailed (Go to Qu 15)
o   I didn't understand it (Go to Qu 15)
o   I didn't have time to read it (Go to Qu 15)
Other (please specify)

About the guidance

Qu 12 in the guidance we provided a list of the types of information the Commissioenr would expect authorities to publish under each of the classes of information, Did you use this list to compile your guide to information?

o   Yes (Go to Qu 13)
o   No (Go to Qu 14)

About the list of types of information

Qu 13 What did you think of the list of information types in the guidance?

o   The list was about right
o   The list was too ambitious – we do not hold all of the information listed
o   The list was too detailed – we would prefer something less prescriptive

o   The list was too basic we would have preferred more detail
         Comment

Qu 14 Was there anything the guidance didn't cover that you think it should?

<u>And finally…</u>

Qu 15 Would you recommend the Model Publication Scheme 2011 to other authorities?

o   Yes
o   No
         Please explain why you have chosen your answer

Qu 16 Is there anything else you'd like to tell us that we haven't covered so far with this survey?

Thank you for completing the survey – it's very much appreciated. We'll publish the results on our website at the end of July.