



Deployment Plan of the GuideStar model in Ireland

Summary report, 31 October 2008

The GuideStar Europe project (April 2007 - October 2008) has assessed the feasibility of implementing GuideStar systems for four European countries as well as a pan-European portal site. Coordinated by GuideStar International, the project included partners with a track record in voluntary sector research, capacity building, and transparency development: DZI and Maecenata Institute (Germany) NIOK (Hungary), CBF (The Netherlands) and ICTR (Ireland). The project was co-funded by the European Commission under its eTEN programme and in several cases by governmental, private sector and philanthropy sources in member countries.

A GuideStar system provides an online, highly searchable catalogue of reports on the civil society organisations (CSOs) operating in a country enabling organisations to communicate their work effectively and easily to national and international audiences. Ultimately, Guidestar Europe will draw together into a single relational database current and pertinent information about the entire civil society sector in the European Union, enhancing transparency and accountability while creating a knowledge infrastructure for the sector and its stakeholders across Europe. The next phase of the GuideStar Europe project is planned to include both a roll out of the GuideStar model to more countries and a launch of a pan-European search capability therefore having a lasting consequence for the transparency and roles of CSOs in Europe.

It is proposed to build a data-rich relational database of c.8,000 Irish nonprofit companies, captured from mandatory regulatory filings, and to publish extracts on a free, searchable public website. The model for this was developed in the USA, is working successfully in the UK, and is under development in a number of other countries around the world.

Even pending charities regulation (currently being enacted in the Irish parliament), compliance with the requirements of Irish company law means that a lot of relevant, audited information about a significant number of Irish civil society organisations is in the public domain, and there is no legal constraint to the re-publication of this information – in fact many commercial information re-sellers already provide similar services derived from the Companies Registration Office filings of commercial companies.

The database will include up to 350 fields of narrative and financial data from regulatory sources, augmented and updated by additional disclosures made online by listed organisations. Nothing like this exists in Ireland although the need has been widely acknowledged in the course of user testing undertaken during the test of the concept project during 2007/8. The project feasibility study was undertaken as part of a five-country consortium, part-funded by the European Commission's e-Ten programme.

With its baseline content renewed annually from fresh CRO filings and more frequently with additional voluntary disclosures, Guidestar Ireland will become the single go-to source of encyclopaedic statistical information, captured consistently across the whole sector, with multiple beneficiaries besides the sector itself – policy-makers, regulators, grant-makers in the public and private sectors, analysts and commentators, service providers and media.

www.guidestareurope.org

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European Commission
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Feasibility testing has shown that the concept is viable in Ireland: the data can be captured and mapped onto the database fields; the technology to publish them online is readily available; of the test group of 200 nonprofit organisations that participated actively in the project, 50% updated their records; and the proposition has been broadly welcomed both within the nonprofit sector and among its principal stakeholding interests.

A full-scale business plan has already been prepared, and adopted by the oversight group of sectoral experts, which has steered the project from the outset. The business model requires the creation of a small dedicated noncommercial entity, modeled on the structures already established in the UK and the US, sharing their experience in developing products and services and collaborating with them on transnational projects. It assumes that Guidestar in Ireland will become a unique repository of comprehensive sectoral data – with the vision of creating a knowledge infrastructure to transform the nonprofit sector in Ireland.

There will be no charge for listing on the site, nor is it proposed to jeopardise the Guidestar values of autonomy and neutrality by carrying advertising. In the medium term, like mature Guidestars elsewhere, it is expected that Guidestar in Ireland will be largely self-financing, deriving its revenues from earnings from raw data sales, information services and bespoke intelligence services commissioned by researchers, public policy-makers and regulators, grant-makers in the public and private sectors, professional service-providers and others. Some of these assumptions have already been tested with potential information end-users.

Until the database has been built, and the functionality of the site tested, launched and established with listed organisations, the project in Ireland requires working capital estimated at €2m over five years. In the months immediately following the termination of the pilot testing, this is being sought from a combination of government and philanthropic grants, corporate subscription, and contributions from the sector. In this respect also the Irish project resembles its sister organisations in the UK and the US, where Guidestar was capitalized with substantial philanthropic and government grants.

The Guidestar Ireland organisation will have a small management and administrative core, with consulting advisors specialising in financial reporting, information services and web development. Effective consultation and communication with the sector are critical to the successful launch and sustainable development of the concept, and this will be consolidated in the form of a sectoral forum; financial reporting interests will also be empanelled, to support greater coherence in reporting standards.

Once funding is secured, it will take approximately 16 months to build a full-scale Guidestar. The Irish content will be published online under the terms of a service contract with Guidestar International, which will also feed summary information about Irish nonprofits onto pan-European and international portal sites.

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