

Press Release: “Frag den Staat” - New Website makes Access to Information at Ministries and Public Authorities easier

Berlin - On August 1, 2011 the website “Frag den Staat” went online - it is run by the Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland e.V, the German Chapter of the Open Knowledge Foundation. The goal of the website is to act as a central online hub for requests to German Federal Ministries and Authorities. FragDenStaat.de supports requests complying to the Federal Freedom of Information Law, the Environmental Information Law and the Consumer Information Law.

Many citizens are not familiar with the possibilities and the potentials of Federal Laws which grant access to records. The threshold for applying access apparently is high. The new website is aimed at lowering this threshold. FragDenStaat.de provides a list of all Federal Authorities. An online form eases making Freedom of Information requests and sending them to the appropriate authority. The answer of the authority is automatically sent to the platform and is published there together with the request of the user. This makes requested information transparent and accessible free of charge to the entire public. Thanks to FragDenStaat.de identical inquiries will not have to be processed several times in future.

Stefan Wehrmeyer, Project Manager of FragDenStaat.de at Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland said: “Via the web a mighty and democratic tool such as Freedom of Information can be used in an ideal way.”

Christian Humborg, Director of Transparency International Deutschland said: “Freedom of Information is a matter of course in the 21st century. It enables accountability and control and empowers citizens. Therefore the State Government of Baden-Württemberg’s decision to postpone the introduction of a Freedom of Information Law by a least one year is very disappointing and incomprehensible.”

Lynn Gogolin of Mehr Demokratie e.V. (“More Democracy”) said: “The free access to information is an absolute prerequisite of our democracy. Citizens should be able to get answers as quickly and easily as possible. This is what we have FragDenStaat.de for now. We still have to extend it to the German Federal States.”

Daniel Dietrich, Chairman of the German Chapter of the Open Knowledge Foundation said: “With the platform FragDenStaat.de we hope to accelerate the cultural shift towards open government within state authorities. We want to support German legislators in considerably improving Freedom of Information Laws. Those German Federal States which are still lacking a state Freedom of Information law have to urgently introduce one. On federal level the different information laws should be merged into one comprehensive law to make requests easier.”

The portal also intends to support the work of non-government organisations and journalists. Via FragDenStaat.de they can make requests non-publicly. These can be published later. Thus the exclusive use of information is granted. At the same time the website can be referred to as source.

The model for FragDenStaat.de is the very successful British website “whatdotheyknow.com”. In 2010 about 12 per cent of all Freedom of Information requests to central state authorities were made via this website. These were about 5200 requests. In Germany only an average of 1600 Federal Freedom of Information requests per year were made between 2006 and 2010.

The Federal Freedom of Information Law has been in effect since 2006. Eleven of the 16 German Federal States ("Bundesländer") have a Freedom of Information of their own. The Federal States of Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony and Saxony do not have such a law. The 2011 coalition agreement of the red-green State Government of Baden-Württemberg proposes the introduction of a FOI law. But the state's Minister of the Interior Reinhold Gall announced that the ongoing evaluation of the Federal FOI Law was to be awaited.

On its launch the portal is already being supported by eleven organisations and initiatives. These are: **Access Info Europe**, **Deutsche Gesellschaft für Informationsfreiheit e.V.** ("German Society for Freedom of Information"), **Deutsche Journalistinnen- und Journalisten-Union** ("German Union of Journalists"), **Deutscher Journalisten-Verband e.V.** ("German Association of Journalists"), **Digitale Gesellschaft e.V.** ("Digital Society"), **Legal Leaks**, **Mehr Demokratie e.V.** ("More Democracy"), **netzwerk recherche e.V.** ("Network of Investigative Journalists"), **n-ost Netzwerk für Osteuropa-Berichterstattung e.V.** ("Network for Reporting on Eastern Europe"), **Open Data Network e.V.** and **Transparency International Deutschland e.V.**

The operating organisation **Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland e.V.** was founded in February 2011. Its three employees are paid by the UK based Open Knowledge Foundation.