

Tue, 11 Oct, 2011

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Got a question for the EU? Ask them....



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The 9th International Right to Know Day, pro-transparency human rights group Access Info Europe will be unveiling the AsktheEU.org web portal today by which the public can ask for information from EU bodies.

AsktheEU.org is a designed to radically simplify the process by which the public puts requests to European Union bodies: an email is sent from the website to the relevant EU body.

All requests sent via AsktheEU.org and the responses are instantly made public. Requesters will have the opportunity to "me too" a request so that more than one person receives the answer, easing the workload on EU officials.

Other features of the site include allowing requesters to rate responses for

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quality and comprehensiveness, permitting other users to comment on answers.

If requesters are dissatisfied, the site helps them file appeals (“confirmatory applications”) and gives guidance on how to complain to the European Ombudsman or to go to the European Court of Justice.

Launching AsktheEU.org portal, Access Info Europe raised the concern that 10 years after the EU’s access to documents rules were adopted in 2001 there are still only a very small number of requests each year: around 12,000 in a region of 500 million people, meaning that at most 0.0024% of Europeans are exercising this right.

There are still significant problems with EU transparency in practice: around one third of the complaints made to the European Ombudsman concern problems accessing EU documents.

“The AsktheEU.org portal will redress the democratic deficit in Europe whereby decisions are made far from citizens and yet only a small clique of lobbyists, academics and NGOs can master the current decentralised and complex system for filing requests,” commented Helen Darbishire, Executive Director of Access Info Europe.

“We aim to make the right to know about what the EU is doing a real right for all Europe’s citizens and residents. AsktheEU.org will reduce the burden on EU officials who will not have to answer the same request repeatedly,” added Darbishire.

With use, AsktheEU.org will generate statistics on the time EU bodies take to respond to requests, the exceptions applied, and the rate of administrative silence, for example. In this way, a clearer picture will emerge of what improvements need to be made in order to guarantee greater transparency of the EU.

AsktheEU.org runs on the Alaveteli software which underpins the UK’s successful WhatDoTheyKnow.com built by the NGO mySociety; it is also inspired by Germany’s FragdenStaat.de, from the Open Knowledge Foundation, and similar sites in countries ranging from Kosova (InformataZyrtare.org) and Chile (AccesoInteligente.org). Access Info Europe and partners are currently preparing TuDerechoaSaber.es in Spain and a similar website in France.

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