



postnote

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OPEN SOURCE

Rationale

Open source is collaboratively produced software developed by online volunteers who release it on the Internet to be freely used, modified and distributed. Open source software has many potential applications, ranging from word-processors, robust and secure operating systems, websites and servers, to many of the underlying technologies of the Internet. One of the most famous examples is GNU/Linux, an operating system which has impressed reviewers with the quality and stability of its performance.

To examine the possible advantages, the UK e-Government unit ran a public consultation initiative in early 2004, aiming to investigate how open source licensing could be used within Government. Nonetheless, open source is generating widespread debate over its licensing model, particularly from proprietary software companies. This briefing will look at current and future applications of open source software and issues raised by its use.

Scope

The aims of the POSTnote on open source are to provide MPs and Peers with an overview covering:

- Background: Introduction to and overview of open source licensing and comparison with other software licensing models.
- Current uses of open source: The main uses of open source at present are on the Internet, mainly in web-servers, and in data servers in private and public organisations that are large scale. Desktop use has been limited.
- Future uses of open source. Where could open source be used and how could its development processes help technology projects be more productive.
- Overview of current UK initiatives to investigate or encourage development of open source software.
- Policy issues arising from the use of open source in Government and public sector bodies. The extent to

which the use of open source is recommended for public organisations and the advantages and disadvantages will also be examined.

Method

POST draws on the expertise of a wide range of external parties. Input comes from businesses, NGOs, academics, regulators and government. A draft of the note on open source software will be circulated to all contributors for comment prior to the publication of the final document.

Timing

It is planned that a draft of the briefing will be produced during Oct/Nov 2004, for publication in Dec 2004.

Dissemination

All of POST's publications are publicly available. The briefing note will be published in paper form and distributed to Parliamentarians and other interested parties. It will also be available on POST's website: <http://www.parliament.uk/post>

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