

WHAT ARE DATA VAULTS, AND WHAT CAN THEY MEAN TO YOU?

Athumi, the Flemish Data Utility Company, officially launched on 4 May 2023. Athumi has often been mentioned together with the process of making personal data vaults, or Personal Online Datastores (Pod's), available to every Flemish citizen. Data vaults are decentralised storage places for personal data under a citizen's access control and are based on SOLID technology. The Flemish founding decree also imposes other tasks and objectives on Athumi.

In this brAlnfood, we elaborate on the tasks and organisation of Athumi under its founding decree. We discuss the provision of personal data vaults and SOLID, its underlying technology.

This brAlnfood was developed in collaboration with Michiel Fierens, researcher at KU Leuven CiTiP and the University of Ghent within SolidLab Flanders. His interests range from data protection to interoperability.



SOLID aims at **decoupling centralised (siloe) data, applications and identities on the Web** (i.e., previously accessing other applications via a central Facebook login) and standardising interactions between these elements via interoperability. Any decoupled element can thereby interact with any other (previously centralised and not interoperable) element.

Specifically, SOLID is **a protocol consisting of technical specifications** (web standards) that are further developed within the W3C. W3C is an organisation that designs the web standards for the worldwide web. Data are thereby **stored** according to certain principles (namely Linked Data, a set of best practices for publishing structured data on the Web) **and encoded according to a (Web) standard** in which the use of standardised metadata (adding semantics or meaning) is essential. Whereas previously, additional interpretation of the data was always needed after exchange to enable computer systems and applications to understand the data and extract knowledge from it, because of the **semantics** used, this is immediately clear when exchanging it.



Athumi (formerly known as and in its founding decree still referred to as the Flemish Data Utility Company) is a **public-private partnership**, created by the Flemish Government. Among other things, the **Flemish Government** and the **Flemish Parliament** participate in approving and amending the articles of association and operating allowance of Athumi. Two government commissioners also oversee the legally compliant operation of Athumi. Athumi is assisted by an advisory committee, the Flemish Supervisory Committee for the Processing of Personal Data (VTC), the Flemish Committee for Communication of Personal Data and, finally, a data protection officer.

Athumi cooperates with **other service providers** such as Digital Flanders, but may also cooperate with **domestic and foreign organisations** in the future. Digital Flanders thereby acts as Flemish Services Integrator (i.e., as an organisation in charge of simplifying and optimising data exchange between agencies) for Flemish and local governments looking to be part of the Solid ecosystem.

Concrete modalities for the tasks, duties, operation, infrastructure, etc. of Athumi will be further elaborated in a **cooperation agreement** with the Flemish Community and the Flemish Region.



Through **decoupling central elements from their current environments**, SOLID offers the opportunity to **give citizens more access control over their personal data**. Based on the SOLID protocol, has already rolled out **data vaults** in a number of projects related to payroll, diploma and health data. These vaults are **decentralised storage locations for data on the Web** that are managed by citizens to a certain extent via an identification method (WebID). User environments such as the Flemish 'My Citizen Profile' can then display one or more citizen data vaults. A data vault or collection of data vaults can pool data residing within different government agencies in a single place.

Data vaults are made available to citizens but **their use is not mandatory**. A citizen can activate and deactivate his data vault at his request, store, or in some cases, modify or delete data in it and, subject to consent, manage the sharing of the data. This consent does not prevent the possibility of other processing grounds for the data under the GDPR. Data vaults should allow citizens to share data in a conscious and informed manner.

Flemish authorities can agree to use the data vault platform for data sharing or data access. They are supported in this by Digital Flanders and, depending on the cooperation agreement, by Athumi in accordance with the cooperation agreement.



Athumi may conduct any activities and tasks that contribute to its **objectives and policy implementation tasks**. In doing so, it may be acting as a **data intermediary service** under the recent Data Governance Act. Such a service aims at creating commercial relationships between data holders and data users for data sharing purposes and is subject to a number of (neutrality) obligations. Yet, the precise relationship between the founding decree and this Data Governance Act remains unclear for now.

- Athumi's **objectives** include:
- Facilitate cooperation around secure data sharing with or by citizens or public authorities;
 - Optimise citizens' data protection rights;
 - Support the development of new data-sharing applications and secure data sharing in a data-driven ecosystem;
 - Provide capital gains to its shareholders;
 - Facilitate citizen requests around these objectives;
 - Function as a lever for the further development of the data economy.

- Its **policy implementation tasks** are related to these objectives:
- Conduct feasibility studies around data-sharing applications;
 - Develop a data vault platform for citizens and a platform for sharing and accessing metadata (documentation describing the content, technical details, etc. of a data source) from government and citizens;
 - Develop a platform for transactions between citizens and/or government agencies. This will also process fees resulting from citizens' or government agencies' access to previously mentioned platforms;
 - Perform special assignments in line with objectives or policy implementation tasks. For now, it is unclear exactly how far these assignments extend.



A concrete goal of Athumi is that **citizens can manage the transfer of their data to others via the data vault platform**. Data of citizens can therefore, at their request, be delivered from various Flemish authorities to Athumi or requested by Athumi from these authorities. This is also possible for non-Flemish public authorities with which Athumi concludes an agreement, or for private partners. Athumi can then share certain data with recipients via the data vault platform at the request and with the consent of the citizen. Receiving entities can range from government agencies to retail companies and services in various sectors such as health, mobility and real estate.

Data is processed to the extent it is necessary for Athumi's objectives and tasks, and in compliance with legal regulations (e.g. [the GDPR](#)). Such data includes personal data, data on immovable property or rights, on legal entities and/or geographical data.

The **data types processed** by Athumi include contact and identification data, data on family and occupation, financial data, and data on leisure, mobility and health. Athumi is obliged to keep the data no longer than necessary for the purposes of its objectives and tasks. **Recipients are strictly prohibited from copying the data received** unless they have been given permission by the Board of Directors. In the future, citizens can also request which entities accessed their personal data through such platforms in the last six months.

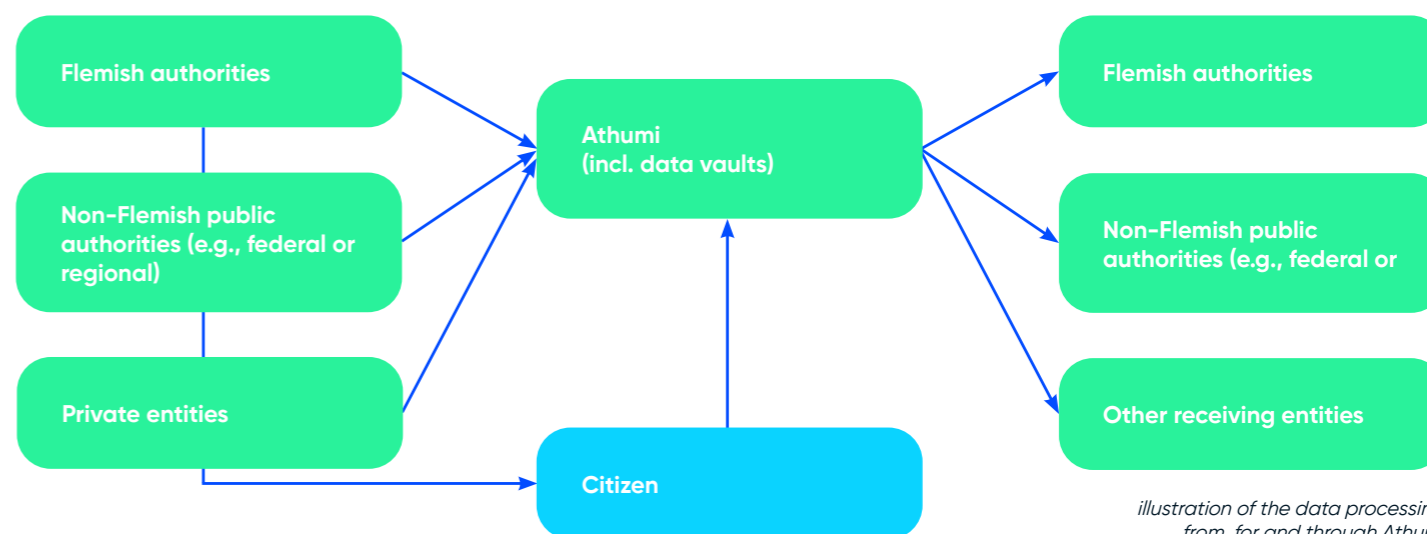


Illustration of the data processing from, for and through Athumi

Knowledge Centre Data & Society (2023). What are data vaults, and what can they mean to you? Brussels: Knowledge Centre Data & Society.

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