

Set All Data Free

Problems with postcodes and the future of the Ordnance Survey could cost local government dear as the world moves to free re-use of government data, says Michael Cross.

The real hero of the free data campaign, which culminated in last month's launch of www.data.gov.uk, was not Tim Berners-Lee or Gordon Brown, let alone Boris Johnson. It was Stuart Harrison, webmaster of Lichfield District Council.

While the others were talking of grand policy, Harrison not only saw the big picture but turned it in to action on the ground. Literally - to make location data available on the council's website without infringing other public bodies' intellectual property, he went out with his iPhone and plotted the datasets himself.

Lichfield's efforts - which can be seen at www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/data - played a big part in persuading politicians and Whitehall that making public sector data available for re-use is not some abstract concept for egg-heads but of real value to local communities. Particularly impressive is the way the Lichfield's My Area service makes use of external sources of data including from the county (via OpenlyLocal), Westminster (Theyworkforyou) and the department for education (www.education.data.gov.uk) - this last via data.gov.uk.

Local government is likely to be at the forefront of the next phase of the free data campaign being led by Professor Nigel Shadbolt of Southampton University. However for all the warm welcome given to the data.gov.uk website, the campaign faces an uphill struggle given the government's apparent intransigence on two of the stickiest issues: postcodes and the future of Ordnance Survey.

[Data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk), launched as a beta version, contains some 2,500 sets of data which are already underpinning third party application such as the School Finder website. The project, which is run under the wing of digital engagement director, Andrew Stott, unashamedly emulates the US government's data.gov site, officially launched last May by the Obama administration.

The launch coincided with that of a new licence model for re-using government data by the National Archives, replacing its pioneering, but little used, Click-Use Licence. The 'non-transactional Creative Commons approach' allows data from data.gov.uk to be re-used both for commercial and non-commercial

purposes.

The terms and conditions put together by National Archives are aligned to be interoperable with any Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Licence. They are also machine readable meaning that applications and programs can access and understand the terms and conditions. Carol Tullo, director of information policy and services at the National Archives, described the new licence as "an important step in making more government information available for re-use, in a streamlined and non-bureaucratic way".

So far, so good. The free data announcements however cannot overcome disappointment at central government's reluctance to tackle two related long-running problems: postcodes and the future of Ordnance Survey.

In the very week that data.gov.uk was unveiled, the government responded to the latest online petition calling for Royal Mail's Postcode Address File (PAF) to be opened up for all. The response however was merely a re-statement of the current licensing and regulatory position: 'Under Section 116 of the Postal Services Act 2000, Royal Mail must maintain the PAF and make it available to any person who wishes to use it on 'such terms as are reasonable'.

The response points anyone with concerns to the last public consultation on the issue, under which apparently 'Postcomm took all the diverse uses of the PAF into account before reaching its decision in 2007, announcing more safeguards for the management of the address information held in the PAF with the aim of making sure that the PAF is maintained properly and made available on fair and reasonable terms.'

The second disappointment was prompted by the publication just before Christmas of the Communities and Local Government department's consultation on the future of geographical information. The consultation, and accompanying impact statement, make it clear that the government is not minded to make big changes to the structure of Ordnance Survey, despite the strains created by its new 'free data' responsibilities announced by the prime minister in November last year.



The consultation outlines three theoretical possibilities: no change, a radical dismantling of Ordnance Survey, or a 'staged transition' to a model which retains the existing set-up but makes some datasets available for free. To no surprise, the consultation reveals that the government intends to go for the third.

This mind-set was condemned by Locus, the trade association representing businesses that re-use public sector information. While welcoming the exercise, it raised concern that 'overall the consultation appears to be focused more on finding a sustainable business model for Ordnance Survey than on stimulating the use of location information in a fair way'.

The preferred option also comes with a sting for the rest of the public sector. According to the consultation, it would require correcting what it calls the current 'imbalance' in the prices charged to private and public sector users. At present, two painstakingly negotiated and procured public sector-wide procurement deals, the Pan Government Agreement (for central government) and the Mapping Services Agreement (for local government) account for one third of Ordnance Survey's total revenue, some £42 million. The consultation recommends 'a transition over time to consistent pricing for all public and private sector customers, through greater customer centricity and greater cost transparency'.

While in the longer term this might mean cheaper data, in the short term prices will rise: 'During 2010/11, the contracts in place between Ordnance Survey and central and local government will need to be renegotiated to reflect the impact of Ordnance Survey Free... The PGA might need to be renegotiated once some products within it become included in OS Free and hence are available free of charge to other purchasers.'

To put it mildly, this proposal is unlikely to go down well with hard-pressed local authorities.

The consultation invites comments on: 'What will be the balance of impact of these proposals on your costs and revenues?'

The consultation closes on 17 March: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/ordnancesurveyconsultation