

## Giving the Council a Geography Lesson

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### The Problem

I love geography. I'm not ashamed to put that in print, and I'd wager that on the basis that you are reading this paper you're probably quite endeared to this world of all things geo that we call home. But there is a problem - our mutual appreciation for what we do is not universal. Sadly, not everyone thinks like you or I. GIS is not known by all. When asked what GIS stands for, some say 'oh what, sat navs?' Others mispronounce the acronym with a confused 'giss?' or chuckle at the ruder connotation that equally can be reached. What's worse is this lack of knowledge isn't limited to brief social dalliances at dinner parties (or in my case children's birthday parties); it's still rife within the arenas where we work.

Local Government is a prime example of this. Despite being heavy users of GIS for a considerable period of time, the vast majority of the work done is limited to data capture, thematic maps and printing. Seeing where assets are is incredibly important, but the desire to learn what extra can be achieved isn't there. In my efforts to promote GIS internally, I feel that I have exhausted the 'Everything Happens Somewhere' statement - but what does that mean exactly? Unless you can back the statement up with a suitable explanation, it becomes an easy to use sound bite, but its importance gets lost.

### The Cause

Why are people afraid to learn or extend their knowledge in our subject matter? Is there not enough time in the day for people to pay more attention to geography and place? Do people really want to know? Has GIS reached a plateau within Local Government? Is it now stereotyped for the basic function of capturing and displaying data on a map? Is GIS still viewed as some form of Dark Art only to be performed by a select few?

To some extent I think the above suggestions are just the tip of the iceberg. When undertaking an audit of the main usage for GIS within the Borough of Poole, 90-95% was based around data capture and data management. People generally don't have the time (or inclination) to go beyond what they know, or what they could potentially do. If this proved nothing else to the GIS team at Poole, it highlighted that the current usage

of GIS was proving incredibly expensive, with high annual maintenance costs being spent on software that was not being used to its full capacity. In a separate assessment, it was possible to see the uptake of GIS had tailed off over the last few years, with fewer enquiries for map production and installations of software.

## The solution(s)

In the same way that I do not think there is any one reason for the problems outlined above, I do not believe there to be one catch-all solution to improve the situation. I believe a composite of solutions, based on a clear message is needed. The following solutions highlight the steps being taken, and the rationale behind them, by the GIS Team at the Borough of Poole to help re-educate and re-engage the authority with geography, GIS and most importantly, the concept of place.

### Make Geography 'Touchy Feely'

Make Geography fun, it doesn't even have to be about work. If you get people to take a quiz on landmarks in your authority, locate hidden Easter Eggs on a map or solve clues about your authority as part of a treasure hunt, you are increasing the number of people looking at, and interacting with, maps and geographic data. This interaction is incredibly important for an individual to develop an ownership and an association with place and GIS. By encouraging people to be 'touchy feely' with our software and our data we are echoing the techniques used by Apple in their stores (Gallo, 2012 a, b). Every interaction helps staff to build up a greater spatial understanding, association and ownership of the work they do in relation to the places they do it in. It may be surprising to realise, but not everyone who works for your authority will know what the boundary looks like or what is contained within it. Some people will commute a long way to work, sit at a desk all day and then travel home. How much of an understanding would they have about the work they do in relation to the rest of the authority, and how it has an impact, if they've never gone out explored and experienced it? Have a think, how many times have you seen services, road signage, street furniture or even buildings, placed in the most ineffective or inappropriate locations? How many of these have been done without anyone taking into account the importance of place and location, and how poor locations can severely impact upon the quality of life for certain communities/groups/individuals?

### Sell Yourself

In these austere times, it is often opportune for teams and individuals to become more inert, closing ranks and reducing functions to the bare minimum, fearful that making

noise or pushing for more work is akin to sticking your head above the parapet. I think it's time to do the exact opposite, go and tell all who will listen how important GIS and place is and how sensible usage of these tools can help make savings across the authority. Effective promotion of GIS and place has multiple benefits:

- 1) You can demonstrate how what you do can save the council money/time/resource.
- 2) You raise your team's profile and get more people involved with GIS.
- 3) You increase the ability to make data more transparent and open across the authority (great for INSPIRE and open data directives!)
- 4) You make yourself (or GIS to be more specific) indispensable as you integrate it with new services, very useful when the next spending review arrives.

A great way to self-promote is to run open days. At Poole every year we run a GIS Day. We give away freebies, give people the chance to interact with our data and software, set quizzes and challenge people to identify datasets that cannot be mapped to win prizes. Copy the private sector at conferences. They offer us pens, sweets and some prizes and we flock to their stands to take a few freebies home. What do they get in return? A conversation, a bit more understanding about what your requirements are, and most importantly, your contact details. Apply the same logic to where you work; wouldn't it be great to know more about what people do in other teams, especially those you're not in direct contact with? Give someone five minutes to explain what they do and take it as an opportunity to sell you, your team, GIS and how integral it is to the council in maximising the efficiency and effectiveness it can get from the places it works with.

The best way to get these freebies? Speak to your current suppliers and those you have contact with, ask them to send a few pens and some flyers, put them out at your open day. They get promotion without having to send a member of staff, you get goodies to entice people to come and talk to you. eBay is equally filled with so many map related gifts, for little cost - I was amazed at the interest I had in people wanting to win trolley pound coin key rings with a globe on it!

### **Challenge the Stereotype**

There are two areas that GIS falls in to for stereotyping within the authority; those that use it and those who don't. For the former they use GIS for what they use it for and don't want to use it for anything else. It has become a process for them. For the latter, they just don't think GIS is for them, their information is not suitable, or GIS is too difficult to learn. Challenge these stereotypes; ask if you can spend some time with these individuals to identify how they work. They know their job. You know GIS. But you

don't know the full details of each others. Spending some time understanding more about what other people do will give you the ability to suggest solutions, opportunities and developments that can be beneficial to both them as an individual and the rest of the authority.

We have found that we can find new tools or techniques that current GIS users have overlooked and improve their efficiency, and for new users we've highlighted the benefits of data sharing and transparency as well as showing them the other datasets that they could gain access to via GIS.

### **Dispel the dark arts myth - Make GIS Easy and accessible to all**

If you want people to work with Geographic Information then it needs to be via an app or a web page, with as few tools and commands on the screen as possible. If the perception of GIS for the un-initiated is Google maps, then try your damndest to give them that. The recent acquisition of our web based GIS (a product called MapThat from CadLine) has made this transition very easy for us, and most importantly, easy for our customers to access Geographic Information. It's so intuitive to use that simple searching, querying and accessing data can be done without training, and to learn all the functionality takes less than 4 hours – we have even managed to train councillors and senior management on using the tool. Even though I don't fully expect them to use the application again, it's a bonus if they do, I know that they will take some key things away from the experience:

- 1) They'll remember what GIS is and how important it is to the authority  
And
- 2) How important and integral place is to decision making

So when it comes to the next round of budget cuts, you will have some of the people who make the decisions aware of what you do and how important it is, so your ability to justify yourself is half done before you need to get involved.

### **Bring in extra resource**

I appreciate that putting in this extra effort to promote your team takes time, something most council workers don't have, so to offset this – bring in extra resource. Over the last couple of years we have built up a very close working relationship with Bournemouth University and the placement program the university has in place. This summer we took on six students who all completed a minimum of five weeks work experience each. Even allowing time for basic training, we are getting an extra resource, equivalent to about 30

week's worth, to complete basic repetitive tasks for little to no cost. This has proved indispensable in improving parts of our street gazetteer, updating our building polygons (BLPUs) and capturing our metadata library.

### Have a clear message

GIS is a brilliant tool that enables better analysis and understanding of spatial data, and it empowers people to make informed decisions based on this knowledge. But the key point is the importance of place; and it is this underlying message that we continually speak of when we talk to people. Place and space are so vital to everything a council does, and I'm not just saying this to keep me in employment, I'm saying this because I genuinely believe that place should be considered within every project of work an authority undertakes, big or small:

- 1) Are we putting litter bins in the right place, in comparison to pedestrian footfall and litter complaints?
- 2) Would extra hedging on the edge of a park make it safer for children to play nearby or provide seclusion for anti-social and criminal behaviour at night?
- 3) Are our catchment areas effectively promoting walking to school?
- 4) How many people will benefit/suffer from the moving of this bus stop/bus route aside from the cost savings that can be made?
- 5) Is the money we are spending on youth centres making a positive impact in terms of social engagement and anti-social behaviour?
- 6) What changes can we implement to our town centre that will be of benefit to public transport, private vehicles, pedestrians and shop owners?

Just some of the questions that have a considerable impact on the citizens who we serve and support, and are often missed when decisions are being made. This is why when we run training or our open days, we not only promote our products and services, but we focus on our message of place and how important it is to all within the authority.

### Have a clear message and repeat it

And we repeat this message wherever we can, whenever we can. It may be driving people crazy, but the more people we can promote the message to, the more likely people will consider place and space when they do their job. You may hate the 'Go Compare' adverts, but I bet you think of them when your car insurance needs renewing.

## Conclusions

I'm not saying that Poole is completely converted to this message, and I'm not suggesting that all of the solutions put forward in this paper will work for everyone, but in Poole what we are finding is that service units, even those usually averse to GIS, are starting to appreciate the importance of place so much more now that our approach has been more proactive. By getting people to understand that spatial data is one of the best ways of making informed decisions, we are helping to increase the number of services being delivered more effectively and efficiently.

## References

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