

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

Looking back, looking forward

How GIS can make the Big Society work

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As GIS technology continues to have an increasing impact on the way that people source and understand information, particularly online, I believe that our industry's main challenge in 2011 will be to consolidate and build on the relevance of location to society in general.

Talking of which... The austerity measures that the coalition government plan to introduce have long been presaged within the public sector by the mantra of 'do more with less'. However, now there's a new buzz phrase that local authorities need to address: 'the Big Society'.

While details of what the Big Society actually is remain sketchy, the central tenet is clear: empowering individuals and communities to take greater responsibility for their local services and environment, and enabling them to do more to help themselves.

There are clearly connections between doing more with less and the Big Society, but how to make them work in practice? I believe that GIS has an important role to play, particularly in the area of location-aware online services.

In simple terms, this is about the 'what?' being integrated with the 'where?' – for example, supplying the public with information about what local facilities are available and where they're located at the same time. With websites now a primary channel of communication with the public, it has become a lot easier to tie these two

elements together using interactive mapping technology.

Using maps as a 'gateway' to other information is becoming increasingly popular on council sites. A recent survey commissioned by Pitney Bowes Business Insight revealed that 44% of local authorities have recently been involved with projects to provide the public with access to mapping data, which was previously only for internal use, 73% expected to provide more location-based services to the public within the next six months.

One of the main reasons that people contact their local authority – and divert staff resources – is to make relatively simple "Where's my nearest?" enquiries. As such, it clearly makes sense to help people help themselves by supplying this information visually in a self-service online mapping format. But that's not all that interactive mapping can do.

Some local authorities have pushed this concept further by enabling self-reporting of problems with the municipal environment. Rather than having to identify and speak to the department that deals with vandalism, abandoned vehicles, potholes in the road, dangerous paving slabs etc, citizens can create a place marker on an interactive map that shows the exact location of the problem and generates an inspection request. Some councils are even starting to make this functionality available via mobile phones, so that citizens can take a picture of the problem and send it to the relevant department with the GPS co-

ordinates automatically attached.

This is not only a perfect example of the Big Society in action, empowering the public to initiate remedial actions in their neighbourhood, but also frees up frontline council staff from having to field so many of these enquiries and reduces avoidable contact and unnecessary paperwork. The time recouped clearly translates as a cost and efficiency saving, with staff able to better concentrate on core activities – doing more with less, and helping to meet the 25% spending cuts that the public sector faces over the next four years.

The role of location-aware technologies in all our lives is only going to get bigger. I believe that 2011 will be the year that the public at large starts to take control of the GIS data released by local authorities and other public sector organisations, and use it to create the Big Society in ways that even the Government haven't yet conceived.

