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Public Advisory Service Centre at the London Borough of Havering

Transforming local government

GIS is finding itself at the heart of Britain's evolving local government services. That is great news for GIS managers but it does mean GIS really has to perform. Here we look at three councils – the London Borough of Havering, Suffolk Coastal and Aberdeenshire – and discover what has made them a recipe for success.

Large councils face some real challenges when implementing GIS and the London Borough of Havering is no exception. The third largest borough in London, Havering had seen silos of data build up over the years as different departments' compiled records and mapped assets. The council had successfully rolled out GIS to 300 users authority-wide and the system was helping to improve service delivery but without any real corporate involvement. However, the council's GIS - GGP - soon caught the eye of the council's executives and they realised that there was real potential for the system to improve council efficiency and finances.

"Big councils continually face the problem of deciding where to focus effort, budget and resources. We look carefully at which technologies can deliver the greatest benefits quickly and GIS was identified as a key system for us. GIS provides real street level information that can make a huge difference in improving services and delivering efficiency gains" says Ray Whitehouse, Havering's Head of Business Systems.

Havering then made a key strategic decision to take corporate control of GIS. For the GIS team this was a huge step forward giving them the resources and power to enable GIS to fulfil its true potential as a serious business tool. "Suddenly we had the authority and budget to move things on and it has made a huge difference" explains Havering's GIS Manager Chris Pickett. "One of our first tasks was to undertake a council wide data audit. This revealed 600 separate datasets and confirmed that we have a vast untapped resource. We have now determined the accuracy and responsibility of those datasets".

The GIS team have been pro-active in their approach by holding regular GIS forums for all the GGP users. Presentations have been given to encourage the best use of GIS, and to keep them informed of GIS plans and developments within Havering.

"With perspectives like aerial photography, GIS really brings data to life and data becomes useful to a much wider audience. The problem we faced 18 months ago was harnessing all of this data and GGP has provided the answer," says Ray Whitehouse. "GIS is a great way of tying information together. You have to be pragmatic - the key is data sharing - we simply want everyone to be able to access all the data that we have, wherever it is." *continued overleaf*

GGP: Delivering the goods

"...GGP Systems provide real value and provide solutions which minimise implementation and running costs .....this has allowed Plymouth to maximise a return on investment. It would not surprise me if the savings from GIS and the LLPG have exceeded £10 million; money that has been re-invested in delivering better services to the citizens of Plymouth."

Barry Foster, Plymouth City

"... Ease of use and ease of integration are big assets of GGP's solutions, which have certainly enabled big gains in efficiency with significant financial rewards to Blackpool."

Louise Bache, Blackpool

"...The automation afforded by the systems all adds up to a powerful corporate solution that leads to huge savings in time and resources...GGP delivers real value for the Council providing an excellent return on investment."

Mark Barnes, Warwick

"...GGP is already producing a return on our investment. By allowing users to access centralised information we are reducing effort and therefore improving our efficiency. Users are encouraged to share information...and this has led to an integrated approach to service delivery with accurate and up to date reports to support decision making."

John Worts, Dacorum

Ray Whitehouse – Havering's Head of Business Systems in foreground, with from left to right, Liz Dixon (Portfolio Manager), Scott Bradley (GIS Analyst), Chris Pickett (GIS Manager) and Bhupendra Behari (LLPG Officer).

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The Council has implemented a range of solutions from GGP that enable them to create, manage and distribute information both within the organisation and to external customers and partners. These include GGP's NGz NLPG management software, GIS and the web mapping solution eGGP. The NLPG property database provides a central repository of addresses that everyone can access and is seen as an enabler for referencing and sharing records council wide.

"With better access to data and more accurate data we can now use GIS to take a real street level look at the borough. So many issues happen at street level so more general statistics based on traditional zones are not much help. Take crime, for example. We can match crime data with graffiti, truancy, noise complaints and property-level Mosaic data to pinpoint specific problems. That is a very powerful tool and means that we can deliver appropriate services – such as re-positioning a CCTV camera to where it is needed most," says Ray Whitehouse.

With Havering's belief in GIS, the council is helping to develop London-wide forums that will allow data sharing so that services to London's residents are affected less by geographic boundaries.

"Not only are we tapping into external data sources from organisations such as the emergency services and the Environment Agency, but we are also sharing data to help other organisations improve services in other parts of London and nearby in Essex, such as local Emergency Planning and Flood planning" says Ray Whitehouse.

Havering has also been keen to open up access to its data and a Citrix network provides access to centralised IT services. The council is utilising online GIS services using eGGP as part of their plans to deliver electronic service to 240,000 residents. "With eGGP we are extending the benefits of mapping and GIS to everyone, opening the way for a host of important services for residents" says Liz Dixon, Havering's E-Government Portfolio Manager.

In fact, GGP's solutions played a big part in Havering becoming the best performing London Authority for speed of decision on planning applications - and in winning the third highest Planning Delivery Grant in the country for the year 2006/7.

"GGP has certainly done its homework in producing a range of software that can underpin the transformation of local government and deliver real improvements, not just at an operational level but also corporately. It is great having such a responsive supplier on our doorstep - with their recent expansion and added capability in NLPG and web applications, they are proving an ideal partner as we push forward with our ambitious GIS and IT plans" concludes Ray Whitehouse.

Coastal Navigation

'Self Service' has become a key mission for one of the UK's leading GIS sites as part of a drive to improve customer service. Suffolk Coastal District Council has been a model for GIS and NLPG since embarking on a major re-vamp of its information systems back in 2003. Winning acclaim at the recent NLPG Exemplar awards, the council has successfully implemented a corporate and fully integrated geo-spatial resource that is underpinning service improvements across virtually all departments.

Now the council is spearheading developments on the web to give its workers and residents information they need at their fingertips. GIS and a corporate address database sit at the heart of the council's information services and the Internet is allowing easier access to the vast amount of information collected and refined over the years.

Covering an extensive area of natural beauty along the East Anglian coast and including Europe's largest container port at Felixtowe and the Sizewell nuclear power station, Suffolk Coastal has always placed the provision of public information high on its agenda.

"We were actually a late starter in GIS but that gave us a key advantage. We brought in expertise from elsewhere and were able to learn from experience gained in other councils. In addition we were not burdened with legacy systems so could take a fresh look at everything and then take advantage of the latest systems on the market" says Tracy King, Suffolk Coastal's Property Information Manager.

One of the big lessons learnt from others was the need for quality information and Suffolk Coastal embarked on a lengthy data capture and improvement program. That included capturing 50 years of planning records, building a high quality LLPG and creating over 300 map overlays.

"A vital element of this whole process was to engage as many people as possible. We realised that to do the job properly we needed the full cooperation of data owners across the council so 'selling the idea' was probably the biggest challenge we faced," says Tracy King.

Fortunately the council's senior management realised the importance of the work and gave the GIS team full support.

Left to right – Richard Chapman (Data Quality Technician), Robert Howes (Data Quality Technician), Paul Tennant (Data Quality Assistant), Mandy Mann (Data Quality Technician), Sheila Manning (Data Quality Team Co-ordinator), Tracy King (Property Information Manager).

The team also realised the importance of being fully independent and now a combined NLPG and GIS team come under Finance and Central Services giving it a corporate status that is ideal.

Of course in addition to the data work, Suffolk Coastal had to get the right systems in place. GGP Systems was chosen to provide the centralised 'geo-spatial' systems linked to back office applications from Plantech and Northgate.

"Our choice of GGP Systems as a supplier has proved invaluable. It has meant that we have a single supplier for our core corporate systems including GIS, gazetteer management and web mapping. GGP is easy to integrate so other systems like Plantech's can be instantly populated with NLPG address data that is updated literally daily. The ultimate aim is to have the whole council connected to live address data. This will totally eliminate data duplication, allow effective data interchange and crucially ensure services are never affected by poor or incomplete data" says Tracy King.

Suffolk Coastal are also looking at other innovations being developed by GGP such as eGAZ - a web portal that will support the next level of online services where visitors to the website can make a query on any address and find out virtually everything about the property – where is the nearest school or recycling centre, what council tax band, is the property listed or in a conservation area, what days are bins collected and so on.

"With our core datasets in place and data sharing becoming a reality, the future is really exciting and we can begin to fully capitalise on all the hard work. GIS really makes information so much easier to understand and it is becoming a key tool that will enable significant improvements in service and efficiency to be made".

"And to back it all up GGP has been fantastic in delivering what we need and in providing support - especially on the NLPG side where they have been instrumental in helping us meet recent NLPG upgrade deadlines" concludes Tracy King.

Scotland's GIS frontier

Some smart thinking early on by Aberdeenshire Council's GIS team has seen the council become one of the leading lights in the use of GIS in Scotland. Aberdeenshire was formed from the amalgamation of three district councils and part of Grampian Region. In the process, it inherited a raft of different systems including a number of GIS applications. Realising that data was the key to the success, the GIS team set about integrating their two main GIS applications, GGP and Smallworld. Then the attention turned to back office systems with integration a top priority to ensure that GIS, and a huge investment in captured geographic data, could be used to maximum effect.

By focusing their efforts on the free interchange of data early on, Aberdeenshire had made a decision that would prove to be crucial in years to come. Today Aberdeenshire has succeeded in making GIS a truly mainstream technology and one that is delivering real operational, financial and customer service benefits. Some 500 different datasets are available through GIS and now with the easy accessibility of data, the technology is spawning an ever growing number of applications - increasingly driven by the web.

It was not only local government re-organisation that threw up some real IT challenges for Aberdeenshire. The area is mainly rural and often very sparsely populated but at the same time is also closely tied to the activities of the North Sea oil city of Aberdeen. Delivering information to those that need it has therefore been vitally important for the council. Early on an extensive wide area network was established to allow digital maps and GIS to be shared across the whole network.

Aberdeenshire has also been an innovator in mobile mapping and a key mover in home working; using technology to overcome geographical barriers so staff can work effectively away from the office. With mobile devices first used to map street light and highways faults, new mobile GIS technology with GPS positioning and laser measuring is now being used to accurately map everything from cemeteries to wind farms, and landfill sites to listed buildings. Meanwhile improved broadband connectivity has made it possible to work from home using GIS with direct access to shared, centrally stored spatial data.

The Council's commitment to making information easily available has begun to have a real impact on customer service. Aided by web technology, Aberdeenshire is providing contact centre staff with real time service information through on screen maps and address gazetteers. The council's geographic resource is also playing a key part in coordinating regional services allowing data sharing throughout a multi-agency flooding group: The North East of Scotland Flood Liaison and Advice Group (NESFLAG).

Anne Buchan – Aberdeenshire's Geographic Information Officer with, from left to right, GIS Team Application Analysts Bob Knorr, Don Lamont and Bob Daly.

Aberdeenshire has close to 500 GIS users and with the Internet GIS there are already up to 6000 requests being logged each day. GGP is used extensively across core council services such as planning and property related services.

"GGP has always played a central part to the success of Aberdeenshire's GIS program" says Anne Buchan, Aberdeenshire's Geographic Information Officer. "In delivering the best possible services to our citizens, easy access to geographic information is vital. GGP has always taken a very open approach, making GIS really work for us. And with their current advances in interoperability, we will be able to keep one step ahead in the development of GIS-related services."

"GGP has underpinned many of the advances we have made in core council services such as Planning and Building Control. The software is relatively easy to use, is less costly to implement and support is excellent with someone always on hand to deal with service calls straight away" comments GIS analyst Robert Knorr.

GGP SYSTEMS

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