



Centralising GI data in Local Government

In December 2005, a huge explosion rocked the town of Hemel Hempstead when the Hertfordshire Oil Storage Depot at nearby Buncefield blew up. Faulty equipment had allowed 250,000 litres of fuel to escape, creating a vapour cloud that caught fire with an explosion that was heard over 100 miles away. For the local authority – Dacorum Borough Council – the disaster was a turning point for those championing GIS as John Worts, ICT Service Support Manager explains.

Following the Buncefield incident, the Council's managers suddenly realised that GIS would be an invaluable tool in dealing with the emergency and its aftermath including the re-development of the devastated area. At the time, the Council had been looking at the business case for extending GIS and Buncefield helped settle any wavering doubts about the value of GIS.

Like other local authorities, Dacorum manages a huge diversity of services and with the need to improve efficiency – particularly now with pressure on public sector funding – convergence of services is seen a vital for the future.

First of all, Dacorum needed to look at the best ways to extend the use of GIS as a corporate resource and it employed GIS consultancy the Nineveh Partnership to advise on extending GIS corporately.

The Nineveh report determined a strong financial case for a corporate GIS, within a single map base and access to maps and datasets via the Council's Intranet, with GGP's GIS replacing ESRI ArcView and GGP's eGGP web GIS implemented to provide Council-wide access to GIS. eGGP was recognised as a vital tool for accessing existing data, making the power of GIS widely available to all.

Convergence of services

Now users are encouraged to share information, both internally and with external customers and partners. This has led to an integrated approach to service delivery and the Council is now able to produce accurate, up-to-date reports to support decision making. Corporately,

the Council can now look at the whole picture and identify areas of inefficiency and make properly informed decisions.

Significant savings are being achieved because of this centralised information through initiatives such as the convergence of services and the sharing of workloads. For example, maintenance staff resources can now be allocated across different seasons. Crews involved in summer activities such as hedge cutting, watering and other landscape tasks can be assigned to different tasks in winter such as litter collections, salting and gulley cleaning.

Traditionally each department has been responsible for managing its space but the lack of corporate visibility had led to duplication of work. The landscape department for instance arranged litter collection in their parks and open spaces, but a different team was contracted by another department to collect litter on surrounding streets. With data from different departments being displayed together on eGGP, this immediately highlighted these inefficiencies and allowed savings to be made.

Improvements in data and the use of GGP also revealed some areas of inefficiency between different authorities. Dacorum cuts grass for Hertfordshire County Council in urban areas but the Borough, County and Parish Councils all employ grass cutting contractors and this had led to different contracts covering the same areas, duplicating work and costs.

Sharing services with other Councils is also top of the agenda as authorities strive for efficiency gains. Dacorum is part of a Pathfinder

Making the business case

GIS consultants from the Nineveh Partnership were employed by Dacorum to produce a Business Case for extending the use of GIS within the Council. Seen as the first phase of a wider corporate implementation, the aims were to:

- Agree a standard GIS platform with central support for corporate-wide use
- Move to a single map base
- Map and appropriate associated data sets for access by staff over the Council's Intranet
- Extend map and data access to the Internet

Providing public access to GIS for map-based data presentation of property-related information was a key driver and was required to secure IEG (Implementing Electronic Government) grant monies. The other main benefits of implementing eGGP for Dacorum were in improving customer service, allowing information to be shared with other partners, and elimination of inefficient multiple GIS platforms and databases.

Within the specific eGGP implementation that Nineveh identified, annual savings were estimated at £60,000 in addition to a one off saving of £7000. The initial one off cost was £73,000, with annual costs of £12,000. In the first five years savings amount to £168,000 with ongoing savings estimated at £48,000 per annum.



Programme, involving Hertfordshire County Council and nine other local Councils across the county.

Through the initiative, Hertfordshire authorities have identified common service so that functions like payroll can be centralised, reducing duplication and improving efficiency. This also enables significant savings in procurement through increased buying power. Savings in ICT alone are estimated at between £1.5 and £2 million.

Interoperability

Smart GIS is seen as a central component for the future of such initiatives and the interoperability inherent to GGP software is very important. The setting up of three data centres under the Hertfordshire

scheme to replace 10 individual Council-run centres for example requires easy open access to data. This means the use of standard data formats, national address datasets such as the NLPG and an open approach by suppliers.

Providing easy access to information through Dacorum's Intranet and to the public via the Internet was seen as central to improving efficiency and service levels. The Council had a lot of data but it was very disseminated and not easily accessible – the planning department alone had over 60 layers of data.

Dacorum believes that GGP Systems has set a standard in terms of openness and interoperability to which other suppliers should follow. In the planning department, GGP links to Plantech's Acolaid system, ensuring access to development control information. Visibility is now much improved. With the previous system, planning managers were pretty much in the dark as current planning information was not readily accessible.

Meanwhile in the environmental health department, GGP is embedded in the Flare system where significant benefits are provided. Here applications include the identification of contaminated land (with Landmark data revealing old industrial sites), pinpointing graffiti hot spots, mapping air quality management zones and speeding up the processing of premises licensing.

In the estates department, GGP has replaced paper maps and records with a fully automated mapping and records system. Much duplication of work and paperwork has been eliminated, with the biggest benefit being much quicker retrieval of data.

Transforming Dacorum

Dacorum knows that maintaining a good profile and building a good reputation are important to its success as a public authority and this is at the heart of its strategy. Showing management proficiency by having the correct facts to hand is important and therefore access to accurate, up-to-date information is essential.

The wider access to Council information over the web has opened up greater opportunities for flexible working and remote working. Home-working is being encouraged where viable, eliminating commuting time and costs as well as freeing up office space - space that can then be rented out to generate income for the Council.

In terms of delivering services, the economic recession has put pressure on funding and the Council's other main priorities are to balance the books and focus on customers. The UK government now requires more for less so there are real pressures on deliverables.

Freedom of Information has added additional demands to local government in particular and Dacorum appreciates that more needs to be done to present information to residents. At the same time the Council needs to save staff time in gathering information. Using the tools provided by GGP, Dacorum are in no doubt they can deliver more for less.

John Worts, ICT Service Support Manager Dacorum Borough Council

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