

casestudy: GIS in Exeter



The new customer service centre at the Exeter City Council Civic Centre. Picture: Mark Passmore, www.apexnewspix.com

EXETER CITY COUNCIL, ONE of nine in the country given the green light to move towards unitary status, has been using desktop GIS for many years. Whilst these systems have been used within the planning and technical services departments, the staff at this forward thinking council have always recognised that the value of GI data won't be fully realised until it is in the hands of everyone that needs access and until everyone can understand the information that they are looking at.

planning, expert support, the right software and imaginative leadership from James Hodgson, Exeter's GIS Officer, and GIS Developer, Paul Gubb.

Goal 1 – A corporate solution The team decided that the simplest method of providing access to the central GI database was over the council intranet, which all potential users could already access. An intuitive, user-friendly tool was needed that would enable them to provide mapping datasets over the intranet that were easy to understand and that would be immediately useful to staff unfamiliar with GI.

Exeter chose the GeoXplorer tool from Aligned Assets. The council has worked with Aligned Assets on a number of GI projects, including the use of the Symphony Suite to manage address data and a partnership that helped the council meet the October 1st 2007 deadline for converting to the new NLPG:2006 gazetteer standard. This revised standard means that the data is much richer in detail and hence more valuable to all users.

Within a very short space of time, the council's implementation, using GeoXplorer, meant that a number of geographic datasets became available,

Innovation and Best Practice In Action

From finding the Cathedral to locating the best spots for a night's clubbing, Exeter City Council's publicly accessible GIS is improving service levels.

The project was driven by Exeter City Council's understanding that the way they deal with their customers is the most important element of their work. Indeed, it is the reason for their existence. Enhanced customer expectations increase the pressure on councils to improve their services. Exeter recognised this earlier than most and instilled the need for a customer focused culture in their drive for excellence.

The council set themselves two goals: to introduce geographical information to the widest number of staff possible in the most efficient and understandable manner and, secondly, to extend this work and provide public access to this data through the council's website.

These were ambitious targets that required

including aerial photographs, places of interest, hospital locations etc. What is more, they were being used by staff right across the organisation, many using GI data for the very first time.

Users could view maps of areas needed for their own workflow and view layers of information that had only previously been available in text format. GeoXplorer also provided a link into the council's local land and property gazetteer and allowed users to perform address searches.

Goal 2 – A public solution The corporate system was a great success and the GIS team monitored its increased use over time. Once they were happy that the new system had provided a boost to the efficiency of council departments, they turned their attention to providing this information to the public – key to the council's commitments for providing better service.

Once again, the council relied on Aligned Assets as their GI partner and implemented the iShareMaps software that they recommended. In the words of James Hodgson, 'We chose Astun Technology's iShareMaps as it was the software best suited for our requirements and we knew that we could rely on the expertise and support from Aligned Assets for this type of project'.

The result was one of the most intuitive and widely used websites in the country. Exeter's website



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is ranked 12th out of 468 in the Society of Information Technology Management's (SOCITM) "Better Connected" local authority websites, as well as being the most used of the 238 shire district websites in the country.

The new web pages enable the public to view maps of the whole city or just the area of interest to them. Also, if a visitor is reading about a city attraction, such as the Cathedral, on another part of the website, a link now exists to display the location of the Cathedral on a map. This has helped dramatically to reduce the time visitors take to find places of interest and has reduced the need to contact council staff for this kind of information.

This is My Exeter The mapping solution has been a huge hit and the council has extended its capabilities through a link to their local land and property gazetteer. Now users can create a map around a given address and be rewarded with a host of local information, including the location of schools, hospitals, cinemas, car parks, planning applications pending and much more. "My Exeter", as this utility is called, provides a fantastic source of local information and, through a simple combination of a text and icon-based menu system and the large, clear mapping window, users have all the information they need to evaluate Exeter as a potential home or just to plan a night out clubbing!

Customers First The council staff have to deal with all manner of enquiries from the public and, whilst they must be answered, they can be extremely time consuming and disruptive. A typical example is when someone in the process of making a planning application needs a map of their area of interest. In the past, these customers would have been directed to the planning department where they would have had to interrupt other work-flows in order to get a printed map. Now, the frontline staff can provide these printed maps simply by accessing the new corporate GI system. The time savings for staff have been enormous.

The Future Plans Due to the efforts of the GI team at Exeter, in partnership with Aligned Assets, mapping is now central to the delivery of information by the council. The simple delivery of information that previously could be difficult or time consuming to obtain is something that the council will build upon immediately as well as in the longer term.

The iShareMaps application is constantly being developed and upgraded. Recently, the council has implemented one of the latest features: Report it. Until now users have only accessed information from the council; now they can also send information back to the council.

If residents want to report the location of an abandoned vehicle, a pothole or graffiti, they can now use mapping on the website – a huge leap forward in



Residents can report the location of problems like an abandoned vehicle and the relevant council department will be notified. Picture (above right): Mark Passmore, www.apexnewsfix.com.



providing a user friendly, "always-available" service to the public. The mapping site links to the council's eForms system, which will note the location information provided and send the notice to the relevant department for action. Information is transferred in a much more efficient manner.

Summary The goals at the beginning of the project were to increase the level of service provided by the council in such a way as to be cost effective, to increase the amount of information accessible to users and, crucially, to ensure that users could understand the information that they were using. The implementation of this innovative mapping solution has meant that the council met all of these goals.

About Aligned Assets

Aligned Assets has over ten years experience of working with Local Authorities. Having acquired this knowledge and expertise, it is able to provide a wide variety of GIS and gazetteer solutions. It currently works with over 70 Local Authorities and was the first company to achieve NLPG: 2006 accreditation. It also has Transport for London, the British Transport Police and two National Parks amongst its customers.

To find out more about Aligned Assets, call 0870 750 8750 or visit: www.aligned-assets.co.uk

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