

place matters



For the emergency services, place definitely matters.

IN A WORLD THAT is getting smaller through technology, it could easily be argued that place no longer matters – or at least not as much as it used to. Pensions are now paid directly into the bank accounts of the recipients, car tax is purchased online and enquiries are often better handled via phone or Internet than in person. As individuals' lives get busier and time becomes a more valuable commodity, it is perhaps little wonder that we live in a world of automation, eBay and Facebook.

A virtual world? So, from one perspective at least, it seems that the location of a person or a service is no longer important. But although worldwide

has collected its own datasets and then formatted and managed them in ways most useful for its own purposes. These individual collections are, one hopes, very useful for their owners but there has always been the potential for duplication (or worse) when such "silos" develop with no higher level strategy. There are many examples of datasets that could be, with relatively little effort, made to serve more than just their original purpose – if only the datasets were well "advertised" and if the parties involved were able and willing to co-operate.

The sharing and re-use of GI is the basic concept underlying recent attempts to formulate local and regional GI strategies and, ultimately, a national GI

The NLPG: a beacon for a successful GI Strategy for the UK? Carl Hancock wonders over this particularly relevant question in a world where "place" seems to be shrinking behind technology.



communication now seems to be trivially easy and free or very cheap – a virtual world – we must not forget the real world in which we live. Our houses are located by well-used addresses, we drive on a well-connected road network and insure against an increasing risk of flooding from very real rivers and the sea.

For this very reason, geographical information (GI) – datasets that describe where people and things are located – has formed a vital element of infrastructure for many services including: local authority planners; highway authority engineers; the armed services; environmental agencies; and postal and delivery services. GI datasets have been collected, piecemeal, for many years. Each institution

strategy for the UK. These strategies, motivated in part by e-government and now t-government ("t" for transformational) modernisation drives, should provide the opportunity to maximise exploitation of, and benefit from, all forms of GI.

But the lack of common standards across the GI community can seem like a giant crevasse, with no obvious bridges. But there is already, within the world of GI, an excellent example of how such co-operation can be implemented between many organisations with different cultures. It is only one of many bridges that could cross the crevasse if the national strategy were to be well articulated and backed up with adequate resources.

Initially conceived in 1999, the National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) brought together all the address and location data held by local authorities – in their local land and property gazetteers (LLPGs) – into one national hub. The same issues of compatibility facing any national GI Strategy were faced by the proponents of the NLPG. In addition, there was some resistance from organisations that had already invested in incompatible standards

The National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) is being used in the UK's FiReControl programme – fire and rescue services will be able to reach an emergency location more accurately and more quickly.



that would become obsolete. The new standard for addressing was to be British Standard BS7666, which was developed during the 1990s with a long drawn out consultation. Many local authorities, therefore, had to convert their LLPGs from their existing formats into the national standard.

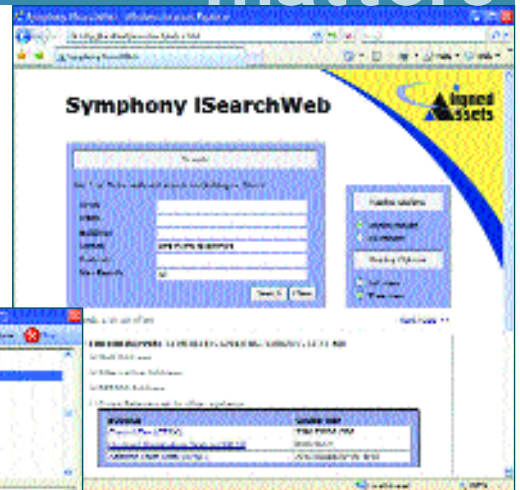
What can be achieved At the time of writing, *Place Matters: The Location Strategy for the United Kingdom* has been with Ministers since October 2007 and will "shortly" be published. National initiatives are not proposed simply for their own sake and it is timely that the true benefits of the NLPG are finally becoming apparent. The NLPG contains the most accurate and up-to-date information available, a fact that has been recognised by the emergency services who understand the essential benefits of the nationally consistent address database. Not only will they benefit from improved day-to-day efficiency but – crucially – the ability for improved location of emergencies will ultimately result in the saving of lives.

The UK's FiReControl programme is one example of how a new national strategy for dealing with emergencies is benefiting from the NLPG. Aligned Assets, a company specialising in gazetteer management, has provided software for the nine Regional Control Centres, which will be able to access the data held on the NLPG in real-time and so pinpoint a caller's location precisely. This will enable fire and rescue services to reach an emergency location with much improved speed and accuracy. The NLPG is also now being used within the British Transport Police, Transport for London and the National Parks.

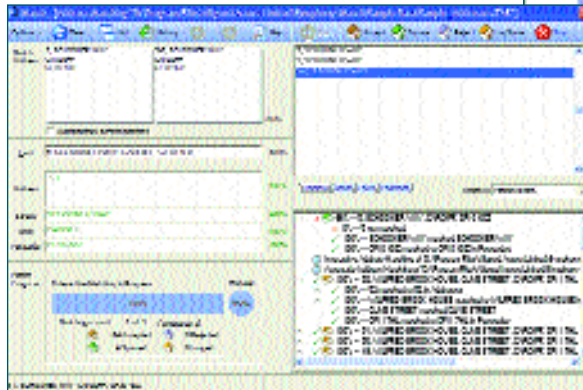
Mike Smith, sales and marketing manager at Aligned Assets, says: 'After working in partnership with over 80 local authorities to provide the solutions by which they could manage and export their address data, it's extremely satisfying to be working with organisations that can now access and utilise that data.'

The NLPG is now in full operation – with regular updates from every local authority. The UK Location Strategy is not yet published. But they are inextricably linked. The NLPG is an example of what the Location Strategy is trying to achieve – data sharing for improved public services. It is to be hoped that there will soon be many more examples spawned by – or perhaps just validated by – the national strategy. It is often said that at least 80% of all information in local and central government has a GI component and that 85% of this will have an address component. It is, therefore, clear that a

Right: Symphony iSearchWeb being used to search the gazetteer via a number of different search options.



Left: Symphony iMatch being used to search a legacy system for inclusions into the local land and property gazetteer.



significant amount of the groundwork for a national GI infrastructure has already been done with the NLPG leading the way.

Conclusion There can be little doubt that the road to success for the NLPG has had its twists and turns but the persistence and determination of those leading the way has produced a product that's value will be recognised for years to come. The same will undoubtedly be true for the UK's Location Strategy – it will take time and a lot of effort but should pay off handsomely in the end. The success of the NLPG demonstrates that national co-operative projects can – given hard work and strong leadership – produce an infrastructure that is even now being seen as a model for the rest of Europe.

Place Matters – however the virtual world on the web develops. The UK Location Strategy, when it eventually sees the light of day and when it has been used to justify and unify various GI initiatives, will bring benefits to public and private sector organisations as well as, most importantly, to society at large. A co-operative, data sharing approach will bring greater efficiencies to the public sector, provide opportunities in the UK and abroad for the private sector, and will enable the public to understand location related issues and become more involved with our democratic processes.

As well as reducing the apparent size of the world, technology is also making the running of the world more efficient, more universal and more accessible. The UK's Location Strategy needs to harness GI technology and individuals need to use their experience of projects, such as the NLPG, to support the next generation of co-operative endeavour. The NLPG is certainly a GI beacon that can be used to light the way ahead.

“
National initiatives are not proposed simply for their own sake...
”