Spatially-enabled services in Southwark

Summary

The London Borough of Southwark now offers its citizens a spatially-enabled one-stop shop through a state-of-the-art web mapping platform. This is underpinned by council data which is intelligently linked.

Key learnings for other councils

- All councils can create something like Southwark's online map service utilising maps provided by the Mapping Services Agreement (MSA).
- Southwark has realised the benefits of presenting information on maps – which makes it easier for the visitor to locate services near to them.
- Ensure that your server, network and internet infrastructure matches expected software and user demands and that it can grow.
- Stick to the principles of spatial data infrastructure (SDI) and resist calls for mapping 'solutions' that don't fit with a mature or growing SDI.

Who was involved?

The project was managed by the Geographical Information Systems (GIS) manager with considerable input from his colleague in the GIS team. The council's web strategist and e-communications team were two other stakeholders who had real input into the final service.

The problems and how we tackled them

Although Southwark has offered basic web mapping on their website for some time, the previous service had become outdated. It didn't, for example, allow information to be linked spatially and had little infrastructure behind it in terms of joined-up information.

A further driver to improve the web mapping service came from the Society of IT Managers (SOCITM) annual 'Better Connected' survey. This rates council websites according to a range of best practice criteria, one of which is based on usability. The criteria rates whether people can easily find information using a spatial search, such as by postcode or address. A third driver came from colleagues who had seen and used online mapping on other councils' websites and wanted something similar.

The GIS manager explored various possibilities and developed a solution which was sustainable and intelligent. The strategy behind the web mapping platform is a joined-up infrastructure of information held centrally.

In order to develop the concept, the GIS manager had to write and present a business case. This was presented to the Information Services Project Board which comprises of senior members of the council. The project was approved in March 2009. From then until launch in March 2010, a series of technical developments such as back office upgrades, server infrastructure improvements and testing took place.

Coincidentally, the entire council website was upgraded at the same time so the launch of the new web mapping product occurred at the same time. This gave the web mapping project more publicity than anticipated and benefited the profile of the project.

Outcomes and impact

There have been several key outputs to the project. The crucial output is the state-of-the-art web mapping service. This can be viewed at:

[Southwark interactive mapping tool](#) – on Southwark Council's website

It is based on a one-stop shop principle – enabling citizens to access all spatial information held by the council in one place. The range of information includes:

- conservation zones
- controlled parking zones
- school locations – which then link to Edubase providing parents with further information and access points
- recycling points
- listed buildings
- council properties for sale
- historical mapping from 1896
- and many more spatial datasets.

In addition, the software allows Southwark to take spatial data and create 'widgets' on other web pages. For example, the Conservation Services page can have an interactive map embedded in it with specialist data relevant to the visitor. This not only enhances the individual council service webpages for the visitor but also ensures services and information is spatially referenced.

Importantly, the web mapping service enables visitors to retrieve information about mapped features by clicking on the map. This is alongside searching for locations by inserting a textual search term, such as a postcode or an address. This allows Southwark council to offer a 'find my nearest' service. This information is underpinned by the councils Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG), ensuring the information is accurate and reliable.

A further benefit of the project has been the improvement in encouraging data sharing between departments. This has been developing for a long time before the web mapping project. However, it served as a further driver to encourage staff to share their data. The main method has been to show data creators the other datasets they can access on the central store. Once staff saw the benefits to them of access to this data, they were happier to share their own information.

Other key outputs have been:

- a sharp rise in unique visitors to the service from an average of 3,000 per month to 7,000 since the service has been launched
- colleagues such as the web team and the communications team are happy with the new system
- both the council and the GIS team have received greater publicity and achieved a higher profile.

Next steps

Southwark's main aims for the coming 12 months are:

1. Improved monitoring information so the GIS team can monitor the use of the new system.
2. Development of a new 'in my area' profiling tool. This will enable visitors to select only the services they are interested in and receive an interactive list of all the relevant services in their area plotted on the web map tool.
3. Introduce embedded maps – through the use of widgets – into selected service pages on the council website.
4. Continue to improve the public mapping service with enhancements such as the introduction of customised mapping, more historical map options and clearer symbology.
5. Thoroughly modernise the existing internal staff-facing GIS. This will be based on the new public service but with the extra functionality that staff need.

Southwark Council's web mapping tool

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The business case is available on request from Stuart Carter.

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