

This article appeared in E-Government Bulletin 266 published by Headstar, 23 June 2008.

For more information, see <http://www.headstar.com/egb/>

Building an Evidence Base

by Tom Smith

There is increasing pressure on public agencies to make better use of evidence in developing strategy and delivering and monitoring services. The use of geographic information (GI) - information linked to location via digitised maps, postcodes or other locators - can be critical to the compilation and examination of such evidence by public bodies.

At a workshop on the topic hosted by OCSI at Headstar's recent conference 'Geographical information systems in the public sector' (<http://www.headstar-events.com/gis08>), delegates examined various examples of good practice in how GI is already being used to support policy.

One way location-based information is useful is to help target precious resources. Nationally and locally, organisations are increasingly using geographical data, often at neighbourhood-level, to better target resources based on local needs. For example, GI can be used to identify the number of case-workers needed for local services, allocate programme resources between different areas, or prioritise funding bids from organisations based in deprived neighbourhoods.

Another key area is in monitoring and evaluating policy and services. Data tracked over time can be used to examine trends, including many social and economic indicators available at small-area level. These are often used by local agencies to evaluate the success of specific programme or projects, and identify how local regeneration programmes are helping the most deprived areas close the social gap.

Public agencies are also getting smarter at exploiting their data on users, linked to other geographical information, to understand how different people are using services; how those services can be better tailored to users; and how to reach different types of users. This brings in 'customer insight' techniques from the commercial sector such as 'segmentation' and 'social marketing', but is not a new idea: the philanthropist and social researcher Charles Booth was classifying neighbourhoods in London based on income and social class back in the 19th Century (see the online archive of his survey work hosted by the London Schools of Economics and Political Science at: <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/>).

In the workshop session, participants highlighted several ways that GI is already helping to support policy in their organisations, including:

- Supporting joined-up partnership working across varied areas such as community safety, health and social care, regeneration and economic development. The ability to share data between different partners was seen as key. This enables services to link their data geographically, helping develop a shared understanding of local needs.

- Communicating evidence to decision-makers: GI is very user-friendly, and has high impact: "senior managers love maps". This can contrast with other types of research, which were seen as often more difficult to communicate to policy colleagues and decision-makers.

Engaging and informing the public: The importance of presenting information to the public about their local areas was highlighted, and linked to the enormous popularity of services such as Google Maps and Up My Street.

Several challenges were also highlighted by workshop participants, including the importance of making geographical data freely-available. One delegate said: "Ordnance Survey licensing restrictions hamper us in putting data out to the public". Other issues raised included the legal status of shared data - "who has liability for data accuracy?" - and the difficulty in making the business case for research to budget holders.

The workshop ended with a challenge and question to public sector agencies on more effectively using geographic information to support policy-making: "in your organisation, how well are geographic information teams linked to research and intelligence? And how well are research and intelligence teams-linked to key decision-makers?"

Over to you.

NOTE: Tom Smith is Director of Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI). OCSI have worked with over 50 public sector bodies to develop and interpret the evidence base for tackling social and economic inequality: <http://www.ocsi.co.uk>.

OCSI have worked with over 50 public sector organisations at national, regional and local level to develop and interpret the evidence base for tackling social and economic inequality.

The OCSI team brings together specialist skills in social policy and economic development, statistical modelling, data analysis and interpretation to develop and interpret the evidence-base for public sector programme planning, targeting, monitoring and evaluation.

OCSI is a 'spinout consultancy' from the University of Oxford Social Disadvantage Research Centre (SDRC), internationally recognised for its research into deprivation and social policy, developing the UK Indices of Multiple Deprivation for England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and advising on the local measurement of deprivation worldwide