

## W3.3

## The local authority experience

Jon Bloor, Oldham MBC

### Introduction

In 1995 a report was commissioned by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council to examine how geographic information was being managed throughout the Authority. This report identified that more than 140 address-based data sets were being maintained; of which more than two-thirds were accessed daily (GM Research, 1995).

Few of these data sets were created with a cohesive commonality *per se*. Departments that required a database to be created often imposed criteria that would appear to provide the best solution for their needs, but without co-ordinated consultation, very few of these systems allowed the sharing of information across Departmental boundaries, and into a Corporate domain. The resultant effect was that few of these legacy database systems could be cross-referenced, in spite of the fact that many stored some form of Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN).

In 1997 the decision was made to undertake the creation of a BS7666 Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) in order to provide a building block for the strategic management of information. As the majority of the Council's legacy systems were property based in some form, it was envisaged that the LLPG would provide a platform from which these systems could be collectively cross-referenced, thereby providing a wealth of data.

As part of the creation process an additional cross-reference table was defined which allowed the storage of the various different data sets' UPRN's. Whilst there is currently no dynamic links between the core data sets from which the LLPG was created, through the cross-reference table any data held in these data sets can be combined at household level.

### Location, Location, Location

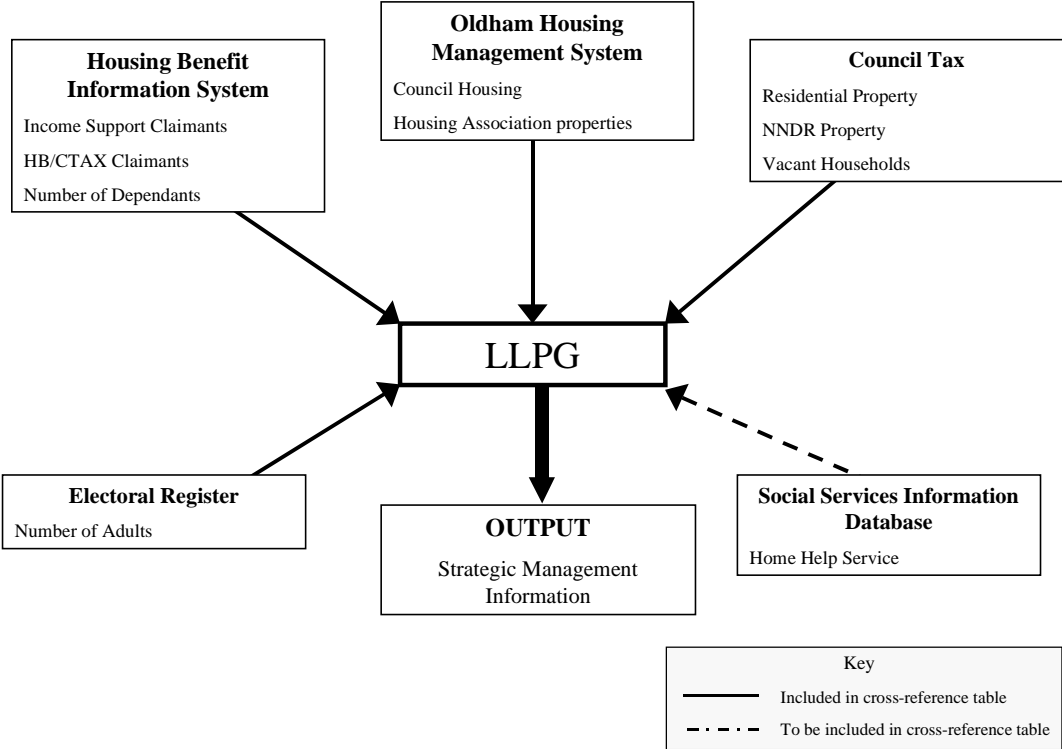
The primary driver for developing the LLPG initially came from the Policy and Partnerships Division (formerly Policy Unit). *Inter alia*, the remit of this Division is to inform members and officers of government initiatives and policies that affect the Council and the citizens of Oldham Borough. By the successful bidding for European and Central Government funded initiatives, the Division has ensured that communities have access to monies to regenerate local areas, and thereby reduce the barriers faced by some of the most deprived communities.

In order to access funding (e.g. Single Regeneration Budget, New Deal for Communities) there is a requirement to gather a wide range of contemporary socio-economic information about the residents of Oldham. The 1991 Census had been used to great effect to measure such information, but the Census only provides a "snapshot" at a particular time. It had long been understood that there were some radical changes within the population dynamics which meant that the data derived from the 1991 Census soon became dated.

In order to determine which communities needed the most support, and therefore ensure appropriate delivery of services, there is a requirement to understand what problems those communities are facing.

Through the creation of the cross-reference table (figure 1) within the LLPG there was now, for the first time, an opportunity link a wide variety of data held within the major Council data sets at an individual household level. This meant that information such as those households in receipt of benefits, or those that are Housing Association owned, and even levels of vacant properties can easily be determined.

Figure 1 - Schema of Cross Reference Table within LLPG



Historically knowledge of areas was usually limited to boundaries defined for use in the Census (e.g. Wards and Enumeration Districts), but through the use of the LLPG and Geographical Information Systems, areas (suitable for regeneration) can be identified by need rather than arbitrary geographical units.

The ability to store information at a household level then allows the aggregation of data to a suitable level (e.g. Ward or Postcode Sector). As some data sets only hold information at a specific geographical unit it allows the cross comparison of such data.

**Case Study: Fitton Hill and Hathershaw ~ A New Deal for Communities**

New Deal for Communities (NDC) forms part of the Government’s programme for tackling the problems of multiple deprivation and social exclusion faced by the most disadvantaged communities. The key objective is to bridge the gap between the most deprived communities and the rest of the country. In doing this NDC seeks to tackle the key problems facing deprived communities such as: low educational achievement, poor job prospects, high levels of crime and poor health.

In November 1999, Oldham was invited to put forward one neighbourhood as an NDC area, and work with the local community in developing a plan for regenerating the area. The neighbourhood needed to be one with high levels of deprivation and comprise of no more than 4,000 households. As previously highlighted, collection of this type of information would have usually been collected from sources such as the 1991 Census or historical data on benefits receipt by ward from the Department of Social Security (DSS). The problem with these (and numerous other) data sets were that they soon became out of date, and they are only available for fixed geographical areas such as electoral wards or census enumeration districts.

In order to fulfil the criteria the geographical unit needed to be an area smaller than a ward. Without the ability to combine data from the various Council data sets the task would have been an onerous task and

extremely time consuming, if not virtually impossible. However through the use of the LLPG cross reference table, a wide range of deprivation indicators at a household level were chosen, and these were then mapped, and a shortlist of deprived neighbourhoods were chosen from which policymakers were able to choose the most appropriate area. A task that traditionally could have taken months of painstaking research was completed within a couple of days.

The implementation of location based information data sets has greatly increased the ability of the Council to tackle issues such as deprivation. By developing strategies through local partnership agreements and Government organisations the Council aims to target and deliver better services to the citizens of Oldham.

### Future Developments of the LLPG

As a consequence of the Modernising Government and subsequent Implementing Electronic Government agendas, Local Authorities have been asked to develop their own LLPG's. Oldham MBC views the LLPG as the cornerstone to providing E-services to residents.

Following a successful Best Value Call Centre pilot, Oldham Council has decided to further develop the project to a borough wide level, as well as developing wider access to a greater interaction via other mediums (e.g. one stop shops, Council website etc.). There is therefore a requirement for more of the location-based data sets held within the Council to be made available to the residents through electronic media.

It is envisaged that a local "hub" could be set-up, similar to the National Land Information Service, which could collate resident and location based information across a wide range of services. The resident could, through a series of channels available, obtain information related to their household, from a number of departmental data sets, passported through via the LLPG cross-reference table. The access to information will be strictly determined by the Data Protection Act, for the most part the data will relate to non-personal services delivered by the Council. Exceptions include online Council Tax payments.

In response to the E-government agenda, Oldham Council is adopting a strategy to build upon the initial data audit. The intention is that a common "Data Warehouse or Pool of Information" will be accessible by every channel. In summation, as more data sets are matched to the LLPG, then more services will be accessible to the residents.

There is also scope for integrating data sharing between Oldham Council and the Oldham Partnership, via similar processes. Whilst there are currently data protection issues to be worked out, it is hoped that through inter agency working the residents of Oldham will be able to benefit from better informed service delivery.

### Conclusion

Oldham Council was perhaps different to many other authorities in its approach to the development of a LLPG. It was not developed as a method to assist local land searches or other conveyancing focused projects.

The initial developmental strategy of the LLPG was to provide a tool from which strategic information could be accessed. Through the creation of a cross-reference table within the LLPG structure a wealth of information could be gathered to inform Councillors and Officers about the socio-economic profile of the Borough.

The associated costs of the development of the LLPG were absorbed because of the realisation of the importance of unlocking the data held within the various legacy systems. The savings can be broadly summarised as a reduction in Officer time required to support bid documents, and an overall improvement in the ability to provide better informed services.

As stated in the Council's Implementing Electronic Government Statement, there is now movement to implement the LLPG fully into the delivery of E-government services.

## References/Guide to further reading

GM Research (1995) Managing Geographic Information. Internal Publication.

The NLPG web site, *hosted by Intelligent Addressing*: <http://www.nlpg.org.uk/>

The NLIS web site, <http://www.nlis.org.uk/>