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Local Government and the NLPG – are we nearly there yet?

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1 Introduction

Before and since the first National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) was compiled in 2001 much has been written about the quality, currency and completeness of the NLPG and Local Government's role in its creation. In the early days of Local Government compilation its role was questioned (Roper & Barr, 2000) and even the Acacia Report (Harrison & Keith, 2002), which seemed to be a resounding pat on the back for the NLPG, raised some issues of quality and the sustainability of the local authority gazetteers.

Local government itself has had little to say on the NLPG, perhaps relying on the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and its subsidiary the Local Government Information House (LGIH) to speak on their behalf while the Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) officers get busy compiling their local gazetteers to feed the NLPG. There is no doubt however that these very same local government officers are critical to the NLPG in its current form. Seeking the views of the 407 street naming and numbering authorities charged with creating LLPGs is also an extensive undertaking but this was the task undertaken in January 2003 as part of a wider dissertation on the NLPG.

Before looking at the research some background on why this was undertaken. Working for a Scottish local authority I had the opportunity to look at the NLPG from the periphery, as progress in Scotland is 18 to 24 months behind England and Wales. Scotland is, however, still part of the NLPG and every Scottish authority is required to complete a gazetteer – now specifically as part of the Definitive National Addressing for Scotland (DNAS) project, more of which later. Another aspect that stimulated my research interest was the rurality issue. Is it more difficult to create a gazetteer for a rural authority? With an opportunity, sponsored by Argyll and Bute Council, to undertake the research, which most LLPG officers are not in a position to even consider, I resolved not only to complete my dissertation but also to make the results widely available. So this paper is part of my evangelisation of the Local Government LLPG cause.

2 Preliminary Investigation of LLPG Progress

In January 2003 some preliminary investigation was undertaken into the different levels of LLPG progress in local authorities. At that time 200 LLPGs were linked to the NLPG hub. The topics looked at were:

- Population, Area and Population Density

- Type of Authority

- Council Performance

- Political Control

- E-government progress

In summary the findings made it clear that the land area of an authority can have a significant bearing on its ability to create and maintain an LLPG, more so than population or density, with 'small' authorities having significantly more linked LLPGs (Figure 1). However, the examination of e-government and council performance provided some correlation with this so there are wider issues for these 'large' councils. Shire districts were also highlighted as an area of concern when compared to single tier authorities. Other differences arising were councils with 'no overall political control' making slow progress and the councils with a 'poor' Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) doing well. These initial findings were taken forward to the questionnaire to attempt to determine the reasons for the differences. The political issue was proved to be irrelevant in terms of LLPG progress and there was some evidence of the 'poor' CPA authorities rushing into creating LLPGs without addressing the sustainability issues. This left the two main issues of 'large' authorities and shire districts to be interrogated further through the questionnaire.

3 The Local Government View

The questionnaire was issued to all 407 authorities at the end of January 2003 and by the cut off date four weeks later 123 (30%) had been returned. A reminder and a two-week extension increased the returns significantly to 215 authorities (53%). At least 30% of authorities in all regions, types of authorities, sizes of authorities and stages of LLPG progress were represented.

The questionnaire examined organisational issues, resources, data cleansing, documentation, sustainability and relationships with the street gazetteer in an attempt to determine the reasons for the differences in progress between authorities. With free rein to comment on any other issues the respondents also covered issues such as suppliers, the BS7666 standard, support and some commercial and legal issues.

3.1 Organisational Issues

No two local authorities have the same organisational structure so there can be no generic business model for managing the LLPG, but there are some things that can help and the main one seems to be to have a dedicated LLPG Manager. 60% of authorities have a LLPG Manager but only one fifth of these do not undertake other tasks with GIS Manager being the most common other role. There is clear evidence that the multiple roles can hinder progress as 47% of linked LLPGs are being updated where the officer in charge is purely in a LLPG Manager role. This reduces to 25% when the GIS Manager role is added and 20% when the Ordnance Survey Liaison Officer role is also included. There is, however, an issue here for smaller authorities as many cannot justify a dedicated LLPG post and this is part of the problem that shire districts are facing. The findings of another recent research into GIS in local government (Baldwin, 2002) came to a similar conclusion – smaller district councils have a greater task and in many of these authorities the LLPG and GIS officer are one and the same person.

The service in which the LLPG is located does not seem to matter. The most common were the IT Service with 40% and Planning at 30% but there were a number of other services mentioned, such as Strategy, Engineers and Building Control, with little difference in progress. What does seem to be important is that one or more people in the service champion the LLPG cause. Championing was significantly greater in linked authorities and is likely to be one of the reasons for their success but thankfully in authorities not yet linked 50% have someone still championing the LLPG. Surprisingly there was no difference in the level of Chief Executive and Member awareness between linked and not

linked authorities so their understanding and support does not appear to be significant although clearly they can influence where the LLPG fits into a council's e-government priorities. The lack of progress in authorities that should have no problem with LLPG creation is often due to conflicting priorities and more visible projects winning out.

3.2 Resources

Resources, both human and financial, were the major concern raised by respondents. Many of the 'large' authorities or Shire Districts that are making slow progress indicated that they cannot divert the staff or funding required to compile their LLPG. 46% of authorities have used temporary staff on their LLPG for an average of 2.5 man-years. Without specific funding for temporary staff it is difficult for small authorities to justify the diversion of expenditure from other projects. The number of staff required to create and maintain a gazetteer of 200,000 properties is greater than one of 50,000 properties but not proportionally so and thus the resourcing problem is amplified particularly as many of the 50,000 property authorities are Shire Districts or large authorities.

A number of authorities raised the issue of making specific funding available to assist authorities in setting up their LLPGs. The recent announcement of £2.25 million of LGOL funding is to be welcomed but when compared with the £11 million the Scottish Executive have made available to create a sustainable Scottish gazetteer for 32 authorities the £2.25 million will not go far for 300+ English authorities. Clearly this money must be specifically targeted at those authorities that need it most and will hopefully bring on the stragglers.

3.3 Street Gazetteer

Again problems with the street gazetteer are amplified in large authorities and Shire Districts and in the questionnaire these authorities were more likely to disagree that the LSG contains all the streets required for the LLPG. Early NLPG adopters such as the London Boroughs did not have the same level of street anomalies and Metropolitan Districts and Unitary Authorities did not have the added complication of dealing with another authority – the County Council – which has held many Shire Districts back. Although some authorities were raising the issue in 2001 only when a greater number of districts started compiling their LLPG did the county/district problem get the attention it clearly needed and deserved. The meetings IDeA arranged with all Street Gazetteer Custodians in late 2002 seem to have helped raise awareness and the questionnaire responses highlighted good examples of joint working between counties and their constituent districts. The transfer of responsibility for the street gazetteer to the district seems to be essential and where this has happened it has allowed shire districts, even large ones with many rural roads not included in the NSG for street maintenance purposes, to create all the streets required for the NLPG.

3.4 Cleaning and Matching

The cleaning and matching stage of the LLPG must not be underestimated and the average length of deployment of temporary staff reported - 2.5 man-years - is probably close to the mark. The point at which an LLPG is linked to the NLPG is a matter of choice for each authority and there were conflicting responses from the questionnaire returns. At the time of linking an average of less than 40% of anomalies were corrected with many authorities linking before any cleansing work and others waiting until close to 100%. The important issue here is to ensure that software is in place that can handle the data transfer to the hub. If the LLPG is loaded in compliant software an authority is as well to connect early and transfer updates as they are resolved. Despite this only 40% of authorities with the software in place were providing regular updates to the hub.

The average number of anomalies corrected now stands at less than 50% so there is still a considerable amount of work to be done. Even in London Boroughs, where progress is ahead of other types of authority, data cleansing and matching is still a major issue.

3.5 Maintenance and Sustainability

The ongoing maintenance of the LLPG is probably the most critical issue that a local authority must address to ensure the gazetteer is sustainable after the initial data cleansing stage. This is the area where there is most concern from the questionnaire results. For the NLPG to be as good or better as the current alternative national gazetteers – Ordnance Survey's Address-Point (or the Address Layer of Mastermap) or Royal Mail's PAF – the minimum update must be weekly with daily the ultimate goal. At present only just over one third of LLPGs linked to the NLPG hub have been updated in the last month. 35% of gazetteers have not been updated since they were linked (Figure 2) and one third of these were linked in 2000 or 2001.

Based on the above the quality of the NLPG must be questioned as it was in the Acacia Report (Harrison & Keith, 2002). There is need for some key performance indicators to ensure there is increased confidence in the NLPG. As a starting point the following information should be made available for all LLPGs:

- Date of last update by local authority

- Frequency of update

- Sources of update information

- Number and percentage of anomalies to be corrected

Internally authorities must use the LLPG widely across business applications to increase the likelihood of sustainability. This issue was not covered by the questionnaire but it was raised as the current concern by many authorities with a gazetteer linked and being maintained. This is an area which does need promoting as the internal benefits to a council by wide propagation of the LLPG may convince the authorities yet to commit resources to the project.

3.6 Documentation, Support and the BS7666 Standard

There is a wealth of information available on the BS7666 standard and applying it to create an LLPG fit for linking to the NLPG. But only 2% of authorities agreed that this documentation is easy to use. For many new LLPG Managers finding the information they require can be a daunting task. The NLPG Website was rated as good or excellent by over 50% of respondents but this still means 40% rated it as fair or poor with poor navigation and search facilities being the main criticisms.

A high percentage of large authorities and Shire Districts consider that the documentation is too urban with not enough rural examples. Of more concern is the small number of rural authorities that think they have addresses which do not fit the BS7666 standard - particularly the street gazetteer. Only the next review of BS7666 can address this but there is now a considerable LLPG community with an in depth knowledge of the standard and it may need to be tightened up, along with the guidance and conventions, to ensure consistency across the whole country.

The support for custodians through the NLPG Regional Custodian Groups was rated as good but some problems were still highlighted. A particular criticism was that authorities well advanced with their LLPGs tended to lead the groups and the early stages of LLPG development were not well represented at the meetings. The 2003 workshops ran by IDeA/IA were better received as there was a split in delegates to allow a wide range of experiences to be covered. The questionnaire also raised

awareness of some groups that have been set up locally, usually on a county basis, where local issues can be discussed and conventions and procedures agreed. Many of these include or are led by the county, which eases the street gazetteer problem, and they were generally rated as excellent.

3.7 Commercial and Legal Issues

The NLPG was 'sold' to many authorities in the early days as an income generator. There are clearly issues relating to OS and Royal Mail which the Acacia board need to resolve before this can be achieved in the private sector but the potential for the LLPG within a local authority and the wider public sector is reason alone to develop a gazetteer. The authorities still holding out for a financial return on their investment, and the questionnaire highlighted that there are still a few, should look closer to home and the 40+ local authority datasets that can be linked to the LLPG and the major service benefits which this can realise.

4 Are We Nearly There Yet?

At the time of writing in July 2003 the answer to the question in the title of this paper – are we nearly there yet? –is probably YES. At the time of the questionnaire in January 2003 the answer would have been a definite NO and hopefully by the time the paper is presented to conference in September 2003 it will be a definite YES.

This optimism is based on the assistance Intelligent Addressing and IDeA are now providing for LLPG Managers. The workshops held in the spring of 2003 were well received by many of the 317 attendees from 168 authorities at all levels of progress, although some of those further on did comment that the events should have been held 18 months earlier. The new 'NLPG at Home' initiative from IA may also help to resolve unique authority issues which may be hindering progress. There is also optimism based on the volume of knowledge and increasing awareness within local authorities of the benefits of a LLPG. 94% of respondents agreed and tended to agree when asked if the council will derive major benefits from their LLPG.

In Scotland, which is the only area projecting a less than 80% linkage by the end of 2003, the £11 million funding for the Definitive National Addressing for Scotland project will bring all 32 authorities forward together, enabling Scottish authorities to catch up with the rest of the country.

5 Summary

This year, 2003, is the make or break year for local government to deliver the NLPG. More LLPGs should be linked to the NLPG hub this year than in any other year (Figure 3) and the resource utilised to clean and match LLPG data reaches a peak. There is no doubt that a local authority can maintain a sustainable LLPG as the questionnaire uncovered many examples across all types and sizes of authorities. IDeA, in conjunction with IA, are increasing the number of seminars and workshops to assist councils but there may need to be more targeting of the IDeA and IA resource, assisted by the software vendors, to pick up the stragglers - for example, a North of England or South West workshop for rural authorities or specific workshops for linked authorities on sustainability and links to back office applications. The LGOL funding will clearly help to enable this. It is also imperative that some form of key performance indicators are developed and widely published.

Based on the figures supplied through the questionnaire some realistic targets for the end of 2003, which will determine if the NLPG can be a local government success story, are:

- 100% of authorities actively creating an LLPG (NLPG Status 3)

- 80% of LLPGs linked to the NLPG hub (NLPG Status 2)

- 50% of all LLPGs updating daily or weekly (NLPG Status 1)

If these targets are achieved there will enough momentum, allied with the wealth of experience and good practice, to ensure a successful future for the NLPG in its local government home.

References

Baldwin, F., 2002. GIS and the 'N'-initiatives. Manchester: UNIGIS.

Harrison, A. and Keith, G., 2002. Final Report - An Assessment on the Suitability of the National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) for Inclusion in the Initial Acacia List of Definitive National Addresses [online]. London: Improvement and Development Agency. Available from http://www.idea.gov.uk/press/acacia_report.pdf [Accessed 2 December 2002].

Roper, C. and Barr, R., 2000. Getting to Go: The NLPG is being built, so what's the problem? Mapping Awareness, Vol.13, No.11, pp 28-31

Figure 1 – Averages of population, area and density for linked and not linked authorities at 31 January 2003.

Linked LLPG?	Average Population	Average Area	Average Population Density
YES	152,160	332 sq km	1,632 persons per km
NO	128,837	812 sq km	841 person per km

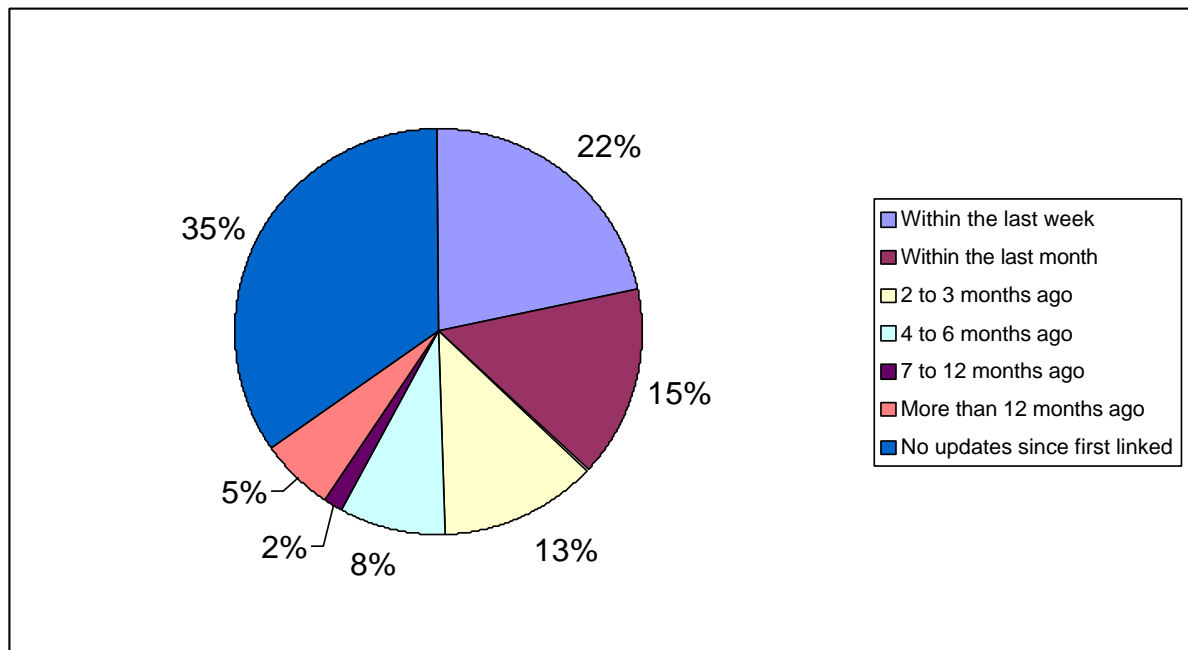Figure 2 – Timescale of last update sent to the NLPG hub for all linked LLPGs

Figure 3 - Year in which LLPG was, or will be, linked to the LLPG hub