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Plymouth Informed: A local partnership approach to supporting neighborhood renewal

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Plymouth

Plymouth is the largest city in South West England (excluding Bristol) on the border between Devon and Cornwall. It has a population of just over 250,000. It is a coastal city with a great naval tradition and history. The city is managed by the City Council as the single unitary authority with a workforce of 12,000. Major employers in the city include Devonport Management Limited, Toshiba and Wrigley's.

Background

Despite being in one of the most attractive areas of the country, Plymouth has its problems! It has some of the most deprived wards in the country. It's child poverty figures are far in excess of the national average. Teenage conception levels are high, there are some severe areas of unemployment, and drug related crime continues to be a severe problem.

Despite this the City Council and its partner organisations – under the 'umbrella' of Plymouth 2020 (the Local Strategic Partnership) - are making great efforts to develop the economy of the city along with urban regeneration and neighbourhood renewal projects. Plymouth is in fact one of the 80+ local authorities participating in the Neighbourhood Renewal initiative.

In this work the 'partnership' found a need for sound, accurate and reliable intelligence about the city as a whole. This would allow them to profile neighbourhoods, identify where problem areas exist (and need targeting) and measure the success of the many initiatives. At the same time the City Council was looking at delivery methods for its spatial data under the eGovernment initiative, and a way to track performance issues and targets in a more meaningful way.

Development of the Plymouth Informed GIS website

Plymouth Informed grew out of this 'need'. We guessed we would need an accessible database of some sort. It needed to be both cost-effective and flexible. Maintenance needed to be easy and efficient. It should be metadata driven. It needed to cater for a wide audience – from the public to professionals. We decided to develop the system using a GIS website as the delivery mechanism as this would make it truly accessible – something that the partnership approach required us to do anyway (also all our data was spatial). The site took over 12 months to get from the initial ideas to a site ready to test. This included data sharing arrangements, site design, the tendering process and site build. The site development was funded mainly by money from the Single Regeneration Budget and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

What is Plymouth Informed

It is a new GIS publicly accessible website. Built in conjunction with Intergraph using GeoMedia WebMap software. It delivers extensive indicator and statistical spatial data about Plymouth to aid and support the above work. Point data is also contained on the site with information relating to services (ie. doctors, schools and libraries). The site not only has the ability to display this data but also to fully analyse it and

export the results. It is a fully interactive and self-contained site. It is a true 'city-wide' partnership project managed by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and lead by the City Council.

An important part of this project is the gathering of spatial datasets from all service providers across the city – taking in data from a wide range of sources and formats, storing and maintaining them centrally. This is the first time the city has successfully embarked on a data sharing exercise across the many service providers.

The site delivers the indicator and statistical data mainly through a new geography set up within the city. This geography is called 'Neighbourhoods' – 43 of them within Plymouth as opposed to 20 wards. They are 'natural' areas that have been identified by extensive research. They are not purely administrative boundaries like wards. They are meaningful.

Lessons to be learnt

In developing this site we found that there were three main issues. Some things took much longer to carry out and others we had to compromise on.

Data sharing projects in the city had failed before. This we found was our biggest hurdle. Despite the enthusiasm of people around us, when it came to the actual point of sharing data all the usual issues came to the surface – confidentiality, sensitivity, sustainability, accuracy etc. Many hours, days, weeks and months were invested into overcoming these issues, this resulted in an agreed 'Data Sharing Protocol' that is now the backbone to our data sharing approach. Data providers have to sign up to this protocol along with supplying information on their datasets to allow the completion of the extensive Metadata on the site. The work on data sharing must not be underestimated!

Despite the advanced possibilities of using GIS web technology, developing your own site takes time. We found that we needed to develop a 'one off'. Balancing your own aspirations for a GIS system with the need for something to be publicly accessible is difficult and ends in compromise. Also the building of a site with 'partners' meant at time the 'committee' approach – something that was not ideal. However Intergraph helped in this work with their extensive experience and knowledge.

Despite developing the new geography for the city (Neighbourhoods) much work has been done on aggregating data. As mentioned previously this is our preferred geography, but as can be imagined data is available in Postcodes, EDs, COAs, Wards, Police Beats, School Catchment Areas etc. Plymouth has even had a substantial change in Ward boundaries this year complete with the creation of new ones! Aggregation of data still continues to be a problem - possibly only time will make this easier?

Future of site

Plymouth Informed is now the only system of it's kind in the city and is the most accessible system for citywide intelligence. The enthusiasm of the 'partners' has made future development plans for the site ambitious. Resources are in place for the maintenance of the site and a second phase development plan is starting to be drawn up.

Visit Plymouth Informed

On www.plymouth-informed.org.uk