



Geographic information portals—a UK perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents a review and interpretation of the development of geoportals in the United Kingdom. We describe the sources and levels of UK central government support for e-government, and the ways in which these have been used, alongside existing sources of spatial framework data, to develop geoportals. We then summarise the salient technical and organisational characteristics of geoportals that have been created at the local, regional and national scales, before assessing the state-of-play in the development of geoportals and evaluating future prospects.

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1. Introduction

Whilst the outlook for many areas of e-government remains uncertain, it is nevertheless clear that geoportals have an important role to play in efficient and effective public service delivery. This paper presents an overview and interpretation of the development of geoportals in the UK, in the context of the UK's agenda for the implementation of electronic government. Unlike the US experience (Maguire & Longley, 2004), these developments have not taken place against the backdrop of the coordinated creation of a national spatial data infrastructure (NSDI). However, we suggest that a 'bottom up' approach to the development and application of geoportals has nevertheless allowed a range of government organisations to develop a range of innovative and interactive map-based applications, and that this is coalescing into a NSDI.

These developments are taking place at a time of increased awareness of the need to improve public service management. This not only entails delivery of new public services, but also improved delivery of existing services. In many areas of public service delivery, this necessarily entails inter-agency collaboration and the pooling of information resources. There is an established track record of the successful use of GIS to facilitate this (e.g. Higgs, 1999), and developments in GIS architectures and networking is enabling access and interrogation of such pooled resources at a distance (e.g. Hudson-Smith, Evans, Batty, & Batty, 2003). In this paper we describe some of the synergies of approach to public service delivery that might be achieved using geoportals in order to lubricate data exchange, in a representative range of priority areas of national and regional policy. We also discuss the ways in which geoportals make it possible to explore new ideas that have practical relevance and the power actively to engage policy-makers, practitioners and novice users. Finally, through extensive footnotes, we provide an inventory of many of the most important general and spatial data infrastructure Websites, in order that the interested reader may explore the developing range of facilities and services that are becoming available.

The central goal of development and application of geoportals is enhancing the performance and productivity of the ever-expanding range of publicly funded organisations. This assumes that managers are empowered to make a difference to the effectiveness and efficiency of public services. This being the case, geoportals can create organisational gains and, through geography, can contribute valuable geographical intelligence to public service management. Geoportals are thus becoming an integral part of the electronic infrastructure underpinning service delivery, whether provided through conventional procurement or new types of public-private partnership. As such, they are catalytic to innovation and new ways of working. More generally, they are also important in the ways in which they assemble geographic information across domains, and thus facilitate creation of new metrics that can be used to measure service delivery.

Geoportals are being created for use in a variety of UK public service organisations, ranging from individual local authorities, through regional partnerships to central government (national) departments. Although coalescing in a much more

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