



Mike Saunt Managing Director of Astun Technology (right), receiving Local Government Exemplar Award for 'Best Business Process Transformation' on behalf of South Tyneside Council from John Hayes, Director at the Improvement and Development Agency.

# GI Data Integration and Publishing

The evolution of an award winning platform by William Allbrook

Much has been made of the Government's transformational agenda in recent years. Local Government has had to deal with a barrage of new thinking, priority outcomes, targets and now national indicators. There's even a new UK Location Strategy to deal with. Throughout Government has been keen to emphasise that this means better services for citizens and businesses and a better deal for taxpayers.

Within Local Authorities there has been a quiet revolution taking place and huge progress has been made improving service provision, through one-stop-shops, websites and through commitment to national projects like the NLPG.

At South Tyneside Council, making sense of the transformational agenda has been part of an ongoing process. It started in 2004 with a project to develop the Council's public facing website, the original business case being determined by the ODPM priority outcomes. The Pendleton criteria then required integration with the planning system. There were further requirements from 'Democratic Services' and links with Council Tax. 'My South Tyneside' available through the Council's website for example lets a citizen know their Council Tax band and then provides them with a link to related transactional services. Another driver was providing up to date roadwork information, so it's a multi faceted business case.

## Show Me The Money

The 2006 Varney Report on 'Service Transformation' recommended that 50% of activity should be moved from the phone to the web. This is borne out by the latest published figures for typical transaction costs with £0.17p for a web transaction, £4.00 for a phone transaction and £7.81 for a face-to-face transaction (Source: NWECC). The N14 'Avoidable Contact' indicator has proved controversial but SOCITM says that all

enquiries coming into a council through non-web channels for information and transactions that are available on the web should be regarded as 'avoidable contacts'. That can translate into real efficiencies and savings. In 2008 there were 17,138 unique visits to 'My South Tyneside'. Using NWECC's estimated costs for web transactions as opposed to phone transactions this would represent an estimated saving of £65,638 alone. These savings have been realised in areas such as planning where customers are now able to self-serve rather than use valuable planning officer time.

At South Tyneside the focus has always been to improve frontline services both through the service centre but also through the website, the lowest cost route. The website is a good example of data sharing with information pulled from all the council's major information systems linked by the UPRN (Unique Property Reference Number) to provide citizen focussed results. Personalising the data facilitates and encourages online transactional activity and engagement. For this reason one of the Council's main objectives continues to focus on improving the provision of citizen focused information and transactional opportunities, through automation, improved access and a personalised alert service all enabled through precise location provided by the NLPG.

"The profile of GIS and GI within local government is changing," said David Bowman, Assistant Head of Policy at South Tyneside Council. We have championed its use for many years but it is no longer seen just as a back office system but as an enabler for business process transformation and better service delivery. At South Tyneside for example we refer to the UPRN as the 'magic number' as it enables all of our efforts in this area.

"Use of GI is not limited to established software vendors for example iShare from Astun Technolgy which we started using in 2004 started life

as a web mapping portal but its capabilities now stretch far beyond that. We now have what we consider to be a complete data integration and publishing platform with Open Source GIS components at its core. It is delivering real cost savings, improving service delivery and enabling greater engagement with our citizens," continued Bowman.

### Ongoing Evolution

'My South Tyneside' has been evolving for nearly five years. In its current iteration the tabbed interface provides a wealth of information based on a citizen's location. Information previously siloed in numerous council datasets is pulled together and published in one place. (See Fig. 1).

Finally there is the 'My Alerts' tab (See Fig 2). Although 'My South Tyneside' provides citizens with a rich source of information and opportunities to engage with the Council it still requires them to visit the website. Increasing numbers of citizens are now subscribing to the 'My Alerts' service added in 2008. 'My Alerts' enables citizens to receive regular email alerts, which let them know about, local events, new or changed planning applications, new road works, changes in refuse collections and a host of other council service information. South Tyneside Council are continuously adding to the range of information available through this service and promoted its use on introduction by offering the first 500 subscribers the chance to enter a prize draw for a free laptop computer.

### Underlying Technology

'My South Tyneside' is underpinned by the NLPG the technology enabler providing the 'location intelligence'. iShare performs lightning fast intelligent address searches on the NLPG, simplifying the complex BS7666 address schema to a single address input.

At the core of the iShare platform are key Open Source components PostGIS/PostgreSQL and MapServer which provide huge capability and a very good return on investment. iShare is separate from and runs independently of all the main council systems but 'interrogates' them on a frequent basis, caching data for use by the website. This ensures that the website remains online even if one of the key systems goes down or

is undergoing maintenance. iShare will always publish the most up to date data available at the time.

iShare integrates with a broad mix of systems spanning many departments for example: Council Tax from a Unix based system, Northgate Planning from Oracle, Road works from South Bank Systems 'Confirm', Over 30 GIS data layers automatically created from a SQL Server data warehouse, News and Events from the Website CMS.

iShare including the 'My Alerts' service is entirely automated, logging any issues as they occur and sending email notifications to system administrators. This means that none of the Council's internal staff have to be employed in system or data maintenance freeing up resources for frontline service provision.

The 'My South Tyneside' project has truly joined up services for delivery internally through desktop GIS systems and to members of the public via the website. Much of the information is updated hourly such as planning applications & UDP / LDF, others daily such as road works, the LLPG for address verification and feedback, facilities gazetteer (GIS overlays derived via the LLPG), Council Tax, news and events. More systems are coming online on a regular basis.

### Improved Access

South Tyneside Council have worked hard to ensure that the website is fully accessible. Web accessibility expert, Grant Broome, hailed My South Tyneside as a rare example of an accessible GIS solution. Grant has used South Tyneside's online maps as an example of good practice during his presentations at web accessibility conferences around the UK.

The British Standards Institute publication 'Web Accessibility - Making PAS 78 Work', cites the South Tyneside web site as one "...that provides data in text format as well as graphically. This approach provides greater access to information to those who cannot easily use graphical systems."

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