

DEVELOPING A GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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ABSTRACT

Mosaic is the brand name for the implementation of the Geographic Information (GI) Strategy for Northern Ireland, an initiative being progressed by the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure (DCAL), through its Agency, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland. Over the past two years, Northern Ireland has become the first region within the United Kingdom to develop a GI Strategy, some two years ahead of the other member countries of the UK. The contribution of geographic information to the delivery of effective services, the management of resources and the development of informed, evidence-based policy rely upon up-to-date, accurate, and relevant information. In this respect, the importance of GI has been recognised by the inclusion of the GI Strategy in the Northern Ireland administration's Programme for Government. This has enabled the Mosaic programme to be funded centrally. This paper describes the steps being taken to implement the GI Strategy in Northern Ireland

KEYWORDS: Geographic information, policy, strategy funding

INTRODUCTION

The delivery of effective services, the management of resources and the development of informed, evidence-based policy rely upon up-to-date, accurate, and relevant information. Much of this information (some estimate more than 80%) may be related directly, or indirectly, to a spatial location - a specific point, an area or some other geographic region.

Geographic information (GI) therefore covers an enormous range, including the distribution of natural resources, the incidence of pollutants, physical infrastructure, such as roads, buildings, utility and transport, and patterns of land use, health, employment, housing and voting patterns of people¹.

Much of this information is collected for specific administrative, operational or policy purposes, often by government (or at its behest) with little thought given to its re-usability for other purposes. That there are other uses, in support of wider public administration or for commercial exploitation, is often realised by accident. Furthermore, the collection and dissemination of information is significantly enhanced by the use of technology, enabling innovative applications, faster access and potentially greater awareness of availability.

DEVELOPMENT OF A GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION STRATEGY

¹ Department of the Environment (1987), "Handling Geographic Information: Report to the Secretary of State for the Environment of the Committee into the Handling of Geographic Information", Chairman: Lord Chorley. P. 7.

It has been recognised for some years that there is a requirement to better co-ordinate GI. This is now more relevant with developing UK and EC policy on public sector information, and GI in particular.

Over the past two years, Northern Ireland has become the first region within the United Kingdom to develop a geographic information (GI) strategy. Since the endorsement of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement by the people of Northern Ireland, the devolution of power has offered a real opportunity for the devolved administration to begin to address, in a constructive and inclusive way, the institutional barriers preventing progress in GI.

In 1999 power was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive Committee of Ministers. Following widespread consultation, a Programme for Government was endorsed by the Assembly in 2001. This provided a strategic overview of the Executive's work and demonstrated how policies and programmes, delivered by different departments and agencies could best be combined to achieve its agreed priorities.

The latest Programme for Government, entitled 'Making a difference' recognises the contribution that GI can make to improved service delivery, by:

- Enhancing the role which mapping and geographic information plays in developing the infrastructure to support a relatively cheap and efficient land registration system and in the provision of electricity, gas, water and transport;
- Targeting disadvantaged areas, geographically identified as deprived;
- Identifying geographic differentials in unemployment and poverty; and
- Examining the geographical barriers that can discourage people from taking up opportunities for education and training.

In order to achieve these and other aims, the Northern Ireland Executive committed itself to develop a geographic information strategy.

Significant progress has been made toward achieving this goal. A stakeholder conference workshop was held in February 2002, to help develop a geographic information strategy for Northern Ireland. The participants explicitly recognised the importance of accurate and authoritative geographic information, through the development of a vision for the strategy:

"To provide the strategic leadership required for a practical, co-ordinated and inclusive approach to improving the collection, funding, dissemination and use of geographic information, in order to maximise the social, economic and educational potential of this crucial component of the national information infrastructure resource."

As a result, a consultation document entitled 'A Geographic Information Strategy for Northern Ireland' was distributed to a wide range of groups. Following the receipt of responses from a number of these groups, a draft implementation plan was developed and subsequently approved by both the Northern Ireland E-Government Project Board and the Minister responsible for geographic information policy.

The draft implementation plan recognised the need for a robust, high-level framework for managing, and co-ordinating GI matters in Northern Ireland to be established. This included the creation of an overarching Steering Group, a GI Support Office, and a number of sectoral and project groups including:

- Culture & Heritage;
- Education and Awareness;

- Emergency Services;
- Environment and agriculture;
- Health & Social Improvement
- Key Datasets;
- Land and property;
- Statistics;
- Transport; and
- Utilities and networks.

Drawing together the themes is the key challenge for the successful implementation of the GI Strategy. To facilitate this, a robust, high-level strategic framework for managing, and co-ordinating GI matters in Northern Ireland is in the process of being established. The framework has the authority of government and industry, and appropriate governance and administrative structures to support it, as well as adequate communication and collaborative mechanisms within and between government and industry. The organisational framework is shown in figure 1.

The overarching group will oversee and drive the implementation of the strategy. The chair of each steering group, technical working group or other cross-cutting theme project group will form the Overarching Steering Group and meet together twice a year to co-ordinate, review, further develop and provide a focal point for GI, and oversee the implementation of the strategy. The overarching group will also have links to the industry representative body, AGINI.

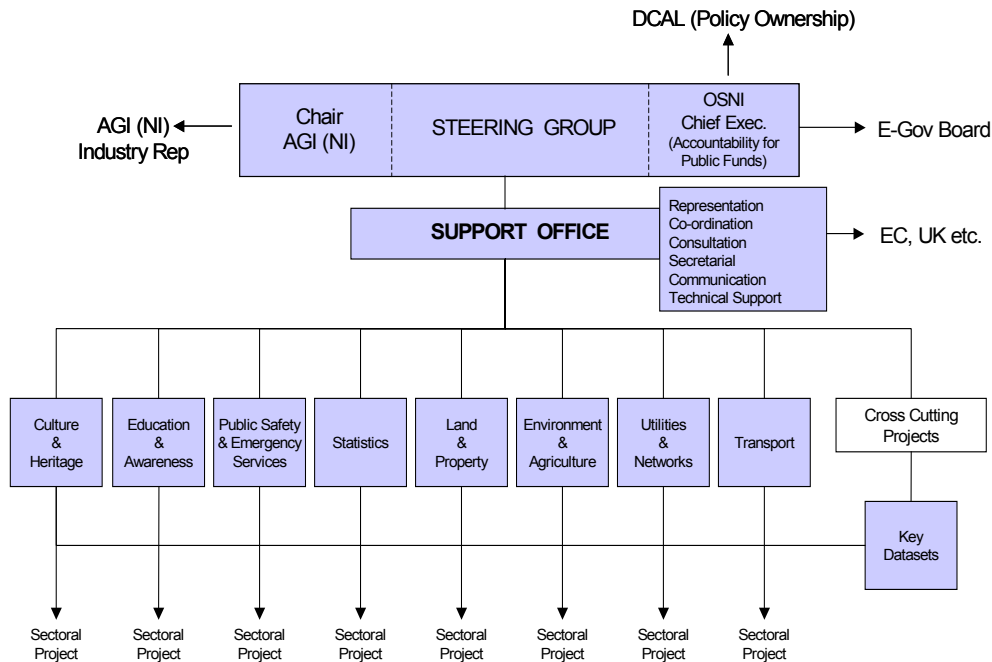


Figure 1: Mosaic Strategic Framework

In order to facilitate the implementation of the GI Strategy, an Implementation Project Board has been established to oversee the initial implementation of the Sectoral and Overarching Steering Groups. This Project Board held its inaugural meeting in early November 2003, and comprises representatives from each sectoral group.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION STRATEGY - MOSAIC

In order to support the work of the Implementation Project Board, a GI Strategy Support Office has also been established. The office will provide administrative and technical support during the implementation stage of the GI Strategy, and will provide a focal point for geographic information co-ordination in Northern Ireland, and a first contact point for UK and EC interests.

In early 2004, the implementation of the GI Strategy for Northern Ireland was branded as Mosaic, as shown in figure 2. In addition, central funding for the implementation of Mosaic was obtained. Consequently, the full implementation of the GI Strategy is currently underway.

This paper describes the steps being taken to implement the GI Strategy in Northern Ireland, and specifically discusses the importance of gaining consensus among the participating organizations, and the need to obtain political support at an appropriate level.



Figure 2: Mosaic logo