

Government geographic information as public records

Introduction

The National Archives (TNA) has asked the GI Panel to consider two aspects of the role of geographic information as part of public records:

- raising awareness of Government geographic information as part of public records, and
- promoting public record disciplines within the Government geographic information community

Background

TNA is responsible for the national archives of England, Wales and UK bodies. There are separate archive bodies for Scotland (National Archives of Scotland) and for Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Public Records Office). TNA is an independent department and Executive Agency reporting to the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, and was formed in 2003 by the merger of the Public Record Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission.

TNA has the responsibility for:

- Preserving appropriate records of central government and the courts of law via the “national archive” itself and through responsibility for other designated “places of deposit” (including Ordnance Survey).
- Providing public access services to researchers for those records selected for preservation.
- To oversee records management across government, encouraging best practice and offering guidance in the appraisal of public records.
- Wider responsibility to cultivate good practice and support among those who hold, manage or use non governmental or private archives, and among the wide public in the national interest.

This work is conducted under the auspices of:

- The Public Records Management Act 1958 (PRMA), as amended in 1967 (which reduced the non-disclosure period from 50 to 30 years).
- The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

Ordnance Survey has been a designated “Place of Deposit” (PoD) for the archiving of selected government geographical information (GI) since 2000.

Issue of Concern

Traditionally the public records focus has been on printed paper and manuscript documents, supplemented latterly by microfilm and emerging electronic document media. The advent of digital databases has posed new challenges, including new approaches to creating, managing and storing information (“records”) that tend to diverge from the principles of public records management described in the 1958 Act.

TNA Client Managers (who provide “account management” to the various central government departments and related bodies) have growing concerns that the processes for creation, management and analysis of GI within government often fall outside established PRMA standards. They are keen to promote the principle that government GI (data, databases and outputs) are public records. They are also keen to develop and encourage best practice models for:

- management and storage of government GI,
- criteria used in the selection of appropriate GI (and possibly underpinning systems) for archiving and future public access.

Examples of GI that forms part of the public record and which illustrate some of the issues identified by TNA are the “What’s in your backyard?” service run by the Environment Agency and the e-PIMS register of government property run by the Office of Government Commerce. Examples such as these present particular challenges due to the fact that they can contain several different data components

which in turn can originate from different organisations, including some outside the normal remit of TNA – such as local government, voluntary bodies or utility companies.

Early TNA approaches to developing and communicating best practice assumed a knowledge base of ‘GI-related’ public records responsibilities and processes across government. Research has shown that this is not the case, and interim reports to senior TNA staff reflect a situation where TNA believe there is little coherence in the management and “archiving” of GI across Government, and poor recognition of government GI as public records. It is perceived that GI is often managed in disconnected ways within “localised” contexts, and with little regard for safeguarding longer term storage and access to key data upon which major public policy or decisions may have been developed. It is noted that many GI databases are dispersed and disconnected from mainstream records management processes and systems, and that GI relies on a range of specialist technology that is rarely seen in the context of core departmental Electronic Records Management (ERM) environments.

Hence TNA have a concern that important GI records across government, (and the systems that have created them and by which they would need to be accessed in future), are being managed, stored and replaced in less than ideal ways from a public records perspective.

Current TNA plans to remedy this situation include briefing the IGGI Steering Group on 22 February 2006, and a presentation to the GeoInformation Group’s *Cities Revealed Event 2006 – “Your Path to Success”* (a training event for users of geo-imagery and derived data) on 10 February. Key aims of these engagements are to:

- seek to raise awareness that government GI are public records and should be managed within the framework of the 1958 Act;
- establish links to major governmental GI creators and users as a stepping stone to developing and promoting best practice in the care and management of GI records.

Recommendation

TNA are keen to secure wide and high level support for their position, and to establish a network of champions who can promote the merits of their plans and objectives. They have identified the GI Panel as a potential partner and influencer in this regard.

TNA Client Managers plan to produce a further formal report to their senior management team later in 2006, reporting on progress in raising awareness of the issues across government, and proposing a developed model for best practice with regard to future government GI management, as well as recommendations for next steps by TNA.

The GI Panel is invited to discuss what support it wishes to offer to TNA on this subject, and how to provide similar advice to National Archives of Scotland and Northern Ireland Public Records Office.

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