

Policy options for geographic information from Ordnance Survey: Consultation

Response by the Census and Geodemographics Group of The Market Research Society

Introduction

The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's largest association representing providers and users of market, social, and opinion research, and business intelligence. Full details regarding MRS and its activities are available at: <http://www.mrs.org.uk>

The Census and Geodemographics Group (CGG) is an MRS advisory board that recommends MRS policy in relation to geographic, demographic and census information. It includes members with experience in the creation and use of population statistics, census data and geographic information. Formed in 1989, as the Census Interest Group, the Group has been operating continuously for the last twenty years and has been a leading voice representing business users. CGG actively promotes the use of census and other statistics, by means of publications, seminars and a Geodemographics Knowledge Base web site (www.geodemographics.org.uk). The CGG has worked with the UK Census Offices, via the Office for National Statistics (ONS), representing the needs of the research industry in consultations on the 1991, 2001 and 2011 censuses. The CGG membership includes specialists in market research, retail site location, market and database analysis, as well as census distributors and academic researchers.

There are many forms of Geographic Information that are key to the activities of the researchers and the research organisations that we represent, including:

- Geo-referenced Address Files – This location intelligence enables operations such as accurate association of individual address records with area demographic information and sampling frames for market, social and opinion research.
- Transport Networks – Accurate and accessible road network datasets enable operations such drive time calculation for use in site location.
- Map Backgrounds – We value high quality, reasonably priced mapping data for visualisation purposes.
- Statistical Units – Accurate and freely available geographic units for statistical and demographic information are essential for many research and marketing applications. In particular we have long argued that geographic boundaries for such units should be unencumbered by IPR restrictions.

Executive Summary

- We welcome this consultation on Ordnance Survey (OS) geographic information policy options. We believe that it is most important that the interests of the many thousands of private sector organisations who use map and address location information (either directly or via agencies) are given due weight in this consultation.

- Two members of the CGG have submitted consultation responses from the organisations that they particularly represent. These are Mr Keith Dugmore (Demographic User Group) and Mr Peter Sleight (Association of Census Distributors). We support in principle the detailed points made in these responses and we also support the general thrust of the response from the Advisory Panel on Public Sector Information (APPSI).
- As with others, we feel that the strategic needs of government for geographic information may have been better addressed by taking a more overview approach and putting less focus on what is currently available from OS.
- We believe that, whilst Option 2 would deliver the greatest benefits, the more prudent approach is the staged transition outlined as Option 3. This supplies some free data and, most importantly, seeks to correct the current imbalance between public and private sector prices. However, review of the progress of this approach must be timely and the commitment to move in due course to an Option 2 scenario binding.
- Any change to the current situation requires Government funding and this must be sufficient and ring-fenced. It is crucial that funding be allowed for maintenance in order to ensure high quality maintenance of the data.
- Additionally, we believe that reform of licensing arrangements is essential and the OS should not claim IPR on derived data such as the boundaries of statistical units.
- We believe that the creation of a National Address Register is vital and long overdue. The results of the current address register project being carried out by the Office for National Statistics for the 2011 Census represents an opportunity to achieve this aim and should be used as the basis, unencumbered by IPR claims.

Brief Notes on Questions

Question 1: What are your views or comments on the policy drivers for this consultation?

We are pleased that policy drivers that have led to this consultation on reform of supply of geographic information from OS, particularly the Prime Minister's policy statements of Making Public Data Public. However, we agree with others that there is a need to take a 'big picture' approach and consider the overall strategic requirements and all data availability.

Question 2: What are your views on how the market for geographic information has evolved recently and is likely to develop over the next 5-10 years?

We agree in general with the market assessment outlined in the consultation document. The market has been transformed on the supply side with web-based applications, satellite data, location enabled phones etc and also 'crowd sourcing' (not mentioned) – and on the demand side with businesses seeking to better understand localised consumer markets. The ability of OS with its high cost base to compete in many market areas must be questioned.

Question 3: What are your views on the appropriate pricing model for Ordnance Survey products and services?

We consider that the current Ramsey model is flawed and has led to restrictions on private sector activity. The imbalance between public and private sector pricing is untenable.

This consultation is concerned with increasingly free OS data, and this should be the objective. The ‘retail minus’ model may suffer from retention of the public/private pricing imbalance. The ‘cost plus’ model is described as inefficient but does have merit. Whatever method is used, there must be transparency.

Question 4: What are your views and comments on public sector information regulation and policy, and the concepts of public task and good governance as they apply to Ordnance Survey?

There has been much (valid) historical criticism of the behaviour of OS and its resistance to change of behaviour (see CUI study).

There would appear to be a need for a review of the ‘public task’ of OS and the way that OS is regulated – with regulation having more power and the ability to enforce transparency. There must also be consideration of the resolution of conflict situations, such as between IPR and policy developments for maximising re-use.

Question 5: What are your views on and comments on the products under consideration for release for free re-use and the rationale for their inclusion?

We welcome the release of limited range of data free of cost and licence issues. However, these data would be considerably more useful if the small and mid-scale mapping was released in vector format in addition to raster. We would expect Codepoint to be free of all IPR (including Royal Mail by buyout if necessary).

It is important that updates are available free for these data with a published updating schedule.

Question 6: How much do you think government should commit to funding the free product set? How might this be achieved?

Government funding should be supplied for the maintenance and distribution of the free data. This should be limited cost as most of the proposed data are derived from larger scale datasets.

Question 7: What are your views on how free data from Ordnance Survey should be delivered?

All of the methods described (online viewing, online downloading, API and DVD) should be available. Some level of customer support should be available for the free data.

Licensing could be by the Creative Commons licence or the ONS style click/use method.

Question 8: What are your views on the impact Ordnance Survey Free will have on the market?

The impact will be very positive with the number of users and uses increasing significantly. Increased awareness by users should help to create new markets for additional value-added products and existing resellers will be well placed to take advantage.

There is a strong analogy to the growth of census data when the 2001 Census data became freely available. The consultation document outlines the positive result of the freeing of data in Canada.

Question 9: What are your comments on the proposal for a single National Address Register and suggestions for mechanisms to deliver it?

The creation of a National Address Register is vital and long overdue, previous efforts to produce a definitive national address register have foundered on issues of the ownership of intellectual property by different parts of government. The economic benefits of better addressing and data matching are potentially very significant in commercial companies, and even more so in government.

As you are aware, the Office for National Statistics is currently compiling a special address register for the 2011 Census in England and Wales, buying information from the Post Office, Ordnance Survey, and the Local Government Information House at an estimated cost of £12m. This will be finally refined at Census time. This represents a unique opportunity to achieve the aim of a National Address Register and should be maintained from that point (by a tendered maintenance contract) and should be unencumbered by IPR claims.

Question 10: What are your views on the options outlined in this consultation?

We did not consider Option 1 as it does not supply any significant steps towards the reform outlined in the consultation. Option 2 would deliver the greatest benefits (and require least regulation) and should remain the end objective. However, on balance we favour the staged transitional approach outlined as Option 3. This supplies some free data and, most importantly, seeks to correct the current imbalance between public and private sector prices and licences. It will also supply greater transparency and accountability. However, review of the progress of this approach must be timely and the commitment to move in due course to an Option 2 scenario binding.

Any change to the current situation requires Government funding and this must be sufficient and ring-fenced. It is crucial that funding be allowed for maintenance in order to ensure high quality maintenance of the data.

Reform of licensing arrangements is also essential and OS should not claim IPR on derived data such as the boundaries of statistical units.

Question 11: For local authorities: What will be the balance of impact of these proposals on your costs and revenues?

Not applicable.

Question 12: Will these proposals have any impact on race, gender or disability equalities?

Some social policy benefits may arise from geographical analysis of relevant statistics.

17th March, 2010

For further information please contact:

Dr Barry Leventhal
Chair, MRS Census & Geodemographics Group

Tel: 020 8905 2634

Mob: 07803 231870

Email: Barry@barryanalytics.com