

GI – EVERYWHERE



Merryn Henderson

is Honorary Secretary of the Association for Geographic Information

Merryn Henderson says that the way we use our GI skills, knowledge, and professional expertise can have great influence. But with it comes great responsibilities

Some might say geographic information is one of life’s greatest levellers. When it’s used well, GI can effect a truly non-discriminatory approach to analysis – something that’s as rare and as valuable today as hen’s teeth.

Throughout history, maps have been a trustworthy resource for making facts easier to understand. However, as the Geospatial Commission¹ sets out its stall, we should remember that the way we use our skills, knowledge, and professional expertise comes with great responsibilities.

For example, by the time you read this it will be common knowledge that London’s bid to become the world’s first National Park City² has been successful. Great news! From 2019, London’s ward teams will be helping residents and visitors to benefit even more from the capital’s outdoor heritage and, not surprisingly, success will hinge on using ‘a beautiful map’, plus plenty of interconnected data of course. (Cartographically, beauty is usually in the eye of the compass, but that’s another debate.)

This is a great initiative. It deserves to be a success. But the capital’s ambition highlights a thorny issue, and it’s one that the AGI is keen to help address.

Limitations

You see, the National Park City initiative is a great example of Smart City thinking in practice – maximising the value of data and making it more widely available – but it is restricted to London’s city limits. We’ll be able to ask questions like, “if there are 3,000 parks to visit, which one is nearest?” “I don’t know the area, so where can I swim outdoors, climb a hill, or pitch a tent for the weekend?” But how about asking, “– and what are the answers to these questions elsewhere in the nation?”

The oft-quoted statistics are that, in 1800, only three per cent of the world’s population lived in built up areas; by 1900, almost 14 per cent were urbanites; and by 2030, 60 per cent of the planet’s population will probably be living an urban life – or so says the UN, a reliable source

of projections if ever there was one. But if we try the same stats from a different perspective – in 1800, 97 per cent lived in rural areas; in 1900, 85 per cent were rural dwellers; and by 2030, 40 per cent still won’t be living within a city’s limits – then we see a much bigger picture.

The UK is also a nation of hamlets, villages, and rural enterprise. Maps for public consumption are just one aspect of our work but insightful, targeted interventions that will improve the quality of life for everyone are our aim.

Benefits for all

As the Commission takes shape, we hope an invigorated focus will result in ALL citizens benefiting from better use and adoption

of government’s location data: discovering best practice in pockets across the UK, and deploying those insights to resolve other, greater issues, much further afield.

Policy makers can make great progress through insightful interpretation of intrinsically linked spatial issues, it’s true, and the lives we live may be as diverse as the unique places in which we live them. But we all deserve the same improvements in our quality of life, which is why we try to promote the benefits of using geographic information to everyone, everywhere.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-to-unlock-hidden-value-of-government-data>
2. <http://www.nationalparkcity.london/>



Crowdfunded by 308 backers and made for the National Park City Foundation by Urban Good CIC, the massive London National Park City map includes all of the capital’s 3,000 parks plus woodlands, playing fields, nature reserves, city farms, rivers, canals and all the spaces that contribute to London’s landscape. Image: National Park City Foundation