Slaying the dragon!

As Nigel Clifford takes the helm at Ordnance Survey to steer it on its new course as a Government-owned Company (GovCo), we touched base with its new Chief Executive to get some initial impressions … and to find out if he really breathes fire!

Born in 1959, Nigel Clifford graduated with a MSc. in geography from Cambridge University and holds an MBA from Strathclyde University. Prior to taking up his appointment at Ordnance Survey, his previous roles have included Chief Executive of Procserve Holdings Ltd (2012–2015), Chief Executive of Micro Focus International (2010– 2011), Senior Vice President of Nokia (2009–2010), Chief Executive, Symbian Software Ltd (2005 –2009), Chief Executive Tertio Telecoms (2000–2005), Chief Executive, Glasgow Royal Infirmary University NHS Trust (1992–1998) and various senior roles in Cable & Wireless, and BT. Nigel Clifford is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and, in his spare time, has a passion for maps, travelling and hill walking.

GeoConnexion (Geo): *In a former interview, you were quoted as saying it would be great if you were regarded as some form of benign 'dragon' in helping young companies succeed [a reference to the Dragons' Den TV show]. How would you like to be regarded in your new role?*

Nigel Clifford (NC): I don't recall the quote, but I guess I'm probably more benign than a dragon! In terms of leadership style, my approach is to set ambitious objectives and gain buy-in from the team. You get far more energy liberated doing that than by stomping around breathing fire, however benignly!

Geo: *How do you think your background in software, telecoms and services will contribute?*

NC: You are the sum of your experiences, and while there is no one way to manage a business, the feel I have at Ordnance Survey is not unlike that I experienced leading an NHS Trust in the 1990s. It possessed a wealth of talent and expertise yet served one of the most deprived areas in Britain. I sense the same at Ordnance Survey: people with an abundance of expertise, an attachment to the job, and eager to improve what they do. My experience in migrating the NHS body from directly-managed to Trust status and getting the best out of that transition will, I think, prove particularly useful here.

Geo: *You arrived at Ordnance Survey as the newly-elected Government took office. Did you set yourself any targets for your first 100 days?*

NC: Not as such, and at the end of my first month I find myself a little frustrated at not yet knowing everything! That said, the process

of getting to know staff, with whom I have had a couple of stand-up sessions, and meeting with our stakeholders in the public and private sectors are my current priorities.

Geo: *What was the key issue raised during those gatherings?*

NC: People are obviously curious to know where we are headed as an organisation and one of the tasks in my first 100 days is to weigh expectations against resources so that we can create something that is interesting and exciting but, at the same time, viable.

Geo: *What were your initial impressions of Ordnance Survey as an organisation?*

NC: As always, there are some things you naturally assume are right, and in Ordnance Survey's case, my first impression was that its depth of expertise and attention to detail and accuracy are second-to-none. What I wasn't expecting was the broad scope of its activity - from Aberystwyth to Abu Dhabi - and the usefulness of its data holdings across so many sectors and applications. To find such a breadth of vision, particularly in a public sector organisation, is truly exciting. Given this, it's easy to see the opportunities for Ordnance Survey data in a world where people make decisions in environments that are becoming ever busier, more complex, and subject to change.

Geo: *What do you see as the organisation's biggest challenge in grasping the opportunities you mention?*

NC: Thanks to the work of Neil Ackroyd and Peter ter Haar, Ordnance Survey has overcome the first hurdle by making its data more accessible and affordable, not least by making an ever increasing number of OS OpenData products available to users free of charge – four more datasets in the past few months alone. Similarly, our work with industry partners has grown apace because there is so much more that can be achieved working together. Growing new partners; turning customers into partners, and growing new apps is fundamental to seizing those opportunities.

Geo: *Ordnance Survey has had to strike a fine balance over recent years between its public role and its commercial activity. Will GovCo status alter this balance?*

The Geovation Hub: springboard for entrepeneurs with location-related ideas
Photo: GeoConnexion

NC: I've met with some of our industry partners over the course of the past month and there is broad agreement that this isn't a capped market. The name of the game is not to divide the pie into ring-fenced portions, but to grow the entire pie. The latest projections reckon the UK geo-services industry to be worth £2.2 billion, with its wider 2013-2014 economic impact estimated at around £1.2 trillion[1], so there's plenty of pie to go round!
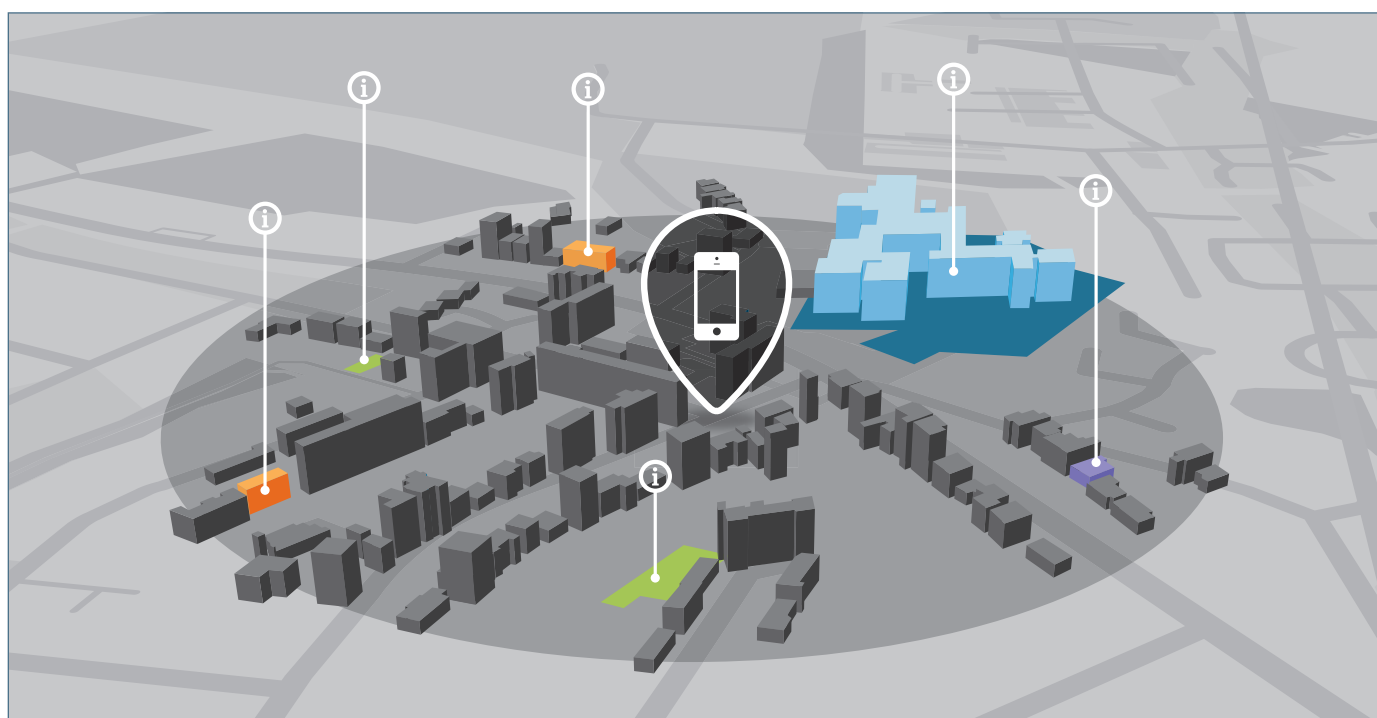
Geo: *Our meeting today is taking place at the new Ordnance Survey Geovation Hub in Clerkenwell in London (see lead image and image above). What is its role?*

NC: It's hard to imagine that When Ordnance Survey was formed some 224 years ago, it started with just £373, three people, and a huge idea. Our aim with the Hub is provide a creative working space, plus up to £20,000-worth of funding and expertise that will help entrepreneurs with location-based ideas succeed in a similar fashion.

Geo: *Why is the Hub located in Islington and not, in say, Southampton?*

NC: Being situated in what is known as the East London Tech City, or Silicon Roundabout, the Hub has the advantage of being close to many other startup hubs, incubators and university departments. This, together with our data, our know-how, and – importantly – the participation of other sponsors, will help individuals and groups make their ideas really come alive.

1. *kMatrix Geo-services report, August 2015* **(www.kmatrix.co)**