

National Gazetteer for Scotland

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History of National Gazetteer

The idea of creating gazetteers for purposes of government is not new and can be traced back to the time of Alexander the Great. The Domesday Book is perhaps our best known historic example and could be argued to be the only definitive, government backed, gazetteer ever to be produced in Great Britain, including up to the present day. A key point in the understanding of gazetteers is in the Oxford English Dictionary description of a “gazetteer” as being a “geographic index or dictionary”, rather than as a database of land, asset and property information, as gazetteers are sometimes considered today.

In the 1990’s the ScotLIS project (www.scotlis.com) was instigated to provide a single point of access to land, asset and property information in Scotland and involved the Registers of Scotland, British Geological Survey, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and local government. Whilst the concept was laudable in intention, the project largely failed to achieve its promise because of a number of factors including:-

- data sharing technology was not readily available;
- there was lack of a common referencing framework; and
- the concept of organisations working in partnership was in its infancy.

In 2002 the Scottish Executive announced the Modernising Government Fund (“MGF”), which was set up to support initiatives aimed at exploring ways to deliver better public services in Scotland. Land and property information was recognised to be one of the key foundations of modern service delivery, because people who consume services live and work at addresses, and services are provided to these and to other locations. A consortium representing all 32 local authorities and 14 Regional Assessors was established and a bid prepared for MGF funding to build local Corporate Address Gazetteers (“CAGs”) to common standards in all 32 councils in Scotland, with these to be aggregated into a national gazetteer on completion. Local government was recognised as being the definitive source of addressing information due to the statutory duty for street naming and numbering and from the direct involvement in property change intelligence stemming from the planning and building control functions.

The bid was successful, with £7.5M being awarded by the Scottish Executive on condition that it was matched with £2.5M from local government, which gave a total budget of £10M to establish a programme to create what was then called the Definitive National Address Database for Scotland (“DNA-Scotland”). At the same time a similar project was underway in England and Wales called the National Land and Property Gazetteer (“NLPG”) but with a different business model where local government funded the entire process on a risk and reward basis against potential future revenue from the gazetteer. Apart from these strategic differences, the gazetteers north and south of the border are completely compatible allowing Great Britain-wide access to gazetteer information.

The DNA-Scotland programme commenced in May 2003 and was guided by a Steering Board comprising of senior managers from the public sector community including local and central government, Royal Mail, Ordnance Survey, Registers of Scotland and several other organisations with an interest in improving the management of land and property information in Scotland. The main objective of the Steering Board was to encourage the future deployment of DNA-Scotland as the definitive public sector source of addressing information for Scotland. In 2007 the programme was renamed as the National Gazetteer to avoid confusion around “DNA”. The programme has been managed since its inception by the Improvement Service, which is a company owned in partnership by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. The remit of the company is to support continuous improvement by building on the expertise within local authorities and working in partnership with stakeholders in the public, private and voluntary sectors and the National Gazetteer is a good example what can be achieved through such partnership working.

Development of the National Gazetteer

The local Corporate Address Gazetteers were developed by each of the 32 councils over the period from 2003 until 2006 and were mandated to conform to the British Standard for land and property gazetteers, BS 7666. This describes how gazetteers are structured but does not specify content, quality or maintenance arrangements, all of which had to be agreed by the councils otherwise when the local CAGs were aggregated together the final gazetteer would have been extremely inconsistent.

The core record of a BS 7666 compliant gazetteer is described as being “an area of land property or structure of fixed location having uniform occupation, ownership or function”, which presented considerable difficulties in defining objects for inclusion. The working definition for inclusion in the gazetteer was thereafter described as being “a (heritable) property object of interest to government in fulfilling its functions” and this generally holds true of the National Gazetteer. There are currently just over 3.1 million entries for Scotland, each of which has a unique property reference number (“UPRN”).

The information held for each entry in the National Gazetteer consists of the addresses of the property object, a geo-reference (National Grid Coordinate) and supporting information about status and start and end dates. A property record can have more than one address, e.g. the statutory address from Street Naming and Numbering, as well as any locally known alternatives or Gaelic names. The grid reference allows records to be displayed in a GIS system and to search for nearby properties. The other supporting information adds to the confidence in the data and allows a historical archive of information to be maintained.

It was a complex task to manage the creation stages of the programme, considering that councils each operated in different operational and political environments, giving different priorities. However, thanks to a large amount of goodwill on behalf of all councils, progress was made and an active practitioners’ community was established to seek consensus. The consistency of the National Gazetteer today is largely as a result of this partnership working between all councils.

Early market research with future users of the National Gazetteer indicated that quality was of the utmost priority and accordingly a substantial effort was directed at ensuring the quality

assurance of the gazetteer. In this context, quality is defined as consisting of the accuracy and completeness of the data contained in the gazetteer, the effectiveness of the business processes in place to maintain the gazetteer and the degree to which it meets the original objective of becoming the preferred source of addressing in Scotland.

Current Status of National Gazetteer

The National Gazetteer now exists and is beginning to be used in a number of early adopter and pilot applications and work is underway towards a production launch date of 1 April 2009. Stirling Council has the lead council responsibility for the operation of the National Gazetteer and this function is being undertaken by Forth Valley GIS on their behalf. FVGIS have considerable experience of gazetteers and address matching and perform the role of National Gazetteer Custodian.

Access to the National Gazetteer at present is via web services, which were developed originally for the Government's ePlanning project, but these have been extended to the Building Standards Agency of the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government Landlord Registration Service is in the process of embedding the National Gazetteer into their redeveloped application and a number of councils are investigating its deployment into their Customer Relationship Management applications.

Discussions are also taking place with a range of potential users in the public sector to seek options for the methods and level of access which they wish to develop to begin to realise the benefit of the investment in the Gazetteer following the official launch date.

The National Gazetteer will also potentially be of considerable benefit to conveyancers. The Gazetteer is an essential foundation for a development of a National Land and Property Information system. See www.unifiscotland.com and articles entitled "The Long and Winding Road to Better Information", 2007 Prop. L.B. 89-4 and "Linking Faces, Spaces and Places" 2008 Prop. L.B. 93-5.

Property Searches will also benefit from the introduction of the National Gazetteer. SPH OneSearch recently stated that they are "fully supportive of the development of the National Gazetteer and welcomes the benefits it will deliver in accessing land and property information in a standard format".

Future Development of the National Gazetteer

The immediate priority is to meet the requirements of the public sector in Scotland as this was the basis of the original funding. This is concentrated upon understanding how access to the National Gazetteer can be achieved in such a way which meets differing requirements or organisations with the most effective use of the custodian resources. Some organisations wish to hold a complete copy of the gazetteer and receive regular updates, others anticipate subscribing to the web services, perhaps with some enhancements, whilst others wish to use existing third party business solutions. There are plans underway to update the Gazetteer from the 2000 version of BS 7666 to the 2006 version. This will take place over the next 12 months and will provide enhanced information, including property types and description.

As the use of the National Gazetteer grows and more organisations reference their own information to include the UPRN, the more information will be available through joined-up partnerships. An early example of this is under pilot development where it will be possible to look up a property, find the UPRN and pass it to Registers of Scotland who will return the registered owner of the property. Many similar services are expected to be offered from other organisations as gazetteer usage matures.

The biggest challenge centres on resolving some outstanding issues concerning licensing and intellectual property rights of the National Gazetteer as both Royal Mail and Ordnance Survey claim IPR over some of the information which may have been used to compile local CAGs. Negotiations are ongoing, with the objective of delivering the vision of the Scottish Government and the original Steering Board for a national framework to integrate land and property information for the good of Scotland. If this can be accomplished we will have achieved a government-backed definitive source of addressing that has proven illusive since the Domesday book.