

UK Government Announces New Geospatial Commission



In his budget on 22 November, the Chancellor announced a new Geospatial Commission which is committed "to maximise the value of all UK government data linked to location, and to create jobs and growth in a modern economy."

The Commission will work with government and the Ordnance Survey (OS) to work out how Mastermap can be made freely available, particularly to small businesses. The announcement is a further boost to the UK's status as a world leader in digital innovation and is a recognition that there are many services dependent on location and that databases of geospatial information are used, and indeed are necessary, for many businesses and services.

The Geospatial Commission, supported by £40 million of new funding in each of the next two years, will look at how to use this data more productively. The government claims that use of the data will create up to £11 billion of extra value for the economy every year.

The Conservative Party's general election manifesto promised a new body to bring together the relevant parts of HM Land Registry, OS, the Valuation Office Agency, the Hydrographic Office and Geological Survey, stating that existing fragmentation was hindering efforts to release value in land data. They were looking for a new body that would be charged with setting standards to digitise the planning process and help create a comprehensive digital map of Britain. The Commission announced by the Chancellor will draw together these bodies with a view to improving the access to, links between, and quality of their data and will look at making more geospatial data available free of charge and without restriction.

New Commission Welcomed

Nigel Clifford, Chief Executive of Ordnance Survey, has welcomed the new Commission and said "we look forward to working with the Geospatial Commission to investigate ways to capture the full potential of growth as it co-ordinates the geospatial agenda for the country" and that OS will explore how to open up OS MasterMap data to UK-based small businesses in particular. Clifford also noted that "Geospatial has a very important role to play in exciting initiatives... such as the rollout of a 5G network, building smart cities, the national infrastructure and connected and autonomous vehicles, all areas where we are already actively working."

The government says that freeing up the MasterMap data for re-use will be done "while maintaining Ordnance Survey's strategic strengths".

The announcement is welcomed by proponents of open data and Professor Sir Nigel Shadbolt, Chairman of the Open Data Institute said: "I'm delighted that the UK government is carrying through on the commitment in its manifesto to open up UK geospatial data. In particular, opening up the OS MasterMap will stimulate growth and investment in the UK economy, generate jobs and improve services. It will make it easier to find land for house-building, and enable the development of services that improve vital infrastructure."

Comments on social media have generally welcomed the move. Ed Parsons (@edparsons) on social media has generally welcomed the announcement [and](#) tweeted "This creation of the geospatial commission in the budget can only be the beginning of a major realignment of Geo in UK government... Not the easiest timing for implementing however but good news without question."

Unanswered Questions

But of course there are unanswered questions: How will the £80 million be spent? Will there be amalgamation of any of the bodies handling geospatial data? And will small businesses really benefit? But overall geospatial businesses and the public should benefit, and this is government recognition of the value of geospatial data and of open data.

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