

Case Study:

DataGM

Type: Website

Organisation(s): GM local authorities, Open Data Manchester, GMFRS

Tags: open data, process, standards, website

This was the earliest attempt in Greater Manchester to create a simple datastore that would hold important data from across the region, focussing on government transparency and providing better public services.

The result was a highly functional datastore with which brought together data from a wider range of data publishers, and included a total of 371 datasets.

It was ultimately not successful in creating a lasting basis for open data cooperation and access in Greater Manchester. However, it provides interesting lessons on how to proceed with future projects.



Background

DataGM was launched in February 2011, inspired by successful projects in North American cities, such as Track DC (now [Open Data DC](#)) in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore City Stats (now [Open Baltimore](#)). It was conceived as a one-stop-shop for key datasets on all aspects of city life.

The programme emerged through a partnership between Trafford Council and the digital culture agency [Future Everything](#). This began in 2009 when the [Manchester Innovation Fund](#) supported Future Everything to build open data innovation architecture in Greater Manchester, funded by [NESTA](#), [Manchester Council](#) and the North West Regional Development Agency (now closed).

Future Everything and Trafford Council in turn partnered with a wide range of data publishing organisations. These included local authority partners, as well as Greater Manchester Policy, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive (now Transport for Greater Manchester), and the North West Strategic Health Authority.

Ultimately, all local authorities in Greater Manchester contributed, although some local authorities (such as Bolton, Rochdale, Oldham, Stockport and Bury) came on board later and were therefore only able to publish one or two datasets. GMPTE was particularly engaged, publishing large quantities of public data.

The project was driven by the [national policy environment](#) at the time, with a new focus on transparency of public data in the final years of the Labour government. Trafford Council and Future Everything intended to push this agenda further through DataGM by making data openly available to the public.

Many stakeholders supported the project, including Manchester City Council, the Manchester Digital Development Agency (MDDA), as well as civil society and tech community groups such as [mySociety](#) and the [Social Media Café](#).

In 2010, during this process, [Open Data Manchester](#) was set up as part of [Future Everything's Open Data Cities Programme](#) and also worked with DataGM to develop a demand-side case for open data in Manchester.

Ultimately, the website was shut down in 2018, around seven years after it was set up. Versions of the website can still be viewed on the [Internet Archive](#).

Important considerations

Content and quality

There was an initial focus on five key areas of data, including transport and planning. A relatively small number of datasets were published initially as a proof of concept to help engage important stakeholders.

When DataGM came offline in 2018, there were 371 datasets published in total. This was a significant range of datasets, providing a good overview of key public assets around Greater Manchester. In the case of more complex datasets, such as timetable information, there were many subsets to the data. The largest publishers were Salford City Council (72 datasets) and Trafford Council (59). By far the most common data format was CSV, followed by WMS and WFS.

Common datasets include government transparency data, such as city council organisation charts, council pay multiples, and locations of key facilities such as public toilets and parks. There were also many useful transparent-related datasets, such as bus stop and cycle locker locations.

A crucial aim from the start was to ensure that target datasets would be of consistent and reliable quality before publication. One example of these efforts was ensuring that planning application refusals were recorded in a more standardised way, allowing for a better overview and comparison between datasets.

Certain public bodies were particularly enthusiastic about opening up their data, such as the Fire and Rescue Service, where there was an appetite to release large amounts of data. However, in such cases, expectations had to be managed to avoid overwhelming the datastore with unstructured data and to establish a clear rationale around which datasets to publish.

User experience and usage data

DataGM included all the key search and filtering features a user would expect of a datastore, as well as good quality metadata in tabular form. Usability was very similar to many active datastores today.

The most popular datasets overall were transport-related (public transport schedules and bus stops and schedules), followed by Trafford Council ward boundaries and Wigan Council senior salary information.

The number of datasets and the variation in the most popular of these datasets suggests a wide range of uses of the data – even if only for information. It also suggests, particularly for the transport-related data, that datasets with a practical usage (e.g. timetables) had more value to users.

Blockers and challenges

From early on, the project faced pushback from some local authorities. There were concerns on both sides about the project - from organisations asked to submit data, there was concern about the motivation for the project, given austerity measures and public service restructuring at the time; and subsequently, concerns from the project leads that those seconded to deliver work for the project were not fully committed given uncertainty and job insecurity.

Also, the strategy of effectively reverse engineering the project based on successful projects elsewhere had key limitations, not least because other projects were built within very different political and institutional contexts. For instance, many North American cities had the advantage of starting with internally consistent and systematised local government datasets. Greater Manchester was not yet at that point.

Moreover, the project overlapped with the growth of data.gov.uk, which was a very coherent project at the time. This meant local authorities were reluctant to publish data in both places and duplicate effort.

Another challenge was overcoming the general perception that this would be a temporary project with a funding-dependent future. It was difficult to achieve buy-in across the board and create the feeling that DataGM would be a permanent feature for local government in Greater Manchester.

This ultimately meant that the project did not achieve either a cultural tipping point of being the go-to place for data in Greater Manchester, nor a sustained and long-term funding agreement to support its continued development.

What can Greater Manchester take from this now?

- This project is a beacon for other projects, setting a precedent for other work and cooperation on these matters by local authorities. A single focal point for open data could act as a rallying point for wider data sharing between the public sector and itself; between the public and private sectors; and between the public sector and the general public, for information re-use.
- Whilst it is important to learn from best practice elsewhere, the best approach is to draw on aspects that are replicable, whilst ensuring the overall model is realistic and tailored to local needs and capacity.
- Internally consistent local government datasets are crucial to the setting up of an open data project. Across Greater Manchester, that becomes more important as there are multiple partners and agencies collating similar datasets.
- Where open data programmes overlap in a certain locality (in places where local, regional, and national open data programmes might coexist) joined-up thinking is needed to either justify, or preferably avoid, replication of effort.
- In some cases, it is necessary to resist the urge to overzealously publish large numbers of datasets all at once. It is important to take a measured approach to ensure a clear process and rationale, potentially curating datasets to ensure they are of value, and being used.
- Political and local leadership buy-in must be secured from across Greater Manchester. This will support the long-term aims of open data projects, and embed open data as a core component of the work of the local public sector.
- Project leaders must be clear about their motivations and goals. This will help secure trust and commitment over the longer term. Aligning work with existing strategic

goals will help make the case for open data being a supportive mechanism rather than 'just another job to do'.

- There needs to be a balance between the involvement of grassroots community organisations and clear leadership and coordination. Both are crucial to a project's success to secure both common purpose and creative flexibility.

Find out more:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170528155422/http://www.datagm.org.uk/>

<https://futureeverything.org/portfolio/entry/open-data-cities-datagm/>