Case Study:

Greater Manchester Data Synchronisation Programme

Type: Programme / Website

Organisation(s): GM local authorities, AGMA, Digital Catapult, Future Everything

Tags: open data, process, metadata, standards

The Greater Manchester Data Synchronisation Programme (GMDSP) aimed to link datasets in Greater Manchester from a range of different sources and publish it openly. This was intended to improve local administration and drive innovation.

The platform created was an N-triple database, linked with unique identifiers. The programme was one of the first in the country to attempt to create a linked datastore. This means datasets are not published on their own, but are linked through consistent naming functions and metadata.

The programme created a great deal of publicity nationally. It was initially backed by four Greater Manchester local authorities and a range of external organisations. The issues that led the project to close provide important lessons on how the city region should proceed with local data projects in the future.

Background

The Greater Manchester Data Synchronisation Programme (GMDSP) was launched in 2014 to standardise data quality and format between local authorities and between council departments in Greater Manchester. The programme was run in tandem with the European project, 'Code for Europe', which focused on building up data skills within local authorities.

The GMDSP had two key aims. The first was to make datasets open to citizens and communities, enabling transparency and innovation. The second was to improve the quality of local administration through linked data, developing horizontal integration between different departments. The intention was to make use of synergies from drawing up information to improve effectiveness and efficiency, such as between planning, highways, and council tax officers.

The programme ran on a relatively de-centralised basis. Key collaborators were the Digital Catapult and Manchester-based research foundation FutureEverything.

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DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Manchester City Council, Salford City Council, Trafford Council and Tameside Council backed the project. Manchester-based company [Swirrl](#) was heavily involved in building linked data capacity.

One of the first stages was to examine and resolve issues around information governance. Working groups were established at the [Association for Greater Manchester Authorities](#) (AGMA) to examine options and to draw up a plan for information management.

A group of ['code fellows'](#) were then sent to participating local authorities, where they would each spend six months coordinating and releasing data. These external experts helped to provide the source data necessary for the DSP to work. A series of coding and data events were also planned to stimulate collaboration between the participating councils.

A linked datastore was also developed, with 55 datasets provided as of 2016. These covered 13 themes, with the most populous being 'Volunteering'. There were no visualisations of the data provided, but users could query the data, or present some of the information in a spreadsheet view on the webpage.

The programme was not long-term funded, however. Without this backing and the support of multiple organisations across GM, the datastore and website were removed in 2019.

Blockers and challenges

One issue that prevented the GMDSP's success was the technology available at the time. Linked data could be very useful but was only accessible with knowledge of [SPARQL queries](#), limiting the potential user base. This meant large segments of the intended audience, such as council officers, were not able to make use of the data without first receiving training.

Data availability was identified early on as an issue. In some cases, electronic data collection capacities were very limited. Patience and capacity-building were needed to fill in gaps, but this was difficult to achieve in the context of scarce council resources. The programme was not made a key priority in a challenging funding environment.

A further challenge was building up sufficient data manipulation skills – both in the general public and amongst public sector officers. This was connected to the need to raise awareness of the opportunities linked data would provide. Data producers and users in Greater Manchester were not always able to perceive how linked data might be used beyond their specific areas of specialism. Stronger external coordination was needed to make these connections.

Moreover, a more formal framework was needed to manage work allocation equitably. Although several local authority employees were enthusiastic about getting involved, a lack of long-term leadership support, engagement with the

programme usually fell outside of these individuals' work remits, and individuals had to find time and capacity to push the programme beyond their formal remits.

In a similar vein, it proved difficult to create an innovative space where those involved were willing and able to identify and critically examine teething problems. Without clear designated capacity from the relevant organisations, stemming from potentially unclear benefits to these organisations, there was little incentive for experimentation and creative thinking. This proved ultimately self-fulfilling, with the closure of the programme in 2019.

What can Greater Manchester take from this now?

- The GMDSP helped Greater Manchester build capacity and relationships, as well as a general awareness of what open data could mean. The basic methodological framework still survives today, though additional capacity would still be required to make the programme a success.
- Different council departments and organisations can have incompatible organisational cultures, purely due to competing priorities. Strong relationship management is therefore an important precondition for the success of any project of this scale.
- It is important to combine specialised domain knowledge with a big picture perspective of the opportunities presented by open data present at scale. Recognising the value of specialist council employees and giving them a stake in open data projects would help strengthen these relationships.
- Open data projects need support from the highest levels and autonomy to give those working on the project the confidence and the frameworks they need to foster innovation.
- The programme was able to create code fellows, support staff with new training, and create a linked datastore from the actions of a few individuals. This suggests significant innovative capacity within Greater Manchester.
- Project leaders need to define the scope of an open data programme from the beginning. This means setting out clear principles about: what data should be collected; how datasets should be presented; and how the project should develop.
- It is vital to set clear KPIs to track subsequent progress.
- A successful open data programme relies to some extent on existing foundations. This means good-quality datasets held by partner organisations that can be quickly integrated into a datastore. Without these foundations, the scale of the challenge to clean up datasets and put them in a usable form can be overwhelming.

Find out more:

[Future Cities website – Greater Manchester Data Synchronisation Programme page](#)

[Guardian article – Manchester councils appoint code fellows in major data sharing project](#)