

Simon Roberts

Data and Engagement Manager

**Royal
Geographical
Society**

with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Data and Engagement Manager

Organisation: Improvement Service

Location: Scotland

How did you get to where you are now?

Good question – long story. I was never very sure if I favoured arts or sciences when I left school. So, I hedged my bets and chose Landscape Architecture (a combination of science modules and design work) to study at university. Having left university and travelled the world extensively, I developed a passion for conservation and the environment and an MSc in Applied Ecology and Conservation (as well as some fascinating expedition work in the tropics) introduced me to GIS (Geographical Information Systems) – which still managed to combine my interest in science with visual design techniques. Learning how to use GIS allowed me to get a job working in government (for Defra) working on animal health preparedness and I was one of the lead geographers helping deal with bird flu, foot and mouth disease and blue tongue around c.2005 - 2010.

As I became more passionate about the importance of geospatial data I took on an engagement role working on the EU INSPIRE directive, which proposed standards for geospatial data for the whole of the UK public sector. This led to a promotion into a different government department (Communities and Local Government) as their strategic geographer – teaching economists, statisticians, and social researchers how to use geospatial data and capabilities for their own purposes. Having left central government and England in 2016, I took on a role working as a geospatial data and engagement specialists in Scottish local Government, where I continue to evangelise about the importance of good (geospatial) data. And yes, that

word is in brackets for a reason, as it can create barriers to engagement – when all data usually happens somewhere anyway. Having said that, I now sit on the Association for Geographic Information - Scotland steering board and am keen to get our profession working better with other data sectors to effect real change and improvement for how data gets used better.

What do you do as part of your role?

As a data and engagement manager at the Improvement Service (a local government-owned company) it is my role to build relationships with data custodians at local authorities to persuade them to provide and improve their geospatial data to our Spatial Hub web portal. I also engage with potential users of this data to understand how it needs to be transformed and made available to them for their specific purposes and requirements. I do a fair amount of data processing, but the majority of my time seems to be taken up with communicating in different ways to different audiences. That means many e-mails, forum posts, presentations etc – finding ways to explain why data and geospatial capabilities are so important to all of us. It's quite a tricky thing to do when people have never really considered data important and where quite complex ideas are involved.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

I think it helps to be fairly outgoing and confident in your knowledge and experience to date in an engagement role. Passion in the topic area is crucial – and when you understand how better data can help to solve so many of our current problems, that is fairly easy. Humility and a willingness to learn better ways of doing things is also important. Communicating complex concepts to people who potentially have little knowledge (or enthusiasm) for a topic is a real skill. It also helps to be patient as things in the public sector can take a fair while to change and effect.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I enjoy the diversity which my job brings. I can spend days on fairly complex data processing tasks, which always give a sense of fulfilment when you manage to solve problematic data issues. Other days I can be in meetings for hours discussing the nuances of data and how to improve the landscape. And I get to work with people from all sectors – public, private and academia – as we're looking to bring everyone closer together through the better sharing, collection and use of data.

W: www.rgs.org/iamageographer



Was there anything particularly useful that helped you get into this role?

Having a variety of different geospatial roles (analyst, engagement, strategist).

Do you get to travel for your role?

Yes – though mostly just around Scotland and the UK.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

My advice would be to work on building up your level or knowledge and experience about (geospatial) data and how it commonly gets collected and used for different purposes. Almost always there are ways to think better about that and think more strategically. Data gets used for a fraction of its potential purposes currently and there are usually good reasons why. So, if we can bring it more to life by thinking about better standards, structures, governance or processes – that is going to be a huge win for so many other people across the data community and it could/should ultimately lead to improvements for all of us as a whole. How many jobs are there when you can genuinely say you're involved in (potentially) improving everyone's life?

What opportunities for career progression?

There are so many different areas to move into, but I have found myself becoming an expert on (geospatial) data and what needs to be done to it to make it more useful and usable. So, I see my role increasing in this area and starting to engage more with senior managers of organisations about cultural change in their organisations around data.

How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?

Webinars, conferences and online reading.

Why did you choose geography?

Because it covers so many different areas of our lives. How many disciplines can you say that about?