

Policy options for geographic information from Ordnance Survey

● Response to the Consultation by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is the learned society and professional body for geography in the UK. We accredit professional geographers and support and promote geographical research, education, fieldwork and expeditions, public engagement and knowledge transfer to policy.

Many of our Fellows use Ordnance Survey products and data regularly, either as research scholars, educators in schools, professional geographers in the business world or as geography enthusiasts.

In drafting our response to the consultation we have consulted with all departments of geography in UK universities, and with the Society's Council (Board of Trustees) and its research, education and expeditions and fieldwork committees whose members comprise Fellows from the university, school and professional communities. Our response has the full support of all but one of those consulted.

We summarise our views as key points:

1. The Ordnance Survey is a world-class organisation, highly regarded for its role as the national mapping agency. It is essential that its ongoing role in high quality, geo-spatial data provision in support of government, public and commercial users is safeguarded and sustained into the future.
2. We agree with the assessment that location identifiers and digital, geo-spatial information increasingly underpins public sector decision-making and the commercial IT industry. It also underpins much UK-based geographical research.
3. It is essential that a high precision, high resolution, up to date, national, digital mapping database exists to serve the current and future needs of government, emergency services and utilities, and the public interest in the UK. The Ordnance Survey, through MasterMap, is best placed to deliver this function building on its outstanding coverage, quality and delivery to date.
4. The funding of MasterMap, and associated large-scale datasets, should be sustainable in the future, preferably through the Ordnance Survey business model, or alternatively with ring fenced funding, guaranteed by government for the long term.
5. The importance of timely, consistent and equally available revisions and updates to MasterMap cannot be underestimated. Important too is the long term provision of recording and tracking revision dates so that digital map data can still be used, in the future, as a national archive and historical source.
6. It makes much sense, in a digital age where geospatial referencing is increasingly used for datasets, for the government – nationally, regionally and locally – to use the same digital mapping base and for that database to be accessibly priced to government users. Joined up government cannot be enabled by departments using different geospatial databases.

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7. We recognise and welcome the commitment made by the Prime Minister to free access to the public for the mid and small scale Ordnance Survey digital reference and display products proposed in the consultation (including the 1:10,000, 1:25,000; 1:50,000 and 1:1,000,000 scale raster products; Code-point, Boundary line, Meridian and Strategi). We trust this includes clarity about the use of OS products in published outputs, including on the internet.
 8. Having made that commitment, it is essential that government funds the free provision of these products with a long-term funding commitment should the commercial revenues from the sale of large scale products (see point 12) be unable to meet this need.
 9. Single unified postcode addressing should definitely be included within the 'free to access' materials. We also recommend that the gazetteer and vector data to complement the raster data is made available.
 10. The existing discounted access to education and university research users should continue to cover those products that lie outside 'Ordnance Survey Free', as in the current CHEST arrangements and the proposed plans for schools. Such access is vital in underpinning place-based, demographic, social, economic and environmental research and in ensuring teachers have the necessary data for GIS teaching which is statutory within the school curriculum.
 11. We welcome the proposal (and supporting analyses) that demonstrates the social and commercial benefits from making the proposed mid and small scale datasets freely available to commercial developers on the basis that this will generate economic growth in this market sector and social benefits. As an example, the American agencies' (eg NASA and the USGS) policy of publicly available data has had a big impact on science.
 12. We see much merit in the Ordnance Survey retaining commercial data licensing for high specification, large scale products (MasterMap, Topography layer, Landline and Site Map). We believe that licensing fees should be priced at market value for private sector users.
 13. We do not share the view that public sector and private sector users of such datasets and mapping need be charged at the same license rates, owing to their differential ability to pay and to reap financial returns. However, cost efficient provision should apply to both.
 14. We strongly support sustainable long term funding for the Ordnance Survey. Should the commercial data licensing model not achieve sustainability, the requirement should fall on the government to meet the need. Without such a long-term commitment the investment and maintenance of up to date, high quality, national databases, and of the future of Ordnance Survey, will be at risk. That is an unacceptable outcome.
 15. There is a need to ensure that the sustainability of the Ordnance Survey model allows it to continue and update information across all areas to the same standards. We express special concern about the need to upkeep maps and datasets of rural, natural and undeveloped areas. Privatisation might well result in data collection becoming market led with reductions in the rate of update and information gathering. So far these areas have benefited from cross-subsidy inside the Ordnance Survey where the revenue making areas compensate for the 'unprofitable' data collection areas. (As an example, we highlight that the commercial competition to MasterMap (UKMap) have no intention to go beyond the top 26 urbanised areas.)
 16. On balance, given the political contexts, we support Option 3 but we do not subscribe to privatisation in this model. The consultation contains no justification whatsoever for any alternative to the Ordnance Survey as some form of public body.



17. Furthermore, providing free access to some of the OS's most valuable assets is precisely not the time to sell it. The OS is an excellently run organisation and is fully capable of defining a new business model that will operate successfully in the fundamentally changed environment. Selling part or all of the OS until this work has been done risks delivering very poor value for money for the taxpayer.
18. Seeking to maximise the short term financial gain from selling all or part of the Ordnance Survey is short sighted and does not have our support.

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Director