

Our Mission is far from Done - Interview with the AGI



THE ASSOCIATION
FOR GEOGRAPHIC
INFORMATION

Recent changes in staffing and direction have been announced by the Association for Geographic Information. After a long haul and some tough decisions – the AGI looks set to embark in a new direction. GIS Professional recently caught up with key members of the Council to talk to them about the changes and the future for the organisation.

GIS Professional editor Stephen Booth met with David Henderson (chair), Graham Wallace (vice-chair), Abigail Page (honorary secretary) and input from Andy Wells (honorary treasurer) ahead of this year's ESRI UK conference to better understand the changes, the difficult decisions behind them and the future for AGI. Council Chair David Henderson regards the changes as a progressive repurposing of the core functions of the organisation rather than a cost-cutting exercise. We are in an age when the mission

remains relevant but the audience has changed, says Graham Wallace. It is a necessary transition at a time when the market has evolved and the organisation needs to evolve with it. For members, they should be reassured that the Council believe these difficult decisions are the best chance of preserving a strong AGI. So what's behind the changes and what are the plans for the future?

Stephen Booth: At last year's AGM, Council shared a relatively positive financial position with the membership yet has chosen to close the AGI office in London. Can you shed greater light on the need to do this?

David Henderson: "Just as the digital industries in which we are immersed are changing how they deliver to customers, AGI is looking at smarter ways to support our members in a more cost-effective way, releasing resources so that we have the option in future to invest in new initiatives."

"Council took the difficult decision to close the AGI office and to significantly reduce the size of the AGI team from the start of April 2016. Whilst AGI continues to maintain healthy reserves, like many similarly sized membership organisations, the Council recognises the need to plan for a sustainable future whereby membership fees and events are not relied upon to cover the organisation's costs; indeed a restructuring of our current membership model is almost certainly required. We are of course a membership organisation and supporting our members is our core activity. Whilst it's reasonable to observe that we need some degree of administrative support, there are different, more cost-efficient, ways to achieve this – a full-time staffed office in central London is well beyond what is required for the administration of AGI."

"We are acutely conscious that we need to be talking to members but as yet that is difficult because we are only half way through considering a number of different scenarios and identifying activities required. The AGI has strong reserves and following recent changes is now in a position where current income generation is expected to cover our annual costs. We are working on opportunities to streamline and automate many of our processes, such as membership renewals. Future activities currently being considered include webinars, roundtables and events which follow the format of the recent regional conferences run by Scotland and Northern Ireland – which proved to be popular and cost-effective to run – benefitting from strong support from our supporters and volunteers."

Abigail Page adds that too much valuable resource has been spent on administering membership and therefore AGI was not able to put resource behind those activities which add value to membership. It has been the volunteer-led activities which add greatest value, she argues. Graham Wallace comments that "what we have is a rebalancing so we can focus all of our resources so we can provide value for money to members."

Graham Wallace adds that "in our role as directors of AGI it is beholden to us to look at how we can manage things more cost-effectively and make the membership pound go further through streamlining the service."

SB: With a significantly reduced team do you really believe that AGI will continue to be able to deliver its mission by relying more heavily on volunteer resources?

David Henderson: "It is notable that over the last few years AGI's most progressive activities have been delivered by a core of committed volunteers realising a new wave of exceptional member value – the development of the Geo:Big 5 event series and associated thought leadership; the subsequent compilation and publishing of the AGI Foresight report at the end of 2015; and the continued development of our Early Careers Network, which is now attracting international interest. However, the delivery of these have relied too heavily on a core of committed volunteers. By taking a new focused approach, with the benefit of a lean operating model, we feel that we will be in a better position to deliver the mission."

"We continue to retain important contracted support to assist with the management of our finances and our marketing and communications. It is essential that any future appointments are additive to the strength of our volunteer base and can help progress our

mission.”

SB: Okay, do we really have enough volunteers to set up events, manage them and deliver them on the day or will you outsource the work?

Abigail Page: “We will always need some degree of support for our activities. While we hope to see members continuing to lead initiatives and activities, they need to be appropriately supported. A more flexible model for administrative support will allow us to have the right skills available at the right time, without the overhead of a full-time office.”

“It’s also worth noting here that AGI is much more than events. Whilst events are a good way to share insights, develop consensus, build networks and celebrate successes – it is not necessary for AGI to only run events on our own to achieve these outcomes. The running of events cannot and should not be run to the detriment of other activities undertaken by AGI. The success of our 2016 events thus far are evidence of our ability to maintain high-quality events under a very different model.”

“There are a broad range of other activities that exist today and in which our members are able to participate. Whether that’s in our National and Regional Groups, meeting with like-minded colleagues in our active Special Interest Groups or using our social media channels to encourage discussion and debate on key topics of interest – there’s lots of ways to contribute.”

SB: How will the website be maintained? How will the important day-to-day management of subscriptions and membership work? Will there continue to be a phone number that members (and importantly prospective members) can call?

Abigail Page: “Arrangements have been made to ensure that we continue to provide members with appropriate levels of support with respect to administration of membership, finance, marketing and communications. From the start of April, we have had a fulltime reception service to answer members’ calls and emails. A service desk system is ensuring that all enquiries are dealt with and that we continue to support our members on a day-to-day basis. In this transition period there is a reliance on a core resource that has been provided voluntarily by members of AGI Council and over the coming months we will transition to a more permanent arrangement.”

“Our website is maintained by a number of web authors and supported under contract. Along with recent investments in CRM, our website is a key point of access for prospective new members. We are also in the process of moving the organisation’s IT systems to the cloud, which will give greater flexibility and present less of an overhead.”

Graham Wallace adds that two years ago a lot of effort was put into improving the website (mainly by Abigail Page) to make the navigation easier so that members can self-serve. Abigail adds that the new service desk service distributes queries to mainly council members, which has given them an insight into the sort of issues and problems that come from the membership such as CPD, a key issue for members.

SB: Can you explain within the context of the changes whether there will be an annual conference this year and if there is, how you will manage it without the fulltime support of a secretariat?

David Henderson: “I’m really glad you’ve given us the opportunity to talk about events! Over the last few years we’ve continued to run an annual conference; and in 2014 and 2015 our Geo:Big 5 event series opened a new dialogue with organisations and partners who typically sit outside of the geospatial industry. Those who participated found them to be a resounding success and of course these events acted as an invaluable input to the 2015 Foresight Report.”

“From 2016 we are looking to run events in a different way – with a greater focus on providing a platform for sharing insights, networking and thought leadership. In recent times the cost base of our events has necessitated a greater focus on sponsorship which has, at times, distracted from what the focus of our events should be about!”

“We have already had some fantastic events during 2016 with those in Scotland and Northern Ireland seeing a record attendance and a high level of engagement with new attendees. Both events have been the subject of significant social media attention and continue to play an important part of the national GIS agendas of Scotland and Northern Ireland. We also know that AGI Cymru along with many of our special interest groups and regional groups across England are making plans to ensure that networking and knowledge exchange continues to be at the centre of their activities.”

“In terms of ‘big shows’, AGI is delighted to continue to partner with RICS, TSA and ICES and the team behind GeoBusiness, which brought together several parts of the wider geospatial and geomatics industries for two days in May. A decision on whether AGI runs a UK-wide event later in the year is still being considered – however, if it is run, it is likely to look significantly different to previous years. GeoCommunity has been a fantastic event for members, however increasingly our members have found it difficult to attend a two-day residential event and any future such event will necessarily have to be built around a different sponsorship model. We will continue the success of the AGI Awards and this currently presents the most likely focal point to bring members together at the end of the year. We’d be delighted to hear from members and/or sponsors who would like to be involved.”

Henderson adds that AGI has an active, excited and motivated group around early career development, CPD and special interest groups, while older members tend to the view that, well it’s done what it was set up to do. The focus therefore has to be on that former group for the future. “We learnt a lot from the Big 5 events in 2014 and 2015 which attracted people who were traditionally viewed as from outside our industry.”

Abigail Page argues that it was important for the GI membership where that “siloed” people need to be more aware of initiatives like Future Cities and BIM, otherwise they could be left behind. “So it was about moving our membership on” she concludes.

Graham Wallace adds that the market has changed from GIS being a specialism to something with a much wider footprint: the reach is no longer the GI specialist. It extends to people working in analytics, Big Data and those involved in business processes within organisations. With that has come engagement with organisations like RICS, Institution of Civil Engineers and others in the BIM sector.

SB: So, can we say that these changes are down to the growing maturity of GIS?

David Henderson: “Yes I would say that. I would refute any notion that AGI has completed what it set out to do. The mission continues to evolve. From twenty years ago when we didn’t have Google maps, the Cloud, the Internet of Things, if we looked at where we are today and ask does this look like success, I think we would rightly consider ourselves to be very proud of our achievements! We are now way beyond mapping and the early advent of GIS. Geospatial is effectively mainstream and our message is no longer an explicit one but an implicit one. GI is part of the solution so we have to work in partnership with other organisations.”

Graham Wallace adds that last year’s Foresight Report highlighted where the footprint of GI had moved to. It found that the nature of GI skills was changing so that it was no longer about the geeky running of computer systems; it’s about how data is assembled, how it can be put together from the web. So the aim is to re-position what skills people are going to need to survive over the next twenty or so years.

SB: Okay, so does the Council as presently constituted have enough skills and resources to manage this?

Well it’s not just the Council, says David Henderson. We have active national and regional groups. The Early Careers Network is coordinated by Andy Murdoch, Special Interest Groups are generally run by non-Council members and we call upon an invisible but active volunteer membership that we often don’t give enough credit to, just as the membership at large probably don’t realise the amount of effort that Council puts in. We want to get the AGI back to where the Council provides strategic support and guidance to the business rather than propping up operational activities. These are interim measures while we transition from one model to another.

Graham Wallace adds that there are some discussion groups which have been looking at various scenarios and costing them up based on the operational restraints and resources. Membership too has made suggestions. “The change in the operational model will enable us to engage with sponsors on a different level” he observes.

SB: Where does the Council envisage that future growth will come from? Are members going to see a major recruitment drive?

Andy Wells (Honorary Treasurer): The environment in which we work is changing rapidly and the need to balance membership cost with benefit is coming into ever sharper focus. We only have to look to the government funding situation to see this. However, from the two events run this year and the feedback from the Foresight report, it is clear there is an appetite if we get the balance right. If we had stayed with the current model, we had little flexibility. With the new membership cost model and the events approach, we will have this. Therefore, we believe we are in a better position to provide an offering that will halt the decline in membership and start to see new entrants as well as some lapsed members returning.

SB: What are the prospects for merging with a larger organisation like the RGS or RICS?

Graham Wallace: “AGI is a relatively small association, but with big ambition. As members, we’ve traditionally punched well above our weight in terms of voice and reach. Our members believe that geographic information has an important role in the digital market. Whilst it is true that GI has become far more implicit in the digital society, where the value of location has become ubiquitous with day-to-day decisions, it is also true that location offers a degree of structure and analytical value that is still under-appreciated in big data analytics and the development of the increasingly smart societies in which we aspire to live, work and play. Our mission is quite unique and our work is far from done!”

David Henderson adds, “In today’s global society no single organisation will win on their own. Partnerships, collaborations and closer working between like-minded individuals and organisations are key to future success. Where there are opportunities for our mission to be delivered with others we will increasingly seek opportunities to do so, both informally and more formally if this is appropriate. At this time, there are no current discussions with external bodies on anything further than encouraging greater strategic alignment between respective organisations’ missions and activities.”

SB: What are the views of the major sponsors of AGI about the changes, like Esri and OSGB?

David Henderson: “The views of all of our members, be those individuals or organisational, are important. Our membership model has traditionally relied on support from a small group of sponsor members from across large government departments and commercial vendors who value the networking we can offer. While continuing to want to collaborate with AGI, these members are increasingly looking for different things and wherever we can we will continue to work with them to ensure a two-way exchange of mutual value. We continue to benefit from strong representation on the AGI Council from many of these members and their views continue to be fed into our restructuring plans.”

Abigail Page adds that new members are attracted by what AGI is doing through specific activities. Sponsor support likewise will be attracted by these activities rather than simply sponsoring the organisation.

SB: So, who leads the AGI and what might we expect for the remainder of the year? Does it want to get back to where the organisation has a leader, a CEO?

We will continue to be membership led. Without the passion of commitment of our members, there is no long-term sustainable value in AGI. At the AGM last year, we challenged all our members not to ask “what AGI is doing for me?” but rather to consider “what might I do to support the mission of AGI?”. Since then we’ve been really encouraged by the number of new members contributing - not least those coming together to collaborate on a range of activities like our Early Career Network, across our National and Regional Groups or Special Interest Groups. We can’t stress the importance of this active participation strongly enough. AGI’s lifeblood is the activity undertaken by the membership and this strong commitment to be an organisation underpinned by active members continues to be a strength we celebrate.

On the question of a CEO Wallace says it’s definitely one of the options that’s in the mix while Henderson adds that it’s difficult to see how they can advance AGI without someone in that ambassadorial role.

