Ordnance Survey Becomes Flag Carrier for Open Data

National mapping agency Ordnance Survey (OS), once the arch opponent of the campaign for open data, is now positioning itself as its champion with OS OpenMap being released at the end of March.

In an announcement to mark International Open Data Day, the organisation announced a new set of "street-level" data, OS OpenMap, which will be available for developers building new products. Restrictions on the re-use of so-called "derived data" - which is used in products sold by developers but originated with OS - have long been a focus of complaints from the geospatial technology industry.

While the announcement does not explicitly mention derived data, the agency said it was committed to improving its licensing terms to encourage re-use. Neil Ackroyd, acting director general and chief executive, said: "At Ordnance Survey we believe that open data releases are best supported by additional resources and we have explored ways to improve and modify our licenses and provide supporting initiatives to aid further innovation."

OS said OS OpenMap was targeted at both public sector and commercial users, will provide an enhanced level of building detail, extended naming of roads and identify sites such as hospitals and schools - in a format it says will be customisable and easy to style.

It will also set up a Geospatial Innovation Hub to provide a space for it to meet face-to-face with developers, provide advice and support the creation of new products and services. It said this will build on its experience of working with start-ups through its GeoVation programme.

The announcement was hailed by business secretary Vince Cable, who said: "Making this data more accessible means more small and medium companies will be able to use Ordnance Survey's world-leading maps, combining geographical data from multiple sources and visualising them at a high level of detail. I am sure this will inspire a number of companies to create sophisticated new products."

OS also provided details for new open data products: OS OpenMap, a street level vector dataset for integrating and visualising analytical data; an Open Water Network covering Great Britain's rivers; a new Gazetteer; and the release of unique property reference numbers (UPRNs) on a royalty-free and open basis.

Ordnance Survey is due to make the transition from a trading fund to a 'GovCo' answerable to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in April.

The Public and Commercial Services Union said today that the change looked like the first stage to privatisation. But the government said the new status would ensure that data remained open.

Francis Maude, minister for the Cabinet Office, said: "As part of this government's long term plan for the economy, we are driving an ambitious transparency programme. Open data is a new raw material and today's Ordnance Survey announcement builds on the progress, which has seen us recognised as the world's most transparent government. Transparency is an idea whose time has come and we must keep challenging ourselves to do more."

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