

Making Open Data available and relevant

The London Borough of Lambeth Council

The Challenge

- Respond to the Government's Transparency Agenda and make council information available as Open Data

The Benefits

- Time savings of over a day a week for council employees
- More meaningful information available online for citizens
- Data downloads in multiple formats for third party organisations
- Recognition as a leading publisher of spatial Open Data in local government in the UK



The London Borough of Lambeth Council has become a pioneer of best practice in the publication of local government Open Data in the UK. Using ArcGIS Online and preconfigured Open Data templates, the council doesn't just make Open Data available; it makes it relevant and useable for the widest possible range of people and organisations.

The Challenge

When the UK Government launched its Transparency Agenda and announced that data about public sector operations would be made 'open' to everyone, it unleashed an enormous technical challenge for local authorities. As Tom Brown, Geographic Information Manager at Lambeth Council says, "After years of funding cuts, we had no budget for additional on premise IT equipment or external IT services to enable us to create an Open Data system. We also lacked the technical expertise in-house to put in place a wide range of download options for citizens and third party organisations."

To comply with the Local Government Transparency Code, the council initially just uploaded data sets to its website, all on separate web pages, which involved manually exporting and updating files. This process consumed a huge amount of time and didn't necessarily result in the publication of data that was useful for citizens; a list of council expenditure that Lambeth Council had a mandatory requirement to publish was only viewed by three people in two and a half years. "We needed a better system for publishing Open Data that would be more cost effective and time efficient," says Tom Brown. "Yet we also wanted to be able to publish the kinds of data that citizens would actually find helpful and present it to them, in context, in a range of formats that they could use."

The Solution

Lambeth Council achieved its goals using Esri's ArcGIS Online and pre-configured ArcGIS Online Open Data templates. As a hosted, web-based solution, ArcGIS Online requires no investment in on premise hardware, no space in the council's data centre and no complex software configurations. Furthermore, as the council has been using Esri's ArcGIS geographic information system (GIS) platform for many years and already has an existing ArcGIS Desktop license, it can use ArcGIS Online without any additional costs.

From the outset, Lambeth Council found it very straightforward to set up the ArcGIS Online Open Data portal and integrate it with its own website. "It is incredibly easy to add, configure and standardise metadata for each web service and I don't have to manually export data past the council's firewall anymore," Brown says. "The data is also live-linked to our internal corporate data, so I don't have to constantly update it."

A key advantage of ArcGIS Online for Lambeth Council is that the Open Data template provides a wide range of data download options, including creating spreadsheets, integrating with multiple API codes and exporting in .kml or .shp formats. The solution also allows multiple data sets to be visualised together on the same interactive map, for the first time. These features enable Lambeth Council to cater for the data needs of a much wider range of users, from those with very low IT skills to highly experienced, technical GIS professionals.

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Tom Brown, Geographic Information Manager, London Borough of Lambeth Council

Benefits



The Lambeth Council Open Data portal, displaying the locations of polling stations

Significant time savings within the council

The new ArcGIS Online Open Data portal has freed up a substantial amount of time for council employees, working across multiple departments. In the IT department, at least one day per week has been saved as employees no longer have to export, convert and dispatch map-based data files to external organisations such as council-appointed architects and companies maintaining traffic light systems; these organisations can self-serve the information they need themselves. When data on business rates was made available on the Open Data portal, the number of freedom of information requests made to the council reduced by 75%, significantly reducing administration time in that area.

Better information available to citizens

Rather than just viewing isolated lists of information, citizens can now view council data in the context of an interactive map and integrate it with other data to help them better understand the services available in their areas. Likewise, local groups, like residents associations, can easily access information about everything from local planning policy to refuse services, and display all pertinent data in the same format, on the same map, in a format they can understand. Lambeth Council’s new Open Data portal has also been used within the council’s call centre, enabling employees to respond to citizens’ enquiries quickly and knowledgeably, delivering a high quality of service.

Greater support for third party organisations

The ArcGIS Online Open Data portal has been extremely well received by third party organisations, which can now download council data in precisely the format they need, to integrate it into their own business systems. SAT NAV providers regularly stream data from the portal to improve the accuracy of their routing information, while small graphic design agencies can obtain free, easy access to map images to illustrate their reports. Lambeth Council’s Open Data will be automatically harvested by regional and national data hubs, like data.gov.uk, making it readily accessible to many more organisations, far beyond the boundaries of the borough.

Leadership in the advancement of Open Data

With more than 200 data sets already available via ArcGIS Online, the council has become one of the UK’s leading advocates of Open Data in local government. “Lambeth Council publishes more spatial Open Data than any other local authority in the UK,” says Brown. “But it’s not just about publishing the most. Using ArcGIS Online we can also publish our data in the best range of formats to make it useful and relevant for the widest number of people. ArcGIS Online has definitely helped to push us to the forefront of the Open Data movement.”

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