

Case Study:

Wigan Council Open Data

Type: Website

Organisation(s): Wigan Borough Council

Tags: open data, process, metadata, standards

[Wigan Council Open Data](#) is a datastore that holds a wide range of maps providing data on key features of the borough. Any datasets that cannot be presented in the form of a map, such as transparency data on council contracts or the gender pay gap, are instead directly available on the [Wigan Council website](#) in PDF format.



The datastore uses [Esri](#) to make a wide range of data available to the public, from demographics to planning and housing. There has been widespread support for the platform from councillors, and open data from the site has been used by third parties to create applications like the the [rowmaps](#) ramblers application.

Background

Wigan Council Open Data (WCOD) was a staff-led initiative following on from the council's first GIS day in November 2017, which tried to raise awareness of the potential opportunities for GIS across the council.

Following this, in 2018/19, the council's Joint Intelligence Unit pulled together an Open Data & Data Visualisation Strategy to guide the use of GIS data (this is an internal document not publicly available). The Data Visualisation Strategy was part of a wider [digital strategy](#) at the council. These strategies were the catalyst for the GIS Office to create the WCOD portal, which led Wigan to be hailed as pioneers for GIS and open data in the region.

WCOD received a lot of support from council leaders in its early days, as well as from the current and former Chief Executives. Councillors have also responded positively, and there have been requests from councillors for GIS training.

There is a strong feeling amongst the council team that WCOD has reduced the workload from FOI and internal information requests. Previously, GIS users at the council had been working in silos, but the WCOD platform allows them to work together in a more streamlined process.

Important considerations

Content and quality

The Wigan open data store is split into thirteen categories, from [Boundaries](#) and [Demographics](#) to [Sport and Recreation](#). Many of these categories, such as [Transport and Highways](#) and [Planning](#) contain only one object, but [Land and Property](#) contains twelve and [Environment](#) fifteen. In total, there are 62 datasets provided on the open datastore, in addition to more provided on the Council's website.

All of the datastore's datasets are geospatial. This means that the information can be presented either as a map to show the dataset before download, or incorporated into specific apps designed to visualise more information about the dataset.

Most datasets are not maps themselves, but instead are presented geospatially to give more granular detail on measures around factors like employment, prevalence of loneliness in over 65s, and the percentage of children who are overweight or obese

Interactive Web Mapping Applications provide interactive and easily navigable versions of geospatial datasets, such as [Tree Preservation Orders](#) and [Planning Applications](#). The Planning Application app allows users to query planning applications made each year up to 2017 by application number or address. Other examples include the [Public Rights of Way](#) map, which is a navigable map of all rights of way in the district produced on ArcGIS using Ordnance Survey data; and the [Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment](#) map, which allows the user to click on any land identified for development and view its location, ownership status, and planning status.

Story Maps also provide additional layers beyond mere data points, and visualise information on the datastore in different ways. The [Community Health Story Map](#) combines several datasets, including datasets on child weights and the prevalence of loneliness. This provides an overview of residents' health around the district, along with a narrative explanation of what these measures mean. Another Story Map, the [Assets of Community Value Map](#), shows properties across the district that have been nominated by residents as having community value. Each community asset is linked with an image and context narrative, describing the site and when it was nominated a community asset.

The data can also be called using an API explorer, using [ArcGIS' REST API](#), and can be downloaded as the raw data (a CSV file) or as a KML or shapefile. The metadata is available in summary below each map in an 'Overview' tab, but most datasets contain a link to more detailed metadata. This metadata is comprehensive, containing brief descriptions of terms of use, data source, author, date of publication, and date of last update, as well as the total number of views.

Usage

The number of views gives an indication as to which datasets and visualisations are most popular. There is a large difference between the most and least view datasets, with the [Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment Map](#) having 1,367 views, whilst the [Greenbelt Map](#) has only had 20 and the [petrol station locations](#) dataset only 2.

The Council is aware of some wider uses of the open data. For example, the public rights of way data has been downloaded and embedded into a ramblers application called [rowmaps](#). Another known example of wider use is that the data has fed into the [Greater Manchester Brownfield Land Register](#).

Blockers and challenges

Building and accessing the portal

There were a few issues with building the portal as WCOD uses an out-of-the-box product. It took a lot of work to bring the standardised package and presentation of data closer to the Wigan style guide.

WCOD is separate to the main council website and is not discoverable on [Geoseer](#), the spatial data search engine, which means the portal is possibly not reaching as wide an audience as intended.

Closed data

The council is currently holding a lot of data that is not public facing, much of which is project-led. There have been issues surrounding the council's budget, with limited budget dedicated to opening data. This means there is little capacity within the council to work on identifying which closed datasets can and should be made open.

Staff capacity

Relatively frequent personnel changes in the Joint Intelligence Unit have created issues with staff capacity and skills, which has caused the project to stall somewhat.

Wider risks and challenges

The Joint Intelligence Unit noted that there were numerous misconceptions and challenges at the beginning of WCOD, which needed to be mitigated. These included:

- fears over potential misinterpretation of the data;
- a lack of buy-in from key departments;
- data sharing and discovery limitations;

- lack of capacity to interpret and apply data; and
- lack of a wider data community and an absence of users of the data.

In general, few of these risks actually transpired. However, it is still thought that a lack of capacity in the community to use and interpret data is an ongoing issue. There is currently no budget at the council to promote open data, which limits the ability to currently push forward open data.

What can Greater Manchester take from this?

- Open data has the potential to reduce FOI requests and internal requests, which potentially allows for a more streamlined approach to working.
- The Story Maps function is a unique approach to sharing data that could engage with and appeal to a wider audience, by providing more detailed background narrative to certain datasets. Greater Manchester could adopt a similar approach on some of its open datasets.
- Making data available in a variety of formats (CSV, KML or Shapefile) means they are accessible to a wider range of different users.
- Many of the council's datasets are not currently public facing, partly due to a limited council budget for opening data. If Greater Manchester hopes to release more open data, it will need to ensure buy-in from the top levels of the organisation to secure the necessary capacity or resource for doing so.
- Initial enthusiasm and funding for the project has reduced since its creation in 2018/19, with other issues taking higher priority. To be effective in the longer term, Greater Manchester will need to maintain ongoing support for open data from the wider organisation and leadership team.
- The lack of a wider data community and skilled user base has arguably been the greatest challenge for WCOD. Efforts to engage with and upskill local businesses and communities could result in wider public and private use of Greater Manchester's open data.
- Staff turnover can create an unexpected skills gap. For WCOD, this has limited the capacity of the Joint Intelligence Unit to update and expand the open data portal. Clear staff training programmes and procedures for new joiners could ensure that any potential skills gaps are eliminated as effectively as possible.

Find out more:

[Wigan Council Open Data](#)