Stand and deliver!

Seppe Cassettari sets his sights on Britain's muddled and costly addressing system and argues that enough is enough

During a recent visit to Norfolk to help out with some building renovation we had to take receipt of several deliveries, large and small. The structure on which we were working is an old farm building in a small rural community. The access road is about five kilometres in length (or 2.75 miles for those still more happy dealing in old money) with the village taking up the last 500 metres. Around 50 properties large and small line the road, all of which are named but none of which are numbered.

While this is typical of many villages, it does present delivery drivers with a problem. The address-finding solutions they use can locate the centroid of the postcode, unhelpfully located some distance away from the property, but they have no easy means of picking up the actual building. On several occasions we had to stand on the drive and wave down the delivery van as it trawled up and down the road. Drivers grumble at time wasted; we get cold, and everyone gets frustrated. Clearly, we all need access to individual geo referencing for each property, not just to the postcode level.

Many address-finding solutions do not, and probably cannot for reasons of licencing and cost, use the existing national address data through OS AddressBase (or one of the many commercial derivatives).

Having worked with some on-line map providers to help increase the accuracy of their property locating tools, this is not an issue confined to small rural communities. The problem of route optimisation, e.g., being at the wrong end of a one-way street, or avoiding certain types of traffic calming measures, may seem an inconvenience, but can pose major issues for our logistics and supply industry.

Bit of a muddle

It is clear we have got ourselves into a bit of a muddle over the way we create and licence new addresses and then allocate the geo referencing, firstly in the form of a postcode and, secondly, a national grid reference. There are too many actors with a vested interest in the process, all claiming rights in the resulting national address database.

While local authorities are responsible for defining street names and house numbers, a new or amended address goes to Royal Mail which owns and controls the postcode system and will create a new one as appropriate. Finally, Ordnance Survey has a role in allocating the national grid location for each address.

Copyright of the national address file is claimed by the Ordnance Survey; Royal Mail own the PAF file, and local authorities claim some ownership of the other address elements. It is no wonder users get confused about ownership and copyright and where the boundaries lie. Recent court cases on the creation of a third-party grid reference system outside OS copyright demonstrate both the complexity of the legal position and the desire from users of address data to have a more transparent system of creation and use.

Costing UK plc

Government (in various forms) has, in recent years, pushed ahead with making much of the national geospatial reference material freely available through Open licencing. Yet one of the key geo reference systems that nearly all of us use in one way or another remains subject to commercial licencing. And the cost is generally not cheap.

Perhaps it is now time for government to step in and untangle the mess and make the UK address data open and freely available so that we all work on a single standard database. Implementing GIS solutions often reveals the existence of poor address databases, many created in house in an ad hoc fashion via forms, telephone enquiries and on-line submissions. Few adhere to the national addressing standard (BS7666). This is a significant problem that should not be underestimated – it costs UK plc and needs to be tackled sooner rather than later.

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