

# SDI workshop



**Above: Robin Waters, RSW Geomatics, opens the workshop.**

THE EC-FUNDED eSDI-Net+ project is a “network for promotion of cross border dialogue and exchange of best practices on SDIs throughout Europe”. The project aims to bring together key SDI stakeholders by establishing a platform for communications and knowledge exchange. It also hopes to tackle the various technological, organisational, legal and

the chapel like our SDI spirit guide.

He explained that there are many different sorts of SDI – the common factor being that they each aim to facilitate access to geographic information assets in order to maximise their overall usage. Professor Masser explained that there is a clear distinction between SDIs that meet multiple needs and those that have a more limited scope. This classification is complemented by the distinction between those that are designed for administrative purposes and those that meet specific thematic needs. There was some debate about this two-dimensional typology, but overall it was felt to be useful because previous discussions have all pre-supposed that SDIs only sit in the multiple/administrative category.

However, for the workshop, the SDI presentations had been classified as “conventional” and “unconventional”. The conventional were those at regional or local authority levels serving multiple administrative purposes:

- Dudley Council’s GIS-MO is a GI component embedded within many applications throughout the

## SDI: best practice in UK and Ireland

What makes a successful spatial data infrastructure and how should one be implemented? These questions were at the core of a workshop in Liverpool recently. eSDI-Net+ UK and Ireland SDI Best Practice Workshop drew together 12 “sub national” SDIs. **Dan Haigh**, data & information management policy specialist, Environment Agency reports.

cultural barriers to accessing, exploiting, using and reusing geographic information.

The eSDI-Net+ programme is currently in its second phase: the identification and analysis of SDI best practices, and a series of national and regional workshops have been held across Europe to gather the thoughts and experiences of the GI community.

The UK and Ireland workshop was held, with over thirty attendees, in the rather unusual surroundings of the chapel at Liverpool University’s Foresight Centre. This turquoise-tiled room, formerly part of the Liverpool Royal Infirmary, and later used as the waiting room in the BBC drama, *Casualty 1907*, seemed somewhat out of sync with the innovative technologies that were being discussed.

After introductions by **Robin Waters** (“think outside the box!”) and eSDI-Net+ co-ordinator, Dr **Joachim Rix**, EUROGI’s vice president **Bruce McCormack** explained that the workshops were the “engine room” of the project, where our creative juices would get going and good practices would be identified and documented.

**Disembodied categorisation** But what are SDIs and how can they be categorised? Professor **Ian Masser**, who was participating via speaker-phone, gave his thoughts – his disembodied voice echoing around

council. Initially launched using access to electoral register data as a selling point, GIS-MO is now viewed as a business-critical service – “from classroom to boardroom”. Its corporate branding has been crucial to its success – the letters “GIS” actually standing for “Getting Information Simply” – this takes the emphasis away from the technology and can be applied to new GI products across the council.

- Fingal Development Board’s Data Hub supports interagency work in the rapidly expanding county of Fingal (North Dublin). Steered by a committee of peer data owners and underpinned by a Fair Use Protocol and clear terms of reference, the Data Hub has led to an uptake of spatial data usage in organisations that previously had no GI capability.
- Northern Ireland’s GeoHub is the culmination of a 2003 GI strategy and is a platform for discovering and sharing spatial data to government and the public, so assisting in policy making and eliminating duplicated effort. The overarching vision is seen as an important success factor – a new vision for the next ten years will lead to further strengthening of the SDI.
- Forth Valley GIS primarily supports three Scottish



**... there is a clear distinction between SDIs that meet multiple needs and those that have a more limited scope.**



local authorities, providing a common infrastructure to the councils and regional partners through re-usable business applications. Uniquely in our industry, it is a local authority owned, limited company with the three councils as shareholders. The robust business model and governance framework provides a strong ethos of partnership working and, counter-intuitively, provides more security for employees.

- South Dublin County Council's SDI is notable for the substantial organisational change programme that has been implemented, placing "space" and interconnected data at the heart of the council's work. A corporate address system now ties together most of the systems used. This SDI is driven by a strong mandate from the top – the chief executive is almost zealous in his enthusiasm for information and has a renowned deskside manner!

**The unconventional** The "unconventional" included the remaining six SDIs (South Wales Fire and Rescue Service were unable to be present on the day). These are all, in fact, thematic though with very different governance and business models:

- The Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) system enables information about Strategic Flood Risk Assessments to be accessed interactively by eleven local authorities and members of the public via a website. This is based on the Atkins SDI environment, which claims the flexibility to integrate with a variety of software platforms and tools to link projects internally and externally.
- The Atlantis project is an SDI that supports water management initiatives. A collaborative project based on a partnership of six UK government agencies, it has already delivered real benefits such as a digital terrain model and a detailed river network dataset. Through its collaborative approach, Atlantis has achieved much more than each organisation could have achieved alone and without any external funding.
- The UK Academic SDI, delivered by EDINA and Mimas, enables access to GI by Higher and Further Education (HFE) institutions through data repositories with associated discovery, mapping, geocoding and gazetteer services. The issues of licensing and payments are negotiated centrally and complex access management is handled through existing HFE authentication mechanisms.
- The Irish Spatial Data Exchange is a co-operative SDI enabling efficient and user-friendly access to publicly-funded Irish spatial data. ISDE is both a



software system and a source of technical advice – this support includes help with the requirements of INSPIRE. ISDE connects existing data catalogues using open standards and provides multiple public entry points – customisable map viewers can be incorporated in the partners' own websites.

- The Marine Environmental Data Information Network is an SDI for the UK marine sector. It aims to provide better management and access to marine datasets, and better support for spatial planning and other applications. Built on a partnership of over thirty organisations, MEDIN has data archive centres, a central metadata search capability and an agreed set of common standards. A "data clause" is also being developed for government contracts to ensure compliance with data standards, metadata, archival requirements and data ownership.
- The National Land and Property Gazetteer and the National Street Gazetteer are definitive address and street lists used by local government in England and Wales to support the provision of citizen services. This SDI operates a "bottom-up" data creation model in which data is provided by local authorities following processes that ensure consistency and timeliness of local gazetteers. LGIH contracts custodianship to Intelligent Addressing and has also had to build agreements and organise data input and quality control with over 400 local authorities.

**Turning it off is unthinkable** During the day, several questions were posed about SDIs. On the question of whether the examples presented were really spatial data infrastructures, it was agreed that it didn't really matter – the important factor is what's actually being achieved. The success of an SDI can be measured by its longevity, especially when it gets to a stage where it is so central to the operations of the organisation that turning it off would be unthinkable.

*Above: Discussion panel listening (from left to right), Cameron Easton, Scottish Government; Bruce McCormack, IRLOGI & EUROGI; Rob Walker, AGI (Chair); Bill Oates, Welsh Assembly Government; Joachim Rix, INIGraphics, Germany.*

“  
**The success of an SDI can be measured by its longevity. . .**  
 ”

# SDI workshop



**Above: The workshop in the Chapel at the Foresight Centre.**

Other success factors noted on the day were that SDIs should have buy-in at a high level in the organisation, with strong governance underpinned by an evolving strategy and vision. SDIs should lead to the re-use of datasets beyond their original purpose and show demonstrable value for money. But it was agreed that this may be hard to measure in terms that the “bean-counters” can understand.

**Factors that hold back SDIs** Most of the factors holding back SDIs are legal or political, rather than technological. Licensing and data protection issues can inhibit some usage and, without central guidance or a high enough priority given to data management, SDIs can fail to reach their full potential.

However, this was not generally the case with the SDIs presented. “Good practices” to be reported back to eSDI-Net+ – and promoted more widely – included strong promotion and branding (e.g. Dudley Council’s GIS-MO); operating the SDI as a service, not as a project (e.g. UK Academic SDI); and having innovative business plans and co-operative agreements (e.g. Atlantis). MEDIN’s “data clause” was also seen as being particularly beneficial.

Overall, the workshop was valuable and showcased some excellent examples of GI innovation. After the reports from all of the Best Practice Workshops have been analysed by **Joachim Rix** and the eSDI-Net+ team, there will be a second call for any other SDIs that wish to see their successes celebrated. The project will culminate in Turin on 26/27 November with a Euro SDI awards event, the workshops having identified criteria upon which SDIs and their components can be judged. Based on the Liverpool workshop, there will be strong contenders amongst the UK and Irish SDIs however it is decided to categorise them.

#### **About the author**

*Dan Haigh ([dan.haigh@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:dan.haigh@environment-agency.gov.uk)) is a Policy and Process Advisor at the Environment Agency, specialising in data and information management.*