

Making votes count

Gayle Gander reports on how two UK local authorities are using modern datasets to plan the smooth running of this year's general election

Local authorities are responsible for delivering a consistent, high-quality service for voters. In particular, this means ensuring that voters are included on the electoral register, will be able to vote easily, and know that their vote will be counted in the way they intended. In the run-up to the general election, ensuring accuracy of electoral registers and location of polling stations is a high-profile service that local authorities have to get right.

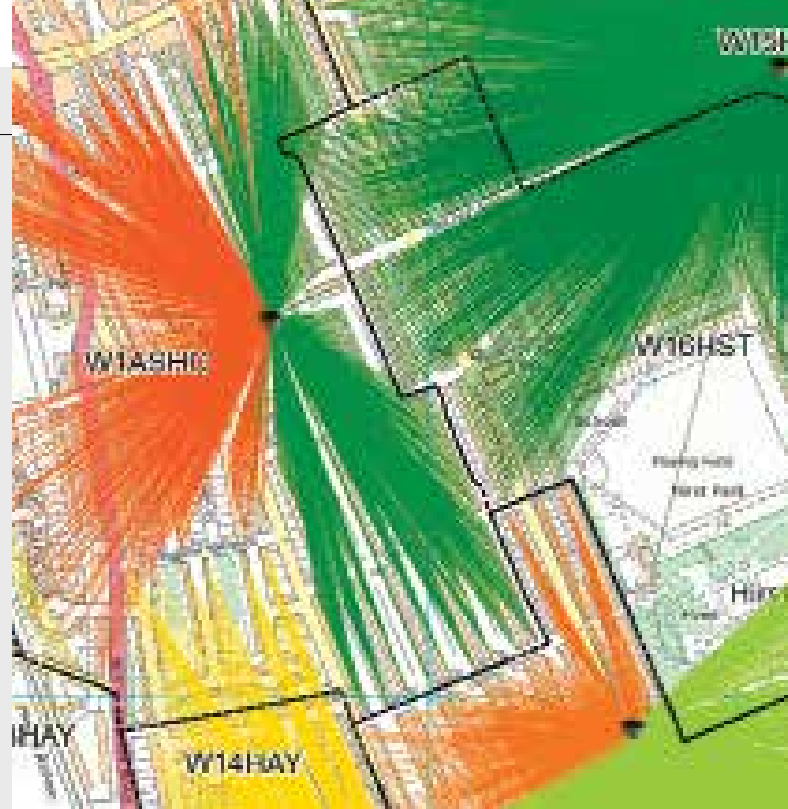
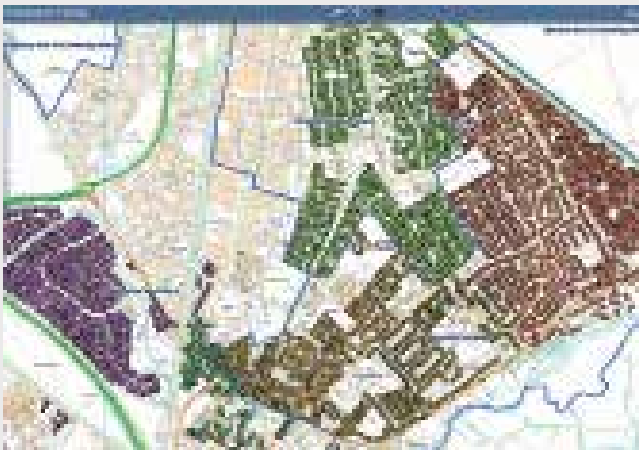
Two key factors are: confirming the completeness and accuracy of electoral registration records; and taking regular reviews of polling districts and polling stations. Some of these issues have become compounded with the move from household to individual electoral registration (IER). Local authorities have needed to ensure they have robust procedures in place for the smooth transition to IER.

Huntingdonshire District Council and Northumberland County Council have both used their Local Land and Property Gazetteers (LLPGs), which are an essential part of AddressBase, to facilitate this key democratic duty.

Huntingdonshire

Huntingdonshire has maintained a 100% synchronisation between the LLPG, the electoral register and council tax

A spatial display allows Huntingdonshire to identify that properties are within the correct register



information since 2005 through cross matching via the Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN), which is used in both systems. The UPRN is the unique identifier for every spatial address in Great Britain, providing a comprehensive, complete, consistent identifier throughout a property's life cycle – from planning permission through to demolition.

The UPRN can link multiple disparate datasets together, both internally or when sharing information with other organisations, for example, local and central government bodies, emergency services, insurance and utility companies.

The integration of various datasets has reaped benefits for Huntingdonshire's voters during the move to IER. As the central hub for address and property information, the LLPG has continuously maintained an up-to-date register of residential properties. The team has also undertaken data mining of other authority datasets, identifying themes and producing workable reports for the electoral service staff.

Prior to 2010, all properties were added to the register by the electoral services team from a number of internal sources, sometimes meaning new properties were in the register months or even years before they were occupied. This distorted electoral registration statistics.

The system has now been customised to accept only properties meeting specific residential classifications, which are held with the LLPG. Each day's change only update file is uploaded by the LLPG team, following successful validation by GeoPlace. All new 'approved' residential properties go into a holding area, while 'provisional' properties are loaded into a future properties area. Any properties that change in the LLPG from provisional to approved are moved to the daily holding area.

The LLPG team also manages property address changes, property classification changes and demolished/historic properties and confirm everything remains in sync by a full monthly reconciliation of the LLPG to the electoral register.

Having this business process in place has enabled the LLPG to give extensive support to electoral services and ensured that all properties were correctly addressed before the data was uploaded to the Cabinet Office for Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) comparison in the transition to IER.

When the match was undertaken by the Government Digital Service, it resulted in an extremely high match rate, with a RAG score of Red 15.63%, Amber 2.16% and Green 82.21%.



m Northumberland polling districts with active polling stations

This meant there was work still to be done to convert Red and Amber electors to Green by local data matching – an integral part of the IER process recommended by the Cabinet Office.

Additional sources of data for local matching were identified from housing benefit and residential social landlords, through the LLPGs joint working with Huntingdonshire's fraud team. This is where the LLPG, as the central hub of property data within the council, was again extensively used.

Additional electoral management matching software was acquired allowing the Council Tax National Fraud Initiative data to be run against Red and Amber electors using the UPRN as the link field. The council tax team was asked to provide the following reports, each including the UPRN to allow for data matching:

- b **List of occupiers names and occupation dates:** this enabled a comparison and report to be produced by names and occupation dates from both systems identifying those that could be ignored as recent occupiers
- b **Single persons discount:** used to compare names and identify additional people
- b **Empty properties:** identified no further work was required by electoral services where properties matched.

Huntingdonshire was able to learn much about its local matching processes and verified the methodology that would be used for the transition to IER. It also resulted in the county achieving the overall third best match in the country.

Northumberland

Northumberland County Council has a similarly close relationship between its LLPG and electoral registration teams to scrutinise boundary information and ensure that polling stations are situated in the most beneficial location for voters.

Previously, six years or so ago, boundary changes were undertaken with an AO map of the affected boundary area and a pen. Administration of boundary changes was a manual process with staff working for months to ensure accuracy. Significant consideration had to be made to maintaining the reputation of the council, as any inaccuracy would have a critical political impact.

By literally tearing up sections of the electoral register, placing it on the map and adjusting the position of where the data sat, the team would keep updating the map and the elections database accordingly until the boundary change was



agreed. There were many iterations and many reviews by senior managers to ensure accuracy. This would include the review by senior managers, directors and the chief executive to ensure errors were minimised.

Through linking the LLPG to the elections management system and allowing this data to be overlaid onto Northumberland's GIS, the council was able to analyse quickly and accurately the data spatially, enabling identification of boundary issues and resolution in real time. This move was essential for the team to view electors' addresses and see patterns in the underlying data such as polling districts and polling station locations. The team also took into account the distribution of registered postal voters in the consolidation of polling district and polling stations, allowing them to 'remove' postal votes from the analysis of location to optimise accordingly.

The team measured the average and specific distances people travelled to vote to see whether changes to locations of polling stations needed to be made and note where travel distances were excessive, important in a rural county such as Northumberland.

There were many examples where electors within one ward could have voted at five different polling stations outside it. By digitising the polling districts the electoral team has been able to analyse not only historical data flaws with the boundaries they were associated with, but also properties that needed to be moved within boundaries.

As well as fulfilling a democratic duty, and identifying 300 addresses that were not listed on the register of electors, the project has yielded a number of savings for the council:

- b the number of polling districts has been reduced from 333 to 284 and polling stations from 234 to 226, without having an overall impact on the voter
- b the organisation of staff has been improved so individuals do not have to travel so far to run polling stations
- b the number of expensive temporary rented buildings used as temporary polling stations has been decreased.

All this has resulted in cost savings of over £39,000 for every election. Polling stations are now easier to access for voters helping to maintain engagement with the democratic process. **C**

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