

A rules framework for spatial information in Victoria

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Introduction

Today I had planned to talk about the results of an investigation the Victorian Spatial Council has been undertaking this year to determine if there is a case for pursuing legislation to govern spatial information management in Victoria.

As the Council members are still deliberating on our response to the draft report, I would instead like to make some remarks about why we are considering the ‘rules’ for spatial information management at all.

I will start by considering the institutional environment, then the information management framework the VSC has developed, and finally outline the investigation we commissioned.

The institutional environment

The VSC believes that to create a culture of openness and sharing of information and to create spatial enablement, a strong institutional environment is needed.

Such an environment should create confidence that sharing data has benefits to custodians as well as users.

We define ‘institutional environment’ quite broadly.

It is more than just the bodies making decisions and policy.

It also encompasses:

- a framework for managing information,

- decision making by and for the whole spatial information community and
- collaboration and partnerships

Today I want to focus on the first of these – that is, the information management framework.

Through the framework:

- Custodians should be given tools to manage their information and
- data management practices should be improved.

The framework establishes the requirements for managing and making information available.

At the same time, by establishing appropriate protocols we provide practical steps to ensuring that can occur.

A relevant framework can balance the needs of custodians with those who want data for creating new products and services.

It should support rigorous information management, while also giving custodians the flexibility and confidence to release their data.

The requirements for achieving this rigour are identified in VSIS through the foundations for spatial information management.

The key elements are:

- Ensuring data is fit for purpose, can be discovered and is available
- licensing that facilitates access and opportunities for new development
- technical solutions that encourage accessibility, and

- Raising awareness

Victoria's Spatial Information Management Framework is the cornerstone of this foundation.

It is the mechanism to make information accessible by making it easy to identify who has it, whether it is fit for the purpose at hand, how it can be accessed and whether it can be integrated with other information.

The critical principle is that of custodianship.

All spatial datasets will have custodians who will maintain them according to the framework's information management requirements, as set out in the framework document which has been published on the Council's web site.

Appropriate protocols can give effect to the provisions of the Framework.

That is, turn policy into practice.

They should address three critical requirements:

- that all data should be managed by custodians,
- all information is provided under a use licence, and
- a minimum set of metadata must accompany all data for the purposes of discovery and assessing its fitness for purpose.

What I have just done is very briefly describe the information management component of Victoria's institutional environment.

The investigation we have recently commissioned, and the results of which we are considering, has aimed to determine the best way to give effect to it.

That is, to make it happen.

Why

The origin of the investigation is a recommendation the Council made in the current VSIS.

That is, that legislation be developed to modernise the management regime for spatial information.

It is one part of the strategic direction for creating a framework in which the development and use of spatial information can flourish.

As my remarks earlier should have made clear, the framework is the set of rules, principles and structures that support participation, appropriate standards, and mechanisms for delivering and sharing spatial data.

The role that legislation could play is in setting requirements and establishing best practice for managing and delivering spatial data.

How have we got to this point?

In the last 20 years, digitisation of information and the rise of the internet have brought many benefits.

In particular, they mean that information that would once have been the preserve of one organisation can now be made readily available to many individuals and organisations at the touch of a button.

With appropriate planning and coordination, this can happen with a significant saving of costs.

However, to take full advantage of this, the data must be consistent, it must be of an acceptable standard, we need to know it exists, it must be accessible, and it must have an easily identified, authoritative source.

Over many years, Victoria has been active in putting place arrangements to support such planning and coordination.

We have enshrined cooperation between the three levels of Government, the private sector and academia, in particular through the VSC.

And together we have developed a comprehensive Spatial Information Management Framework, as I have already described.

It has been a successful approach, with many features leading the way or having been emulated in other jurisdictions.

Shortcomings

But despite all this, there are still a number of underlying issues that mean we need some form of authorising mechanism to make it sustainable.

In a paper considered by the Council, we noted a number of such issues.

Existing processes are inefficient.

Even with cooperation, there is a lack of coordination.

This results in duplication of effort and inconsistencies in the way data is held, managed and made available.

Secondly, Government is a critical source for spatial data.

However, its agencies tend to develop significant datasets and solutions independently of their counterparts in other agencies.

Once again, there is duplication and the potential for incompatibility between information from various sources.

A third issue identified by the Council is that *the value and importance of information management is not consistently recognised* by organisations.

Information is often created as a by-product of an administrative activity.

As a result, valuable information that could be used for other purposes is often not available because others are not aware of it.

Further, the role of data management is not always recognised as an important one by senior decision makers.

Most recently, the Parliamentary Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data acknowledged the importance of there being an identifiable responsibility for the management and quality assurance of metadata.

The VSC believes this should be extended to all facets of data management or ‘custodianship’.

There are also louder and more frequent calls to open up access to public sector information.

At the same time, developments in technology are providing the capacity to deliver greater volumes of data.

While these are enabling more people to access spatial information, the demand for it to be immediately available and accurate is increasing and will continue to do so.

Therefore, the pressure is on custodians to maintain quality and supply the content for new applications.

One of the ways to deal with these issues is to put in place a framework for managing information.

Such a framework has the potential to minimise the call for funding and resources.

It should aim to establish standardised approaches and principles that encourage the availability and release of data.

At the same time it must support agencies’ own needs for spatial information.

We have such a framework – as I have already described.

But it has certain requirements to make it work.

For example, there is no obligation to adopt it.

So that while its principles are supported and recognised, it has not been accompanied by uniform take up by agencies.

The lack of a mandate has been the primary reason for this situation.

To address the issue, the VSC commissioned an investigation to look into the appropriateness of a rules based approach.

These rules could be in the form of legislation, guidelines, or regulations.

The investigation has considered three areas:

- the roles and responsibilities for managing spatial information,
- defining a set of fundamental information, and
- requirements, or protocols, for exchanging and making information available.

Council members are now reviewing the outcomes.

We understand that the adoption of a rules based information management approach will have an impact on agency operations, at least in the short term.

But over the long term they should become a normal part of their spatial information management.

In many cases, it will simply formalise existing practices.

In others, there will be some cost to convert.

On the other hand, there will be a number of benefits from a mandated approach.

For example,

- it will set out clear roles and responsibilities for custodians;
- custodians will have autonomy to manage and control their information; and
- it will provide access to authoritative sources of spatial information managed by other custodians

Over time, agencies can anticipate operational cost savings.

It will provide opportunities for increasing efficiency by reducing duplicated acquisition of spatial information and the accompanying requirements for managing it.

The result should be a greater focus of resources on the products and services that are central to agencies' business operations.

At the same time, they will be able to obtain the full benefit of access to information produced by other agencies, which will also be managed within that environment.

Conclusion

The Victorian Spatial Council believes spatial information is a critical enabling infrastructure.

And it has significant role to play across government, the private sector and in the community.

But to do that it needs a robust institutional environment.

In Victoria we believe that this is best provided by taking a holistic approach incorporating:

- a framework for managing information,
- decision making by and for the whole spatial information community,

and

- collaboration and partnerships

Today I have described what we mean by the framework.

And I have given you the background to the Council's investigation into how such a framework can be mandated for the benefit of the whole spatial community and the users of spatial information.

We have taken the first step on what may be an important journey that will involve everyone here today.

I look forward to presenting the Council's response to you in due course, and to your participation in helping us create a robust but practical framework of rules that will deliver accessible and useful spatial information.

Thank you.