Case Study:

Insight Cheshire East

Type: Website

Organisation(s): Cheshire East Council

Tags: open data, process, metadata, standards

Insight Cheshire East is an ArcGIS-based datastore where Cheshire East Council publishes datasets relating to council operations and local facilities.

The platform is extensive for a datastore covering one local authority, and provides a total of 73 datasets on a range of topic areas, which are updated frequently.

Background

Cheshire East Council's open datastore, Insight Cheshire East, has been built using ESRI's ArcGIS Online tools to open up data about the council and its activities. The Council uses the following definitions of information to identify which datasets they should release:

- Who we are and what we do
- What we spend and how we spend it
- What our priorities are and how we are doing
- How we make decisions
- Our policies and procedures
- Lists and registers
- The services we offer

Any datasets that fall within these categories and that can be published easily are made available on the website. As such, the focus is clearly on council-held datasets, rather than on publishing datasets about the district, which may come from third party providers.

The datastore is linked to a separate FOI Request Disclosure Log. The log allows users to search for recent successful and unsuccessful FOI requests and view any resulting data releases.

Some open data relating to the Council's organisational structure, such as the council organisation chart or the gender pay gap report, as well as tribunal and planning decisions, are also published on the Cheshire East Council website.

Important considerations

Content and quality

Datasets are divided into six categories: Spending and Finance, About the Council, Community, Consultations, Environment and Planning, and Transport and Parking. The most populated of these categories is 'About the Council', which contains 25 datasets, and the least populated is 'Transport and Parking', which contains just one dataset – a publication about the borough's profile.

Datasets are kept up to date, with many of them updated on a weekly, monthly, or at least quarterly basis. The datasets are generally available as CSV-format downloads. Where relevant, simple in-built visualisations are also included, as in the case of the business rates dataset, and some documents are also visible in a simple viewer. As is standard on ArcGIS-based datastores, there is a complete list of all the dataset attributes on the landing page. The data user can also link to each dataset using an API Explorer.

There is a detailed metadata page associated with each dataset, with the date of creation and update, viewer numbers, and a description explaining what the datasets are about. Where data releases are the result of an FOI request, as in the case of business rates, there is also a detailed webpage explaining what is contained in each dataset and the inherent limitations around the data.

The feature 'Create a Webmap' is available as a link on every dataset. In theory, this allows the user to create a GIS visualisation of each dataset by adding layers. Another feature, 'Create a Storymap', is available for ArcGIS-registered users and allows interaction with several visualised datasets simultaneously to draw conclusions. These features are generally not supported, as is the case with LSOA data, because the supporting shapefiles are not included. However, this demonstrates potential additional features that could be added.

Information Asset Register

One particularly useful dataset on the portal is the Information Asset Register. This is a table with a complete list of 1,014 council information assets, with an information rating, how the information was stored, who is responsible for them, and a brief description. This register makes it easier for the Council to keep track of what personal information it holds to ensure GDPR compliance. The register also allows the Council to verify that it is meeting its obligations under the Re-use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2015.

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Usage

The number of views gives an indication as to which datasets are most popular. There is no ranking by viewing numbers, but one of the most viewed datasets is the one on Council Tax charges for the financial year 2019/20, with 78 views. Most datasets have been viewed no more than 20-30 times, however, indicating a relatively small user base and low uptake of the data.

The relatively low uptake of the datasets, at least according to viewing figures, suggests that more needs to be done to grow the user base for these data. A higher uptake would also make it easier to justify the resources spent on creating such a well-functioning datastore.

What can Greater Manchester take from this?

- The 'FOI Disclosure Log' feature is an interesting approach to avoiding excessive FOI requests. It allows users to easily serach for both larger data releases and discrete datasets provided on request, thereby saving both themselves and the Council time and effort.
- Where datasets reach a datastore as a result of an FOI request or an internal data request, it makes sense to publish information on the nature of that request and how it was fulfilled. This can both improve transparency and provide context that might be useful to the user.
- The Information Asset Register is another useful resource that Greater Manchester might consider providing. By giving an overview of all the closed and open datasets held by the Council, it allows users to identify any gaps as well as what datasets are easily requestable.
- One way a datastore can be augmented and made more interactive is with features such as 'Create a Storymap', which allows users to manipulate multiple datasets to explore trends. However, it is important to first verify if there is any user demand for such sophisticated features.
- Where rigid templates are used as a basis for a datastore, there is a risk that some features of the website will be empty or defunct, as data releases may not conform to this template. This can harm user experience.

Find out more:

Insight Cheshire East data portal

Cheshire East Council website – Open data and transparency

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