IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Natural England

This article has been put together in collaboration with Harjit Panesar from Natural England. Harjit is a Lead Advisor in the Geographical Information and Analysis Services Team. This article provides a brief overview of Natural England's experience of migrating from other GIS software packages to ArcGIS and how GIS247 and its training was able to support them through the transition and beyond.

Natural England – GIS Software Migration Project

"Natural England (NE) is a non-departmental public body which advises the government on the natural environment. We provide practical advice, grounded in science, on how best to safeguard England's natural wealth for the benefit of everyone. Our remit is to ensure sustainable stewardship of the land and sea so that people and nature can thrive."

Natural England was formed in October 2006 by the joining of three founder bodies:

- Countryside Agency (landscape, access and recreation elements)
- English Nature
- Rural Development Service (environmental land management functions of Defra)

"As a result of the union, Natural England inherited two main GIS applications (MapInfo and ArcGIS), differing versions of software and staff with different skills. This raised a number of issues for the organisation including paying for different software licences, ensuring that training was available for staff with different skills and supporting different data formats."

"Natural England made the strategic decision to consolidate all its spatial data and applications on a single GIS platform: Esri's ArcGIS." This would be supported with training, including e-learning provided by GIS247. It was determined that transferring to one GIS platform would provide the following cost reduction benefits:

- only one licence fee to pay;
- less support needed within Natural England and software providers;
- stream-lined training and guidance provision by and for NE staff.

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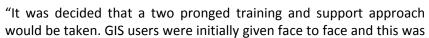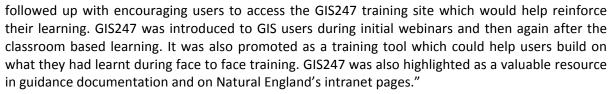
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Other benefits included:

- the removal of GIS packages no longer supported by software providers e.g. ArcView 3.2a;
- reduced number of skills required by NE staff and therefore greater flexibility of staff;
- reduced data management demands on Geographic Services, as only a requirement to maintain support for one data format.

"The first problem we faced in migrating was to identify users of MapInfo and ArcView 3.2. We didn't have a definitive list as the software was installed on user's machines when they worked in the legacy organisations. At the outset a questionnaire was used to identify approximately 470 people who were considered as software migrators."

"There was initial resistance from users in the migration to ArcGIS 9.3 as many had been using MapInfo for a number of years so there was a working practices change required. Some users were also using systems which were based on ArcView 3.2 and as this software is no longer supported these users also needed to adopt the new working practices."

"It was decided that a two pronged training and support approach would be taken. GIS users were initially given face to face and this was followed up with encouraging users to access the GIS247 training site which would help reinforce their learning. GIS247 was introduced to GIS users during initial webinars and then again after the classroom based learning. It was also promoted as a training tool which could help users build on what they had learnt during face to face training. GIS247 was also highlighted as a valuable resource in guidance documentation and on Natural England's intranet pages."

"After the face to face sessions I received a large number of users asking to be registered for the GIS247 service. The online training allowed users to recap what they had learnt during their face to face training which helped them to retain the new skills they had learnt."

"GIS users are able to manage their own learning on GIS247 and go at their own pace. It is convenient and flexible and can be accessed from home or the office 24 hours a day 7 days a week. The training allows users to dip in and out of training modules as it suits them, they can redo modules if they wish and are able to visually see how to do things rather than looking for instructions through a written manual. It also allows users to work towards accreditation provided by GIS247; this is a great way of recording developed skills and is valued by users and managers."

"The e-learning approach really works for Natural England. Also, in the last couple of years we have had an increased number of homeworkers, so training via e-learning allows users to access the training from any location at any time. There are also the cost-benefits to e-learning, as well as

saving on course costs there are no travel costs, and people don't have to spend large amounts of time away from work."

"The GIS247 service is a most cost effective and valuable e-learning tool which has proved very beneficial in Natural England's software migration project. As well, GIS247 provides different levels of training to all levels of user and the training material can be easily updated. GIS skills are no longer seen as being specialist and basic GIS skills benefit all work areas - GIS247 allows NE to provide GIS skills to everyone in the organisation!"

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Natural England has a large number of responsibilities for safeguarding the natural environment in England. These include:

- Establishing and caring for England's main wildlife and geological sites, ensuring that over 4,000 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are looked after and improved.
- Working to ensure that England's landscapes are effectively protected, designating England's National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and advising widely on their conservation.
- Running Environmental Stewardship and other green farming schemes that deliver over £400 million a year to farmers and landowners, enabling them to enhance the natural environment across two thirds of England's farmland.
- Funding, managing, and providing scientific expertise for hundreds of conservation projects each year, improving the prospects for thousands of England's species and habitats.
- Promoting access to the wider countryside, helping establish National Trails and coastal trails and ensuring that the public can enjoy and benefit from them."

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