ODUG Benefits Case for releasing a Rights of Way dataset

Description & Request Overview

Several data requests were made that regard the provision of Rights of Way (RoW) routes by local authorities as inconsistent and not accessible. It is proposed to make RoW data available under OGL so that they can be incorporated into open source mapping projects such as Open Street Map and provided in open formats that data can be more easily reused. Data are often published as pdf, software proprietary formats (such as ESRI shape files) or as part of an interactive web map Data provided in these formats cannot be easily incorporated into web services or mobile phone applications to create a national walking map application for leisure use. Furthermore, availability of data by local authorities is patchy and not released as open data due to licensing restrictions.

Local highway authorities (county and unitary authorities) have the legal duty to create and maintain RoW as part of their highways duty. The responsibility include to

- Maintain a definitive map of RoW and associated statements at local authority level
- Maintain RoW network in relation to street works and publish RoW as part of the Authority's List of Streets within the streets works register within GeoPlace
- Pass RoW mapping data to Ordnance Survey to allow for publication on medium scale mapping and for inclusion in the trails and path dataset

Under the Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000) local authorities are required to update their records of Rights of Way by 2026. Under the Act local authorities have to keep a copy available for inspection free of charge and supply a copy to any person who requests one, either free of charge or on payment of a reasonable charge determined by the authority.

Ordnance Survey is collating RoW data from local authorities and include them in their 1:25000 and 1:50,000 map series. None of the datasets are currently available by OS under open government licence.

Data Release Rationale

RoW data requests stated a variety of benefits from the release of RoW under OGL in open formats. The release would enable the data to be utilised in a range of projects including:

- as a secondary source when contributing to the OpenStreetMap project
- use in apps for ramblers finding their way
- on-the-ground surveys by volunteers to update the maps (however, the definitive map is always held by the local authority).

Uses of the data can inlcude: the production of specialist hiking maps, pedestrian and cyclist routing mobile apps, etc. This creates commercial opportunities for small businesses, and opportunities for not-for-profit groups to use in support of their aims. Many of the maps and applications created (national online cycling map, CycleStreets cycle routin) would not be viable as commercial projects and thus rely on open data.

The availability of RoW data in open format could make it possible to combine the data into an England wide map of RoW. Centralising the data in one place would remove the need to search through several councils websites when planning longer walks. In addition, RoW have to be recorded by 2026 according to the Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000). by making the data available it becomes easier to find un-recorded RoW and to feed back to local authorities to update their records as a way of crowd sourced volunteering efforts.

Many OS maps do not contain the latest course of some footpaths because the Ordnance Survey does not actively re-survey footpaths as regularly as roads but rather awaits updated submission from local authorities. Allowing projects such as OpenStreetMap to make use of the data in combination with on-the-ground surveying, will enable the creation of a fully up-to-date national RoW map - something that is not financially viable without volunteer effort. However, such maps will never be able to replace the definitive legal map and statements held by local authorities.

Target User Description – Community Fit

The availability of RoW data are of interest to

- the outdoor community for finding walking routes in the countryside
- property owners and developers to determine limitations on land use
- utility companies when planning any road works

Several requests were received from a range of users who wish to utilize the data for personal, business, community use. Websites that already use RoW include www.rowmaps.com, Open Street map and individual mobile phone app use. However, all requests state limitations on accessing RoW for various reasons related to license restrictions, fragmentation due to patchy releases from local authorities, the lack of availability in open data formats and inability to find the data on councils' websites.

In addition, there is a lack of understanding by some local authorities on their right to release the data under OS Open data license. This leads to lengthy enquiries by organisations seeking the information. One user has published his experience of getting a local authority to publish RoW as open data here http://opendatauser.posterous.com/public-rights-of-way-not-as-accessible-as-you.

Benefits

Benefits include:

- The release of consistent RoW data published in open data format under OGL means the data can be incorporated into national datasets such as Open Street Map or RoWmap so that it can be reused in mobile phone apps used when hiking, planning utility updates, property searches.
- Making the data available as a consistent national datasets avoids lengthy and burdensome data requests to 172 individual highway authorities in England and Wales and reduces multiple data requests from different organisations to local authorities.
- The release of data could potentially lead to serendipitous uses of the data such as walking apps linking hiking routes to car parks, transport nodes, points of interest and other services.

- Combining RoW data with other datasources could help walkers understand where they could get refreshment, park their car, get a taxi, stay overnight or even cycle from one appointment to another using RoW. This is not possible with the current restrictions on use. As always, access to data will generate many new ideas and some will be completely innovative that canot be predicted.
- Overall availability of ROW could encourage greater use of rights of ways leading to health, social and environmental benefits.

The value of the open RoW to the marketplace has already been established through announcement in the autumn statement 2011as one of the open data sources http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/shareholderexecutive/structure/portfolio-unit/public-data-group/background. However, the majority of requests ask for the data to be made available in machine readable open data format so that they can be more easily reused and combined.

Barriers and Requirements for Release

The lack of a national open data set is the primary barrier to using the data in web services and phone apps. The release and supply of local data is the responsibility of local authorities. However, the supply is fragmented, patchy and inconsistent pending on local availability of the data. To create a nationally viable dataset requires the collation of data from local authorities, release under OGL, provision according to three star open data model as a minimum with the aim to create linkable data using standards. Attempts were made in the past to create a national dataset but there are costs involved to

- Create electronic copies of the data and to given standards,
- Keeping them up-to-date
- Release data for free (loss in revenue to local authorities/OS in creating electronic copies of ROW to given standards)
- Publish the data using INSPIRE web services (a requirement related to providing geospatial data related to the environment)

Recommendations

ODUG recommends

- promoting the release of open ROW under OGL from local authorities
- the release of ROW dataset by Ordnance Survey under OS open data licence as a national dataset (following the example of Natural England releasing local nature reserves collated from local authority datasets)
- release of the full Ordnance Survey business case by PDG/BIS