

Online GIS and a Perfect Storm for Local Government



The author thinks we have been using the wrong metaphors. We shouldn't allude to aircraft taking off but to storms and perfect ones at that, argues Chris Mewse. Getmapping has been in the forefront of providing aerial imagery and other services for many years, as well as promoting the benefits of collaborative on-line mapping.

The potential for the use of digital mapping and GIS in local government has taken a long time to take off amongst the lower tiers like parish and town councils. There have been several delaying factors including the cost of software, cost and licence restrictions on data, and very fragmented council structures with many different silos 'doing their own thing'.

There's a perfect storm raging in local government at the moment, but not one of those bad ones that ruins fishing boats. This is a much more positive storm and it revolves around communities and innovative GIS tools. It's really about three separate storms that have been brewing offshore for several years and have now coalesced into one. It is now making a landfall to stir up greater community engagement and leave a trail of efficiency savings wherever it goes.

The GIS Storm

The first storm comes from local councils. Whether towns, parishes or communities, these organisations are the front line in local government and are charged with protecting and improving our environment and way of life at the most local level. Since the 2011 Localism Act these councils have been stirred and are now offered greater powers and responsibilities in an effort to find new, efficient and professional ways of managing their local area. By reducing the amount of legislation and control placed upon them they are freer to do what's right for their corner of Great Britain.

These devolved powers mean that a parish or town council's task now includes managing assets, developing Neighbourhood Plans, installing new infrastructure, ensuring local resilience, reviewing planning applications and protecting and defining an area's character, among many others. All these activities have geography at their core; whether it's a postcode, a political boundary or the exact position of an asset. At this point, those in the geospatial-know would immediately employ some GIS tools to manage, view and analyse this information. But local councils, many of which have a skeleton crew of a part-time clerk and a few volunteer councillors, have never heard of GIS and how it could make their lives so much easier. This leads this one storm into the path of another: online GIS.

This second storm has been on the horizon for many years now. There are many online GIS / web GIS / hosted platform / SaaS / cloud-based (whatever you want to call it) solutions out there, all with their own specialities, USPs and quirks but none catering specifically for the parish or town council sector. So in 2009 Getmapping created Parish Online, a GIS web portal that councils can subscribe to, providing key GIS functions required to manage their increased responsibilities. It has a wide range of mapping datasets including Ordnance Survey's PSMA stack, aerial photography, EA flood data as well as a large collection of other public sector layers. Combined with asset management, neighbourhood planning and route analysis tools to build up their own GIS layers, Parish Online brings them into the 21st century and helps the decision making to become a 'smart parish'.

With nearly 1,000 town and parish councils subscribed to the service to date, each paying an average of £74 per annum, it's proven to be an essential tool for both large and small councils. The range of uses now far exceeds the product's original remit of simply providing digital mapping over the web. A key example is for creating Neighbourhood Plans for which local councils are compiling large amounts of information to help design the future of their towns and villages. This activity can substantially increase their income, as a completed Neighbourhood Plan entitles them to 25% of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments from developers instead of the current 15%. This gives them an incentive to strengthen their position when considering development projects over which they have been given many more powers. In an exercise that needs to be so evidence-driven, having access to definitive digital mapping from a range of sources is absolutely paramount. Much of this data comes from the district and county councils which hold spatial information such as drainage, highways assets, public rights of way, council-owned land, to name but a few. And this leads us to the third storm. But this storm was largely distant, at sea, uninterested.

Since the economic downturn in 2009, local authorities have been put under immense pressure to improve public services as well as save money. This initially began as a whipping up of internal processes, streamlining and cutting the fat from operations. But today in the second big wave of cuts with most of the fat already trimmed, it's the public services that are in the firing line - libraries, waste collection and heaven-forbid, middle management (in jest)! But with the rumblings in the distance of local councils awakening, the upper tier local authorities have seen an opportunity to tackle a task that saves money and promotes localism: engage more with the towns and parishes.

A few years ago, with the exception of a few forward-thinking examples, you could have asked any county or district what support they provided to towns and parishes. The answer would have been 'we don't get involved with parishes', or 'not a lot, we supply some paper

maps occasionally and that seems to keep them off our back'. But with this opportunity to engage a willing audience (and with a nudge of high pressure from above) that attitude is changing fast. Now you'll hear 'how do we go about providing these layers for our parishes?' and 'I hear this online thing is really good value as a group subscription, I'd like to do that for our parishes.'

And with that, the third storm joins the party and a supercell is created! Local authorities want to save money and deliver services more efficiently. Local councils want more data, tools and power to do those jobs. Online GIS is the right tool, the data sharing platform that allows this all to happen easily and cost-effectively. Ultimately the solution is for both the authority and the local council to use the online GIS and the cost savings and efficiencies follow with ease.

Local authorities such as Bath & North East Somerset work in partnership with Getmapping and were heavily involved in pioneering the concept and developing Parish Online. All 50 parish councils within B&NES use the system, with 77% using it on a regular basis, and with the unitary authority feeding daily information into the system, clerks and councillors know that they can rely on the mapping information to make informed decisions for their community. For Martin Laker, GIS officer at B&NES it started off as an efficiency drive. "It began as a simple way of providing digital maps to my parishes so that we spent less time creating, printing and emailing maps. Six years later and with Parish Online as a mature online product and with a dedicated annual mapping event for clerks it's brought the authority and parishes closer together so that we can work in a more coherent and unified way. All the clerks think it's a big improvement from the siloed ways of working that we had before. The cost savings are easy to find through reduction in local authority time and resources, but the main benefits are much larger in the positive effect it has on each community". B&NES now use their own version of Getmapping's Online GIS, acting as their primary source for web mapping within the authority. This compounds the benefit as the mapping is within one ecosystem and easy to share with all interested parties.

Online GIS

Getmapping has invested heavily in online GIS for Parishes for over six years, with importance placed on the infrastructure that the software is hosted from, the ease of use and the end-use applications to help the local councils. Including unlimited access to high-resolution mapping and aerial photography was the first easy step and since then tools such as AddressBase search, editing, printing to PDF, INSPIRE-compliant layers, spatial search and Street Layer have been added. Panoramic street-level imagery captured specifically for local authorities and local councils is just another innovative feature that gives users compelling ROI cases as well as quick decision-making capabilities.

West Sussex County Council also uses Parish Online. It wanted to demonstrate that it took the Localism Act seriously and to show their commitment and support to the work of local councils. In 2014 they took out a three-year subscription to Parish Online, loaded essential mapping layers into it and tasked their team of principal community officers (PCOs) to help promote its benefits, provide tutorials and engage with the town and parish councils on projects that were important to them such as devolved responsibilities. Services such as grass cutting and asset maintenance were high on the agenda and the use of mapping has led to a more accurate and consistent view. Local councils can now accurately mark out the areas that need maintenance, send out accurate tender documents, choose their own supplier and see the results. The benefits are reduced reliance on the county council, better value for money, a greater use of local businesses and a better service to the public.

Elaine Munns from the strategic planning division of West Sussex County Council explains the importance of a partnership with Parish Online and her local councils in achieving the county's goals: "It's important that these councils have the right tools for the job. Digital mapping is a powerful aid and can assist them by providing location intelligence and a unified view from the county council right down to the towns and parishes. By using Getmapping's cloud-based technology, access to this information is easy, consistent and cost-effective. All this enables informed decision-making which is in line with our ultimate aim to make the towns and villages in West Sussex great places to live and work".

At Getmapping we believe that the storm is still growing stronger but relies on forward-thinking and proactive GIS officers at district and county level to kick-start initiatives. The workflows for making this happen are now mature and easy to adopt, the Parish Online team are well-versed in implementation, and the ROI business case is a no-brainer when it comes to presenting to the chief exec.

Weather-based analogies aside, the combination of people, processes and data sharing can only lead to a more joined-up local government structure, better working communities and a vision of reducing costs AND improving public services.

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