

NEW WEATHER APP PUTS AUTHORITIES ON HIGH ALERT

An extreme weather alert service for local authorities – MapAlerter – generated 500,000 emergency alerts in the space of just 72 hours, potentially saving countless lives as Storm Ophelia ripped through the country in mid-October.

Designed and developed by a former council official, over 620 individual alerts were issued by council staff during the course of Storm Ophelia on Monday 16 October. These were shared with the wider public who signed up for free to receive such alerts on the MapAlerter.com website.

MapAlerter – the brainchild of former Kilkenny County Council digital mapping expert Brendan Cunningham – is already linked to 11 local authorities nationwide. This means that outdoor staff working in these areas were able to quickly send in alerts from the field during ‘Ophelia’ which were then forwarded to affected people living in the local area.

The rapid response alert system also helped staff at various council emergency management centres to follow progress on each incident location on an interactive map and see in real time where the damage occurred.

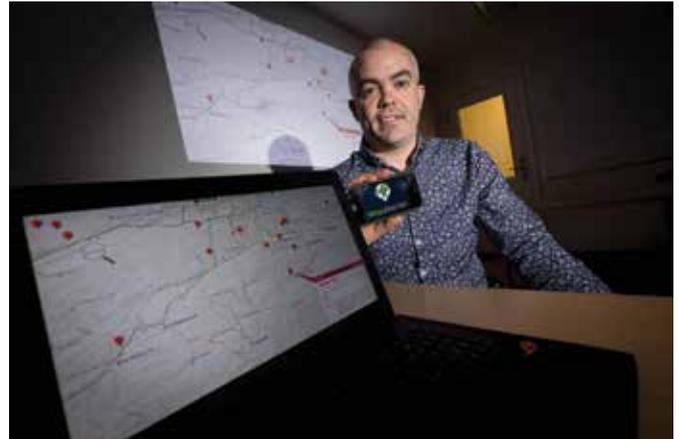
MapAlerter automatically links up with Met Éireann to collect severe weather information, as well as data from other tried and trusted sources such as the Office of Public Works (OPW) river level sensors.

It all means that emergency teams, the public, media and social media outlets are provided with up-to-date information during extreme weather situations such as Ophelia.

GEO-FOCUSED INFORMATION

All information shared over the system is geo-focused using ESRI Ireland’s ArcGIS technology so only the correct audience members are ever alerted via their chosen method – be it SMS, an email, social media post or the MapAlerter smartphone app. The hi-tech system operates via texts, which is crucial, as the biggest technology issue often faced by outdoor staff, particularly those working in severe weather conditions such as Ophelia, is the absence of WiFi, 3G or 4G connections, MapAlerter.com Managing Director, Brendan Cunningham explains.

The UCD and Maynooth graduate and his team at Burrell’s Hall Innovation Centre in Kilkenny have built and tested the system over several years, adding new features all the time. It withstood its biggest challenge to date when the ‘Red Storm Alert’ came into force.



Brendan Cunningham, MD at MapAlerter – the digital eye in the storm that sent out 500,000 alerts for 11 local authorities on Sunday 15 October, the day before Storm Ophelia. (Photography by Dylan Vaughan)

“Using texts allows updates to be delivered in a timely and efficient manner, no matter how severe the conditions and no matter how basic a staff’s phone in the field operates. It doesn’t even require that operators use a smartphone.

“We put in a 19-hour day on the eve of the hurricane, preparing for Ophelia and similar time as she struck and left a trail of destruction in her path. Everything ran smoothly – without a single glitch.”

SEVERE WEATHER TEST

He added that when the storm path changed the day before it hit, they took a decision to move server providers to a new location, fearing the existing infrastructure might be struck and people would be left in the dark.



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“It was exceptionally busy but the system worked and passed its first major severe weather test with flying colours. It was hectic, with Cork County Council alone raising 220 impassable road alerts for trees and fallen items.

“It was refreshing to see later texts with ‘Open’ and road numbers follow through on the system within hours to indicate to road users that these obstructions had been cleared and motorists and other road users could venture out safely.”

MapAlerter was first deployed by Wexford County Council and is now the tried, trusted and chosen alert system for emergency events to be used by other local authorities which include Waterford, Cork County, Kilkenny, Carlow, Tipperary, Limerick, Roscommon, Monaghan, Fingal and most recently Donegal.

CLOUD-BASED SYSTEM

“Our service was initially deployed during 2011 in response to a harsh spell of weather. Wexford County Council was the early adopter for the fledgling system and several other local authorities followed suit shortly afterwards.

“Since MapAlerter is cloud-based, it is easy to link in and limited IT staff input is required. The system is used every day by councils for non-emergency situations to include alerts for roads and infrastructure, water service updates and planning and development as well as community notices and other miscellaneous alerts.”

While councils and other system subscribers can choose their audience and how they are alerted – via SMS, email, social media posting or the

MapAlerter smartphone app –members of the public can sign up for free on www.mapalerter.com, choose which alerts they want to receive for specific locations and how.

“That way, the public can access all the information they need on roads and infrastructure alerts, get planning application alerts for their chosen area, community notices, water service updates, severe weather and emergency notifications and so much more. “What you want to receive, how and for what area is totally up to you and you can choose to modify your settings at any stage.”



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