

# Saxon Weald gives the green light to OS MasterMap®

Case study



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[www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk)  
[customerservices@ordnancesurvey.co.uk](mailto:customerservices@ordnancesurvey.co.uk)

Business enquiries: +44 (0) 23 8030 5030  
General enquiries (calls charged at local rate): 08456 05 05 05  
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**Customer Service Centre**, Ordnance Survey, Romsey Road, SOUTHAMPTON, SO16 4GU.

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## Executive summary

Saxon Weald Homes Limited owns and manages around 4 500 homes in Sussex and 300 homes in Hampshire, including over 1 100 retirement flats and bungalows. The organisation, rated by the Housing Corporation as *green* in all four compliance categories, is facing up to its challenge to maintain this level of excellence by using its ArcGIS geographical information system (GIS) in a quest to drive down cost, improve efficiency and increase tenant satisfaction. Steve Dennis, Saxon Weald's IT Manager, says, 'This is not GIS in splendid isolation. What we are doing crosses over the GIS, the financial management system and the Orchard housing management system.'

The organisation is already using GIS to help in:

- improving the management of grounds maintenance contracts;
- the calculation of service charges for general-needs tenants, retirement tenants and leaseholders;
- dealing with tenant issues at first call with a very high-satisfaction rating; and
- improving the balance between expensive responsive repairs and less expensive planned maintenance.

Steve Dennis comments, 'Over the next 6 to 18 months we'll be able to analyse the business benefits and return on investment to show that this really has made a difference.'

## The challenge

### Maintaining excellence through sound investment

Saxon Weald Homes Limited, a registered social landlord (RSL), was established in December 2000, acquiring Horsham District Council's housing stock. It also owns more than 400 leasehold, shared ownership and shared equity properties. Saxon Weald has a strong focus on performance and aims to improve the quality of life of tenants and the communities in which they live by providing excellent homes and services. Saxon Weald doesn't settle for the average; instead it uses the creativity and enthusiasm of its professional staff to deliver a top-class result. In November 2005 the Housing Corporation rated Saxon Weald as *green*, the highest performance rating, in all four compliance categories: financial viability, governance, management and development. The challenge for Saxon Weald is to maintain this level of excellence, which means driving out cost, improving efficiency and increasing tenant satisfaction.

## The solution

### Not GIS in splendid isolation

To respond, Saxon Weald has invested heavily in IT skills and systems. For example, the organisation has adopted OS MasterMap intelligent digital mapping and has implemented a new ArcGIS GIS from ESRI®. Steve Dennis is Saxon Weald's IT Manager. He says, 'This is not GIS in splendid isolation. What we are doing crosses over the GIS, the financial management system and the Orchard housing management system.' Steve continues, 'We are looking to gain significant efficiency and customer benefits from this investment with any savings ploughed back into further reducing our costs or improving our stock.' He adds, 'Over the next 6 to 18 months we'll be able to analyse the business benefits and return on investment to show that this really has made a difference.'

Justin Chamberlin, IT System Analyst, has been involved with GIS at Saxon Weald for a number of years and more recently has been working intensively to implement the new system. He explains, 'We've also taken the opportunity of moving our mapping from

Land-Line® to OS MasterMap. We are focusing our efforts on a number of areas, two of which – grounds maintenance and service charges – have already generated benefits.' He adds, 'In addition, work on the areas of responsive repairs, tenant plans and rent arrears is well underway.'

## The benefits

### Everyone working from the same information

Justin Chamberlin recalls, 'When the association was created we inherited two large A3 folders of paper plans from the District Council. They were monochrome with certain types of hatching to represent different types of amenity and it was extremely time-consuming trying to interpret them. There were, for instance, more than 15 classifications for different types of grass cutting. Using those as a starting point, we have captured them in our GIS against OS MasterMap and plotted the position, shape and area of every piece of land to which we hold title, eliminating any ambiguity in classification and ensuring that everyone is working from the same information.'

### Removing uncertainty and guesswork

Brian Keene, responsible for grounds maintenance at Saxon Weald, continues, 'This has allowed us to break down the overall cost of the grounds maintenance contract, currently just under £250 000, and has been a big winner for us.' He adds, 'With OS MasterMap and ArcGIS, it is simple. All we need to do is to capture the item that needs attention, allocate the correct classification to it, extract the area and that gives us the cost that the contractor will charge. We now have far better control over quotations for work additional to the contract. It takes away all the uncertainty, all the guesswork.' In Justin Chamberlin's view, 'All of this would have been tremendously difficult without OS MasterMap and ArcGIS, and there would have been serious cost implications. We just would not have had the resource. We would have had to take on extra people to go out on site and replot everything. The accuracy with Land-Line wouldn't have been nearly as good as with OS MasterMap and the opportunities for error would have been greater.'

### Resolving tenant queries at first call

Tim Shepherd is Saxon Weald's Finance Manager and is responsible, amongst other things for calculating and collecting service charges for general-needs tenants, retirement tenants and leaseholders. He records, 'From April 2006 we've been required by Government to bill tenants separately for rent and for the services they receive. Our new GIS has been invaluable in helping us analyse our costs for this.' He continues, 'We used the ground maintenance information and then added other elements of service that we provide to determine the proper level of service charges to be collected from each property.' He adds, 'We were expecting a high volume of calls after the new bills were sent out. However, because we had published the plans in Adobe® PDF to our Intranet, anyone in the organisation who deals with service-charge collection could view them and explain to callers exactly what the service charge covers in their specific instance. As a result, staff were able to field all the calls and deal with the issues at first call with a very high satisfaction rating from callers. This has been the biggest winner for us. It really is working very, very well.'

### The prize of improved efficiency and reduced cost

Another area where Saxon Weald is anticipating savings is on responsive repairs. Les Marjoram, Operations Manager,

comments, 'The balance between planned maintenance and responsive repairs is key. With some 10 000 call-outs a year at an average cost per call of £150, we feel there is scope to reduce our costs significantly. Using GIS we will be able to spot clusters of similar incidents and decide if it will be cost-effective to devise a planned programme rather than dispatching contractors on a series of adhoc repairs.' Citing an example, Les points out, 'We can use the GIS to identify say 20 properties in one area that all have asbestos that needs to be treated so that we can implement a programme to get them all done at once rather than carrying out the work on an ad-hoc basis.' He adds, 'Yes, we could plan this using sheets and sheets of tabular data but it would take much longer to do and would be far less efficient. There is a prize in the form of improved efficiency and reduced costs for those organisations that can reduce spend on responsive repairs more than they increase spend on planned maintenance – and we want to win it!'

### Targeting rent arrears hot spots

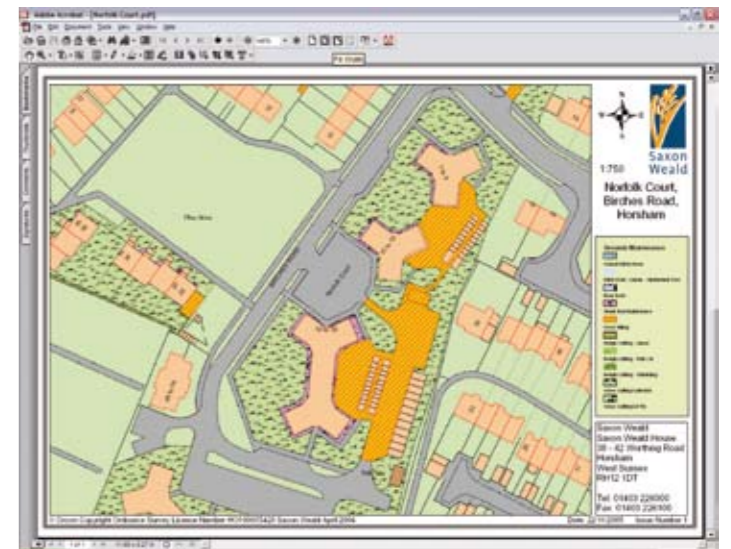
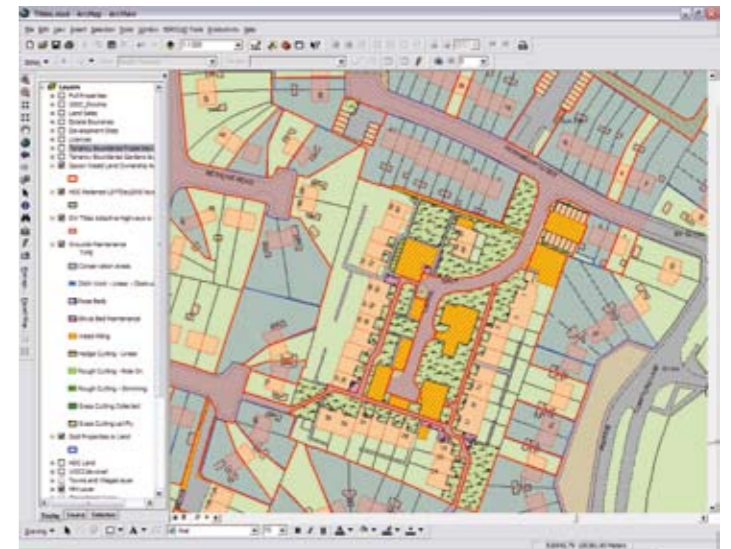
Although rent arrears at Saxon Weald are lower than the national average, they still amount to hundreds of thousands of pounds, so even a 10% reduction would be significant. According to Les Marjoram, 'The level of arrears is one of our key performance indicators and we will be using the GIS to map these arrears and match them to other related data such as income levels. We will then provide our housing managers with maps so they can target particular hotspots and develop effective remedial and collection strategies. Currently, this is done on paper and the housing managers make their own decisions about this. By providing them with this more easily understood information, they will be able to focus on priority properties.'

### Making data capture and map production easy

Until the move to OS MasterMap, Saxon Weald had used Land-Line base mapping. However, according to Justin, '...OS MasterMap is far superior. It is far more representative of what is on the ground and makes it far easier to locate features.' He adds, 'It also makes data capture and map production considerably easier.' and explains, 'I am currently capturing the titles for the whole of our stock of over 5 300 properties. By doing this, we get an immediate understanding of what liabilities we have within the vicinity of the property without the cost and time involved in site visits. However, the Land Registry® will only issue paper plans and I have to go through them all to establish the required boundaries. I have completed 62 sheets out of 222, some of which contain only a few of our properties and some containing over 300. I have to say that OS MasterMap is very much more usable for this than Land-Line. Justin points out, 'For us, OS MasterMap is slightly more expensive than Land-Line, but it's worth it for the advantages we get. For example, using OS MasterMap, the work for the grounds maintenance plan took just 3 weeks, whereas with Land-Line I estimate it would have taken 10 weeks at least.'

### Sharing GIS expertise with other organisations

Because of the work done by all involved at Saxon Weald, the understanding of what can be achieved with OS MasterMap and GIS has increased both inside and outside the organisation. In fact, Saxon Weald has already been asked to share its expertise in using GIS to manage ground maintenance contracts, service charges and other application areas with other housing associations and is now examining ways of doing that.



## The return on investment

### Improving tenant satisfaction and saving time and money

Since the move to OS MasterMap and ArcGIS, the value of GIS is becoming more and more evident to staff at Saxon Weald. Brian Keene has direct experience of this, commenting, 'If I can use it, anyone can use it. Because people are aware of what I've been doing, they keep asking me to show them so they can use it too. So I do.' Has the investment, reported by Steve Dennis as being close to £20 000 in software alone, been worth it? Steve says, 'We are aiming to implement the ArcIMS Intranet map server by early next year so that everyone in the organisation can have access at the click of a button. We'll also be reviewing the situation more formally over the next 6 to 18 months, but I can tell you now; we are already saving time and money in a number of areas.'

## links

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