Working to organize events around the world in the music industry, Chris Sheldrick struggled with the challenge of bands and equipment constantly getting lost on the way to venues and festival locations. It became clear that street addresses were not good enough, and there needed to be a better way to communicate locations.

GPS coordinates are hard for people to input into devices and nearly impossible to give correctly over the phone. Sheldrick sat down with a friend and devised a solution as accurate as coordinates, yet concise and memorable.

what3words

That solution – what3words – is an easy way to identify precise locations using a unique
combination of three words. The benefits of what3words for fire and emergency services agencies are already being realized. what3words addresses are shorter, easier to understand over the phone, and built-in error prevention technology allows emergency services to immediately verify the location and correct mistakes.

what3words is an easy way to identify precise locations using a unique combination of three words

Founded in 2013, what3words has divided the world into a grid of 3m squares and given each square a unique combination of three words: a what3words address. For example, TheBigRedGuide.com’s London office has an address of ///soaks.buddy.decent. It means that anywhere in the world – from a specific building entrance to a remote point in a field – can be communicated using just three words.

Around 80% of emergency services in the United Kingdom accept what3words addresses from 999 callers. Receiving a precise location means they can dispatch crews to the scene faster, saving precious time, resources and lives.

Fire and rescue services in the UK that accept what3words addresses include Avon, Derbyshire, Essex, Greater Manchester, Lancashire, North Wales, South Yorkshire and Suffolk – among dozens more.

An Advanced Mobile Location Solution

Around 80% of emergency services in the United Kingdom accept what3words addresses from 999 callers

For services that use Advanced Mobile Location (AML), what3words is helpful in situations
where there’s a lack of confidence in the information being presented, or in cases where the caller is not on their “home” network (i.e. an emergency roamer).

AML gives the location at the time the call was started and cannot be used to locate an emergency in a different place than the caller. In these instances, what3words is an extra tool that can work alongside AML. Many emergency services in the UK do not have access to AML and, for them, what3words provides a useful solution to getting a caller’s location.

“Throughout all services, regardless of access to AML, we’ve seen that what3words has an additional benefit in multi-agency response to a single location, as what3words can be written down, passed and shared easily among different systems and teams,” said Sheldrick, who is Co-Founder and CEO of what3words.

Assisting Emergency Services

In an emergency, a caller can find the what3words address for their current location by opening the free what3words app (which works offline) or visiting the link: map.what3words.com.

“Successful rescue stories include a rural road accident, walkers lost in a forest and people stuck in cars on flooded roads.”

They then tap the “current location” icon on the screen and read the three words displayed to the 999 call handler. “From speaking to emergency services around the United Kingdom, we know that in incidents where they are struggling to locate callers, they can often be dealing with a search radius of multiple kilometres,” says Sheldrick. “what3words is a tool they use to narrow this down.”

Some agencies in the United Kingdom have their control room systems enabled to allow the call handler to send the caller a text message with a link to map.what3words.com in case
they do not already have the app installed. The caller is then prompted to open this link and follow the steps above.

Successful Rescue Stories

Herts Fire Service was one of the first emergency services to use what3words to help members of the public describe the location of fires.

Recently, a fire crew from Knaresborough assisted Yorkshire Ambulance Service in a rescue of a male casualty with a leg injury in woodland near Nidd Gorge. His exact location was provided using what3words to help the fire crew reach him, and the story was shared by North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service via Twitter.

Other successful rescue stories include a rural road accident, walkers lost in a forest and people stuck in cars on flooded roads.

Raising Awareness For Widespread Implementation

The #Help999FindYou hashtag has become synonymous with services around the country sharing stories and videos on social media and with local press about successful response operations.

what3words is easy to build into existing processes both in the control room and operationally. It can be integrated into any Computer Aided Dispatch system, or the online map can be used immediately without any development work required.
The #Help999FindYou hashtag has become synonymous with services around the country sharing stories and videos on social media and with local press about successful response operations.

To get a what3words address from a caller, an operator can send an SMS with a link, which displays the what3words address for the location on the caller's phone, so they can read it out to the operator. Response teams can use the free app, or the location can be sent directly as a map pin to the Mobile Data Terminal for navigation.

With many UK fire services already using what3words, training is ongoing in more control rooms around the country. The focus of training has been with 999 call handlers, who are the people who receive and use a what3words address.

Internal awareness of the benefits of what3words is a crucial focus for widespread implementation. The company's emergency services training toolkit is regularly updated with the latest internal and external communications templates, posters, leaflets, training webinars and how-to videos.

#Help999FindYou

Services are seeing the benefit for themselves, and many are running effective public communication to encourage people in their region to download the free what3words app.

The #Help999FindYou hashtag has become synonymous with services around the country sharing stories and videos on social media and with local press about successful response operations involving what3words. Many also build what3words awareness and education into their community engagement activities such as school visits, rural crime workshops and events. There is also a what3words supporter community, The Squares, who are spreading the word to their organisations and communities.
“Being in need of urgent help and not being able to describe where you are can be very distressing for the person involved and a really difficult situation for emergency services,” said Sheldrick.

“Today, people nearly always have their phone on them. We need to use the tools at our disposal to improve public services and potentially save lives. Just as you may have your emergency contacts set up on your phone, we encourage everyone to download the app to make sure they are ready to share accurate location information quickly, should the worst happen. It’s free, it’s simple to use, and one day it might make sure help finds you quickly.”

Emergency Services Embracing Technology

what3words continues to work with emergency services across the United Kingdom to get what3words enabled in their control rooms and to encourage the public to understand how to find and share their what3words address so that they can be found quickly when they need it most.

“It’s been incredible to see UK emergency services embrace our technology to respond effectively and quickly to people in need,” said Sheldrick.

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