

# Timely information for citizens pilots

## Evaluation summary

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# 1. Introduction

The Timely Information for Citizens programme<sup>1</sup> was established to deliver on commitments in the 2008 white paper *Communities in Control; real people, real power*<sup>2</sup> to “increase the quality of engagement that local authorities have with their citizens, in order to make it easier for people to engage with public services and influence local decision-making”.

The specific aims of the Timely Information for Citizens programme were to:

- increase local transparency, access to information and better enabling citizens to hold local authorities and partners to account by improving the breadth, relevance, quality and consistency of information provided by local authorities to their citizens
- increase the quality of engagement that local authorities had with their citizens, in order to make it easier for people to engage with public services and influence local decision-making

In 2009, 20 local authorities across England were selected through a competitive bidding process to develop and pilot innovative approaches to providing better, more relevant, and more timely information to citizens. The Department for Communities and Local Government also commissioned the Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands to provide a support and promotion package for the pilots, including organisation of a number of national workshops, to facilitate networks across the regions and enhance dissemination of the messages and learning arising from the work of the pilots.

The pilot areas were funded through a Section 31 Grant which involves very few reporting and monitoring requirements. The specification for the pilots was also very light touch to encourage innovative bids. Accordingly, pilots have undertaken a diverse range of activities to improve the availability and timeliness of data for citizens in their areas.

Since the programme was established, there has been a shift in policy under the new Coalition government from a participation, community engagement and engaged democracy ethic to a focus on enabling the conditions for citizens to hold services to account on standards, efficiency and cost in the context of greater decentralisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on the programme is provided at this DCLG link:  
<http://www.esd.org.uk/esdtoolkit/Communities/InformingCitizens/ContentView.aspx?ContentType=Content-382>

<sup>2</sup> DCLG (2008) *Communities in Control: real people, real power*  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol>

In order to maximise and disseminate the learning from the Timely Information for Citizens pilots, in 2009 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) commissioned the Tavistock Institute to undertake an evaluation of the Timely Information for Citizens programme. The evaluation has aimed to provide evidence on:

- the efficiency and effectiveness of the Timely Information for Citizens programme
- outcomes from the pilots and 'what works'
- transferable learning

The evaluation has utilised a range of research methodologies to address the evaluation questions.

- Desk research (policy and literature review; 10 key stakeholder interviews; environmental audit (a tool which helps to understand more fully the context in which the pilot operates and which entailed the collection and analysis of social, economic and demographic data of each pilot area and theory of change analysis of each of the pilots).
- Twelve of the pilots were selected as in-depth case studies. The case studies included 96 in-depth interviews with project leads and key internal stakeholders (such as communications departments), external stakeholders<sup>3</sup> and pilot partners<sup>4</sup>. (Detailed profiles of six of these case studies can be found in Appendix 2 of this summary).
- Four focus groups were conducted with citizen users of the Timely Information for Citizens initiative.

Two online surveys were also conducted for users of the services provided by the pilots (one for council staff and one for citizens). However, the very low number of responses to these surveys has limited the conclusions that can be drawn from this data.

This evaluation summary presents an overview of the findings from this evaluation.

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<sup>3</sup> Such as community and voluntary groups.

<sup>4</sup> An individual or organisation that has been formally contracted to contribute to the development, implementation or maintenance of the Timely Information for Citizens initiative.

## 2. What the pilots did

All pilot areas became involved in the Timely Information for Citizens Programme because they saw the need to improve the quality and timeliness of information made available to local residents. There were, however, two other important objectives understood amongst the pilots. These were to use the funding to try and alter the relationship between the council or partners and its resident citizens, and to enable citizens to hold local authorities and partners to account.

The activities that the pilots were engaged in were diverse. Most commonly, pilots used the funding to develop websites and related applications. Around half adopted fairly conventional ways of providing information. More advanced pilots, however, were able to use the opportunity the funding provided to experiment with emerging technology and new ways to engage with citizens. Examples of these include GeoTagging<sup>5</sup> and Mashups<sup>6</sup> both of which allow staff and citizens to participate in putting together different kinds of information to create a new application and more visual way (for example marking location of schools on maps, or personal points of interest).

### **Providing information**

Around a quarter of the pilots focused on the provision of timely information about council services and local events. For example, in Gloucestershire 18 'Community Noticeboards'<sup>7</sup> bring together information on news, events, activities, community contacts (such as police and local services); local statistical data; and minutes, information and proposed actions from neighbourhood community meetings. This information is gathered from a number of third party sources by the local authority and then processed and updated on a regular basis to ensure it remains current and accurate.

There were also several other super-local sites created within council websites, usually called 'My Neighbourhood', in which users could enter their postcode to access neighbourhood level information on services and events.

A small number of the pilots also provided information or opportunities which aimed to help councillors, council employees and other stakeholders in their work by providing up-to-date information on local areas, or opportunities for Members to create information relevant to their wards.

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<sup>5</sup> GeoTagging: the process of adding geographical identification to various media such as photographs, video, websites or SMS messages (short message service) so that residents can, for example see an Ordnance Survey National Grid reference, postal address, place name or administrative area

<sup>6</sup> Mash-up: Mash-ups combine different data types from multiple public sources in the browser and organises it through a simple browser user interface.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=92552>).

## **Engaging citizens**

Another group of pilots saw the role of the Timely Information for Citizens programme as being predominantly about altering the relationship between local government and citizens. This translated into a broad range of applications and activities such as supporting the right of citizens to use public data, consulting the public on decision making, increasing the range of information so that particular groups had better access to information, and by empowering target groups by increasing the ICT and digital skills of citizens to hold the council to account better and encourage democratic participation.

The majority of pilot sites, well over half the total, combined information provision with attempting to alter the relationship between council and citizens. In Lichfield for example, applications included a calendar of local events, as well as a facility to allow users to view and comment on planning applications. One such facility is 'Voiceit - the online consultation tool' – a one stop shop encouraging citizens to give their views on local issues which affect them<sup>8</sup>. It also provides citizens with the opportunity to create petitions to directly influence the council. (See the Lichfield case study profile in Appendix 2)

## **Holding local government to account**

Six of the pilots included a focus on engaging citizens in challenging poor performance, becoming involved in decision-making and seeking redress. In Birmingham the 'Open Cities' project<sup>9</sup> focused very specifically on changing the way that citizens engage with local and national government (see case study profile 6 in Appendix 2). Their activities were designed to re-skill and encourage citizens to hold government to account through using social media. They supported super-local blogs (often run by campaigners), provided a central hub for data and equipment such as laptops, flip cameras, microphones, digital cameras and a GPS device for use by citizens, and kick-started new projects through organising networking events for members of the social media community.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/voiceit>

<sup>9</sup> <http://bevocal.org.uk>

### 3. Outcomes and impacts of the Timely Information for Citizens programme

Unfortunately, limited data were available on the full range of outcomes achieved by the pilot projects in the programme. Several pilots were not sufficiently advanced in their implementation activities to have had a measurable effect on users. In other cases, 'end-users' – particularly citizens – as website users were not accessible for collecting evaluation data, despite attempts to collect data through online user surveys. As a result, the outcomes and consequent impacts achieved across different pilots have been difficult to assess.

#### **Effectiveness of information provision**

Most citizens across the pilots who were interviewed as users of the Timely Information for Citizens funded initiatives were positive about the pilots, reporting that the information provided was up to date, easy to use and almost entirely meeting their information requirements. Many of the pilot areas used tools, such as RSS feeds, that drew on existing information but brought the information together into one easy to find location, which users felt saved them time when searching for relevant information. For example, users described the Leeds initiative as “*a mine of information*” about their local area.

#### **Extent of citizen engagement**

One measure of engagement with communities was to measure the use of new websites. Five pilot areas were able to provide this data and together they reached over 26,000 individuals since their launch. This was an average of 5,200 users per site, with an average of 600 users visiting each website a month. The two pilots with the greatest reach, Lichfield and Welwyn, reached approximately 5 per cent and 3 per cent of their population, respectively.

Local authority staff reported that the Timely Information for Citizens programme had helped them think more positively about the opportunities virtual communities could provide, improved their knowledge of local sectors and helped them to consider how volunteers and community and voluntary organisations can be involved in the co-production of information for citizens.

Four of the Timely Information for Citizens pilot areas had multi-stakeholder partnerships in place when designing, developing and maintaining their initiative. Examples of this are Gateshead, Redbridge and Cambridgeshire. For example in Gateshead promoting the project to community and voluntary groups has enabled these groups to have specific ownership over parts of the project and therefore sustain it beyond the funding period. The level of digital literacy varied greatly among the community and voluntary organisations and therefore training these groups provided them with the IT skills they needed to design, develop and

maintain their own websites. For many of the groups, having these new skills provided a new platform to promote and communicate with residents who were interested in such community and voluntary organisations.

In Cambridgeshire, the Tic-Talk project was delivered by 'Pinpoint10' an independent information, support and parental involvement network. This pilot shows how the partnership between small independent groups and the local authority allowed both parties to achieve much more. The local authority, for example, benefited due to the better information gained about its citizens through the local knowledge that an independent group is able to tap into. Involving users as co-creators ensured that Pinpoint could develop the site with the detailed local knowledge achieved through active involvement of families.

The evaluation found a number of specific examples of citizen engagement resulting from the activities of the Timely Information for Citizens pilots:

In **Leeds** (as part of the 'InfoStore' package) training has been provided in libraries and also sheltered homes to older people. This has enabled older people to engage with ICT (often for the first time), in turn enhancing the levels of digital literacy among this group. Teaching older people how to use computers introduces them to some of the benefits that technology provides such as saving time and money, interacting with family, friends, groups and organisations, in addition to giving them the freedom to explore and navigate, as one user stated, a "*new world of opportunity*". The technological platforms in place (such as blogs and Web 2.0 tools) enabled users to advertise, be made aware of and discuss upcoming local events.

In **Suffolk**, carers were asked their opinions on the kind of information they would find useful and then organised an event looking at alternative ways of providing data more suited to their needs. The results from this were sent to the local authority to inform their ongoing review, and thus directly gave citizens more of a say in the information they received.

In **Redbridge** one citizen who had used the community forums to protest about the closure of some local allotments was further drawn into attending council meetings and becoming a more active citizen, including commenting on the design and functionality of the Timely Information for Citizens funded my neighbourhood application.

In **Gloucestershire** one user described how he reported some graffiti through the 'Report It' function signposted by the website. Prior to using the Timely Information for Citizens initiative the user was not aware that citizens could actively report such issues and consequently now considers himself to be a "*more active citizen*" with a higher investment in his community.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pinpoint-cambs.org.uk/home>

However, despite some examples of engagement in the pilots, the concept of shifting the balance between citizen and state using data was still evolving and evidence from the evaluation suggests that while the intention was there (the majority of pilot projects reported that they expected their activities to have the greatest impact on citizen engagement), the methods used to provide information were not always designed in the best way to achieve this.

It appears there was, in some pilot areas, a mis-match between what the initiative intended to do and what was actually done in practice. An analysis of the underlying ‘theory of change’ of many of the pilots suggests that not enough attention was paid to developing and applying a ‘logic of intervention’ that makes a clear link between programme objectives (and related over-arching policy objectives) and the objectives and activities of the pilots. In turn, the linkages between pilot objectives, target groups, activities, outputs and expected outcomes were also under-developed across the programme as a whole at the time of the evaluation.

The findings of the evaluation suggest that the higher level vision and objective of the 2008 Empowerment white paper – *“increasing the quality of engagement that local authorities have with their citizens, in order to make it easier for people to engage with public services and influence local decision-making”* was still developing in many pilot areas at the time of the evaluation.

### **Factors affecting data quality and citizen engagement**

Most of the pilots engaged with too few users in the timeframe of the evaluation to enable a comparison of the impacts associated with different methods of information provision and sources to be carried out. However, the evaluation evidence suggests that in terms of technology, ‘single line’ communication methods (basic provision of information) which provided little or no scope for feedback or co-production were less likely to promote engagement or enable citizens to better hold the local authority to account.

The depth and extent of information was also found to be important in the impact the pilots had on citizen engagement. Websites which provided service information data, offering citizens data about performance on all national indicators, without developing ways of making the information accessible were found to be less successful, and use was lower. There was a tension between ensuring the simplicity and functionality of a website, and maintaining the aims of the Timely Information for Citizens programme by providing sufficient and robust datasets, and information for users covering a wide range of information needs.

Wider research suggests<sup>11</sup> that working with the target community to understand information needs produces better policy, services and use, and that data quality and relevance is also improved when citizens are involved in its production.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Boyle D, et al (2010) *Right Here, Right Now, Taking Co-production into the Mainstream* NEF/ NESTA

Some pilots understood this but found that it was challenging to achieve in practice, especially where the initiative was intended for all citizens rather than specifically defined target groups such as older people in Leeds, or parents and carers of disabled young people such as in Cambridgeshire.

However, 15 of the pilot areas did work together with citizens to some extent to 'co-produce' the initiative. This was achieved by creating space, either at the design stage, and/or at the implementation stage to allow the ideas of citizens to influence the information provided by the initiative. The advent of web 2.0<sup>12</sup> has also made virtual co-production and interaction easier because it encourages and invites participation.

Birmingham was the only pilot which gave full ownership of the initiative to citizens. The local authority enlisted nine local organisations (such as 'podnosh'<sup>13</sup>), most of whom were micro businesses with less than 10 employees, well connected in the Birmingham social media scene, in the development of the initiative. They therefore had a pool of very high level technical expertise, particularly people who were experts in using data to create mash ups which makes information easier to digest. These organisations worked together to develop ideas, build local capacity and acted as facilitators rather than producers of information. For example, as part of the project, social media surgeries were commissioned where "geeks" met with local bloggers who had limited technical knowledge, usually in a local pub, to build capacity among these active citizens.

### **Improving service performance**

Five pilot areas had some focus on using information to improve service delivery, through for example, allowing citizens to scrutinise performance data relating to local service provision and use this to challenge the local authority and local service providers.

In the main, existing mechanisms such as Fix my street and Report it were utilised in several sites but customised for local councils. These provide the opportunity for citizens to hold their councils to account by reporting local street problems and logging the time taken for repairs to be effected.

The Gateshead initiative included a 'check and challenge' element, which aimed to improve the level of performance data available online and enable users to re-

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<sup>11</sup> Child C, *Scoping research: What LSPs can do to support behaviour change in local communities* (2008) IDeA (now Local Government Improvement and Development)

<sup>12</sup> **Web 2.0:** The term Web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services, web applications and mash-ups.

<sup>13</sup> <http://podnosh.com/>

use and/or query this data easily. It also includes a reply and discussion functionality which intends to encourage feedback to the council about the level of service performance and suggestions for improvements. And in Lichfield, consultations with citizens were moved online in some council departments. This meant that projects did not just provide information but gathered it too, improving on past consultations by postal survey and focus group, and in turn improving the services: *“getting the survey out, analysis and reporting all comes out much quicker, meaning service development is also much quicker.”*

Similarly, Liverpool developed a citizens’ portal (‘My Neighbourhood’) for service requests, neighbourhood problem reporting, request tracking/automatic updates and providing information on reported incidents and performance against Service Level Agreements via an interactive ‘neighbourhood dashboard’. A further example is Redbridge, which introduced a monitoring role for citizens. This entailed locality-based problem reporting, rating of local authority services, citizen feedback; and contract monitoring of key local services such as street cleansing, recycling and refuse collection.

However, overall it was still too early for pilots to be able to report consistent improvements in performance as a result of the Timely Information for Citizens programme.

### **Unexpected outcomes**

In addition, pilot sites achieved some ‘unexpected outcomes’ that were not part of their original aims, or on which they had placed less emphasis at the start of the programme.

Reducing avoidable contact, thereby reducing costs, was identified in at least two authorities as an unintended consequence. In Leeds a Customer Service Manager identified the following:

*‘Before [the initiative] it was very time consuming, difficult and inefficient for members of the customer service team to find information...[the initiative] allows for information to be extracted easily quickly and efficiently’.*

In Lichfield the targeted outcomes were to engage the community in decision making and consultation, yet it also achieved significant additional benefits in terms of council performance and the operation of council services. This is largely as online consultations have produced efficiencies and reduced council costs, saving on focus groups and postal surveys.

## 4. Lessons for the future

Some common challenges were identified by the pilots:

### ***Structural and organisational***

- *Securing the support of those at senior levels* amongst officers and Members. Aligning the project with a key agenda was a way to gain crucial support, usually through support at senior officer and Member level. In pilot areas where the support of Members was strong, it was an important factor in ensuring that the developments stayed on council agenda during periods of economic constraint.
- *Including broader sets of stakeholders.* Failure to include key partners could hold up progress. For example, the intention in several of the pilots was to reduce reliance on call centres and develop use customer services but not all council departments were engaged to facilitate this.
- *Cultural resistance to opening up data.* In a number projects, for example, data was collected from across different council departments. One in particular said it was as if 'Timely Information' was a cultural change programme. Even more difficult was collecting data from other agencies, such as the police and the NHS. Limited progress was made, as protocols for information sharing are still under development in many places and not worked through.

### ***Technological***

Working with new technology proved to be more challenging than anticipated in several pilot areas. This was especially the case when using web 2.0 in the council was a new departure. Particular technological difficulties that the pilot areas encountered that ultimately led to delays to the project included:

- *Compatibility of technological tools.*
- *Managing sensitivity of data* (particularly a challenge for those initiatives using data from multiple agencies and when sharing citizen records with citizens).
- *Too detailed versus not enough information.* Many pilot areas experienced a tension between making a technological tool that was too detailed, (which was often difficult to navigate or access information easily) versus a tool that was too broad sweeping (which did not consist of enough information to give the user what they needed).

- *Data format.* For example, some pilot areas struggled to get data into a useable or re-useable format so that citizens can create mash-ups or otherwise manipulate it.

### ***Development and sustainability factors***

- *Marketing and promotion.* Many of the pilot sites found this aspect challenging as they did not have a strategic approach and the process was therefore ad-hoc or reactive. The evidence they provided (generally usage statistics) suggests that these pilot sites were less effective in generating citizen awareness.
- *Co-production.* As noted earlier, working with the target community was particularly challenging to achieve, especially where the initiative was intended for a wide range of citizens covering a wide range of demographics (compared with defined target groups such as older people, or families with disabled children). Pilots also needed to decide what to offer in terms of the depth and extent of information: in some instances there was a tension between providing too much information resulting in user overload whilst maintaining the aims of the initiative in providing sufficient, in depth robust sets of data and information for users – covering a wide range of topics.

### **Overcoming challenges**

Many of the pilots developed successful strategies to overcome these challenges, with most success in addressing structural and organisational problems. Technological and sustainability issues proved to be the most difficult to resolve.

The main strategies implemented to address the challenges encountered included the following:

- *Structural and organisational challenges:* Engaging champions in promoting the pilot from councillors and council staff; engaging staff from relevant departments and creating buy-in; getting external stakeholders involved community and voluntary sector members to increase the spread of involvement.
- *Technological challenges:* Including IT departments at an early stage to help with technical issues. The evidence suggests that in cases where this was done, the tension between achieving maximum functionality against the ease of use and representing the data in a way that can be accessed by all citizens was more likely to be overcome. Evidence from projects also suggests issues around data sensitivity and how this may affect the initiative should be considered early on.

- *Development and sustainability challenges:* Implementing user needs analysis; designing targeted approaches to market the 'product' at a user group (methods included contacting agencies or organisations where there was high number of potential users, for example, pilot areas used community groups, charities, vulnerable group agencies, and hospitals amongst others); developing a collaborative, bottom-up approach where potential users are part of the design and development of the initiative and will help to ensure its sustainability into the future.

## 5. Implications for local authorities and central government

The evaluation has highlighted a number of areas where the Timely Information for Citizens programme made less of a contribution than was expected to the policy objectives of the 'Community Empowerment' agenda it was established to support. Applying these findings to the transparency agenda (still in the early stages of development at this time of this research) suggests a number of issues these and future policy initiatives in this field could usefully explore. These are:

- One of the early decisions made about the programme was that it was a Section 31 grant and therefore un-ringfenced. This gave pilot areas freedoms to innovate and be flexible in the use of their funding, changing direction where they needed to in response to local conditions. While this worked well in a number of areas, for other pilots there appeared to be a lack of institutional motivation to develop timely information for citizens and in one case the funding remained buried until almost the end of the programme.
- Another challenge created by the section 31 funding arrangement was in developing an evaluation approach across all pilots. Learning lessons in real time was therefore limited and contributions to this evaluation were difficult to collect from a handful of the pilot areas.
- Citizens and other stakeholders still had concerns over what will happen to the information that they provide to local authorities, and who is accountable for its management. A review of what these concerns focus on and how they can be addressed would support future policy development and implementation.
- Awareness-raising was highlighted as a key success factor in the pilot areas. It is possible that emerging policy agendas would benefit from greater public awareness and better promotion. This could be linked to broader initiatives aimed at promoting awareness-raising of the possibilities and benefits of emerging transparency agendas for policy-makers (central and local government) and local government officials, and could in turn promote and support better partnerships and partnership working and on promoting 'sense-making' between stakeholders.
- In line with emerging transparency objectives, some pilots worked to standardise multiple sources of data so that citizens could scrutinize them and even re-use them. Difficulties existed across local authority directorates and departments. These difficulties were even greater across local authority, police and other agencies. Accessing and standardising data across different departments and sectors posed challenges for staff in terms of time and creating data-sharing norms, making it resource

intensive and costly. There appears to be a role for central government in supporting local authorities and other public sector agencies in standardising data for re-use.

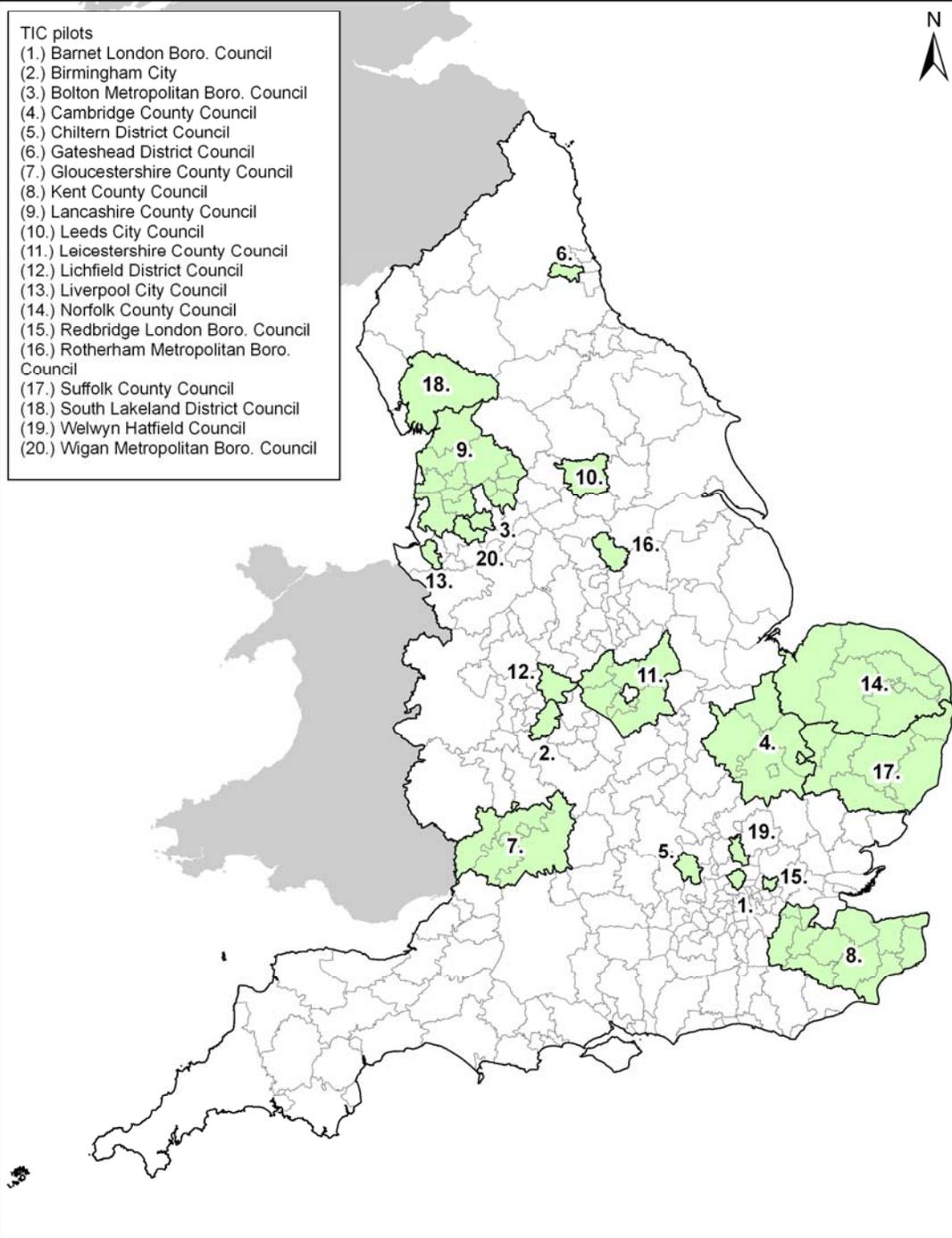
- This evaluation also posed questions about the kinds of information citizens want and the role of citizens in its production. Authorities varied in the scale and scope of their research and consultation activities to identify what would be useful and relevant. There is still more work to be done with citizens, in particular with hard to reach and socially excluded groups to achieve relevant and accessible information for all.
- There is also further work to be done in understanding the extent to which citizens will use information 'because it is there'. Emerging evidence from this evaluation challenges the assumption that if information is available people will necessarily use it. However, evidence from this evaluation and from the literature is suggesting that a number of factors working together will encourage active use of information. These are: involving citizens in the choice and production of information, providing effective mechanisms for engaging people over time and including elements of interaction which can transform perceptions and make information more meaningful.

## Appendix 1 – Location of the Timely Information for Citizens pilots

## Timely Information for Citizens pilot (local authority) areas

### TIC pilots

- (1.) Barnet London Boro. Council
- (2.) Birmingham City
- (3.) Bolton Metropolitan Boro. Council
- (4.) Cambridge County Council
- (5.) Chiltern District Council
- (6.) Gateshead District Council
- (7.) Gloucestershire County Council
- (8.) Kent County Council
- (9.) Lancashire County Council
- (10.) Leeds City Council
- (11.) Leicestershire County Council
- (12.) Lichfield District Council
- (13.) Liverpool City Council
- (14.) Norfolk County Council
- (15.) Redbridge London Boro. Council
- (16.) Rotherham Metropolitan Boro. Council
- (17.) Suffolk County Council
- (18.) South Lakeland District Council
- (19.) Welwyn Hatfield Council
- (20.) Wigan Metropolitan Boro. Council



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Ordnance Survey 100018986 2010. 03 002

Kilometres  
0 12.5 25 50 75

Data Sources:  
OS Boundary Line

## Appendix 2 – Case study profiles

Case study profile 1: Cambridgeshire County Council

Case study profile 2: Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council

Case study profile 3: Leeds City Council

Case study profile 4: Lichfield District Council

Case study profile 5: London Borough of Redbridge

Case study profile 6: Birmingham City Council

## Case study profile 1: Cambridgeshire County Council

### **pinpoint Timely Information for Citizens-Talk project**

<http://www.pinpoint-camb.org.uk/home>

#### **Background**

pinpoint is an independent information, support and parental involvement network run for parents by parents in Cambridgeshire. For the past two years, pinpoint has been working with Cambridgeshire County Council's Families Information Service to improve the way information is provided to families. Evidence gathered from more than 1,200 families, showed that information was their highest support need and those who had a child with a special educational need or disability added that they wanted access to honest and open information systems which make clear everything that is available, not just what is affordable. This resulted in commissioning pinpoint to work with children, young people and parents to develop the pinpoint website to provide better information to parents of disabled children, and to give them opportunities to comment on some of the services they use.

#### **1. Objectives of Timely Information for Citizens-Talk pilot**

The aims of the pilot were to:

- Develop a 'one stop shop' website with independent, specialist and more detailed information that parents and carers of disabled children could use in order to be able to make better choices for young people and children.
- Find sustainable solutions for providing opportunities for families with disabled children to be actively involved in monitoring and evaluating services online through a rating system and commentary.

#### **2. What the pilot did**

**Setting up a project group:** Prior to the development of the site, a project group was set up, consisting of a range of partners (young disabled people, parents and carers, disability teams, Connexions, a private website development company who specialises in accessibility, the PCT, the Parent Partnership Service, the Papworth Trust, which is a voluntary organisation already working with disabled young people to help improve the support they provide to help them move towards independence) and special schools.

**Running an event:** The project team then set up an event, called MOTO (Moving On Together), which was attended by disabled young people, their parents and carers and representatives from services who provide them with

support. The aim was to bring people together and provide an opportunity to hear each other's views. This event provided a structure for the new website based around the existing evidence gathered on parents' information and support needs.

**Developing the website:** The idea was to re-use, and aggregate, information that was already 'out there' into one source: a 'one-stop-shop' access point for parents and carers. In particular, the site includes information on:

- all the services available to parents
- how to get the support they need
- who they can speak to if they need help and advice issues that may interest them
- information on activities and clubs available in the area
- networking opportunities
- allowing parents to add comments and 'star rate' groups and activities to help other families find an activity that suits their child's needs

While the council website has search facilities and lists activities, users cannot comment on the cambridgeshire.net site in the same way that pinpoint facilitates. When people click on the particular activity they are interested in through cambridgeshire.net, this opens up on the pinpoint website and this is when they can leave comments and ratings. This is one of the benefits of accessing information through the pinpoint website.



- if you are a parent or carer this website is for you
- look around and tell us what information you'd like added
- get involved and give parents a stronger voice

pinpoint is an independent information, support and involvement network for parents in Cambridgeshire. Help us build the website by telling us what information you want added.



 **Get information**  
You can [get information](#) and add comments.

 **Get support**  
Find places you can [get support](#) from other parents.

 **Get involved**  
Ways to [get involved](#) in improving support for families.

**Latest from the forums**

- Next Hunts network meeting on 28 June at Maple Centre, Huntingdon [more...](#)
- Next Fenland network meeting is in Wisbech on 29 June [more...](#)
- Next East Cambs network meeting is in Ely on 1 July [more...](#)
- PLA PICNIC [more...](#)
- Young parents web-page [more...](#)

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**pinpoint TV**



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- NSPCC launch text helpline service 8th Jun 2011 [more...](#)

**Upcoming events**

- 25th Jun 2011 – Impington Village College (IVC) Parent Support Group Picnic Join other parents and families for an afternoon picnic [more...](#)
- 25th Jun 2011 – One Leisure Jump Club Come and try Rebound therapy -

**Latest blog entries**



News and views about pinpoint, parents and young people.

- Welcome to the new pinpoint website! [more](#)

**3. Key success factors**

**The engagement model:** engaging with users and young people was done by following a model rather than by starting with a blank slate. The pilot began with identifying the information that what families want, and then supporting them to work together with project and service managers to develop the features and content of the site. The project took family participation to a level beyond consultation to actively involving them in service planning and development, allowing them to co-create the site from the beginning.

**User participation:** The number of children and young people involved has been good and has allowed participation skills and confidence to rise. The main evidence of this is parents' input into the development of the website. As one stakeholder said: *"Parents are now willing to give their views and assess the website. Co-creation is the main evidence that the initiative is encouraging engagement. The power and choice is in the hands of parents and this is not something that has happened a lot in the past"*.

In addition, the MOTO event, which occurred as part of the research prior to the development of the site, was an opportunity to get users and service providers together. This proved to be very important in order to find a common ground as well as to identify where the differences in thinking were. In addition, as one

interviewee noted: *“the MOTO event was an example of holding officers into account”*. (The website has a video of the MOTO event, which can be found at <http://www.pinpoint-cams.org.uk/MOTO-video>).

**Building the website:** being able to build in flexibility in the development of the site was very important because it enabled additional features to be incorporated into it as new insights were acquired through comments from the users.

#### 4. Challenges and how they were overcome

**Content management demands:** The amount of time it takes to write web-pages is significant and this wasn't taken into account enough at the beginning of the pilot. However, further down the line, a web content expert was brought in to cover this role.

**Delays:** The pilot experienced some delays mainly due to difficulties in being able to make direct contact with disabled young people and their families. These difficulties were linked to data protection and safeguarding issues when working with disabled young people. Therefore, getting in touch with young people meant working through schools and this was very challenging. This challenge was overcome with time and when parents became engaged with the youth club (which was run by the Papworth Trust, a partner in the pilot).

**Partnership working:** Engagement with some service providers was not easy (one partner, for example, turned up only at one project group meeting) and many others didn't attend the MOTO event, which was intended to bring all stakeholders together. However, on the whole it was possible to keep a core group going, which was crucial to the pilot's success.

#### 5. Learning for other areas

**User involvement:** all stakeholders interviewed agreed that the main learning point was that to develop a site, it is essential to start from the user and design an initiative with users in mind. As one stakeholder interviewed said, *“don't lay a foundation unless you have the target groups engaged in laying this foundation”*. Also, understanding that the 'user' comprises many different people and they all need to be considered is crucial, and means significant research needs to be carried out prior to developing a project of this kind. Having been able to involve users as co-creators has ensured that pinpoint could develop the site with detailed local knowledge gained through active involvement of families. As a result, the site is better able to meet the target groups' information needs. This aspect is also important for the sustainability of the initiative. User engagement

and buy-in can act as a catalyst for them to add information themselves and actively support the development of the site<sup>14</sup>.

**Partnership working:** working in partnership allows small independent groups to achieve much more, and also allows bigger partners like the local authority to benefit due to the better information they can gain about their citizens through independent groups' local knowledge. In addition, the partnership established through this pilot had not previously existed and it enabled learning to be gathered on how to work together and share information as well as getting a greater awareness of each others' role.

**Getting the right provider** to set up the website proved to be very important. In this case, the provider involved was an accessibility specialist, who therefore understood what would work well and was able to provide the necessary expert advice. As one interviewee noted, the provider *“fully understood the community need and how to translate this into the development of the site”*.

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<sup>14</sup> The website has videos of interviews with disabled young people and parents, highlighting how user needs' feedback was responded to. These can be found at <http://www.pinpoint-cambs.org.uk/information/activities>

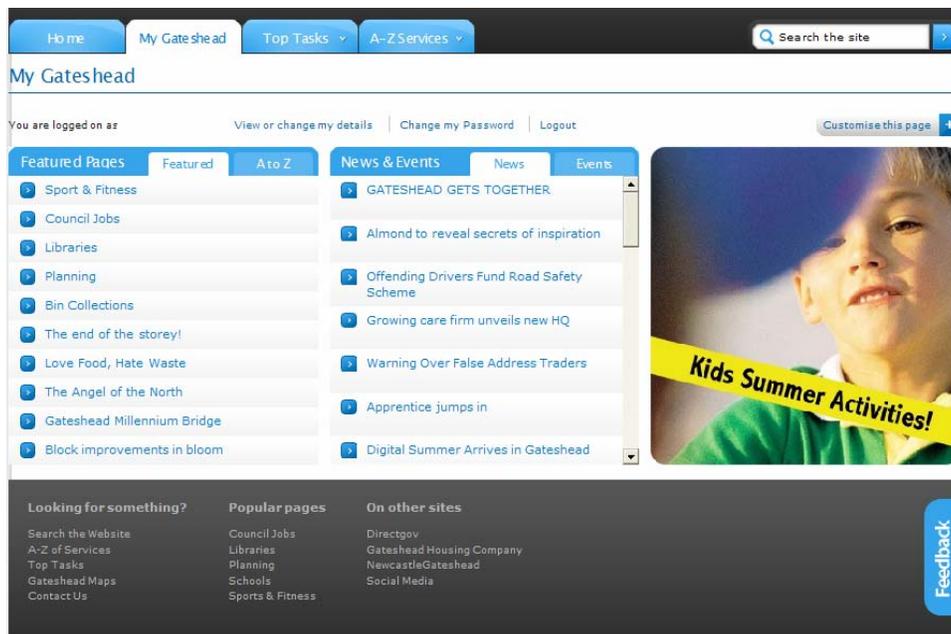
## Case study profile 2: Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council

### 'My Gateshead'

<https://online.gateshead.gov.uk/CustomPortal/Login/Login.aspx>

### Background

My Gateshead is a web-based resource that targets Gateshead residents, workers and visitors. The Timely Information for Citizens funding enabled the establishment of a website that brings together a number of innovative new and existing technological projects in the council under a website with a single access point for information on news, local services, performance data and a place to engage with local community and voluntary organisations.



### 1. Objectives

The overarching objectives of My Gateshead are to: i) improve communication with Gateshead residents and to ensure that residents can communicate with the council, in addition to accessing information at a time and manner that suits them, and ii) increase the ease with which residents can access services, understand performance of the council and engage with the development of services and policies.

In organisational terms, the pilot challenged and promoted change in the way that the Council works, bringing together a number of disparate projects into a coherent programme.

## 2. What the pilot did

My Gateshead provides personalised functionality on new and existing council projects, specifically providing five key services:

- **Check and challenge:** This focuses on providing accessible performance related information specific to residents in the Gateshead area. The delivery team aimed to make this information visually stimulating and easily digestible. Previously this information was available but it was difficult to locate and not regularly updated. Now, performance data is updated monthly (or quarterly as appropriate). This has heightened levels of transparency in presenting data to the public and also encourages residents to hold the council to account through being able to communicate to the council via the website.



- **Report It:** This is a mechanism whereby Gateshead residents can report any enquiries, problems or concerns on issues such as graffiti, highway maintenance, street lighting, refuse collection etc. through completing an online service request. This enables residents to report issues at a time that is suitable to them and also reduces the levels of contact with Customer Service staff, in turn making the service more efficient from an organisational perspective.
- **My Neighbourhood:** This is a mapping service that enables residents to locate services and facilities specific to any given address or postcode in

the Gateshead area. Services that residents can locate on this map include libraries and doctors surgeries.

- **Chat and Interact:** This provides the platform for customers to interact with the council and for the council to interact with Gateshead residents using a variety of methods. Methods include a number of web 2.0 tools including Facebook, Flickr, Youtube and online consultation tools. This two-way communication is evident on the councils' Facebook page where discussions, questions and concerns have been proposed by residents and then addressed by the council. Additionally, the Chat and Interact service enables residents to identify what is 'going on' in the Gateshead area and to participate in consultations at a time that is convenient to the user. Here residents can communicate their views about council proposals and a record is kept of all communication between the council and user providing a historical account.
- **Connected Communities, 'Our Gateshead' (separate website):** This service is developed, built and maintained by community and voluntary organisations in Gateshead to promote and make their services more visible to residents in the area. IT training has been provided to the community and voluntary organisations as well as conducting focus groups to understand what they wanted to achieve from owning such a website and what support would be needed from the council in the future. From this a training package has been designed and delivered to the community and voluntary organisations. Additionally, bringing local community and voluntary organisations from Gateshead into one location has built a network and will encourage shared learning, engagement, experiences and potential joined-up working in the future.

### **3. Key successes of the pilot**

**A personalised service.** My Gateshead has aimed to make the service as personalised to the user as possible. This has been achieved through using technology that enables users to customise their 'home page'. This allows the user to have specific information, updates and feeds from the internal council website as well as external websites such as BBC. In order to maintain the users' personal customisation of the website over time the users access the My Gateshead function by signing in. This was felt to heighten levels of user engagement in the service as well as providing the information that is pertinent to the user as effectively and efficiently as possible.

**Conducting 'test groups'** to develop and refine the service. Interviews with council staff highlighted that this allowed for user experiences to be fed back to the delivery team. In particular participants highlighted areas where 'information

overload' was a problem, which was then refined accordingly by the delivery team.

**Working closely with other departments** in the council such as ICT, Customer Services, and the Communications Team has allowed for the project to be promoted internally and also illustrate how the project can be of benefit to their work. Council interviewees stated that this has *“increased levels of internal participation and ownership of components”* of the project leading to sustainability beyond the funding period. An unexpected success was that relationships across the council have developed and nurtured during the development of the project.

**Promoting the project to community and voluntary groups.** This has enabled these groups to have specific ownership over parts of the project and therefore sustain it beyond the funding period. Training community and voluntary groups provided them with the IT skills they needed to develop this part of the website and provide a new platform to promote and communicate with residents who are interested in the community and voluntary organizations. Additionally, the project has enabled for community and voluntary groups in the Gateshead area to communicate with each other and encourage levels of shared learning, networking and support.

#### **4. Challenges and how they were overcome**

**Timing.** Dovetailing the launch of the Timely Information for Citizens initiative with the re-launch of the council website provided a number of positives, such as a vested interest in technology within the council. However, a simultaneous launch meant that the Timely Information for Citizens project had delays in going 'live' as the council website was not ready for launch. This did allow, though, for more time to refine different parts of the project.

#### **5. Learning for other areas/local authorities**

**Dedicated team:** Council staff stated that having dedicated full-time members of staff that have ownership and leadership of the project promotes a focused approach for developing the project, and a close knit team. This allows for decisions and actions to take place more efficiently. This team is then *“visibly recognisable in the council as the point of contact”* which can then encourage and mobilise high levels of buy-in and joined up working with other departments in the council.

**User involvement.** Maintaining a high level of user involvement during the planning, building and maintenance stages of the project was felt to be important. Working collaboratively with users during each stage of the project has enabled content to be specific to the audience whilst simultaneously building awareness, buy-in, ownership and sustainability of the programme as users are encouraged to make decisions on how the project develops.

**Challenge ways of working.** The pilot provided an opportunity to promote change in the way that the Council works and delivers projects by deliberately bringing together a number of disparate projects into a coherent programme. In addition, building 'My Gateshead' around the user experience enabled a wider view to be taken of timely information provision, broadening thinking beyond individual service areas.

## Case study profile 3: Leeds City Council

### **Infostore: Better information for older people in Leeds**

[http://www.olderpeopleleeds.info/clients/infostore/modules/combined/interface/COMBINEDMOD\\_viewlist.aspx?itemtype=all&page=home](http://www.olderpeopleleeds.info/clients/infostore/modules/combined/interface/COMBINEDMOD_viewlist.aspx?itemtype=all&page=home)

### **Background**

Infostore is a web-based resource used by older people in Leeds, their carers and the professionals who work with them. Infostore is a resource not only for people to go to when they have a health, social care need or issue, but where people are engaged and encouraged to help them prepare for older age.

### **1. Objectives:**

Infostore brings together information about resources, news, events and activities within the Leeds area along with more general advice and information of specific interest to the target audience (older people). The overarching objective of Infostore is to support older, and disabled people in maintaining health and independence, maintaining a healthy active lifestyle and wellbeing, by being able to find out about and access information and services in good time. Infostore also has a number of wider objectives:

- to provide better information for older people in Leeds so they can give better and more informed life choices
- to improve citizen engagement through giving them the platform to start discussions and interact with others on the website, helping to overcome isolation among older people
- to improve older people's IT skills and enhance digital literacy through training provided by Infostore at libraries and in sheltered home organisations
- to produce an interactive resource that allows users to feedback on events, organisations and services that older people use
- to provide older people with a space to suggest content, participate in discussions, and keep up-to-date with what is 'going on' for older people in Leeds
- to produce a more efficient back-office administration system
- to enable data sharing with other websites/organisations and to produce a database that can use other website's data; and
- to allow for information to be accessible to minority groups for example, publishing information in multinational languages and British Sign Language

## 2. What the pilot did

The information that Infostore provides can be divided into core areas/themes, including: Care and Support; Carers; Disability; Health and Wellbeing; Home, Neighbourhoods and Community; Leisure and Learning; Money; Rights, Advice and Advocacy; Transport; Work and Volunteering. The website has been designed to be easy to navigate for first time users and there are clear instructions on how to use the Infostore site, an A to Z of the site as well as popular links in large attractive design on the right-hand side of the homepage. Information is available in other languages, selected based on local minority groups and through a consultation process. 'Key news' is also displayed on the site, this provides an up-to-date news'stream of information that is of use to older people, their carers or community organisations in the Leeds area.

The screenshot shows the Infostore website homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Home | About Us | Contact | Sitemap | A+ A-' and a search bar. Below the navigation bar, there is a main header with the Infostore logo and the tagline 'better information for older people in Leeds'. The left sidebar contains a vertical list of category buttons: 'Care and support', 'Carers', 'Disability', 'Health and wellbeing', 'Home, neighbourhood and community', 'Leisure and learning', 'Money', 'Rights, advice and advocacy', 'Transport', 'Work and volunteering', 'Community languages', and 'All'. The main content area features a large banner with the text 'better information for older people in Leeds' and a photo of an elderly woman. Below the banner, there is a feedback poll titled 'Feedback: take our poll' with the question 'Did you find what you were looking for today? (Poll Closed)'. To the right of the poll, there are two news articles: 'Falls Awareness Week' and 'The Big Tree Plant'. The right sidebar contains several utility links: 'Print this page', 'News...', 'Blogs & Discussions', 'Join us on Facebook', 'Free email newsletter', 'Community Languages', 'Handy Numbers', and three RSS feeds for 'Recently updated items', 'Highly rated items', and 'Most popular items'. At the bottom of the page, there is a 'Google' search bar and an 'Add to Infostore' button.

Infostore utilises web 2.0 technology to enable more interactive features such as blogs, Facebook; review and rate; discussion boards; I-Google, cloud-tagging and e-forms. Therefore, in addition to using Infostore as a hub of information that can be used by the target audience (collating over one-thousand pieces of scattered information into one location), it allows for users to co-produce data as well as engage with other users to find out information about events in Leeds. The development of the website was enhanced through user consultations. Here, the Infostore team researched the types of information that older people in Leeds

wanted to know, as well as the type of layout, and web 2.0 technologies that the website should/should not have.

As part of the InfoStore package training has also been provided in libraries and also sheltered homes. This allowed older people to engage with ICT (perhaps for the first time), to enhance the levels of digital literacy and to understand the benefits of using technology, such as saving time and interacting with family, friends, groups and organisations. The training was primarily funded through Cities in Balance.

### **3. Key successes of the pilot**

**Easy access to information** is a priority for Infostore. Interviews with council staff and stakeholders stated that the site has been designed with the *“audience firmly in mind”*. The site took into consideration the target audience regardless of abilities and language, for example having language available in multiple languages as well as having text that could be made larger or smaller depending on the user’s preference.

**Training.** Many of the Infostore’s target audience had no previous experience of using computers. From user focus groups it was felt that the training provided by the Infostore team had helped to increase levels of digital literacy among older people in Leeds. Additionally at each site where training had been delivered to older people, mentors were identified in order for continued support to be provided. From the first training sessions eleven mentors had been identified across five locations. Users in the focus groups stated that *“Infostore has opened up a whole new world”* where they can *“explore”* and *“learn”*.

**User consultation.** There were six user groups, comprising of 36 older people, carers, volunteers and professionals that were held during the development of Infostore’s new features in 2009. Feedback influenced the developments of Infostore in terms of content, design and technologies. In addition, ongoing panels and editorial boards have been established to inform content and to drive the blogs and discussions. This enhances the levels of ownership of Infostore leading to users driving the content of the website in the direction that will benefit them the most.

**Proactive promotion.** Infostore has been promoted in the local community through building and nurturing relationships with agencies and organisations who are well connected with the target user group. Such agencies and organisations include sheltered home agencies, libraries, hospitals and neighbourhood community groups. This proactive method, rather than a ‘build it and they will come’ approach, has resulted in a number of successes. For example, establishing these relationships has led to libraries giving their computers one day a week for the use of Infostore and an area for training to take place, also hospitals have put advertising on waiting room screens telling patients about

Infostore. In addition, promotional materials have been produced including more than 50 posters, 8,000 flyers, 3,000 bookmarks, 1,000 pens, 1,000 business cards and 500 A6 pads all with information about Infostore. There is also a continuing focus to promote InfoStore in the local press.

#### **4. Challenges and how they were overcome**

InfoStore encountered relatively few challenges, arguably because the programme had been established prior to Timely Information for Citizens funding and many of the teething problems had been identified and rectified. However, there had been some perceptions reported that older people do not use computers and questioning why there should be a programme specifically targeted for them. This has come from a variety of people both internally to the council and organisations that they work with. However, ensuring that there was high level political support from inception was a way of helping to overcome opposition.

#### **5. Learning for other areas/local authorities**

**User involvement.** Maintaining a high level of user involvement during the planning, building and maintenance stages of the programme was important for a number of reasons. In Leeds, user groups, panels and boards have been established to ensure that the content of Infostore is suitable for the target audience in terms of information provided, technology used as well as the layout of the website. Working collaboratively with users during all stages of the programme has enabled content to be specific to the target audience whilst simultaneously building awareness, buy-in, ownership and sustainability of the programme as users can, and are encouraged to, make decisions on how 'their' Infostore develops.

**Proactive marketing.** Infostore proactively contacted agencies and organisations that have strong associations or links with older people in Leeds and introduced the benefits of the programme to them. This approach has been particularly successful in Leeds because many of the target users had no, or low levels of digital literacy and therefore would not have been exposed to the service. Furthermore, working with agencies such as Arms Length Management Organisations raises awareness and provides the opportunity for older people to be trained and use technology in a safe and trusting environment.

**Partnership working** enables groups and organisations to achieve more than working independently. Infostore worked with various partners including University of Leeds, Age Concern, Neighbourhood Network Schemes, NHS Leeds, Arms Length Management Organisations and other sheltered housing providers, Connect Housing and Libraries increasing the levels of shared learning; awareness of Infostore; and the quality of information that Infostore can share with its users. In addition there was joined up working in the Council

between different departments producing organisational benefits. For example, Infostore worked closely with the Customer Services Department allowing for staff to answer enquiries more accurately and efficiently generating in-house efficiencies combined with improving the service to the customer. Working collaboratively across the Council was found to increase the level of buy-in and awareness of Infostore whilst also highlighting the benefits of the programme.

**Accessibility.** Producing an accessible website is imperative for the success of the initiative, especially when the website is designed for minority or targeted groups. Working with a website provider who has specialist experience and provided the necessary expert advice, combined with the user group consultations allowed for the website to be made accessible to the target groups in terms of language, content, navigation and technology.

## Case study profile 4: Lichfield District Council

### Voice It

<http://www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/voiceit>

### Background

Lichfield Voice It! is an online consultation hub. It combines information about the locality with interactive tools so that the public are able to interact with the Council. It has been able to replace more costly face-to-face and paper based consultations with online versions.

### 1. Objectives of the pilot

The main aim of this pilot was to improve people's knowledge of how they can interact with their council and influence its future direction. The pilot developed an online platform which:

- provides a portal to quickly access services provided by the council
- allows users to view and comment on planning applications
- lists local consultations in a calendar, so people can see what's coming up
- allows citizens to have their say on all consultations that affect the district
- gives citizens the ability to create petitions to directly influence the local council

### 2. What the pilot did

Lichfield district council developed Voice it!, an online tool that brings together all district council, county council and other local and regional consultations in one website area. It was intended to become a hub for citizen interaction across the district, both on behalf of the district council, key strategic partners (such as PCTs, police, fire etc) as well as regional and national bodies.

The site links to consultations, old and new, and makes it easier for citizens to find out about what agencies want their views on, as well as to get involved and comment. It also allows for people to find out how previous consultation responses have been used and how past consultations have been taken forward.

Making it easy to [access council services](#), [report problems](#) in your area, view [planning applications](#), find out [what's going on locally](#), [have your say](#) on local issues, and much more.

[Home](#) [A-Z of services](#) [Council services](#) [News](#) [Contacts](#) [Opening hours and location](#) [My area](#) [Online map](#) [SIGN IN or REGISTER](#)

[Home](#) » [Voice it!](#)

## Welcome to Voice it!



Voice it! is your one stop shop for giving us your views on the things that matter to you, whether it's finding out about the consultations that affect you in your area, or discussing local issues in our online forums (coming soon). For help or advice on using this system, call our team on 01543 308122.

### 3. Key successes of the pilot

**Strong business model:** Potentially, having online consultations saves a considerable amount of money. Previously, all consultations were done via paper surveys and online consultations, which were difficult to find as they could sit in various areas of the website. Arranging consultations through adverts in the local paper as well as funding venues is costly and did not always produce a high response rate. Paper surveys too can be expensive due to printing and postal costs and do not always reach those who want to engage. Having online consultations has meant that these were run by project leaders who *“each became a moderator, so it was in their interest to promote it.”* Also, as the surveys are now online the results can be entered straight into Snap Surveys for analysis *“making my job easier”*.

**Users able to see results:** Some users were very happy to be able to see the results of the consultations, demonstrated by the comments left on the website. This feedback loop was part of the initial rationale of the project as according to the project manager *“As a resident it's frustrating being asked for a view and not seeing what happens to it... It's hard to make them come back if they don't feel their wishes were listened to.”*

**Greater convenience for users:** According to one user, whose parents also use the website, they no longer need to come in to do consultations and as they don't have their own transport the ability to now contribute to consultations online is a big bonus. Other users reported that the site was easy to navigate. A number of respondents also mentioned that the website being on 24 hours a day is a big advantage as consultations can now be ongoing rather than at a specific time.

#### 4. Challenges and how they were overcome

**Language not well adapted to citizens:** Several users complained that the language on the website was very esoteric and not easy to access for ordinary citizens. The Voice it! manager believed this may have been due to different people writing individual explanations at the front of each consultation and that each had a different style. The project manager felt the problem has been resolved to some extent since *“A final check by the website team means that the explanations incorporate the feel of the rest of the website”*.

**Marketing strategy could be improved:** According to a project partner, *“it was a very soft launch in Feb 2010 in a resident’s newsletter”*. Voice it! has so far relied on word of mouth to market the website and promotion via council tools such as the website and residents newsletters, due to budget constraints. Indeed, four of the five users interviewed found out about Voice it! through internal council communications. This indicates that more could be done to market the site more widely. However, after the initial success of Voice it!, it has become the main consultation tool for many district council projects so that the website now features in promotional materials for the projects it supports

**Too council led:** For some users, the site could be greatly improved and could be more user-led. As one user suggested, the website *“seems to be written by people who know what they’re looking for... [much of the content is] the statement that everyone’s agreed to put out, not to the question you’ve asked.”* Through the development process of Voice it! this criticism has become less valid. The initiative has played an important part in making sure that the consultation process leads development so that communities are involved at the very beginning of the process. The launch of online petitions and the planned inclusion of e-forums are part of this effort.

**Engagement with Customer Services:** According to a project partner, the customer service teams should have been involved from the outset. As Customer Services are important in Lichfield in terms of getting feedback from citizens, the plan could have initially included a role for Customer Services in delivering the project and sharing data better. Indeed, *“training customer services so that they can guide people through the system is now part of the overall community engagement strategy”*.

#### 5. Learning for other areas

**A simple and integrated website leads to better usage:** As mentioned above, 20 per cent of all users wrote a comment on the website. The majority of comments were in relation to the simplicity of the concept. As one citizen said, *“all the consultation tools are all in one place... There might be a current consultation on but you might want to start a petition or contact a local member. It*

*should be all in one pot. If you work or live or study in Lichfield you want to do everything in one place not be constantly moved on, you want a one stop shop.”*

**Internal buy-in is key to improving future use of the website:** Even though a high number of users visit the site (4,464 between January 2010 and October 2010), there was a slight drop in numbers in recent months. A number of users claimed that there was currently not enough going on the site and it was claimed by one interviewee that what makes a website healthy is a continuous stream of new material: if this stops, users will stop returning. Consultations posted on the site were generated from a small pool of participating teams at the district council; if all teams were participating, far more consultations would be posted.

Convincing council partners to begin using the service may be essential to the initiative taking hold in the council. It was hoped that internal and external promotion of existing consultations will improve take up, as will long term planning of consultations. However, it was thought that *“there will always be times when no consultations are necessary and the site is quiet. By introducing other methods of engaging such as e-petitions customers will still be able to engage with us and use Voice it!”*.

**Topics need to be interesting:** It has proven difficult for some consultations, such as street lighting, to generate interest. Citizens will not engage in every topic. This is an issue of the quality/quantity balance for the project manager who felt that *“having lots of consultations on the site does not necessarily make it better but having the constant facility for customers to feedback to us is key”*.

## Case study profile 5: London Borough of Redbridge

### **My Neighbourhood**

<http://www.redbridge.gov.uk/>

### **Background**

The My Neighbourhood project developed by Redbridge aimed to develop an interactive, ultra-local, communications network linking residents to their own communities, and to information provided by councils and other local organisations. The pilot was integrated with Redbridge 1 (the council online site), which is an award winning council website and had already over 20,000 users at the start of the My Neighbourhood project and now has over 33,000 users. It had the dual aim of service improvement and citizen engagement.

### **1. Objectives**

The overall objectives of the Redbridge pilot were to:

- make local government more directly relevant to people's lives as part of what was already a well developed council website
- engage the community in a more dynamic way, enabling the council to engage at levels more meaningful for individuals in a community and in a way which is more in tune with what residents want

In particular, the project aimed to enable the council to expand the impact of existing resources and learn about ways to combine new, web-based technologies to enhance the flow of information and resident interaction. They include:

- Better understanding of how to take community engagement and development online, including access to personalised information and taking existing offline networks online (for example, neighbourhood watch).
- Use of existing statutory and other information (Modern.gov, planning notices, etc) to increase resident involvement.
- Integrating the councils' existing website platform with web 2.0 technology (e.g. Google mapping) to create effective ICT solutions with minimal development costs.
- Using ultra-local information to demonstrate local government's direct relevance to residents' lives.

## **2. What the pilot did**

Redbridge worked hard to include users in the production of information in the My Neighbourhood part of the council website.

What was distinctive about the implementation of Redbridge's objectives was its adoption of an 'ultra-local' strategy. It involved a migration of community-based services that were previously off-line (such as voluntary sector organisations and neighbourhood information) to on-line status. In turn, statutory information (like planning notices) was made more accessible to enable more active resident involvement in decision-making. A key innovation in this strategy was to integrate the formal information held by local government agencies with information provided by citizens, thus promoting a transition from traditional forms of local government information to co-produced knowledge.

The information provided covered local services information (council and police, health and voluntary sector); email/SMS alerts for service changes and updates; a local planning activity register, providing updates and alerts of planning activity in the local area; local councillor and councillor surgery details; local neighbourhood committee details and interactive opportunities; local events listings including a submission facility for partners and residents; local newswire facility delivering locality-based news from the council, its partners, citizen journalists and external local news sources, to include RSS feed facility and automated links to external sites such as local blogs, Twitter, Facebook; locality based discussion forums, and an 'Ask my neighbour' neighbourhood-based social networking facility.

## My Neighbourhood

### This is your neighbourhood online

Enter your postcode for information and interactive opportunities from within 1km of where you live. Register to set your own boundaries on our interactive map. Simply drag the circle to take in an area covering anything from 100m to 1km from your home address. Once you have set your neighbourhood, you may:

- **Find** what's happening where you live, including information about local services, news, events, planning applications and community activity.
- **Do** Report a problem such as broken street lamp, missed bin collection or abandoned car (there are more than **37** reports). Or make a pledge to do something positive in your community.
- **Say** Join your neighbourhood social networks and discussion forums to have your say about local matters, submit a local news story or promote a local event.

### Keep up to date

#### Do it online

- Find your nearest 
- My Neighbourhood 
- Report issues 
- Redbridge i feedback 

#### Redbridge news

-  Businesses pledge to make Ilford stronger after conference
-  School dancers light up Ilford for Olympic countdown

An important innovation was the introduction of a monitoring role for citizens. This entailed locality-based problem reporting; rating of local authority services; citizen feedback and contract monitoring of key local services such as street cleansing, recycling, refuse collection.

The use of particular Web 2.0 tools like geo-tagging; Google Mapping; Google Calendar and Google Video reflects the ultra-local focus of the pilot. By drilling down into the sub-communities in Redbridge, it was expected that the aggregate outcomes of individual citizen involvement would contribute to developing social capital and community cohesion at the larger scale.

### 3. Key success factors

**Third sector involvement:** Involving the local voluntary sector in the development of the site ensured that there was broad buy-in and also provided smaller voluntary sector organisations with the opportunity to develop a web presence often for the first time. One focus group member said:

*“Having the information about what CVS have to offer is good direct marketing. Information is put up quickly by the council and is up to date.”*

**Internal buy-in:** There was a clear relationship between the clarity of the

concept and project objectives, and a high level of officer and member support, and engagement of the stakeholders through the voluntary sector which ensured that the project would go ahead and be completed.

**Use of interactive elements:** High numbers of users (33,000) of the Redbridge I website has meant that there is a user population already alert to the opportunities provided by the emerging technology and evidence tells us they are using My Neighbourhood. Including interactive elements has a payoff for the council. Anecdotal evidence already suggests that users engage in activities of direct interest to themselves may become more 'engaged and empowered citizens' as a result. For example, one resident who became involved in order to protest against the sale of allotments went on to become actively engaged in local politics more generally. It was also used as a learning tool for older people:

*"Our organisation has a webpage but many of our members are over 60 and have limited access and experience of IT. So we use My Neighbourhood as a tool for learning and our information is there as information."*

**Cost savings** are already perceived: for example, 30 per cent more people now using planning applications online (with a 75 per cent cost saving per application); online payments have tripled and council staff reported that service repair times have improved now that they are more visible.

#### **4. Challenges and how they were overcome**

**Developing such an initiative is time intense and high on resources.** A beta site was launched in November 2009 but when the small internal team was moved to a different project some delays to the final launch were inevitable. Launch proper was in September 2010

**The focus of My Neighbourhood** as being ultra-local and the forums attached to these has not suited some users who wanted broader discussion areas across the borough. Although there is also forum for this on the wider site, users cannot initiate discussions themselves. In both, posts are put up in office hours. This highlights the tension between council and user control of sites. Attached to this was view held by users interviewed (and on posts) that there needed to be an 'animator' to keep the forums alive with issues and questions and at ultra-local level this many not be possible.

#### **5. Learning for other areas**

Research work with voluntary sector revealed how far 'back' the sector was and that even engaging smaller charities and providing them with publicity was a bonus. They were not however, ready to use web 2.0 tools so the team had to think more about using it as a basic communication tool which also supported CVS developing IT and communications capacity.

## Case study profile 6: Birmingham City Council

### Digital Birmingham, Birmingham Open City

<http://bevocal.org.uk/>

### Background

Birmingham's Be Vocal project represents an innovative example of how timely information could be produced for citizens. The information delivery was highly decentralised with the council operating as a data source and network hub rather than provider, and civil society in the form of socially active technology experts and bloggers were viewed as the information deliverers with the project team acting to increase their capacity to communicate for the public good (and to hold the council to account).

### 1. Objectives of the pilot

The aims of the project were to:

- increase awareness of council datasets accessible by citizens – this was delivered by the first and third strands (see below)
- produce innovative examples of resources using council datasets – these examples were produced in the fourth and fifth strands
- develop expertise in representative groups that connect to citizens – these were in part developed by strands three to five
- provide a resource point and a feedback channel to the council to facilitate impact on service provision – it was unclear where this was developed in full

### 2. What the pilot did



[Home](#) [Brum Data](#) [Speed Data](#) [About](#) [Mashups](#) [Public Data](#) [Brum Blogs](#)

A site about social media for social good in Birmingham and using the internet to turn public data into something useful.

The project was delivered in five main strands:

1. A central website (BeVocal.org.uk), describing the initiative with educational material about how to create web 2.0 technologies such as mash-ups, where public datasets can be found, a link to a large number of local blogs and promotion for the other strands of work.
2. Social media technology equipment (laptops, flip cameras, microphones, two digital cameras and a GPS device) was purchased and given to a community centre to encourage citizens to produce local mash-ups and other social media.
3. Social media surgeries were commissioned – “geeks” met with local bloggers who had limited technical knowledge, usually in a local pub, to ask questions about blogging and learn new skills (concept explained here: <http://vimeo.com/3688118> ).
4. Mapitude – a technological ideas event which created a mash-up which let the public know where allotments were and what facilities they had. Not utilised further (available here: <http://geopinion.herokuapp.com>).
5. Hackitude – creating a data map that allows people to add their ideas, thoughts, and emotions about a place. This was used in Pilzen, Czech Republic, in the run up to a successful campaign to be the European capital of culture 2015 (available here: <http://maplzen.herokuapp.com/>).

### 3. Key successes of the pilot

Digital Birmingham had a number of successes in creating an interest in the city around using data in new ways. There were a number of things that Digital Birmingham did right to get to this point:

**Tapped into existing networks.** This was confirmed by the Google analytics. Eight of the top 10 methods of getting to the site were referrals, with the other two being direct to the website and Google searches. In order the referrers were: twitter.com, podnosh.com, birminghampost.net, birminghampost.net, paradisecircus.com, digitalbirmingham.co.uk, onlinejournalismblog.com, and birminghamitsnotshit.co.uk

**Outsourced services:** Non-local government logic at work, more comfortable with letting things happen, than predefining deliverables – e.g. mapitude event just got people together with the “*aim of doing something with maps*” whilst the social media surgeries gathered bloggers and technology experts together in a pub and let them mingle as a method of transmitting expertise. Both models were

very loosely controlled and had a less defined theory of change, yet produced more outputs than other pilot areas.

**Project was innovative and intrinsically interesting:** Although locally focused, the project was attractive to a number of stakeholders who may have had no interest in the locality but were interested in the project. This is reflected in the Google analytics which showed that the Be Vocal blog was used by people in 51 countries and that 17 per cent of the website hits were from outside the UK. This is likely to be due to the agenda of the initiative in democratising knowledge and the level of expertise, which was of an international standard.

**Birmingham city:** According to one participant, *“Birmingham was the success factor, full of web savvy individuals, energy is really very strong.”* Therefore similar activities in other smaller towns and cities may not work so well without the critical mass of technologically adept, public-minded individuals within existing and easily created networks.

#### **4. Challenges and how they were overcome**

**Opening data:** As the remit of initiative was to use open data better and open more datasets, there were some difficulties in doing this in certain sectors, such as the police force. In one instance the data map that was being created required up-to-date data from the police which was challenging to keep timely.

**Limits of volunteer run projects:** According to one interviewee, *“the policy assumption of the Big Society is that lots of people want to do volunteering for free, lots of public spirited geeks want to come to events like this. We may well hit a limit on that”*. He added that he would not run an event like Mapitude again for free, so further funding would be necessary to continue with these events. This may represent a limit to purely voluntary action, the organisers in particular.

#### **5. Learning for other areas/local authorities**

**Built capacity in citizens** rather than local authorities. The logic of the intervention was in building capacity in citizens to hold public services to account. In this way, accountability would continue regardless of whether funding is continued and accountability is through independent entities rather than by the commissioning body. The surgeries in particular increased the engagement and empowerment of the bloggers who participated and led to greater civic online participation.

**Harness expertise unavailable within council:** The project was delivered by Digital Birmingham, but utilised nine local organisations, most of whom were micro businesses (less than 10 employees) that were well connected in the Birmingham social media scene. They therefore had a pool of very high level technical expertise, particularly of people who were experts in using data to

create mash ups which made information easier to digest. This expertise coupled with a culture of informal learning led to very innovative interactions which would have been impossible if done in a centralised manner by the city council.

**Importance of human relationships in negotiating access to data:** Although the team was very interested in the use of datasets and the possible technological uses, often it was very important to spend lead time in ensuring that data was open and up to date. This appeared to be the most frustrating aspect of the project for the interviewees, who initially may not have anticipated the scale of resistance against opening datasets. This difficulty was reflected in the lack of communication from the police when the dataset the project was using was made redundant after boundary changes.

**Activities will continue through aided organisations:** Sustainability is best achieved when the project is tapping into existing work streams and networks. The project funded nine organisations and mentored at least one, [podnosh](#), which has since began running more surgeries outside the locality and disseminating it's surgeries more widely.