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Suffolk County Council Family Information Service

Challenge:

Bringing multiple databases together

Suffolk County Council and Idox have a long-standing relationship, going back over 14 years. With thousands of activities, services and events taking place across the county, the challenge for the local authority was how to combine existing directories to create a better user experience across them all.

The Council's forward-thinking team initially recognised a need to bring together multiple sources of community information; family information services (FIS), SEND Local Offer and adult social care, to become a growing and exemplary platform for local information, advice and guidance.

Solution:

Developing a trusted source of local information

The Suffolk team's vision was brought together into one directory and Suffolk InfoLink was created. InfoLink is a dynamic system in which data can be searched, filtered and updated according to a wide variety of information needs. Anita Abram, Directorate of Children and Young People said: "The Directory has changed the way we provide information. We realised the power in bringing everything together, making it much more accessible and useful for our community. By working more closely with all our service providers with live information on InfoLink, we can easily keep in touch with them via email or broadcast messages to ensure the information is always up to date and relevant."

The Council has also linked up with neighbouring local authorities, Norfolk and Devon County Councils to support data syndication and sharing to add value for both providers and the public.

Responding during the COVID-19 pandemic

InfoLink has been put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic. Suffolk's integrated and responsive directory has allowed the Council to be flexible in adapting to new challenges and communicating with residents on crucial issues.

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Anita Abrams

Systems Liaison Officer
Suffolk County Council



The team could communicate with service providers across Suffolk, asking them to report adaptations to their services in real time, information which was fed into a coronavirus support page of the Council website. Users were signposted to vital services including food banks, community support groups and social activity providers. More than 400 services across Suffolk updated their details and InfoLink quickly became the only source of up to date, county-specific information for local services.

Faced with the pandemic, existing services also took on new importance, changing the way information was provided. The Community Information Team (CIT) at Suffolk worked with Idox to quickly deliver the necessary technical changes. Domestic cleaning, for example, suddenly became a key service that people were looking for, as restrictions impacted normal cleaning services. Another innovative feature rolled out was the 'leave website' button which quickly redirects to the BBC Weather website. Initially implemented to support those seeking information about domestic abuse support services, it has now been applied to all pages, allowing users to feel secure on any record.

The close collaboration between Suffolk FIS and the CIT on the InfoLink directory also supported Suffolk's Track and Trace roll-out, the Suffolk Advice and Support Service and the Council's 'Home but not Alone' campaign. All of which helped protect and support the vulnerable, while enabling key workers to find childcare. By working closely with childcare providers across the county, InfoLink quickly developed a list of more than 500 childcare providers who could support key workers and a brief was sent regularly to over 900 providers.

The communication process was two-way, with residents and providers able to pass vital information to the Council. Weekly data catch ups fed into directory updates, ensuring the system remained up to date and responsive.

Outcome:

Looking to the future

By harnessing the power of information, Suffolk has become a more efficient county council, and one which has a more direct relationship with the people it serves. This efficiency has been recognised widely and led to Suffolk County Council being recently named 'Most Innovative Family Information Service' by the National Association of Family Information Services (nasen).

The local authority's working relationship with Idox has been key to both delivering the service initially and allowing it to adapt in response to customer demand.

With an established community directory, Suffolk continually strives to add new features and functionality to keep it fresh, exploring new ways of engaging with its service users by linking into other platforms and making use of social media to build an even stronger connection with families in the county.

Anita continued: "Idox has a really good understanding of how we can work together to move at pace. We don't have to wait for the next release of a product and it's always been easy to do things quickly. We also have a really responsive relationship with the Idox Service Desk. "Facilitated by Idox, we're also building a network with other local authorities using the directory to discuss best practice and share experiences, as well as feeding into the future development roadmap of the product to keep it as dynamic as possible for service users. We're excited to continue working together to develop InfoLink further."

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