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Reading Borough Council Idox's award-winning Directory platform supports a diverse local community

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Maryam Makki

Family Information Service Manager
Reading Borough Council
(delivering on behalf of BFFC)

Background:

A proactive Council prioritising community engagement and collaboration

With a highly transient and diverse community of over 160,000 residents, community engagement is central to Reading Borough Council's strategy for delivering a high-quality information, advice and guidance service, delivered on behalf of and in partnership with Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC), to meet the needs of its residents.

The Council's forward-thinking team recognised the advantages of bringing together multiple sources of community information, working with its communities to understand how best to deliver advice, guidance and access to services in a way that meets their needs.

Challenge:

Delivering a high-quality, robust, streamlined, tailored information platform to support the community

In 2013, the Adult Services team at Reading Council was looking to procure a new system that could deliver a central information hub to meet the Care Act across all services – this includes services within children's, SEND Local Offer, Family Information Services (FIS) and Adult Social Care. When the SEND Code of Practice came into force in 2015, the Council consulted with parent carers to understand how to best provide access to the wide range of information across those services in a way that met the community's needs.

Feedback from parent carers included the need for an impartial service, with information available on an independent website and platform. It also needed to meet the varying needs of users in terms of accessibility, ease of use and statutory guidance.

Maryam Makki, Family Information Services Manager, Reading Borough Council, comments, “While we had a previous solution in place for FIS, we needed something more robust to suit the front-end website of the Local Offer.

“We didn't want the challenges associated with having multiple systems including getting them all 'talking to one another', nor a complicated user journey and unnecessary cost implications.”



Solution:

Delivering a trusted single source of local information and support

The Council considered its existing systems and researched providers in the market. Parent carer feedback through Reading Families Forum was crucial to its decision. The Council wanted a way to give access to all services in Reading to anyone of any age in the community who might need support. The Council also recognised that neighbouring councils were using Idox's Directory platform and needed to ensure that Reading families could access services in those neighbouring authorities. The Directory platform had a syndication portal option to pull information from local health trusts, both of these being a high priority for parents and carers.

It implemented Idox's Directory platform, in consultation with parent carers, young people, voluntary and statutory services. It delivers vital information about services available to families, children, and young people within the local area. The Council needed to focus on providing a whole service, not just the platform. As a family information service, the Council has almost 3000 records on its Directory, so it needed to have engagement and buy-in from those services to ensure the information is accurate and up to date. Working closely with childcare providers, schools, the voluntary community sector and other statutory partners, it has worked hard to raise awareness and encourage them to use the platform as their key point of contact and primary tool to display and access local information.

Outcome:

An award-winning platform with community engagement at its core

The Council and BFFC's proactive approach to communication, collaboration and co-production to support the community has been well-recognised. At the 2022 NAFIS Awards, Reading Borough Council was **awarded Best Community Engagement** for its SEND Local Offer and FIS websites (delivered on behalf of BFFC). This marks the second consecutive year that the Council has won at the NAFIS Awards, having taken home the award for Best Local Offer in 2021.

Maryam comments, "One of the benefits of Idox's solution is that we have been able to tailor the delivery specifically to suit our families, children and young people to ensure it fully meets their particular needs. During our 2021 SEND inspection, we received overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding the Local Offer, primarily from parents and carers, on the user experience, navigation and comprehensive information available. The collaboration and co-production with users have been central to ensuring it is a valuable service for all."

The Council and BFFC is committed to ensuring its services are fit for purpose. The team reviews, analyses and updates the Directory on an ongoing basis to make sure it keeps up with the needs of the community. It has a Local Offer working group, made up of parent carers, voluntary and statutory sector that are highly involved in any enhancements we undertake. This includes a design refresh which it delivered in 2022.

Maryam continues, "We wanted to build on the feedback from the Ofsted inspection in 2021. We don't want to stand still, and by continually reviewing our services, including the design, our users have a continued positive experience, they know where to get information – it's helpful and easy to find. And they feel supported."

"We work closely with Idox to help ensure the Directory delivers information services to the community easily, quickly and all in one place."

Maryam Makki

Family Information Service Manager
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“Our approach to collaboration includes engaging with other local authorities to share insight and best practice. A group that we started for neighbouring authorities in the Berkshire area has grown to approximately 25 local authorities.”

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“We work really closely with our parent carer forum. They are instrumental to any changes we make. We also work with Special United, a group for young people in our community, to get feedback from them about what’s working well, or not working well, and what we can improve. Guidance, advice and input from the parent carer forum is crucial – they use the platform and have direct contact with families so it has to work for them as well. By involving and collaborating with the right people, we listen to the community and base our approach on the needs of the families and the statutory services working with the families so that the Directory is successful.

Maryam concludes, “Having a Directory platform which meets the needs of our Reading families and young people is paramount. To be successful, we need to deliver accurate and helpful information to our users via an effective navigation tool and simple journey, so they can get the information, advice and guidance they need. Our success has been down to our engagement with the community, and having Idox’s Directory system in place to deliver that information.”

Call us now on 0333 011 1200 or email marketing@idoxgroup.com for more information about Idox’s family information services and Local Offer websites.

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