

Knowledge Hub

Case study

Sophie Wilson and Alice Lilly

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Knowledge Hub

Date: 2012 to the present

Location: UK-based

Mission: To connect the intelligence of the public sector globally

Methods: Online resources and forums

Spend: The initial cost of the programme was £585,000¹

Reach: 122,000 members across 1,900 communities as of April 2016

Access: Registration is free

Context

Knowledge Hub² is an online platform that allows individuals interested in public service delivery to exchange ideas and knowledge through forums, blogposts and messages. With a strong emphasis on facilitating connections and sharing, it is 'the UK's largest platform for public service collaboration'.³

Knowledge Hub was launched in April 2012 by the Local Government Association (LGA), a representative body for local authorities across England. It is a platform for users from a range of sectors – including local and central government – to contact each other, and share information and resources, online. Originally focused on England and Scotland, it is currently broadening its reach internationally, seeking to allow users to 'have global conversations from your desk'.⁴

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Knowledge Hub grew out of, and replaced, the earlier Communities of Practice (CoP) website, which was set up by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) in 2006 and became fully operational in 2007. At its height, the CoP website had 95,000 users and 1,025 communities.⁵ In 2012, the site was rebranded as Knowledge Hub, at the same time as being upgraded technologically.

In 2013, the LGA ran a consultation on the future of Knowledge Hub, against the backdrop of budget cuts. Although there was speculation that the service would be closed, its future was secured through an agreement with CapacityGrid, the business services arm of Liberata UK Ltd, which took over operational responsibility for the site.⁶ For two years, Knowledge Hub was run by the company, whose staff included those who had worked on the site under the LGA.⁷ In December 2015, four staff from Liberata completed a management buy-out, and Knowledge Hub is now run as an independent company, which has no other business interests.

The LGA remains involved as a subscribing organisation, along with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace), the Society of Chief Information Technology Managers (Socitm) and the Improvement Service in Scotland. These organisations contribute funds in return for their own branded communities and a share of revenue in the form of dividends from

digital advertising. The purpose of this new approach is to make Knowledge Hub a source of income, rather than a cost, for these organisations and future public service customers.

The 2015 buy-out of Knowledge Hub was driven by a belief that there is a greater recognition that the public sector globally is facing many shared challenges – in particular, trying to do 'more with less'. Many global challenges, such as the environment, also affect public sectors across national borders. This has led to a greater interest in the global public sector than was previously the case, motivating Knowledge Hub's desire to expand its international reach.

Ways of working

Knowledge Hub's vision is to connect the public sector globally, using a free-to-use platform. The platform allows public service professionals to share and discuss ideas and knowledge. Forty-four languages are built into the platform, allowing for its use by visitors from around the world. So far, only English and French languages are in use.

Individual users can:

- create their own profiles
- add other users as connections, with the Hub suggesting potential connections based on the groups they have joined, and send each other direct messages
- view the documents, blogs and events that are available to users, both as individuals and (where applicable) through groups – 90,000 documents are available on the site's overarching library across a large number of themes, searchable by keyword, with their content ranging from toolkits to reports and guides⁸
- join over 1,900 groups to participate in discussions, share ideas and resources, and work collaboratively.⁹

“Groups that are access-restricted tend to have more activity.”

Groups may be open to anyone; require approval from the group owner (restricted); or be completely hidden (private). Generally, groups that are restricted tend to have more activity. Many groups are based around a particular event or subject, some of which have developed into large national communities of practice over time. Many of these are active on an ongoing basis, for example those covering trading

standards, street naming, and project and programme management. Others fade out of use over time. There are groups on Knowledge Hub that specifically deal with the integration of services at the local level; for example, one group is focused on health and social care integration in Dumfries and Galloway. Some groups focus on particular projects or training courses and are time bound; for example, different cohorts of the national graduate development programme for local government.

The Knowledge Hub team helps members to set up and grow their groups. It supports owners in making the most of the platform through its online facilitators' community, regular webinars and bespoke advice.

Organisations can:

- make use of the Social Hub – an intranet and extranet space for 'organisations who need both internal, secure collaboration spaces and an easy way to work with external partners'¹⁰

- make use of Professional Networks, hosted by Knowledge Hub on behalf of organisations – these are separate, secure spaces on the Hub with the hosted organisation’s branding, allowing it to better engage its staff and partners, and encourage collaboration among them; organisations manage these networks themselves, with support from Hub staff.¹¹

Organisations that currently use Knowledge Hub include Solace, the Local Area Research & Intelligence Association (LARIA) and 406 local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales. In addition, Knowledge Hub is expanding its user base into education and health through partnerships with the Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT) and the Health Project Delivery Community led by Health Education England.

Impact

In April 2016, the site had 122,000 registered users, and it has an average of 2,000 new members every month. Over the previous 12 months, the platform saw an increase in social activity of 25%. On average, 50 groups are created every month. Knowledge Hub has published several case studies exploring how members use the site.¹² These describe a range of benefits, including time and resource savings, such as halving the number of face-to-face meetings of a group by using Knowledge Hub to discuss issues in between meetings.¹³ Beyond this, there is little openly available evidence of the organisation’s impact on its members or wider service outcomes since it became privately owned.

While the platform was run by the LGA, a 2013 study of heads of policy and performance found that among the LGA’s various resources for sector-led improvement, Knowledge Hub was the most well-known, with 91% aware of the site. This survey had a 30% response rate, which the LGA suggest can be taken as generally indicative of the attitudes of the sector.¹⁴ Between February 2013 and February 2014, users accessed an average of seven pages per visit, suggesting that members were engaging with the content available, moving from page to page.¹⁵ The most common motivations for using Knowledge Hub were listed as:

- finding the answer to a specific question
- sharing good practice
- finding people with similar interests.¹⁶

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When asked to choose the main benefits of Knowledge Hub from a list, most respondents chose keeping up to date. Other commonly chosen benefits were exchanging ideas and sharing best practice. However, 21% of respondents said that they hadn’t yet got any benefit from using Knowledge Hub and the survey data revealed little about how improvements have been made in delivering services.¹⁷

Knowledge Hub has suggested that an important area for the development of the site and its future work is to understand the behaviour of its users and encourage them to take ownership of the platform.

Insights

Creating restricted or closed groups can help build trust and encourage participants to share honest reflections

People can be anxious about sharing experiences using public, online forums. Therefore, having the option to restrict who views a post or who can join a group can help to build trust and encourage users to share experiences openly. Private groups can allow for greater 'off-the-record' discussion, making members feel more comfortable about sharing work in progress and ongoing frustrations, not just examples of 'success'.

Online methods provide opportunities for learning from any location at any time

Online resources also have the benefit of being accessible anywhere, allowing people to keep up to date and connect regardless of their location or schedule. This creates opportunities to learn from places or people that might not otherwise be easy to reach and can support 'virtual co-location' allowing teams to share information despite sitting apart. However, online methods cannot replace face-to-face engagement which often makes it easier to have more meaningful and honest discussions about what's working (and not working). A range of approaches are included in our accompanying paper, [Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate and improve outcomes](#).¹⁸

Further resources

Knowledge Hub, ['About Knowledge Hub'](#).

Knowledge Hub, ['Services'](#).

Notes

1. Improvement and Development Agency for local government, 'Costs for Communities of Practice Knowledge Hub' (response to a Freedom of Information request), WhatDoTheyKnow, 2011, retrieved 16 May 2016, www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/costs_for_communities_of_practic
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9. As of March 2015.
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16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
18. Wilson, S., Davison, N. and Casebourne, J., *Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate and improve outcomes*, Institute for Government, London, 2016, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/local-public-service-reform

About the authors

Sophie Wilson is a Researcher at the Institute for Government. Since joining the Institute in 2015, she has been involved in its ministerial development programme and work on public service delivery. Prior to this, Sophie was a researcher at the Office for Public Management, working on a range of engagement and evaluation projects across UK public services. She holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge and a BA from King's College London.

Alice Lilly is a Researcher at the Institute for Government, having first joined the Institute as an intern in 2015. She is currently finishing her PhD thesis at the University of Nottingham, which explores transatlantic links in anti-poverty policy during the 1990s and early 2000s, under New Labour and the New Democrats. While a PhD student, Alice spent a short time as an intern at the Social Market Foundation. Prior to undertaking her PhD at Nottingham, she completed an MA in American Studies, also at Nottingham, and a BA in History at the University of Cambridge.

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All errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

About the project

Last year, the Institute for Government began a major research project on public service delivery at a local level in England. This is a vast, complex terrain and there are many important areas that require urgent attention – whether it is how to drive efficiency savings, deliver digital transformation or make effective use of all providers in a local area, including voluntary and private sector organisations. We decided to focus on one aspect that is critical to achieving better public service outcomes for citizens: joining up and integrating public services around local, citizen needs.

Our briefing paper, [Joining Up Public Services around Local, Citizen Needs](#), identified five perennial barriers that repeatedly hinder integration at a local level, as well as several insights on how to tackle them. Limited sharing of what works (and doesn't work) emerged as a critical barrier that needs urgent attention. Although variation is crucial in ensuring that public services meet local needs, not learning from what has been tried before, or elsewhere, is costly, time intensive and risks duplicating the progress made in other parts of the country. At a time when capacity within local government is declining, and less money is available for service delivery, we cannot afford to keep reinventing the wheel.

A set of eight case studies, including this one, provides more detail about the methods and impact of different approaches designed to support learning between areas. Our accompanying paper, [Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate services and improve outcomes](#), provides much-needed clarity on what would help people leading integration programmes to share experiences and learn from one another to improve outcomes on the ground.

For more information and resources, visit www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery

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2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 0400

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

Email: enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

Web: www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk

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