

The Knowledge Hub

Does this sound familiar? You want to research a new project. You need basic information, policy guidance, evidence of improvement and you need to network.

First, you conduct a search of a government website. Next you click on the LG Improvement and Development and Audit Commission websites, then you trawl Google. Finally, you ring an expert you've found online – and go straight to voicemail. Two hours, several online searches and much note-taking later, the data you've amassed is either incomplete or out of date (or both), and you have a sneaking suspicion that you've left several stones unturned.

Now picture this: you log onto a new website that brings up a customised homepage displaying news and policy information specific to your interests. There's a feed from the micro blogging site Twitter, a link to new guidance just added to the online data bank, there are documents and podcasts recommended by peers and alerts about blogs that the system suggests might be useful.

This sounds like IT fiction but will be social media fact by early next year (2011). LG Improvement and Development's Knowledge Hub, or KHub.

"The KHub is a revolutionary new platform for communication" explains LG Improvement and Development's managing director Rob Whiteman of the resource currently under development. "It will bring people together in one place online to share ideas, knowledge and information. Users will be able to find peers and experts who share their interests, to help each other and develop how they work. It will be a much more co-ordinated and dynamic way of using social media."

What is the Knowledge Hub?

The KHub will be a single window into a world of innovation, improvement and performance, allowing local government to produce and capture its own knowledge more easily. It will be an easy to navigate online resource with huge potential to help you do your job more easily, more quickly and more efficiently.

Imagine the social networking aspects of [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/)¹, the recommendation element of travel website [Tripadvisor](http://www.tripadvisor.com/)² value for money comparisons like [moneysupermarket.com](http://www.moneysupermarket.com/)³, access to value-added applications such as the iPhone

¹ Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/>

² Tripadvisor: <http://www.tripadvisor.com/>

³ Moneysupermarket.com: <http://www.moneysupermarket.com/>

[app store](#)⁴ and a serendipity engine to suggest useful content, like on line retailer [Amazon](#)⁵ does.

As well as all this, the KHub will be an interactive information exchange where users collaborate online to solve problems. There will also be a facility for submitting and comparing data, enabling users to benchmark their performance.

The KHub will trawl through disparate sources of online content, guessing what you're interested in by using a combination of your user profile (you log your interests when you register) and your digital footprint (the system securely tracks your online activity). It will suggest which networks of people or what types of content you might like. A user review function – as on Amazon – will allow users to rate information, therefore helping their peers judge its usefulness.

The KHub will be for councillors, officers, practitioners across public sector, regulators, policy makers, experts. It will be national and international and include users from the private and academic sectors.

More than just an IT solution, the KHub is a far-sighted social media resource that could lead to a major cultural change in the public sector.

Why is social media useful for the public sector?

Social media – for example, Facebook, Twitter and video site YouTube – has made information sharing and communication more immediate.

The public sector can use social media not only to connect with users of its services – councils use Twitter to warn about school closures, for example - but to develop practice and solve problems. At a time when the sector is under enormous pressure, social media can save time and money by making communication and information exchange easier and faster.

The spending squeeze also makes it harder to attend events and conferences. Money can be saved if lessons are shared without spending money or time on travel.

“The emerging hole in town hall finances means we need a radically new vision of how we work, where we rely on interested parties, volunteers and local communities to shape their services,” says Whiteman. Councils are being asked to do more with less as demands from local people are rising and the need to innovate is crucial - the K-Hub could not be launched at a better time.

How does the KHub fit in with government policy?

The development of the KHub is in line with the government's transparency programme which includes the website [data.gov.uk](#). The programme encourages government, local government and public bodies to make more information accessible online and boost the transparency of public services.

⁴ iPhone app store: <http://www.apple.com/iphone/apps-for-iphone/>

⁵ Amazon: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/>

In June, CLG Secretary Eric Pickles said that all local government spending above £500 should be in the public domain by January 2011. Once councils publish this data, they can use KHub facilities for benchmarking and for doing value for money comparisons. Using this sort of information in a secure conversational space means councils will be able to identify ways to make efficiency savings and improve services.

How does the KHub fit in with existing online resources?

Think of the KHub as a single gateway to access different online resources ranging from public sector websites to local government blogs and podcasts.

The KHub will act as the hosting framework for existing online tools such as the LG Improvement and Development's cost comparison professional networking site the Efficiency Exchange and its Local Innovations Awards Scheme website. It will build on the LG Improvement and Development's award-winning Community of Practice resource (CoPs) which has more than 60,000 members sharing ideas and support in over 1000 communities. CoPs will eventually become part of the KHub.

For cynics who suspect this will create another layer of online bureaucracy, far from it. The KHub will not only be the glue that binds different Internet-based content, but the filter that makes sense of it all. Stephen Dale, the knowledge consultant developing the KHub project for LG Improvement and Development, says:

“Conversations are taking place all over the social web; the KHub will be a permeable environment that provides greater visibility and access to these conversations, enabling users to discover and participate in the topics of most interest to them.”

At Devon County Council, an authority at the forefront of the public sector social media revolution, officers and councillors are aware of the benefits the KHub can bring.

Devon has integrated its website with Twitter and Facebook and uses Vimeo to share videos. It has piloted an internal social media platform to replace the email lists used for circulating information. The volume of emails fell from 400-500 to 70-80 across a team of eight people and the need for physical face-to-face meetings fell. The council estimates that the reduction in email and meetings helped save £15,500 a year. If applied across the whole council, the time saved when looking for information is estimated to be worth over £750,000 each year.

The Devon example indicates how the KHub could lead to similar savings at other councils. Carl Haggerty, Enterprise Architect in the Business Solutions and Innovations team, says:

“The KHub takes the best of the existing social web and provides the integration and the serendipity. It is not that it creates or provides a new platform for blogs, but it creates an infrastructure and takes all that content and makes sense of it. People might have a direct feed from the KHub to their intranet site. As local government moves more towards service delivery through third sector partners, partners can share information on the KHub.”

The KHub - a social media signpost

One useful element of the KHub will be its serendipity engine – rather like the online retailer Amazon suggests what products to browse once you have shopped once or twice, the KHub will point you to useful items of interest. “The KHub tracks your digital footprint as you view information online and identifies what you’re interested in,” adds project lead Stephen Dale. “It will be a lens and a filter for you to see relevant content through.”

The KHub – making data make sense

The KHub will be what is known as an open platform, meaning that users can create their own applications and ‘mashup’ or combine data to reveal new information. Different sorts of publicly available information will be accessible and comparable, for example, data sources from portals such as local.gov.uk and data.london.gov.uk. You might overlay figures on youth employment with other socio-demographic data and display them in a 3D graphic or a time-series graph. Or you might compare knife crime incidents with social deprivation statistics and display this on a map, while another user could then add the youth facilities available in that area. However, the true value of such comparisons is dependent on having consistent data standards and access to accurate reference information which will be supplied to the KHub from the esd-toolkit.

Kent County Council, another leading proponent of social media in the public sector, is looking forward to exploiting the potential of the KHub. Kent piloted the development of CoPs, has an internal micro-blogging pilot and uses Twitter corporately with some 1,250 followers.

Noel Hatch, Projects and Research Lead in the Innovations team, says:

“The best things in life are free and local government should make better use of the skills it has by sharing them between local authorities so we don’t reinvent the wheel. We have all this information, all this knowledge and all these datasets but we need to make better sense of what can sometimes be seen as an information overload.”

Hatch says that a recent Kent community meeting to generate solutions to local problems, such as access to learning opportunities, raised issues that could have been explored on the K-Hub. He explains:

“One of the ideas was about a ‘learning bus’. Now if this could come through the KHub, you could overlay the location of learning opportunities with bus routes and timetables and type ‘learning bus’ into the search engine and be pointed towards other councils running similar schemes.”

The KHub – peer-reviewed content

“People tend to trust content if it has been recommended by people they know or trust,” says LG Improvement and Development’s Dale. “A holidaymaker would potentially judge comments on Tripadvisor as being more honest than the description in a travel agent’s brochure. In the same way, the KHub will enable users to comment on and recommend content that they have found useful.”

The KHub – signalling cultural change

Ultimately, it is hoped, there will be minimal steering required from national bodies such as LG Improvement and Development - the KHub will effectively be owned by the local government sector and its partners.

What's more, says the LG Improvement and Development's Whiteman, as the UK moves towards economic recovery "there will be greater demands on local government to be more fleet of foot". Social media resources such as the KHub can help achieve that goal. "Knowledge of what works and what doesn't work can be found within the local government community," he says.

"Unleashed, this knowledge can be collectively focused on excellent public service delivery. Bringing people together in the KHub will help us all to capture that energy, sharing ideas and experience to make change happen."

Although local government as a sector is embracing online working, many individuals are apprehensive about using social media for work. Dale adds: "This is a cultural barrier that we need to break – the CoPs platform has proved the professional benefits of social networking."

The KHub not only upgrades and integrates existing platforms of knowledge sharing, but it also represents a significant cultural shift and a new way of capturing, sharing and integrating our local knowledge. "It could change our interaction with each other, and open up new opportunities for collaboration and co-production with public and private sector partners," says Dale. "A cultural and technology framework fit for 21st century government."

ENDS

Weblinks

LG Improvement and Development (<http://www.idea.gov.uk/>)

Communities of Practice (<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk>)

Knowledge Hub community of practice (<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/c/1195520/home.do>)

esd-toolkit (<http://www.esd.org.uk>)

Knowledge Hub (<http://www.local.gov.uk/knowledgehub>)

Knowledge Hub Video (<http://www.local.gov.uk/lgv2/core/page.do?pagelId=517074>)

Local Government Transparency programme
(<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=21407431>)

Data.gov.uk and data.london.gov.uk - data portals into non-personal government data that is free for the public to see or for web application developers to re-use.

Explanation of terms

Social Media (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media)

Media used for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques.

Facebook (<http://www.techterms.com/definition/facebook>)

Facebook is a social networking website that was originally designed for college students, but is now open to anyone 13 years of age or older. Facebook users can create and customise their own profiles with photos, videos, and information about themselves.

Twitter (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>)

A social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read other user messages called *tweets*.

Blog (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>)

A type of website or part of a website. Blogs are usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video

Podcast (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcast>)

A series of digital media files (either audio or video) that are released episodically and often downloaded through web syndication.

Serendipity engine

The technology that supports the ability to find something valuable or delightful when you are not looking for it.

Mashup (<http://www.techterms.com/definition/mashup>)

A Web application that combines multiple services into a single application. The primary purpose of most Web mashups is to consolidate information with an easy-to-use interface.