

DCSF Information and Signposting Project: Sharing the Learning

Taking Positive Activities information further



Introduction

Section 507B of the Education Act 1996¹ requires every unitary and county local authority in England to secure access for all young people aged 13-19 - and those with learning difficulties up to the age of 24 - to sufficient **'positive leisure-time activities'**.

In order to support this access the duty also requires that local authorities publicise information on positive activities and facilities in their area and that the information offered should be **comprehensive, accurate and accessible**.

Primary responsibility for fulfilling this duty falls within the remit of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services within each of the relevant local authorities.

The DCSF Information and Signposting Project (ISP) has been working with twenty local authorities to learn about the challenges associated with meeting the duty. Through use of Substance's Plings platform it has involved the piloting of fresh approaches to **gathering, managing and sharing** positive activity information².

This document aims to share the learning from the first year of the project and includes practical step by step guidance, addressing each of these three areas, to help local authorities benefit from it.

What is a Positive Activity?

Positive activities can be delivered by local authority, third sector or private sector providers and include:

Educational leisure time activities such as homework or special interest clubs; out of school hours coaching in artistic, sporting or physical activities; learning opportunities presented by facilities offering residential, weekend or holiday time services; and volunteering activities generating non-formal educational benefits.

Recreational leisure time activities such as sports and informal physical activities; cultural activities including music, performing and visual arts; and self directed learning in a museum or gallery.

The pilot ISP authorities

Birmingham	Blackburn
Blackpool	Bolton
Coventry	Doncaster
Durham	Gateshead
Halton	Hull
Islington	Knowsley
Leicester	Lewisham
Newcastle	Nottingham
Salford	South Tyneside
Wakefield	Walsall

This document has been produced by the Information and Signposting Project. The Information and Signposting Project is delivered by Substance on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). For further information please visit: www.substance.coop

¹ Inserted by Section 6 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

² This does not represent an endorsement of the Plings platform by the DCSF. Other publishing platforms may be available.

Gathering

Step 1: Ensure a coordinated response

In many authorities the collection of positive activity information is dispersed across different departments with responsibilities for sport and leisure, libraries, youth services, extended schools and the anti social behaviour and youth crime agendas as well as those providing communications, marketing and IT support.

To avoid problems associated with duplication, lack of compatibility, departmental insularity and the exclusion of third sector providers **it is critical that authorities adopt a coordinated approach towards the gathering of positive activity information as the foundation of an integrated communications strategy.** Statutory guidance suggests that ‘local authorities consider bringing together, or creating effective information channels between designated officers from relevant departments to share information on provision and on other providers of positive activities’³. It explicitly states that planning should not be undertaken in isolation by individual services.

The ISP has found clear advantages in the identification of a specified cross departmental role within local authorities, with responsibility for managing and publishing positive activities information held by the authority and other providers. In many cases the Family Information Service, which is responding to a similar duty under the terms of Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006, will be best placed to adopt the role of data manager.

Step 2: Map the offer

Statutory guidance states that, as part of the positive activity provision planning process, local authorities need to undertake a detailed analysis of which facilities (places to go) and activities (things to do) are currently available and accessible to young people.

The ISP has found that most authorities have made efforts to map their positive activity provision and that many published hard copy directories of providers with some information about the services they offered shortly after the duty was established. In most authorities hundreds, if not thousands, of activity providers were identified, which has made it hard to resource a sustainable system of activity mapping.

There is also inconsistency across authorities both in terms of the number of activities mapped but also the interpretations being made of positive activities. Only some have chosen to include volunteering activity and very few have included private sector leisure provision such as cinemas, ice rinks, bowling alleys, sports centres and gyms as suggested in Government guidance.

It is critical that local authorities develop systems and processes that enable high quality information about positive activity provision to be maintained on an ongoing basis, whereby providers update information about their activities directly. This will enable the information gathering process to be established as the key to wider communication and commissioning strategies.

Untying the Knots in Nottingham!

“Confusing”. That’s how James Ward-Rice, Nottingham City Council’s Youth Service Development Manager, described local information on positive activities for young people before it took part in the ISP pilot.

Having pulled together key activity providers for 13-19 year-olds, such as Connexions, sports development and extended schools to look at the type of information they collected, who kept it, and how it was made available to young people “It became apparent that everyone was doing their own thing, in their own ways, and none of it was joined up,” James says. “It was a bit of an awakening. There was a realisation that we needed to start again to ensure that joined-up services provided joined-up information on positive activities; this was a difficult beginning to the pilot.”

“To support us in this challenge, the Plings team at Substance devised a standardised spreadsheet, with clear and relevant fields that could feed information straight into a searchable website. James says, “this is when the penny dropped and all partners could visualise how the challenge of trying a new approach would yield the type of results that would make a difference, especially when the data was shown in the Plings website.”

Now, Plings presents data on thousands of activities in Nottingham. Information that has been provided and updated in standard format by all the major council providers, including the youth service, the play service, children’s centres, every city council sport and leisure centre. This data has also been linked to the work of the Family Information Service.

“The project has really raised the bar,” says James. “It has revolutionised our approach and there is a sense of achievement that Plings is articulating our local ambition regarding joined-up and accessible services. The ability to search by activity, or location or organisation - in an easy to use website - has moved us miles into the future. We are proud that local people can see the range of things to do and places to go.

Our next step will be to feed information between Plings and the council’s corporate website; to broaden the information to include other types of activities aimed at a wider age group; to add data from all providers; and to publish it on other platforms, such as mobile phones, Blackberries and calendars.”

³ Statutory Guidance on Section 507B Education Act 1996, DCSF, March 2008

Step 3: Reach out

The guidance on the publication of positive activity information makes clear that the scope of what is included should stretch beyond local authorities' own provision to embrace all relevant public, private and third sector activities and facilities and, potentially, activities based in other local authorities' areas of jurisdiction.

Whilst there is no statutory requirement to inspect activities or facilities offered by independent providers⁴, in accordance with good safeguarding practice, guidance does make clear that local authorities should not promote activities or facilities which they believe to be inappropriate or unsafe. Local authorities are also responsible for assuring the safety of their own activities and facilities and those commissioned from third parties.

Many local authorities are therefore understandably nervous about promoting activities they have not quality assured or which are not subject to their regulatory procedures. In the face of the resource

Who's adding data?

Alongside the thousands of activity instances being aggregated from the 20 pilot local authorities the ISP has established mechanisms for the addition of activity data with 40 networks that have to date provided details of over:

- 20,000 activity providers
- 2000 clubs to join
- 6000 places to go

implications associated with the safeguarding agenda and risk assessing and quality assuring third sector provision, the ISP has found that some authorities have chosen to exclude it from their information gathering. Equally, some third sector organisations are reluctant to share information that they believe will not be promoted or which they perceive to have commercial value or data protection issues attached to it.

The screenshot shows the 'Plings' website interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'Home', 'New Activity', 'Activities', 'Venues', 'Organisation', and 'Preview'. Below the navigation, there is a section titled 'Which Organisation is putting this Session on?' with a 'Cancel' button. The main content area contains a table with columns for Name, Contact, Street, Town, Postcode, and Email. There are three rows of data, each with a radio button next to the 'Name' column. Below the table, there is a 'Next' button and an 'OR' section with the text 'Add a new Organisation to my list.'

Name	Contact	Street	Town	Postcode	Email
<input type="radio"/> Nottingham City Youth Service	Justine Dene	2, Isabella Street	Nottingham	NG1 6AT	justine.dene@nottinghamcity.gov.uk
<input type="radio"/> Nottingham City Youth Service	Justine Dene	2, Isabella Street	Nottingham	NG1 6AT	justine.dene@nottinghamcity.gov.uk
<input type="radio"/> Nottingham City Youth Service	Justine Dene	2, Isabella Street	Nottingham	NG1 6AT	justine.dene@nottinghamcity.gov.uk

To address these issues, through use of the Plings platform, **a network model has been developed to enable clearer lines of accountability and wider engagement.** This approach encourages activity providers to contribute their data via feeds and direct inputting tools irrespective of their relationship to the local authority, since they can identify the benefit of sharing it with their own networks regardless of the local authorities' interests. Equally, it enables those authorities to have an awareness of provision from other sectors without being compelled to promote it prior to obtaining satisfactory assurances of the standard of provision.

Managing

Step 1: Standardise and aggregate data

The variable range and consistency of positive activity information held by local authorities has made it difficult for them to present good quality information on all positive activity 'instances'. Most authorities have been able to produce leaflets and brochures in PDF and hard copy formats which provide relatively comprehensive information for 'fixed' time periods such as school holidays. However, it is a far greater challenge in relation to the population and maintenance of 'live' media channels such as 'one stop shop' branded youth offer websites.

The technical demands of such resources require a level of data consistency, which can be challenging, but which does fit with non statutory guidance highlighting the core elements of data required to ensure effective publication of high quality positive activity information.



Through the ISP, an aggregation platform has been mobilised to help collate and pool activity 'instance' data together. This phase of the project involved intensive work with local authorities and third sector providers and the use of a variety of approaches including data feeds, spreadsheets and direct input tools to ensure the collection of data from organisations at different stages of development.

The action of aggregating data with consistent standards has established the foundations for a new dialogue and set of trials underpinned by a shared confidence in the quality of the information being worked with.

What information to include?

- Name and description of the activity
- Where the activity is delivered
- The date, start and end time of the activity
- The provider and contact details
- Cost of the activity
- How to get to the activity
- The accessibility of the activity and venue for young people with disabilities

⁴ Except when such inspection is required by other legislation.

Knowsley Knows

According to Carol Farrell, Commissioning Officer for Youth at Knowsley Council, the ISP has enabled the local authority to do three things:

- 1 Look at how they collect information
- 2 Work out who is best placed to gather the data
- 3 Create their own brand to promote the activities in ways relevant to young users.

“In the past we used to coordinate information on activities mainly around holiday periods when we produced leaflets and posters,” she says. The main source of information came from mainstream, local authority providers and from the community and private sector that worked closely with the Council. What was missing was up to date information all year round and the full range of activities on offer in the borough across all sectors.

“Information was usually collated through a spreadsheet and this could be quite onerous for services to keep filling out”. The advent of Plings opened the possibility of a web-based system allowing providers to feed information directly to a database where it could be continuously updated. This also meant that activities could be filtered by area or collated borough-wide. “Bringing it all together made us see more clearly what was missing,” says Carol. “So it began to tie into commissioning.”

The council also branded the new data with a colourful design, and since April this year have been marketing it to young people with credit card-sized leaflets distributed in “strategic places”. These leaflets direct youngsters to the Knowsley website which links to a list of local activities on the Plings site. The service is also advertised to police and support officers with leaflets, to parents in booklets, and to residents by local newsletters.

“Partners, both within and outside the Council, have seen how it can work”, says Carol, who now has a colleague dedicated to managing and publishing the information day-to-day and working with young people to evaluate the activities on offer. What’s more, the improved feedback it has generated is already starting to have an impact on commissioning with a number of new activities commissioned over the Halloween period as a result of young people’s input.

“Plings has helped us enormously,” she says. “It has given us a real momentum in that direction. Now we want to get smarter about evaluation too, to ensure the activities we offer young people are the right ones for them. The project has really pushed our response to the statutory duty.”

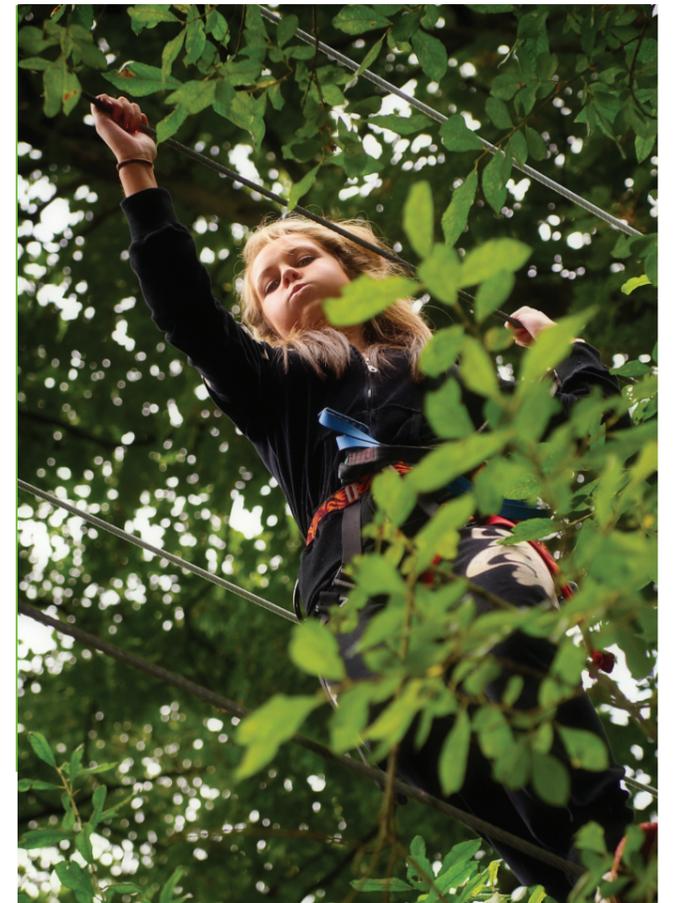
Step 2: Enhance the data

Beyond the collection of positive activity information in its raw form the ISP has been keen to look at ways in which additional material can be added to these datasets, so that they become more descriptive and ready for communication. Increasingly, it has become apparent that the communications and marketing teams involved in promoting positive activities have an interest in, and increasingly prominent role to play, in improving the quality and form of the data.

Through its first year the ISP has been generating a series of tools and resources to help the pilot authorities:

- **Tag** — providing simple exercises and tools that enable people to quickly and easily tag activities with keywords and categories in a ‘fun’ way which will help people to find activities
- **Search** — producing games and tools focused on optimizing the search terms that young people use when trying to locate information
- **Describe** — providing materials and guidance on the presentation of text with which to describe activities in generic and locally appropriate ways
- **Illustrate** — presenting graphics and pictures for people to use when promoting activities

These resources are increasingly being adopted to enhance the quality of the raw data being submitted, with the end result that the information will become more relevant and appealing to its target audience.



Extended Families

As manager of Newcastle City Council's Families Information Service, Carole Barnes was already gathering information about events and activities for the authority's web-based Family Services Directory when she became involved in the ISP.

It didn't take long before she realised the ISP could help improve their data-gathering, make better use of the information they had, and present it in ways more likely to appeal to the city's young people.

"We were primarily targeting parents, carers and providers, so it was not really youth-focused," says Carole. "Plings helped us to make it more exciting, to provide a better product for them. It's the same data but presented in a better way for young people."

The ISP was "an injection of support" for what the FIS was doing as part of the council's integrated youth strategy, says Carole. But it also helped to reinforce the importance of collaboration between the local authority and the private and voluntary sector frontline staff, and young people themselves.

"Other organisations began to see what we were doing and how they could fit in," she says. "It gave us a stronger reason to collect data from people who might not have been so open before."

The ISP also prompted them to provide "richer" information about the activities – about venues, accessibility, how to get there – and includes features such as Google maps and calendars which helped the council improve communication with youngsters.

"Unlike parents, young people don't want to plan two weeks ahead," says Carole. "They think about what's going on tomorrow night, or 'Where can I go now?' We've had to learn that it's very different to how we present information to parents and carers."

The next step is to improve feedback from young people, and begin to assess the longer-term impact of the activities.

"We've been focusing on communication, on getting the information right and into one place," she says. "The ISP has been a catalyst to focus our attention and shape what we do. It's only one part of the youth strategy, but if we get the communication right, then we can get them accessing activities and feeding back into what we offer. Then we can start to look at impact. That's where we want to get to."

Step 3: Use analysis to plan & commission

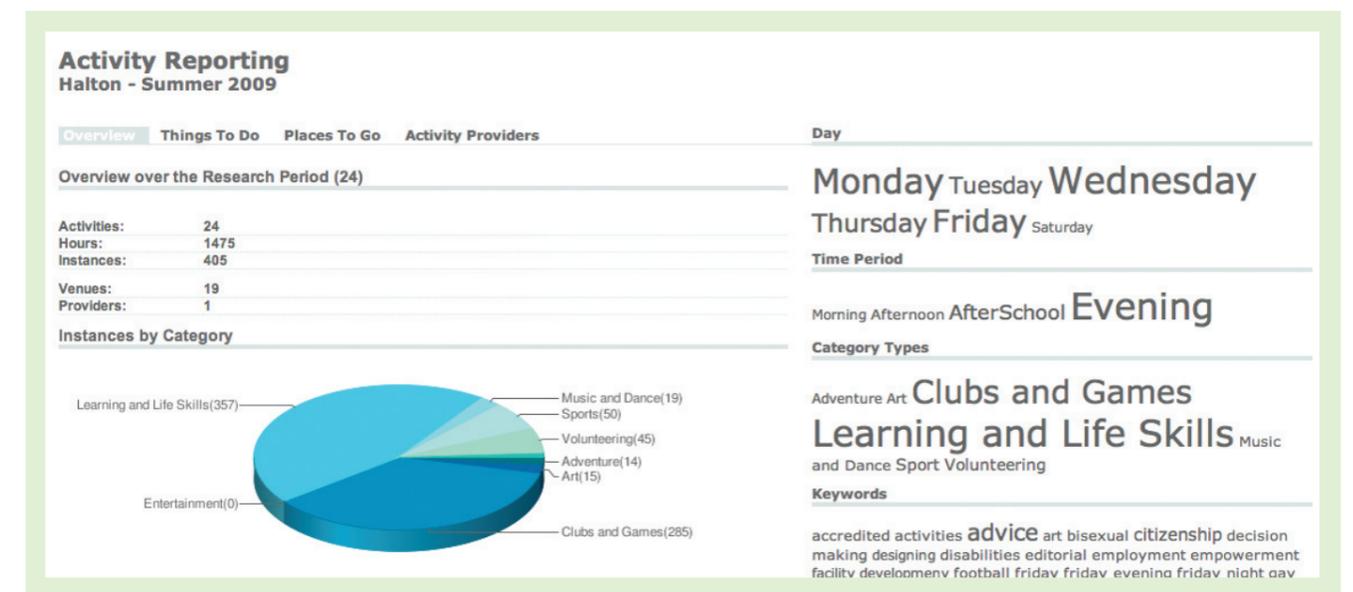
The Government has put in place arrangements to capture the impact of the statutory duties included in Section 507B and related policy initiatives. Local level data is currently being compiled through the TellUs survey⁵. This data provides valuable information to help us understand young people's opinions on matters affecting their participation in positive activities and will also help local authorities to meet the requirement to ascertain the views of young people.

In accordance with the Government's new commitments to ensure the provision of positive activities on Friday and Saturday evenings there is growing pressure on local authorities to monitor this provision. Following a recent review by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit it has now been agreed that data on local authorities 'youth offer' is to be collected in early 2010⁶.

Through the ISP efforts have been made to synchronise the easy analysis and reporting of

positive activity data with the data aggregation process which resulted in the production of the first dedicated positive activity information analytics tool. This tool provides the functionality to interrogate activity instances and to filter them by authority, ward, location, type of activity, provider, day and time, both retrospectively and in relation to upcoming activities.

Important as the activity data is, authorities' analytical and reporting needs extend beyond the counting of activity instances in particular wards. It is vital that they are also able to present information accessibly as it relates to the channels of communication being used to promote activities and, critically, the engagement with those channels. A series of tools to assess people's engagement with activity data have now been identified which will be mobilised through the next phase of the project so that **each of the 20 pilot authorities will be able to seamlessly monitor and report on their published youth offer**. Furthermore, this functionality will enable real time local analysis which can be used to inform a wider commissioning strategy for positive activities.



⁵ <http://www.tellussurvey.org.uk/>

⁶ See <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00628/> for further guidance

Sharing

Step 1: Publish information

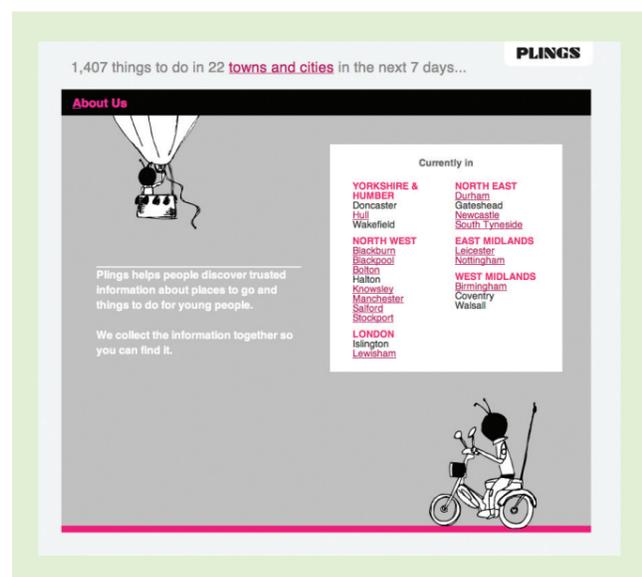
Although there is no prescription for how local authorities publicise information, the Government does hold a set of core expectations about what information should be provided and how it should be presented and maintained. Crucially, it is expected that the information be **comprehensive, accurate and accessible**.

In emphasising the need to involve young people in the production and design of this information provision, authorities are also encouraged to take into account the importance of creating media which young people perceive as attractive and engaging. This may include providing access to information from other sources than the local authority, such as other (commercial) websites, radio stations or simply through friends. Authorities are further encouraged to consider the benefits of using such channels to pursue with young people and external partners any innovative approaches to publicising activities and facilities; particularly where these are seen as being likely to attract the most marginalised young people.

In practice many authorities have tended towards representing their offer in whatever online spaces they can get easy access to, even if this is limited to the main local authority website or its sub directories. Some authorities have developed external partnership sites to present their main 'youth offer' but when the ISP commenced, none of the pilot authorities were actively promoting their information via independent third party channels. This is largely due to a lack of appropriate resources and an associated tendency to focus on in-house publication.

However, finding all the in-house information about positive activities from the full range of local authority service providers can be challenging. The widespread reliance on static directory listings means that information can rarely be searched in a dynamic way, despite this being the most effective way of sourcing information. Furthermore, this format also reduces its capacity for being re-presented in other media such as a social network site or text messaging service.

The ISP has worked with the pilot authorities to establish common data standards which have enabled the information to be brought together and presented in a single searchable website.



Step 2: Syndicate



With positive activity information held in a standard format it becomes possible to make it more accessible to young people via syndication. Through the Plings platform **positive activity data gathered by the pilot local authorities can now be fed into a range of social media**, which means that rather than young people having to look for information, they are more likely to come across it in the spaces where they already go.

Rather than simply expecting this information to start appearing in a variety of new spaces **the ISP is now meeting, discussing and planning with the local authorities, taking account of internal risks, to help develop guidance and formulate the most appropriate local marketing strategies**. Inevitably this involves aligning our activity with existing approaches and methods, facilitating the application of different tools in different contexts and then further refining approaches on the basis of feedback, research and analysis.

Where does the information go?

Calendars, DigiTV, Google Earth, Google Maps, Iphone/Ipods, Mobile phones, Partner websites, Personalised homepages, Leaflets, Social Network Sites, Social network site applications, Twitter, Wii

Step 3: Share data

Guidance makes it clear that involving young people in the production and design of the information provision will help identify appropriate content and ensure the relevance, appeal and accessibility of the information provided. However, in responding

to these duties, much of the consultation conducted by local authorities with young people to date has focused on the presentation of information and the look and feel of branded youth offers. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which young people currently access information or the effectiveness of the channels of communication being used.

The involvement of young people has also tended to make use of traditional consultative techniques including youth councils, forums and committees rather than the role that new media can itself play in revealing young people's information search preferences and wider views on service provision.

Through use of a broad range of research and consultation techniques including online surveys, activity diaries, activity search games, online feedback channels and user centred design workshops, the ISP has gathered critical learning around the search behaviours of young people. **The key message is that trusted information needs to be presented in the spaces where young people will come across it rather than expecting them to come and find it.**

So rather than simply dumping positive activity information in social networking sites, where the information may be swamped by the sheer volume of alternative content marketed by commercial campaigns, **the ISP has worked to build attractive applications which allow young people to engage with and share information**. This approach has the potential to become much more social, with young people suggesting places to go and things to do, inviting others to join them and highlighting their frustrations at periods of boredom.

The boredomometer is a social networking application developed to relieve young people of their boredom by asking friends to suggest ways to fill up their time when they put out a 'shout' that they have nothing to do. It is currently available on the Bebo social network platform and will be available on Facebook in 2010

Joined up Bolton

The ISP came along at just the right time for Bolton council, according to the authority's Communications Manager for Children's Services, John Bidder. With his corporate colleagues, John was already planning the council's new service directory, and looking at how to make it accessible through the council website when he began to realise how many "customers" were unsure how to find specific information.

"The ISP identified that we needed a single strategic point of access," he says. "But it also made us look at how we reach young people in particular. We are giving young people a personalised view on the website shortly, with their own search engine, but we still relied on them coming to the council as a source, and they just don't do that in large enough numbers. Plings gave us the opportunity to make our information more agile and convenient, to get to the spaces where young people are. Young people hang out in other kinds of spaces – social networking sites, and so on. The added value we got from Plings was knowledge about how to access these places with council managed information."

With help from Substance, the council consulted young people about the online tools they use, as well as what they do, where they go and what activities they like. Using the interactive "Boredometer" application, they will target the Bebo social networking site, leading "bored" youngsters to access the council's directory of local events. Not only those from council providers but places and activities young people recommend themselves. There are now plans to make the directory more interactive, allowing providers to talk to each other and young people to feed back directly about the events they go to.

"We've had to accept the council doesn't always know about absolutely everything that's going on for young people," says John. "We're now moving forwards though and information about all activities will be sourced from one place but used many times by many people from either the local authority sites or via a young person's social network."

Bolton also hopes to integrate the data about positive activities with the authority's new Learning Platform, connecting the council more closely with young people, families and schools, and so giving youngsters a greater understanding of what the council can do. It's about building "a deeper customer-provider relationship", as he calls it.

Making the information available through mobile phones and other handheld portable devices is just a matter of time, he adds. "Plings has been a really helpful catalyst. But all we're doing really is responding to the shift in how information is accessed and commoditised. If we did anything else it just wouldn't work."



Checklist

Gathering

- Has a dedicated lead been identified to co-ordinate a cross departmental response to the duty?
- Has the full range of provision been identified?
- Are systems in place to enable the gathering of data from third party providers?

Managing

- Have consistent standards been established for the provision of information?
- Are systems in place to assure and enhance the quality of activity data?
- Is the authority able to seamlessly analyse and report on its activity provision?

Sharing

- Is all positive activity information presented in a single accessible resource?
- Is information being syndicated to non local authority media channels?
- Have tools been identified to enable peer to peer sharing of information?

Resources and Further Guidance

- DCSF, Every Child Matters, Youth Matters, Things to do, places to go <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/Youth/youthmatters/thingstodoplacestogo/thingstodo/>
- Education and Inspections Act 2006 http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2006/ukpga_20060040_en_1
- www.plings.net
- Aiming High for Young People: Non-statutory guidance on 'Data collection exercise on provision of positive activities' and 'Use of CCIS to record young people's participation in positive activities' <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00628/>
- Davies, T. (2009) Safe and Effective SNS Application for Young People: Considerations in building social networking applications for under 19s http://www.plings.info/wiki/index.php/Safe_Social_Network_Site_Applications

This leaflet is only a general guide and is not a full statement of the law. We have made every effort to make sure that the information in this leaflet is correct in November 2009.

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