

Local Government Open Data Breakthrough Projects Evaluation Report 2013/14

Project title: Community Data
Lead organisation: London Borough of Lambeth
Submission date: 26th August 2014

Type of project: Interactive platform for the visualisation of data

Total grant: £38,000

Summary of the project

The Community Data project is a simple proof of concept designed to allow the community, local government, service providers, businesses and others to create visualisations of data, build dashboards based on those visualisations and get help from mentors and other in interpreting data and the issues surrounding it.

Challenge/opportunity:

Whilst there is starting to be available a collection of datasets, invariably as large spreadsheets or similar, there is still a huge barrier to the effective take-up and exploitation of open data due to the problems in creating simple effective visualisations and maps. Being able to create and access interpretations of the data, glean new insights as to what the data reveals, will enable decision-makers to be more informed before taking investment decisions. Unskilled users could benefit from help from experts, mentors or others who are also tackling issues in the same area.

By creating an environment where the quality and applications for open data is crowd sourced, there is mutual help available and experts on tap will bring in both new uses and users who can benefit from the wealth of information available. It is not a “techie” led solution but one that is squarely aimed at as wide a range of end users as is possible, it is empowering everyone with open data.

The system is all built using open source components to encourage the take up and co-development by others. This way it will have a greater chance of success through improvements and enhancements being added by a wider group in the community, businesses and the public sector.

Data published and uses:

The project allows for the addition of datasets that are either uploaded to the site or are available on any CKAN server (open source database that stores and allows access to a wide range of files and datasets). This allows easy expansion of the range of datasets that can then be worked on, visualised and mapped.

The site has been released to a selected range of potential users and key stakeholders to explore how it can benefit their sphere of work and involvement. So far the feedback has been positive and over the coming weeks more datasets will be available as users start to add their datasets or they get published on other CKAN sites. This is in addition to the Lambeth Borough Council web site that has a collection of open data sets published in their raw form.

The users range from community individuals, local government officers, service providers, commissioners, business people and council members.

Approach to publishing data

The site is designed to allow users to add their own datasets from wherever they wish. In addition it can easily access datasets published on other open data servers running the open source database based on CKAN (Leeds Data Mill being but one example). By adopting the user driven approach the ability to get new datasets available for all is that much greater. Over a period of time we expect the range of datasets being available for visualising to increase rapidly. The main area of usage will be the creation of visualisations, graphs, maps and associated background information.

The system is being promoted within Lambeth Council, selected community groups and external organisations and individuals for a short initial period. The aim is to elicit feedback on the proof of concept, create new uses for the data, enable community groups to be involved in open data and to see how open data can be harnessed by both local government officers and members, community users and businesses.

As the system is built on open source code the entire system can be installed on additional sites that wish to be able to exploit the ability to visualise their data, combined with other existing datasets to help their business, community needs or commissioning and service design. The adoption of the Community Data resource on additional sites will be taking place over the coming months as technical resources allow.

A key component of the design is the information, comment and help that can be viewed surrounding each dataset or visualisation. There is a free-form area that users can use to describe the background to their visualisation, such as what components were used to come to the conclusion or interpretation that they did, what use have they put to the information, what is missing and what issues they addressed. By crowd sourcing reviews and comment it will improve the quality of data and the ways in which it can be viewed and mapped. This is a key area that can really empower users who have not been able to exploit open data in the past to start to make use of the information.

There is a whole range of areas that the system could expand upon in the near future; the range of graphs and visuals, easier access to external datasets, slicker dashboards and greater range of mapping tools. The development of the system will continue if additional funding is available.

Benefits and impact

Lambeth Council is committed to open data and has a council wide policy of being Open by Default. It is also a Co-operative Council and believes in co-commissioning with the community the design and type of services that it delivers. Without ensuring that the community have access to the same information along with the same mentoring and expert help that the commissioning officers have it would not be a level and beneficial playing field. To this end the availability of a wide range of open data and as importantly the ability to visualise and interpret the data in conjunction with on-tap experts is central to the operation of the council.

The community have frequently suffered from a lack of access to critical information that affects their lives. In addition, if they were presented with that information it would be invariably be in a form that precludes easy interpretation and so excludes

them from the decision making process. The Community Data system starts to help non-experts exploit and understand the wealth of open data that is now becoming available.

The site was recently demonstrated to a local higher education college. They realised that they could start to use it to research their prospective target audience by harnessing the datasets available that gave a breakdown on ethnic mix, education and background of the local population. This information could then be mapped easily and analysed so that they could target their marketing at the right section of the community. In addition they were keen to start to publish their performance figures on the site and to create and encourage a dedicated higher education group to share their data and visualisations to improve standards and collaboration.

Lambeth Council web site, local community web sites and others are linking through to the prototype Community Data resource to enable access to a wide range of people in the community. Within Lambeth Council it is being promoted to help officers move towards an “open by default” with any report, dataset or other information that would be beneficial to the wider community.

As more data gets added to the site the commissioners within Lambeth will use the resource to improve the commissioning process by managing KPI information. These visualisations and dashboards will be publically viewable so improving on transparency and accountability.

Data from a local community project based around encouraging children’s health through walking, improving air quality and other campaigns will be using the site to start to share their data and visuals.

Future Brixton, a large council and community design project that brings together the a wide range of local stakeholders and the community to re-design the centre of Brixton and create a future vision, will be using the Community Data platform to visualise key data that will determine strategy and outcomes.

The benefits within Lambeth Council have also been considerable. It has triggered evaluation as to adopting document-publishing standards, the issues surrounding extracting key datasets that are required for service design, and exactly what is entailed in the policy of being “open by default”. The benefits of open data are starting to be accepted; delivering on the idea is still a hurdle.

As the project was commissioned later, the completion date is after the other Breakthrough Fund projects. A key aspect of this project is to develop usage and feedback over the coming months from as wide a range of users as possible. As such we are at the very early stage of getting users on board. The key stakeholders who were involved in the early design and strategy are starting to use the proof of concept system but given their resource availability their input and feedback will be coming in over the forthcoming months after the deadline for this report.

Further information:

The site is located at:

<http://live-communitydata.gotpantheon.com/front>

To fully interact with the site, users should create a profile and log in.

The Lambeth CKAN data server is located: <http://5.101.100.119/dataset>

**The open source code of the project is located on github – search
Folklabs/communitydata**

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