

Ten tips for creating online local public services using **open data**

Make It Local was a NESTA initiative to stimulate the creation of online public services using local authority data.

In September 2010 four projects were commissioned, each one pairing a council with a local agency or developer. These projects produced innovative services that launched in April 2011. If you'd like to develop your own services, here are some tips...

nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/make_it_local

1 Generate the idea

Focus on the needs of the audience. Look at examples of existing best practice in web services and describe why your idea is better than what already exists.

- Social Innovation Camp sicamp.org/
- Seedcamp seedcamp.com
- Kickstarter kickstarter.com
- Stanford Research Institute's NABC approach goo.gl/M9w8G

2 Find the relevant data

Finding relevant data for a service, in a format which is easy to use can be difficult. Data.gov.uk is the main repository for government data with over 5,400 datasets. Other useful sources of open data can be found at:

- Infochimp: infochimps.com
- Scraperwiki: scraperwiki.com
- Datamarket: datamarket.com
- Guardian Data Store: guardian.co.uk/data
- Or you can ask for data if it can't be found elsewhere: whatdotheyknow.com

3 Understand the problem

Within the area you're developing, gather together people with knowledge and expertise. For example, there will probably be council officers with deep knowledge of the data, community issues and supplier details as well as any technical knowledge and an understanding of any legal issues. Engaging with these stakeholders early on can help you to map out and solve potential problems.

- Human Centred Design Toolkit by IDEO: ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit

4 Understand open data

There's a movement to open up government data, so that it can be easily found, is in a 'machine readable' format and has a license to be re-used. This is to be managed by the Government's Public Data Corporation. The license of data is critical to re-use. An 'Open Government License' applies to most government data (though some agencies are exempt).

- Open Government License: nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/open-government-licence.htm
- Good practice and government data: opengovernmentdata.org

5 Access the data from council suppliers

Data is often managed by third party service providers who may have no vested interest in opening up the data. Ensure you allow appropriate time and resources within your project plan to account for this.

Get the data provider on board early and scope out the issues involved in getting the data you want. Make sure your deliverables take into account the dependency on the data provider.

6 Create advocates

A good idea still needs advocates to make it happen. This may include both internal advocates as well as external.

Showcase examples of service provision that tap into the interests of different stakeholders. Community activists will engage with ideas that give citizens a voice. Policy makers will want to showcase current thinking.

Find out what excites people and you'll get a greater level of support from them.

7 Release early, release often

Launching with a 'minimum viable product' is likely to be more effective (and less risky) than a 'bells and whistles' product. Traditional approaches to development often try to specify a full set of features before launch.

A more effective approach could be to use an 'agile philosophy' and focus on a core set of user stories, iterating quickly as you go. Enlist the help of some early users (usually six is enough) who can test out the service, you can then launch a 'beta' product to a wider audience.

Minimum viable product: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimum_viable_product

Agile development: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agile_software_development

8 Understand public sector procurement

There are strict procurement processes within government that can make undertaking quick, agile projects difficult. Recent Government strategy aims to simplify procurement, making it easier for SMEs to tender.

Find opportunities to pitch a joint proposal with a local developer or agency. If you have an idea or want to pitch for a piece of work try and connect with other talented local developers and agencies to see how you could work together.

Government IT Strategy document: cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/government-ict-strategy

9 Get the language right

We use different words and acronyms to describe the same things and this can be an issue in creating a service for citizens to use. Avoid jargon and adopt a friendly tone of voice.

When creating the architecture for a new service, gain an understanding of how your audience might describe the things described in your data. Card sorting exercises can be helpful in doing this.

Card Sorting Exercise: boxesandarrows.com/view/card_sorting_a_definitive_guide

10 Measure success

How do you know when you've made something brilliant? It helps if you know what you're looking for. At the start, state what success would look like. Identify outcomes and measures for your success.

Tools like Google Analytics can be used to measure the performance of your web service (number of visits, users, referrers). Qualitative feedback is also invaluable in providing useful metrics. When designing your service build in an easy-to-use mechanism for people to provide feedback.

Utilise Twitter and Facebook as well as tools like Uservice uservice.com and Get Satisfaction getsatisfaction.com to help gain feedback.