

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL AND NHS HEREFORDSHIRE

Client Interview with Dr Ashley Tucker, Web Content Team Leader



Herefordshire Council is a very modern local government authority in more ways than one. Formed in 1998 to look after the interests of its 180,000 inhabitants independently from Worcestershire, the council now uses online consultation and collaboration software to connect with partners and residents across one of the most rural and sparsely populated counties in England.



Herefordshire Council is a refreshingly dynamic local authority committed to using technology to drive changes that will ensure that the county's unique character and diverse communities continue to thrive.

Living in one of the country's most rural regions sandwiched between Worcestershire and Wales, Herefordshire residents and businesses understand the importance of communication links and engagement more than most. All key services including education, highways and planning, social services, economic regeneration, taxation and even domestic refuse collection benefit from greater coordination and engagement between agencies spread across over 200 square miles of countryside and the council headquarters in Hereford City.

Merging organisations and departments

The importance of being able to share information and resources became evident in 2007 when it was proposed that Herefordshire Council and the

Herefordshire primary care trust (PCT) would form a deep partnership to create England's first truly integrated local authority and health management team. While there were many advantages in pooling health and social service budgets, the amalgamation of departments, including infrastructure and employees, was never going to be easy. Dr Ashley Tucker, web content team leader for the combined organisation, used INOVEM Collaborate to support the internal Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire ICT restructure.

"Because the council and the PCT had two distinct ICT departments with their own networks, file servers and websites, we needed some way of sharing information and the latest drafts of documents without duplication. As INOVEM Collaborate is independent of existing systems and externally available to everybody we invite, it fitted the bill perfectly," said Ashley.

"In this way we could have one individual moderating and running the INOVEM

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Collaborate group, providing all invited ICT staff with access to the latest structure diagrams, job vacancies and application forms wherever they wanted to access them. The alternative would have been to either duplicate information across two intranets, or design and develop a bespoke external website with secure login protection. Both approaches would have obviously taken a lot longer and demanded far more overheads.”

The new online group supporting the restructure enabled staff to ask questions and receive open replies while sharing guidance on the job allocation process. It contained a range of folders and documents as well as a database facility to provide detailed job information and FAQs. The ICT restructure was completed successfully, no technical problems or queries were received about the online group, and verbal feedback suggested the site was attractive in design and easy to use.

Spreading the word

Ashley continues to lead the project to evaluate ways in which online collaboration can empower a wide range of individuals and departments across the partnership to run their own projects. With the expansion in community engagement and local leadership encouraged through Government initiatives such as ‘Total Place’ and the ‘Big Society’, there is a growing need to provide environments for team managers and community leaders to share information, both in public and in private.

“Everything we’re currently working on actually satisfies these new government initiatives. We’re undergoing a major period of change following restructure, putting a single website, intranet and CMS in place and using online collaboration where appropriate to include and involve external partners,” explained Ashley.

“One obvious and exciting demonstration of this expansion in team working is the way it is being taken up by our different directorates, departments and parishes. After just a couple of hours of introduction to the INOVEM software, we’re now seeing stakeholder engagement take off across the authority.”

Many groups previously found the barrier to entry too high for such engagement. Enterprise systems such as Microsoft SharePoint are used by the council, but are predominantly regarded as file repositories and calendaring tools. They are often restricted to internal access only and normally require significant ICT resources to configure and support. Likewise the council’s CMS does not currently offer secure ‘private areas’ and again demands configuration time from an ICT team with finite resources. INOVEM Collaborate is popular because it allows council staff of all specialities to quickly setup and purpose their own secure groups with minimal cost.

There are already, simply through word of mouth, a number of groups being built, deployed and managed online across the authority, suggesting staff have a real need for online collaboration and are finding it genuinely useful.

Ashley added: “INOVEM Collaborate works because people find it so quick and easy to re-purpose the software to support a range of projects, working parties and interest groups. We invited people who might use it to a training day and after that they were self-supporting. ICT is available to help when people get stuck but this hardly ever happens. People across the authority working with external partners and residents can create as many groups as they want – we have at least 28 groups already acting as workspaces for all manner of purposes: transport, strategy, education – you name it.”

The Children and Young People’s Directorate

A major challenge for The Children and Young People’s Directorate within Herefordshire Council involves identifying and responding to the training needs of individuals, teams and groups of colleagues who have a lot in common but rarely meet each other.

Mike Nelson, the development officer for teaching and learning support at the directorate has used INOVEM collaboration software to set up a community for learning mentors. Around twenty individuals based

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at separate schools are now registered and can be kept informed about directorate activities, as well as being connected to their peers and provided with a channel for their own queries. “It’s early days but they are very enthusiastic about having the system in place and very keenly want to get into the habit of using it to share issues, resources and factual updates,” said Mike.

Further communities in the pipeline include one community for around 130 higher-level teaching assistants and another for a similar number of deputy head teachers. Invitations for these communities will be sent out as soon as management and moderation training has been provided to key members. Mike has also been asked to set up another community for ‘Information-Sharing Champions’ (in a child protection context), and perhaps one further group for school business managers.

“The new government favours a model of training and professional development that brings expertise together from different organisations rather than local authorities merely ‘running courses,’” explained Mike. “Online communities provide a way of linking all these approaches and individuals together, while maintaining this facility contributes to building ‘brand loyalty’ with employees, partner organisations and the public.”

Community Led Planning (CLP) Coordinating and Commissioning

CLP can be defined as a step-by-step process that enables every citizen to participate in and contribute to improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of their local area. It has the potential to greatly contribute to the Government’s desire to create the ‘Big Society’, by providing people with the opportunity to become more active in their communities, while taking greater ownership over the decisions, forces and agencies which impact on the well-being of their environment.

Chris Gooding is the CLP Coordinating and Commissioning Officer at Herefordshire Council: “Although everybody is still trying to work out what ‘Big Society’ means, we

feel it is certainly in the spirit of localism. CLP enables a community, usually based around the local Parish, to deliver a vision for the next five years – an intensive and inclusive consultation programme that takes around 18 months to complete.”

Chris manages a ‘virtual team’ across the partnership supporting the development of CLP, involving the voluntary sector, parish councils and local population in 134 community groups. He remarked, “Until now everyone has been involved through consultation mechanisms largely driven by paper-based questionnaires and face-to-face meetings. But now that there appears to be greater penetration and take-up of broadband in rural areas, we are asking groups to consider online consultation and team working.”

INOVEM’s software can speed up processes while reducing the costs of developing, distributing, collecting and importing paper-based questionnaires as well as providing a common platform of communication and document storage for all the disparate organisations involved. Groups in the field now have an effective way of communicating electronically as well as having the power to set up their own collaborative user groups, store minutes and consult with each other.

“It’s an excellent facility,” said Chris. “It’s very user friendly, requires little training and has huge potential as a collaboration platform for all kinds of user groups.”

He believes that the increased transparency and accessibility the software has brought has made it a lot easier to share team commitments and tasks across multiple organisations. To date 55 plans have been completed and 25 are currently in progress.

Integrated Transport

Mark Edwards is the Integrated Transport assistant for cycling, staff travel plans and Park & Ride for the Transportation department of Herefordshire Council. He is currently steering ‘Pedal Power’, a consortium bidding for European Energy Efficiency Directorate funding in collaboration with twelve partners from around the European Union.

A requirement of the bid is to reduce travel and the wasteful distribution of paper documents so the consortium used a number of INOVEM Collaborate functions – including the calendar, email, blog, questionnaires and discussion groups – to work together very successfully. The software made it possible to coordinate partner activities and put the bid together in under two months.

“We’d been looking for something like this for some time,” Mark explained. “We wanted a secure online workspace that was quick to setup and easy to use as English is not the first language of most of the 12 participating member states. We got our project site up and running without any training required.”

But that’s not all; Mark has set up two further groups for a greenway project currently underway. The Connect2 project, which runs until 2013, has one group which act as an extranet for the project’s technical delivery team involving various council departments and Amey, the council’s contracting partner for construction projects. Another group enables the public steering group to access project documents as well as facilitating discussion and coordination of meetings. It’s a key obligation for the project which requires stakeholders to inform the progress of the project.

Mark has found INOVEM Collaborate to be invaluable in coordinating the ‘Pedal Power’ bid and for managing documents with partners across his other groups and will be using the software again for future bids over the coming months.

Controlling collaboration internally and externally

Online collaboration and consultation software from INOVEM has proven to be the perfect solution to help Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire engage with internal and external stakeholders, particularly when supporting partnership activities. As well as bringing communities and partners closer together and providing them with more efficient platforms for sharing information, INOVEM’s software has also helped teams of all kinds across the county to empower individuals who are willing to engage and have ideas to contribute.

The team leaders that we have heard from at Herefordshire have shown the many roles INOVEM software can play in engaging internally with staff, supporting learning and development, empowering local community groups and collaborating with partners right across Europe.

“INOVEM Collaborate has filled holes that were simply not supported by our enterprise document sharing platforms or our CMS, but has allowed our ICT department to retain control of data and users while branding all new groups to fit in with the look and feel of the rest of the council’s platforms,” said Dr Tucker.

“Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire are running more and more shared services and have an increasing need to work together. INOVEM Collaborate has proven to be easy to use, well liked and adds no support burden on central ICT. I suspect that once we start advertising its availability more widely across the county, usage will go through the roof...”

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