

substance

Spreading the Word
DfE Information and Signposting Project
Final Report

Executive Summary: Findings and Lessons

In September 2008 the Information and Signposting Project (ISP), funded by the Department for Education, began working with 20 local authorities to support them in providing young people with information on educational and recreational leisure time activities through use of the Plings - www.plings.net - platform. The aim of the project was: To help local authorities deliver accurate, comprehensive and accessible information in order that more young people participate in structured activities.

Lessons

Lesson 1: Co-ordinate

Strategic leadership from a single service is the most effective way to co-ordinate a cross departmental response. To make this happen, the first step is to identify which service in the authority is best placed to take responsibility for managing a new style of information gathering and promotion.

Lesson 2: Work together

Improving internal systems and joining up different information resources can help to reveal information from other services. This can reduce the workload created by duplicating data entry at different points and from different providers

Lesson 3: Be flexible

Local authorities should develop data gathering solutions that are appropriate to the local context. In doing so they can make use of existing tools developed to support the Information and Signposting Project rather than building new ones.

Lesson 3: Keep it Updated

Information needs to be current and well maintained. Some authorities undertake all the inputting and updating whereas others have adopted publishing tools which allow providers, including those from the voluntary and private sector, to update their own content.

Lesson 5: Make the information available

It is critical that trusted information is placed in the places and spaces where young people already go - rather than expecting them to go and find it. The use of new media in various forms, including Facebook, mobile phone applications and text messages as well as traditional leaflets are successful in encouraging young people to engage in activities information.

Lesson 6: Shout it from the top

Local authorities need to raise awareness of information resources through promotional campaigns to fully realise the benefits of their efforts to collect, aggregate and publish activities information.

Lesson 7: Re-fuel the fire

In the face of the proliferation of social network and mobile phone applications there is a danger of niche products being marginalised. In order to ensure applications gain traction it is important to back them up with appropriate online and third party promotion.

Lesson 8: Share where young people share

Opportunities should be provided to support the sharing of information about activity provision on a peer-to-peer basis. Social groups are then more likely to be formed around the activity with a consequent positive impact on attendance by those young people.

Lesson 9: Share where young people meet

Schools have great potential to become focal points for sharing information as young people have indicated they are only likely to go to an activity if friends go and that their main way of finding out about activities is through friendship networks.

Lesson 10: Listen to your audience

Young people are more likely to feedback on the range and quality of activities if they can do so in the ways that are appropriate to them. Feedback mechanisms should therefore be obvious, quick and easy.

Findings

Finding 1: More activities information published

As a result of the project there was an overwhelming feeling that there was 'more going on' for young people in the pilot authorities. 61,134 activities were listed on the Plings website in July 2010 compared to 18,403 for the same period in 2009.

Finding 2: More engagement with information and activities

There has been a significant increase in the use of Plings with total visits to the main Plings website rising from 909 to 10,555 for the same time period in 2009 and 2010.

Finding 3: Better information leads to better commissioning

The project demonstrated that it is possible to synchronise the analysis and reporting of activity data with the data aggregation process. This enables seamless monitoring and reporting on the provision of activities and real time local analysis to inform a wider commissioning strategy, based on desired results and outcomes.

Introduction

In September 2008 the Information and Signposting Project (ISP), funded by the Department for Education, began working with 20 local authorities to support them in providing young people, aged 13 – 19, with information on educational and recreational leisure time activities. The overarching aim of the project was clear.

To help local authorities deliver accurate, comprehensive and accessible information in order that more young people participate in structured activities.

At the end of the first year of the project we produced a document to share the learning to date, which included practical step by step core guidance to improve the gathering, management and sharing of activity information¹. Through use of Substance's Plings platform we were then able to test this learning with our 20 pilot authorities during the second year of the project, before a further 28 local authorities actively joined the 'Summer of Plings' initiative in summer of 2010.

Plings is an integrated information gathering and publishing platform that brings together activity information from local authority, voluntary and community and private sector providers. Once aggregated, information can be published via multiple communication channels and formats; making it work harder and reach young people in the spaces they are more likely to find it. The Plings platform also supports analysis tools that enable authorities to view statistical information about activities, feedback on the quality of information and provision and users engagement with the different information channels.

In this document, as well as providing further practical guidance on how best to approach the challenge of promoting structured activities, using these tools, we assess the impact the project has had on the core aim of increased participation. Drawing on a more intensive and detailed programme of research with four of the pilot authorities, the process of achieving the project's aims is discussed together with illustrative examples of innovation and best practice. Throughout the development and delivery of the ISP we have sought to capture and share learning in an open way using a variety channels that extend beyond the publication of reports such as this and we highlight some of these resources in order that this process can continue.

Ultimately the document considers the potential for a fully integrated marketing, monitoring and commissioning platform for structured activities that could deliver greater efficiency at each stage of the promotion and procurement process.

Original Authorities		'Summer of Plings' Authorities	
Birmingham	Islington	Bournemouth	Hackney
Blackburn	Knowsley	Bristol	Kent
Blackpool	Leicester	Bromley	Leicestershire
Bolton	Lewisham	Buckinghamshire	Luton
Coventry	Newcastle	Cambridgeshire	Oxfordshire
Doncaster	Nottingham	Central Bedfordshire	Norfolk
Durham	Salford	Croydon	North Lincolnshire
Gateshead	South Tyneside	Cumbria	North Yorkshire
Halton	Wakefield	Derby	Reading
Hull	Walsall	Dorset	Staffordshire
		Derbyshire	Stockport
		Ealing	Stoke
		East Riding	Sutton
		Greenwich	Wigan

¹ Substance (2009) DCSF Information and Signposting Project: Sharing the Learning – Taking Positive Activities information further, DCSF: London

Make it Happen

Lesson 1: Co-ordinate

Prior to taking part in the ISP the majority of the pilot local authorities published activities information through the different service areas of the local authority website as static directories of providers or as printed leaflets and brochures relating to school holidays and festivals. In some cases this led both to gaps in information provision and duplication of effort.

The ISP promoted a new approach with information from multiple sources being brought together into a central database. With activities provision dispersed across a wide range of services, achieving a comprehensive data set depended on the co-operation of a wide range of local authority service providers as well as those services providing communications, marketing and IT support.

“In the past we used to coordinate information on activities mainly around holiday periods when we produced leaflets and posters. 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.” Commissioning Officer for Youth, Knowsley Council

The ISP found that strategic leadership from a single service was the most effective way to co-ordinate a cross departmental response. To make this happen, the first step was to identify which service in the authority would be best placed to take responsibility for managing a new style of information gathering and promotion. In many cases the most obvious source of leadership was the Family Information Service (FIS) team who already provide information, advice and guidance services and have an infrastructure and skills to support the work. They were often further motivated as the ISP provided them with an opportunity to capture information from a wider range of sources and to improve their ability to communicate information more effectively.

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 Plings project. “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.”

Plings was an “injection of support” for what the Family Information Service 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.

“Young people told us that ‘knowing what was going on is really important’ and Plings has played a key role in supporting this”, she says. “For example, young people have been working with the Integrated Youth Board over the last few months to develop the Youthlinx brand which includes a quality assurance scheme led by young inspectors.”

Plings 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.”

Newcastle City Council publishes over 500 activities every week that are delivered by voluntary and community organisations as well its own Children's Services. While they continue to explore new technologies to make sure their information reaches their target audiences they are now turning their attention to utilising the new feedback tools and measuring the impact of their activity providers.

“We’ve focused on getting the information right and into one place,” she says. Plings has been a catalyst to focus our attention and shape what we do. Its only one part of our 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 looking at the impact. That’s where we need to get to”. Families Information Service Manager, Newcastle City Council.

Lesson 2: Work together

Improving internal systems and joining up different information resources can help to reveal information from other services and reduce the workload created by duplicating data entry at different points. Knowsley Council found that after focusing on the initial data collection exercise, database management and information sharing between services was central to their solution. Here, as part of an integrated approach, the Youth Services team used the Plings platform as the central database for activities that could then be continuously updated and filtered to other relevant channels, creating a flow of information from a single data entry point.

With the majority of local authority commissioned activities included in the database local authorities involved in the ISP pilot reported taking forward outreach initiatives to locate a wider range of providers.

“Finding the people is another job - we are now planning at locality level, looking for a way into the grass roots, our focus now is on neighbourhoods.” Commissioning Officer for Youth, Knowsley

In Knowsley this involved participation in area partnership meetings that are frequently attended by a range of local providers. The Youth Services team found that simple visualisation of activity information can be a powerful tool for jogging memories and finding additional provision. By showing a print out of a week’s activity from the Plings database people remembered those activities that were not listed and came forward with new information, contacts and leads.

Similarly in Hull, Content Management Services are confident that they have now captured the majority of information on council provision and are seeking to broaden the range of information contributors. They also identified partnership working with other local authority services as key to developing new links with voluntary and community sector providers. Local partnership and stakeholder meetings provided opportunities to showcase Plings and signpost organisations to the opportunity for participation.

“We are continually aware of the need to broaden the range of activities on Plings and are currently building relationships with local providers (cinemas, music venues, sports clubs) in an effort to reflect their contribution to the local youth offer as well as that provided by the public, voluntary and community sector.”, Content Management Team Manager Hull.

However, many local authorities have neither the inclination nor capacity to collect activity information from voluntary and community sector organisations. This could be as a result of their internal safeguarding systems; because the Family Information Service simply don’t have the resources to process the data; or because voluntary sector agencies don’t want to promote their activities at the official council website. We have developed a network model to take the pressure off local authorities which are not well enough resourced to collect and promote all activity information while at the same time placing some responsibility on voluntary sector networks to support their members to increase participation rates.

Through this model the ISP began working with national and regional voluntary sector networks such as Clubs for Young People, YMCA and the County Football Associations who could verify their members as ‘accredited’ providers of activity programmes. This allowed agencies affiliated to any of these networks to promote activities via the Plings channels.

Furthermore, as most of these networks do not collect or promote the information themselves and therefore couldn’t feed it to the Plings database it was decided to build a simple web based data publishing tool. The publishing tool is utilised by organisations once their membership of a recognised network has been confirmed. The tool allows individuals to add to and edit their own information in the national database of activity providers, which is then published via the multitude of Plings channels.

Lesson 3: Be flexible

The ISP encouraged local authorities to develop data gathering solutions that were appropriate to the local context and to adopt efficient and accessible tools suited to their organisational capacity.

The tools provided by the project include:

- A spreadsheet loader – based on a standard spreadsheet template that automatically uploads activity information to Plings

Spreadsheets in Kent

“The ‘Summer of Plings’ gave us the opportunity to look at a discrete section of data... and we set about a data collection exercise and used the spreadsheet templates provided to us by Plings. It was a fairly easy process, which was positive... This pointed out that we don’t have session level data and through looking at Plings we realised that we needed that. We now need to look at how we go about collecting that data. It has helped us to think through the relative merits of that approach.”

Youth service Manager, Kent County Council

- Plings Publishing Tool – web-based tool that allows voluntary and community organisations to add their information directly to Plings
- An open Application Programme Interface (API) - for building automated data feeds from third party databases to Plings
- Pling-o-matic – feeds data in the Family Information Directory (FIDy) directly to the Plings platform

Pling-o-Matic

The Pling-o-matic is a tool to help local authorities’ avoid duplication. It identifies, extracts and converts data on positive activities in the Family Information Directory into Plings.

If users add, delete or edit a record in the FIDy, this is reflected in Plings within 24 hours. Each night records added and tagged with the term ‘Positive Activity’ are identified and pass through the Pling-o-matic to identify information about the date, day or time of an activity. During the pilot phase 25 local authorities reached the minimum requirements to enable their data at FIDy to be converted into Plings helping the project to achieve near national coverage with many authorities not needing to do any additional work to have their activities feature in Plings publication channels.

“One of the beauties of the Pling-o-matic is that most of the local authorities whose data we’re converting and displaying don’t need to do anything that they shouldn’t be doing anyway.” Director, 1upDesign

- Personalised solutions – including Google calendars, external data feeds and content management solutions.

Personalised solutions

Cumbria County Council was faced with the task of coordinating data from across a large county provided by a network of detached workers. They didn’t have an adequate system in place and no resources for any training so the choice of Google Calendars was both practical and inspired.

“I used a Google calendar to store all the events as it is simple to use, providers could input their own activities and there is a lot that can be done with the data, such as embedding it on wotson4u and feeding to Plings to aid with the summer of Plings project.” Website and Directory Co-ordinator, Cumbria County Council

Mechanisms have also been established with 40 networks to provide details of:

20,000 providers

2,000 clubs to join

6,000 places to go

- Data scraping processes – Involving guidance to authorities on the local improvement of their data quality in order that it can be ‘scraped’ and re-presented via Plings channels without any internal resource requirement.

In some cases, activity information is presented and published in sufficient detail and scope via official youth offer websites, that it is possible to “scrape” the information to enable people to read and consume the content in other applications. Through “screen scraping” we are able to pull the information through to Plings and then onto other publication channels.

Teen Wirral provides a good example. The team at Wirral Council first contacted the ISP team to look at data standards and took this on board when building their website. As the information presented here is of a good quality and scope, it has been possible to write a scraper that takes the information into Plings. For Wirral, no extra overhead or resource has been required.

Lesson 4: Keep it updated

The ISP revealed that many local authorities that had developed bespoke youth offer websites had initial success in terms of the engagement of young people in the design and launch of the sites and the presentation of data. However, as the resources dedicated to these developments were re-deployed it became hard to maintain the quality of the information and in turn the engagement of young people.

Running Out Of Steam in Nottingham

“Confusing” That’s how 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,” he 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 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. He 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.”

So for almost a year, Plings presented data on thousands of activities in Nottingham, information 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. “The project really raised the bar,” he continues. “There was a sense of achievement that Plings was 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 - moved us miles into the future.

However, the use of spreadsheets was only ever a temporary measure and designed to kick start the process while a more sustainable data collection strategy was agreed. It never happened and the attempts made to engage senior staff over a 12 month period never materialised into anything tangible.

The strategy of updating myriad spreadsheets across council services was ultimately unsustainable, particularly after the Youth Service Development Manager left to join another Council and it became apparent that no one was willing to step into his shoes. The number of activities dwindled and the lack of senior strategic involvement throughout the pilot period meant systems weren’t in place to halt the decline. The lesson was clear; an approach built on the hard work and enthusiasm of a single member of staff, no matter how effective, will ultimately fail without support from senior staff with an agreed sustainable data collection strategy.

In recognition of this threat, with the support provided by the ISP, the authorities included in our more focused research put in place systems for providers to register to have their information updated regularly. The design of these processes reflected the local authorities' recognition that information needs to be current and well maintained, as well as having to balance the resources available to them to accomplish the task.

Local authorities, in the main, prefer to act as 'gatekeepers' with regard to data management and as a consequence providers must rely on the efficiency of internal systems by which activities information is modified, validated and published. Some authorities undertake all the inputting and updating whereas others have adopted publishing tools which allow providers, including those from the voluntary and private sector, to update their own content once they have registered as part of the network of users.

Involving Young Apprentices in Hull

In Hull, Content Management Services currently undertake data inputting manually.

"The rationale behind this approach is that it benefits providers because it simplifies the process and limits the time commitment required and as a result providers are more willing to participate if the hard work is done for them. Also managing the data centrally helps to maintain data quality. In Hull we aim to make gathering data on positive activities as easy as possible – not for ourselves, but for providers.

We contact an ever growing list of providers every couple of months. We provide them with a range of options for how they tell us about what activities they are providing – there is a choice of two pro-formas or the option of an online form on the Hull Children's Trust Website. It's not about our needs, so we are more than happy to receive copies of existing publicity or even just an email with the relevant information.

Data is largely inputted by our Young Apprentices and this helps make sure that the information is 'youth proofed' and meaningful to its target audience." Content Management Team Manager, Hull City Council

Relying on the Providers

In Salford, Youth Services have approached the problem from a very different perspective.

"Without the resources to have staff manually inputting and updating information in house, providers have to do it themselves. Once registered as a provider, they have responsibility for updating their own information and can access the system whenever they want to. Regular email reminders are sent out but the onus is on them to refresh their own information. The use of mandatory fields in the online form helps to maintain data standards.

The benefits of this approach are that users have more control over their own information – the challenge is that they have to have a greater "buy in" and commitment to spend the time and effort needed to keep their information refreshed.", Project Co-ordinator for WUU2 website, Salford

Getting it Out There

Lesson 5: Make the information available

With systems in place to gather and update activity information in a single data base the next challenge for local authorities was to consider the most effective media channels and formats for dissemination. The Plings platform has the potential to feed data out to many different media channels and ISP research showed that local authorities needed to have a better understanding of social networks and the local context when considering the most appropriate and effective communication channels for their audiences. It is critical that trusted information is placed in the places and spaces where young people already go - rather than expecting them to go and find it.

Young people revealed that they found out about places to go and things to do through word of mouth, from their parents, teachers and youth workers, as well as through printed leaflets, brochures and booklets in their neighbourhood shops, at school and in libraries or youth centres. They rarely searched council websites for activities information. Most importantly they also pointed us to their use of the internet with an overwhelming majority saying that they used social networking sites such as Facebook, but would not usually look for information via search engines.

“To be honest I think those sort of big brother information websites have had their day, like the dinosaurs; young people use the web in a different way from the old browse and search way of doing things.”
Youth worker, Bolton

The ISP worked with partners to help display information in a range of formats including²:

- Plingorama - places Plings onto a map with a timeline
- Calendars - displays information in a calendar format
- iPhone App - enables access to Plings from an iPhone or iPod touch
- Android phone App - enables access to Plings from an Android mobile device
- Plings Mobile- enables access to Plings from any web-enabled mobile device
- Radiowaves - a safe social network for schools and youth clubs
- Boredometer - a social network application accessible on Facebook and Bebo
- Plings PDF - printable leaflets
- Looking Local – Presents Plings on Digital TV and the Nintendo Wii
- Pling u Like - a game to help find activities you might like

“Actually as a process it saves me time. If someone asks for a particular piece of information I would say ‘OK how would you would like it, email, calendar or print copy’? And the best thing is that the information is always accurate and relevant, it’s up to date. So it really saves me time and is there at the flick of a button.” Marketing Manager, Dorset County Council

Stakeholders told us that the use of new media in various forms including Facebook, mobile phone applications and text messages are successful in encouraging young people to engage in activities information. Increasingly information providers are adopting new technologies as part of their communications strategy.

² <http://about.plings.net/apps>

Don't forget the leaflets

Antisocial Behaviour and Community Policing Teams said they would value the opportunity to have printed leaflets with up to date information to distribute to young people whilst out on the beat. Not only would this be a way of signposting young people to activities, it would also provide the PCSO's with a positive intervention, preferable to simply dispersing young people around the area. In response the Plings team developed a tool to enable activity information to be printed off in a smart PDF format.

"We now generate weekly or daily listings using the Plings PDF generator which means we can email local and immediate information to frontline staff such as area youth workers, area youth networks and community policing teams for them to make available to communities.

We also used Plings as the main point of information for call centre staff responding to public enquiries about summer activities. Plings unique selling point is that the information is updated daily so it has more activities and is accurate.", Content Management Team Manager, Hull City Council.

Youth services in Knowsley also circulated the leaflets with positive feedback from providers:

"My initial reaction is that this is good and will hopefully reach a wider audience who don't have internet access. Our team would find it useful when attending resident and community meetings. The police and other partners could also have access for engagement work and at their respective meetings." Area Relationships Director, Knowsley

Lesson 6: Shout it from the top

Local authorities involved in the ISP were increasingly aware that they had put a great deal of effort into collecting, aggregating and publishing activities information and that to realise the benefits of this they needed to raise awareness of the resources in their local communities. Even though they dedicate a lot of time, effort and resources to promotion and engagement they were not always sure what worked and what didn't.

"There is an expectation that just because the information is there it will be accessed."
Manager, Content Management Services, Hull

However, in the face of spending constraints many services involved in the ISP reported having limited capacity to launch an effective marketing campaign, identifying the main barriers as:

- Ill defined corporate lead
- Data management taking up the majority of available staff time
- Limited, dispersed and at risk marketing budgets
- Lack of specialist marketing expertise in discrete service areas
- Lack of an identifiable point of responsibility in central marketing teams

In the face of this need, throughout March 2010 a Plings promotional campaign was initiated in seven wards across four of the pilot authorities. The campaign included community based activities to increase the 'noise' around Plings and raise awareness of activities information. In each area, working with local youth service teams, young people were recruited to act as street marketing teams at a series of public promotional events alongside engagement with regional and local media. Local schools and further education colleges were also involved in helping to promote the activities through internal marketing opportunities such as student radio, virtual learning environment systems and internal e-mails.

On the event days mobile youth service buses visited key locations and young people were invited for a demonstration of Plings and the Boredometer social application. The street marketing teams also conducted a survey to gather feedback on activities in the area and awareness levels of Plings.

- 750 young people were directly engaged during the promotional activity
- 450 young people completed the survey
- 12 schools and further education colleges were involved in the promotion
- Promotional activity reached a total of 42,800 young people
- 5,500 pieces of marketing collateral were distributed

Feedback from the campaign highlighted that FIS and Youth Service's valued the experience; gained from working with marketing specialists; and that the promotional campaign had provided them with a template for further activity compatible with their human and financial resources.

"We did the Plings marketing in Salford, which was great. We went out in the bus with laptops and promoted the website and over the next few days we really saw the number of hits to the site go up. So the promotion works and the best method is the face to face contact because you know it's the young people you are reaching." Project Co-ordinator for WUU2 website, Salford

Lesson 7: Re-fuel the fire

Whilst it is exciting to have new publication channels, in the face of the proliferation of social network and mobile phone applications there is a real danger of niche products such as the Boredometer being marginalised. However good they might be, no new application is likely to gain traction without a degree of active promotion. In this light the ISP sought to explore the potential of different online promotion methods and ran a Facebook advertising campaign for the Boredometer targeted at young people in Knowsley and Newcastle. Data from Facebook Insights revealed an increased number of "click throughs" from Boredometer adverts following the start of the campaign and an increase in take up, with 2,695 installed users.



Interestingly the Facebook Insights analysis also highlighted that the campaign attracted young people in the target age group and indicated that it cost approximately 19 pence for each person that clicked on the advertisement. The conversion rate was around 1:5, with the resultant cost of generating a download of the Boredometer application and getting target group members engaged with the activity information being less than 90 pence.

We also established the benefits of third party promotion through a partnership between North Lincolnshire Council and Scunthorpe United Football Club (SUFC) who agreed to promote Plings on their club website. A page of the site was dedicated to information about Plings with endorsements from the council Cabinet Member, SUFC Trust Chief Executive, manager and players with messages such as:

“The Plings website is a great way for young people to find out what’s going on in their area. During the school summer holidays, lots of events and activities have been organised to suit most tastes. It’s simple to access the information, so why not give it a go.” Cabinet Member for Children’s Services

“We’re delighted to be launching the Plings campaign. All of our summer soccer camp information is on the Plings site, as well as many North Lincolnshire activities throughout the summer.”,
Chief Executive, SUFC

Making it Social

Lesson 8: Share where young people share

What became clear from the ISP was that where opportunities exist to share information about activity provision on a peer-to-peer basis, social groups are more likely to be formed around the activity with a consequent positive impact on attendance by those young people.

In 2009 Young Apprentices working with Hull Council Content Management Services set up the Clued up in Hull Facebook Group. The group started with the Young Apprentices sharing it with their own friends on Facebook and has grown organically since then with friends inviting other friends to join and now has over 700 registered users. Activities information is updated daily via the Plings platform and young people can feedback and respond to polls and surveys about activities through the Facebook group. The beauty of this approach is that it enables young people to access activity information by bumping into it when they are 'on Facebook' rather than having to go to a dedicated site. It also has added credibility because the information is seen as being presented by friends, friends of friends and the wider Facebook community rather than coming from the local authority.

"I am a friend of Clued up on Facebook and that's how I find out about things – I can go on there and if I see something then I can tell my other friends on Facebook and ask if anyone else wants to go to something". Resident, Aged 15, Beverley, Hull

"We all go on Facebook, us lot, me, my Mam and the kids so three generations are on it – if I saw something on there I could pass it on to my mates". Resident, Orchard Park, Hull

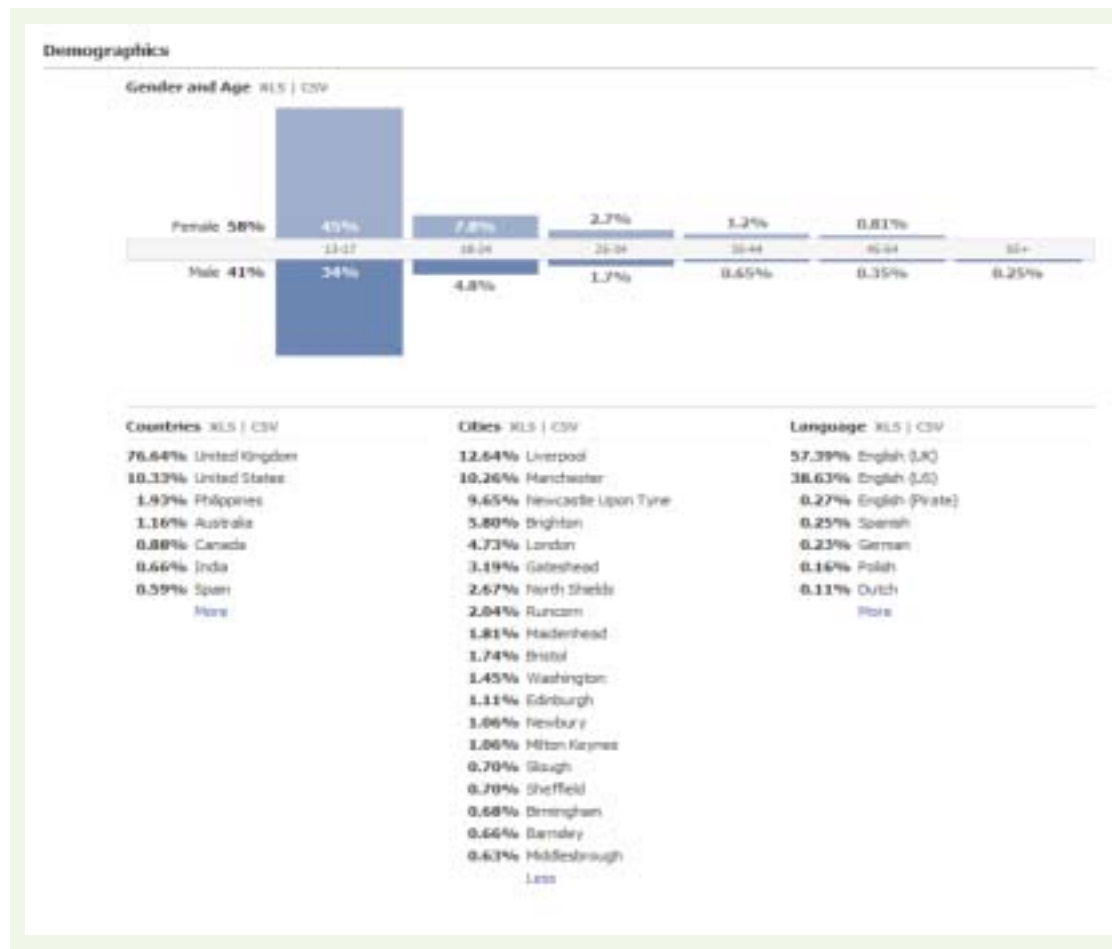


Taking this a step further the Boredometer social networking application was developed in response to young people saying that friendship networks were how they liked to find out about activities. The Boredometer was co-designed with young people to enable them to ask friends about things to do when they put out a 'shout' to say they are bored. Information from Plings is then fed directly to Facebook or Bebo pages via the Boredometer application and is installed on a profile. It makes it easy for young people to help each other find places to go and things to do in an environment which feels fun and safe.

By October 2010 the application had been installed over 18,000 times with a spread across the areas covered by the ISP pilot and other Plings partners³:

The Boredometer also has an administration tool that is available to councils for monitoring usage. It allows council staff working on the local youth offer to:

- Publish Plings onto Facebook Pages easily
- Send messages to all Boredometer users in their area
- Follow an admin trail showing which specific Facebook account sent which messages
- Examine statistics on Boredometer usage in their area.



Lesson 9: Share where young people meet

The ISP revealed the potential for schools to become focal points for disseminating information. We found that many teachers were keen to be involved in local networks and made the critical point that school is the one place in the community where all (or most) young people are often together in one place. Almost a quarter (24%) of young people interviewed during the Plings promotional campaign said that they would like to hear about activities through school.

In response, working in partnership with Radiowaves, an application was developed that delivers Plings information directly to pupils' Radiowaves pages. Radiowaves is a safe social network that provides social media for education, including internet radio, podcasts, videos and blogs. The new application brings activities information into a trusted social media space where young people can share information about events and provide feedback via a "likes" function⁴.

³ NB With those 10 locations accounting for around 50% of all visitors.

⁴ <http://www.radiowaves.co.uk/story/134855/title/IntroducingPlings>

During previous consultations young people had indicated that they would only go to an activity if friends also participated and that their main way of finding out about things to do and places to go was through friendship networks. The Radiowaves application fulfils both these criteria as young people can find activity information, share it with friends and invite them to come to.

“Here at Radiowaves we’re very excited by this new development. We’ve been working with the Plings team so that all events can now be delivered directly to pupils anywhere in the country through their Radiowaves page.

It’s a complex task made very simple. When pupils login they can quickly find events nearby, send an invite to their friends and easily find out who else wants to go. They also have the option to send themselves a free SMS reminder at a time of their choosing, just so they don’t forget. All this happens within the school’s learning environment on Radiowaves.

As well as getting all the practical information contained in the ‘Pling’ they can also give feedback on an event and see what others think through ‘likes’ and comments. Both of these can be done before and after the event and will form a useful bank of information for the event organiser.”

Programme Manager, Radiowaves

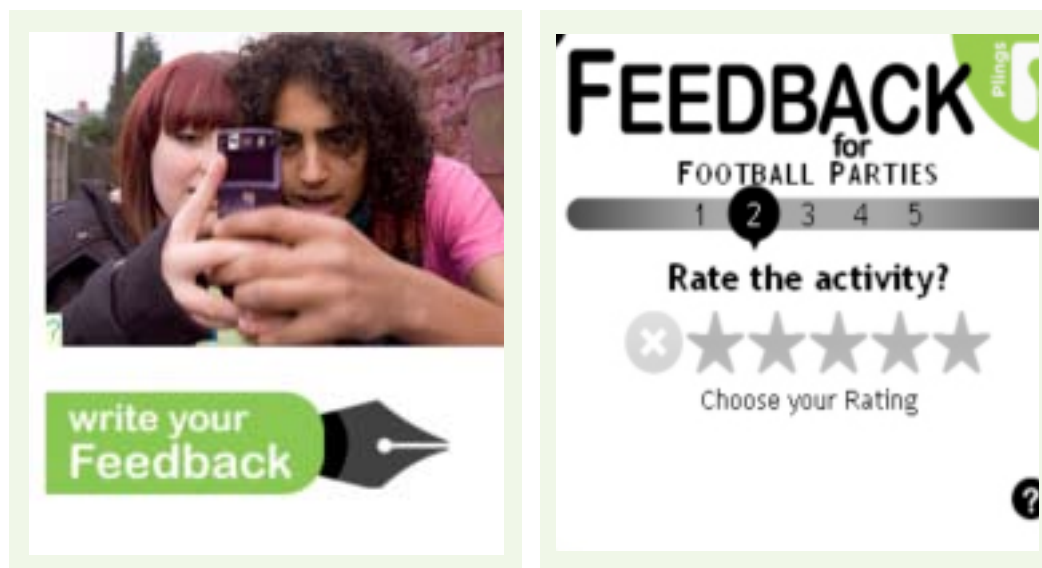
Lesson 10: Listen to your audience

It is now fairly universally accepted that the voice of young people needs to be heard in relation to service provision aimed at them. What has been less clear is what the appropriate methods for capturing young people’s thoughts on activity provision might be. The ISP has established that young people are more likely to feedback on the range and quality of activities if they can do so in the ways that are appropriate to them.

In order to develop a robust and appropriate feedback channel, the ISP team worked with groups of young people in London, Nottingham, Hull and Blackpool to devise ideas and prototype feedback tools. The message that came back was loud and clear. Make the feedback mechanisms obvious, quick and easy.

Ultimately an infrastructure was developed to enable activity providers to collect feedback through a variety of means - including the Plings publication channels, but also the local authorities own web presence. This was achieved through the development of a “widget” that enables the feedback tool to be embedded within any number of web properties.

The tool itself enables users to indicate attendance, rate and comment on activities and to continue a conversation via a range of communication channels including email, phone and Facebook.



Making a Difference: Impact and Evidence

Finding 1: More activities information published

Whilst the ultimate aim of the ISP was to help increase participation in structured activities it always sought to achieve this by learning more about how best to communicate activities information to young people and how to do it in a sustainable way. This was never likely to be a one-off, fixed term exercise since the very nature of the project was actively experimental, requiring time for new working practices to be embedded and the impact realised.

With the ending of requirements on local authorities to report against national indicators, the measure for young people's participation in positive activities, NI110, is likely to become an increasingly redundant mechanism for assessing progress. However, as part of an audit of advertised activity provision in 81 local authority areas for the period November 24th 2008 to January 25th 2009, an online analytics tools was built to present the information. This tool created the first single facility for comparative analysis of published activity information. It provided the functionality to interrogate 224,907 activity instances and to filter them by local authority, ward, location, type of activity, provider, day and time.

As this tool was restricted to the retrospective publication of activity information rather than the communication channels it flowed along or the engagement with those channels a new tool, Plingalytics, was developed to help visualise and analyse this information through a single web interface. The tool centres on three main data sources:

- Activity data – data on activities, venues and organisations
- Traffic data – website hits and activity
- Interaction data – feedback and sharing

The tool visualises the information held in the Plings database and analyses data across a variety of data ranges such as activity instances, types, times and dates, providers and ward statistics. The tool also draws in additional statistics from Google Analytics and Facebook Insights to plot the numbers of hits together with geographic and demographic information. Plingalytics re-emphasises the need for different stakeholders to 'get around the table'. By bringing together various datasets, those responsible for data collection, managing and sharing can see how 'their' area of responsibility is influenced by and related to other elements.



Using this capability we were able to demonstrate that over a fixed one month period during the summer holidays there was a fourfold increase in activities listed in Plings in 2010 compared to the same period in 2009:

Time Frame	Total Activities Listed
6th July 2009 – 5th August 2009	18,403
6th July 2010 – 5th August 2010	61,134

Looking at the activity instance data in two of the pilot local authorities, Hull and Knowsley, there was a significant increase in the number of activities, venues and provider listings.

	06/07/2009 – 05/08/2009	06/07/2010 – 05/08/2010
Knowsley		
Activities Listed	229	1084
Venues Listed	53	107
Providers	12	47

“It’s a really good foundation that we’re building on – yes we can say that young people and parents know better now where to go to find out what’s on – yes it’s definitely better and the message is getting across that there’s lots of ways to find activity information – whether that be Help4Me, Plings or the local authority web-site.”, Marketing Co-ordinator, Youth services, Knowsley

	06/07/2009 – 05/08/2009	06/07/2010 – 05/08/2010
Hull		
Activities Listed	226	1684
Venues Listed	93	178
Providers	1	40

“The main developments in the last twelve months have been a substantial increase in the amount of activities information that we now have available and the variety of different media, channels and pathways we use to disseminate this across the city.

Twelve months ago the Clued up for Summer booklet was light on activities information with around 300 activities listed (even though there were more actually taking place) where as this year there are approximately 1070 listed in the booklet.

As well as having more information in the summer booklet we have currently 2,281 activities listed on Plings over the summer period and this is going up daily as new activities get added. For the first week in August there are 402 activities listed on Plings compared to the eight activities listed in September 2009.”
Content Management Team Manager, Hull City Council.

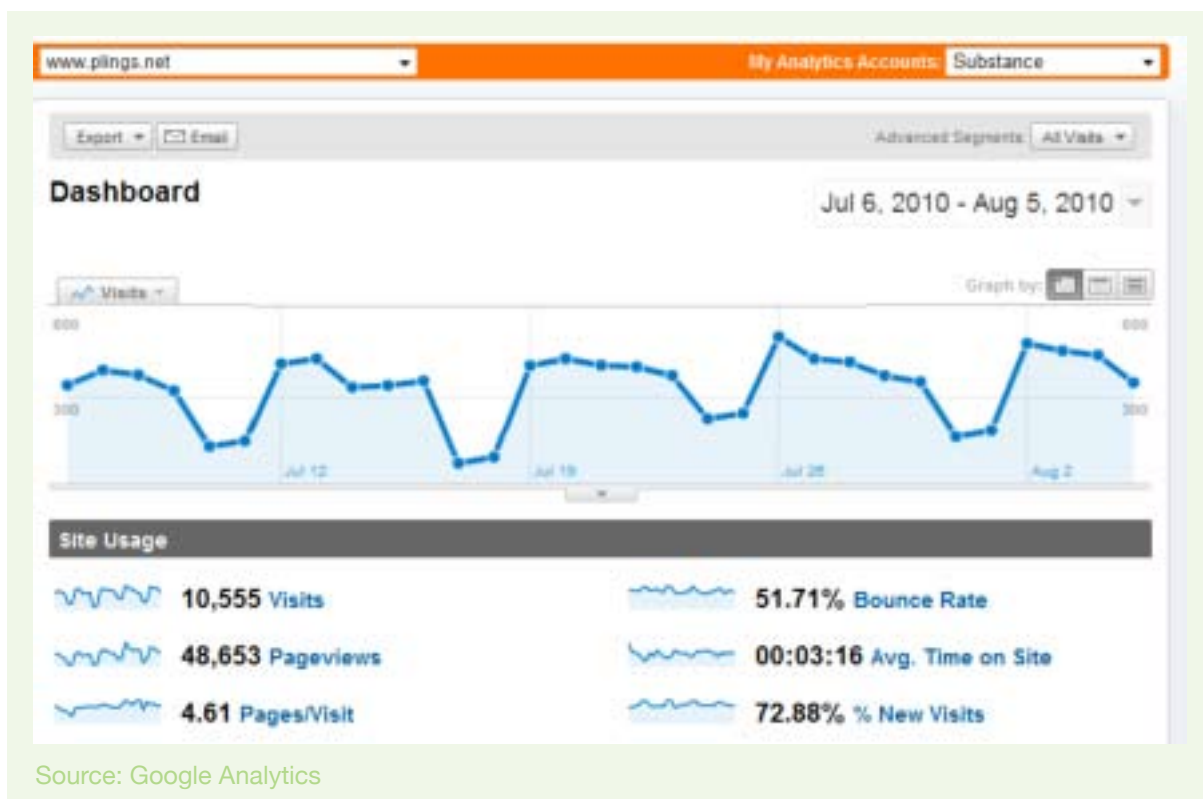
‘On the ground’ there was an overwhelming feeling that there was ‘more going on’ for young people and that young people were faced with more opportunities to participate than ever.

“Well I couldn’t believe what was going on in the area and for free. I used to send them to a paid activity but they actually prefer this one and it’s free. There are more activities than there used to be and they are also creative activities like street dance and music which is good because my daughter prefers that to the sports activities. I’m really pleased that she actually wants to come here and learn new things and not just slob about all summer. I’m really impressed with it all.” Parent, Salford.

“Honestly I never realised there was so much going on – I am amazed because people are always saying there’s nothing for young people to do which is why there is so much anti-social behaviour.. there really is something for everyone from cooking to fishing and days out, and I didn’t realise that so many are free.” Resident, Hull.

Finding 2: More engagement with information and activities

Additionally there is clearly a significant increase in the use of Plings with figures showing the increase in total visits to the main website over the year rising from 909 in 2009 to 10,555 in 2010 for the same time period.



Source: Google Analytics

The total page views also point to a rapid growth, with 48,653 distinct pages being viewed in one month of 2010 which points to 4.61 pages per visitor compared to only 1.13 in 2009. This suggests people are engaging more with the site and visiting four times more pages than they did previously.

The bounce rate, which relates to the rate at which people visit pages and then instantly navigate away rather than engaging with the content, has almost halved over the year and suggests that more people that find the site engage with it.

Subject	July 6th - August 5th 2009	July 6th – August 5th 2010
Total Visits to Plings	909	10,555
Total Page Views	1,023	48,653
Average pages per visit	1.13	4.61
Average time on site	00:00:13	00:03:16
Bounce Rate	96.37	51.71

Many stakeholders reported that the use of new media had been successful in reaching and engaging young people with activities information.

“It has given us as a Council confidence that we have a great tool that we can progress and develop to meet the needs of children and young people and is able to give them the information in a format that they are able to access – what is key to the success is that they can access it in a variety of ways... young people can choose to access information via the internet, Facebook or Boredometer,”
Youth Activities & Marketing Co-ordinator, Knowsley MBC.

For some the project helped to encourage new ways of thinking and marketing based on the principles of making information more accessible and relying on young people to pass it amongst themselves.

“We promoted the website through schools. I presented at various school assemblies and then the school ICT teachers spent time in class looking around the website. So the message is getting out there and those young people we reach pass this information on, so it’s really word of mouth.” Marketing Manager, Salford City Council.

“If I am bored and looking for something to do I find out what’s on from Clued Up In Hull Facebook (a Plings app). I use Plings to look for information that is specific to me like activities I want to do. I think there is loads to do this summer I currently go dancing, to the cinema, bowling and horse riding.”
15 year old girl, Hull.

In turn, there is growing confidence that the easier access to information is feeding through into better uptake of activities and perceptions of provision.

Having better information has helped me to organise summer holidays for the family. I have been able to do a lot more things for myself over the summer and the family have been keeping themselves occupied a lot more. Tomorrow they are all going to the National Playday to see what’s there. It’s a day out and it doesn’t cost me much – I found it on the Facebook feed. My household has been a lot quieter this summer than last and the “I’m bored” phrase hasn’t been used as much this year!” Parent, Hull.

“Yes definitely more young people are attending the activities, I mean here in Westvale before there were about 15 to 20 young people at a youth club session whereas now it can be up to 40 or 60 at a time and we are attracting them from a much wider geographical area than in the past.” Youth Worker, Knowsley.

Finding 3: Better information leads to better commissioning

With a growing body of intelligence on the activity offer and people's engagement with it, pilot local authorities are in a better position to establish where the gaps are in their own activity provision. This information can now be used to help inform what activity providers are commissioned or supported to deliver.

In order to help them meet these needs more effectively local authorities engaging with the learning presented in this document should seek to understand who is best placed to deliver their requirements by encouraging feedback from service users on their experience. The key point here is that information provided by service users and others can be used as evidence of 'impact' that should be analysed and reported back to activity providers to hold them to account and help them improve. This information should also be supplemented with information around attendance, achievements and outcomes from providers, partners and other stakeholders in order to ensure that authorities are commissioning services that deliver value for money.

The ISP has demonstrated that it is possible to synchronise the easy analysis and reporting of activity data with the data aggregation process. This enables seamless monitoring and reporting on the provision of structured activities and real time local analysis that can be used to inform a wider commissioning strategy, based on desired results and outcomes.

Knowsley Knows

Carol Farrell, Commissioning Officer for Youth at Knowsley Council explained that "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."

Getting the basics right has given Knowsley the confidence to adopt a more innovative approach to marketing activities, including a social media strategy and, by more effective targeting of information to publicise activities in 'hot spot' areas. This has given them confidence that they are fully meeting the needs of young people, parents, residents and the wider community. It no longer feels like a traditional 'council service' as young people now choose how to engage with information in anyone of a number of spaces where it is available 24/7.

"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. The strategy that Knowsley put in place two years ago is certainly paying off, as more and more feedback is positive, including from residents, police and local businesses.

"Plings has helped us enormously," she says. "It has given us 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".

Learning Resources

Throughout the development of the Information and Signposting Project we have learned about and benefitted from working in a collaborative way and pooling knowledge and resources through a number of initiatives including:

The Plings Blog.

Found at <http://blogs.plings.net> the Plings blog predates the ISP having posted its first blog on 13th July 2007. It has been active ever since with:

- 260 posts to October 2010
- 183 comments made on those posts
- 264 registered subscribers to the blog
- 13,071 visits to the blog
- 23,788 page views
- 3,808 clickbacks whereby people share the blog posts with others

Via the Plings blog we have maintained three types of posts including:

- 1 – Updates about the project – including announcements, developments and news relating to the ISP and Plings
- 2 – Key features around themes – including a focus on using particular technologies or marketing methods etc.
- 3 – Updates about youth activities provision in general

The audience for the blog has largely consisted of those who are working in local authorities to promote activities information but what is most encouraging is the extent to which subscribers have taken the learning further and shared it with a wider constituency.

Plings Twitter.

Found at <http://twitter.com/plings#> the Plings twitter feed has generated:

- 557 Tweets
- 599 Followers
- A profile on 30 different lists
- And is following 727 tweeters

Use of the Plings Twitter channel was tested around various aspects of the project, which has ultimately led to a focus on:

1. Distribution of news stories around structured activities – sourced through local media
2. “Retweeting” interesting and relevant links shared by people within the sector
3. Curating lists of relevant tweeters in the sector

In this sense Twitter has not been used to ‘promote’ Plings to young people directly or even to be conversational with those with an interest in the project. Rather it has provided a useful subsidiary channel to promote learning and news around the project.

Policy Briefings and Learning Documents.

The ISP has resulted in the production of a series of public policy briefings which to date have focused on 'Safe and Effective Social Network Site Applications for Young People', 'Activity Mapping', 'Location Based Services' and the 'Better Publicising of Positive Activities' as well as generic learning documents such as this.

Plings Developer Hub.

Found at <http://plings.info> the developer's hub provides freely accessible documentation and support materials for those with a technical interest in the project and the development of applications using Plings data. During the course of the ISP:

- 174 articles of documentation have been created and posted on the Plings wiki
- 39 people have joined the technical discussion forum and discussed 64 topics
- 7,242 visits have been made to the wiki homepage

The Developer Community build up around the project had very real and practical benefits in terms of providing a crack team of engaged developers who could respond to the needs of pilot authorities.

A clear message from our research with outreach and community workers in Hull and Knowsley related to the need to redistribute Plings data in paper formats - especially to those who could not access the web or mobile.

To facilitate this a prototype tool was built to trial the format, distribution and take-up of the tool two areas. Using the feedback from the pilots, members of the developer community were then able to produce a fully scalable version of the tool (www.plings2pdf.net) for use by all.

Meetups.

The ISP has consistently revealed the importance of maintaining a commitment to offline as well as online communication. As a reflection of this, through the course of the project we have delivered a series of stakeholder events with partners and young people, including:

- "Plings surgeries" with activity providers to provide hands on learning around Plings
- Three rounds of 5 regional meetings in the North East, North West, Yorkshire, Midlands and London with relevant pilot authorities
- Three national stakeholder events in London, Manchester and Birmingham
- An All About Plings event for non-pilot local authorities attended by around 40 authorities
- Two developer conferences for those at the technical end of the project. One held at Google UK in London attended by 30 developers and a second in Manchester attended by 45 developers.

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