

SMARTER STATE CASE STUDIES

TORFAEN COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL: WISDOM BANK TORFAEN

This neighbor-helping-neighbor expert network attempts to replace the “pub conversation”



TALENT BANK

February 10, 2016

We would like to thank Sue Browne, Partnerships and Policy Manager, Torfaen County Borough Council for her assistance.



SMART CITIZENS SMARTER STATE



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BASIC INFORMATION

BASICS

Owner

Torfaen Local Service Board (LSB)

Project Contact

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Project Summary

A local expert and social network to connect citizens and allow them to share wisdom and use their experience to solve problems facing other members of the community.

Sector

County Government

Audience

All citizens of the Borough of Torfaen, Wales.

Problem that Wisdom Bank is Trying to Solve

Local individuals possess knowledge and experience that is useful to other residents but hard to target.

Platform

Online library and toolkit

Design Basics

Simple email based sign up. Citizens can ask questions or request advice, answer questions or post content such as videos for the benefit of other users. It allows for one-to-one conversation between users if they need it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What's new?

This platform makes use of the wisdom and experience of the citizens of Torfaen (The median age of their citizens is in the 40s and rising), to help each other and especially youth by making it easy to share this knowledge.

Incentives for Participation

Purely voluntary participation with citizens eager to share their expertise for mutual benefit.

Challenges

Lack of emphasis on user interface and marketing and consequently low number of returning users. Lack of funding after initial grant.

Anticipated impact/Metrics

Given its broad focus, platform is anticipated to have impact across a number of domains, including unemployment and health services.

Why is this project interesting?

A project designed to make findable the experience of citizens at a local level and “bring the public” online.





Members of a community are often experts in local conditions -- what it takes to start a business in that town; how to navigate obtaining city services; which doctors and hospitals provide the best services; and how to manage living with a disability in that place. Unfortunately, this community wisdom is dispersed. Hayek refers to this inability to gather information distributed among individual actors as the “local knowledge problem.”¹ On global social networks, the specificity of local know how can get lost. If only this local knowledge could be systematically tapped, citizens could help one another on certain topics even more effectively than a government agency and local civil servants, in turn, could learn what topics are of concern to members of the community.

ABOUT THE WISDOM BANK

In 2011, the Borough of Torfaen in southeastern Wales began consultations in connection with the development of a community expert networking project called Wisdom Bank.² Torfaen had been grappling with a rising unemployment and poverty rate and the county recognized that it had within its midst no paucity of experience to combat these problems since the median age of its citizens was in the 40s and rising.

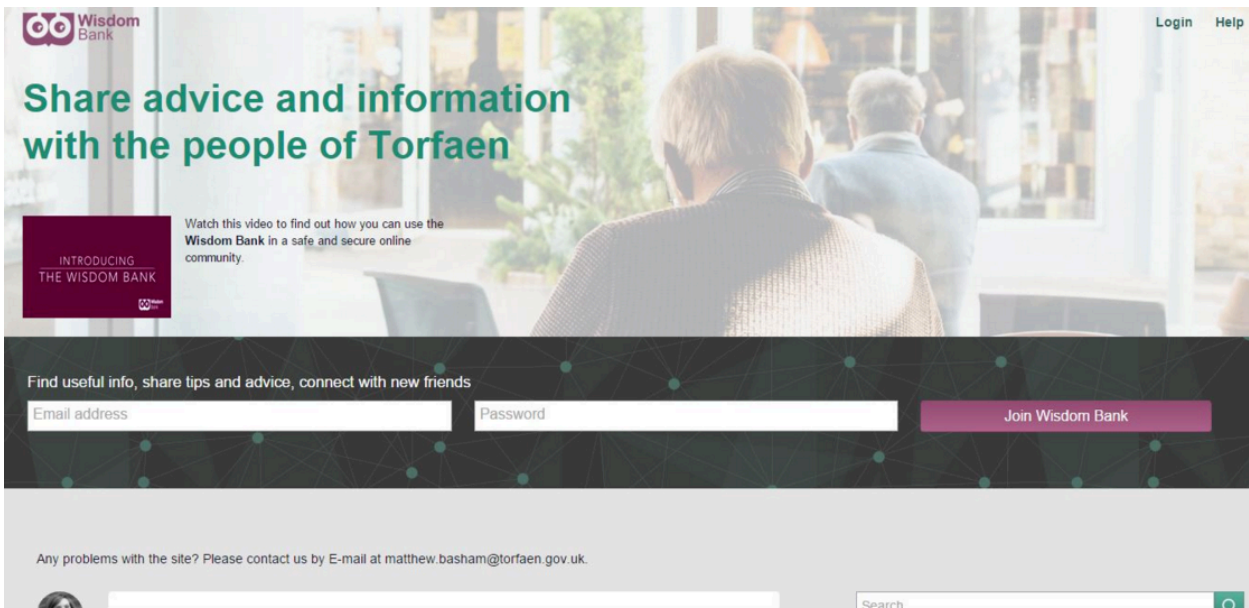
These “Pivot Generation” citizens aged 45-65 comprise a hidden talent pool that the Wisdom Bank tries to make available to the rest of the community. Project leaders in conversation with the local community identified 17 target areas of expertise where neighbors could uniquely benefit from peer-to-peer communication, including entrepreneurship mentoring by experienced business owners; job advice from the employed for local youth and patients helping newly diagnosed patients with Diabetes.

Following two years of planning by the Torfaen Local Service Board (LSB) in association with Cisco’s Business Solutions Group as part of the Wisdom, Wealth and Well-being (WWW) program, the Big Lottery (BIG) People³ and Places Fund supported the launch of the platform with a £250,000 grant in 2013. The project has since been absorbed by the Borough government’s Digital Transformation initiative.

1 Hayek, Friedrich A., "The Use of Knowledge in Society." (Library of Economics and Liberty, 1945)

2 <http://www.wisdombank.org.uk>

3 <http://www.torfaen.gov.uk/en/News/2013/April/12-Wisdom-Bank-receives-250k-grant.aspx>



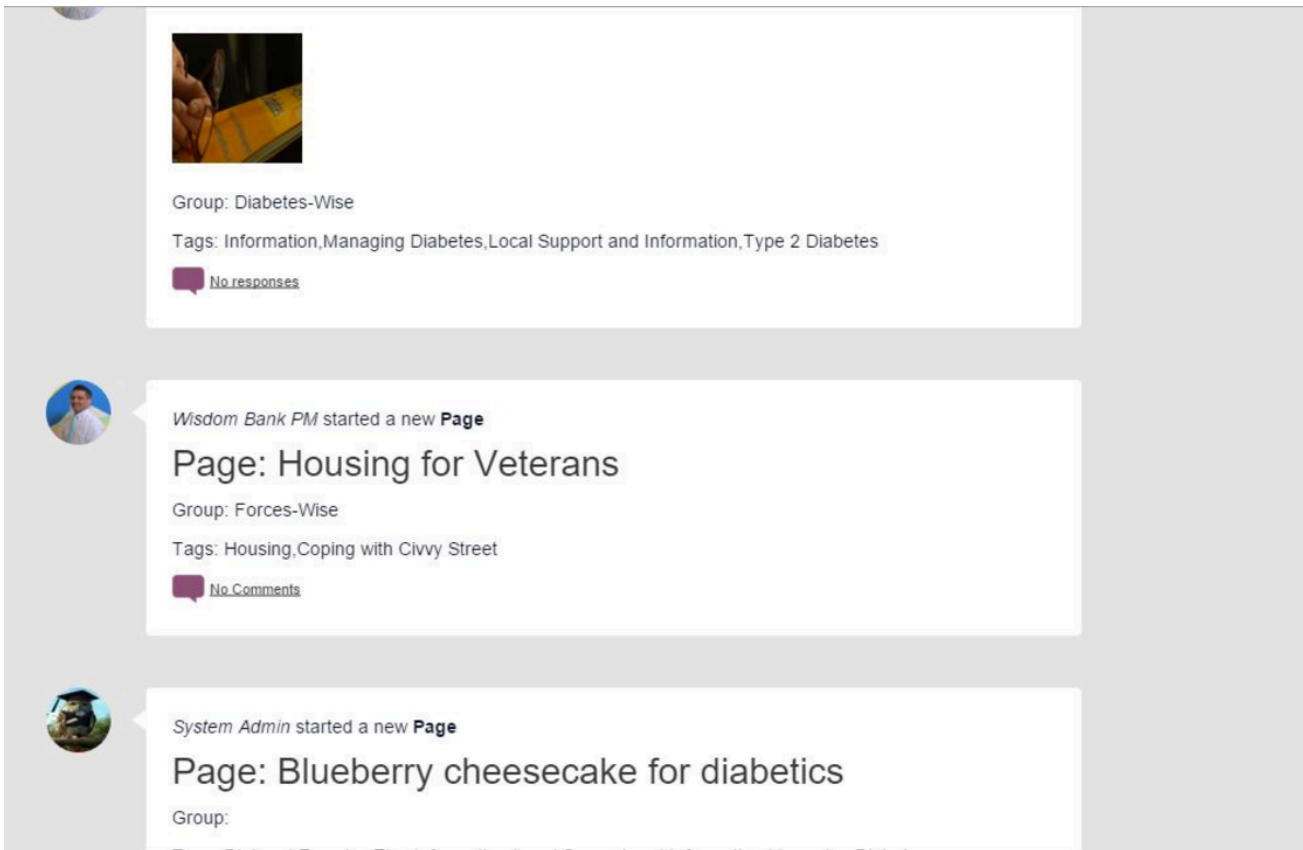
Home page of the Wisdom Bank-Torfaen

HOW IT WORKS

The Wisdom Bank is a hyper-local web app where users can find answers to questions, answer other people’s questions or just post useful content that anyone can access. It allows users to have one-to-one conversations to find or provide solutions to problems. Unlike successful social media networks like Facebook, which focuses on building large groups of friends, or LinkedIn’s “dry, corporate”⁴ format, which lacks lively interaction, the Wisdom Bank was designed to encourage one-to-one conversations as well as the post of user-generated videos, blogs and short films all for and by a local audience.

To allow even citizens with limited experience using the internet to share practical wisdom, the interface is simple to use. At the same time, to encourage users to participate without any inhibitions, the online platform was built with privacy and security as one of the foremost priorities – cyberbullying is strictly prohibited, and any content that is flagged as such is immediately taken down.

4 “Report from Wisdom, Wealth and Wellbeing programme (WWW) Phase 2: Initial Proof of Concept for the Wisdom Bank” (Torfaen County Borough Council, 2012)



Sample groups and posts on Wisdom Bank-Torfaen

Users can ask questions, answer them, create groups, post videos and post comments on the website. Users are constantly “depositing”⁵ wisdom into the Bank when they have something to share and “withdrawing” information when they’re looking for answers.

As a local expert network designed to help conversations that usually take place in the pub or over the picket fence to scale, the project remains intentionally small. As of November 2015, there were close 400 active members contributing actively to the Wisdom Bank.

CHALLENGES

The ambitious goal for this platform was to create something that was used so extensively that it would eventually encourage people to ask questions of one another on the platform instead of turning to government.

5 <http://digitaltorfaen.com/2015/08/24/people-know-useful-stuff-introducing-the-wisdom-bank/>



However, project owners admit that they underestimated the amount of time and technological investment required to build something as advanced as a full scale expert and social network.

Infrastructural limitations meant desired features like one-to-one or one-to-many video chat had to be scaled back.⁶ At the same time, limited funding and lack of universal Internet skills required the Borough to provide more support than anticipated.

Furthermore, growing the site has demanded a great deal of time and investment in marketing the project. Since BIG lottery's initial grant, the platform has had to be funded internally. Another attempt at securing second BIG lottery funding has been unsuccessful.

ANTICIPATED IMPACT

Since the platform's goal is to help people find solutions easily, "akin to the times when one would inevitably find someone helpful at the local pub for tips to fix a leaky tap," says Sue Browne Partnerships Manager and original project lead for Wisdom Bank, the hoped for impact is wide ranging, including reduced unemployment rate, shorter job recruitment times, reduced burden on an already stretched health services, and increased community harmony.⁷ Although the platform is still very new and its design has not yet been fully realized, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Wisdom Bank is slowly beginning to pay dividends.

6 "Report from Wisdom, Wealth and Wellbeing programme (WWW) Phase 2: Initial Proof of Concept for the Wisdom Bank" (Torfaen County Borough Council, 2012)

7 "Report from Wisdom, Wealth and Wellbeing programme (WWW) Phase 2: Initial Proof of Concept for the Wisdom Bank" (Torfaen County Borough Council, 2012)

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ABOUT SMARTER STATE

New tools—what GovLab calls technologies of expertise— are making it possible to match the supply of citizen expertise to the demand for it in government. Smarter State is a GovLab initiative to design and test how public decision-making could improve if institutions knew how to use the technologies of expertise to tap the wisdom of citizens’ and civil servants.