

Bringing people together through technology

Reading Borough Council's catalyst for change



Reading Borough Council wanted to find a way to join up a labyrinth of over 190 support services intended to help people get into work. Working with young people, they found out what they wanted and how best to deliver it. All they needed was a catalyst for change – which is where O₂ came in.

Across the UK today, there are almost one million 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training¹ (NEET) – including over 4000 in Reading. The challenge for NEETs in Reading has always been the starting step – finding the right way into the labyrinth of support services. Reading Borough Council saw how much young people love their phones – they'd rather spend their money on credit than lunch – and realised this could be a key to solving this challenge.

Understanding the need

Reading Borough Council staff attended job fairs and youth groups to find out what young people needed. The answers were consistent – help with CVs, work placements and mentoring advice – in a format that worked for them. Reading Borough Council understood the need, and they had the right partners on board. What they didn't have was a catalyst to kick off the change.

The O₂ Local Government Future Fund was exactly the catalyst they needed. Alan Magness, Local Strategic Partnership Coordinator at Reading Borough Council, says why the Future Fund appealed to them: "The combination of technology and the process change it can bring about was really key to us." The council decided to bid for funding to help create an app that would speed up young people's search for jobs – while getting them involved in bringing it to life.

Plan into action

Reading's winning pitch recognised how O₂'s technology, consultancy and support could help them to create an innovative new app. Connecting young people with the support services and resources available to help them get back into work – by pooling all the information and putting it in the palm of their hand. Reading Borough Council's ambition went beyond just helping its youngsters – it also had an eye on the applicability of the concept across the UK to help solve issues for NEETs.



The Local Government Future Fund

In 2012, O₂ set up an initiative to help local government authorities to kick-start digital innovation. The fund offered local authorities the opportunity to compete for a total of £250,000 worth of consultancy and technology. Councils were invited to present business plans to O₂, and four councils won three awards to develop innovative services. You can find out more by visiting:

lgff.business-o2.co.uk

¹ Department for Education NEET Statistical Release, Quarter 2 2012

From inspiration to execution

A critical part of making the app work was ensuring it was right for young people. That's why Reading Borough Council joined forces with a team from The Lab – O₂'s digital innovation experts. Together, they met up with a group of young people in Reading and picked their brains about the look and feel of their ideal app. Then they transformed those great ideas into a prototype and tested it on the target audience. How's it gone down? Ask Sean Stokes, a young person who's been involved in the process from the start: "I think it's great, I think it organises all the information really well and I think it will help a lot of young people, as well as myself!"

Committed to community engagement

Alan feels that O₂'s support goes way beyond providing the technology behind the app. As part of its commitment to corporate social responsibility, O₂ was integral in helping Reading Borough Council link up with a wider community of small and medium-sized businesses to solve the issue together: "As a key business player in the nation, they have access to businesses that we need to engage with to help young people into work placements and mentoring." Reading Borough Council was also able to get on board with O₂'s Think Big programme, which Alan Magness recognised as "a great way to get lots of good ideas from young people in our area".

Handset delivered, mindset shifted

Now the app's been given the go ahead, Alan's really excited about what this means for young jobseekers in Reading: "We've raised their expectations, and with O₂'s help we've given them a way to shape their own futures." Beyond the app, O₂'s involvement in the project has been integral in getting the wider community – including the 190 support organisations – bought into the concept, "so the mindset is shifted as well as having the handset delivered", as Alan describes it.

Looking ahead

By working together with O₂, Reading Borough Council has seen the value of using technology as a driver for process change, and Alan can see a similar approach being applied in areas such as adult social care and beyond: "The principles from this project can be applied to any area where you've got dispersed users and multiple providers. The users need to be at the heart of it and the information needs to be all in one place."

Think Big

O₂'s initiative for providing money, support and training for people aged 13-25 who have big ideas around improving the communities they live in. Visit o2thinkbig.co.uk to find out more.

"Having technology at the heart of process change has proved a real catalyst for moving forward."

Alan Magness,
Local Strategic Partnership
Coordinator, Reading
Borough Council