

# East Sussex County Council

■ South coast council develops four principles for using technology to improve its work with vulnerable children and families

■ Key element of the approach is the development of a 'digital toolkit' for social workers to access resources via the council's intranet

■ A suite of approved apps and resources support social workers in their day-to-day tasks with young people

## ACTION

Social workers in East Sussex are using a "digital toolkit" that is accessed through an intranet-style private communications network to support and improve the day-to-day work of practitioners.

The toolkit allows social workers and practitioners in the children's services department at East Sussex County Council to find recommended and tested tools, applications, websites and guidance to help them in their contact with children and families.

It hosts a variety of different resources, providing information across a range of categories including engagement and intervention, keeping children and families safe online, advice on practitioners' wellbeing, and suggested sources of help and support for young people.

Alastair Lee, data and information manager at East Sussex County Council's children's services department, says that one application that has been tested and is recommended to social workers

is "ZipIt" developed by NSPCC.

ZipIt is being used by social workers to help vulnerable young people recognise when discussions online and on social media become inappropriate. It also provides useful tips to help young people manage conversations and stay in control of online chat.

Another application to help young people navigate online relationships included in the East Sussex digital toolkit is "Send This Instead". This helps to manage issues around "sexting" and inappropriate texting for children.

Meanwhile, "Head Space" is a guided meditation and mindfulness application designed to help improve attention, exercise mindful awareness, relieve anxiety and reduce stress.

Lee says that all practitioners at the council can gain access to the digital toolkit and the applications



Head Space is a guided meditation app

that are recommended all come from generic application stores. The intranet network and digital toolkit are also updated constantly to ensure social workers can keep on top of what applications work best with children and families.

He explains that the digital toolkit is the first of "four key principles" for how the council is harnessing technology to improve services for children and families.

# Social work apps

■ Social work professionals and the children, young people and families they work with are increasingly using apps on smart phones and tablets to communicate, access support and share information. Here are four examples

## ACTION

The **weKonnekt** app was designed to help meet the needs of young carers across the UK. It was developed by a group of five pupils aged 13 and 14 from a school in Luton, and launched in February this year with support from education technology charity Apps for Good.

The app won the People's Choice award in the charity's annual awards last year, and the teenagers have since been shortlisted for a BBC Radio 1 teen award.

The app consists of three sections, including Babble, an online support network for young carers by charity Carers Trust that

allows users to communicate with each other.

The app also features a "take part" section, where users can find local services, including care centres, youth clubs, community centres, hospitals, GP surgeries, and pharmacies. This feature uses mobile satellite navigation to link to Google Maps, to pinpoint services that are local to the user. It also gives users useful information, such as opening times, and links to NHS services, so young carers who are looking after a family member with special health needs can access information and guidance.

Another feature of the app allows users to see case studies, containing stories from other young carers and how they cope with the everyday challenges they face.

Noreen Aldworth, Apps for Good communications and events manager, says: "For us, the really interesting part is that it's young people creating this app for other

young people. They've seen this problem, they've recognised it in their community or within their own families, and then they wanted to do something to help those young people."

**MOMO (Mind of my Own)** aims to improve communication between young people and professionals in the social care system. It has been running for three years, and is currently used by 44 local authorities. Children as young as six have used the app, but the most common age of users is 14.

The app can help children express their views and feelings, and make it easier for social workers to record these, and help inform decisions about their care. The app can be used on phones and tablets, so it is seen as more accessible for young people.

It enables young people to engage with social workers, tell them what they are unhappy with, and talk about issues when they are not with their social worker, or

that they find difficult to bring up in person.

It also allows young people to pick topics to discuss with their social worker before a meeting, selecting from a menu of different emotions on how they are feeling, and asking questions such as what they would like to be different and what they hope the outcome of the meeting will be.

Joe Roberson, co-founder and director of MOMO, says: "What we've been impressed by is how workers in some areas have used the app in different ways than we would have expected.

"Some social workers started using it with children, side by side; we didn't design the app that way. They've essentially repurposed it. We've learned a lot from that."

He says the app has worked particularly well in cases where a child does not want to attend a review with their social worker, but the worker suggests writing things on the app instead of on paper.

The second is using new systems to support relationship-based practice, including hearing the voice of the child.

The council uses the “Mind Of My Own” (MOMO) application to gather the views of looked-after children in preparation for, and during, meetings about care plans. Through social media, children can use MOMO to make comments on their plans, Lee says.

“It is giving them an easy way to have a conversation with social workers because one of the key things is that the young person’s views are taken into account as part of any review and often they are sat in a room, which is quite threatening,” he explains.

“But if they have an application where they can make comments as they go through, it is much more likely we will get something [from them].”

The third principle is investing in new equipment. This has seen social workers kitted out with smartphones, laptops and hybrid laptops/tablets. The equipment is Wifi- and 4G-enabled, allowing staff to use online resources alongside children and families, making the process more transparent, explains Lee.

“We needed tailored phones and computers to enable us to be secure,” adds Lee.

Information on children and families is stored on a web-based server instead of the devices themselves, so that there are no security risks if devices are lost or stolen.

“That [security] has taken a lot of work and I think all local authorities are in that position because it is tricky,” he says.

The final principle is the comprehensive use of data to

support service improvement. Lee says that a few years ago the authority identified that there were a lot more referrals than originally anticipated, so they started to benchmark data with other areas and found the authority was committing too many resources.

“We have changed our practices,” Lee says. “To do that we needed to understand [practice] in much finer detail. Overall we were quite high-performing, so we needed to know where in the teams and the process were things going awry? We had to have that fine detail by team and area and as a result of the data and practice changes we have brought ourselves in line with everyone else.”

## IMPACT

The investment in mobile technology has seen social workers cut down the amount of time they

spend travelling to and from offices. Hybrid laptops with detachable screens have also made it easier to do work around children and families because the device can be shared more openly, Lee explains.

Benchmarking data against other authorities has also been positive, Lee says.

“We are now working more effectively with the Local Government Association (LGA), Department for Education and Ofsted in terms of benchmarking tools we can all use so that not all local authorities have to do it themselves,” he says.

“The LGA are making tools that will allow us to benchmark against each other on some key indicators without committing any resources from within the local authority.”

*By Adam Offord*



**MOMO helps young people to talk about difficult issues with their social workers**

The **Inspire Me App** was developed by care workers working with the Learning and Work Institute, an employment and education policy and research organisation. It follows the pathway plan, which every young person leaving the system is legally required to have.

The app was designed for care leavers, and features stories

written by children who have left care and are living independently and have taken steps towards education, training and employment.

They can also share advice and stories on their living arrangements, financial plans, health and relationships.

The care leavers can write short passages on the app about what

they are doing, how they got to where they are now, and the impact their progress has had on them.

The **Let’s Talk FGM App** was designed to assist professionals to make sensitive enquiries regarding female genital mutilation (FGM), and enable discussions about it between health professionals and members of the public.

Public health nurse Joanne McEwan came up with the idea for the app after coming across victims of FGM in her work, and worked to develop it with the campaign group Oxford Against Cutting, Oxford Health and Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust.

McEwan won funding for the app through the Mary Seacole Leadership Award, which recognises outstanding work in the black and minority ethnic community.

McEwan sought the views of FGM survivors and health

professionals as part of the app’s development process. Her aim was to develop something that enabled professionals to sensitively enquire about FGM.

Users can watch features, videos of expert views and interviews with survivors, as well as soundbites of information in five different languages about the impact of FGM, why it happens, the law around it, and how to protect children.

The app also includes video interviews with FGM survivors, campaigners and professionals who support FGM survivors.

## IMPACT

Due to the small number of users of some of the apps, impact data is currently in short supply. However, MOMO has surveyed around 120 children over the past year, with around 80 per cent rating it “useful” or “very useful” in terms of content, and “easy” or “very easy” to use.

*By Jess Brown*