

1. Executive summary

Introduction

Belfast was one of 31 cities selected to receive a Smarter Cities Challenge® grant in 2013 as part of IBM's citizenship efforts to build a Smarter Planet®. During three weeks in September, a team of six IBM experts worked to deliver recommendations on a key challenge identified by the political and executive leadership teams of Belfast City Council (BCC) and agreed with a range of stakeholders.

Address the need for a smarter and more effective approach to planning and decision making and provide a single view of activity based on multiple data sources from several agencies.

Belfast is fast becoming one of the most attractive cities in the UK and Ireland to live, work, study and invest in. The city sits at the heart of a growing population in the wider Belfast Metropolitan Area, encompassing Castlereagh, Lisburn, North Down, Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus, which has a population of 671,559.

The challenge

Belfast has been subject to a number of intervention programs initiated by many groups, agencies and sources with different priorities. However, despite these efforts and investments, the most disadvantaged areas of the city have remained consistently disadvantaged.

Belfast City leaders were looking for a way to capture and use information to make better decisions. Better decision making will allow more efficient and effective use of funding and resources as well as enable the scaling of good practices across communities.

The Smarter Cities Challenge team met with various representatives from statutory, private, community and volunteer groups as well as with educators and consultants who have conducted studies around the problems of segregation and deprivation in the area. This allowed the IBM team to gain an understanding of the complexity of the situation and the various initiatives planned or underway.

Although the groups for assessment were chosen based on health inequalities in the most deprived areas of East and West Belfast, the team's recommendations needed to be scalable in order to apply to other issues, such as education and unemployment, and to other areas of the city.

Findings and recommendations

The team has identified an innovative approach to creating a smarter community planning solution based on information collected to determine effectiveness, good practices and impact on overall wellbeing.

The team's 13 recommendations describe the requirements needed to identify data sources and define standard sets of data needed for comparative metrics, to build and test the operational and technical models and to deploy.

Prepare for solution implementation

Given the number of stakeholders and the need to leverage data from intervention programs, BCC must begin with a strong project management process in place. Establishing a method for regular communication with stakeholders will allow information sharing and stakeholder buy-in during the development and delivery process.

People: Create a collaborative planning environment

BCC must incorporate community-level input in order to create a fully representative planning environment. The development of this framework is a dependency for effective decisions based on the metrics that will be made available by the community planning solution. The execution model and rollout of this framework must incorporate the type of information and analysis that will be available via the community planning solution.

Process: Implement an evidence-based decision-making model

A lot of money is being invested into research on behalf of the various agencies working in specific geographical areas of Belfast, with little evidence of real change. An evidence-based decision-making model will enable a composite analysis of the information currently held.

This will create a collection of meaningful data to help determine the key priorities and most appropriate type of interventions required for specific geographical areas, and it will help agencies to measure the level of their success within those areas.

Technology: Management system for providing services and consolidating information

BCC needs a technical platform for data collection and augmentation of decision making. This will enable it to reach stakeholders with the information they need and provide them with the ability to share information. BCC should implement an IT solution that enables the evidence-based decision-making solution described above; take advantage of social technologies to enhance community reach; and use mobile technologies to collect, access and share information.

Conclusion

Despite historical social events and industry changes, Belfast continues to emanate a culture of pride, hospitality and potential. There is a real determination to create an environment in which all citizens have equal opportunities. The result of BCC's journey with the Smarter Cities Challenge revealed an urgent need for a solution to improve stakeholder interconnectivity and to enable metric-based collaborative decisions that consider program effectiveness as well as an individual's sense of empowerment and wellbeing. If successful, Belfast will enjoy resource and funding efficiencies, scale successful programs and expand the impact to one that effects social as well as physical regeneration, even for the most challenged segments of society.

Highlights

- There are a variety of initiatives focused on addressing deprivation in Belfast.
- Outcomes from these initiatives are not always measurable or known.
- Belfast City leaders wish to create a smarter way to use information to make better decisions.
- Collection of standard and useful data is needed to enable evidence-based decisions.
- Adapting and developing governance and management systems is required to support the project and execute the solution.