

Tackling Poverty Issues with Open Geographic Data

Customer

Falkirk Council recently refreshed its approach to poverty in an attempt to mitigate the impact poverty has on individuals, families and communities in the area. This strategy, Towards a Fairer Falkirk 2019-2024, aims to support people to increase their chances of moving out of poverty and reduce the impact that poverty has on their day to day lives.

To achieve this, the strategy focuses on four key themes; fairer money, fairer access, fairer culture and fairer childhood. It is underpinned by an action plan, which partners have contributed to, detailing the steps that will be taken to deliver across each theme.

Problem

Over the last 20 years the population in Falkirk has grown at more than double the national rate – from 143,340 in 1997 to 160,130 in 2017 and now it is thought:

- 1 in 5 children live in poverty,
- 6,900 households are experiencing in work poverty,
- Over 50% of welfare reforms affect disabled people,
- 37% of older households experience fuel poverty.

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of poor access to services so services that provide money advice, access to food provision, digital access and community support, are key. For example, digital access can help address the £490 per year 'cost of being poor' through online shopping, accessing better financial products and getting better deals for electricity, gas, mobile phones, etc.

For children and young people access to education, health advice and other support services is crucial and a lack of access can limit life choices.

In 2018, Falkirk Council partnered with thinkWhere to tender for the Open Data Institute's (ODI) Local Government Geospatial Stimulus data funding stream. The successful bid, one of just four chosen to receive funding, support and advice from the ODI, provided the opportunity to develop an online support services map as part of the fairer access theme.



“By reducing the impact that poverty has on day to day living we can reduce the longer term impact that it has on aspirations, achievements and health.”

Councillor Cecil Meiklejohn
Leader of Falkirk Council

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Solution

Our Falkirk is a new web mapping tool that is designed to improve access, and signpost citizens, to essential services. Developed by thinkWhere, Our Falkirk is grounded in the use of OpenStreetMap (OSM), often described as the 'wiki mapping platform', a powerful editable map resource. OSM is open data, meaning it is free to use and uses 'tags' to allow users to freely describe data in a way that meets their specific needs. Using OSM, thinkWhere developed a simple web-based user interface with four information themes; Digital Access, Food Provision, Community Help & Advice and Council Advice.

Falkirk Council had already identified open data as a gateway to data sharing and making essential services more readily discoverable. So, council held information on service provision was supplemented with information from community groups. Each service provider or outlet was added to the map and information about the service, such as description, contact information and opening times, translated to OSM tags.

In Action

Following an initial workshop with project partners, two user acceptance-testing sessions were held with a local Work Club and Digital Skills for Life session. Overall feedback was extremely positive with the majority of users agreeing the map was a useful and easy to use tool:

“this is a step in the right direction for those needing to find these facilities.”

“it is very easy to use as it works just like Google maps.”

Our Falkirk went live in May 2019 and, as the service moves forward, feedback will be gathered from Council advice hubs, staff in direct contact with the public and service providers. Google analytics will also be used to monitor the use of the Our Falkirk map page.

Benefits

- A web map showing the support available within communities
- A simplified process for the creation and publication of data
- Community tool and outreach programme for data validation and additional data themes
- Experience and tool kit for other local authorities to develop data sharing projects

Summary

Our Falkirk uses open data and open source technology to deliver a web mapping application that provides access to information on services in the Falkirk area. The project demonstrates how open data can overcome barriers to data sharing, licensing and cost. Our Falkirk has improved engagement with service providers and end users and created a process for data collection, validation and publications, it has also developed practices and methods to empower data sharing.

“Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of poor access to services so improving service accessibility is a core objective.”

Sally Buchanan,
Fairer Falkirk Manager

“thinkWhere’s technical expertise and innovative approach has enabled us to develop a product that will really help us reduce the impact of poverty.”

Sally Buchanan,
Fairer Falkirk Manager

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thinkWhere uses leading edge cloud, Open Source and GIS technologies, to develop innovative software and solutions, backed by a wide range of GIS implementation, consultancy, support and training services.

thinkWhere provides an online platform for storing, sharing and using maps and geographic data, and helps solve real-world problems using open data and open technology.