

Service Definition Document: Online Communities

1. Service Overview

Thiscovery Online Communities is a customisable cloud-based collaboration platform enabling health and social care organisations to connect stakeholders, facilitate collaboration, and generate insights to connect stakeholders, facilitate collaboration, and generate insights in support of improvement initiatives or phased transitions.

The platform provides a secure online space where organisations can bring together diverse stakeholders for sustained engagement, co-design activities, peer learning, and knowledge-sharing. Unlike one-off consultations or surveys, Online Communities enables ongoing dialogue and relationship-building over extended periods.

Who this service is for

Organisations seeking to:

- Connect diverse stakeholders for sustained engagement during periods of change
- Facilitate co-design and collaborative decision-making in improvement initiatives
- Build communities around shared experiences and mutual learning
- Conduct participatory research involving multiple stakeholder groups
- Coordinate ongoing stakeholder engagement beyond one-off consultations

2. Platform Features

- **Discussion Forums** Threaded conversation spaces enabling asynchronous dialogue among community members. Members can start discussions, respond to others, and build on shared ideas over time.
- **Polls, Surveys and Voting Tools** Tools for gathering member opinions, testing ideas, and building consensus on priorities or decisions.
- **Activity Streams** Real-time updates showing community activity, new posts, and member contributions to maintain engagement and visibility.
- **Modular Project Spaces** Focused workspaces within the broader community enabling structured activities, tasks, and collaboration on specific initiatives.
- **Resource Libraries** Centralised repositories for storing and sharing documents, wiki pages, toolkits, guidance materials, and resources accessible to community members.
- **GDPR-Compliant Communications** Built-in communication tools including member digests, notifications, and customised emails, all compliant with UK data protection regulations.

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- **Customisable Design** Platform can be customised with organisational branding, visual styling, and bespoke Codes of Conduct to create safe, appropriate spaces.
- **Sub communities** The platform can include standalone communities nested within the main community to facilitate collaboration on specific projects, within organisations and/or special interest groups. These can be private or public for all members of the community.
- **Flexible Access Controls** Communities can be configured as private (invitation-only), public (open access), or hybrid models depending on engagement objectives.

3. Service Delivery and Access

Platform Access

The web-based platform can be accessed from any web enabled device using standard browsers such as

- Microsoft Edge
- Chrome
- Safari
- Firefox

The application is also available on mobile and tablet browsers, and the interface adapts for the device and screen resolution. In addition, there is an App which allows access to the platform.

Accessibility

Platform aims to meet WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standards, ensuring access for users with diverse needs including those using assistive technologies, with options for multilingual delivery. We work with the client to achieve standard required for individual communities.

4. Onboarding and Setup

Initial Setup

We work collaboratively with clients following a four-step process:

- Understanding client aims and objectives
- Exploring design options and developing an engagement plan for community members
- Building and testing a prototype
- Launch, review, and refinement

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This process begins during procurement when we develop the project service description. Once agreed, we can set up the community platform rapidly - most projects are ready to launch within three to four weeks.

During initial setup, we:

- Agree on a brief including overall scope and community design
- Set up infrastructure scaled to support anticipated user numbers and interactions
- Configure security on application and database servers
- Deploy the application and complete initial configuration:
 - Space/sub-community architecture
 - Visual design and branding
 - Users, groups, and permission levels
 - Global and space-level module deployment
 - Client administrator accounts
 - User testing
 - User guides and FAQs
 - Custom homepage and module development (if required)

Following setup, we hand over to the client for review and testing, then refine the configuration before launch. Following launch, our team provides ongoing support for the client community administrators with technical queries and advice on successful community managements.

Configuration Options

To maintain security and prevent outages, we retain overall administrative rights for the platform. Clients receive administrative rights to:

- Manage users and permissions
- Administer spaces and associated modules
- Configure and manage custom pages
- Set up terms and conditions, privacy policy, and code of conduct
- Create additional joining questions for individual spaces/sub-communities
- Manage surveys, wikis, polls, Q&As, files, galleries, calendars, and meetings
- Moderate content

Training and Support

Onboarding includes administrator training and a train-the-trainer session. We provide ongoing support for questions and change requests.

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As part of setup, we develop user guides and FAQ documents available on the platform as HTML pages or in PDF format upon request. We provide a comprehensive suite of detailed guides covering all aspects of community administration.

5. Service Levels

Platform Availability

The platform operates 24/7 with 99.9% uptime, aligned with AWS service level agreements.

Support Hours

- High-risk urgent issues: Within 6 hours during business hours
- Standard technical queries: Within 1 working day
- Non-urgent queries: Within 4 working days

Performance

We conduct regular load testing using automated tools and adjust server capacity as needed. Performance requirements can be tailored to client needs upon request.

Planned Maintenance

Servers are rebooted daily at 2am with minimal downtime to refresh systems and apply patches. Application updates to the latest version are scheduled with the client, typically outside business hours. Maintenance windows range from a few minutes to two hours, with major application upgrades requiring up to 24 hours.

6. Data Backup and Disaster Recovery

Data Backup

Automated daily backups are enabled for both application and database.

Disaster Recovery

In the event of a disaster, we restore the application and/or database from the most recent backup.

Business Continuity

Proactive monitoring is enabled on both application and database servers, sending automated alerts to a centralized email inbox and our Slack channel. An external uptime monitoring service provides additional alerts if downtime is detected. Documented setup and management procedures ensure business continuity.

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7. Technical Requirements

From Clients

The web-based community platform is accessible through browsers or mobile apps. Clients and users only require internet-connected devices with a web browser. No special firewall or security configurations are needed. Specific requirements (e.g., NHS or public sector compliance) are addressed on a case-by-case basis.

8. Hosting and Data Location

Hosting Infrastructure

The platform is hosted on Amazon Web Services (AWS). Geographic location is determined by client requirements, with current hosting in either London or Ireland.

Data Residency

Clients can choose between London or Ireland for data residency based on their requirements.

Security Infrastructure

The platform is hosted on AWS, and we follow best practice guidelines provided by AWS. Key security features are

- Multifactor authentication for users
- IP restrictions for management interface and server access through SSH
- Web Application Firewall for threat detection
- CloudWatch dashboard to monitor servers

9. Security and Data Protection

Data Protection Compliance

All services delivered in accordance with UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018. Platform includes appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect personal data.

Encryption

Data at rest is stored on encrypted Amazon RDS database instances using industry-standard AES-256 encryption. Amazon RDS automatically manages authentication and decryption with minimal performance overhead, requiring no modifications to client applications. All data in transit is secured using TLS version 1.3, which encrypts data to prevent unauthorized access during transmission.

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Access Controls

Access to the database and application server is restricted to allowed IP addresses and requires SSH key-based authentication.

To access the web interface, users must provide a username, password, and an MFA code delivered by email. Administrators can assign users to roles such as User, Member, Client Administrator, or Moderator.

Security Monitoring

Every deployment includes AWS Web Application Firewall for threat detection and blocking, plus CloudWatch monitoring for server performance and security. The system sends automated email alerts to administrators when threats or performance issues are detected.

Data Processing

We establish a Data Processing Agreement with each client during procurement, outlining key terms and data governance procedures. All data processing occurs within the agreed geographic location.

10. Service Constraints

Customisation Scope

Standard Lot 2b subscription includes organisational branding, visual styling, basic configuration of access controls, and community structure setup. Advanced customisation, bespoke feature development, and complex integrations require Lot 3 Cloud Support Services.

Usage Limits

The platform supports unlimited users, communities, posts, and activities. During procurement, we assess expected usage to scale infrastructure appropriately.

To ensure optimal performance, file uploads are limited to 10MB. For video content, we recommend hosting on external services (such as YouTube or Vimeo) and using the platform's embedded video feature for playback.

Integration Limitations

The platform offers several built-in integration modules including AWS S3 storage, Single Sign-On with Google, and OpenID authentication. For integrations not covered by standard modules, we work with clients to evaluate technical requirements, feasibility, and associated development costs.

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Support Scope

Lot 2b includes platform access, standard technical support, routine maintenance, and security updates.

11. Offboarding and Data Access

Data Export

Self-Service Exports: Clients can export the following data directly from the application:

- User lists in CSV or XLSX format
- Analytics in CSV, SVG, or PNG format

Custom Data Exports: Clients may request a full database copy or custom data extracts. We process these requests as needed, subject to the terms of the Data Processing Agreement.

Access Period After Cancellation

Upon service termination, we provide clients with a complete backup of their database and application data upon request. Data retention periods and export timeframes are defined in the Data Processing Agreement established during procurement.

Data Deletion

Data retention periods are defined in the Data Processing Agreement. When no specific period is agreed during procurement, we consult with the client at project completion to establish their requirements. Regardless of the agreed period, all data and application backups are deleted no later than two years after contract termination.

12. Outage and Incident Management

Incident Response

Incident Identification: Incidents are identified through multiple channels:

- Automated monitoring alerts from CloudWatch and uptime monitoring services
- Reports from clients via email or support channels
- Detection by our internal technical team

Incident Response: When an incident is detected, our technical team investigates and works to resolve the issue promptly. We communicate with clients throughout the incident lifecycle, providing updates on status and expected resolution times.

Client Notifications: Clients are notified of service incidents and outages through:

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- Email alerts to designated client contacts
- Updates via dedicated Teams/Slack channels (where established)
- Direct communication for high-priority incidents

Planned Maintenance: For scheduled maintenance requiring service interruption, we:

- Notify clients in advance with the maintenance window
- Enable maintenance mode, which temporarily prevents application access and displays a maintenance message to users
- Schedule maintenance outside business hours whenever possible
- Provide advance notice where possible

Status Communication: We do not currently operate a public status page. Incident and maintenance notifications are sent directly to client administrators via the channels listed above, ensuring timely and targeted communication.

Issue Escalation

Clients have a dedicated Insights Programme Manager as primary contact for reporting issues and technical queries. Issues are escalated to technical specialists as required to ensure timely resolution according to service level commitments.

13. Service Management

Updates and Enhancements

Infrastructure Updates: The AWS managed service model handles server and infrastructure updates automatically, including security patches and system-level updates.

Application Updates: We deploy application updates when new versions become available. Prior to any update, we:

- Notify client administrators with details of the update
- Agree on a maintenance window that minimises user impact
- Schedule updates outside business hours whenever possible

Change Management

All platform changes follow our change management process:

- **Testing:** Changes are validated in development and staging environments before production release
- **Scheduled changes:** Client administrators receive advance notice and we coordinate maintenance windows

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- **Emergency updates:** Critical security vulnerabilities or service-impacting issues may require immediate deployment, with client notification provided as soon as possible
- **14. Getting Started**

Contact us through the G-Cloud Digital Marketplace or visit www.thiscovery.org to discuss your community engagement requirements.