

Fingal County Council launches AI virtual agent using IBM Watson

DUBLIN, Ireland December 18, 2020: Fingal County Council has successfully introduced a virtual agent - 'COVID-19 Assistant' - which is trained to answer questions from members of the public to its Community Call Response initiative and the availability of Fingal Services during the current pandemic.

The pace and timescale of the pandemic has created long term implications for local government to ensure the needs of the public continue to be met. This includes the growing expectation for instant and remote access to trusted information from local agencies, services and organisations.

When the pandemic struck back in March, Fingal County Council responded by working at pace to develop a virtual agent with IBM and SureSkills Consulting. Since launching it has helped to answer the unprecedented flood of information requests, while reducing the overload on the Council's Call Centres.

Responding to thousands of requests, the virtual agent is integral to the work of the COVID-19 Fingal Community Call Forum and supports at risk members of the public in accessing non-emergency and non-medical supports and advice 24/7.

Based on IBM Watson Assistant on the IBM cloud, the virtual agent replies to common queries on COVID-19 in English. It uses [Watson Assistant](#) and [natural language processing](#) capabilities from IBM Research, which helps organisations create powerful virtual agents that understand the unique language of their business. The agent is currently being tailored to use Irish language.

Questions the virtual agent can answer include, "Can a Volunteer collect my shopping?" or "I want to look at planning applications for my area?" If the agent does not have the answer it redirects the user to the specific information on the Council's website, or to other websites related to the query.

The Chief Executive of Fingal County Council, AnnMarie Farrelly said: "By using this type of advanced technology we are making easier and quicker for citizens to access the information they are looking for. It has enhanced the Community Call Helpline service and is a key resource in the management and operation of our community support programme which we provide with our partner agencies and groups."

The virtual agent is deployed in a web browser and built with security that safeguards the privacy of the users. It has been designed to continuously evolve and learn through its use and user feedback. All responses are based on information from trusted sources.

The Fingal Community Call Forum includes over a dozen agencies and organisations from within Fingal and co-ordinates the operation. It ensures that vulnerable members of the community, or those living alone, can access important services or arrange the collection and delivery of essential items like food, 'meals-on-wheels', household items, fuel or medicine.

The Mayor of Fingal, Cllr David Healy said: "There are a number of agencies currently doing excellent work in delivering care to older and vulnerable people in our communities. These groups are currently operating

independently of each other and Fingal County Council's role is to provide a targeted, integrated and coordinated approach to the delivery of these much-needed services to our more vulnerable citizens across the county during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Ronan Dalton, CTO, IBM Ireland, said: "IBM has years of experience helping global businesses and institutions use Natural Language Processing and other advanced AI technologies to better meet the demands of their customers. In applying these technologies to the COVID-19 crisis, Fingal County Council is demonstrating that AI has the power to be your agent during this uncertain time."

To view the virtual 'COVID-19 Assistant' in operation please visit www.fingal.ie

<https://uk.newsroom.ibm.com/2020-12-18-Fingal-County-Council-launches-AI-virtual-agent-using-IBM-Watson?lnk=hpv18f4>