

the online neighbourhood networks study 2010

a study of the social impact of citizen-run online neighbourhood networks and the implications for local authorities

online neighbourhood networks

With the recent uptake of social media and self-publishing, there has been a surge of interest in online networks based on local community interests. With coverage ranging from a single street to a neighbourhood, ward, or postcode area, in many areas, citizen run neighbourhood websites have emerged to play a central role in local communication ecologies.

(See full research summary & typology for detailed definitions of citizen run neighbourhood websites.)

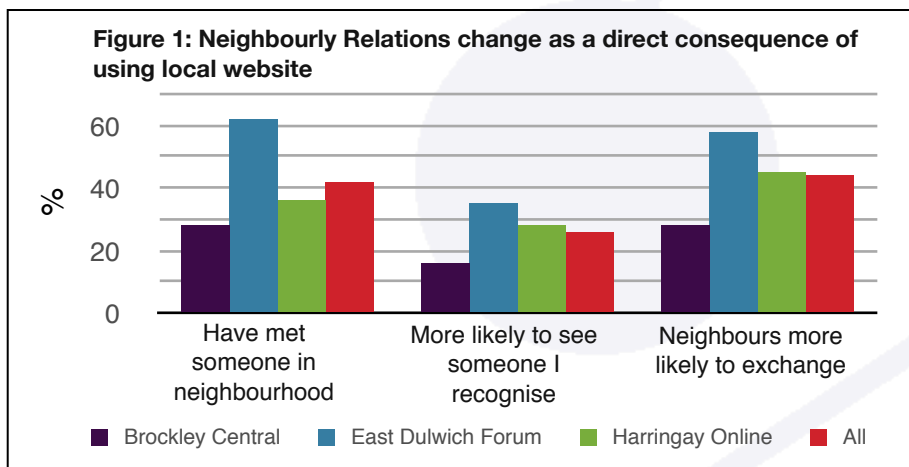
the research

The study has explored the ways in which people communicate online using citizen-run websites, the impact of that communication, and the implications for local service providers. It focused on three well-established sites around London: Brockley Central, East Dulwich Forum and Harringay Online.

The research shows that they serve to enhance the sense of belonging, democratic influence, neighbourliness and involvement in their area. Participants claim more positive attitudes towards public agencies where representatives of those agencies are engaging online.

social capital and cohesion neighbourly relations

The case study sites stimulate positive connections between residents, both in terms of encounters and exchange. Forty-two per cent of respondents say they have met someone in their neighbourhood as a direct consequence of using the website; and a quarter say they are more likely to see someone they recognise as a result of participating on their site.



'I can't walk down the road these days without bumping into 1 or 2 people I've met directly or indirectly through the forum.'

collective efficacy

The term 'collective efficacy' refers to local social cohesion and people's ability collectively to intervene in their area in the common interest. The results show considerable conviction among respondents that collective efficacy is supported by the sites. Three quarters of respondents felt that participation on the local site had had a positive effect on whether or not people pull together to make improvements.

belonging and attachment

Some 91 per cent of respondents agreed that through their site, people express pride in their area. 69 per cent felt that participation on the local site had strengthened their sense of belonging. The sites appear to be playing a consolidating role, building stronger attachment on already-sound foundations.

communication and information-sharing

Responses to our survey show clear appreciation for the information sharing function of neighbourhood websites. 95 per cent say that they feel more informed about their neighbourhood as a consequence of using their site; 74 per cent say that their site makes it easy to find local tradespeople who can be trusted; 92 per cent agree that people are helpful if someone seeks advice on their website.

Council officers and elected members confirmed that they regard neighbourhood websites as important for sharing council news and information on council services and events, as an open channel of communication with residents, and for dealing with rumours and incorrect information.

supportive and negative behaviour

Although respondents tended to agree that 'people make negative comments about others' (proportions range from 27 to 63 per cent), overall 75 per cent agreed that unkind remarks are quickly countered.

Almost four out of five respondents agreed that 'people show support for one another' on the websites. A slightly higher proportion, 83 per cent, agree that 'the website feels very welcoming'. Even keeping in mind the nature of our sample, which comprised respondents more likely to be active on the websites, these figures are a powerful endorsement and serve to contextualise the opinions about negativity.

'has made a real difference to how I feel about and engage with my neighbourhood. It's been very important that although there is a focus on local democracy and active citizenship, the site is moderated and managed by non-Council, non-political members of the community.'

empowerment, civic involvement and co-production

Our study took place during a time of turbulent transition in the public sector, with severe pressures on funded services, and intense efforts to renew the relationship between citizen and state. Neighbourhood websites clearly have a part to play in this unfolding agenda. They help to raise and debate local issues transparently. They offer the promise of increased co-production and hence cost savings. They provide a channel and encouragement for people to get involved in civic and community issues. And they function as a space for the renewal of resident-council relationships.

empowerment: influencing local decisions

More than half (59 per cent) of respondents already feel able to influence decision-making processes in their area. Our survey question for this measure was based on the Citizenship Survey which reports a national average of 37 per cent for 2009-2010.

The websites in our case study areas appear to afford an increase in the sense of influence from this relatively high base. Overall, two thirds (68 per cent) of respondents felt a little more or much more able to influence decisions locally as a result of participation on their local site.

'it certainly helps to mention the website when dealing with the council to get things commented on/ an email replied to/ work done..etc invaluable potentially as councils dont like bad publicity and it's a giant round robin!'

civic activism and civic participation

Overall, only 13 per cent of respondents said they have been involved in formal groups or organisations locally in the past year. This is consistent with recent Citizenship Survey results. However, a review of the content of the sites, augmented with focus group material, shows that there is strong commitment to local involvement.

“Harringay Online has shown our group that the catchment area with people out there who want to work together is there.”

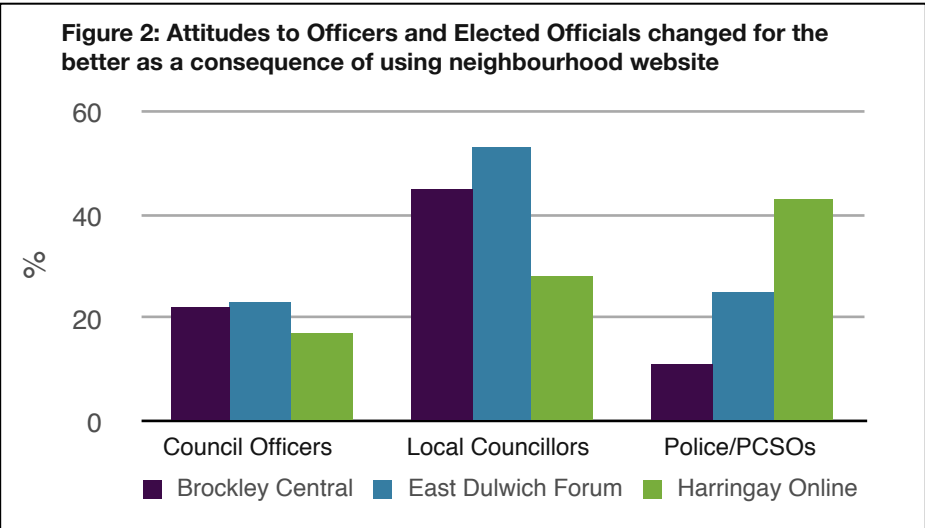
Our results suggest that this energy is less likely to be contributed through participation in organisations and groups. It seems likely that local websites can both stimulate and reflect a latent demand for informal opportunities for collective involvement, very much on a dip-in dip-out basis.

co-production: attitudes towards official roles

Neighbourhood websites appear to promote improved relations with local agencies and hence offer a stable platform for co-production. Twenty one per cent of respondents said that participation on their site had changed their attitude towards council officers for the better. Almost twice as many (42 per cent) said their attitude towards local councillors had changed for the better.

In those areas where people in an official role had been proactive in making themselves accessible and providing information, the figures were significantly enhanced, suggesting a correlation between their participation and improved perception of their role.

Fears that neighbourhood websites could unleash an unrelenting fury of council-bashing appear, in these cases at least, to be entirely unfounded.



relations with councils

barriers to participating in neighbourhood sites

Our national survey of officers and members showed the most significant barrier to be ‘concern about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations’: some 69 per cent of officers and 69 per cent of members identified this.

But eight of the nine barriers were identified by at least 40 per cent of either officers or members, or by both. We conclude that there is no single readily-fixed barrier to the engagement of councils in neighbourhood websites. Some of the issues are internal to councils but some relate to the need for sites to be appropriate spaces for democratic engagement if they wish officers and members to participate there.

This is by no means an insurmountable condition. Our survey showed that, among elected members, 42 per cent already find neighbourhood sites to be ‘mostly constructive and useful’ while a further 41 per cent were ready to describe them as ‘somewhat constructive and useful’.

‘The exchanges (conversations) by and large are tedious, trivial and criticism is often written in sarcastic tone. If I saw better practice and respect I would have more confidence in this method of communication.’

the future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites

We asked site users to identify what they regarded as their main source of local news. Seven per cent said it was 'television', 11 per cent said 'local newspaper', and an emphatic 63 per cent indicated 'neighbourhood blog / website'.

The lively mix of content appears to be a key ingredient in the success of these sites. People raise the alarm about concerns, disagree about trivial and significant points, scrutinise public decisions, call their agencies to account, apportion blame, broadcast and correct misinformation, explore solutions and volunteer to take action. They also see that others are being pro-active. Our survey of council officers and members confirms that these sites are valued for the way they help to identify issues that are of concern to residents. Those who have sought the revival of democracy in mechanical processes like voting, petitions and scrutiny might do well to examine the way this fertile mix of content nurtures an agitated, involved democracy of everyday life. Council officers and members confirm that these sites are valued for the way they help to identify issues that are of concern to residents.

Successful sites which establish balanced argument and avoid the downward spiral of aggressive negativity, and which therefore offer an environment in which councils will wish to engage, depend heavily on the culture established and maintained by founders and administrators. The study revealed great respect for the way administrators act to contain negative posts and comments, insist on fairness, and remove combustible material.

'Brockley Central has made our life so much easier. I wish we had one in every area.'
Council Officer

We have found readiness within local government to engage with citizen-led websites, together with a lot of uncertainty about how to do so. In most cases caution prevails, and there is no single problem susceptible to a single solution.

There is widespread understanding that the independence of these sites is essential but it is acknowledged that as the benefits become apparent, councils themselves could have an enabling, hands-off role to play in the development of new sites across their areas.

concluding remarks

This study comes at a critical moment in the history of citizen-state relations. With the establishment of a new coalition government, unprecedented reductions in public sector spending, and a new culture of localism and co-production, citizens are being expected to assume greater responsibility for what happens in their area and local councils are expected to concede power. Neighbourhood websites can play a role in fashioning these new relationships, providing transparent, informative spaces where issues are raised and, whenever possible, local solutions are found.

This summary offers a highly condensed overview of the *Online Neighbourhood Networks Study*. The full material set includes an extended summary, full report, report on survey of council members and officers, typology, research context review, and a Guide for Councils with accompanying video interviews.

The *Online Neighbourhood Networks Study* was led by Hugh Flouch and Kevin Harris.

Full details can be found on the Networked Neighbourhoods website at www.networkedneighbourhoods.com

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