*Study report:*
# How councils respond to local websites:
## Report on survey of council officers and elected members

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

*part of the*

online neighbourhood networks *study*

2010

the
Networked
Neighbourhoods
group

capital
ambition

# Networked Neighbourhoods

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# How councils respond to local websites

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Councillors and local government officers are likely to see neighbourhood websites as constructive and useful, and to have co-operative relations with them, according to the 2010 Networked Neighbourhoods local council survey. However, the picture is very uneven, with reports of negative experiences discouraging some members and officers from participating.

The research finds that there is no single, readily-soluble barrier that constrains local authorities in engaging with local sites. A combination of factors, such as lack of guidance or negative impressions of what happens online, has meant that many councils and members are only just beginning to consider how to respond to the emergence of these local resources.

# Introduction

Local online networks have developed strongly since the 1990s. With the recent uptake of social media and self-publishing we have begun to see citizen-run neighbourhood websites flourishing within local communication ecologies.

These sites have the following characteristics:

- they have been established and are run by local citizens
- most of their content relates to local issues or interests
- they are open to discussion and contributions from anyone living in the area or with an interest in the area.

One officer commenting in our survey suggested that,

> *'From the council's perspective, they fall into two categories: about neighbourhood with little if any interest in Council; and very interested and generally oppositional/scrutinising of the Council.'*

The websites may be established using blog software, or on forum or full-blown social network platforms. Coverage may range from a single street to a neighbourhood, ward or postcode area.

This short report covers the findings from the survey and offers some reflections on their implications. The study was funded by Capital Ambition. The survey was carried out online in August and September, 2010 and the link was sent to officers and members in England, using several sources including London Councils and the IDeA's community of practice. There were 210 responses from council officers and 117 from elected members. The relatively small sample size, and the degree to which it was self-selecting, have to be taken into account in assessing the significance of the results.

The survey was completed by representatives from a total of 130 local authorities, 29 of which are London authorities. Among members, the political distribution of respondents is shown in figure 1 below. Figure 2 shows the distribution of roles among officers who responded.

**Figure 1: Political representation of elected members responding to the survey**

Liberal Democrat
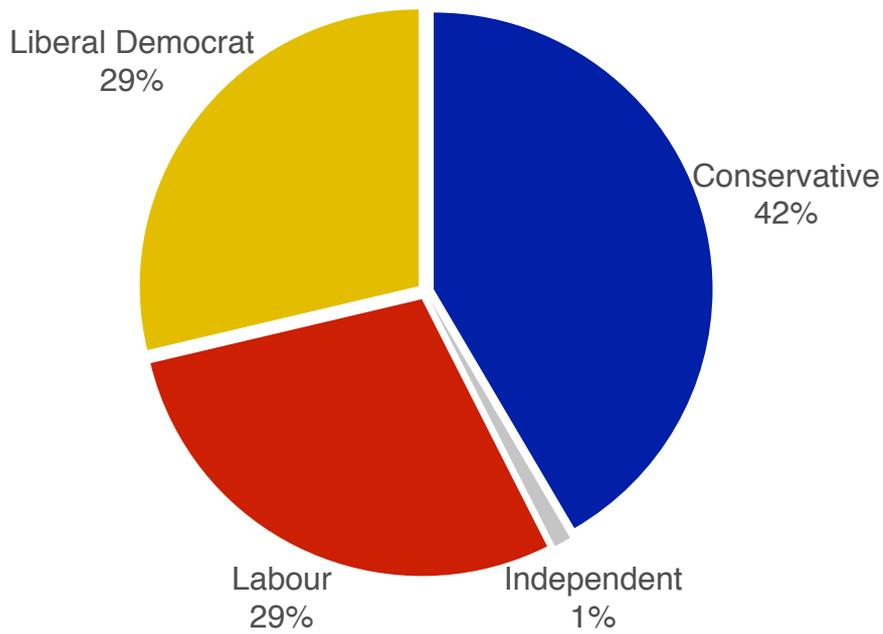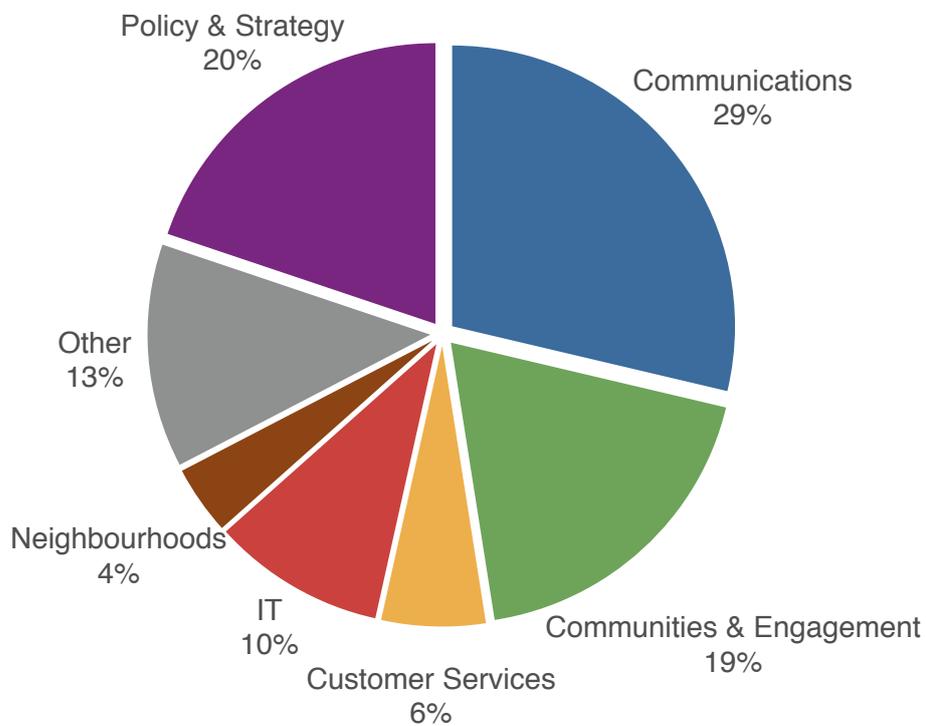29%

Conservative
42%

Labour
29%

Independent
1%

**Figure 2. Roles of officers responding to the survey**

Policy & Strategy
20%

Communications
29%

Other
13%

Neighbourhoods
4%

IT
10%

Customer Services
6%

Communities & Engagement
19%

More than half the officers (55 per cent) who responded were aware of at least one neighbourhood website within their council area. Only 35 per cent of the councillor group have such sites in their ward: some 28 per cent of councillors who responded to our survey say that their ward is host to more than one neighbourhood site.

# Relationships with local sites

Do officers and members find local sites to be constructive and useful, or are they negative and even perhaps counter-productive? Both groups were positive about the relationships overall, although there were sharply dissenting voices. Among elected members, 42 per cent 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'. Among officers, the figures were similar: 41 per cent and 47 per cent respectively.

Respondents' experiences of participating on the sites were also largely supportive. Sixty nine per cent of officers, and 73 per cent of members told us that their experience was 'very positive' or 'mostly positive'. Six officers and seven members reported that their experience was 'somewhat' or 'very' negative.

We also asked for impressions of the overall relationship between local websites and the council: could they be described as 'warm and co-operative'; characterised by 'occasional mutual co-operation and information sharing'; 'indifferent'; or 'hostile'? Some of the comments reflect on the nuances of these relationships:

> 'Warm and co-operative until recently when it has become hostile with group taking issue with council's policy on charging for home care.'

> 'We lack the capacity to engage with them - most therefore no relationship, some are hostile to the council.'

> '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.'

> 'Members are at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile to these sites so co-operation is difficult.'

Another comment illustrates how sites can become set up in opposition to the council, resulting in a very stale stalemate:

> *'I view a site that has a political angle and play no part in it - tends to be very anti Council based on rumours - some of which are wildly inaccurate, others less so. Very limited number of participants, nearly all of who have a different political view to the Council - lack of participants mean it is not useful as a basis for reflecting local opinion, just local opinion that takes a different view from the Council on almost every issue.' (Officer)*

The results of the questions about members' and officers' relations with neighbourhood websites are summarised in the table below.

**Figure 3: How are local sites perceived by members and officers?**



# What are the costs?

There were several comments about financial constraints and resource restrictions, perhaps reflecting an assumption of costs without reference to benefits. For example one member wrote:

> *'Whilst important not likely to be an immediate priority because of resource restrictions.'*

The financial costs of neighbourhood websites are negligible. The significant costs are in terms of time and energy for anyone committing to participation. For site administrators, this usually means collaborating with a small team. For councillors, in theory it could mean a trade-off as time committed to a transparent information source generates goodwill and reduces the time needed for face-to-face work with individuals. However, the case of East Dulwich Councillor James Barber, reported in the Online Neighbourhood Networks study,[1] confirms the increase in goodwill but not the time-saving, as yet. As for the 'benefits' part of the equation, the London study has clarified broad positive outcomes such as neighbourliness, belonging, engagement, empowerment and general social capital, in terms which few elected members or council officers would wish to be seen to obstruct.

The costs and benefits differ for members and officers. Most officers have a remit far wider than most neighbourhood sites, and have to meter their work according to criteria other than the volume of voices calling for attention. A successful site in one part of the borough could easily attract a disproportionate amount of an officer's time without justification. Since some of these sites have a high volume of activity (for example East Dulwich regularly has more than 4,500 unique visitors per day) officers cannot be expected to monitor a resource which is not central to their duties.

Some authorities deal with the inevitable imbalance by localising the responsibility, for example to an area manager; others by establishing collaborative relations with the site administrators in order to be alerted to important content; and some have appointed 'online engagement officers' or similar in order to develop the relationships in a positive way. We are not aware of any authorities that have delegated an intermediary responsibility for monitoring sites to local libraries, although it would seem that (at least before the current spending crisis) the network of local libraries and the information management skills they offer makes them well-placed for this role.

For councillors the arguments for participation are different, and may be seen in terms of political outcomes on election day, or being seen to be responding to issues and helping to resolve them. An elected member's remit is geographically more confined than that of most officers, but encompasses all areas of information that a council covers, and implies connecting with residents consistently. It is hard to deny the logic that councillors should engage constructively with residents, in their space, and help to get things done.

In the London Digital Neighbourhoods study (run in parallel with the present study), 42 per cent of respondents said that participation on their site had changed their attitude towards local councillors for the better. Twenty two per cent of respondents said that their attitude towards their council generally had changed for the better; with a similar proportion (21 per cent) claiming a better attitude towards officers. An argument may emerge before long, to the effect that members will not be able to afford *not* to participate.

1. See Harris and Flouch, Online Neighbourhood Networks Study, (2010c).

# Reasons to participate on neighbourhood websites

We invited respondents to indicate what justification there might be for officers and/or members to participate on neighbourhood websites. We used a list of nine options developed through a workshop and through individual interviews. The options were as follows:

- sharing council news and information on council services and events

- as a route for the delivery of some online services

- as a cost-efficient complement to current customer services provision

- quickly identifying issues of concern for residents

- to get informal and formal feedback from residents

- as an open channel of communication with residents

- dealing with rumours and incorrect information

- generating solutions to local problems

- generating and co-ordinating support for residents delivering services in partnership with the authority.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether each of these was deemed 'Very important', 'Somewhat important' or 'Unimportant'. Responses from members and officers were broadly similar. The only options to be deemed unimportant by a significant proportion of respondents were the following:

- as a route for the delivery of some online services (19 per cent of members and 11 per cent of officers indicated this was unimportant)

- as a cost-efficient complement to current customer services provision (22 per cent of members and 11 per cent of officers indicated this was unimportant).

The combined results are summarised in Figure 4 below. They show clearly the importance attached to neighbourhood websites as resources for quickly identifying issues of concern to residents: 83 per cent of responses to this option classed it as 'very important'. The table also illustrates the role of neighbourhood websites in connecting councils with residents: the options deemed very important by the highest proportion of both members and officers were

- quickly identifying issues of concern for residents

- to get informal and formal feedback from residents, and

- as an open channel of communication with residents.

Figure 4: Reasons to participate on neighbourhood websites (officers & members combined)
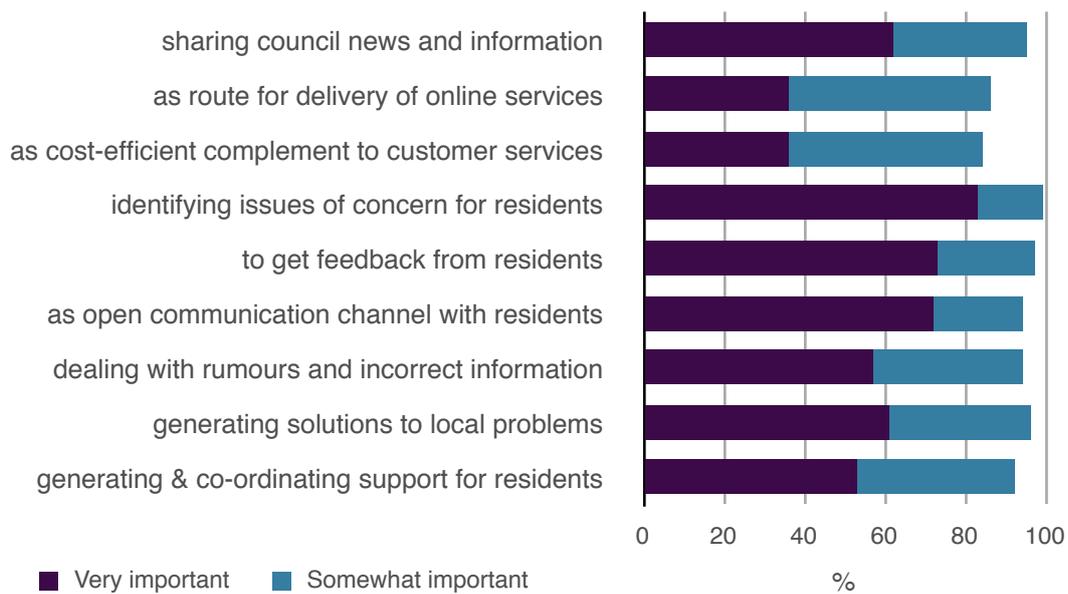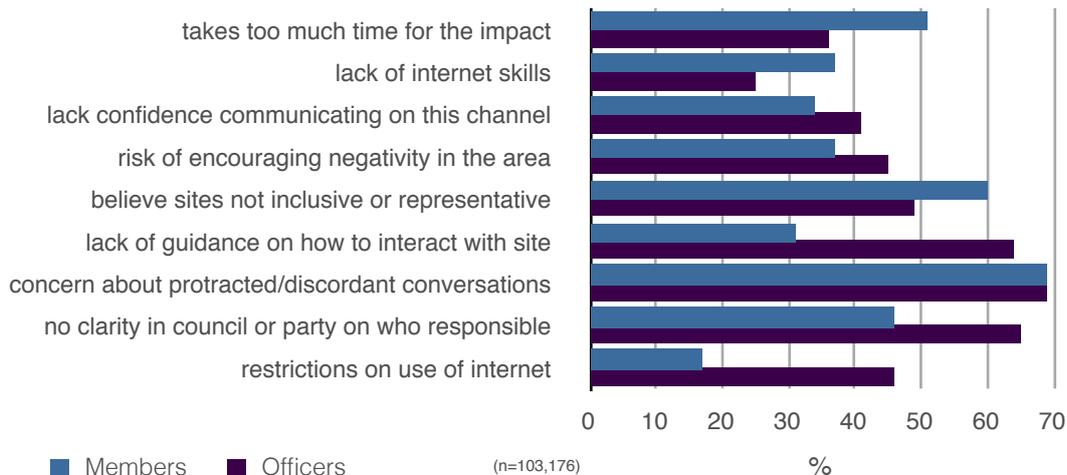
# Barriers to participating on neighbourhood sites

Following a focus group with local council officers and individual interviews with several officers and members, we identified a list of nine barriers which might be constraining engagement with neighbourhood websites, as follows:

- takes too much time in relation to the impact on the ground
- lack of technical skills to use the internet
- lack of confidence in getting a message across on this channel
- risk of encouraging negativity in the area
- belief that sites are not inclusive or representative
- lack of council or party guidance on how to interact with neighbourhood website
- concern about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations
- no clarity in council or party on who is responsible for interacting with the sites
- restrictions on use of internet.

We asked members and officers to identify any of these that they felt applied. The results are summarised in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: Barriers to participating on neighbourhood sites**



Barriers (top to bottom):
- takes too much time for the impact
- lack of internet skills
- lack confidence communicating on this channel
- risk of encouraging negativity in the area
- believe sites not inclusive or representative
- lack of guidance on how to interact with site
- concern about protracted/discordant conversations
- no clarity in council or party on who responsible
- restrictions on use of internet

■ Members  ■ Officers     (n=103,176)     %

Simplified Question wording:

*'What do you see as the barriers to elected members/council officers participating on neighbourhood websites? Please tick any that apply.'*

Members and officers were both more concerned about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations than about any other barrier (the proportion who saw this as a barrier was 69 per cent for both categories). This points clearly to the importance of ensuring a positive, inclusive and tolerant culture on local websites; and hence to the significance of the site administrator's role.

Three other barriers are accorded significance in the responses:

- the belief that sites are not inclusive or representative(indicated by 60 per cent of members)

- the lack of guidance on how to interact with sites (indicated by 64 per cent of officers), and

- the lack of clarity of responsibility for interaction with sites (indicated by 65 per cent of officers).

When we consider the differences between members' and officers' responses, there are two particular points to be made. First, as would be expected, officers are considerably more affected by restrictions on their use of the internet: 46 per cent say that this is a barrier. Secondly, we note that elected members are noticeably more concerned about the cost-benefit justification for engaging with local sites: 51 per cent of members, compared to 36 per cent of officers, regard the comparative lack of impact, for the time spent participating, to be a barrier. We have discussed the costs and benefits of participation above.

A number of comments that were offered by respondents serve to clarify attitudes towards these barriers. One member noted that:

> *'while some councillors are comfortable with the media involved, others tend to distance themselves. Its often not about internet skills, but more the ability to express themselves sufficiently and then control the way in which their information is used.'*

Another member referred to a sense of 'paranoia' about the new communications environment:

> *'being involved with such websites requires a lot of other work gaining the trust of the local community and showing you are working with them. If only more of our colleagues got rid of their false paranoia about such things and joined in!'*

Several comments reflected a lack of recognition that 'controlling' attitudes towards the council's message are felt to be outdated. One officer commented:

> *'They are scared of 'losing control' and having conversations going on that are not 'on message'. They also don't seem to understand the impact these sites can have...'*

And as our question options and responses make clear, the barriers are not just to be identified in the approaches taken by councils. As one respondent noted:

> *'It is very easy for web sites to be hijacked by people/organisation with an axe to grind or a personal agenda. Policing for inaccuracies and untruths is difficult.'*

It's worth pointing out that this can apply to some residents' organisations and area assemblies. It's not yet clear whether a negatively-biased neighbourhood website can be more damaging to local social relations than a negatively-biased influential local group.

# What steps are councils taking to develop relations with neighbourhood sites?
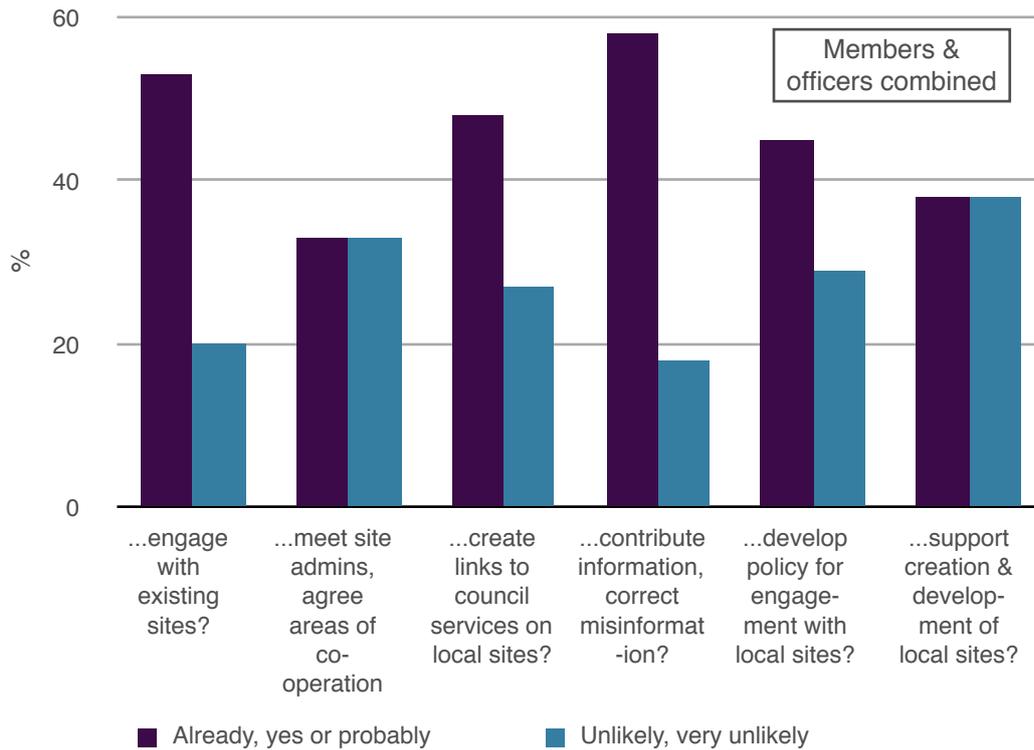
Finally, we asked respondents to tell us whether their authority is taking, or is likely to take, or has already taken, certain actions in relation to neighbourhood websites. These covered:

- engaging with existing sites

- meeting site moderators to agree areas of co-operation

- establishing links to council services from local sites

- occasionally contributing information or correcting misinformation

- developing a policy for engagement with neighbourhood sites, and

- supporting the creation and development of neighbourhood sites.

The results for members and officers combined are summarised in the table below. The most striking findings were as follows:

- 41 per cent of officers say it is unlikely in the next year, or very unlikely, that their authority will support the creation and development of neighbourhood sites; while 28 per cent of them say they are already engaging with such sites, or will definitely be taking steps to do so. This suggests that some authorities will be well-placed to take advantage of the potential of neighbourhood sites, while others will take some time to catch up.

- Fifty-five per cent of members, and 60 per cent of officers, say their council will definitely or probably, or is already, contributing information or correcting misinformation on local sites.

- More than a quarter of respondents say their council is unlikely to establish links to services on local sites; and 29 per cent say the authority is unlikely to develop a policy for engagement with neighbourhood websites.

**Figure 6: Is your authority taking steps to…**

Members &
officers combined

| | ...engage with existing sites? | ...meet site admins, agree areas of co-operation | ...create links to council services on local sites? | ...contribute information, correct misinformation? | ...develop policy for engagement with local sites? | ...support creation & development of local sites? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Already, yes or probably | 53 | 33 | 48 | 58 | 45 | 38 |
| Unlikely, very unlikely | 20 | 33 | 27 | 18 | 29 | 38 |

# Concluding remarks

This survey 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. It seems clear that 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.

But it would still be possible for the founders and administrators of local sites to adopt or encourage the old confrontational style of unrelieved council-bashing. It would still be possible for members to retreat in consequence, continuing to work with known groups and individuals on a party political basis. And it would still be possible for officers to try to control corporate messages and ignore the voices beyond the town hall. There are some misconceptions. One respondent for instance, referring to a local site, told us:

*'They do not want input from elected members in order to keep the site non political.'*

It's not clear why either the site administrators or the councillor should feel the need to adopt a political stance on a local website. It is hard to argue against the view that a local elected representative should be involved in discussions about the neighbourhood and available to respond. There are plenty of ways of doing that without being politically raucous; and plenty of evidence to show that political over-assertiveness turns people away.

In practice what the survey shows is that there is recognition of the potential contribution that local sites can make. Officers and members see them as largely constructive and useful, and have positive relationships with them. In particular they see the sites as providing useful communication channels with residents. One officer noted:

> *'Sometimes there are negative comments, but having said that there can be balanced discussions. This has worked in the favour of certain arguments and debates, whereby from a local authority / officer view point, members of the community have been able to comment and change behaviours of their peers without the Council getting involved.'*

Certainly there are adjustments to be made, and these are turbulent times. The neighbourhood websites movement can take steps to encourage sites to promote a tolerant, inclusive, respectful culture. Councils can ensure that their staff have sensible guidance and appropriate access, and that positive relations are developed with local sites. And members can take encouragement from pioneers who have engaged with residents in these spaces in a non-political way and gained respect while contributing to the local quality of life.

# Guide to materials in the online neighbourhood networks study

1       *Online neighbourhood networks study* short summary (4 pages)

2       Introduction, background and extended summary

3       Online neighbourhood networks study (Main paper):

          Section 1: Social capital and cohesion
          Section 2: Supportive and negative online behaviour
          Section 3: Empowerment, civic involvement and co-production
          Section 4: Relations with councils
          Section 5: The future for citizen-run neighbourhood websites.

4       Council survey report

5       Guide for councils to online neighbourhood networks

6       Videos (Part of the Guide for councils)

7       Network timeslices

8       Research context

9       Online neighbourhood networks typology

10     Neighbourhoods seen through online timeslices

11     Local broadcast media

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