

*the*  
online  
neighbourhood  
networks *study*

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

Section 1: Social capital and cohesion

2010

# Networked Neighbourhoods

The Networked Neighbourhoods group works with communities and organisations using technology-based approaches to strengthen neighbourhoods and create opportunities for the more efficient delivery of public services. We develop innovative projects that make a difference on the ground as well as providing leading edge research.

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# Online neighbourhood networks study

## Section 1

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(See last page for complete listing of the *Online neighbourhood networks study* materials)

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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.

In many areas, citizen run neighbourhood websites have emerged to play a central role in local communication ecologies.

# Social capital and cohesion

The perceived decline of neighbourliness and social capital is a recurring theme in popular social commentaries. Both concepts refer to social relationships which people invest in, and which they might be able to draw on in time of need. Social capital is generally measured in terms of trust and/or in terms of social networks. Neighbourliness tends to be assessed in terms of 'knowing' fellow residents. Both are associated with the sense of cohesion and belonging - referring to a cluster of 'feel-good' concepts which are now recognised to have implications for a wide range of policy issues such as health, education, crime and so on. To take one clear example, councils and police have an interest in people's readiness to intervene ('collective efficacy') to influence what happens in their area. If levels of neighbourliness or collective efficacy can be stimulated, quality of life can be improved without necessarily increasing the costs to the state.

It's reasonable to suppose that neighbourhood websites will reflect, and might contribute to, the sense of belonging, level of neighbourliness, cohesion and collective efficacy in a given area. The flow of information is an essential part of these processes. Neighbourhood websites are collective local resources, and as such they can be expected to help people support one another in contributing to the quality of local life. In this section we explore this potential to see how far the case study sites can be shown to contribute.

This section of the report covers the following themes:

- Information sharing
- Neighbourly relations
- Collective efficacy
- Social inclusion and diversity
- Belonging and attachment.

*'The site 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.'*

## Information sharing

The availability of pertinent information and the ease with which it flows can make a significant difference to the quality of life in neighbourhoods. The sharing of information is an essential but curiously overlooked ingredient in local social capital. Where information and communication are stifled, trust and co-operation are less likely to thrive. Where they flourish, residents can be expected to feel more empowered and ready to engage in co-production.

The kind of information shared on the sites is reflected in our typology of local sites (Flouch and Harris 2010) and our review of site content (Harris and Flouch 2010b). They cover for example news of forthcoming events, explanations for anything out of the ordinary, the achievements of local people, items for sale or going to a good home, recommendations for local tradespeople or restaurants, travel routes from A to B, local history, council services, shop opening hours and so on. One survey respondent wrote:

*'Events to go to the following day, new businesses opening, and, really usefully, immediate comment on water close-downs or a road closure following an incident (in time for me to go home an alternative route).'*

Responses to our survey show clear appreciation for the information sharing function of neighbourhood websites:

- 92 per cent agree or strongly agree that 'useful information gets shared efficiently';
- 95 per cent say that they feel more informed about their neighbourhood as a consequence of using their site;
- 91 per cent agree or strongly agree that the sites help people to find out about shops and venues;
- 74 per cent say that their site makes it easy to find local tradespeople who can be trusted;
- 92 per cent agree or strongly agree that people are helpful if someone seeks advice on their website.

The sites provide numerous examples of their power as resources for sharing information. Much of the information that people share is held by or could be found through council services, but enquiries are resolved by other citizens: as far as we are aware this

*'I have learnt so much about what's happening locally in one afternoon than I have in a whole year of living here – so a huge thanks to everyone who replied and made me feel very welcome.'*

*In July 2010 a HOL site member sought information about a local incident when police sealed off part of a road. Responses led to a sub-thread about another resident being given a parking ticket while his car was inaccessible within the cordoned area. Other site members, including a local councillor, provided information on how to get the penalty revoked.*

contribution to council targets for ‘reducing avoidable contact’ remains unquantified.

This information-sharing power should not be under-estimated, nor is it an unqualified benefit. Residents and local tradespeople alike find the sites valuable for trustworthy recommendations. However, in one of our focus groups we heard how a local trader was threatened by a disgruntled resident:

*‘if you don’t do what I ask, I’ll give you a bad reference on the forum’.*

Some tradespeople, we were told, ‘live in dread of that one negative post’ that they feel might destroy their business.

The fact that information shared may not be impartial is not necessarily a disadvantage: a recommendation for a restaurant or carpenter is just that, a recommendation between ordinary people and not something that a public authority can make. Participants on a website are expected to be able to make judgements about what they are told just as they are if given such a recommendation in a pub or at a bus stop. In the case of websites, a further advantage comes from the transparency of the process, multiplying the usefulness of the information as more people view and comment on it. As one of our Brockley focus group participants put it:

*‘Reading about an event on the blog increases my interest by saying who’ll be involved and how much interest there is – you don’t get that sense from a leaflet.’*

The material that has emerged from our study contributes to the argument that information sharing is critical to the metabolism of local democracy. Information can clear blockages and revitalise those it reaches. Openly shared information enriches a culture of mutuality and can strengthen the sense of belonging and pride in the area. Local citizen-run websites can and do contribute significantly to these benefits.

## Neighbourly relationships

Where people have neighbourly relationships that are positive and supportive, we would expect to find an expressed sense of belonging, feelings of well-being and security, and approved norms of behaviour. Neighbourliness lubricates the flow of information, stimulates mutual support and encourages instrumental aid and reciprocal exchange: we discuss this further below. It has never been easy for policy to stimulate neighbourly relations, partly because these relationships are essentially informal. It's also fair to say that, hitherto, there have been few devices that governments or councils could exploit for this purpose.

*'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.'*

Do local sites stimulate neighbourliness? It could be that some residents have a latent, stifled readiness to connect, which these sites might be allowing to flourish. Or perhaps the sites simply reflect existing levels of neighbourliness, providing a channel for those who are already neighbourly but not stimulating any other connectedness. It is possible that somehow they even stifle neighbourliness in general while amplifying it among a few. In this section we look at the contribution the study sites are making to neighbourly relationships.

### Meeting other residents through the local site

Our findings add to the evidence that online communication stimulates face-to-face connection.<sup>1</sup> Participants on the websites meet other people through their site and these connections lead to other actions in the local area.

In our survey we asked 'Have you ever met someone in your neighbourhood as a direct consequence of using the website?' Responses varied between 62 per cent on EDF and 28 per cent at Brockley Central, with a mean of 42 per cent.

Some 86 per cent of respondents told us that they are likely to see someone they recognise when out in the neighbourhood, either 'sometimes' or 'very likely'. A quarter (26 per cent) then said that it was 'more likely' to happen as a result of participating on the site. See Figure 1 below. Figure 1 also refers to a question about the likelihood of residents lending things or exchanging favours as a result of participation: this and other aspects of these data are discussed later in this section.

1. See our paper on the research context for this study (Harris and Flouch 2010a).

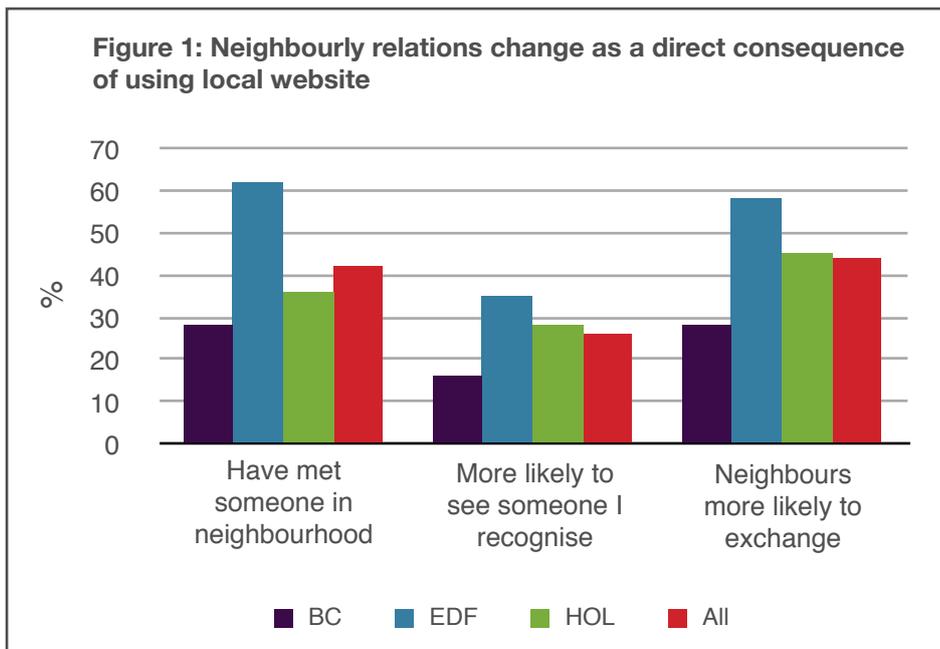


Figure 1: response counts were as follows:  
 'Have met someone in neighbourhood' – 133,204,168:505  
 'More likely see someone I recognise' – 130,196,169:495  
 'Neighbours more likely to exchange' – 127,195,169:491

Many of the comments offered by survey respondents refer to social events organised by the site administrators or organised for the site; or to social occasions that were mentioned on the site. These events demonstrate the continuity of offline and online life:

*'I have made many new friends as a direct result of the forum and we socialise regularly.'*

*'After reading about events and people, I attended one and was able to put faces to names.'*

All three study sites organise 'drinks nights' and similar get-togethers, such as 'curry nights,' 'homeworkers' lunches' and 'women's drinks'. One site founder said that such events 'just seemed like a perfectly natural thing to do:'

*'They consolidate relationships and strengthen the site. We were also satisfying an expressed demand from users.'*

Numerous respondents mention meeting others in their neighbourhood through these events, and in some cases they mention consequences:

*'Met the HOL crew through the drinks. Met N and A through it too - and got an action group together as a result.'*

*'I've met several people through the "offline" drinks and have often seen them around the area afterwards. It makes the district feel more local and friendly.'*

However, while these events may lubricate digital conversations and valued connections among those who attend, it could be that they make it easier for critics to claim that there is a separate central clique.

Leisure activities referred to on the site have brought a lot of people together. Among the examples mentioned were: a backgammon group, book swap and reading groups, netball, running, football, a folk club, French, meditation, photography, and choirs.

## **Instrumental aid, reciprocal exchange and support**

Support provided by neighbours to one another can take various forms, most commonly emotional or 'instrumental'. Instrumental support covers practical aid (for instance in helping to mend a fence), or lending tools. Some neighbourly practice, such as offering prepared food at a time of illness, can be regarded as both emotional and instrumental.

Do local websites make a difference to the provision of instrumental aid or reciprocal exchange among residents? We asked respondents to tell us if people in the neighbourhood lend things or exchange favours with one another. Three quarters (76 per cent) said 'often' or 'sometimes'. A convincing proportion, 44 per cent, said it was more likely to happen as a result of participating on the site. This last point is covered in Figure 1 above alongside other findings relating to neighbourly relations.

Many encounters have been generated through site-based exchange and recycling, or with tradespeople mentioned on the site:

*'When you sell or buy goods, you meet the folk involved and then see them around.'*

*'Through posting an offer of free strawberry plants I met someone who now shares my garden.'*

*'Buying furniture, using local tradesmen - tree surgeon, hairdresser, tv ariel fitter. Contacting someone for information about their dog.'*

*'found out about local shops and pubs, which I now often visit, and got to know the people that run them.'*

*'Asked somebody to see work done in their house by a workman recommended on the forum.'*

There are also examples of connections being made as a result of people offering to help or responding to some need:

*'I met someone clearing up the snow'*

*'Rehomed a stray cat & met the new owner.'*

*'Found a car share partner which has worked out well a year on.'*

## **Perceived benefits from participation on the sites**

People are unlikely to continue visiting and contributing to a site for long unless they feel they are gaining some benefit. Apart from the practical benefits from instrumental aid, it's clear from the comments in our survey that respondents recognise personal emotional and social advantages from their participation.

Some of the responses refer to connections within a sub-category of site users. In EDF's Family Room, for example:

*'I've made strong 'mum' friends this way - far more so than through my NCT [National Childbirth Trust] group!'*

There are also various comments referring to individual and sometimes personally significant connections made:

*'Met with a few people who had a common interest and background - discovered via the comments section.'*

*'Have made 3 really good friends. One now a "spiritual soulmate".'*

*'I have met many new friends and my current partner through the forum.'*

Taken together, the qualitative comments and our focus group material suggest that the number of connections made between site users is probably substantial. One respondent wrote:

*'too many to mention - monthly drinks, book clubs, curry meetups etc etc'*

Others pointed out that these connections do make a difference:

*'Have made lots of new friends for social meet ups. I knew none of the neighbours before I joined the site.'*

*'I've met several people through the Harringay Online socials (the "offline" drinks) and have often seen them around the area afterwards. It makes the district feel more local and friendly.'*

## Do active contributors gain more?

Are there benefits from active participation on a neighbourhood website, that do not accrue to ‘lurkers’<sup>2</sup> who simply observe and do not contribute?

In terms of the likelihood of just ‘seeing people they recognise when out in the neighbourhood’, when we compared regular contributors with lurkers we found that there was no noticeable difference. However, we found that regular contributors to the sites were far more likely to say that they had met someone in their neighbourhood as a direct consequence of using the website:

**Figure 2. Have you ever met someone in your neighbourhood as a direct consequence of using the website?**

	BC	EDF	HOL	All
	%	%	%	%
<b>Lurkers</b>	21	35	20	24
<b>Contributors</b>	42	80	70	70
Base (lurkers): 105,69,98:272. Base (contributors): 31,90,30:151.				

Furthermore, we found that contributors are significantly more likely to say that they recognise others in the neighbourhood as a consequence of using the site:

**Figure 3. (Recognise others in the neighbourhood). Is this more or less likely to happen as a result of participating on [the site]?**

	BC	EDF	HOL	All
	%	%	%	%
<b>Lurkers</b>	10	15	18	14
<b>Contributors</b>	45	55	60	54
Base (lurkers): 102,65,98,265. Base (contributors): 31,89,30,150.				

The results show a 40 per cent difference overall between lurkers and contributors. Although the sample is small, this does suggest that there may be significant social capital benefits accruing to contributors that are not available to lurkers. This is consistent with Hampton’s (2007) finding that lurkers ‘did not experience the

2. We defined lurkers as having posted or commented either ‘never’ or ‘less often’ than every two or three months. We defined regular contributors as having posted or commented once a week or more often. Note that Brockley Central uses a blog platform and normally only the site founder posts, so other contributions are in the form of comments. It could be argued that this format is a disincentive to contributing, but the volume of contributions on BC is often very high.

same benefits as those who were involved in online discussions’. An earlier study of two mailing lists in suburbs in Israel, however, found no noticeable difference:

*‘Measures of mailing-list activity, such as frequency of initiating messages on the list and frequency of list use, were not found statistically significant. In other words, active membership on the mailing list did not increase the number of neighborhood-based social ties’*

*(Mesch and Levanon 2003, p345).*

The extent to which lurkers do or do not benefit from participation may be less important than the fact that they are there. What this technology offers is uncomplicated membership for non-joiners and the time-poor. Those who may have less energy, time, aptitude or confidence for local sociability can still participate on their own terms, at their own pace. We should not lose sight of the immense social value in this. For some, these quasi-public spaces may allow what Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole (1995), referring to parks, memorably called ‘being private in a public space.’ For others, a sense of loose association perhaps or simply being more informed about their neighbourhood. For some, as we discuss in Section 3 below, the sites provide opportunities for informal civic involvement which may not previously have been accessible.

## 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 concept was developed in several seminal research papers by Robert Sampson and colleagues.<sup>3</sup> It is used here broadly to cover what people sometimes refer to as ‘social capital’, in the sense that it refers to a social resource that people feel they could draw on in time of need.

We used a standard question for this measure, asking whether respondents agree or disagree that ‘local people pull together to improve the neighbourhood’. Overall, 82 per cent of respondents said that they strongly agreed or tended to agree with this statement. This is considerably higher than the overall figure for England and Wales published in the 2008-2009 *Citizenship Survey*, which was 67 per cent (Lloyd 2010).

We then asked respondents if they thought that their website had made a difference to whether or not people pull together to

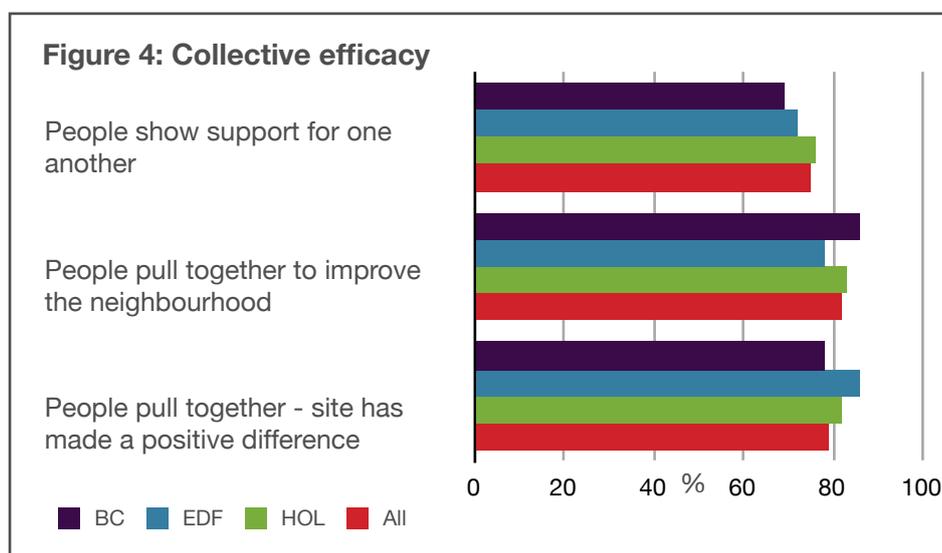
3. See <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/faculty/sampson/>.

improve the neighbourhood. The response options for this question were: ‘Yes, for the better’, ‘Yes, for the worse’, ‘Made no difference’, and ‘Don’t know’. 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. The figures were very similar for the three sites, ranging from 72 per cent for EDF to 78 per cent for BC.

We also asked whether people agreed or disagreed, as a statement about the website, that ‘people show support for one another’? Overall, some 79 per cent of respondents agreed strongly or tended to agree with this statement. The proportions varied from 69 per cent for BC, 82 per cent for HOL and 86 per cent for EDF.

The results for these three questions are summarised in Figure 4 below. Allowing for the fact that respondents are likely to be already committed to their website, the results show considerable conviction that collective efficacy is supported by the sites. There is a sense that social capital is being pooled, visibly, and can be drawn on for individual or collective need. As one of our focus group participants put it,

*‘Demonstrating that we (the majority of non-violent Brockley residents) care and are interested in what happens in our locality is an important deterrence.’*



**Notes to Fig. 4**

Response counts vary as follows: BC - 91,130,130. EDF - 175,197,195. HOL 136,169,166. All - 402,496,491.

Question options included here:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about [site]? 'People show support for one another.' Strongly agree or tend to agree.

'Do you agree or disagree that local people pull together to improve the neighbourhood?' Strongly agree or tend to agree.

'Has [site] made a difference to whether or not people pull together to improve the neighbourhood?' Yes, for the better.

## Belonging and attachment

We have found that positive relationships between neighbours arise as a consequence of participation on local sites. Can the same be said of belonging and attachment?

We know that the sense of belonging is complex. Often people identify with a wider area such as a city or their country, but may remain indifferent to the more local scale. According to the 2009-2010 *Citizenship Survey*, 87 per cent of the population feel that they belong strongly to Britain (DCLG 2010a). One of our test sites covers part of the London Borough of Southwark, and apparently

*'more Southwark residents identify with London (80%) and with their neighbourhood (74%), than with Southwark as a borough (64%).'*

*(Ipsos MORI, 2006)*

Our respondents already show high levels of attachment to their neighbourhood: overall, 83 per cent of respondents in our survey agreed strongly or very strongly that they belong. Across England, in 2009-10, 76 per cent of people felt that they 'belonged strongly' to their neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup> Attachment is associated with home ownership, and as noted in our demographic summary (see Introduction), 82 per cent of our respondents are home owners.

Nonetheless, more than two thirds of our respondents (69 per cent) felt that participation on the local site had strengthened their sense of belonging. The results are summarised in Figure 5 below. This suggests that the sites are playing a consolidating role, making it easier for people to build stronger attachment on sound foundations. In other localities where attachment is not claimed to the same extent as it is in these areas, the question arises, would neighbourhood websites have a similar, greater or lesser effect?

Sense of belonging is related to levels of interest in local news, local history and local characters. Illustrations of how this arises and is packaged by digital conversation come from all three sites studied. The History of Haringay group on Haringay Online currently has 111 members.<sup>5</sup> The site's Ning platform offers options for visual content and discussion groups, and a great deal

*'Haringay Online has made a pretty big difference in my life, I used to get so lonely in London and now I feel like I have neighbours and a community and there are people around me who care.'*

4. This figure comes from the Citizenship survey, (DCLG 2010a). Note that there is a discrepancy with the (postal) 2008 Place survey, which gives a national figure of just 59 per cent (DCLG 2009) for sense of belonging to 'immediate neighbourhood'.

5. <http://www.haringayonline.com/group/historyofharingay>

of local history content has accumulated with residents' reflections. Recent discussion was stimulated for example around memories of greyhound racing at Harringay Stadium from 1927 to 1987. On Brockley Central, an old postcard sparked numerous comments about changes in the area – including the visual effect of parked cars.<sup>6</sup>

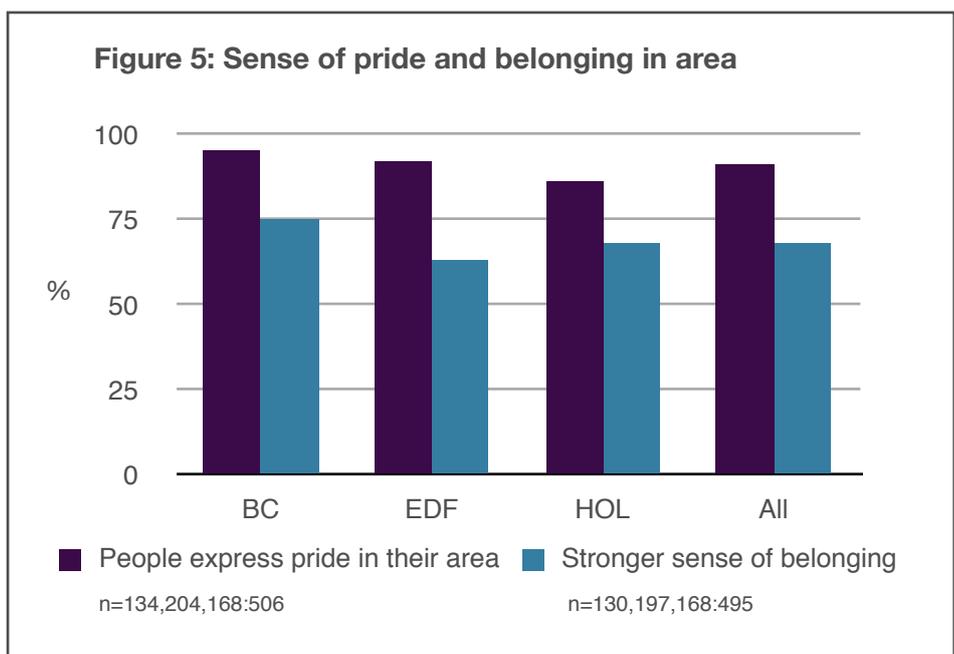
Belonging is also claimed through an expressed sense of pride in the area. In our survey, as shown in Figure 5 above, 91 per cent of respondents agreed that through their site, people express pride in their area. From a local authority's point of view, this has value: a transparent noticeboard in which residents overwhelmingly celebrate their locality, in however modest a way, would seem to provide the basis for a promising future of co-production.

Indeed, it is apparent that the technology offers a context not available through any other media: as one focus group participant put it,

*'even if you never meet people, the site makes you feel connected.'* (Brockley focus group).

Many of the exchanges we have examined on these sites demonstrate the level of vigilant attention paid to their neighbourhood by many local people, which becomes mutualised by online correspondence.

*'I have found East Dulwich has become a much warmer, friendlier and lively place to live since I joined EDF and felt utterly bereft when the forum was recently closed for 2 weeks'*



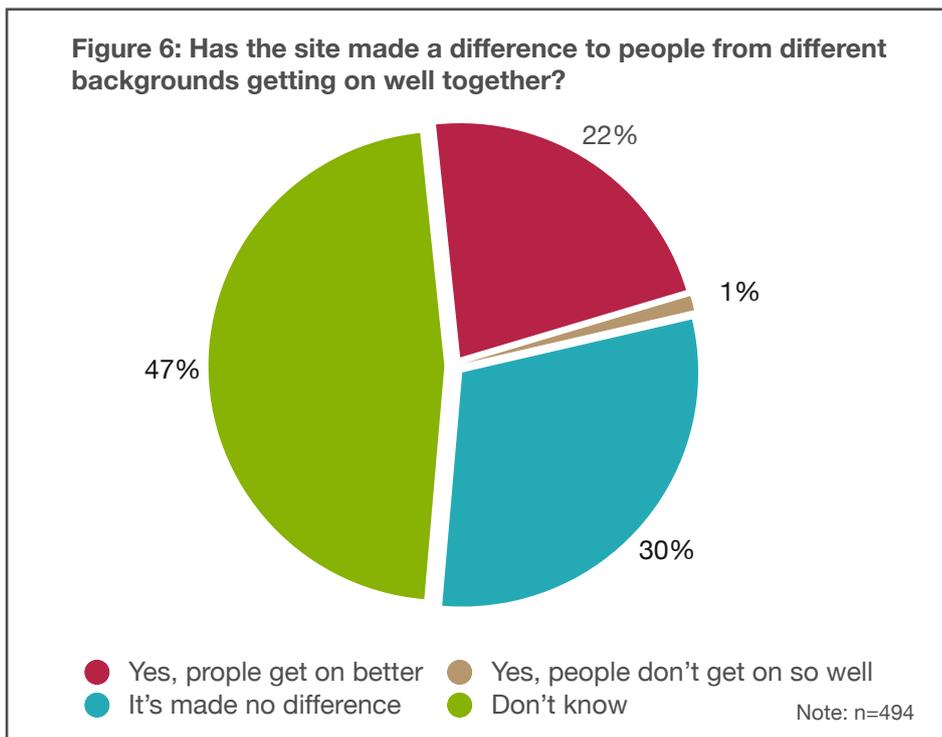
6. <http://brockleycentral.blogspot.com/2010/09/dogville.html>

If people are using local websites to confirm their sense of belonging, as seems to be the case, we would expect that to be reflected in an outspoken readiness to defend amenities, co-produce mutually-approved outcomes, call authorities to account, and campaign for improvements. The evidence for these consequences will be considered in Section 3 below.

## **Social inclusion and diversity**

In our interviews with site founders we learned that each had set their site up with a broad sense of social purpose but no explicit intention to promote community cohesion or social inclusion. The sites do not set out to be, nor claim to be, democratically representative, culturally representative or accountable. Nonetheless, these are local resources which appear to have considerable capacity to influence and contribute to the quality of local life, and are widely valued as resources. It follows that we should take careful note of any effect, positive or negative, that they might have on social inclusion and cohesion.

The evidence on the power of our three case study websites to contribute to community cohesion generally is weak. When asked if their local site had made a difference to whether or not people from different backgrounds get on well together, a majority of respondents either did not know (47 per cent) or felt that it had made no difference (30 per cent, see Figure 6). These are all localities where respondents feel that people from different backgrounds already get on well. In Brockley, 73 per cent tended to agree or agreed strongly that this was the case; in East Dulwich, 74 per cent; and in Haringay, 78 per cent. Similarly, people perceive a degree of racist content on the sites (see Figure 7), but the figures given below suggest this is not at a level likely to raise particular alarm for policy makers.



**Figure 7: Perception of racism on sites**

	BC % (n=133)	EDF % (n=200)	HOL % (n=165)	All % (n=498)
Agree or strongly agree				
<b>People sometimes make racist remarks</b>	11	16	5	11

The concern here is that a kind of Mathew Effect could be operating, by which those who have an advantage, can take further advantage: the power of local websites to bring social benefit is being exploited by those who are already in a position to take advantage of it.<sup>4</sup> This is not to imply that neighbourhood websites do not have the potential to make a difference in places where a high proportion of people experience exclusion. A recent study by Keith Hampton (Hampton 2010) suggests that when the internet is used for local communication within an area of concentrated disadvantage ‘it overcomes contextual constraints on the formation of collective efficacy.’

Our demographic summary (see Introduction) suggests that the case study sites are dominated by people who are relatively

4. The Matthew Effect is the theory of cumulative advantage, proposed by Robert Merton in a 1968 paper on communication in science (see <http://www.garfield.library.upenn.edu/merton/matthew1.pdf>). It refers to a saying in the Christian gospel of St Matthew: ‘unto him that hath it shall be given, and he shall have abundance’.

affluent and educated. We know that 59 per cent of our respondents feel they can influence decisions in their local area. These are relatively empowered people who put energy into helping their site grow, contributing and generating social capital and civic involvement to sometimes enviable levels.

Around them and among them live smaller numbers of less affluent people, renters rather than owners perhaps, people from minority groups and with English as a second language, perhaps people who may not have home internet access but who use telecoms shops in the high street to call family in other countries and access websites in their own language. In section 2 below we refer to the significance of pseudonymity and the way that sites afford the participation of people who experience oppression or specific discrimination. A proportion of these categories of people participate on the sites: it's impossible to say how many or at what level of participation.

Meanwhile, it should be recognised that participation on some of these neighbourhood sites can call for a high level of confidence and assertiveness, which may be closely related to levels of literacy. These are text-based environments and the currents are fast-flowing.

Some respondents expressed bald criticism of what they perceived to be a lack of cultural representativeness, while others suggested that perhaps the sites could make more effort to be inclusive. We include here a selection of the remarks offered:

*'Seems to be for white middle aged people, basically.'*

*'I would imagine the website doesnt attract a contribution from a full range of social demographic backgrounds to reflect the actual community as a whole.'*

*'doesn't seem to represent the diversity of the local community, particularly ethnically and in terms of social class.'*

*'The area is very multicultural but the cultures tend to stick to themselves in many ways... How to reach out to them and other groups to make it a truly inclusive 'community'? Some of us may get very involved in local issues but clearly large groups dont and this is where the limits of such neighbourhood sites are obvious.'*

*'I am not sure but I get the feeling that the site is not very diverse, it would be great to get a greater amount of people chatting who are from different backgrounds.'*

*'don't assume that online forums etc = more democracy. They may simply give more power to those already at an advantage.'*

*'the website represents a small minority of people in and around the neighbourhood and should not be considered representative of the views in the area.'*

If nothing else, this suggests a healthy awareness of a potential discrepancy between the cultures in the neighbourhood and those reflected online. The logic of the technology allows excluded groups to set up their own space within or alongside the dominant site. At least one of the sites has tried to encourage this, but it could be that motivation, skills and confidence do not yet match the opportunity.

But there is an important issue here. Sites like those we have studied are quickly accruing influence and the potential to mobilise people around issues. The time may come when there is a pronounced tension between the legitimate but unsystematic influence of local sites on the one hand, and their lack of representation on the other. We offer further reflections on diversity and representation in section 5 of this report.

We have deliberately not located our study within the context of the digital inclusion debate. In our research review we cautioned against expecting simplistic correlations between the socioeconomic classification of localities and the uptake of local sites for digital conversations, noting that studies of digital inclusion in the UK have either not found or have overlooked the potential contribution of local sites to social inclusion.

A desirable consequence of the present study would be investment in the development of neighbourhood websites in less affluent areas - through awareness raising workshops, supportive council staff, community development, twinning with established sites, and so on. Given the unfavourable economic conditions for people on the margins of poverty, this agenda merits urgent attention. A key research question will be to understand how much difference it makes for people on low incomes to have transparent and readily-accessible sources of information and trusted advice.

## Concluding remarks

The evidence we have collected suggests that local websites can contribute to social capital generally: we have not been made aware of any concomitant disbenefit. While the extent to which they might help promote positive relations between people from different backgrounds remains to be proved, the case study sites clearly stimulate positive connections between residents, both in terms of encounters and exchange; and are felt by participants to contribute to collective efficacy, sense of belonging and pride in the area. Through their participation on these sites, people establish and maintain face-to-face contacts, lend and borrow things, support local businesses, recycle materials, and participate in positive collective leisure. This would seem to be a sound basis for enhancing quality of life generally and for more organised civic involvement.

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# 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

part of the  
online neighbourhood  
networks *study*

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