the

online neighbourhood networks *study*

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

Section 3: Empowerment, civic involvement and co-production

2010

capital ambition

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 3

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Section 3 contents

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Do neighbourhood websites have a part to play in this unfolding agenda?

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. Do neighbourhood websites have a part to play in this unfolding agenda?

In this section we report our evidence on the extent to which those who participate on the websites feel empowered to influence local decisions that affect them, and the extent to which they are motivated through the sites to get involved in civic issues. We also ask whether there is evidence that people are ready to work more closely with local agencies to co-produce their own quality of life.

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 36 per cent for 2009.[1]

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. In Harringay, the proportion who claim to feel 'much more able' to influence local decisions is 21 per cent, notably higher than the other two sites. The proportion of respondents who say they feel 'a little more able' to influence decisions was similar (between 51 and 54 per cent) across all three sites. Notably, only 20 respondents out of a total of 492 said they felt less able or answered 'Don't know'.

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1. See DCLG (2010b). There is a discrepancy with the findings of the 2008 *Place Survey* (DCLG 2009) which reported 29 per cent using a postal self-completion survey. The *Citizenship Survey* was conducted through face to face interviews.

This is perceived influence at the individual level; but it's also the case that the sites as collective resources are coming to exert a general influence. For example, one councillor, active online, noted that if a theme is discussed on the forum it helps him, in his relations with officers, in trying to get things done. At the same time, some focus group participants felt that the influence of the sites is largely indirect (although nonetheless valid for that).

Furthermore, a local site can have influence as it accumulates, simply through the information it presents. Several of the elected members and council officers we spoke to told us that they use the sites to identify issues of concern:

> *"it helps us to see issues that are bubbling up....that perhaps otherwise would have taken us a little by surprise."*
>
> *(Council Officer)*

The following example comes from Herne Hill, an area in south London close to East Dulwich and Brockley:

> *'I just had interesting meeting with new officer in charge of one of the local safer neighbourhood teams. In order to get up to speed on what the crime and anti-social behaviour issues are he said that he simply read through the entire correspondence on our local web site. He now knows where the hot spots are, speeding traffic issues, mugging etc etc.*
>
> *'He uses the postings and info on the site as part of his evidence gathering for getting resource to be allocated to an issue or area.*
>
> *'His previous area he was posted to he said, had no local community web site and he was so glad that there was one in his new location as it made their job so much easier.'[2]*

In Harringay the police, unusually for London, are regular contributors as well as readers. Officers use Harringay Online to monitor local concerns informally as well as using the site to help set local policing priorities. The local police sergeant's recent post on 5th November, updating members on an incident, received over two pages of comments. An example of the regular police monitoring of the site to spot local problems arose when a resident posted about a burglary attempt the previous night. The next morning the police had posted the following:

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2. Giles Gibson, Herne Hill Forum, post to google group for [London Neighbourhoods Online Unconference, 2010](#).

Civic activism and civic participation

Following the use of the terms in the *Citizenship Survey* we distinguished civic activism and civic participation as forms of civic involvement.

The former covers involvement either in direct decision-making about local issues or in the actual provision of these services by taking on a role such as a school governor. We also asked people if their level of involvement in decision-making groups had changed as a consequence of participating on the site.

The civic participation question was narrowed in our survey to cover contact with people working in an official capacity (such as an MP or council officer). Our question asked about contact as a direct consequence of participation on the local website.

Just 13 per cent of respondents said they have been involved in groups or organisations making decisions locally in the past year, either by ticking one of the suggested categories or by specifying a valid role in the 'other' option. This proportion is consistent with recent *Citizenship Survey* and *Place Survey* results. Only 10 per cent of respondents said that their involvement with decision-making groups had increased as a consequence of online participation. An overwhelming 80 per cent of respondents felt that the local site had made no difference to their participation in formal decision-making groups.

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

This contrasts with our review of the content of the sites, augmented with focus group material, which suggests that there is strong commitment to activism in all three areas. It may be that this energy is less likely to be contributed through participation in formal organisations and groups, and that the sites are both stimulating and reflecting a latent demand for informal opportunities for collective involvement, on a dip-in dip-out basis. This possibility would need further research.

The options for our question on contacting officials as a direct consequence of using the website included local councillor, Member of Parliament, council official, government official, official working for the Greater London Assembly, or anyone else working in an official capacity such as a police officer, teacher or nurse.

It should be remembered that our research took place during an election year, with local council as well as national elections.

Responses in the 'other' category were checked for valid options, which included for example prospective candidates for council election, neighbourhood watch organisers and social workers.

Figure 1 below shows the number of respondents who contacted councillors, council officers or MPs in the past twelve months, as a direct consequence of using the local website. Using the total survey sample of 510 as a base, we can say that 22 per cent of all respondents had contacted a local councillor in the past twelve months as a direct consequence of participation on the site; a similar proportion, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of all Harringay Online respondents had contacted an MP, and 28 per cent of EDF respondents had contacted a local councillor.

We do not know what levels of contact would otherwise be made, and as we have acknowledged this was an election year. But the results suggest that the sites are stimulating interest in representation, accountability and the flow of information between citizen and state. With issues aired publicly and through transparent discussion, supported by proactive and reactive information-sharing, residents appear to be encouraged to contact decision-makers.

Figure 1: Civic Participation - number who contacted as a direct consequence of using the site
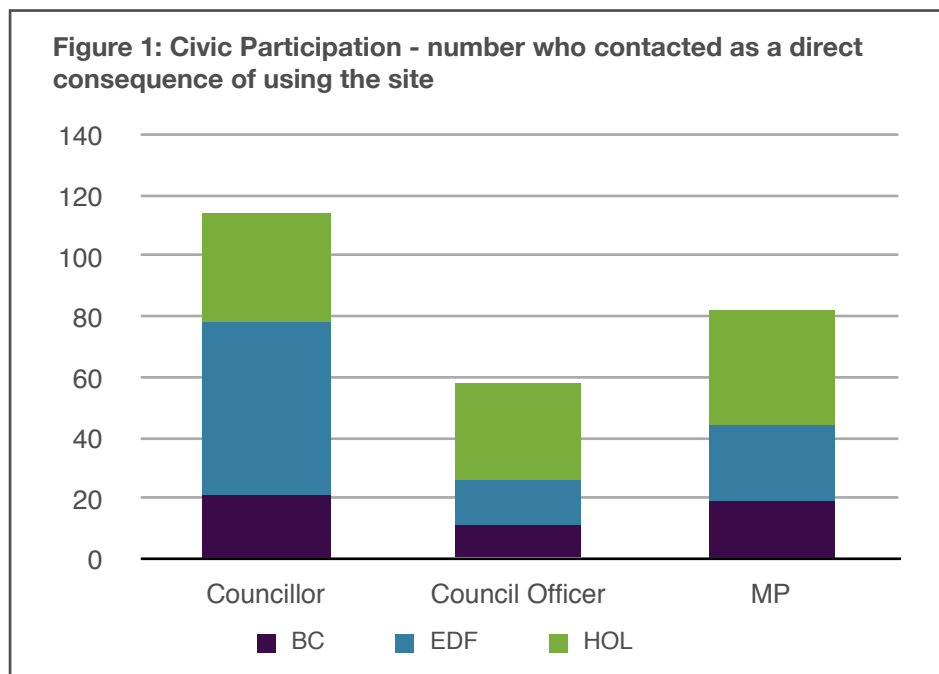
Civic involvement: evidence from 'timeslices'

As part of this study we took a snapshot of content from the three sites on three occasions: Thursday 18 February 2010, 1700-2300; Wednesday 14 April 2010, 1430-2030; Friday 9 July 2010, 0845-1445.[3] This 'timeslice' exercise illustrates how the preoccupations of everyday life provide a realistic context for local political affairs. It also confirms the kinds of commitment, vigilance and attention to detail among residents in the localities that a healthy democracy needs. In what follows we draw on this material to illustrate the contribution of the sites to civic action and participation.

At a basic level of involvement, there was evidence of connection with local groups, such as Brockley Action Group and a post about supporting the local scouts. Connections were also provided on BC to agencies with wider responsibilities, such as Transport for London (TfL) and the East London Line. This included an informal consultation exercise provided to TfL, with BC contributors feeding opinion and views into the agency's work inexpensively and at short notice. In addition a link was made to a petition on part-pedestrianisation of one of the local streets. These initiatives taken together suggest a degree of alertness to civic involvement on Brockley Central.

A similar example from HOL was offered in one of the timeslices, in this case raising questions about the local applicability of national policy on changes to police search powers.

There was correspondence with and between local councillors, and clear connections with local councils. In an ongoing discussion with a Harringay councillor, one participant made it clear that they are paying attention (ie taking seriously their responsibility as a citizen) and acknowledged the part played by HOL in changing the demands made of a council:

> 'One great thing you could do that would really help? Increase the number of planning enforcement officers… Given the role of sites like HOL has no doubt considerably increased the number of contraventions reported, I find it hard to believe that 5 officers is a real commitment to planning enforcement. Can you please let us know the plans here? And whether the council really thinks that 5 planning enforcement officers is sufficient.'

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3. For an explanation of the time periods chosen, and for further detail, see Harris and Flouch (2010b).

The involvement of elected members may not always be constructive. On EDF, not long before the general election, an exchange between two councillors representing different political parties led to this intervention by an administrator in wrist-slapping mode:

> *'I'd rather this thread didn't turn into a bun-fight between Labour and the LibDems.*
>
> *James, Vikki.....I'm looking in your direction. Please conduct yourselves with some decorum and debate the issue at hand rather than trying to score cheap political points.*
>
> *As PeckhamRose says, this is exactly the sort of stuff that turns people away from politics, even at a local level.*
>
> *This thread poses some interesting points about shared services and efficiencies of scale - why not start there?'*

For those who bemoan the negative bias of much online debate, this expression of commonsense, directive moderation might be unexpected.

It's worth dwelling for a moment on what's going on here. The forum has the appearance of a public space but has been set up and is run privately by a local resident; it cannot be described as a profit-making initiative, but is socially-motivated without any known connection to existing community groups or movements and without any democratic credentials apart from the transparency provided by its technology; it generates feelings of passionate association among some its members; attracts and comes to be occupied by key civic figures; and they find themselves ticked off publicly by an anonymous voice assumed to be a local resident. This is not how we are accustomed to conducting local democracy. This little episode can be seen as a tiny, distinct victory for detached citizen interest. We submit it as evidence that neighbourhood websites are contributing to the changing nature of democracy.

Also on EDF, with an eye on the forthcoming general election, on 11 April 2010 the moderator had announced a series of debates, involving each prospective parliamentary candidate, to take place 'within the confines of the Drawing Room' (an online area on the forum). Within the timeslice three days later there were comments from participants interested in refining the nature of the proposed debates. A link to the Southwark Labour Party's manifesto was published by one of the candidates and two comments were posted within the timeslice. All this seems to us to be convincing evidence of local interest in governance mediated by the local website.

Civic involvement: more evidence relating to democratic processes

The other sites in our study also paid scrupulous attention to local democracy, particularly around the 2010 local elections. HOL built up 'unofficial' portfolios of information on each candidate standing in the two wards that are part of the site's target area. They also uploaded copies of all local election leaflets, and filmed short video interviews with candidates and leaders of the main party groupings. The aim was to help local people to feel more informed about candidates and the process, and to create an indelible record that could go some way towards holding elected members to account in the years following the elections. The evidence that this had genuine impact is offered in this account from a HoL member:

> 'I think this kind of scrutiny is superb I wasn't going to vote in the Euro elections but did so because of Harringay Online. Not only did I vote but told friends and neighbours who aren't a part of HOL and they all did the online quiz thing. This created great discussion and at least four other people who weren't going to vote did so. So, the citizen power of HOL stretches beyond just its members!! Many of us can't be bothered with politics and HOL has made me think about voting and invite the neighbours in – the elderly, those for whom English is a second language – for a cup of tea or a sherry and a pakora to discuss the message on the video.'

Brockley Central meanwhile ran a successful online text-based Q&A for local, parliamentary and mayoral candidates. The site's administrator wrote:

> 'Although the Q&A's featured some stock answers, there were also many that had plenty of thought put in to them and there were some answers that surprised us.'

The discussion that followed recorded over 40 comments with site users discussing candidate views and their own voting intentions.
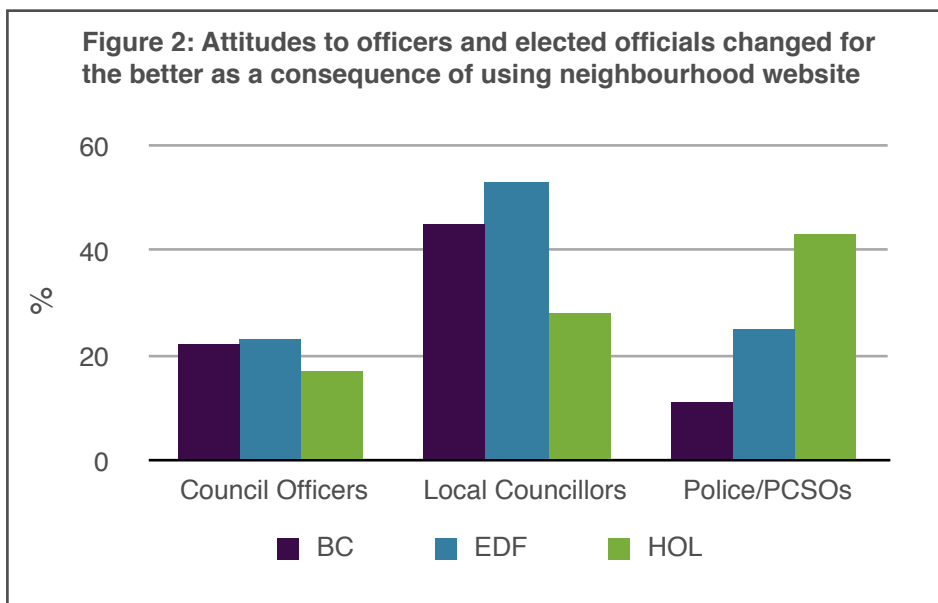
In summer 2010, Brockley Central and HOL carried announcements about council budget cuts. BC's article referred to a document outlining proposed cuts and quoted the mayor and a councillor. There were some 83 comments in total, 19 of which fell within the six hour timeslice that we reviewed.

Haringey Council's budget cuts were announced at the same time and covered by HOL, but with no reference to 'proposals' or 'debate'. A link was provided to a full report to the council's cabinet, but the announcement seems to have been treated as a *fait accomplit*: there were no comments until some three weeks later.

Co-production: attitudes towards official roles

Neighbourhood websites appear to promote improved relations with local agencies and hence may 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 that their attitude towards local councillors had changed for the better. A quarter of respondents said that their attitude towards the police or Police Community Support Officers 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 noticeably higher, suggesting a correlation between their participation and improved perception of their role. In East Dulwich, where through the efforts of one elected member, councillor contributions are the most consistent and visible, 53 per cent of respondents said that their attitude towards local councillors had changed for the better. In Harringay, where the local police have been regular contributors to discussions and have been providing information and reassurance, 43 per cent said their attitude towards the police had changed for the better.

Figure 2: Attitudes to officers and elected officials changed for the better as a consequence of using neighbourhood website

Could this open attitude towards official roles be seen as a platform for increased co-production of services? We asked whether people agreed with the following statements about their site:

- The council shows that they're willing to work with residents to improve things locally

- People demonstrate a willingness to work with the council to improve things locally.

For two thirds of our respondents, the experience of the local website demonstrates that people are willing to work with the council: 66 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. Overall, 42 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the experience of the local website demonstrates that the council shows a willingness to work with residents. These results are summarised in Figures 3 and 4 below.

It's noticeable that the results for East Dulwich Forum contrast with the other two sites. Unlike BC and HOL, more EDF respondents tell us that the council shows itself willing to work with residents than it does residents willing to work with the council. Although these responses are not as persuasive as those for the change in attitudes shown above, it is possible that they confirm the 'Barber Effect', the influence of the ward councillor who is active on EDF (see Section 4 below). However, that would not explain the markedly lower level reported by EDF members of residents being willing to work with the Council, compared to the other two sites.
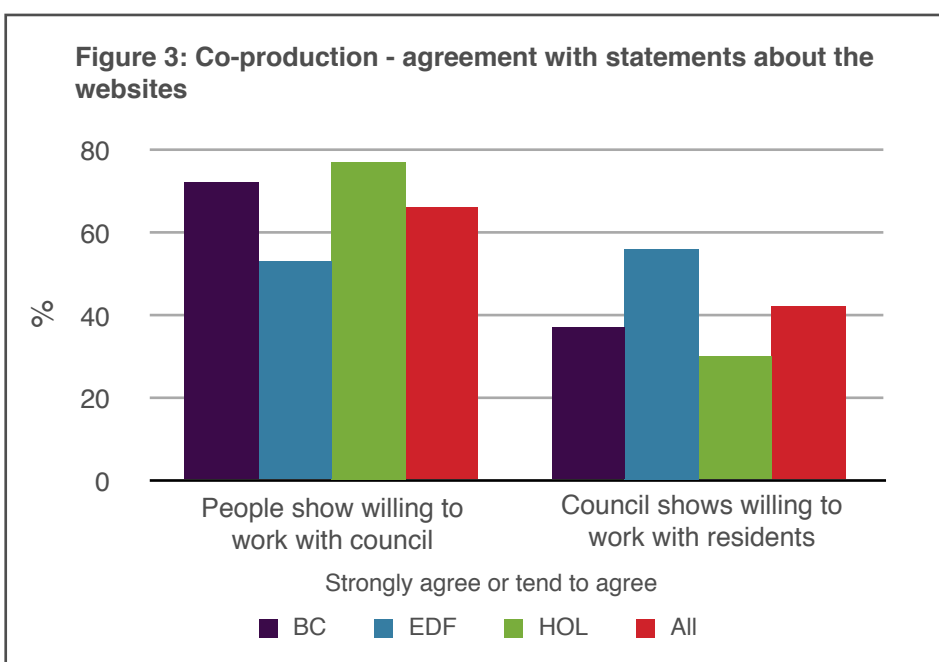

Figure 3: Co-production - agreement with statements about the websites

Figure 4. Co-production: perceptions of council and resident willingness

Agree or strongly agree	BC %	EDF %	HOL %	All %
People show willing to work with council	72	53	77	66
n=	131	204	168	503
Council shows willing to work with residents	37	56	30	42
n=	134	200	168	502

The statistics suggest the potential for co-production: the evidence from site activity confirms it. An example was provided on HOL in January 2010 after heavy snow. The local council, like many others, found itself unable to keep local streets clear of snow. In the hilly terrain of Harringay, this led to dangerous street conditions and meant some residents were in effect housebound. Residents used Harringay Online to rally others and organise to clear the snow sufficiently to ease the situation. Over a single weekend up to 60 residents at a time worked together to clear the snow from a passageway that links 20 streets in the area, as well as clearing pathways down to the main road.

> *'It was a fantastic effort. We couldn't believe how many people came out to help. In the end getting people working together was almost as important as getting the snow cleared.'*
>
> *(Site member)*

This year the council has told the website that it is planning to use this example to stimulate copy-cat episodes elsewhere in the borough should severe weather conditions return.

Concluding remarks

In this section we have tried to show how neighbourhood websites help people to raise and debate local issues transparently; where appropriate, retaining residents' ownership of the terms of the debate. They offer the promise of increased co-production and hence of 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. In the next section we go on to explore the sites' relations to local councils more closely.

References

DCLG (2009). *Place survey 2008, England.* Local government statistical release, Department for Communities and Local Government, http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/1326142.pdf

DCLG (2010b). *Citizenship survey, 2009-10*, Cohesion Research Statistical Release 12, Department for Communities and Local Government, July 2010, http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/164191.pdf.

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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

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