

the
online
neighbourhood
networks *study*

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

Section 4: Relations with councils

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 4

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

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Sixty nine per cent of officers, and seventy three per cent of members said that their experience of local sites was 'very positive' or 'mostly positive'.

Both officers and members attach importance to neighbourhood websites as resources for quickly identifying issues of concern to residents.

Relations with councils

Review

The preceding sections of this report have included numerous references to relations between residents and their elected members and councils. In Section 2, we discussed concerns among officers and members about getting involved in discordant or protracted conversations on local citizen-run sites; we reflected on issues to do with pseudonymity online and considered the role of moderators in maintaining a respectful culture.

In Section 3 we showed how residents use local sites to raise issues of concern, and explored the extent to which the study sites appear to have stimulated civic involvement and contact with local authorities. We also referred to the role played by the sites in stimulating interest in the 2010 local elections. All this potential was reflected in the research finding that a significant proportion of respondents' attitudes towards officers and members had changed for the better as a consequence of participating on the websites.

We have seen that the case study sites stimulate the flow of information which contributes to generalised social capital, sense of belonging and pride in the area. The sites appear to achieve a balance of supportive behaviour alongside moderated freedom of expression, and they serve to increase levels of influence and involvement in local decision-making processes, contributing to a platform for the co-production of services and quality of life.

In this section we draw on a nationwide survey of officers and members as part of the present study,¹ and consider some of the implications for councils.

1. 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. See Harris and Flouch (2010c).

Relationships with local sites

Officers and members who responded to the survey were positive about the relationships with local sites, and there were no significant differences between them. 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’. For officers the figures were 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’. Only 3 percent of officers and 6 percent of members reported that their experience was ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ negative. The results are summarised in Figure 1 below.

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.’

‘Elected members are at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile to these sites so co-operation is difficult.’

Another comment, referring to a site outside London, 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)

It's also important to acknowledge that the motivations and pressures are different for officers and for members. Most council officers have a remit far wider than most neighbourhood sites, or the ward for which councillors have been elected. They 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. Some of these sites have a high volume of activity and attract a lot of attention, but officers cannot be expected to monitor routinely a resource which is not central to their duties.

For councillors the arguments for participation in online sites are perhaps more compelling. They may be seen in terms of political outcomes on election day, or in being seen as a representative who is 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.

As we saw in Section 3 above, 42 per cent of respondents in our local website survey said that participation on their site had changed their attitude towards local councillors for the better. Twenty one per cent said that their attitude towards officers had changed for the better. An argument is emerging to the effect that before long, councils will not be able to afford *not* to participate. The situation for councils, as Andy Gibson has written, is that not engaging now represents a greater risk than engaging:

'Citizens will still use these networks to talk about you, whether you add your voice to the conversation or not... It is becoming increasingly clear that if councils don't use these tools, the citizens will do it for them, and bypass the council entirely.' (Gibson 2010)

The point was reinforced for us in an interview with Alice Ainsworth, E-content Manager at Southwark Council:

*'It's the council's responsibility to get involved in the conversation. You can't just ignore your community.'*²

'You need to decide at what point something becomes a reputational risk. You can't respond to everything.' (Council officer)

'You mustn't be frightened. You have to understand this is about open engagement, you can't ignore it. Councils have got to see that the important relationships are external.' (Elected member)

2. Video Interview, [Online networked neighbourhoods Guide for Councils, video resources](#).

Reasons to participate on neighbourhood websites

We invited respondents to the council survey 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 focus group 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).

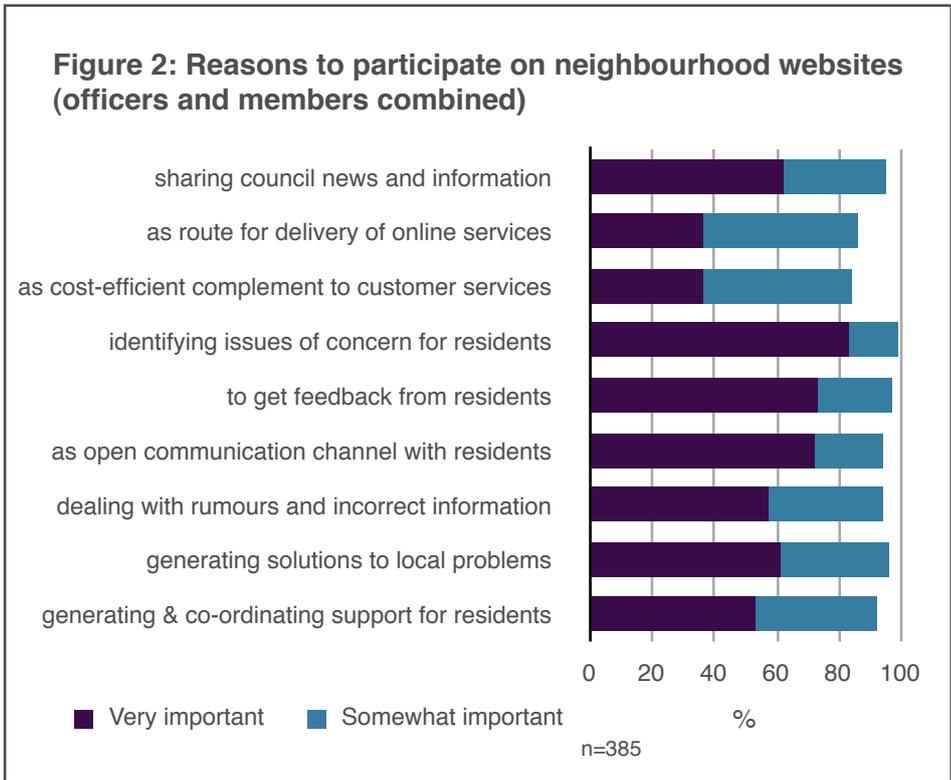
The combined results are summarised in Figure 2 below. They show clearly the importance attached to neighbourhood websites as resources for quickly identifying issues of concern to residents: 83 per cent of responses to this option classed it as 'very important'.

Figure 2 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.

The results show the importance attached to neighbourhood websites as resources for quickly identifying issues of concern to residents.



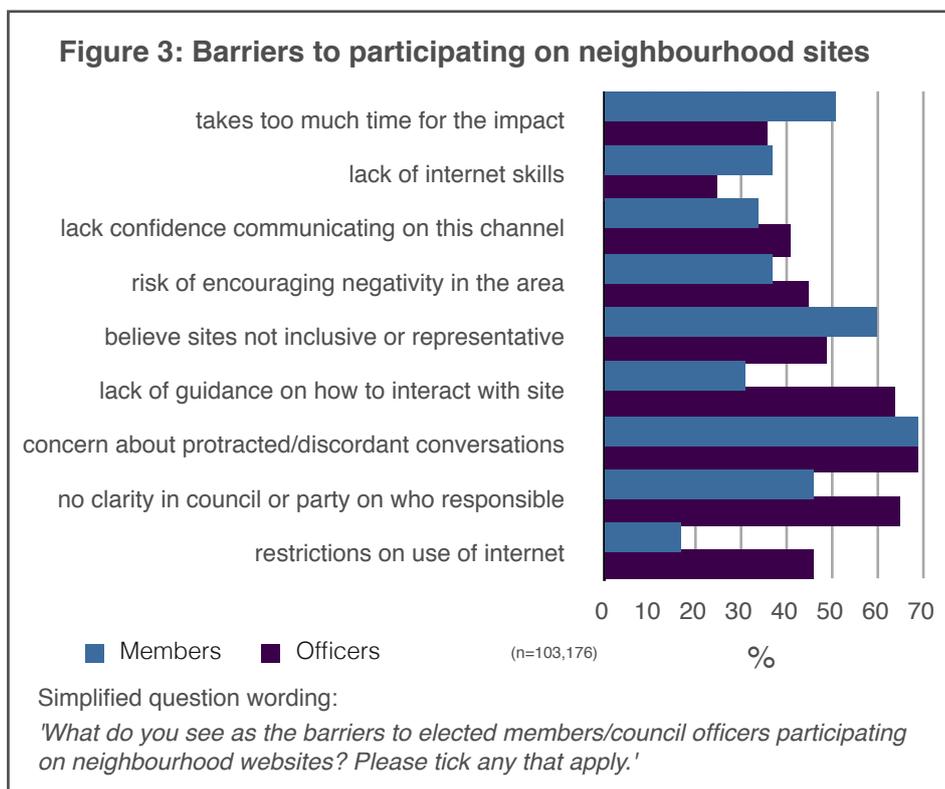
Barriers to participating on neighbourhood sites

We identified a list of nine barriers which might be constraining engagement with neighbourhood websites, and asked members and officers to identify any of these that they felt applied. The list was 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.

The results are summarised in Figure 3 below.



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 (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.

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/ organisations with an axe to grind or a personal agenda. Policing for inaccuracies and untruths is difficult.'

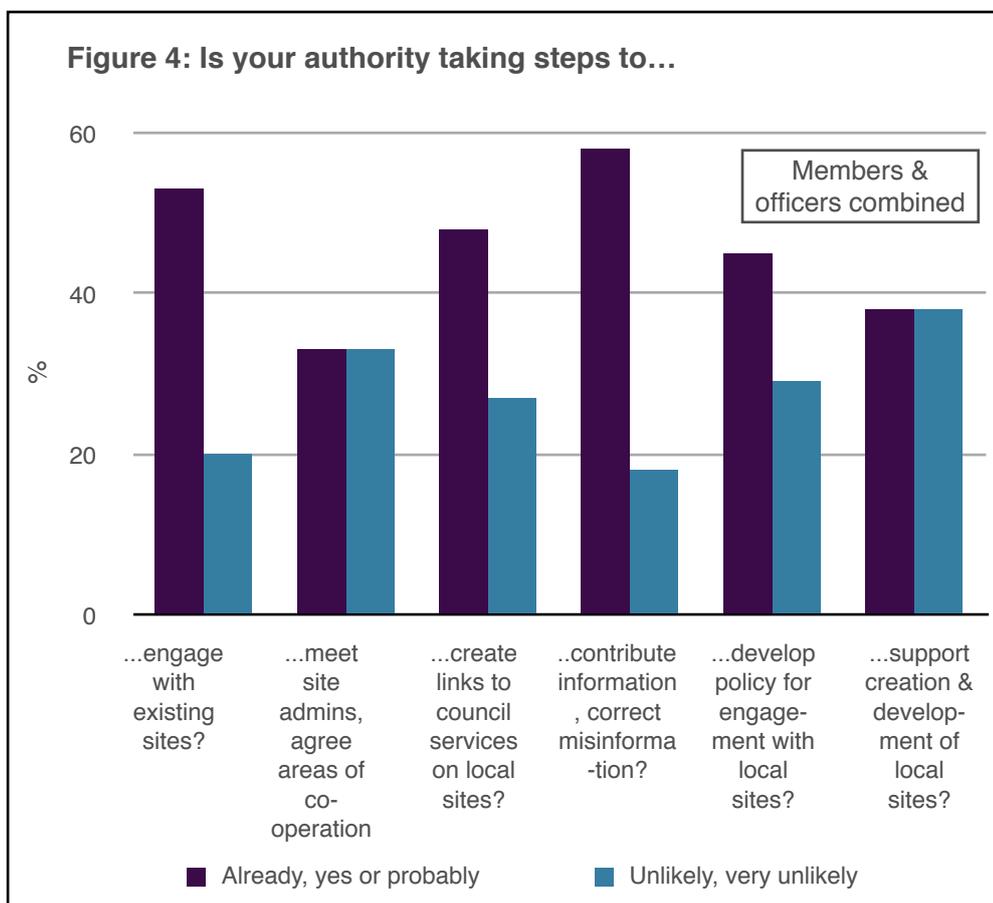
It's worth pointing out that this can apply to some residents' organisations and area assemblies. It's not yet clear whether a negatively-biased neighbourhood website can be more damaging to local social relations than a negatively-biased influential local group.

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 Figure 4 below.



The most striking findings were as follows:

- More than a third of respondents are positive about working more closely with site administrators and almost a half see the potential for linking council service to local sites.
- Forty one 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 contribute, 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.

Strategies for engaging with local sites

For officers and members it is not necessarily a straightforward matter to engage with local sites. Officers spoke of a range of barriers. In addition to those listed above, they mentioned council reluctance to relinquish control of messages. Some felt that as officers they were not trusted to toe the line; and if they saw a need to contribute online, there were too many barriers to getting approval.

There appears to be 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 remain unclear about how to respond to the emergence of these local resources.

For councils, the key decision appears to be to decentralise responsibility or not. We know that there is genuine concern that in an online environment, officers can get cornered and drawn into time-consuming and unnecessary negative arguments, being misinterpreted or even making mistaken claims.

Our Guide to councils is designed to help officers and members consider these issues and make informed choices about how they relate to local citizen-run websites.

'There's a real danger of officers effectively making policy on the hoof.'

From our interviews with officers we know that some councils are piloting ways in which monitoring and responding can be devolved away from the centre. Using a 'keep in the loop' strategy, individual officers can establish co-operative relations with site administrators so that either party is alerted when something arises of interest to them. Thus for example, in January 2010, Brockley Central invited an officer to write a guest column about the council's domestic waste strategy, and the post was well-received.³

One approach would be to use local library staff to monitor the sites in their own area, since they are supposed to have a presence on a comparable geographical scale. The network of local libraries and the information management skills they offer seems to make them well-placed for this role. Unhappily, libraries appear to be serious casualties in the current public sector funding cuts, and may not always be able to respond to any invitation to be intermediaries between neighbourhood websites and council.

Authorities with a dependable consultative infrastructure supporting local representation might use area forums or similar bodies to link with the sites. One officer we spoke to noted that this is not as standardised as it might sound:

'With the assemblies, we don't have a one-size-fits-all model. We'd have a mixed model of support - in one assembly councillors are leading everything; in others it's the officers or the residents, in another the library and so on. I can see links with local sites being similarly localised and varied.'

Another option might be to emphasise collaborative offline relations with the site administrators, although there would still be a possibility that these relationships could be controlled by those at the centre, following a traditional communications model. A few authorities have already appointed 'online engagement officers' or similar in order to develop the relationships in a more forward-thinking way.

Among elected members, we have identified two main approaches, which we describe here in broad terms.

'Do what you can and go with the flow' – in this mode, members treat the site with respect and contribute when they can (for example by clarifying

3. See <http://brockleycentral.blogspot.com/2010/01/guest-column-lewishams-domestic-waste.html>

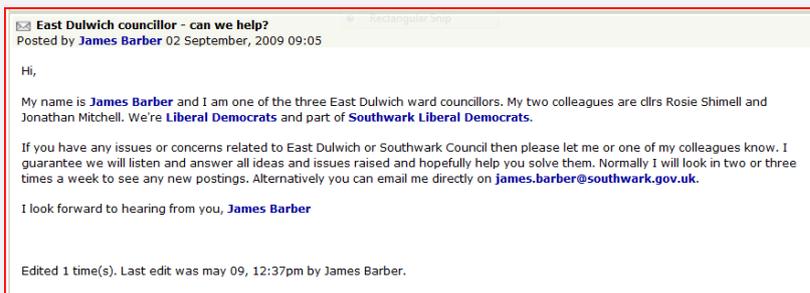
points or agreeing to examine an issue). But they behave as guests, treating the site distinctly as citizen space, not councillor space. They constrain themselves by a determination not to allow participation to divert them from other calls on their time, nor would they want the site to appear to supplant the role of existing local groups and agencies.

‘Bring it on’ – as an elected representative you can set out your stall online and invite people to raise issues to be addressed. This approach is fairly high-risk because of the possibility of being over-burdened or being brought down in flames. Here we offer a short case study, to illustrate how it has worked for one councillor.

Case study: Councillor James Barber

On 2 September 2009, Councillor James Barber took a pioneering step by posting a note on East Dulwich Forum in which he introduced himself and offered to address people’s issues:

‘If you have any issues or concerns related to East Dulwich or Southwark Council then please let me or one of my colleagues know. I guarantee we will listen and answer all ideas and issues raised and hopefully help you solve them.’



There were seventeen comments within the next seven hours, with many more over the ensuing days and weeks. Some fourteen months later (at the end of November 2010) the thread had recorded 1,227 posts and 37,202 views. The thread now appears to be a consistent flow of legitimate questions and informed responses.

Cllr. Barber told us that when he first went onto the forum ‘there was a backlog of angst’. It took some months to get in front of public opinion and gain the current general (not perhaps universal, but this is politics) level of respect for his role. In Section 2 above we quoted his reflections on this early experience, in which he said that in the first two or three months, ‘a lot of contributors were very robust - some were downright rude.’

‘But actually if you stick with it, and you honestly are just trying to deal with casework, and get responses and fix things, people will very quickly start to respect that you are offering a genuine service.’⁴

There are clear advantages for his role as a councillor. He finds out a great deal about council work that otherwise he might not; and being able to point to a volume of concern about an issue adds weight to his dealings with officers on the council. ‘It’s a great way of gathering intelligence’.

Campaigning at election time, he said he was ‘really surprised’ at how many people recognised him from the forum –

‘including people who don’t post. Loads of warmth at the doorstep.’

In our survey, some 53 per cent of East Dulwich respondents said that participation on EDF had changed their attitude towards councillors for the better (see Section 3 above). This result was significantly higher than the other two sites, where councillors have been far less prominent, and therefore suggests a possible ‘Barber effect’ resulting from his visible presence and constructive approach.

Barber says he has no explicit agreement with the forum moderator. He says he ‘may have met’ the site founder but he thought it was important not to know who it is.

There appear to be two key lessons to be drawn from James Barber’s experience. First, simply playing a practical role with a non-political style:

‘I’m hopeful that being as non-political as a councillor can be, people will be more willing to just talk about issues, without thinking there’s a political motive behind it.’

4. Video Interview, [Online networked neighbourhoods Guide for Councils, video resources](#)

Secondly, and most fundamentally, he has gone where the conversations are already taking place. Rather than adopt the political convention of expecting residents always to come to him with their issues, he has recognised the power of the neighbourhood website for raising those issues anyway, and therefore as the logical place to address them. When we spoke to EDF focus group participants there was unanimous praise and respect for the fact that he carried out this online role in a practical, non-political manner as their elected representative.

Supporting the creation and development of neighbourhood sites

As shown in Figure 4 above, 38 per cent of respondents told us that their authority will definitely or probably support, or is already supporting, the development of citizen-run neighbourhood websites. We can expect this proportion to increase. In our focus group and interviews we heard about informal and piecemeal ways in which this is happening, but strategic approaches are only just beginning to emerge. A number of agencies like [Talk About Local](#), [Podnosh](#) and [Networked Neighbourhoods](#) have been developing approaches to help people understand the potential of local sites; but these efforts need the impetus that would come from local government commitment at the national level.

Any support provided by local authorities would have to be based on an acknowledgment of the independence of the sites. But since, as we have shown, there are clear benefits to councils in having mature, lively citizen-run websites in their areas, it is in the councils' interest to play an enabling role in their development. There is a strong case for councils to work together to establish awareness-raising workshops, explore twinning between sites or mentoring from experienced administrators, and support training. In our view these initiatives are always likely to work best if they involve a mix of residents, activists, members and officers.

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. 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 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 council 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:

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

'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.

References

- Gibson, A. (2010). [*Local by social: how local authorities can use social media to achieve more for less*](#). London: Nesta, 2010,
- Flouch, H. and Harris, K. (2010c). [*How councils respond to local websites: report of survey of council officers and elected members*](#). Networked Neighbourhoods,

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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