

Councils and Online Neighbourhood Networks

Report of the second Networked
Neighbourhoods survey of council officers
and elected members

2011

the
Networked
Neighbourhoods
group

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. As well as providing leading edge research, we deliver innovative projects that make a difference on the ground.

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Councils and Online Neighbourhood Networks:

Report of the second Networked Neighbourhoods
survey of council officers and elected members

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November 2011
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Levels of awareness of neighbourhood websites appear to have increased significantly since 2010.

These sites are valued by officers and elected members as the most useful online channel to listen to and talk to residents, above others such as Facebook and Twitter.

Key Findings

- Neighbourhood websites are valued as the most useful online channel, above others such as Facebook and Twitter, by officers and elected members.
- Those claiming that they are aware of one or more neighbourhood sites in their area increased from 63 per cent in 2010 to 84 per cent for members, and from 55 per cent to 92 per cent among officers responding.
- The proportion of members who perceived local sites to be negative dropped 5 per cent, from 17 per cent a year ago.
- Nonetheless, in 2011 the proportion of members who feel that relationships with sites can be described as 'co-operative' is about 50 per cent, compared to two thirds in 2010. Among officers the trend is in the other direction: from 53 per cent in 2010 to 67 per cent this year.
- Some 90 per cent of members feel that they should read and contribute to neighbourhoods websites as active participants, compared with 65 per cent in 2010.
- Members and officers recognise a broad range of pro-social and co-productive roles, such as 'quickly identifying issues of concern for residents', acting 'as a link to council online services' and 'sharing council news and information on council services and events'.
- Officers and members reported more concern about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations than in 2010.
- Internal barriers within councils are still constraining their ability to take advantage of neighbourhood websites. These include restrictions on the use of the internet, the lack of council *clarity on responsibility* for interacting with the sites, and the lack of council *guidance*.

Introduction

As their numbers expand, citizen-run neighbourhood networks and other digital channels are becoming an established feature of the relationship between councils and citizens in a growing number of areas. In 2010, our research showed how local websites contribute to a range of social benefits that are of interest to council officers and elected members.¹ As part of the research, we conducted our first survey of officers and members, which found that councillors and officers are likely to see neighbourhood websites as constructive and useful, and to have co-operative relations with them. Summarising the research we noted 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.'²

With our 2011 survey³ we wanted to find out if there have been any noticeable changes in awareness of and relations with local sites. We also wanted to explore how respondents saw neighbourhood networks in relation to other online channels.

There might have been grounds for anticipating markedly different results this year compared to last year. It has been a tumultuous period in many authorities, with sharply revised budgets and many redundancies. Shortly before our survey opened, the country was stunned by a series of disturbances (mainly looting and vandalism) in urban areas, starting in north London, and social media were implicated in both the orchestration of the criminality and in the subsequent responses of residents.⁴ While the police featured in most debate, it seemed as if local councils were in danger of being sidelined:

'A website for every neighbourhood should be a minimum [and] a proactive key contact in each neighbourhood to facilitate flow of information to/from council'

(Officer)

¹ http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/?page_id=409

² <http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Online-Nhood-Networks-Council-Survey-Report-rev-1.pdf>

³ As in 2010, our survey was carried out online during August and September. There were ninety four responses from council officers and 132 from elected members. The relatively small sample size (undoubtedly affected by public sector staff reductions), and the degree to which it was self-selecting, have to be taken into account in assessing the significance of the results. All quotations are from respondents in our 2011 survey unless otherwise stated.

⁴ See [our article](#) for the Guardian's Joe Public column, 9 August 2011.

but the discussion may have encouraged many people in local government to think more urgently about online channels. At the same time, it could be argued that many council officers are so heavily pre-occupied dealing with the effects of financial constraints, that it seems too experimental to invest in support for citizen-led sites that could help them develop engaged, responsive services.

What do we mean by ‘neighbourhood websites’?

As in 2010, our survey this year referred to "independent citizen-led neighbourhood websites," which we describe as websites having the following characteristics:

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

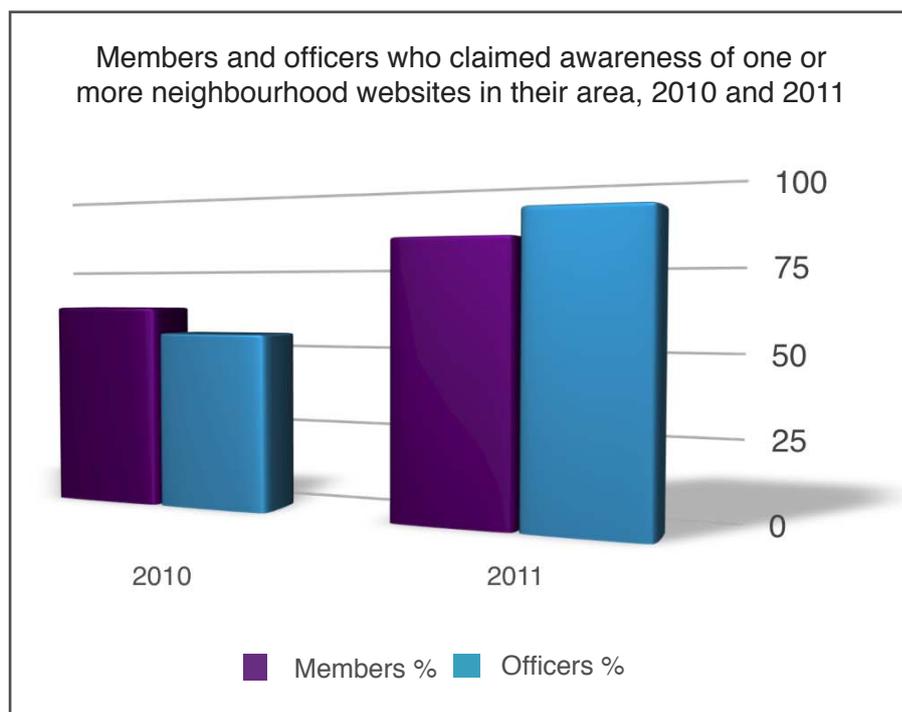
This helps to distinguish such sites from (a) websites initiated and/or maintained by councils or other public agencies; (b) static ‘noticeboard’ sites or individual residents’ blogs which provide information but little or no discussion that involves a significant range of residents or any scale of readership.

‘The Council has its own website on which it explains activities and provides information on its work. A neighbourhood website has a somewhat different role in separating the specific local aspects from the general information and perhaps interpreting it in a neighbourhood context. Participation by the council should not normally be seen as controlling content.’

(Member)

1. Awareness of local sites

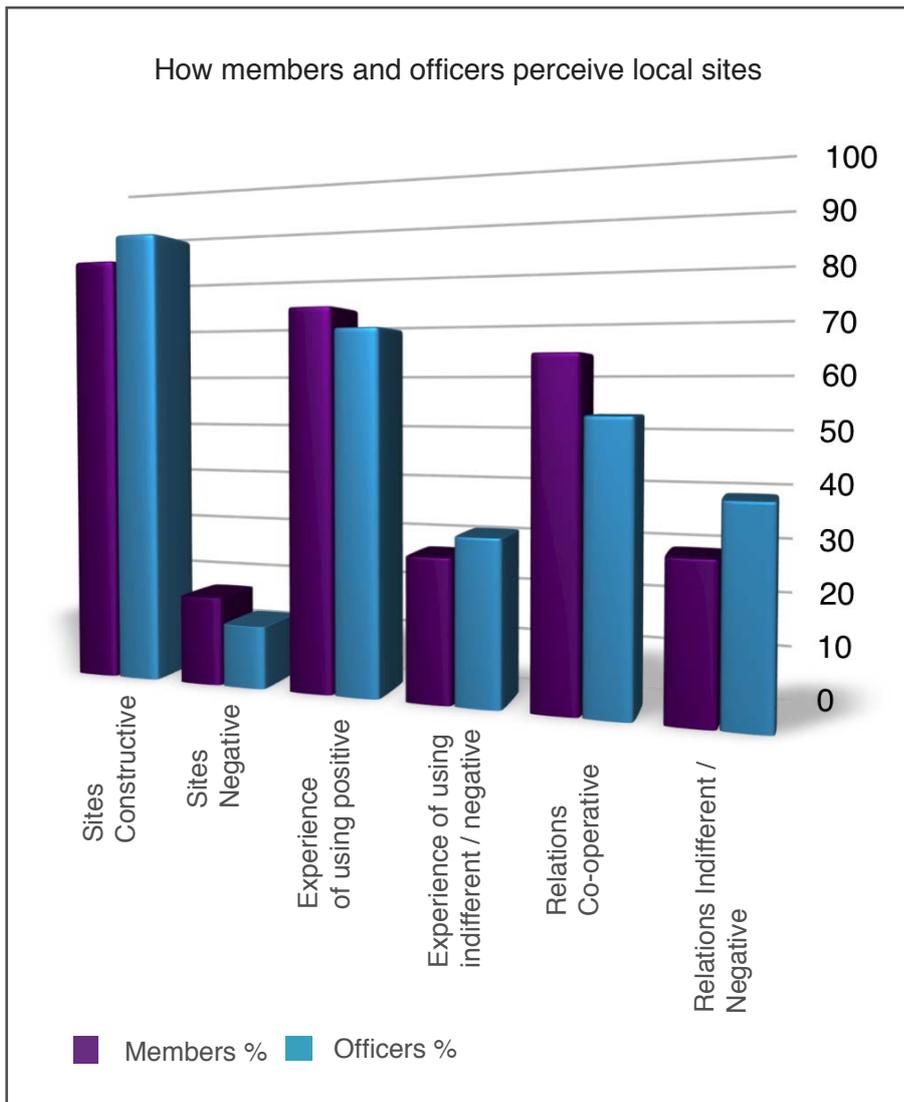
Awareness of neighbourhood websites appears to have increased more than might be expected. Those claiming that they are aware of one or more sites in their area increased from 63 per cent in 2010 to 84 per cent for members, and from 55 per cent to 92 per cent among officers responding.



2. Perceptions of local sites

Officers and members find local sites to be 'constructive and useful' in roughly equal proportions. Thirty nine per cent of officers described them as 'mostly constructive and useful' (41 per cent in 2010); with 47 per cent saying they were 'somewhat constructive and useful' (the same as in 2010). Among members, the figures were 43 per cent and 45 per cent (42 per cent and 41 per cent respectively in 2010).

'There is one standout example which is beginning to build a relationship with the council. The rest are treated as regular media outlets.'
(Officer)



The proportion of members who perceived sites to be either 'negative and counter-productive' or 'tend to be negative with little utility' is just 12 per cent this year, down from 17 per cent in 2010.

Respondents were noticeably less positive about their experiences of participating on the sites this year. In 2010, 73 per cent of members, and 69 per cent of officers told us that their experience of participation was very positive or mostly positive. In 2011 the respective figures were 52 per cent and 47 per cent.

It could be that with the public sector funding cuts, citizens have been more critical of councils during the past year. However, until we have several years' of data it will be difficult to confirm this as a trend.

'We have one local blog/website that is set up solely to be very negative and critical of the Council and loves rumour and vicious gossip - we advise officers not to engage with this website unless to add a purely factual rebuttal to anything.'

(Officer)

There was also a change in the general perception of the sites' relations with councils. In 2010 almost two-thirds of members felt that the relations could be described as co-operative, whereas in 2011 the proportion had dropped to just below half. Among officers however, the trend is in the other direction: from 53 per cent in 2010 to 67 per cent this year.

3. How should councils be represented on local sites?

We asked officers and members 'Do you feel the council should be seen to participate on neighbourhood websites?'

Three quarters of officers (76 per cent) said 'yes' and just 13 per cent said 'no'. The response from members was more striking: two thirds (67 per cent) said 'yes' and 20 per cent said 'no'.

We asked members how they felt they should participate on neighbourhood websites: an emphatic 90 per cent (compared with 65 per cent in 2010) say they should read and contribute as active participants. We also asked officers if they felt that they, officers, should participate on local sites and 85 per cent said yes.⁵

We asked both categories of respondent whether they felt the council should be represented by any or all officers; by approved officers from any department; by specialist online communications officers; by the leader's or chief executive's office; or by elected members?

Less than half of officers responding thought that the council should be represented by elected members. But 59 per cent of them thought that the role could be performed by approved officers from any department. The results are summarised in the following chart.

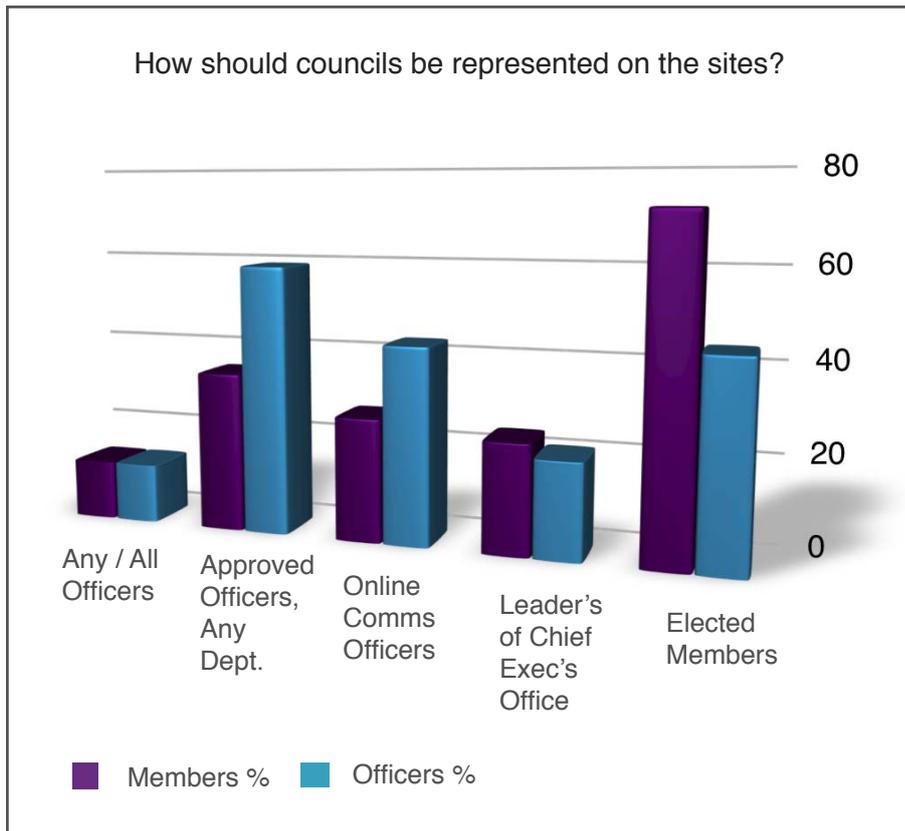
'The site needs to be seen as fully independent of the Council but that should not preclude local Members from contributing their views and providing information and links to Council news.'

(Member)

'From time to time it may be helpful if Council staff post information on a specific area. However, this can raise unrealistic expectations that they are able to have an ongoing relationship with the site.'

(Member)

⁵ The wording to this question was different for officers in 2010 and the responses not directly comparable.



4. What benefits are perceived?

In order to try to identify the most valued uses of local sites, we asked officers and members to rate a range of benefits as 'very important', 'fairly important' or not important. Nine suggestions were offered: these options were originally developed following workshops and interviews carried out in our research last year.

The table on the following page shows the percentage of members and officers who felt the benefit was either fairly important or very important.

'I have used it for everything to provide feedback on a campaign through to giving a resident the number to call about a missed bin.'

(Member)

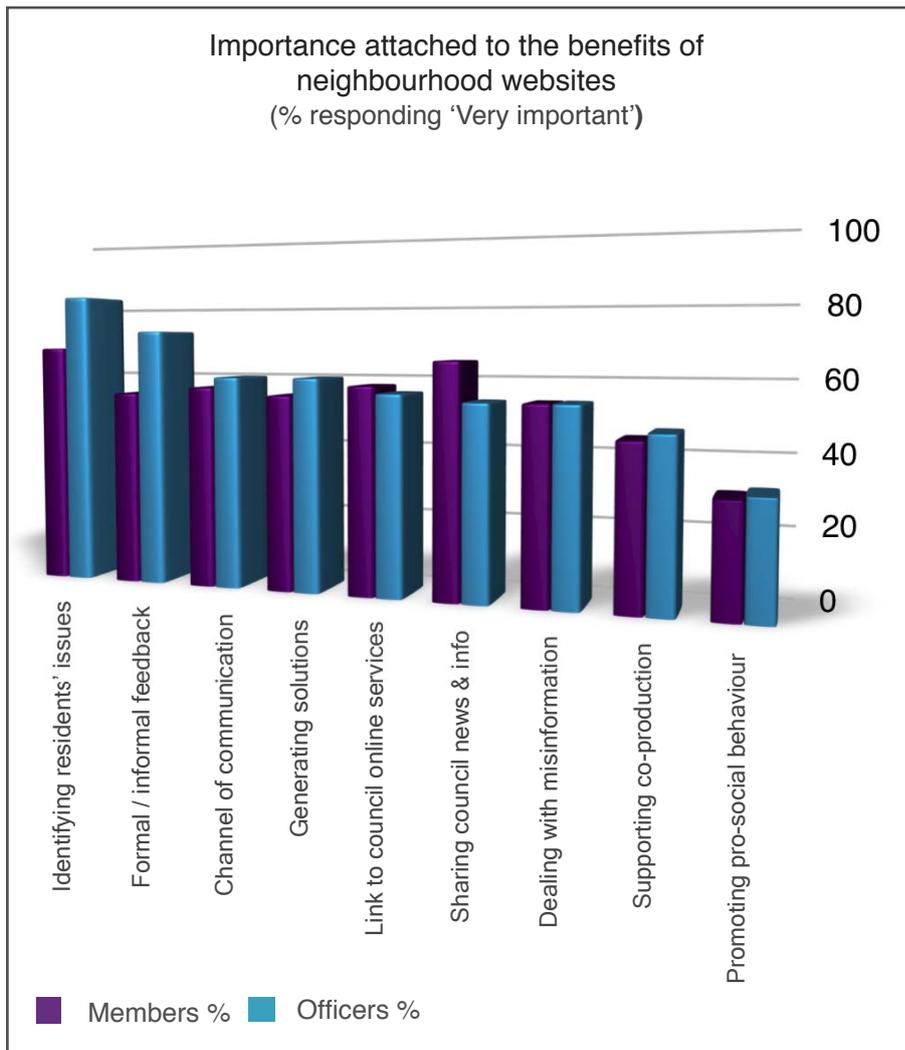
What importance would you place on each of the following? (Either 'fairly important' or 'very important' %)				
	Members 2011	Members 2010	Officers 2011	Officers 2010
sharing council news and information on council services and events	91.6	97	92.2	93
as a link to council online services*	88.9	80	93.6	89
quickly identifying issues of concern for residents	95.3	99	98.7	99
to get informal and formal feedback from residents	90.6	98	98.7	98
as a channel of communication with residents*	88.8	91	92.4	97
to promote civic and pro-social behaviour	76.4	+	83.4	+
to support residents who are ready to work in partnership with the council*	77.7	88	89.7	95
generating solutions to local problems	89.5	96	93.5	96
dealing with rumours and incorrect information	88.8	92	98.7	96

* Wording differed slightly in 2010
+ New question in 2011 survey

As in 2010, 'quickly identifying issues of concern for residents' registers highest as an important benefit of neighbourhood websites. But what remains striking is that there are not just one or two key benefits that can be attributed to neighbourhood websites: their importance is widely recognised by members and officers alike for a *broad range of pro-social and co-productive roles*.

It is worth noting that almost a quarter of members (24 per cent), and 17 per cent of officers, felt that the role of neighbourhood sites in promoting civic and pro-social behaviour is 'not important'.

The data from this section is summarised in a chart on the following page.



5. The range of online channels

This year we wanted to test respondents' views about the perceived usefulness of neighbourhood websites against a range of other online channels. We invited both members and officers to assess the following as 'not useful', 'fairly useful', or 'very useful' or indicate if they 'don't use'.

1. Local residents' personal Facebook profiles
2. Area-based Facebook pages or groups (not council run)
3. Council Facebook page
4. Member Facebook profile/page
5. Local residents' personal Twitter streams
6. Twitter streams set up as neighbourhoods channels
7. Council Twitter stream
8. Residents' groups' websites and chat groups
9. Local online communities of interest e.g. local environmental groups, history groups etc
10. Local bloggers
11. Neighbourhood websites

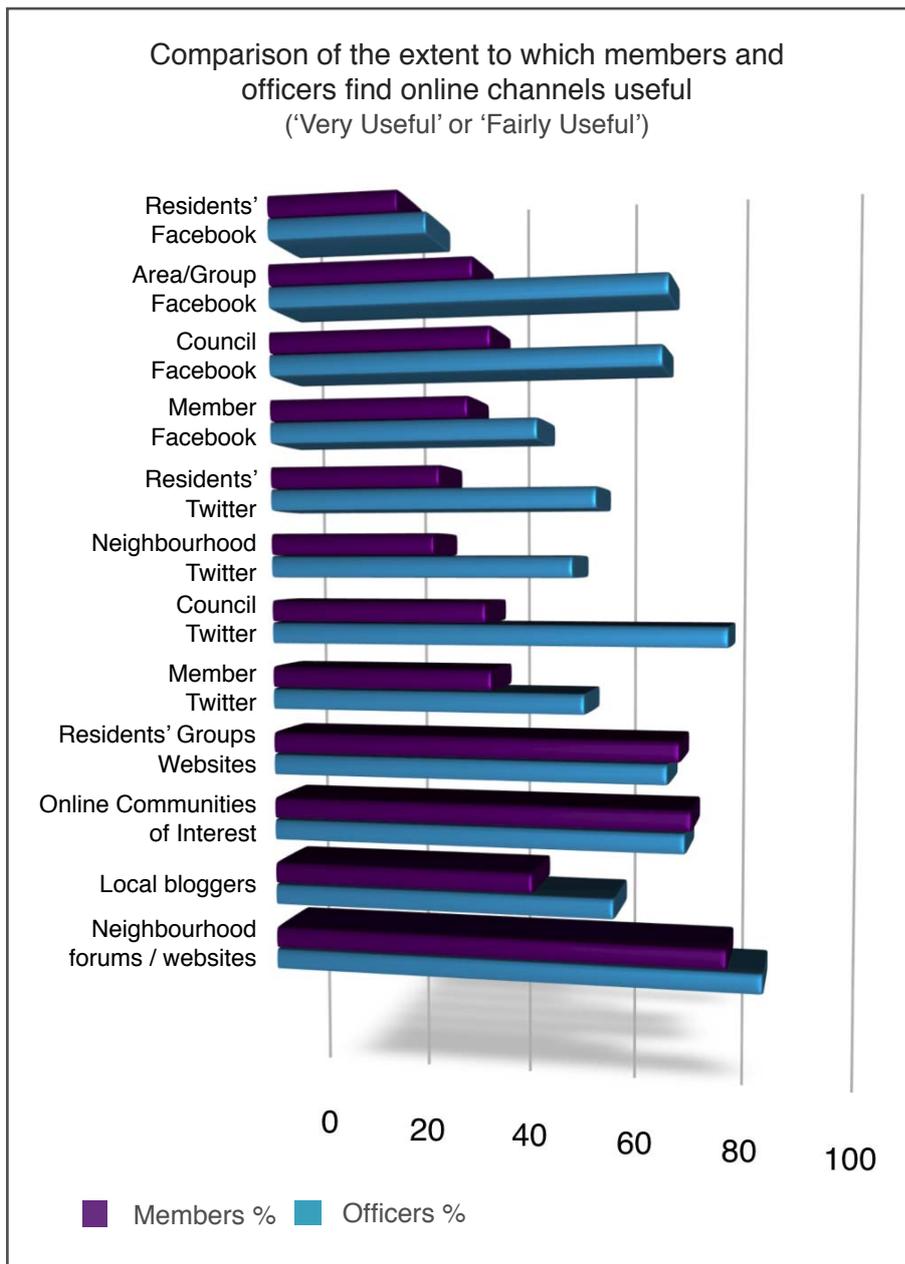
'My ward is affluent and many are professionals. 90% casework is email or Twitter. I put info about council events etc. on my councillor website. I learn lots of local news on the forum more quickly than from the press.'

(Member)

Both categories of respondent indicated that neighbourhood websites are the most useful to them in their role. The last four channels in the list were all regarded by members as 'fairly' or 'very' useful, and the figures are similar for officers.

<i>Fairly or very useful %</i>	Members	Officers
Residents' groups' websites and chat groups	72	69
Local online communities of interest e.g. local environmental groups, history groups etc	75	72
Local bloggers	68	60
Neighbourhood websites	80	85

A significant minority of members responding (ranging from 38 to 47 per cent) say they do not use the first seven of these channels (Facebook or Twitter). A quarter of them find members' Facebook pages useful. Among officers, 41 per cent say that they do not use members' Facebook pages. Officers appear to value Twitter, particularly its use by councils: almost 80 per cent of officers find their council's Twitter stream useful.



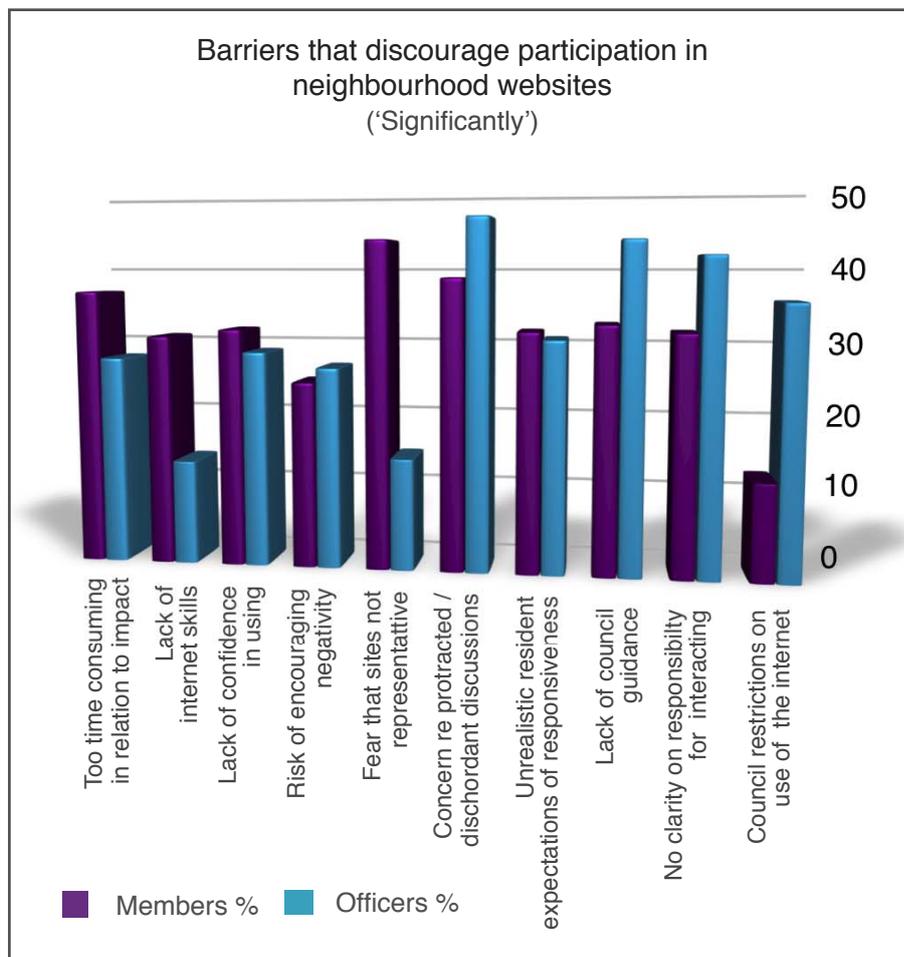
6. Barriers to participation

In 2010 we asked respondents to indicate any items from a list of nine that they felt were barriers to their participating on neighbourhood sites. In 2011 we sought some granularity by asking respondents to indicate where these barriers were significant, moderate or slight. In addition, we gave one further option: 'perception that residents have unrealistically high expectations about member responsiveness'.

In 2010, seven of the nine possible barriers were indicated by 40 per cent of respondents or more. This suggests that there is no single compelling factor that will persuade councils to engage with neighbourhood websites. The most significant barrier was 'concern about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations': unanimously, 69 per cent of officers and members recorded this. In 2011, this remained the most significant barrier for officers; but members now seem to be more concerned with the perception that the sites are not inclusive or representative.

*'More use by local residents! Our biggest issue is that they are still nascent and under-used'.
(Officer)*

The following table summarises how members and officers indicated which barriers they regarded as the most *significant*.



A quarter of members and one third of officers regard lack of technical skills as 'not at all' a barrier; but 31 per cent of members still see it as a barrier which 'significantly' discourages them. Disconcertingly, 36 per cent of officers still find restrictions on the use of the internet to be a significant barrier, with 22 per cent seeing it as a moderate barrier.

This is compounded from officers' point of view by the fact that 68 per cent regard the lack of council *clarity on responsibility* for interacting with the sites as a significant or moderate barrier; and 83 per cent think officers are moderately or significantly discouraged by the lack of council *guidance* on how to interact with sites.

Members are even more concerned than in 2010 about the perceived lack of inclusiveness and representativeness of local sites. Sixty per cent indicated this last year: this year, 44 per cent said 'significantly' and 36 per cent said 'moderately'. Officers are noticeably less exercised about this: just 15 per cent regard it as a significant barrier. Members and officers seem even more concerned than they were in 2010 about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations:

<i>Concern about getting involved in protracted or discordant conversations:</i>	2010%	2011 % (<i>'significantly' or 'moderately'</i>)
Members	60	72
Officers	60	81

It is worth noting that some of these barriers (such as internet skills and access) are practically soluble within authorities. The other barriers are susceptible to an informed awareness-raising approach, which could benefit from the leadership of agencies representing the local government sector.

7. Future developments

In order to fulfil their potential to contribute to local quality of life, most neighbourhood websites will benefit from a positive, active relationship with their local council. As in 2010 we asked respondents if their authority is taking steps to support the development of local sites.

Some of the results are encouraging in spite of the pressures on staff time in the current financial climate. Sixty nine per cent of officers (compared with 28 per cent in 2010) say that their authority is already engaging, or will be engaging with existing neighbourhood websites. Some 64 per cent are already or will be promoting existing local websites; and a similar proportion are already or will be creating links to council services on neighbourhood websites. Two thirds say they are already or will occasionally contribute information and correct of misinformation.

'Constraints financially are leading to difficulties carrying out normal work. Passing on information to these sites is the best way forward.'

(Member)

'A positive change would be to see a proliferation of local websites and bloggers (more micro sites for individual ward areas).'

(Member)

Perhaps most significantly, 63 per cent of officers claim that their authority already has, or will be developing, a policy for engagement with neighbourhood websites. Some 36 per cent (compared with 41 per cent last year) say it is unlikely in the next year, or very unlikely, that their authority will support the creation and development of neighbourhood websites.

Members seem less informed about what steps their authorities are taking, but as with the officers, 36 per cent say that their authority will support the creation and development of neighbourhood websites. Only 50 per cent of members told us that their authority is already or will occasionally contribute information and correct misinformation, even lower than in 2010 (55 per cent): this suggests that half our local authorities may not be interested in the quality of information about local services that is circulated openly by residents.

'The Council could offer assistance with setting up and running such websites - advice only.'

(Member)

'They should provide free hosting and technical assistance.'

(Member)

Concluding remarks

We have found that levels of awareness of neighbourhood websites have increased significantly since 2010. These sites are valued by officers and elected members as the most useful online channel, above others such as Facebook and Twitter. Concerns persist over some of the negative experiences of participating on local sites – particularly the fear of getting involved in discordant digital conversations; but more than twice as many officers as in 2010 now say that their authority is already engaging, or will be engaging with existing neighbourhood websites.

As in 2010, we found that officers and members see neighbourhood sites as largely constructive and useful, and have positive relationships with them. In particular they see them as providing useful communication channels with residents.

The need for council or party guidance on how to interact with neighbourhood websites is emphasised in this survey. Those authorities that continue to stifle their officers' ability to connect to neighbourhood websites through constraints on access need to take advice urgently. At a seminar in Westminster in October 2011, Kerry McCarthy MP called for council officers to be 'freed up' to engage with local sites and use them to connect with residents.⁶ We suggest that the future health of neighbourhood websites and the future health of local government are closely intertwined.

'I used to blog, but now focus on Twitter and a neighbourhood forum. I have a Cllr's online surgery thread (which the moderators of the forum actively pressed me to run, they consider that it encourages people to post as they can get results when they raise issues with a cllr, whereas otherwise a forum can just be a place for people to moan without any outcome). I also tweet a bit, I follow as many people as I can who live in my area and am often asked about local issues.'

(Member)

⁶An event organised by Networked Neighbourhoods group, the Local Government Information Unit, and the Hansard Society.

part of the
online neighbourhood
networks *study*

by
the
Networked
Neighbourhoods
group