

Lumbertubs, Lings and Blackthorn

How do you create an online platform to connect residents and share information about Big Local? Resident Margaret Pritchard (pictured) considers the lessons her community has learned in bringing together people - and making their area an even better place to live



Built in the 1970s as an overspill from London, our Big Local area is just a couple of miles away from Northampton town centre - though it has never really been accepted as part of the town. I've lived here for

15 years and have seen it grow and become more diverse. Today, we have Indian, Somali, Chinese and more recently, eastern European communities residing here.

One of the big challenges has always been to join up the many different communities and groups. There is no meeting place for the four estates here, and we felt that we really needed to look for commonalities and shared spaces.

When I heard about Big Local, I felt that it should be run by people in the area. I'm secretary of a local residents' council and we partnered with another neighbourhood group to form a steering group for Big Local. This comprises residents, community groups and other agencies - we all share the passion for making our community a better place to live.

We felt that a great way to bring people together would be a virtual community space, as a digital platform would ensure the space is open and

long lasting. Coincidentally, we were asked at this time to participate in an online pilot project with the consultancy Networked Neighbourhoods. It was just what we were looking for.

Since summer 2011, we have been working to create this digital space, with guidance from Networked Neighbourhoods. Our online community network is called Surrounding Lings Wood and is at <http://hamtungateway.ning.com/>.

The online community space is a live project and constantly evolving. Some of its highlights to date include:

- Running local workshops to inform residents about our progress and check our direction.
- A virtual 'coffee lounge' to make our members feel at home.
- A searchable map of the area which we will be populating with community facilities.
- Beyond Big Local, the site is also becoming a social place where members can exchange tips, raise issues and meet neighbours.
- A section to share videos and photos.
- Local newsletters, news articles, information on local charities and services, as well as an advertising section for local businesses.

The website is already getting residents engaged. We currently have 34 members and there are many more visitors to the site. We know that we can do more to promote our online community



As a pensioner and self-taught computer user, this has been a huge learning curve for me. I now have the confidence I need to work on the community website and enjoy it greatly

Margaret Pritchard, local resident and Big Local steering group member

space and grow our online community. We plan to make business cards that we can give out at events, to friends, at the school gate and leave in local shops.

There have been many lessons learned along the way. We know that not all of our residents use computers so we need to take a balanced approach. We have also learned a lot about how to make our web space more user-friendly.

We've also discovered that this work takes time. Although web projects are not short, we have spent the time wisely because we have been able to spread the news about Big Local. Looking to the future, we think that patience will be the key. The community has been around for a long time but it has never had a shared online space before. We understand that it will take a while for this website to grow and become shared by all communities in the area.

Creating the website has influenced how we have approached Big Local. For example, it has showed us that we need to have more people on board to deliver activities and make decisions. When you're working long hours, you can feel overstretched and it is hard to get things agreed. It took us very long time to decide on the name of the site, for instance.

We have learned from all these experiences and that is why we invited residents and representatives from different organisations in our area, such as the Wildlife Trust, Indian Hindu Welfare Association and Age UK, to a meeting to

form a Big Local steering group. It is much easier to get the work done and plan things ahead with the group in place. We have supportive partners and everybody is so enthusiastic.

We still need to do more to draw in new members and get residents on board. One thing we've learned to help with this is to be personal - that's why I always welcome each new member with a personal message. Along the way, we've learned a lot about online skills, such as marketing, website development and video production. Before getting involved in this project, I knew virtually nothing about any of these. We are now thinking of how to pass this knowledge to other residents in the area.

We hope to make the best use of social media to engage more people. We have joined Twitter and formed a marketing group to consider how we can best connect with people of all ages and backgrounds. In particular, we'd like to get more young people on board. They could become online members through school competitions and help to shape the site. We would also like to encourage older residents to contribute to our website and Big Local work.

In ten years' time, we see ourselves as part of well-integrated community, one that is helping itself and others to improve life chances. We hope that the area will have established 'hubs' where residents can go to engage with others and find work- and home-related support. As for our online, shared network, we see this as becoming a buzzing community space that connects people and is the first place residents go to see what's on. In short, we see a real sense of community - somewhere that people want to move to and where residents are proud to live.

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