

Online Neighbourhood networks in low income areas



2012

The
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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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Neighbourhood online networks in low income areas:

evaluation report on work funded by the Big Lottery Fund
and Barrow Cadbury Trust, 2011-2012

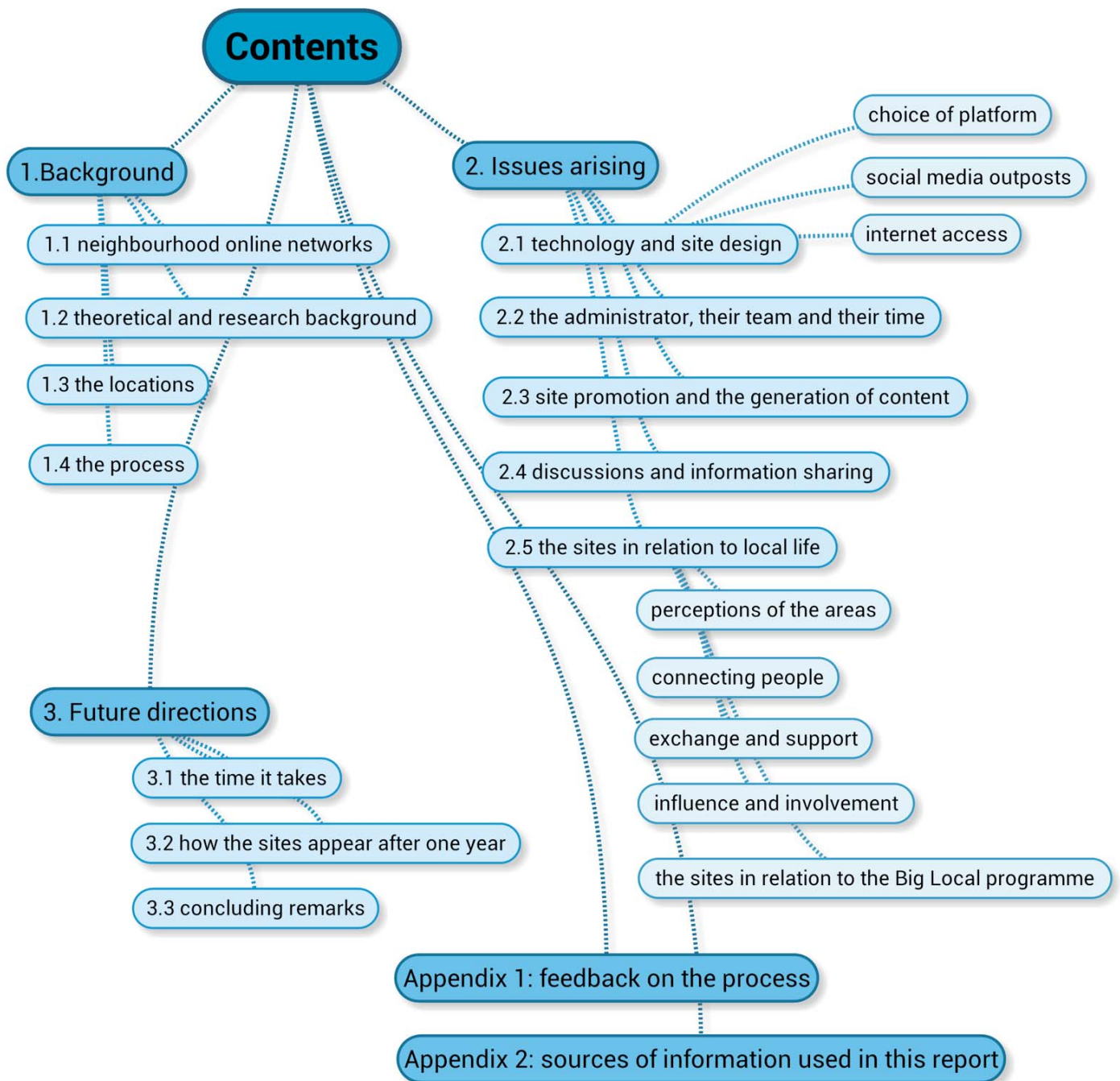
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“ The experience described in this report adds weight to claims that local online channels can be established inexpensively in low income areas, that they can be made sustainable, and that they contribute to the quality of local social life.”



Summary

- This report describes and reflects on four experimental projects carried out during 2011-2012 in separate localities in England – Shropshire, Weymouth, Northampton and Wolverhampton. The basic rationale was to test whether resident-run online neighbourhood networks could be established in low income neighbourhoods and if they could be shown to bring social benefits.
- The report adds weight to claims that local online channels can be established inexpensively in low income areas, that they can be made sustainable, and that they contribute to the quality of local social life.
- The work involved engaging with residents to ensure their ownership of the project and empowerment as a consequence. Residents were supported in the technical, administrative and editorial aspects of the project, which resulted in the creation of four websites:
 - [Community Online](#) – covering the villages of Gobowen, St Martin, Weston Rhyn and surrounding area;
 - [Littlemoor Live](#);
 - [Surrounding Lings Wood](#), covering the Lumbertubs, Lings, Blackthorn and Goldings area; and
 - the [New Low Hill website](#).

The first three of these sites were pioneers in using online to support the development of [Big Local trusts](#).

- In Low Hill and Littlemoor there was a clear aspiration to use the site to counter negative labelling of the area. After early enthusiasm the Low Hill site lost momentum but the work has given rise to other promising online activity. The Littlemoor and Lings Wood sites are stable but struggle to sustain active participation. *Community Online* is recognised as a very successful initiative which quickly achieved stability.
- Local online networks are *collective* endeavours, but the project has highlighted the critical *dependence on key individuals* in getting them established and running them successfully. These are individuals with insight and commitment – they quickly appreciate the potential of social technologies, and show readiness to invest in the potential benefits for their area. The advantages in having a core of willing key contributors, who appreciate the value and purpose of what they are getting involved in, have

also been demonstrated. When an individual, ready and able to lead, is supported appropriately by other residents, as *Community Online* shows, a site can go from start-up to stability very quickly.

- Neighbourhood online networks can contribute to local quality of life by providing easily accessible, up to date information as well as citizen-led discussion and conversation. These roles are mutually-reinforcing, allowing coverage of topics from the most worthy of civic issues to frivolous gossip, which in turn reinforce face-to-face interaction. Only one of the sites has achieved this mix consistently, one less consistently. But sites that are dominated largely by information sharing rather than discussion can still occupy a valued place in the local communication ecology, and have the potential to become well-used networks in time.
- To a limited extent, all the sites appear to have helped residents connect with one another and to commit to civic involvement with agencies or initiatives like their big local trust. Online connection is often converted into face-to-face recognition at local events.
- The report summarises lessons in relation to site design and the choice of software platform. Time and effort has not always been invested in ensuring the design is clean and 'legible' to navigate; but there does not seem to have been a sense in any of the sites that a mistake was made in choice of platform. It may be that this choice is less critical than is sometimes believed.
- A critical injection that is needed to help these four sites thrive and fulfil their potential now is *the visible attention and involvement of public services and elected members*. All formal local agencies (including the police, health, housing and advice services) stand to gain or are already gaining from the social value of these sites. Officials need to be adding information, linking to sources and correcting misinformation as part of their job. In all four localities the official contribution has been disappointingly slight at best – and this has made things harder for the citizens who are trying to bring about change on everyone's behalf.

1. Background

Introduction

This report describes and reflects on four experimental projects carried out in separate localities in England during 2011-2012. The basic rationale was to test whether resident-run online neighbourhood networks could be established in low income neighbourhoods and if they could be shown to bring social benefits.

Three of the projects were established under the aegis of the Big Lottery Fund's Big Local initiative. The fourth, in Low Hill, Wolverhampton, was established in collaboration with Wolverhampton Homes with funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

The Big Local programme was established in 2011 to provide £1m to each of 150 'disadvantaged and overlooked neighbourhoods in England', meaning 'overlooked for funding in the past from the Big Lottery Fund and other funders'. The selected localities were described as 'areas where there has been little or no funding to date and low levels of social capital'. The programme was designed to help involve local people in deciding how to spend this funding to improve their areas.¹

The work described in this report was designed as 'a discrete piece of work around the development of community skills and confidence using technology'. It was piloted in three Big Local Trust areas, 'taking a complementary approach to the work being carried out via the pre-trust grants.'

In the remainder of this section we describe what is meant by 'online neighbourhood networks' in the context of local online initiatives generally; we summarise briefly the theoretical and research background; we offer a short description of the project locations; and summarise the process that was undertaken.

¹ The Big Local programme has since been taken on by an independent trust, [the Local Trust](#).

1.1 Neighbourhood online networks

Neighbourhood websites have the following characteristics:

- they have been established and are run by residents
- most of their content relates to local issues or interests
- they are open to discussion and contributions from anyone living in the area or with an interest in the area.

The websites may be established using blog software, or on forum or full-blown social network platforms. Coverage may range from a single street to a neighbourhood, ward, or postcode area.

The more successful sites have user groups numbering into thousands. Stories of their growing levels of influence, with some notable successes in leading resident campaigns, have attracted attention at the national level. Local sites can raise awareness of local issues, strengthen local identity, stimulate local democracy and contribute to the co-production of public services.

Within the context of discussion about 'hyperlocal' initiatives generally, it's helpful to distinguish between:

- Community websites, which are often led by an agency, and mainly used to broadcast information. These usually struggle to generate digital conversations.
- Citizen journalism using citizen-led sites, typically run on blog software, with a local focus. They are oriented to civic vigilance and action but not necessarily conversations or collective involvement.
- Online neighbourhood networks, established and run collectively by local residents, oriented to information sharing, discussion and mutual support. Most of these seek a balance of civic and social purpose.

We argue that neighbourhood networks are both harder to establish and decidedly more powerful in their social impact, than community websites or hyperlocal blogs. We also acknowledge that in low income areas, success will be still harder to achieve and will require some form of intervention which combines face-to-face and online to stimulate participation.

1.2 Theoretical and research background

The Networked Neighbourhoods Group published research in 2010, based on three examples in London, which clearly showed that online neighbourhood networks can make a distinctive contribution to local social capital, cohesion and civic involvement. Each of the sites studied served to enhance the sense of belonging, democratic influence, neighbourliness and involvement in their area.²

It was acknowledged that populations in the areas studied in that research were known to be largely relatively affluent with high educational attainment. This raised questions about differential advantages accruing to such constituencies from uses of local online channels specifically, and social media generally. It was suggested that the successful exploitation of social media in more affluent areas could accentuate social divisions, with people in less affluent areas less able to make their case or stimulate co-production to a comparable extent. The projects reported here were established to test the argument that, with the right kind of support, the social benefits that can be attributed to having a healthy local online channel can be reaped in low income areas.

The Online Neighbourhood Networks study was not conducted in a theoretical or research vacuum: a detailed review of previous research was published³ as part of that study, demonstrating the comparatively long history of community-based efforts to exploit digital technologies at local community level, and showing that themes like community cohesion, social inclusion and participation have often been aspirations in local projects.

During the course of the projects reported here, two other studies have been published which address similar issues to those we have been considering. The first, carried out by e-Democracy.org, reports on the establishment and use of email-based local online groups in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Minneapolis-St Paul; the second, carried out in England by the Young Foundation, reviews several projects on the potential for local online channels to stimulate and support civic involvement.

The e-Democracy.org [report](#) emphasises the significance of having paid and volunteer workers to promote the link between the online spaces and face-to-face interaction in the neighbourhood. The model used suggests that to stimulate online engagement in low income neighbourhoods, some professional intervention and a mixture of online and face-to-face community development work may be needed.

² See [The Online Neighbourhood Networks study](#).

³ See [The research context: the online neighbourhood networks study](#), 2010.

The Young Foundation project, [Local 2.0](#), did not succeed in stimulating civic involvement through online engagement. The report attributes this to a mismatch between *opportunity for dialogue* (which the online channel represents) and the *demand* for such dialogue, which was lacking. We surmise that this mismatch could have been due to an over-emphasis on the ‘worthy’, pro-social potential of local online channels, to the detriment of their function as casual ‘gossip’ grapevines for chat and information. This is not to imply that stimulating digital conversation is necessarily easy, but it could be that demand for dialogue could be realised partly through participation in everyday chat.⁴

1.3 The locations

The four sites for this project were all in England:

- The area surrounding Lings Wood, known as Lumbertubs, on the outskirts of Northampton;
- The ‘three villages’ of Gobowen, St Martin’s and Weston Rhyn in Shropshire;
- Littlemoor, an estate on the outskirts of Weymouth in Dorset; and
- Low Hill in Wolverhampton.

The first three of these are ‘Big Local’ areas and our work there was funded by the Big Lottery Fund: in the fourth, we worked with the dominant housing provider, Wolverhampton Homes, with funding provided by the Barrow Cadbury Trust.⁵

As it turned out, parts of Low Hill were subsequently included in the Big Local area of [Scotlands and Bushbury Hill](#). However, there was no move to include the New Low Hill website in the Big Local activities, nor to expand its scope to cover that area.

Lumbertubs

Lumbertubs has three estates (Goldings, Lings, Lumbertubs and Blackthorn), a population of 8,907 and approximately 3,545 households. Most of the housing dates from the early 1970s, following Northampton’s designation as a new town when there was a significant population shift from London. Lumbertubs, and the Blackthorn area in particular, has a relatively high proportion of BME residents – principally Somali and Bengali. It also has a very high proportion of one-parent families.

⁴ Our review of these reports is available [here](#).

⁵ Information provided in this section about the areas comes from data supplied by the Big Lottery Fund and Wolverhampton Homes.

At the time the project began, five of the six LSOAs (Lower Super Output Areas) in Lumbertubs fell within the top 10 per cent in the country for crime and disorder, with the other falling inside the top 11 per cent. Five of the LSOAs came in the top 20 per cent for income deprivation and the top 20 per cent for education, skills and training deprivation.



Seventeen per cent of the working age population of the ward had a limiting long term illness and more than a quarter were providing over 50 hours of unpaid care per week.

The three villages

The villages of Gowbowen, St Martin's and Weston Rhyn form a triangle in the north west corner of Shropshire, to the north of Oswestry. The southern end of the Denbighshire coalfields extends through all three villages, with the last colliery in St Martin's closing in 1969. Memories of the colliery-based sense of cohesion informed discussions about the need for a common information channel. The villages have cores of 1930s council housing, some being ex-coal board, which has been added to in an *ad hoc* way by later post war phases of social housing and owner occupiers. These villages are urban in nature, have basic local services, and suffer from pockets of neglect with boarded up properties and high levels of vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Local transport connections were commonly criticised and until recently internet connectivity was poor.

Rural Shropshire has the highest rural index of multiple deprivation in the West Midlands, although none of the three LSOAs represented falls within the most deprived 20 per cent in the country. Two of them however do come within the 20 per cent most deprived for income deprivation, health, barriers to housing and services, education, skills and training.



The total population of the area is 4,091. More than a quarter of households occupy social housing and there are a large number of families with children. In terms of ethnicity the area is more than 99 per cent white. More than 20 per cent of the population has a limiting long term illness, with a high incidence of lung disease. More than one third of the population has no qualifications.

Littlemoor

The centre of Littlemoor is about five miles from Weymouth town centre and main beach. The total population is 3,642. The estate is surrounded on two sides by agricultural land, and on the other two sides by separate residential areas. A high proportion of households, 35.4 per cent, live in social rented accommodation. This is almost three times the borough average.



Littlemoor comprises two LSOAs, one of which falls within the 10 per cent most deprived in the country. As of 2009, more than 40 per cent of the households in the ward were in receipt of housing or council tax related benefits.

Data for 2005-2007 put the teenage conception rate (15-17 year olds) on Littlemoor at more than 80 per 1000, compared with 26.7 per 1000 across the county. In part this reflects a high proportion of young people in the area. The 2008 Place Survey showed low levels of satisfaction in Littlemoor with respect and consideration for others in the area, with safety, and with disorder. Against that, a significant proportion of residents (91 per cent) agreed that public services were working to make the area safer.

In November 2011 a member of the Littlemoor Live site [commented](#):

‘Kids walk past, aged about 10 or 11, smoking, shouting, swearing....don't look at them though as you'll get the next mouthful. Needles in the toilets before they closed. The needles are now to be found by the flats. Best to not take your dog for a walk up the fields as dog owners I know have had their dogs attacked...the list goes on. Sometimes I'd rather have idiot neighbours but be happy to walk around the streets at night.’

Low Hill

Low Hill is centred around Showell Circus, a large traffic island which was the first in the country to be accorded village green status. It lies about 2 miles north of the centre of Wolverhampton and mostly comprises housing built as a single estate by the city council in the 1920s.

Some people here experience acute disadvantage. Parts of Low Hill area come within the top one per cent of the most deprived areas in the country. In the 2001 census the population was recorded as 2,888. This includes a very high proportion of adults with no qualifications and a concentration of unemployed adults in the area.



There are strong links between households in the Low Hill area, with several generations of the same families living on the estate or close by. It has a largely white population with few households belonging to BME groups. From the outset it was apparent that residents feel a sense of stigma attaches to the area.

1.4 The process

The role of Networked Neighbourhoods as consultants in these projects covered three phases: project set-up, site development, and ongoing support.

We had initial conversations with the clients about the criteria for appropriate localities where a local online network might be seeded. These criteria included, for example: the existence of a 'neutral' community facility for meetings, whether there was a recognisable tradition of community action, whether the council was likely to be supportive, level of broadband penetration, and so on. Attention was paid to the scale and density of population: it was felt that, given current levels of interest in local online channels, and fairly low rates of social media use, below a certain population level (perhaps 3,000) it could be difficult to establish and maintain digital conversations.

Through contacts in each area, an initial open meeting was set up with local residents to discuss the implications of getting involved in a local online channel. We summarised the pitfalls and challenges as well as the benefits that could result, taking care to avoid raising false expectations.

Residents were invited to decide on whether they thought it was a good idea for their area, and whether they wished to get involved themselves. In the three Big Local areas, these conversations were carried out in the context of awareness of the forthcoming funding and its implications.

Those residents who expressed an interest progressed to 'sandpit' sessions in which they were encouraged to experiment with text and images, set up a dummy site or sites, prepare and upload short film clips, draft stories of local interest, and so on.

The intention here was always to keep local issues, rather than the technology, as the main focus: if too much attention is directed at the technology, some people who have much to offer will be put off. Two of the sessions that took place at Low Hill Community Centre in summer 2011 can be used to illustrate the approach.



The first session was about getting familiar with some of the technology and having a bit of fun talking about local history. Two members of the group had brought plenty of old photos, so some of the residents wrote a little text about each one - odd recollections about what life was like, and the individuals they could identify in the pictures. Four of the group then made a video using the images and talking about memories from the past. They also took some shots of a new adventure playground adjacent to the community centre. The participants were really enthusiastic and had already engaged the interest of some other groups - the children's centre and the 'Good Companions' group.

The next session was designed to take a more strategic approach to the site, as a resource that needed to reflect the group's intentions and aspirations. We ran a short post-it exercise to capture ideas for what the website could cover and achieve. This surfaced about 20 ideas such as:

- Forthcoming events
- Good work done by tenant reps
- Take away the stigma
- The history (of Low Hill) up to the present day
- Create a forum page for residents to input
- Show outsiders we are not workshy or unemployable.

From these it was agreed that the three main themes were:

- Inform and communicate
- Address the stigma and image of the area
- Use the history of the area to link the past and the future.

We identified five ways in which the website could contribute to change:

- Showing and celebrating
- Encouraging
- Informing
- Communicating
- Empowering.

And finally, from this, two straplines were agreed as ways of describing the site:

‘Residents celebrating Low Hill’

‘Celebrating our history and building our future’.

Our approach throughout, in all cases, was to work closely with groups of residents to ensure their ownership of the project and empowerment as a consequence, and to make sure that the project progressed at a pace with which they were comfortable.

Subsequent progress depended on what the group wanted and what was felt to be needed. This might require catalysing meetings of people who did not know one another very well; sessions designed to populate the initial site with content; participants interviewing one another on video and uploading the results; specific training issues; working on marketing ideas and so on. We provided ongoing support by email and telephone. We also sought to galvanise interest in the background, for example by establishing contact with a housing association in one case, and in another, with a local university in pursuit of technically skilled volunteers.

Feedback on participants’ experience of this process is summarised in Appendix 1.

2. Issues arising

Our work in the four localities helped to bring four websites into being:

[Community Online](#) – covering the villages of Gobowen, St Martin, Weston Rhyn and surrounding area;

[Littlemoor Live](#);

the [New Low Hill website](#); and

[Surrounding Lings Wood](#), covering the Lumbertubs, Lings, Blackthorn and Goldings area.

Some of our involvement amounted to negotiation and manoeuvring, taking account of community politics and setting up local meetings or contributing to them in such a way as to stimulate interest and action. Much of it required giving advice and making suggestions, in groups or one-to-one. Some of it was technical, but only one part of one session, in one of the locations, could be described as conventional training.

Sometimes we invested time trying to catalyse specific involvement – for example, spending several hours with young people at the youth centre in Littlemoor in the expectation that they might use the site to publicise their campaign for a new skatepark: this did not happen. On another occasion we offered late evening support to an administrator who (mistakenly, as it turned out) felt attacked by a particular post.

In this section we summarise five main themes that arise from the work carried out, using examples from the sites, comments from site members, and interviews with site administrators.⁶

2.1 Technology and site design

From initial meeting to establishing an online presence took about two months in Low Hill, about three months in Littlemoor, four months in Lings Wood, and about seven months in the three villages. We were conscious that a seasonal effect could be operating. Those sites that were established in early summer found it harder to build momentum, whereas Community Online, which was not launched until the autumn, became well-established very quickly.

⁶ A note on sources of information for this report is included at Appendix 2.

2.1.1 Choice of platform

‘The site doesn’t feel either hostile or corporate. That’s important.’

(Site member, *Community Online*)

The choice of platform for a local online channel can be of critical importance. Some platforms encourage comment and interaction; some have strengths in organising and presenting different media such as photos and videos; some are very powerful but require skills to avoid having the site look over-complex. And there are other arguments: for instance, Facebook has the appeal of familiarity to many people, but a Facebook site can be very hard to find with Google or even searching on Facebook if you don’t have the precise internet address.⁷ Finding and referring to old content can be problematic.

At all the project locations, working with residents, we looked at various different examples of successful sites on different platforms, encouraging discussions about advantages and disadvantages. We provided lists of examples and encouraged people to do their own homework, with a view to making their own informed decisions.

In all cases, blog software was quickly rejected by participants because of the difficulty in generating collective involvement. Three of the sites chose [Ning](#) as a platform. Ning has a reputation as a powerful platform which gives the administrator or designer plenty of options. This power needs to be configured if a site is not to be off-putting to new users. Participants in the fourth area, the three villages, opted for a powerful conventional forum platform, [IP Board](#).

Among those who expressed interest in working on a local site, we found particular technical expertise in the three villages and Littlemoor; in the Lumbertubs area and Low Hill, enthusiasm was perhaps higher with less technical competence. In our view this does not necessarily explain the lack of momentum in the latter two sites.

We have received numerous comments about the ease of use of these sites, from users and administrators. Some are almost contradictory - for example:

‘New to this sort of thing but found it very easy to use and useful’.

‘I really don't know how to use it. I don't know how to post things. I press links and stuff comes up but I don't understand. I am not a computer whizz and I find the site very frustrating.’

(Both survey respondents, *Community Online*).

⁷ Experimentally we tried searching for the Facebook outposts for the sites in this study, and were unable to find any of them.

This is a reminder of the need to have other support mechanisms in place, such as open evenings where hesitant members can be informally and supportively introduced to the site. Two people can say they are 'new to this sort of thing' but their experience of trying to get to grips with a site can be sharply contrasting.

On the whole, users and administrators have not found Ning difficult to work with or to use:

'This was my first attempt to help set up a web site and now I find it quite easy to use.' (Administrator, *Low Hill*)

'Ning is easy, I found. It looks nice, and the SEO [*search engine optimisation*] is really good, and that's undoubtedly important. Without SEO nothing can be found. It's got to be easily found... It's a smart website, Littlemoor's reputation is not good, and for me having a smart website is important to counter the negative image.' (Administrator, *Littlemoor Live*)

'Easy to use and find information.' (Survey respondent, *Littlemoor Live*)

'I have found my way round the site fine, but some of the headings like Forum and Gallery are not particularly welcoming and maybe a bit scary to someone unfamiliar with this medium or where English is not their first language.' (Survey respondent, *Surrounding Lings Wood*)

'I was pleased with how the site looked, after some initial tweaks and how easy it was to put on events, photos and join in discussions.' (Administrator, *Surrounding Lings Wood*)

There does not seem to have been a sense in any of the sites that a mistake was made in choice of platform, affecting their success or failure. However it is clear that time and effort has to be invested in ensuring the design is clean and 'legible' to navigate. Without anyone taking the lead on the design of the *New Low Hill* website, users appeared to become confused (for example over the difference between status updates and discussions) and the site may have been off-putting as a consequence.

2.1.2 Social media outposts

With all of the administrators we discussed the role that social media outposts, particularly Facebook and Twitter, can play in extending audience reach and interaction. Some sites have felt confident to establish a Twitter outpost, whilst others have lacked the confidence or the time to do so.

Both *Community Online* and *Littlemoor Live* have set up Twitter profiles. Both are used primarily to broadcast content to the website rather than to develop

independent conversations. As a result, levels of involvement are relatively low, but nonetheless the outposts have helped to extend audience engagement.

As levels of confidence grow, and the number of people involved increases to allow more time to be allocated, we would hope to see a further growth in the use of social media outposts. With over a third of users now accessing established hyperlocal sites via mobile devices, Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels become an increasingly useful part of the mix for connecting neighbours.

2.1.3 Internet access

Inadequate access to the internet is still a feature of life in many low income areas and continues to have an impact on the development of neighbourhood networks.

In this project, there were two particular examples to illustrate this point. First, in Low Hill, all the sessions with residents took place in the community centre which had no wireless access. We used mobile dongles to connect to the internet. This was satisfactory but video had to be uploaded elsewhere, which meant that the participants' experience was incomplete.

Predictably, we also experienced limited broadband access in the three villages, particularly in parts of the village of St Martin's. It was made clear to us that this was an issue on which residents have been active and our understanding is that it is being addressed through the county council's [Broadplaces](#) initiative. It is referred to in the [press release](#) for the site's Media Trust award announcement, when site administrator Lee Barnfield talks about:

'what we are trying to do here in the wilds of Shropshire with our slow broadband speeds and slow take up of internet'.

These points are a reminder that there are still technical barriers to the ways in which local online channels can be exploited in some areas.

2.2 The administrator, their team and their time

Our 2010 research showed clearly the importance of the role played by a lead figure in establishing a local online network:

‘Our focus groups and survey revealed great respect for the way administrators act to contain negative posts and comments, insist on fairness, and remove combustible material. Interviews with administrators have revealed the complexity involved and the stress experienced in the role.’⁸

Where an ‘initiator’ emerges to drive a new online channel, they are still likely to need others around them who generate content and interest. In this section we reflect on some of the lessons from the four sites in our study.

First, we can draw a simple contrast between the three Big Local areas, where individuals (or in the case of Lumbertubs, two individuals) accepted the role; and Low Hill where this did not quite happen, in spite of efforts to identify someone and a commitment to support them.

After a lively exploratory start with a great deal of enthusiasm, it became apparent at Low Hill that no one felt able to commit the necessary time and energy - or felt they had the necessary skills – to take it forward. One member of the group said:

‘I think overall things started quite well, till the training became more advanced, then some excuses started to come out so they did not or could not attend.’

At one point a resident came forward who appeared to have an ideal combination of technical nous, local connectedness, interest in local issues, time and energy. We spent an afternoon with him discussing the role and clarifying all the points of potential difficulty and likely opportunity. We followed up with a scheduled telephone conference going through some of the technicalities of managing the site. At this point the future seemed very promising; but very little happened and the contact atrophied. This is partly a problem of being unable to follow up such potential from a local base on a regular basis. The individual might have had illness or personal difficulties which accounted for the silence and withdrawal, but this was never explained, and from a distance, with the project budget spent by this time, it proved impossible to revive the sense of interest and enthusiasm.

⁸ [The online neighbourhood networks study: introduction, background and extended summary](#), 2010, p21.

In the light of this absence of leadership, it has been striking how much welcome interest there has been in the Low Hill site. People still use it as a place to greet others, for example:

"hi guys hope everyone is well!! still working in Bilston as a neighbourhood warden for my sins lol HOPE TO CATCH UP SOON XX"

Posted on September 4, 2012 at 13:32

In Littlemoor, the site administrator Tammie Barnes expresses a slight feeling of abandoned isolation – having agreed to lead on the role with the assumption that others would gather round to contribute, and finding that they have not really done so:

‘I never saw myself getting involved nearly as much as I have done. There are other people better placed to run the site. I’m not the best person to do it.’

Tammie feels that the job requires a more outgoing temperament, and in that respect does not feel suited to it. ‘Personality is a key part of it’, she says, adding ‘I feel pressure in terms of the flow of content’.

Surrounding Lings Wood differs again. At the outset we worked with a group of about 12 people to discuss the potential of the site and understand the demands, so that residents could feel their way into appropriate roles. After a while the site settled down under the joint administration of Tammy Mizon and Margaret Pritchard, with very occasional input from others. Both quickly got to grips with the site design and management and have worked hard at promoting it; yet they appear to be up against widespread lethargy. There are periods of inactivity, although in the background the information resource is accumulating. It could be that the site has the potential for lift-off as a discussion forum, perhaps if someone comes forward with the necessary time, energy, skills and enthusiasm to stimulate conversations, but it has never quite, yet, materialised. It is possible that some significant local event, covered by the site, could catalyse sufficient interest to gain the necessary momentum. Margaret notes:

‘I was disappointed that the membership has grown very slowly and is static now. I think this is due to lack of one-to-one conversations with people.’

Neighbourhood online networks are community development initiatives, which means they are emphatically *collective* endeavours. However, this project has clarified the critical *dependence on key individuals* required to get sites established. These are individuals with insight and commitment – they quickly appreciate the potential of social media, and show readiness to invest in the potential benefits for their neighbourhood or area. When this commitment is appropriately supported by others, as in the three villages, a site can go from start-up to stability very quickly.

Lee Barnfield, who had visualised and tried to establish a project of this kind several years previously, offers this advice:

‘Remember that you or your group are running the project, so take the advice and guidance but take ownership and do things how you believe is right. There may be a few problems, mistakes, but they can be sorted out and that’s how we learn.

‘I think what worked in this case, was that I set up and worked alone, I believe it meant that you only have one decision maker, no meetings were required and the set up was quicker. However, I had a few key people in the various areas that contributed to the forum by adding content and commenting on other members’ posts, and their contributions have been invaluable to the project. Look out for these people and get them involved.’
(Lee Barnfield, administrator, *Community Online*).

It is not simply individual residents who can contribute support. Local authority staff and representatives of other agencies such as the police need to be adding information, linking to sources and correcting misinformation as part of their job. The Citizens Advice Bureau on *Surrounding Lings Wood* stands out as an example. Obviously agencies should not appear to be dominating discussion, but in all four localities the official contribution has been disappointingly slight at best.⁹

2.3 Site promotion and the generation of content

All the groups were encouraged to publicise their site with a view to establishing a pattern of small commercial deals to ensure a route to longer term support.

Community Online persuaded a local garage to display a large banner with the url, and had coffee mugs made: they also sponsored a local school calendar and the ‘Weston Rhyn Club Racenight’. *Littlemoor Live* attracted funding from the main local housing provider to pay for postcards and T-shirts carrying the site’s banner image and url. *Surrounding Lings Wood* has attracted local commercial advertising onto the site.

Marketing a local website is not easy even in an affluent urban area: in these areas it’s a major challenge, and can depend heavily on the connectedness and personal styles of the people involved.

Two particular potential approaches that have been tried could probably be more fully exploited. The first is simply encouraging more video content. As discussed in

⁹ Section 4 of our 2010 report, [Relations with councils](#), clarifies and discusses the benefits of involvement for agencies and residents alike.

section 2.4 below, videos generate significant numbers of views, and the links are easily shared. The second is the use of other social media channels, which we discussed in section 2.1.2 above. Simply using these channels increases awareness and can generate content.

We also discussed with the site administrators the value of extending the reach of what they mean by 'local', from where they live to where residents live their lives. For example, in Lumbertubs this might mean covering some news about the centre of Northampton, or in Littlemoor it could include Weymouth. Residents visit their local centres and often have contacts there, legitimately stimulating further interest.

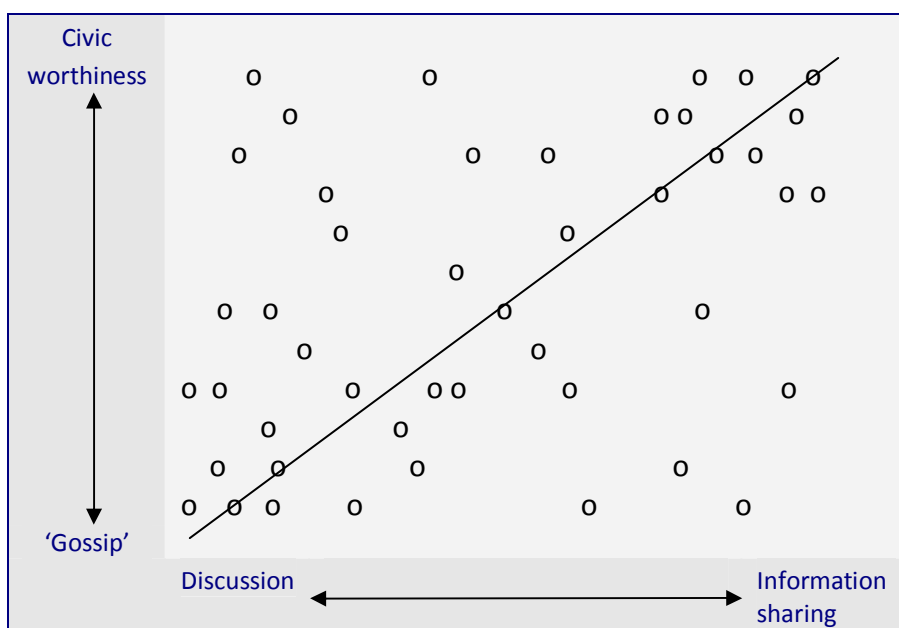
All these and other suggestions are worthy ideas for generating content and support, but for a lone volunteer administrator, with relatively little evidence of success from early attempts, it can be hard to sustain the effort. This is where councils and other local agencies have a role to play. *All formal local agencies and elected members stand to gain or are already gaining from the social value of these sites.* These are agencies with contacts who can spread the word, provide content, augment existing information or correct misinformation, and possibly help to arrange small sponsorship deals. Those who make a contribution are likely to see the benefits quite quickly in terms of co-production, as our 2010 research demonstrated.

2.4 Discussions and information sharing

The assumption that neighbourhood online networks can contribute to local quality of life is largely based on the way they provide a transparent medium for these two combinations:

- straightforward provision of information on the one hand, and generalised discussion and conversation on the other; and
- coverage of topics from the most worthy of civic issues to frivolous gossip.

If it were possible to categorise content according to its place on a spectrum between light hearted chat and earnest civic responsibility; and whether it constituted simple sharing of information or involved discussion, we might generate this sort of matrix:



We would argue that this sort of distribution is a sign of health in the local communication ecology. A healthy site through which residents are most able to contribute to local life will be one on which people readily share simple, opinion-free information – whether it be a notice about an important civic meeting or about having an unwanted item free to a good home; *and* where they feel they can have a discussion about local issues (such as the closure of public toilets in Littlemoor) or chat about the quality of a local pop group.

Community Online already demonstrates this level of robust health. In just ten months the site generated 1,216 posts with some 114,000 topic views. There have been discussions about a range of civic issues from pedestrian crossings (28 responses, 3,576 views) to dog nuisance (various) to a sustainable transport scheme (142 responses and a whopping 6,520 views). The site has had numerous posts offering links to useful sources of information, from Shropshire damsons, to grant-making trusts. There has been chat about sport, heritage, the environment, the cost of petrol, a book by a local author and so on – the kind of mix that sustains a diverse audience and generates more interest and more participation.

In a modest way, and without the same momentum, *Littlemoor Live* shows a comparable mix. The estate's proximity to Weymouth, scene of the 2012 Olympic sailing events, resulted in various posts, grumbles and laughs about '[The dreaded 'O' word!](#)' – with plenty of reference to traffic-related problems and the use of public money. The site has had a lengthy discussion about sexism ('[Holding doors open for ladies...](#)'), a sprinkling of crime and anti-social behaviour related news items, and short discussions about the uncertain futures of amenities like the public toilets and

the library. A typical thread headed '[What are they building at the top of Louviers Road?](#)' generated 21 responses from seven members, and 125 views.

It's fair to say that neither *Low Hill* nor *Surrounding Lings Wood* have stimulated very much discussion, and the matrix of content on those sites would not resemble the hypothetical example above. But this is not to denigrate their potential roles either as information resources or as more general networks.

In *Low Hill*, a welcoming, enthusiastic and hospitable culture was quickly established, in which new members were greeted, and residents linked as 'friends': but very little substantive information about the area has been shared. Residents experimented with video and photos, and showed that they were able to upload these, also adding comments. Events were added to the site, people joined and were welcomed: but there was very little conversation and no real discussion.

Nonetheless, the number of views for photos and videos (nine videos, 158 views) suggests that residents are exploring and getting accustomed to their local online environment. But few are ready to raise issues, or raise their voices there.

Something similar may be happening on *Surrounding Lings Wood*, which currently has 10 videos with 155 views in total, with good use made of the Events section. A few discussions have looked promising, but faded. The site administrators are acutely conscious of the need to stimulate discussion, to keep the site looking fresh. It may be that as it gradually becomes more well-known as a noticeboard, the site will be seen to have established an ideal platform that will host discussion, when residents are ready to use it in that way.

For many people, the internet is not a familiar space and they do not feel comfortable in it. This may apply particularly to people who experience exclusion and who are disempowered, because they are seldom accustomed to having their voices heard. It is naïve to assume that just because a channel is made available to communicate, people will use it: various other factors, such as understandings of netiquette, appreciating who might be listening, being comfortable expressing yourself in the written word, and being comfortable with the technology, will all influence the take up of neighbourhood networks.

There is still community development work to be done in two of the areas we studied, to help residents claim the sense of empowerment which will come with exploiting these channels. In our view, it is reasonable to have the sites in place playing a role mainly as noticeboards, available for subsequent development as people gain in confidence. Lee Barnfield puts it like this:

'I see the figures of people that read the content of the site and believe that maybe one of the major goals is getting information and content out into the

community, so with many people coming to the site to read content maybe it's achieving its goal.' (Lee Barnfield, administrator, *Community Online*).

2.5 The sites in relation to local life

These were experimental community development projects, intended to see how an internet based resource could help local people contribute to the quality of life in their own neighbourhoods. In order to assess the extent to which this has happened we have looked for evidence on whether people feel their connection with others has changed, whether perceptions *by others* of the area has changed, any increase in levels of exchange and support, in civic involvement, or in influence over decision-making processes, including Big Local.

At a general level, there has been a clear sense of success and pride in the initiatives developed. Tammie Barnes for example described the contribution that she thinks *Littlemoor Live* has made:

'It's let people know what's on and when, it serves as a good noticeboard. Some good connections have been made, it's a platform where people can voice their feelings about Littlemoor.'

Similarly Maggie Rowlands, an active contributor to *Community Online*, summed up her view of what the network has contributed:

'It has played a part in community development, even if it's just information, there've been no fierce arguments but plenty of discussion.'

One survey respondent from Lumbertubs, acknowledging the 'slow progress,' claimed the *Surrounding Lings Wood* site 'will make a noticeable contribution once its relevance has been established'.

Against that, it was made clear that not everyone feels that the *Community Online* network contributes to local life:

'Apart from the admin team I don't know anyone who uses it in my village. ANY Change the life style of people!! NO. ANY Change the community spirit!!! NO.' (Survey respondent, *Community Online*)

This is a reminder that there are probably two kinds of critical mass to take into account. First there is the volume of online contribution, critical to the sustainability of the site, which is made up of the number of contributing site members and the frequency of their posts and comments. Secondly there is the critical mass of penetration into the day to day lives and face to face interactions of residents in the localities, which takes rather longer.

In what follows we summarise our evidence on the way the sites have been affected by perceptions of the areas; the extent to which they appear to help people to connect with others; whether or not they have an effect on levels of exchange and support; the extent to which they encourage civic involvement or increase the sense of influence over decisions; and the relationship they have with the Big Local process.

2.5.1 Perceptions of the areas

In two of the localities, Littlemoor and Low Hill, the issue of 'labelling,' or negative perceptions by outsiders, was something that exercised residents and for some was a motivation to get involved.

Low Hill residents were particularly keen to use the website to address the perceived poor image of their area. They chose the name 'New Low Hill website' expressly to imply a sense of renaissance, associating the initiative strongly with a welcome chance to change outsiders' perceptions.

There's nothing naïve about that, and it was echoed in some of the [thoughtful comments](#) on *Littlemoor Live* after a young person had tweeted: "shouldn't have to justify myself to you just cus i live in littlemoor!" One resident [wrote](#):

'do you know what started me wanting to like living here? First it was the fun day, then it was looking around this site, talking to Synergy Housing and seeing what improvements are being planned. So I thought maybe if I try and get involved somehow, then my views will change. So plan one is to get talking to other residents, which is why I now visit this site daily!'

There are at least two components in the way a neighbourhood network can bring about a change in perceptions. One is through the level of confidence, open assertiveness and vigilance that residents themselves express online – since the content is visible to others, a sense of confidence, pride and belonging can accumulate and be transmitted quite quickly. In our 2010 research this was reflected by the way people claimed their website was a reason to move to, or not to move away from, the area.

The sites in the present study are still at an early stage and we would not necessarily expect to find evidence that they have been successful in addressing negative perceptions. However, we did receive a very striking testimony from an outside observer who sent us this comment about how the *New Low Hill* website influenced his impression of the area:

'For the last year I have been driving through Low Hill on my way to work, as you know the estate is quite large and at first sight does not appear

particularly welcoming. I had heard a few stories and comments about the estate and never felt particularly comfortable when driving through. It was certainly not the kind of place I would think about stopping.

‘However, since looking through the Low Hill community site especially the old photographs, I find that my view of the estate has changed. It is now a place I feel a partial connection to and my feelings of the estate are more positive. If one of the aims of the community site is to develop a positive view of Low Hill then I think from my experience that it has been a success.’¹⁰

We conclude that not only can local online channels be perceived as a means to challenge labelling: they can help to reverse it.

2.5.2 Connecting people

It is too early to draw conclusions about the extent to which the sites are helping residents to connect with others face to face, although this is clearly already happening in the three villages. Maggie Rowlands, who as we noted above was an active user of the *Community Online* site from the outset, submitted an application to the Media Trust’s [Inspiring Voices award](#) in April 2012. She wrote:

‘The core of persistent posters on the site have all become used to receiving phone calls from people (usually older) who have no computer but want us to post something, or respond on their behalf to something they have heard is on the site.’

In a separate interview comment, Maggie noted:

‘It feels like there’s a lot more going on, this may be partly because of Big Local but you couldn’t have this level of activity without the communications. The sense of community has strengthened.’

At a basic but very visible level, the sites have helped form connections just through the process of registering. On the *New Low Hill* website, for instance, in nearly all cases, when someone signs up to the site they are welcomed by at least one other person. At the neighbourhood level, when there are meetings or community events, this is often converted into face-to-face recognition and subsequent interaction.

In our survey we asked ‘Have you met any new neighbours, or got involved in any new community activities, as a result of using [the site]?’ This is a selection from the responses:

¹⁰ E McGirr, personal communication, February 2012.

‘No, I work full time and this is difficult to become involved.’ (*Littlemoor Live*)

‘Yes, but mainly at meetings.’ (*Community Online*)

‘No too busy with local community’. (*Community Online*)

‘Found out about Ekokids and met founder.’ (*Surrounding Lings Wood*)

‘Yes through the Local Trust project and through new members such as CAB.’ (*Surrounding Lings Wood*)

‘I am certainly more aware of several groups and have had discussions with individuals - this is an area that will improve I feel with time and increased membership.’ (*Community Online*)

2.5.3 Exchange and support

Some neighbourhoods lack cohesion and a tradition of mutual support, and may have relatively low levels of trust among residents. Those conditions are not suddenly going to be transformed just by establishing an open channel for sharing. It takes time and often calls for skilled intervention. The extent to which exchange and support visibly takes place on an online neighbourhood network is an indication of the social capital in the area and of the degree to which community development is (or is not) needed.

A short questionnaire survey was carried out in the Lumbertubs area just before the website initiative, and a surprisingly high proportion of respondents (42 per cent) said that they were *not* aware that people support each other in the neighbourhood. This is consistent with the difficulty that the *Surrounding Lings Wood* site administrators have had in generating content, which in turn seems to be confirmed by the lack of responses to posts requesting exchanges: so far the section ‘[Wanted / Offered - Free, For Sale, To Borrow or Lend](#)’ has just two posts and no replies.

In Littlemoor there has been a little more success. A short thread on *Littlemoor Live* illustrates simply how a neighbourhood network can help people by sharing information and experience. One member asked for a [recommendation to get an MOT on their car](#), and several comments were received which will continue to have value to others long after they were posted. Subsequently a member has posted a plea for a list of ‘[known and trusted tradesmen](#)’ and it seems likely that such a list will be ‘grown’ by participants as they go along. This in turn will draw people to the site and contribute to the quality of life generally.

Of course, not all exchange and support that is sparked through an online network is necessarily visible. Several respondents volunteered views on the extent to which this is happening in the background, for example:

‘Yes people do share but only the few who use it.’ (Survey respondent, *Community Online*)

‘I think there are a dedicated few who are enjoying sharing their views and resources, but I think the site is not updated with relevant information frequently enough.’ (Survey respondent, *Surrounding Lings Wood*)

‘I do get to hear about contacts being made through the site, the trading of skills and the setting up of groups.’ (Lee Barnfield, site administrator, *Community Online*)

2.5.4 Influence and involvement

Our previous research has shown how neighbourhood online networks can be powerful vehicles for residents to become involved in local issues and ultimately to influence decision making processes in their areas. We would expect levels of civic and community *involvement* to increase before there were any claims of increased *influence*.

It’s already apparent that participation in these sites is giving rise to greater civic and community involvement. Some of that can be attributed to the Big Local process (discussed in section 2.5.5 below), but our impression is that so far these sites have had a stronger impact than Big Local.

In Low Hill, the aspiration to stimulate involvement and influence was apparent from an early stage. As this post shows, participants were keen to develop the site and felt empowered to claim ownership in no uncertain terms:

[Website being shown to local politicians](#)

Posted on September 22, 2011 at 14:48

We're holding a meeting at the local housing office to meet councillors and our MP and a representative from Midland Heart. We're introducing them to our fantastic new website, telling them the reasons why it was set up and what we would like for the future.

Our main reason for meeting is to explain how the website came about, all things that are going to be included. We hope they will come on board with us. We're going to be quite clear that we want them to use it but NOT as a political tool.

It is disappointing that this positive energy dissipated within a few months, but it may well be possible to revive and sustain it in the future.

Other examples illustrate the ways in which the sites reflect people's readiness to get involved in local issues. In her nominating [statement](#) for the Media Trust [Inspiring Voices award](#) for *Community Online*, Maggie Rowlands wrote:

'Some successes for the forum have been developing new projects such as a 'Knit and Natter' group (bringing together young and old around handicrafts and passing on skills); walking groups, environmental interests, and activities for young people shared across the villages. Lobbying has been developed around issues of sustainable transport and saving local libraries and now increasing numbers of council officers and councillors watch the site to gauge what is going on. There is no other similar site in north Shropshire so the site has greater influence than would be otherwise expected. Local newspapers find stories via the site.'

This suggests assumptions of potential influence at least, on both sides, although as we have noted, officials have been unfortunately reluctant to contribute so far.

On *Surrounding Lings Wood*, we have seen numerous efforts to stimulate involvement, and for a time it has looked as if a spark might catch. For example, there was a [thread about creating a community garden](#) which generated 14 responses from six members, showing the potential for generating community action if the breakthrough idea and opportunity can be found.

Two more interesting examples can be found on *Community Online*. When [a new pedestrian crossing was proposed](#) in the village of Gobowen, some fairly strong opposition was voiced on the site, and there was little reaction to these opinions. The crossing seems to have been installed anyway. A few months later, under a thread about [Street and Road Problems](#), a contributor wrote, unchallenged:

'The new Zebra Crossing in the village seems to be working fine...'

This may be considered an illustration of how an open, transparent forum can smooth the sharp edges of public disagreement. And given the likelihood that officials *do* watch the site - for various reasons, and so they should – [this](#) was a revealing comment:

'It seems that posting here is more productive than picking up the phone to the authorities... Soon after the posts were made a vehicle was actually removed from Fernhill Lane. Is this a mere coincidence?'

We suspect it was not a coincidence, although a note from the authorities would have helped: there is no reason for them to be silent lurkers. As one survey respondent from *Surrounding Lings Wood* points out,

‘It would be good to see the local community police team, neighbourhood watch, the borough council and other local service providers positively involved to help cement the site’s relevance to a wider proportion of the community.’

What people contribute to local online channels *does* have an influence on services and *does* result in higher levels of citizen participation.

2.5.5 The sites in relation to the Big Local programme

In relation to the three Big Local programme areas,¹¹ this project was designed to ‘prepare the ground and widen the potential pool of people ready to participate in the programme;’ and ‘equip residents to become more empowered partners in the main phase of the programme’. It was also anticipated that the sites could be established as information channels ‘about opportunities that will be presented by the neighbourhood programme’ and ‘could subsequently be used for engagement with residents during delivery of Big Local Trust.’

Each of the three Big Local sites has developed a positive relationship with their Big Local initiative, while at the same time ensuring that the site and the initiative are not too closely associated in residents’ minds. One survey respondent wrote:

‘It is operating in parallel, not as part of the Big Local process. Being independent is how it should be. As such it can be an unbiased forum for discussion.’ (Survey respondent, *Community Online*)

Community Online contributor Maggie Rowlands, who has written a communications strategy for the area’s Big Local Trust, reflected on the relationship:

‘It runs parallel to the Big Local process. I was worried about this at first. Lee gets worried if too much Big Local stuff goes up. So we need a Big Local site for archiving and more formal content. If we’d tried doing that from the outset, it wouldn’t have worked.’

¹¹ As noted in section 1.3 above, the *New Low Hill* website was not part of the Big Lottery’s Big Local programme and is not included in the discussion in this section. Of course, there is no reason why the Low Hill site could not support local residents’ interest in funding and regeneration initiatives.

The rationale here is that in order to be useful for their Big Local trusts and for residents generally, the sites' content coverage needs to be far broader than the local trust's agenda.

It's also the case that the site administrators have contributed to the Big Local programme, both locally and nationally. Tammie Barnes, *Littlemoor Live* site administrator, prepared a [video for Big4Littlemoor](#), and has given a [presentation about the site](#) at a Big Local national conference in Birmingham. Similarly, *Surrounding Lings Wood* administrators Tammy Mizon and Margaret Pritchard have been active participants sharing their experience in Local Trust seminars on social technologies.

When asked whether their local site is 'making a noticeable contribution to the work of Big Local?' another survey respondent wrote:

'Yes it is definitely making a difference. I am aware of several committees, local groups that I was unaware of before and I have read and on occasion been part of several discussions about local concerns. Most importantly, for those who would not normally be vocal in a face to face situation, the site provides a vehicle for those to voice concerns or opinions - similarly it allows involvement that people can feel unthreatened by in as much as they may not attend meetings or committees or fear being "roped in"'. (Survey respondent, *Community Online*)

The following example illustrates the way *Littlemoor Live* functions as an information channel linking other sources – in this case a local newspaper – with the local trust, Big4 Littlemoor. It demonstrates the independent but connected relationship between the site and the Big Local trust:

A member [mentioned a newspaper article referring to suspected arson on the estate](#). The question was raised as to whether Big Local investment in addressing vandalism might be a first priority, which was linked to the Big Local preliminary survey work.

April 13, 2012 at 17:03

In view of the recent incidents by the few who would spoil it for everyone else do you think that the Big4 committee should address the problem of vandalism before trying to make improvements? After all, there is little point in planting out flowers and clearing the streets of litter if people are still afraid to go out. Should we put some of the lottery money towards establishing a Neighbourhood Watch scheme?

April 18, 2012 at 14:31

We have asked a question in our Big4Littlemoor survey form about whether people want a Neighbourhood Watch scheme and if so if they would be prepared to be a member. If the results show this is a popular idea I'm sure we could get one started without waiting for the Lottery money. Neighbourhood Watch schemes don't cost much financially, they cost in terms of people being prepared to give up a little bit of time.

3 Future directions

3.1 The time it takes

With the exception of *Community Online*, it could be said that each of the sites clearly needed more time from the project. It is important to note that this meant something different in each case.

In Littlemoor, more consultant time would have meant more effort being put into encouraging practical support for the administrator, so that she did not feel so isolated and the site would then be more clearly established as a recognised community resource.

In Low Hill, it would have helped to have been able to offer more consistent attention on the ground, on a weekly basis or even more frequently, to keep the initial group engaged, develop their skills and recruit others. However, the real issue there was not being able to identify an individual who would lead the initiative, take decisions, and drive content and use of the site.

In the Lumbertubs area, it became apparent that the community development input necessary for initiatives of this kind, and for the Big Local Trust, is still at an early stage. The short general survey that was conducted at the outset, with just 64 responses, suggested low levels of awareness of mutual support and a weak sense of collective efficacy: as yet there is little 'sense of community' for the site administrators to build on, they have to build it in partnership with others. It will be fascinating to observe how the *Surrounding Lings Wood* site will support and reflect that change over time.

3.2 How the sites appear after one year

Looking back after approximately 12 months at each of the sites, and knowing the hard work that has gone in and the complications that have arisen, it's valuable to step back, take a fresh look at them, and reflect on their direction.

All three of the Big Local sites can be classed as successful in that they can be expected to carry on and to grow, although two are still slightly vulnerable. It's more likely that the experience at Low Hill will come to be seen as a necessary preliminary for some further development.

Surrounding Lings Wood gives an impression of solid, unflustered determination in spite of the low level of activity. Those involved in keeping the site going, Margaret Pritchard and Tammy Mizon, are already very busy working on community issues, including Big Local, and while others have contributed from time to time there is a lack of consistency or urgency. One survey respondent wrote:

‘things are slowly progressing, but at least we have a tool to communicate more locally.’

In time, the regular flow of noticeboard information may help to generate some discussion which will contribute in turn to community development. We might characterise the *Surrounding Lings Wood* experience as ‘promise awaiting momentum’.

In our view, *Littlemoor Live* is the most remarkable achievement, given the odds against its likely success. This is a difficult area with a high proportion of young people and young families in social housing in a fairly small population – people with other interests and who are less likely to have time for experiments in community development. More than any of the other sites, its success is down to the commitment of a single individual, Tammie Barnes, with comparatively little day to day support or encouragement from other residents. If we had to sum up *Littlemoor Live* in a single phrase it would be ‘determined to shine’.

The *Community Online* site, covering the three villages, is demonstrably a genuine, thriving local network with plenty of information being shared, discussion of local issues, and even managed disagreement. This is largely down to the expertise of Lee Barnfield, who runs the site using forum software, having had an idea for something similar several years previously. Lee in turn acknowledges that he has various active contributors who help to keep the site looking fresh and active. Within its first ten months the *Community Online* site was recognised with two awards.

A wide range of participants have quickly got into the habit of checking regularly and posting occasionally, and there’s a sense of confidence in the way the site has quickly bedded down. One respondent told us:

‘It’s been really successful, it’s got its own little life now, it doesn’t depend on one person, it doesn’t depend on Lee anymore. If Lee stopped, other people would come forward.’

This site tells the outsider that here is a community that is confident and vigilant, and ready to play a part in its own development. Our short summary phrase for *Community Online* is 'confidence going forward'.

As for the *New Low Hill website*, it looks as if it may be superseded, and energy transferred to another platform. Tony Blakeway, Community Centre Manager, writes

'The site we set up has become defunct because getting involvement became hard to keep up, but as a consequence of this site we have gained the confidence to create another web site using Wordpress.'

While this group, like others, had previously decided against Wordpress as insufficiently collective and/or too difficult to get to grips with, the point is that a degree of confidence is being taken from the initial experience. There were clearly other issues around people's readiness to commit time, and their readiness and confidence to prepare and post content. Tony Blakeway stresses the value of the experience in terms of getting people to see the benefits of connecting online around local issues:

'it has given us the opportunity to invite people from other areas to look at what we are about, link it to other web sites and Facebook... It has also given some of our newest members the confidence to access the internet and input on our site.'

Our short summary for *Low Hill* is 'ready for another go'.

3.3 Concluding remarks

'Be aware of community politics but keep in mind that it is an organic, highly public space.' (Tammie Barnes, administrator, *Littlemoor Live*)

This project has not provided unequivocal answers to *all* the questions about developing neighbourhood online networks in low income areas, but it has dismissed some of the fundamental doubts about what is possible.

We are not able to draw conclusions about appropriate software platforms, save to ask whether the choice may be less of an issue than is widely assumed.

We have seen that sites are perceived to have a role in addressing negative labelling of an area; and we have argued that sites which are dominated largely by information sharing rather than discussion can still occupy a valued place in the local communication ecology, and have the potential to become well-used networks in time.

The role of a key individual who takes responsibility for the site has been strongly emphasised in this project, although we are not yet able to offer conclusions about the kind of skills and personality most suited to this role. It is also clear how beneficial it is to have a core of willing key contributors who appreciate the value and purpose of what they are getting involved in.

A critical injection that is needed to help these four sites thrive and fulfil their potential now is *the visible attention and involvement of public services and elected members*. On all sides, their absence is noticeable and has made things harder for the citizens who are trying to bring about change on everyone's behalf.

The experience described in this report adds weight to claims that local online channels can be established inexpensively in low income areas, that they can be made sustainable, and that they contribute to the quality of local social life. While two of the sites can be regarded as still slightly vulnerable, we should note that they are no less vulnerable than many other community resources in similar localities, and show considerably more potential than many, for the benefit of all residents, businesses and services.

Appendix 1

Feedback on the process

In carrying out this evaluation we did not seek responses on the way the support process was carried out: nonetheless some comments were offered and are quoted here because we believe they confirm the importance of the open and inclusive approach which we adopted.

‘The Networked Neighbourhoods contribution was brilliant, you were very approachable and very encouraging, very accessible, very reassuring and you took me seriously. When I needed you I have felt very supported.’

‘Network Neighbourhoods were very good at helping me learn how to do things, especially when we had one to one sessions and conference calls.’

‘The main thing was that ‘you got us’, you got what we were about, found an answer to our situation, responded from the beginning to our situation, not coming in with a template saying ‘this is how to do it’. I trusted you from the start.’

‘Networked Neighbourhoods were very good at putting people’s minds at ease, and showed their expertise and experience in similar projects and what they have and can achieve. I think they were also quick to spot the people who were going to be the key people in the project and facilitate how this would move forward.’

‘Networked Neighbourhoods were very good in offering advice and assistance in these type of projects.’

‘What went well was that both Kevin and Hugh are very knowledgeable about projects like this, are very aware of current technologies and how these can help projects such as these. They are both very approachable and offer very good support as and when required.’

Appendix 2

Sources of information used in this report

This report is based on notes (including planning notes) for various meetings with residents in the four areas; evidence from the sites themselves, including posted content and statistical data about use; telephone interviews with (or questionnaire responses from) site administrators / key participants; and an online survey of site users conducted during August 2012.

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