

Online neighbourhood networks in low income areas

Kevin Harris and Hugh Flouch, [Networked Neighbourhoods](#), 2012

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.

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