

## DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

# Join in the local discussion

Hugh Flouch and Kevin Harris from The Networked Neighbourhoods Group argue that councils and councillors shouldn't be afraid of getting involved with online neighbourhood networks.

**T**he role of the citizen in local democracy is undergoing revision. This is not just a consequence of central government thinking and economic constraint: it is just as much a function of the equalising effects of the network society.

The advent of social media, contrasting with the old 20th century backdrop of centralised broadcasting media, illustrates the ways in which power relationships change. But services like Facebook and Twitter are naturally seen as global in scope, not local. How likely is it that uses of social media will make a difference to local democratic relations?

It's already happening, and we believe it will develop rapidly. Research conducted for London Councils in 2010 shows that people are already using local citizen-run online neighbourhood networks in this way. Over two thirds of respondents in our survey felt a little more or much more able to influence decisions locally as a result of participation on their local website.

There was also significant support for the idea that local websites lay strong foundations for co-productive approaches. Two thirds agreed or strongly agreed that through the website, people

demonstrate willingness to work with the council. Rather fewer (42 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that through the website their council demonstrates willingness to work with residents.

Many local government officers and elected members are aware of these sites but choose not to get involved out of fear that doing so will increase reputational risk. Our research showed that the opposite is true. For example two fifths of respondents claimed that their attitude towards local councillors had changed for the better as a direct consequence of using the local website. Moreover, there appear to be markedly higher levels of reputational enhancement in areas where councillors are actively engaged on the websites.

Eighty-three per cent of elected members, and 88 per cent of officers, found neighbourhood sites to be 'mostly' or 'somewhat' constructive and useful. Sixty-nine per cent of officers, and 73 per cent of members said that their experience of local sites was 'very positive' or 'mostly positive'.

Populations in the case study areas for this research were urban, relatively affluent, with high educational attainment. Our view is that

local online channels have a comparable role to play in less affluent rural areas, although it may require some careful community development. We are currently testing this principle with some pioneering projects in outer urban and rural areas, supported by the Big Lottery Fund.

We are also running a small number of projects to better understand how websites can work alongside councils – in one case, using local websites to stimulate neighbourly support for older people; in another, using local websites to support a behaviour change approach.

So some authorities are clearly ready to work with local websites in quite innovative ways. It makes sense to learn quickly from these innovations. How should other councils respond to this emerging movement? There is already good and bad practice to refer to, from the 'ostrich' head-in-sand approach to the enabling and supportive. The first few principles are these:

- Support citizens in developing their own websites: do not try to direct or influence. Small grant funding may be appropriate, but enabling supportive connections is paramount.
- For elected members: go where the conversations are, avoid party political pronouncements, and show that you value the potential to enhance service to local people.
- For officers: be prepared to provide helpful information and to correct misinformation, but avoid the risk of seeming to dominate. Invest in relationships with site administrators; this will pay dividends.

Local online neighbourhood networks can be expected to flourish. They contribute to pro-social and civic outcomes at low or no public cost. One officer we interviewed said she wished they had local sites all across the borough because they make her job so much easier. We will be seeking to bring together knowledge and experience in this field later in the year, to help local authorities negotiate new relationships with citizens. [http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/?page\\_id=409](http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/?page_id=409)

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Following this posting on a local website, people got together to clean up the park within 48 hours: Fairlands Park is in a bit of a state. The Council knows about it and is organising some staff to come and empty the bins etc. However, there is a lot of small litter spread across the grass areas and rocks/sticks all over the play areas which the Council probably won't get. Is anyone interested in meeting at the park sometime in the next few days to spend an hour of so to help sweep the play areas and pick up the loose rubbish? If so, please send me a PM on here and we can organise a time to meet and clean.