I&DeA
improvement and development agency

Connected councillors

a guide to using social media to support local leadership

This work is supported in partnership by the **National Association of Local Councils**, the **Standards Board for England** and the **Leadership Centre for local government.**

About IDeA

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) supports improvement and innovation in local government, focusing on the issues that are important to councils and using tried and tested ways of working.

We work with councils in developing good practice, supporting them in their partnerships. We do this through networks, online communities of practice and web resources, and through the support and challenge provided by councillor and officer peers.

The IDeA is a member of the LGA Group.

www.idea.gov.uk

About NALC

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) represents the interests of town and parish councils in England - a total of around 8,500 councils. The councils NALC represent serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to major cities, and are all independently elected. Together, they can be identified as the nation's single most influential grouping of grassroots opinion-formers. Over 15 million people live in communities served by parish and town councils nationally – this represents about 35% of the population.

www.nalc.gov.uk

About Standards for England

Standards for England is a strategic regulator responsible for promoting and maintaining high standards of behaviour among members of authorities in England, and have independent oversight of the conduct of those members.

These arrangements bring increased public confidence in the accountability of local politicians.

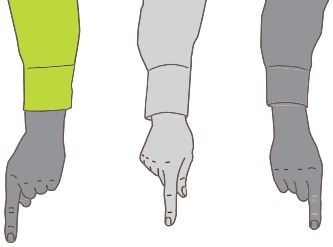
www.standardsforengland.gov.uk

About Leadership Centre for Local Government

The Leadership Centre works with the leaders of local authorities and, within local strategic partnerships to help them develop the skills and qualities they need to be effective leaders across place.

The Leadership Centre is funded by the government department for Communities and Local Government. In April 2008 the Leadership Centre acquired charitable status. It operates within the LGA Group, which collectively aims to support, promote and improve local government.

www.localleadership.gov.uk



Introduction

People are now turning first to the web to find everything from information about days out, entertainment, shopping, to making connections with friends and colleagues. People expect to be able to comment and contribute on everything from online versions of newspapers to items they purchase from online retailers like Amazon. Citizens will increasingly expect that local government will be able to provide its services online with the same level of interactivity that they find everywhere else. It wasn't that long ago that email was a novel way to contact your councillor. Already many councillors are interacting with the people they represent online through social media, and it won't be long before this is common expectation, too.

Facebook has almost 24 million user accounts in the UK. Some have suggested that more local residents are using online networks than are reading local newspapers. Nearly two-thirds of all UK residents are participating in 'social computing', a number that rises to 87 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds[1]. Seventy per cent of UK households have access to the internet [2]and the vast majority are on a broadband connection.

Taking part in social networks and interactive activity online is now a majority activity and will certainly grow.
If local government does not keep up with the pace, it will increasingly seem less relevant and will not be able to fulfill its role in the leadership of place. As representatives of their local areas and the democratically elected leaders of their organisations and partnerships, councillors must take the lead in using the social web.

This guide is meant as a brief introduction to social media for councillors, outlining how social media can be used to:

- support councillors' leadership roles
- create a space for community conversation
- keep a finger on the pulse of local needs
- campaign for political office and on important local issues.

It is targeted particularly at councillors who have some IT skills, and would like to know more.

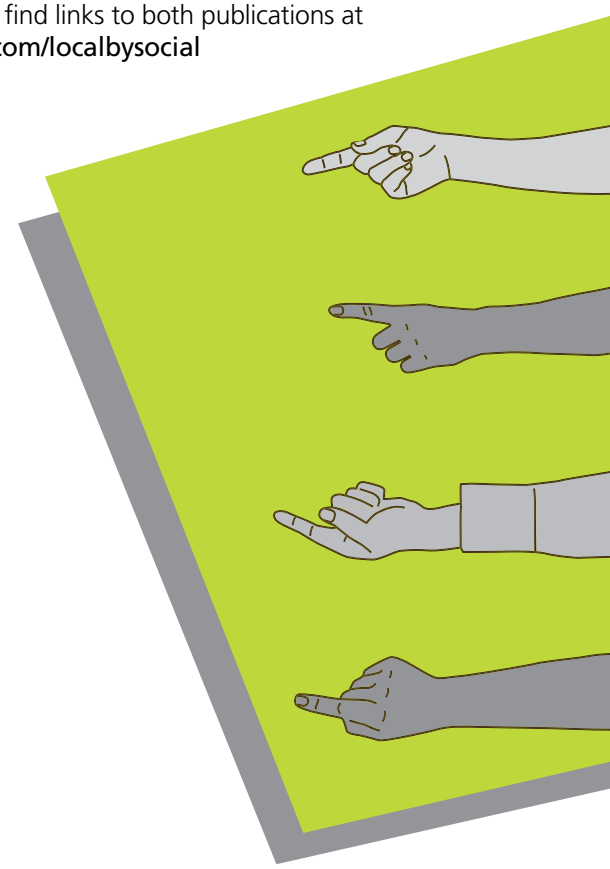
Maybe you're comfortable using email and word processing, or already have a Facebook or other social networking account. This guide is designed to help you find out more about how you can use social media to support your role as a democratic leader in your local area.

1 Forrester's Groundswell Research 2009 figures: www.forrester.com/Groundswell/profile_tool.html
2 Office for National Statistics, 2009 www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?ID=8

This guide is only meant to be the beginning. As part of the 21st Century Councillor programme, the Leadership Centre for Local Government, together with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), has produced an interactive online resource for councillors using social media. Whether you're a skeptic, just getting started, or are already a dab hand but would like to take your social media use to the next level, you can find resources at **www.21st.cc/socialmedia**.

This guide also briefly covers how local authorities and their partners can use social media in support of efficient service delivery. So even if you're not interested in becoming a Twitter superstar you can ensure that your council is taking advantage of the opportunities that new media affords.

Another publication *Local by Social*, has been produced by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) and the IDeA to address social media for councils as organisations. It builds on the detailed work of Social by Social, produced by NESTA last year to look in depth at how public and voluntary sector organisations can use social media to achieve positive outcomes in the public realm. You can find links to both publications at **www.tinyurl.com/localbysocial**



Section 1:
So what is social media?

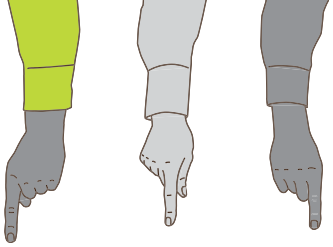
Social media is a collective term used to describe easy ways to create and publish on the internet. People generally use the term to describe how organisations and individuals share content – text, video and pictures – and create conversations on the web. It is transforming the way that companies do business and individuals interact with each other. It is providing a voice for those who weren't well heard before. Social media will change the way that councillors and councils interact with local people.

Unhelpfully, when many people talk about social media, they talk about the tools. Twitter. YouTube. Blogging. This can seem like impenetrable jargon. The important thing to remember about social media is that it's social. It's about communication. It's about putting the transformative power of the printing press into the hands of the people. Just as the ability to publish political pamphlets and talk about them in coffee houses was the foundation of our liberal democracy, social media will have just as big an effect on the way we govern and do business. Now anyone can publish and share their views, and more importantly can engage in conversation with others about those views, with just a few clicks of a mouse. It's the political tract and the coffee house all rolled into one.

The term 'social' can be unhelpful as well. It can imply that it's just for fun, a bit trivial, and not for the business of government. The Latin origins of the word social mean 'allied', or connected in a civil sense. Social media is connected media. Social media is communication that is aligned to the networks of business and human interaction that we already have or aspire to.

Social media is usually fairly open, meaning a wide variety of people can see, comment on or collaborate on materials. The tools are usually free or low-cost and very often easy-to-use, requiring no more skill than adding an attachment to an email or creating a Word document. And most importantly, social media is designed to be shareable, meaning that it's very easy for people to forward, link to or even re-publish content. This means there are very low barriers to entry for sharing opinions with a potentially very wide audience.

You may also see the term 'web 2.0'. This is used as shorthand to describe how social media has changed the content of the internet from being dominated by one-way publishing or e-commerce, to a greater emphasis on words, pictures, music and videos being published, shared and commented on by ordinary people.



Government 2.0 is sometimes used to describe how social media is changing the relationship between government institutions and citizens. Citizens and service users are increasingly expecting a greater say in how things happen in the place where they live and are probably already discussing your local issues online. Government 2.0 refers to the uses of social media tools to engage in those conversations, shape policy, support local democracy and improve services.

Section 2: Conversations with communities

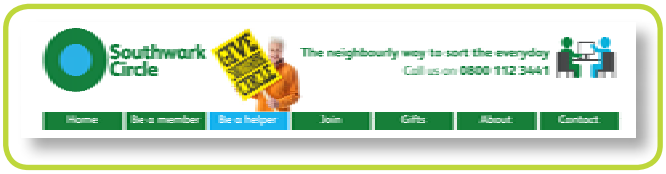
2.1 Making connections between communities and outcomes

Social media is all about community. It connects people together, helps them share who they are, encourages conversation and builds trust. It is the most powerful tool available today for building a sense of belonging and collaboration in a virtual, or local, area. Making astute use of free tools and more complex services such as SMS text and bespoke social networking software can give councils a scalable, time-efficient way to connect residents together and build community in their locality. This might seem like nice icing on the cake compared with delivering critical services, but it can be the missing ingredient that makes everything in the community work better. Any councillor who wants to help build a sense of belonging in a neighbourhood, increase resident satisfaction levels, and reduce social problems like vandalism or racism, can do much with social media. It is not a replacement for talking in person with local people, but it can help councillors extend the reach of community conversations.

Councillors know that the challenges facing councils and their partners over the coming decade are about much more than delivering standard services for less. It is much more about working across partnerships and with local people to improve outcomes and change people's lives for the better. For example, councils are working with parents and children to help them live healthier and more active lives to reduce childhood obesity, which has many positive effects on children's lives and reduces costs to the health service in the long run. Local partnerships are supporting teenagers to make better choices about their education, career, how they spend their leisure time and how they conduct their sex lives. These are all areas where peers have more influence

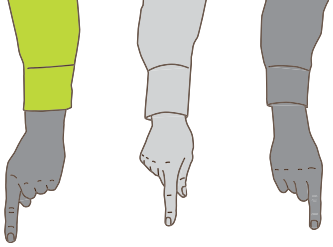
than parents, councillors, officers or health workers. Sharing messages through the online networks people are already using and which are populated with their friends and peers can have a tremendous impact on providing individuals with information abut the choices on offer. And it naturally uses peer support help them make the right choices. For example, the City of Los Angeles is partnering with schools and the local public health service to provide social networking support to help kids make better choices about diet and exercise through the We'reFedUp network[3].

Social media can also play a supporting role in making traditional methods work more effectively. An excellent example of this is Southwark Circle[4], a membership organisation that provides older people with on-demand help with life's practical tasks, through local, reliable neighbourhood helpers. The primary service is delivered face-to-face, but it is supported by social media and a social network for teaching, learning and sharing. They use YouTube videos to explain the service, Twitter to promote their work, and help their helpers communicate and share knowledge using a blend of digital tools and offline meetups. Though not run by the council, it is supported by it, as it meets the council's aims to ensure Southwark is a place where people love to live, where everyone achieves their potential, and which promotes healthy and independent living.



Southwark Circle

3 www.werefedup.com
4 www.southwarkcircle.org.uk



2.2 The important role of councillors

Councillors, as local leaders, will have a key role in these changes to the way people engage and communicate; if they take that opportunity. Enhancing local democracy through greater transparency and providing both a greater voice and a greater responsibility for citizens in setting priorities and delivering public services means that the nature of representative democracy may change. But the need for elected members does not go away and there are tremendous opportunities for local leaders to use social media to engage with a wider range of people in a powerful, focused way.

Tricky cross-cutting issues such as community safety and cohesion can't be solved by a single institution or even a partnership of organisations and they certainly can't be solved by a remote central government.

Only by working together with local people can we hope to crack some of the most intractable issues. Councillors working in their wards, neighbourhoods and parishes are placed at the right level to deliver the changes we need. Social media can help people make the connections to share information and take action on these difficult issues, and councillors can be at the centre of this digital revolution.

As councillors and candidates stand for office, people will increasingly look online to see who these people are and what they stand for. Councillors who hold office will find social media to be an important platform for listening to residents, identifying problems and communicating complex positions. There will be an expectation that – just like commerce, education and entertainment – civic roles can be carried out online. Councillors risk being left behind if they don't take a leadership role in this space.

As a councillor, you don't have to have a Twitter account or a flashy website to participate in this space. But it is well worth taking a look at what's already out there – blogs, Facebook groups, local social networks – and seeing what people are saying about your area and your council, and maybe even joining in.

2.3 Left behind? Inclusion, exclusion and digital democracy

For those with access to the internet, social media provides new opportunities for them to have their voices heard on the issues they're passionate about. But some people are being left behind; because of lack of internet access, lack of technical skills or poor functional literacy. We cannot afford to wait until everyone catches up, but at the same time public services have an important role to play in promoting digital inclusion. Many councils are already doing great work to promote digital inclusion, and examples are highlighted by the Beacon scheme at Solihull, Stratford-on-Avon, Staffordshire Moorlands and Sunderland.

Social media provides an opportunity to include more people in 'idea generation' and decision-making. Some citizens are already excluded from contributing to council meetings or consultations for the reasons we generally understand as social exclusion. But others are left out because of professional or parenting responsibilities, or they are intimidated by formal methods. Going to a community meeting in person is a big time investment. But dipping in electronically to share views on a single local issue doesn't take much effort and many find it a more comfortable way to contribute.

What are the biggest benefits of using social media?

Councillors say....

Social media is a good way to tell people what you actually do as a councillor.
Nick Bason, Liberal Democrat, Waltham Forrest

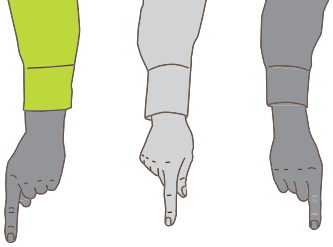
Having an immediate, unmediated and two-way channel of communication with people we represent and need to engage with.
Steven Adams, Conservative, Buckinghamshire

[My] website had 1000 visits in first 9 weeks [after it was re-launched]. I know that residents are being informed.
Ken Hawkins, Conservative, Solihull

In such a fast moving world, councils need to keep up or get left behind. Smart councils and councillors are now taking advantage of technology and social media to drive communications, innovation and improvement.
Councillor Michael Chater, Chairman, National Association of Local Councils

It's the widening of the local government network. Councillors tend to be isolated into small groups, [but] social media can create larger groups.
Tim Cheetham, Labour, Barnsley

[Twitter is good for] communicating the hundreds of tiny things you do that bit by bit make a difference, but don't warrant more than 140 characters.
Joshua Peck, Deputy Leader, Tower Hamlets, Labour



Section 3: A few social media tools

When people talk about social media, they often make reference to some well-known tools or products. Although there are many more than we can list here, we'll highlight a few of the general approaches and the most widely used products which are characterised by their ease of use and are free or low cost.

We've attempted to categorise these tools, but their features often mean they can cross-over into different categories and their flexibility means they can be used in many different ways. There are even tools that improve your other tools, such as **Friendfeed** (which pulls together content from a variety of social media tools and brings them to one place) and Ping.fm (which posts content to a variety of social media tools in one go).

3.1 Written communication

Blogs

Blogs are easily updated web journals, usually published by an individual or a small group. They are almost always commentable, meaning readers can share their opinions about what the author has written. Blogs have been used by councillors to share their views on public policy, share information about council services or issues of local interest, and canvas opinion. Even very 'business-oriented' local government blogs have a personal feel with bloggers sharing some detail of their daily lives, for example sharing how changes in local services have affected them, how much they enjoyed taking their kids to the village fete, or sharing pictures of tasty local produce.

There are many free blogging tools such as **Blogger.com** or **Wordpress.com** which make it easy to set up a blog in a few minutes. However, gaining readership can take longer.

Some examples of councillors who blog:

- Sean Brady, Independent, Formby Parish Council
  www.formbyfirst.typepad.com
- Daisy Benson, Liberal Democrat, Reading
  contributes to a group blog with other councillors who represent her ward
  www.redlandslibdems.org.uk
- Peter Black, Liberal Democrat, Swansea
  and Welsh Assembly Member
  www.peterblack.blogspot.com
- Mike Causey, Conservative, Waverley Borough Council
  www.mikecausey.wordpress.com
- James Cousins, Conservative
  London Borough of Wandsworth
  www.jamescousins.com
- Anthony Mckeown, Labour, High Peak Borough Council
  www.anthonymckeown.info
- Bob Piper, Labour, Sandwell
  www.bobpiper.co.uk

Blogging has been around longer than most of the tools described here, but it is still one of the most powerful. Many councillors use a blog as the bedrock of their social media strategy.

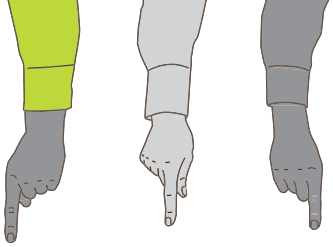
Twitter

Twitter was the social media phenomenon of 2009 and is still growing. It's a way of sharing short snippets of information, links to interesting resources, telling people what you are doing or asking for help. Users are limited to 140 characters (letters, numbers, spaces and punctuation), so it's ideal for sending and receiving text information on the go. It can be used as a one-way publishing tool, pushing out short bursts of information, and many councils use it this way through corporate accounts. However, it's more powerful as a conversational tool, with councillors and local people sharing information and getting feedback.

Many councillors are already using Twitter. You can see a growing list at www.tweetyhall.com, a website that features councillors' use of social media to support local engagement.

On Twitter, people are all identified in the same way, by an @ sign and their username. For example, someone could be registered as @jonsmith, or @governmentmike. You can find their Twitter address by using their full user name without the @ sign. Mine is **www.twitter.com/ingridk**

> **Twitter helps me keep in touch with what others locally are thinking and seeing. Broadcasting is one thing, but listening is more useful!**
> Councillor Tim Prater,
> Folkestone Town Council



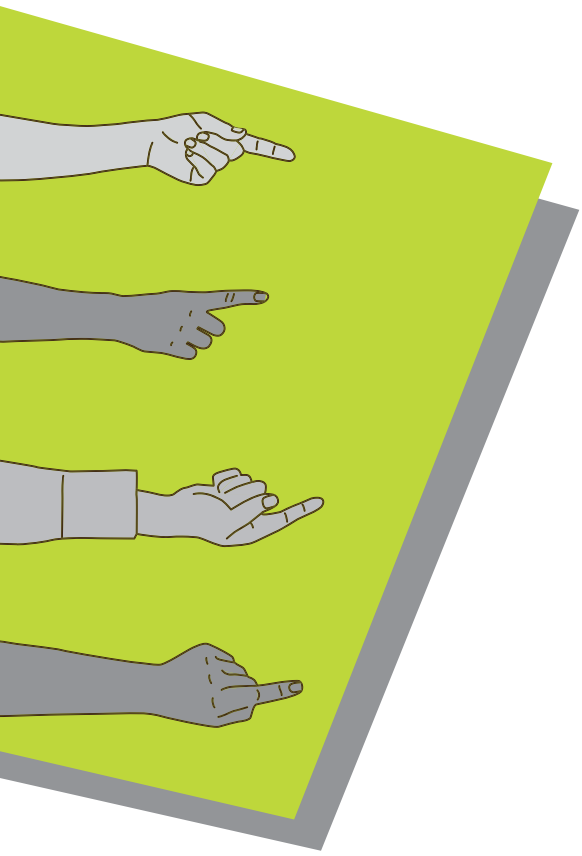
3.2 Social networking

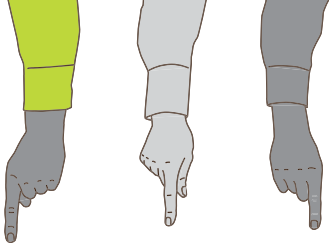
All of the tools we describe in this guide have an element of social networking, but there are a number of very popular sites dedicated to building social networks. Social networking means using online tools to build communities of individuals who are interested in sharing information and support. Networks like **Facebook**, **Bebo** and **MySpace** can be used to facilitate connections between people who already know each other, usually in a social context. But it can also be used by organisations and businesses to share information about products, services or events with a range of interested individuals. Other social networking tools like LinkedIn are built around professional identities, where the focus is specifically on an individual's career, and often their job search or developing business leads.

Some social networks are built around particular issues. For example, **MumsNet** was set up for parenting, while www.harringayonline.com focuses on a neighbourhood in the London Borough of Haringey. These sites often facilitate connections between people who don't know each other from 'real life', but who may share a common interest. The **IDeA's Community of Practice** platform is a social network for people who work in or represent local public services and who want to share ideas about improving services.

Using social networks as a councillor requires a different approach to using it as an ordinary citizen. Many councillors use Facebook in a personal capacity in the same way as anyone else would – to share personal news, information and holiday snaps with people they already know. Other councillors use their Facebook accounts more openly, 'friending' (that is, by allowing them to view their accounts, sharing information with) people they don't know personally. Facebook now allows politicians to create 'pages' which is a way of keeping personal use and professional use separate. A 'page' is similar to a regular Facebook account in style, but it is open for anyone registered on Facebook to see. On a page you can provide a political profile and can share information with supporters without disclosing personal networks or worrying that the wrong people will see the 'funny' pictures of you as a child that your friends are showing each other.

Anyone on Facebook can start a group. Councillor Allan Andrews from Coventry started the Facebook group **'I Love Earlsdon'** which has been used to discuss local issues and as a focus for very local campaigns. Other councillors and candidates have used Facebook to help organise their supporters during elections and there have been a number of successful issues based campaigns with popular Facebook groups. Some were started by councillors themselves, but others have been shown support as councillors join them and contribute.





3.3 Listening

Perhaps the most valuable use of social media is using it to listen (and perhaps engage) with conversations that are already happening. Your area, your council and maybe even you yourself are being talked about online, but do you know when and how that's happening?

Most interactive websites have something called **RSS** (Really Simple Syndication) feeds. This is a way that websites can automatically 'push out' new material as soon as it's published. This means you don't have to actually go a website to find out if there is new information on there; instead, the websites tell you with RSS. Free tools called feed readers (Google Reader and Bloglines are examples) can help you collect and subscribe to feeds in a single accessible place. Most mainstream media outlets have RSS feeds. Blogs and social networking sites almost always have them, too. You can even generate an RSS feed from an internet search. Your council may have RSS feeds for its website (and if it doesn't, it should).

Google also allows you to set up something called an 'alert'. Instead of you having to type a specific word or phrase into Google each day to check if anything new has been written about it, the website sends you an email detailing all the new instances of that word online. Alerts can provide daily or instant news about local issues straight to your email inbox. You can set up alerts for the name of your council, your ward, hot local issues or even your own name.

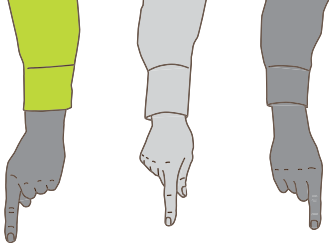
Tools like **Addictomatic**, **Pageflakes** and features within a Google account can help you bring all your feeds together into one place. These can be private so only one or a few people can see them, or you can make these pages public. Here's a Pageflakes example for Kirklees Council (www.pageflakes.com/kirkleescouncil/).

'Listening' to the social web will give you a more detailed picture of what people are concerned about. As a councillor, you will have to make a decision about how you act on that information.

3.4 Collaborative working

Wikipedia is the most famous example of people coming together to create a document or information resource. It is built with a tool called a wiki, which means anyone on the internet can go onto the site and add to or edit the content. Formby Parish Council has developed and consulted on its community plan using a wiki. This guidance itself was developed on a wiki.

But you don't have to set up a wiki to help people bring their ideas together online. Instead, you can also use social media to 'crowdsource' policy ideas and initiatives. Crowdsourcing is the internet equivalent of 'workshopping' an idea with the public. The White House under US President Barack Obama has used a collaborative tool called Mixed Ink to allow citizens direct access to the policy making process. Closer to home, the Mayor of London's office has launched a climate change consultation which calls for individuals to submit their own ideas and rate others people's. You can see this at: **www.london.gov.uk/climatechange**

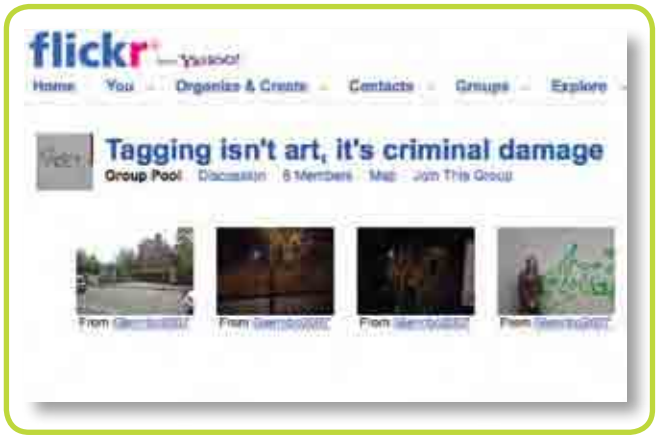


3.5 Videos and pictures

Services like **YouTube** and **Vimeo** allow anyone to upload and share videos with the world. Image sharing services like **Flickr**, **Picasa** or **SmugMug** allow people to share photos. Many councils and councillors are using these services to share video diaries or images of their local areas.

Local people too are using these services to share content about the area you serve. There will almost certainly be a group on Flickr sharing positive and negative images of your area. Someone may be complaining about your council services on YouTube.

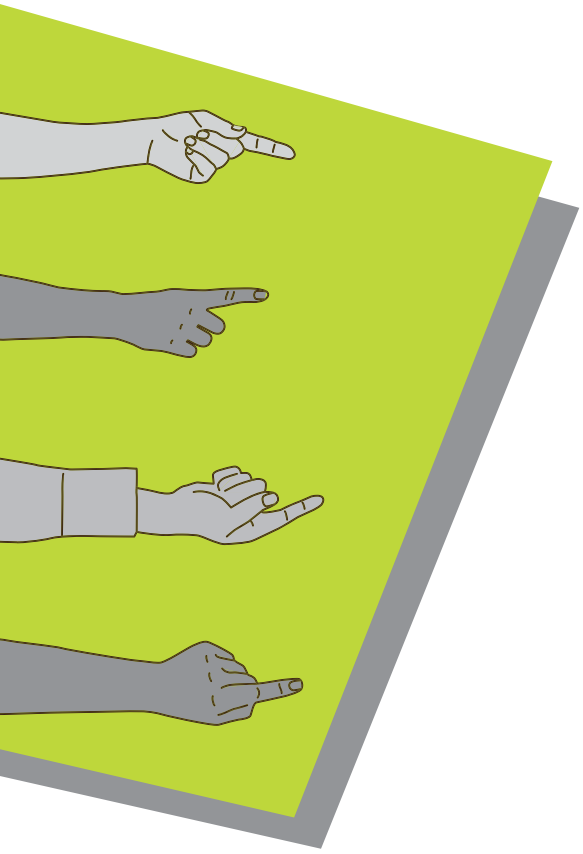
Stratford-on-Avon council has been a leader in using Flickr photos to promote its area. Another example is councillor Daisy Benson of the Redlands area of Reading who with her councillor colleague Glen Goodall has been using a Flickr group called 'Tagging isn't art, it's criminal damage' to highlight examples of graffiti in her area. She encourages residents to upload and share their photos as well with the aim of getting it removed.



Section 4: Getting started with social media

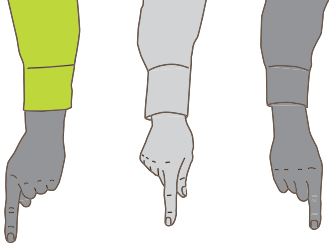
Councillors usually have just the right qualities to make them natural users of social media. They're dedicated individuals with a strong sense of local place. They're good connectors, motivated to help and to share information. They're used to holding their own in the hustle and bustle of multiple voices and strong opinions, and the best of them develop the ability to cut through the chatter, deflecting and reflecting on negative feedback.

But many councillors also have characteristics that make it unlikely that they'll be signing up for Twitter or starting their own blog any time soon. On average, they may be a bit older than the usual profile of social media user. They may not have developed the basic IT and social web skills through work or personal experience. And local politicians are insanely busy juggling work, family, community and political responsibilities. Social media can be time-saving in the long run, but it does take a little effort to get set up and gain confidence.



Below are examples of what you can do to quickly get started with social media:

- **Give it a go and contribute**
  It can feel quite unnerving putting forward your ideas and contributions online at first, especially if you're not used to working in such ways. But having a go can get you used to the technology, and build your confidence. Just signing up to Facebook or Twitter is a good start. You probably already know quite a few people online, and both these tools will immediately show you how to find out which of your friends and colleagues are already signed up. Watch what others are doing. Make some small tester contributions.
- **Listen, before you speak**
  Set aside half an hour to do a few internet searches on local issues or just type the name of your area into Google. Look for discussion forums or social networks. If you're a member of Facebook, search on the name of your area. Google has a specific blog search that can help you identify local bloggers.
- **Ask around**
  Other councillors or local party activists may already be using social media. Find out what they're doing and how they got started.
- **Find a friendly officer**
  You may find that that there's an officer in the policy, communications or IT department, or perhaps in your group's political office, who's passionate about social media.
- **Look to your party**
  The Liberal Democrats, for example, have a specific blogging platform for councillors and offer help to get you started through the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors. You can also make connections through dedicated political networks such as the Conservative Party's **www.myconservatives.com**, the LabourList (**www.labourlist.org**) or the Liberal Democrat Act network **http://act.libdems.org.uk/** These will put you in touch with other people in your party who are active online and often provide useful resources and links to local web activity.
- **Set up a blog**
  It only takes a few minutes with free services like Blogger or Wordpress, and both have privacy settings which mean that you can show your blog to only a few people until you're ready to go public.
- **Find out more**
  See our section on sources of support for signposting to additional help and information or join us online at **www.21st.cc/socialmedia**



A few tips to keep in mind as you get started

Councillors say....

I have three bits of advice. Social media doesn't replace speaking to people face to face, don't think that it does. Don't worry if you don't have 10,000 followers after a week on Twitter it takes time to establish yourself. Respond to people that write to you! Don't just send out links to your press releases or website, that's not what social media is for.
Nick Bason, Liberal Democrat, Waltham Forrest

I'd possibly suggest twitter as being a good place to start, as essentially it's asking you what you are doing – which is a question most people should be able to answer.
Councillor Anthony Mckeown, Labour,
High Peak Borough Council

Be honest, but not abusive. Assume the local editor is reading it. Update often, it's a slow burn not a quick fix.
Steven Adams,
Conservative, Buckinghamshire

Case study
Kirklees councillors and social media

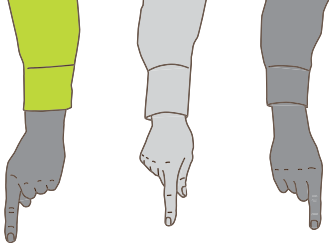
At Kirklees Council a cross-party team of members has been part of the 21st Century Councillor pilot scheme. This innovative project aims to develop councillors' internet skills and encourage more people to become elected representatives. Not only have the group looked at the value of using social media, but the council's web team has created individual ward portals, which gather information from across the web and present it in one place alongside the members' blog posts and comments, planning applications and complaints and suggestions from the public, making it easier for councillors to find out what a wide range of voices are saying about their area.

The councillors taking part in the programme have been offered help to make videos, set up social media accounts and write blogs. They have also been advised how the different tools can be used to reach different audiences for different purposes. Kirklees is hoping that increased social media use will allow councillors to engage more effectively with citizens and also increase the appeal of becoming a councillor to a wider and younger audience. Each of the four members have so far taken different lessons from the ongoing work.

Andrew Cooper (Green) is a keen blogger (**www.greeningkirklees.blogspot.com**)and tweeter (**@clrandrewcooper**). He recently tweeted live from the council's budget meeting.

> "You've got to find as many ways as you can to engage with people. Let's face it, it's used by a lot of young people and we've got to try and engage with them as much as possible. It's also important for politicians to go through the discipline of having views and opinions and being able to express them and having a blog helps me work out how I feel about things in my own mind."

From left to right: Cllr Andrew Palfreeman, Cllr Cath Harris, Cllr Andrew Cooper, Cllr David Woodhead



Andrew Palfreeman (Conservative) has found some barriers to using social media including the council's own firewall, but believes it is important to make the effort.

> "It's important to make it easier to contact councillors and for people to be aware of what their councillors are doing. By using the modes of communication young people are using then hopefully we can get them involved in campaigning and even becoming councillors themselves."

Cath Harris (Labour) is wary of social media becoming the main strand of communication for councillors, because many people in her ward don't want to or are unable to access it, but she still feels it has a role to play for councillors.

> "I can see this is a good way to contact young people because this is the media they choose to use, but councillors need to be aware it is just one method of communication and it is important to engage with a wide range of the community by using all the communication methods available."

David Woodhead (Liberal Democrat) writes a blog (**davidwoodhead.mycouncillor.org.uk**) which has grown to between 2000 and 3000 readers a month. He finds the two way communication of social media helps him talk to and hear local residents.

> "I can communicate my messages to the electorate and they can respond and let me know what they think. Traditionally we have done this face to face, but as more and more people communicate through social media we need to keep-up. I would urge all councillors to look at it and I'm sure they will be pleasantly surprised with how easy it is. I had some training and downloaded the blogging tool from the party website. I have since gone on to encourage eight or nine colleagues to start a blog."

Section 5: A word of warning… staying out of trouble online

Any form of communication is rife with the possibility of misunderstandings. Social media is perhaps no more or no less vulnerable to this, but there are some new ways to misfire with your message. Although the best use of social media is conversational in tone, publishing to the web is still publishing. What you've 'said' on the web is written down and it's permanent.

As you get started in social media and build your online profile, there are a few things to bear in mind. While there's no additional legal or ethical burden around using social media, the usual rules still apply and you need to think about them in this new context. The following legal and ethical guidance applies to councillors in England.

Section 5.1 Legal considerations

Victoria McNeill, head of legal at Norfolk County Council, provided her councillors[5] with some pointers on avoiding possible legal pitfalls. The following is based on her advice, and while this list does not purport to be exhaustive it does highlight some of the more obvious issues. If you are in any doubt, speak to your council's monitoring officer or legal services. Almost all of these pitfalls can be avoided if your online content is objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using their websites for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters.

5 This section is adapted from CivicSurf's Legal Guidance for councillor blogs. Included here under Creative Commons attribution, non-commercial license.

Libel
If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you will result in an award of damages against you.

Copyright
Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

Data Protection
Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

Bias and pre-determination
If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything on your blog that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

Obscene material
It goes without saying that you should avoid publishing anything in your blog that people would consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Electoral periods
The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk[6]

6 www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents

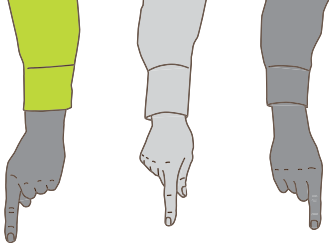
The council's legal position
Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

Some councils take a strict line on this and do not provide links to councillor blogs or social media accounts from councillor profile pages. But many people (especially young people) prefer to communicate via social networks and so this is as valid a method of communication as an email address. This can have significant advantages in terms of transparency and the ability to answer frequently asked questions more efficiently through an open format. Bearing in mind, of course, the data protection requirements.

Section 5.2
The Members' Code of Conduct

It's worth pointing out that councillors can have 'blurred identities'. This means you have a social media account where you comment both as a councillor and as an individual. For example a Facebook account where you've posted about a great night out (personal) and another time explained the council position on pothole repair (councillor). It may be clear in your mind when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor, but it could be less clear to others. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. So it's worth mentioning the need to get your on social media accounts/profiles clear, then you can be confident as to what you can and can't say while you are representing your organisation or party.

How you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the council, for example blogging as an un-elected Mayor, or as a councillor or as a private citizen, and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter. The key to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a councilor. And that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.



This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or a Facebook profile. There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast line. For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a councillor, the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most councillors are using their online profile to communicate with citizens about representing their local area so engaging the code, if necessary, should be a relatively straightforward decision. Since the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role.

Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct will apply to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication you undertake. Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

You will need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:

- Treat others with respect. Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- Comply with equality laws. Take care in publishing anything that might be considered sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.
- Refrain from publishing anything you have received in confidence.
- Ensure you don't bring the council, or your councillor role, into disrepute.

Members of the public (or other members or officers) may make a complaint about you if you contravene the Code of Conduct. That complaint, and the sanctions that may be imposed, will be considered by the Standards Committee.

More information about the Members' Code of Conduct can be found at **www.standardsforengland.gov.uk**. Standards for England is preparing specific guidance to cover blogging and social networking and has already provided a quick guide to blogging at **www.tinyurl.com/blogstandards**.

> **If you are pompous face to face your electronic persona will show it. If you are zany you will show that. The problem for councillors is that we are a bit like Worzel Gummidge. We have different heads or styles for different occasions. In our advice centres we are listeners, in our wards, facilitators, in council we are statesmen or orators (hopefully!). The danger for us could be that people will see our postings and use them out of context – a statement that can be jocular in one context can be flippant in another; a sentence that is sound in context can look stupid out of context. We need to be sure about who we want to talk to and what we want them to think of us – otherwise we could be creating a hostage to fortune.**
> Councillor Richard Kemp, Liberal Democrat, Liverpool (Deputy Chair, LGA)

> **I do think it is absolutely vital that we really show politicians as true representatives of the public, acting, thinking and doing too, with lives and fears and troubles of their own. But we cannot escape the fact that we are doing so in an environment where there are those who will seek to abuse the information they get.**
> Councillor Tim Cheetham, Labour, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Section 5.3
Just using good sense

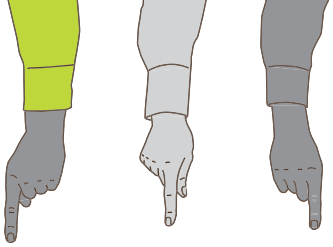
Although these warnings may seem stark, they shouldn't put you off engaging online. Use your common sense. The things that can get you in hot water anywhere else are the same things to avoid in social media. Most councillors who are using social media engage with citizens in entirely constructive and often colourful fashions without ever engaging the Code of Conduct or running foul of the law.

Councillors, just like anyone, should also take due regard of internet security. Use secure passwords (generally over eight characters long and using a mix of letters and numbers) and never share your password with anyone. If you are using shared IT equipment, don't store your password on the computer.

There are few additional things to be aware to ensure you are well-respected online. For those new to the online world it can take a short time to get used to the culture of the web.

Avoiding gaffes and maintaining good 'netiquette'

- Make your commenting policy clear
  You will need to take note of the comments that other people make on your site. It may be a fine line to tread, but if you allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand on your site then it can put off other members of your community and you may even be called to account under the Code of Conduct. For blogs, the easiest way to handle this is to moderate comments and to state clearly on your site that you're doing so and reasons why comments may be rejected. For Facebook or other social networks, including multi-media sites like YouTube and Flickr where people can post public or semi-public messages to your profile, you will need to regularly check on messages (you can be notified by email) or, far less preferably, disable message posting.
- Allow disagreement
  Some comments may be out of line, but on the other hand deleting the comments of people who disagree with you will backfire. You can't stop them from posting the same comment elsewhere, then linking back to your site and saying you are gagging those who disagree with you.



- **Think before you publish**
  You can't un-ring that bell. Words can't be unspoken and even if you delete a hastily fired off blog post or tweet it will probably have already been read and will be indexed or duplicated in places on the web beyond your reach.
- **Beware the irony**
  Few writers are able to communicate sarcasm or irony through short online messages. It's probably best to assume that you're one of those that can't.
- **Don't be creepy**
  Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their council, local police service or councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some councillors wait to be followed themselves first. Do make use of other communication functions that social media allows you. Twitter's 'list' function, for example, can help you to follow local people in a less direct way. And bloggers are almost invariably happy for you to link to them, so you don't need to ask first in this instance.
- **Own up: Social media is transparent**
  The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake – perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.
- **Avoid the trolls**
  You know that person who always shows up to area forums and asks the tricky but entirely irrelevant questions? That person has an equally difficult cousin who likes to go online. As you begin to use social media, you'll find some argumentative characters out there. Don't get bogged down. You don't have to respond to everything. Ignore if necessary.

Section 6: How councils can use social media

Councillors, councils and their partners are using social media for a wide range of purposes. It is being used as a way to spark innovation, drive efficiency and engage in conversations with local people. As well as using social media themselves, members should ensure their local authority as an organisation is using it well.

6.1 How councils are using social media

Councillors should be aware of the opportunities for social media to be used by councillors and partners. Below are examples of how some councils are using social media.

Providing information about services

In February 2010, the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) provided an audit of councils' social media usage and showed that 154 councils are using Twitter and 73 have Facebook pages[7]. Some other uses of social media for services include:

- Staffordshire's **RateMyPlace.org.uk**, which provides food safety ratings for local people and a place for local people to share reviews of eateries.
- Islington's **Facebook group**, which is used to promote and share information about recycling in the borough.
- **ManchesterLitList**, a blog that provides information about literary events and featured books.
- Sutton Council providing **information about grit bin locations** which was mapped by a member of the public who is a web developer. The map was then hosted on Sutton's website informing residents of their locations so citizens could grit and clear icy pavements themselves.
- Many schools and councils used Twitter and easy to update blogs to alert parents of school closures during the heavy snow in January 2010.

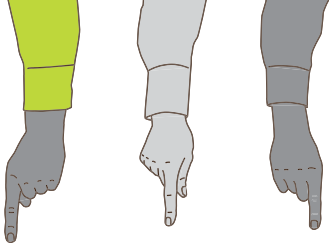
> **Many folks don't read local papers or magazines, so if your council isn't online it's invisible. How then can you reach and talk with those people?**
> Councillor Fiona Cowan, Chairman, Collyweston Parish Council

Supporting local democracy

Redbridge's Big Conversation provided a platform for local people to set priorities for spending and engage in policy discussion during a major borough-wide consultation, providing a place for local people to discuss issues. Just as you would consider what people are saying at area forums, councillors should take account of these discussions in their decision-making and can find that these platforms are a good way to explain why difficult decisions have been reached.

In the 2009 local elections, councils with integrated and interactive reporting (for example mixing traditional web communications with tools like Twitter or blogs) doubled traffic to their websites. (Source Socitm). Derbyshire County Council used a mix of online tools and channels to support and report local elections results in June 2009. This included multimedia web content, social bookmarking (a way of storing, sharing and recommending websites to others) and real-time results delivered through web graphics, Twitter and a dedicated Facebook page. Media interest was high and citizen feedback was extremely positive. Visitors levels to the council's website were the highest ever recorded.

7 Web Improvement and Usage Community, IDeA Communities of Practice website



Gathering customer insight and managing customer relationships

Barnet Council is using social media monitoring tools to find out about conversations that are taking place online and tackle complaints about services. Greater Manchester Police are using social media monitoring to read what people are saying publicly online to identify and tackle fear of crime.

Some well-known commercial brands use communities of users to answer questions and resolve complaints, and several councils are beginning to experiment in this area. This has the potential to reduce transaction costs for the council and provide a more 'human' face to dealing with bureaucracy. In Newcastle, engagement with a Facebook group critical of the council's perceived role in shutting down a popular nightclub helped to explain the issues around noise enforcement. As a result, one of the group's organisers met with council officials and the council has since advised a co-operative that aims to buy the bar.

Councillors will find that these tools provide a vital insight into what's going on in their communities and often allow them to engage directly with the key players.

Promoting culture

Medway Council is one of many that uses Facebook to promote festivals and events.

The London Borough of Wandsworth's film office uses Flickr, an image sharing social network, to promote film and television locations. Many museums, often local authority supported, are using a combination of social media tools to promote collections, events and special exhibitions.

Councillors can support cultural events by joining Facebook groups or promoting them through their own social networking profiles.

> **Social media for local councils matters. We need to use every available tool to successfully engage with our residents and generate activity from all ages.**
> Councillor John Williams, Chairman, Lickey and Blackwell Parish Council

The council-run Facebook page for Coventry has over 11,000 fans

Supporting community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience

There is strong evidence that online networking can promote better connected neighbourhoods. One American study showed that neighbours who were connected online were much more likely to talk to and engage with the people who lived near them [8].

Local networks like Harringay Online or Pits n Pots in Stoke-on-Trent provide an online platform for the views of local residents. Although these are usually independent websites, councillors can and should engage with these sites constructively.

Internal communications and learning and development

Many councils are using the tools of social media such as videos, blogs and internal social networks to support internal communications. The IDeA's Community of Practice platform has over 50,000 members and every council in the country is represented. The IDeA's Knowledge Hub programme will take communities of practice to the next level and offer even greater opportunities to harness these technologies for professional development and data and information sharing between partners.

Councillors can take advantage of these learning opportunities themselves and encourage the use of internal networks like Yammer (a corporate version of Twitter) within their councils and use them to reach a wide range of officers in their council or among partners.

8 Broadband Neighborhoods - Connected Communities: www.mysocialnetwork.net/downloads/hampton-chi.pdf Keith Hampton, MIT

Open data

Governments around the world are making efforts to open up their data and make it available for re-use. The US began with data.gov and the UK has upped the ante with the comprehensive (though not yet complete) data.gov.uk which focuses on central government data. Opening up data sets promotes the notion of a government responsible to the people it serves, giving them the tools of information and transparency to hold it to account. But there are other benefits, too, which include better interchange of information between public sector partners and the re-use of open government data to provide useful information and services to citizens.

Some councils are making strides with open data, notably Lichfield and the GLA and others are experimenting with some data sets. Barnet, Windsor and Maidenhead and a few others are experimenting with exposing data on all purchases over £500. Kent County Council has made more than 500 data sets available online as part of its 'Pic and Mix'[9] project. Visitors can browse the data catalogue and use online tools (known as mashups) to transform and personalise public data. This essentially means they can combine different statistics to make it useful to them in a variety of contexts.

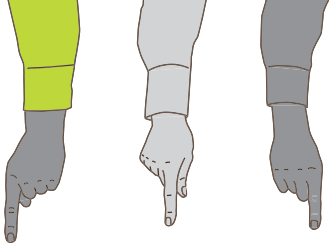
> **[By opening up data] councils could massively increase the value (to their residents) of the data they hold. And residents could feel more in charge of what happens around them, by knowing more of the facts about their local area. In my experience, it's often the inability to get information, and therefore a sense of obfuscation from local government, that sows the seeds of distrust and low expectations.**
>
> Councillor Mike Causey, Conservative, Waverley Borough Council

This puts citizens in control of public information and avoids unnecessary contact with the council, Empowering citizens in this way means they can solve their own problems and become more engaged with their community. Early indications from US cities like San Francisco, Chicago and Washington, which have already opened their data, show that significant value can be created through open data[10] and that savings can be achieved by reducing the cost of freedom of information requests.

Councillors can play a vital role in providing the assurance that's it's ok to put information in the hands of the people or use the data themselves to hold a range of public services to account.

9 www.picandmix.org.uk

10 Washington DC's Apps for Democracy project has claimed an ROI of over 4000% www.appsfordemocracy.org/



6.2
Opportunities not taken

Although social media can be used to effectively and efficiently support council priorities, in most councils these opportunities have not yet been fully exploited. There are significant barriers to using social media within councils for both councillors and officers who wish to engage with citizens to improve local services. Some are technical, but most are cultural.

For example:

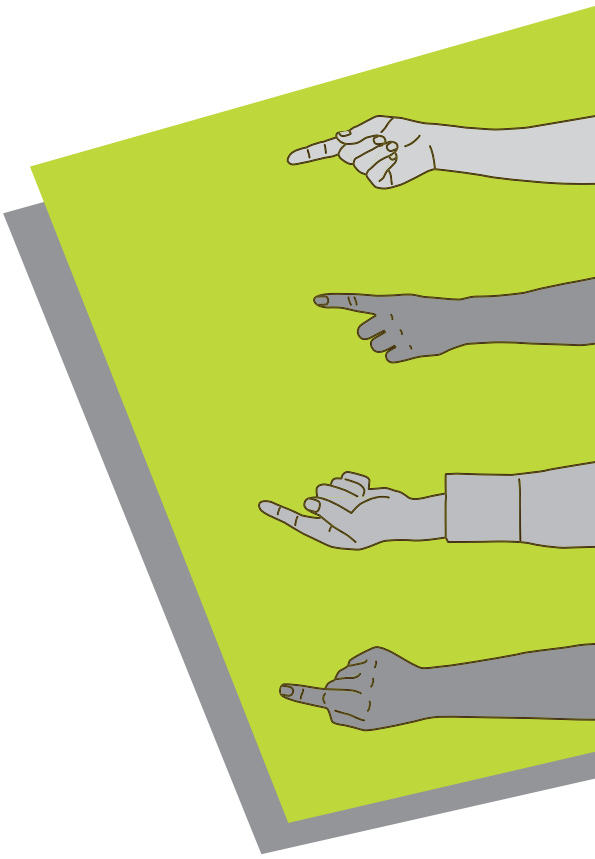
- Access to social media sites like Facebook, blogs, Twitter and YouTube is routinely blocked from council computers.
- There may be no clear policy on using social media for councillors or officers either in a personal capacity or in an official capacity.
- There may be a lack of clarity about whether a councillor's blog or social media profile can be linked from council corporate sites and whether this counts as political or council business.
- Communications strategies rarely incorporate social approaches.
- There often isn't a clear policy for responding to comments from citizens on social networks, whether these be compliments, complaints or service requests.
- Computers can be out-of-date or ill-equipped to use social media. For example, older versions of web browsers or computers with no sound makes viewing residents' YouTube videos impossible.

Councillors wanting to support their roles as local leaders and campaigners with social media may find that it's easier to just set up their own social media presence such as blogs or Facebook pages. There are plenty of free sites and this neatly circumvents the issue of whether official council blog sites need to be shut down during elections.

Councillors do have a responsibility to ensure that their councils are making the most of the potential these tools are offering. Councillors should ask whether there is a council policy for social media use, particularly for officers who work in communications, policy, customer facing services or those who work with communities.

Some questions you may ask about your council's approach to social media:

- Is there a social media policy?
- If access to social media sites are routinely blocked, who can authorise unblocking and what is the procedure for those whose work requires access to social media?
- How are complaints and compliments from external social media sites such as FixMyStreet.com fed into the council's customer service arrangements?
- Is the council integrating social media effectively with more traditional communications channels such as print and the web?



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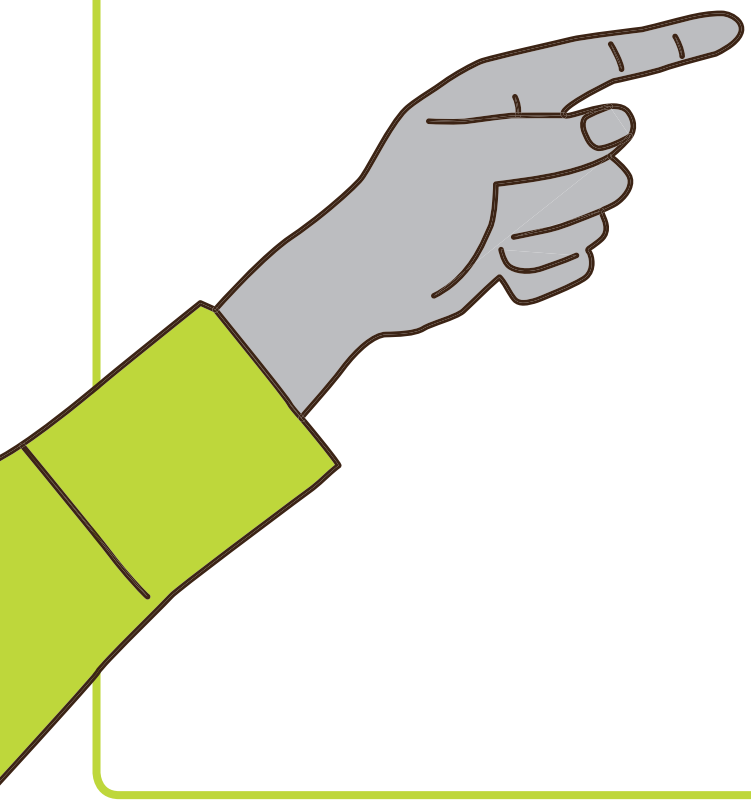
Local government social media myths

Perhaps the main barrier to effective take up of social media by councils is a lack of understanding about how social media communication differs from centrally-controlled and largely one-way broadcast communication (print media, for example). And some people may not fully understand the benefits – and risks – of social media. The 10 Local Government Social Media myths is an attempt to counter some common assumptions.



1. You have to be (technical/ geeky/ a bit weird) to use social media

Millions and millions of otherwise ordinary people use YouTube and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. On the IDeA's own social network – Communities of Practice – over 50,000 local government types are registered, and that's growing every day.

You may have to be a little bit geeky to build some of the more advanced applications, but not always. Anyone can set up a blog in a few clicks. Anyone can upload a photo. Anyone can set up a profile or a group in Facebook. It does take a little expertise to get it all meshed into a good standard for a corporate account. But for individuals and local interest groups, there's no such onus and social media can be a powerful communication tool straight out of the box.

2. It's all about 'tools'

Too often people experienced in the use of social media use the names of popular tools (like Twitter) to describe types of interaction and social networking. Unfortunately, that's just the way things have evolved – a bit like vacuuming being described as Hoovering. Tools are the support, but people make the conversations.

3. Only young people use social media, so you will only reach them in terms of online consultation

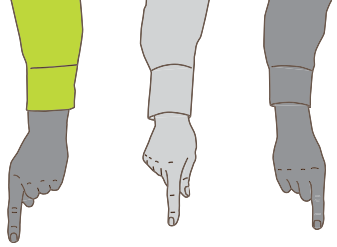
Younger folk may use it as a matter of course, but lots of 'older people' use social media too, and more and more are using it all the time. The average age of Facebook users is 38, and for Twitter it's 39 and Delicious, an online bookmarking service, is 41[11].

However, you do need to have a good idea of who and where people are congregating online. And understand that some people just don't want to engage this way. That's ok.

4. It's a big old waste of time

Human beings are amazing in their ability to waste time. But they don't need social media to do it. People waste time at work emailing their friends, chatting about Formula 1, or wandering around aimlessly holding a piece of paper.

11 Royal Pingdom research, US data, Feb 2010: http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/02/16/study-ages-of-social-network-users/



And people can waste time on social media, too. But increasingly, many councils and councillors are using social media very effectively. They use it to keep people updated on important but very local issues that wouldn't be covered in local newspapers, or to identify issues which are bubbling up locally before they get out of hand. Communicating and listening constructively is never a waste of time.

5. It's too hard

It's not that hard. There are lots of easy ways to get started, and you can focus on doing one thing at a time – like Twitter or blogging or a Facebook page – and get to grips with doing that one thing well. And the great thing about social media is that there are a lot of very social people to turn to for help once you get started.

6. It's easy

It is and it isn't. Much of social media is easy and accessible. But good conversation, consultation, listening, facilitation and communication skills take time and effort to develop. We don't expect people to find their public speaking voice the first time they step onto a stage. We don't expect the first report someone ever writes to be a masterpiece. That doesn't mean we don't do it. And just because many people can do these things, it doesn't mean we don't respect those people who do it well.

There are skills, efforts and talents in social media and online facilitation which should not be taken for granted. But they are skills most people can develop with a bit of practice.

7. If we let people say anything, then they'll say the worst thing

A council site or a councillor's blog must never be the home of nasty vitriol, racist, sexist diatribe or links to porn. And these are all things that can happen if you open up conversations online.

But most people are responsible. Most people know what's appropriate. Do we trust local people? We don't let the random loudmouths stop us from holding public meetings. And we shouldn't let the internet equivalent stop us from holding public conversations in spaces online.

Trust people to behave, but be prepared in case they don't. There are a number of simple tools that can prevent bad things from appearing on your site. Be ready to step in and moderate.

8. Social media is too risky

What are the risks of not doing it? What are local people talking about? If you're not listening to their message where they're saying it, then you're missing a trick and that's a big risk, too. We can't control what other people are saying about us or our organisations. Better to monitor and manage and counter false messages than to get caught unaware.

On the flip side, sometimes mistakes will happen. Only by actively managing your approach to social media in an open environment can you hope to mitigate that.

9. You have to hire an expensive consultant to make social media work

Local government is a big employer. Chances are there's already somebody working within your council or in your local political party who is passionate about social media and they know local government already. They're almost certainly already sharing with and learning from the best in local government.

Find those people and support them to build your approach.

10. It's a replacement for traditional consultation and engagement

The invention of the printing press and the development of political pamphlets never stopped the need for us to hear directly from politicians and local people.

True enough, as you gear up with social media some people will switch over from traditional means of consulting with you. But more likely, you'll start to get more and different people engaging with you. And what also happens is that as you demonstrate that you're listening online and supporting an active community, you'll actually get more rather than fewer people turning up to that drafty hall on a wet Wednesday evening.

This, of course, has cost implications. You or council officers may spend more time engaging or have to accomodate more interest in local issues. But we either believe that democratic engagement has its own value and that involving people will make services more appropriate and therefore more efficient, or we don't. If you're reading this, you're unlikely to be in the second group.

Section 7: Campaigning and social media

Whether you're running for office, promoting council services or raising awareness to help people change their behaviour to achieve local outcomes (for example, encouraging people to stop smoking, eat healthier or reduce teen pregnancies), social media can play an important role in your campaign strategy.

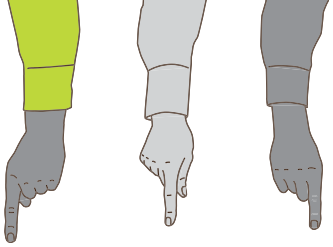
Using new technologies won't eliminate the need to leaflet, use the local paper or knock on doors, but it can help you target and coordinate activities. Councillors and candidates have used to social media to:

- understand local issues, by surveying and engaging with what people are saying online
- co-ordinate campaign workers through social networking sites like Facebook
- translate likely support to real votes by sending out reminders by email, messaging or text
- communicate more complex positions by using blogs to engage in dialogue with citizens
- keep their campaigns at the front of people's minds using Twitter and RSS feeds

As an election candidate, Barack Obama broke new ground in using social media to work with his supporters. His team understood how people use social media and were able to provide support through social networking (myBarackObama.com) which helped citizens discuss issues and organise themselves for local action. Most importantly perhaps, they used their site to collect mobile phone numbers and email addresses which helped them mobilise workers and deliver votes.

Boris Johnson's campaign for London Mayor included resources for bloggers to badge themselves as supporters online. The 2010 local and general elections are likely to be the first in the UK where social media will play an important role in communicating issues, raising money and getting out the vote. We are already seeing the importance of both official political party use of social media and the use of social media by supporters and detractors in the lead up to the general election.

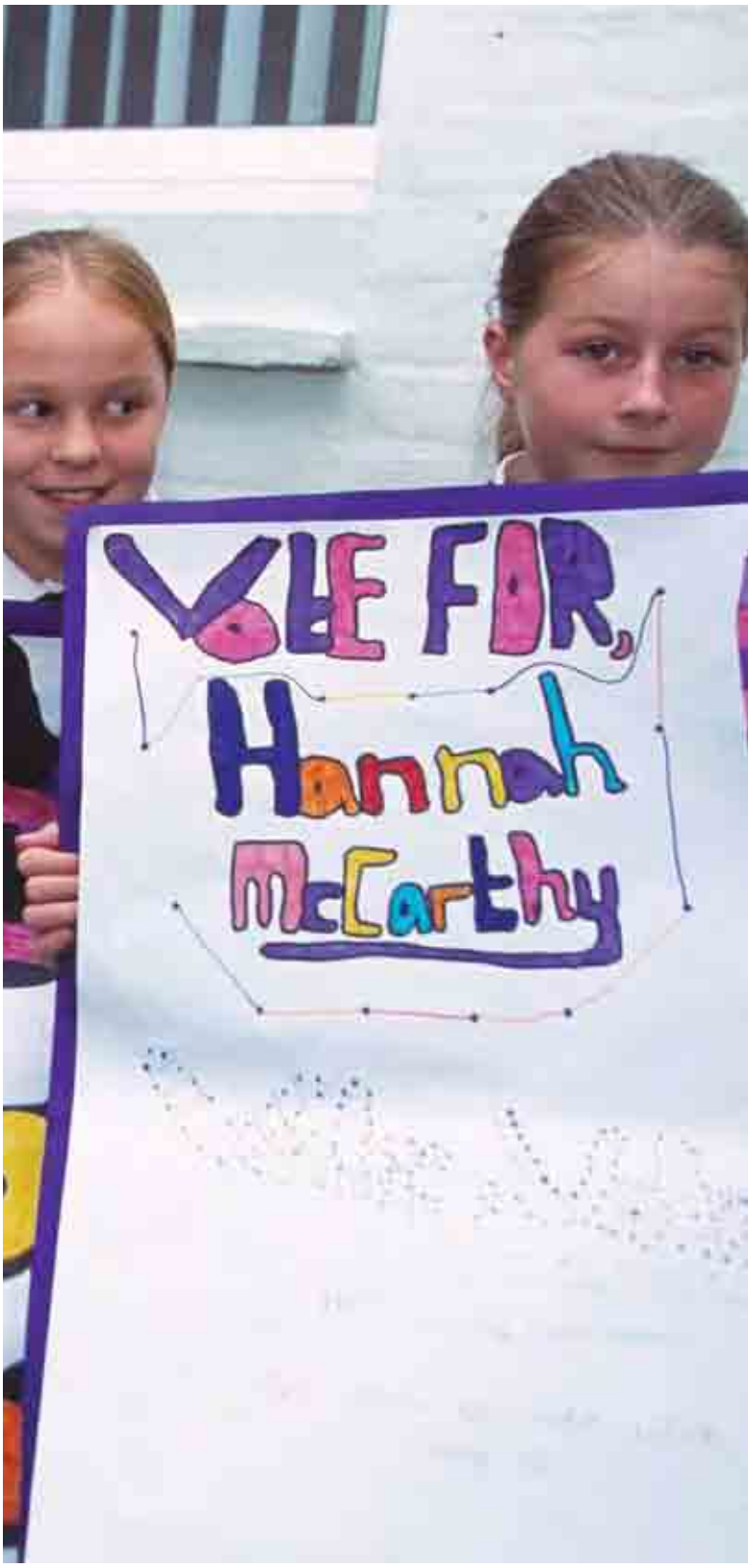
Similar approaches can be used to support campaigns or publicity on local issues. Using social media can help you reach different audiences than you might otherwise. And one of the key benefits of social media is its 'share-ability';



it's easy for people to pass on relevant information to others through email, blogs or social networking sites. Effective campaign media can go 'viral', meaning it's passed on from user to user reaching a far wider range of people with essentially zero marginal cost.

A great example is the Visit Blackpool channel on YouTube (**www.youtube.com/user/VisitBlackpool**). Clever professional production linked with a wider campaign saw some of their videos garner over 100,000 views. The Visit Blackpool website (www.visitblackpool.com) integrates blogging and Twitter, and there's a Facebook presence as well. The Sussex Safer Roads campaign (**www.sussexsaferroads.gov.uk**) produced the Embrace Life[12] video encouraging people to buckle up. It had over a million views in its first month on YouTube. Councillors can take a leading role in organising local campaigns or join in with support for those organised by councils and their partners by joining Facebook groups, posting content on their blogs or tweeting it out to their local followers.

> **'Communication isn't just about broadcasting information, it's an exchange of information. Our new website is a vital tool for us to better engage with all sections of the community. The second of our recent online polls concerned proposals to reduce library hours, which the community just don't want, so we're submitting a petition to maintain existing opening times.'**
> Councillor Antony Bull, Chairman, Southwater Parish Council



12 www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-8PBx7isoM

Section 8: Building engagement

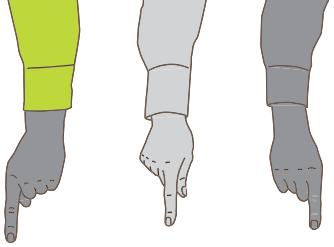
More and more local politicians will start embracing social media as part of their political profile. During elections, they will use it to campaign, to organise their supporters, to solicit donations and to explain their positions. While in office, they will use social media to listen and engage with local people, to provide information to local residents and perhaps to campaign on local issues.

Search engines like Google love blogs because they are usually frequently updated and their structure makes it easy to point directly to relevant content. But you can do a few things to make your online presence easier to find. As you begin to use social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and especially blogging, you'll want to build up their readership to extend their impact. These tips are based on the advice of Mary Reid, Kingston-upon-Thames councillor and long-time blogger.

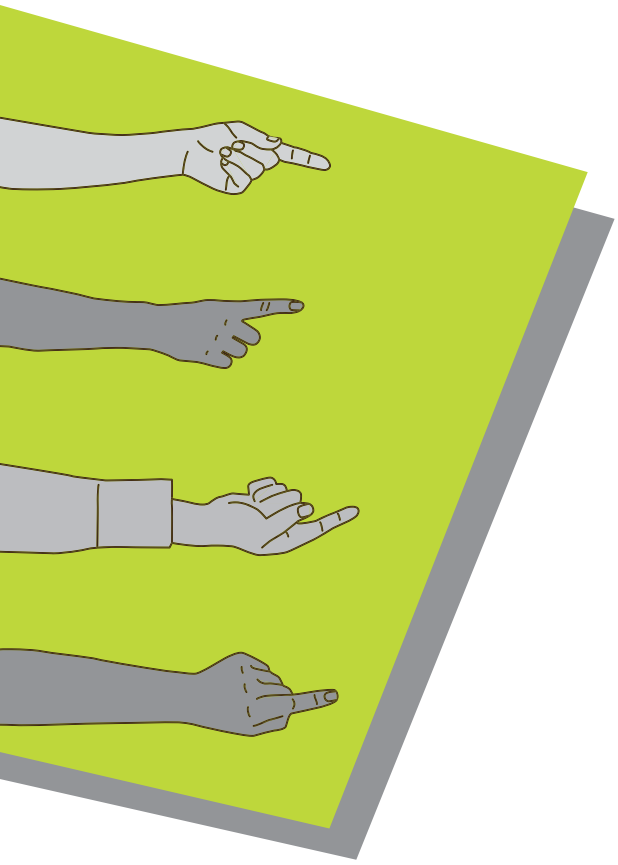
1. **Choose your name well**
   Your name is your political brand, so make sure that your blog name and usernames for networks like Twitter clearly identify you as you. This is particularly important if your real name has already been taken by someone else. Although you will certainly want to identify yourself as a councillor, you may or may not want to use the councillor identity as part of your website address or ID (www.cllrsmith.com for example). Keep in mind that you may not win the next election or may not stay with your current party, but still want to remain in local politics and use your online presence. It's much easier to change a few headers on your blog than to change a URL address such as www.democratpat.com. It's slightly easier to change your Twitter ID.
2. **Make your blog search engine-friendly**
   Most people will be interested in you because of the place you represent. Make sure that your ward, your council and commonly used neighbourhood names are included in any 'about' sections and are frequently mentioned in individual blog posts where relevant. Location, location, location.
3. **Content is king**
   If you're covering local issues well, you may be the only online source of information that's important to local people but not listed in the local newspaper. Local people searching for information about schools, libraries or parking will come to your blog.
4. **Get linking**
   If there are other political bloggers, particularly in your area, start linking to them. Ask members of your own party to link to you. The more linked you are by websites with lots of sites linking to them, the more you'll be found in internet searches.
5. **Cross-link**
   Make sure that all your relevant social media accounts link up. Does your Twitter address link to your blog and vice versa? If you have a Facebook political page, you can set it up to be automatically updated from your blog. Is your website address in your email signature? Make sure your councillor profile on the council's website links to your blog. Some councils don't allow this, so this may be something you want to take up at an organisational level.

Wandsworth councillor James Cousins has links to all his social media accounts on his blog and allows people to subscribe by email

6. **Be reciprocal**
   The blogosphere (a term to describe the online culture of bloggers) is built as much on reading and commenting as it is on writing and publishing. Good bloggers will leave comments on others' posts and most blogs will allow you to leave a link to your website in the comments section. Some local discussion forums have this functionality, too. But be careful. You can link to your blog in all kinds of online spaces, but make sure that it's relevant to the discussion at hand. If you've written about a specific issue being discussed, link directly to that post. If you just randomly drop links, it looks desperate.



7. Leave a paper trail
   Make sure your political leaflets, cards and so on have your web address or social network details.
8. Be a champion for your local area
   Nobody is ever too busy to read good things about themselves or their projects. When you post a good news story, email the people involved to let them know. They will likely pass it on to other people too.
9. Be a good host
   A good blog can provide a platform for further discussion. A good host will encourage comments, and these are a key driver for repeat visits. That usually means culling comments which are offensive (the racist, sexist, and homophobic ones or those that attack private individuals, for example) but allowing a healthy and vigorous debate, including disagreement with you.
10. Be realistic
    If your blog concentrates on local issues, it is going to be of interest only to a relatively small group of people. But those are often precisely the individuals who are likely to make a difference in your area. Quite 'low' numbers can actually mean a huge reach in a small area.



When I started with my blog formbyfirst (www.formbyfirst.typepad.com) it was a little like firing an arrow into the sky. I was never sure whether anyone would actually notice. Then the local newspaper started to follow up some of my blog entries. Stories both personal and in my capacity as a councillor started to appear in print. My bowling club colleagues started to comment on the frequency I was being featured!

Now residents when they meet me in the local shopping centre recommend my site to me with words like, 'you should try to get a story on that local web site – 'formbyfirst'! The most recent and pleasing response has come after I wrote about submitting some issues to our district council using FixMyStreet.com. On my blog I complimented the officials on their quick response. They must have drawn this to the attention of local district councillors, two of whom then wrote to me seeking my views and comments about how the district council web site could be improved.

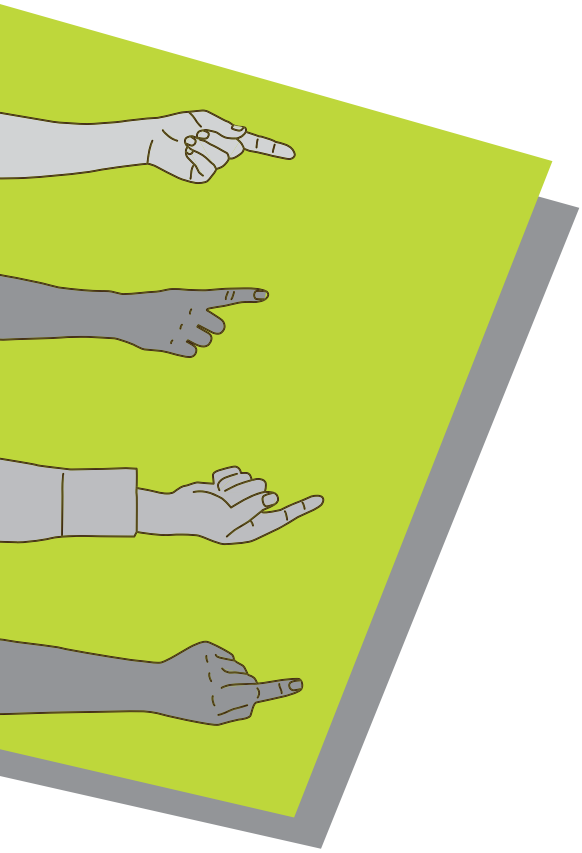
All in all, in my view, social media in local government have a clear future ahead. My advice is 'pick up your bow and start firing the odd arrow or two!'.

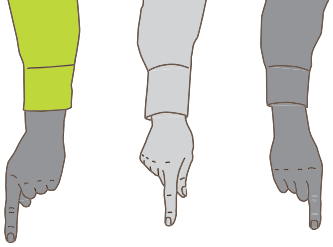
Sean Brady, Independent Parish Councillor, Formby Parish Council

Section 9: Sources of support

Through the Leadership Centre's 21st Century Councillor programme there is an interactive version of this guide with links to examples, support and more at **www.21st.cc/socialmedia**. And you can contribute as well. Most blog posts or social bookmarking services allow you to tag items to help you describe and index them and to help others find them, too. To include your ideas and examples tag them 21stcc or on Twitter #21stcc or visit the website for more information.

Social by social is a practical guide to using new technologies to deliver social impact. There are tools to help you get started, ideas for using social media to lead change in local communities and a very helpful jargon buster at **www.socialbysocial.com/book/a-to-z**. Local by Social is a companion publication produced by the IDeA and NESTA to address the specific issues of social media in local government. You can find both at **www.tinyurl.com/localbysocial**





The IDeA's Communities of Practice for Local Government **www.communities.idea.gov.uk** has over 50,000 registered members dedicated to sharing practice to improve local services. The Social Media and Online collaboration community is specifically dedicated to helping councillors, local government officers and partners use social media to enhance democracy and improve services. The National Member Development Community is focused on councillor development and support.

CivicSurf is a blogging programme for local leaders www.**civicsurf.org.uk**. There is step by step guidance for getting started in blogging and a range of other resources.

Twitter: A Quick Start Guide for People in and around Government by Dave Briggs from Learning Pool **www.learningpool.com/twitterguide/index.php**

The Local Government Information Unit's *Local Government 3.0. How Councils Can Respond to the New Web Agenda* is a good exploration of the issues around councils, councillors and social media.

Socitm Insight has produced *Social Media – Why ICT management should encourage leadership to embrace it* (January 2010) and *Twitter Gritters: Council use of digital channels in emergencies.* (February 2010)

The IDeA's Leadership Academy includes an optional module on media handling and social media for councillors. The IDeA's Connecting with Communities is a local government communications toolkit and includes a host of ideas and suggestions.

Acknowledgements

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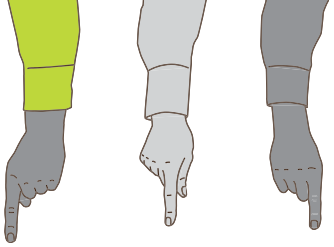
I am deeply indebted to the many councillor users of social media who have contributed directly or indirectly to this document. In particular, one of my own councillors who appears in this list.



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@stevenradams

Nick Bason, Liberal Democrat, Waltham Forrest

www.nickbason.mycouncillor.org.uk

@nickbason

Daisy Benson, Liberal Democrat, Reading

www.redlandslibdems.org.uk

@cllrdaisybenson

Peter Black, Liberal Democrat,
Swansea and Welsh Assembly Member

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Sean Brady, Independent, Formby Parish Council

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Mike Causey, Conservative,
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Tim Cheetham, Labour, Barnsley

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James Cousins, Conservative, Wandsworth

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