

C:\>going where the eyeballs are_

C:\>how email is connecting councils
with their communities_

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The LGiU would like to thank all respondents to the survey on which this report is based. The LGiU would also like to thank GovDelivery for their support. All views, errors and omissions are the authors'.

The data

377 people from 245 councils participated in the survey, which can be accessed at www.surveymonkey.com/s/LGiUdigitalcomms.

Of these, 39 per cent worked in communications, 28 per cent in democratic services, 15 per cent in customer services, 10 per cent in finance and 8 per cent in web management. Other participants included council chief executives, leaders and other key officers.

Participants were asked about four main areas:

- personal use of digital tools to receive information
- current and future communication priorities
- technological capabilities of the council
- potential cost savings through increased use of digital communication channels.

The survey was then followed up with phone calls to add qualitative insight.

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Channels: average cost per transaction

Face to face

£14.00

Telephone (direct to council)

£5.00

Interactive voice response

20p

Web

17p

Average costs based on data gathered by SOCITM from councils in the North West region of England.

10% to 25%: the amount of money participants estimated could be saved through a more integrated use of digital communication.

15% to 35%: the amount of avoidable contact time participants estimated could be saved through a more integrated strategy of digital communication.

77% of participants agree or strongly agree that digital technology will be a key instrument if councils are to deliver savings of 28% by 2015.

79% of participants agree or strongly agree that digital technology can help design more personalised council services.

Forewords

Democracy depends on dialogue

The democratic ideal requires government (national and local) to provide leadership, but leadership that is responsive to the preferences and priorities of the citizens the government serves.

Ideally this dialogue should not just occur every four years through the ballot box, but be an on going conversation between citizens and government.

This is both a democratic and a practical good. We know that services are also more effective when they are designed around the needs and priorities of local communities.

In tough economic times this becomes more important than ever, but shrinking budgets also put pressure on government's ability to conduct effective conversations with citizens.

For local government, faced with the toughest funding settlement for a generation this is particularly true.

To many people new web technology seems the ideal way to engage in more dialogue with communities in a way that is low cost, efficient and allows a two way (or indeed a multidirectional) conversation.

At the LGiU we have long argued that new web technologies are important; in the summer of 2009 we published *Local Government 3.0*, a discussion paper which looked at the different ways in which councils and councillors were using new social media technologies to engage with communities, deliver better services and drive efficiencies.

In that paper we argued that we need to stop thinking of web 2.0 as a set of tools and see it more as a way of thinking and doing that is open, collaborative, non-hierarchical and creative.

The conversation has indeed gone in this direction. It is interesting that people tend to talk less now of social media and instead talk about 'digital democracy' reflecting a growing recognition that what matters is not the technology or the tools but the uses you put them to: the forms of engaging, doing, being that they enable and the way they increase and improve democratic participation for a growing number of people.

In this paper we seek to give some shape to what this approach means in practice for local government. We explore the possibilities and limitations of different social media tools and make practical recommendations on how councils can assess the 'digital ecology' of the communities they serve in order to construct the most effective digital communications strategies.

Dr Jonathan Carr-West, Director of Policy, LGiU

Oakland, a better way?

We are active over many forms of digital communication to build bridges between local government and the people it serves.

One example is the Cross-Boundary Email/Text Alerting Network, created by Oakland County using GovDelivery services and shared with the County's 62 local municipal governments at no additional cost to either the local governments or to citizens.

The Email/Text Alerting Network was instrumental in testing the County's emergency preparedness communications and in managing the distribution of seasonal flu vaccinations. The

County used the email subscription service to notify subscribers of the opportunity to register to receive flu vaccinations. Within just five hours of the message being sent, more than 12,000 residents had registered to receive the vaccine.

The County Animal Shelter has also achieved significant savings and benefits by converting most of its public communications to email subscriptions and alerts.

Coordination of volunteers, donations, and pet adoption events are now easier to manage through the use of group email communication. Another example is the NetVolunteers program, a technology-based communication and outreach initiative that enables trained volunteers to perform resident-to-resident customer service.

Volunteers use social media and other web-based public forums to share information about county programs and services, promote accurate and up-to-date information about county government, and assist in the growth of social networking as a viable tool for communication between government and the people.

Benefits to county government include reduced support costs through increased opportunities for resident self-service and peer-to-peer support. Oakland County estimates that NetVolunteers resulted in more than \$10,000 in cost avoidance savings in the first year after the program began.

**Phil Bertolini, Oakland County, MA, CIO
and Deputy County Executive**

“So many people are living their lives through technology – how can we expect their interactions with politics to be the one exception?”

David Plouffe, manager of the 2008 Obama for America campaign

Executive summary

Our research shows that authorities can reduce communication costs whilst building a more effective and engaging communications strategy.

But to do this they need to choose the right tools for the job. Social media is fashionable and popular within councils, but may often be less appropriate for citizens than more ‘traditional’ tools such as email and text messages.

Council communications should be where the eyeballs are. They should be fitted around the spaces citizens are already using to network with each other and the institutions around them.

In practice, this looks like a fusion of transactional email notifications and social media.

To achieve the right balance, councils need to undertake work in three areas:

First, understanding the problem to assess what action is required. Second, improving content, delivery and reach of existing information produced. Third, signposting to council services, external providers, voluntary and charitable organisers to equip people with the information they need.

This report suggests that councils offer residents a free opt-in personalised subscription platform. The service would allow subscribers to individually identify the information they receive from the council – and how they receive it.

In addition to this we recommend 14 areas of good practice that local authorities should consider adopting.

Understanding the problem

- 1 Conduct an audit of the local digital 'ecosystem' to discover who (people and businesses) are online and what communications channels they prefer.
- 2 Conduct an audit of digital use by council staff, both professionally and personally.

Improving content, delivery and reach

- 3 Open up the use of social media networks to all officers and elected members.
- 4 Designate a digital champion(s) who can run informal 'surgery' sessions with colleagues and promote collaboration and co-production with local residents and businesses.
- 5 Use services that allow residents to tailor the information they receive by opting-in to individual information channels.
- 6 Use multiple channels, integrated with social media.
- 7 Send updates at time-effective points.
- 8 Create content which can easily be shared and encourage the spread of key messages.
- 9 Offer easy feedback opportunities and space for comments and suggestions for improvements.
- 10 Show that you are listening and reply to comments.
- 11 Monitor local, citizen led websites for opportunities to assist the conversation.

Signposting to other services, both internal and external

- 12 Link all notifications to relevant pages on council website.
- 13 Highlight opportunities to engage on social networks.
- 14 Equip people with the information to help themselves.

Taken together, we believe these proposals would considerably improve the delivery and engagement of a council's communications strategy.

Overview

The revised Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity¹ has issued local authorities with a challenge to “take an innovative approach to getting information to those that need it”.

Social media tools, for many, appear to be this innovative approach. These spaces can enable a new relationship between state and citizen and harness the public creative energy, ideas and intelligence required to cope with contemporary challenges such as changing climates, demographics and economics.

This may prove so, but today a Facebook “fan” or Twitter follower doesn’t necessarily capture the connection and lead to a direct, sustainable, two-way relationship with a resident.

There are also many internal barriers yet to overcome – less than 50 per cent of council staff can access social media from their desktop, only 22 per cent agree that they have the skills to respond effectively to the rising digital expectations and just less than a third believe their IT infrastructure is suitable for a ‘digital by default’ method of service delivery.

Today, we remain some way from realising the full potential of the new engagement opportunities that social technology is opening up for us.

New research by LGiU has found that the best contemporary local government communications strategies are ones that:

- reflect the multimedia use of the local community and the services the council offers

1 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/coderecommended>

- build an active subscription and distribution list
- proactively pursue the use of personalised, targeted and timely email alerts
- integrate social media
- direct people to social media at certain opportunities
- use analytics to build an understanding of the wants and needs of individual users.

Local authorities doing this, as this paper shows, are delivering information that is wanted, authenticating their work, creating emotional connections and opening the door to a new relationship between council and constituent.

Policy context

“The current climate in the public sector has helped with the erosion of siloed behaviour, which was a luxury public sector communicators couldn't afford”.

George Eykyn, communications director, DCLG

The revised publicity code has presented the opportunity for councils to look afresh at their communications strategy and, with particular reference to the demands of the Big Society agenda and today's diverse media environment, develop a more proactive approach.

Councils² are being encouraged to:

- explore their communications needs and ambitions – to promote the role and work of elected members, facilitate democratic debate and accountability, engender participation and engagement, and promote co-operation and partnership
- get better at exploiting the mechanisms by which to achieve those ends – not only with reference to the new code but especially to capitalise on web-based opportunities which escape the code's limits to reduce unfair competition with the local press.

Much recent web momentum can play a strategic role in eroding traditional ways of doing things and enabling a new culture of

² Councillors should take heart from the distinction made between publicity reflecting the views of the council and that of individuals. The new publicity code enables elected members to continue making good use of websites, blogs and social networking media, within the context of codes of conduct and equalities duties rather than council oversight.

communication. Hyperlocal and community websites, geo-tagging and open, local data illustrate a 're-localisation' of the web; much of the web's momentum until now has been about the eradication of geography but these developments are about engaging people with place.

This presents unique opportunities for local authorities to transform their relationship with their communities whilst saving money at the same time.

Twitter: 145 million users



Facebook: 500 million users



Email: 2.9 billion users



Mobile phone: 5.7 billion users



Cutting down on costs and avoidable contact

Digital technology can not only improve communication and design better services. It can save money. *Directgov 2010 and Beyond: Revolution Not Evolution* found that if just 30 per cent of services were provided online, savings of £1.3bn a year could be achieved.

The results in our research support the belief that online services can achieve significant savings for councils. Participants in the survey estimated that 15-25 per cent of an authority's communications budget could be saved through a more digitally integrated communication strategy.

One of the main ways these savings can be achieved is through cutting down on avoidable contact time. Participants estimated that 15-35 per cent of contact could be avoided through a more proactive delivery of information through digital channels.

“The shift towards online services has the power to transform the relationship between government and individuals. Not only are services more convenient and cheaper, but they can be better and more personalised.

“This does not mean we will abandon groups that are less likely to access the internet: we recognise that we cannot leave anyone behind. Every single government service must be available to everyone — no matter if they are online or not.”

Response by Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office, to the *Directgov 2010 and Beyond: Revolution Not Evolution* paper

Today's digital, tomorrow's mobile

The landscape is fertile for this innovative approach. As David Plouffe, the manager of the 2008 Obama for America campaign has said, people are increasingly living their lives through technology.

FixMyStreet, a free service to “report, view and discuss local problems” currently receives 40,000 unique visitors per month, with 32,000 new problems posted. We can only expect demands for such online interaction to rise.

Writing recently for the LGiU's *C'llr* magazine, UK Digital Champion Martha Lane Fox, explained that “we lead the world with the highest percentage of internet users with broadband connections” – currently at 82.5 per cent of the UK population.

Looking ahead, it has been estimated that the smartphone “tipping-point” – the time when smartphone ownership makes up half of the mobile phone user population – may be as early as June 2012. Similarly, tablet sales are predicted to overtake laptop sales by 2012, and desktop sales by 2015.

These advances will only shift us further from traditional push communication techniques to ones that are more open, collaborative and non-hierarchical.

Local authorities must take an agile approach to their communications strategy, so that they reflect where people are already networking online, while remaining flexible enough to stay connected to technological innovation and future societal changes.

What are council priorities?

An innovative approach that saves money while building relationships requires authorities to design a clear, evidence driven, resident-focused strategy for their digital communications.

The LGiU's research found that councils identify email notifications, Twitter and Facebook as the key priority for future digital communications.

What tools do you use to receive updates from websites?

Email notifications	95.1%
Newsletters	66.7%
Twitter	34.3%
Facebook	28.4%
RSS feeds	27.8%
Text messaging	13.7%

What are councils using to communicate with local residents?

Surveys/Polls	82.7%
Twitter	79.6%
Facebook	71.7%
Email notifications	71.2%
Youtube	42.9%
Text messaging	42.0%
RSS feeds	41.6%
Blogs	27.9%

What are councils' future priorities?

Email notifications	75.6%
Twitter	72.4%
Facebook	62.8%
Text messaging	56.4%
Newsletters	44.2%
Surveys/Polls	43.6%
Youtube	35.9%
Blogs	32.7%

**“To a man with a hammer,
everything looks like a nail”**

Mark Twain

What, why and where to use social media

Qualitative research found that councils are discovering that social media is especially powerful

- during specific, and usually special, events
- when quick updates and feedback are required
- through channels already commonly used by local people.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's BwD Winter page "provides a winter service from October through to March". By the end of the winter 2011, posts were receiving 4,000 views and subsequent examination of year on year call centre activity revealed a drop of 10,000 in incoming calls compared to the same period in previous years.

BwD Winter demonstrates the scalable impact of such issue-focused initiatives. Residents have been using it throughout the spring and summer to post further queries about local services.

Resident: anyone know if the tip is open in Darwen off watery lane?

BwD Winter: Hi, the tip is open every day except New Year's Day.

This is an example of what we may call social listening. Using web 2.0 technology like Social Mention and Google Alerts a council can collect information about their online communities (or audience) and acquire an understanding of their wants and needs; and at the same time find out what is being said about the council and its services.

But there is a deeper big society element to this work. By being forthcoming with information about grit bins and tip opening times, councils can facilitate more civic action and open new communication channels with people commonly disengaged from council services.

Here then, we start to see the power of social media to save money and deliver better services whilst opening up a new dialogue between the council and the people it serves.

However, as the data is owned by a third party (i.e. Facebook or Twitter), you simply do not have the statistical feedback required to help determine what messages work and what the audience wants.

Therefore, in terms of being evidence-driven, results of many social media initiatives remain more anecdotal than statistical.

The potential of social media

BwD Winter demonstrates the ability of social media to save money, design more efficient services and improve conversations between council and community.

What we need to remember though is what works in these special circumstances doesn't necessarily work in all situations, especially day-to-day interactions.

Manchester City Council has a population of 464,200. The @ManCityCouncil Twitter account has 6,739 followers (the highest of all councils who participated in the research) while the council's Facebook page has 991 likes. This equates to 0.011 per cent and 0.002 per cent respectively.³

How many of these followers are residents of the area? A quick look through @ManCityCouncil's most recent followers suggests that many are private business and journalists.⁴

How many of these followers are online around the time updates are posted? Apparently the best one can hope for is two per cent at any one time.⁵

3 By contrast, The Leader's Blog, by Cllr Richard Leese, Leader, Manchester CC has had over 226,00 visitors in the first half of 2011

4 twitter.com/ManCityCouncil/followers

5 <http://geofflivingston.com/2011/05/16/when-to-tweet/>

The case of Manchester City Council suggests that currently there are simply not enough eyeballs looking to local government through social media to make these channels a top priority of a communications strategy.

It is undeniable that routines are shifting more towards these tools⁶, but the digital statistics on page 13 show that email has 2.9 billion users compared with 145 million for Twitter.

If councils are to position themselves where people are today then foundations must be solidly laid in email communications with a flexible and experimental social media output added on top.

6 Over half of all adults in the US are now on social media
<http://bit.ly/oupYX6>

Has local government got the resource to succeed in this new culture?

63% agree or strongly agree that the use of digital communication internally is encouraged

72% agree or strongly agree that the use of digital communications with the public is encouraged

47% agree or strongly agree that access to social media is available to all staff who should be using it

22% agree or strongly agree that council officers have the necessary skills to use digital communications to engage with residents

35% agree or strongly agree that there is in-house training and support available to officers wanting to learn new digital communication techniques

33% agree or strongly agree that their current IT infrastructure is good enough to deal with more digital-first operations

Is local government ready to engage?

This report has queried whether enough people in the community are yet networking with their local councils through the web for it to create sustainable engagement. But we must also look at councils' internal capacity to effectively use social media.

The findings on the previous page highlight three key issues.

- 1 Local authorities need to remove all barriers that prevent access to social networks.**
- 2 Local authorities need to equip staff with the skills required to adapt to quickly-changing communications cultures.**
- 3 Local authorities need to invest in IT and services that promote innovative practice.**

If we ask whether councils are equipped with the skills and technology to meet the growing expectations of an increasingly online population, we must conclude that many are not there yet.

It therefore becomes even more important that councils remain authentic both to their character and to that of the local community. There is no point creating a Facebook page and asking people to engage if officers and councillors are not ready for the new communications culture these initiatives represent and require.

What is needed, then, is for councils to take an audit of their local 'digital ecosystem' to discover who is online, where they are, how they're connecting and design their online communication around this existing activity.

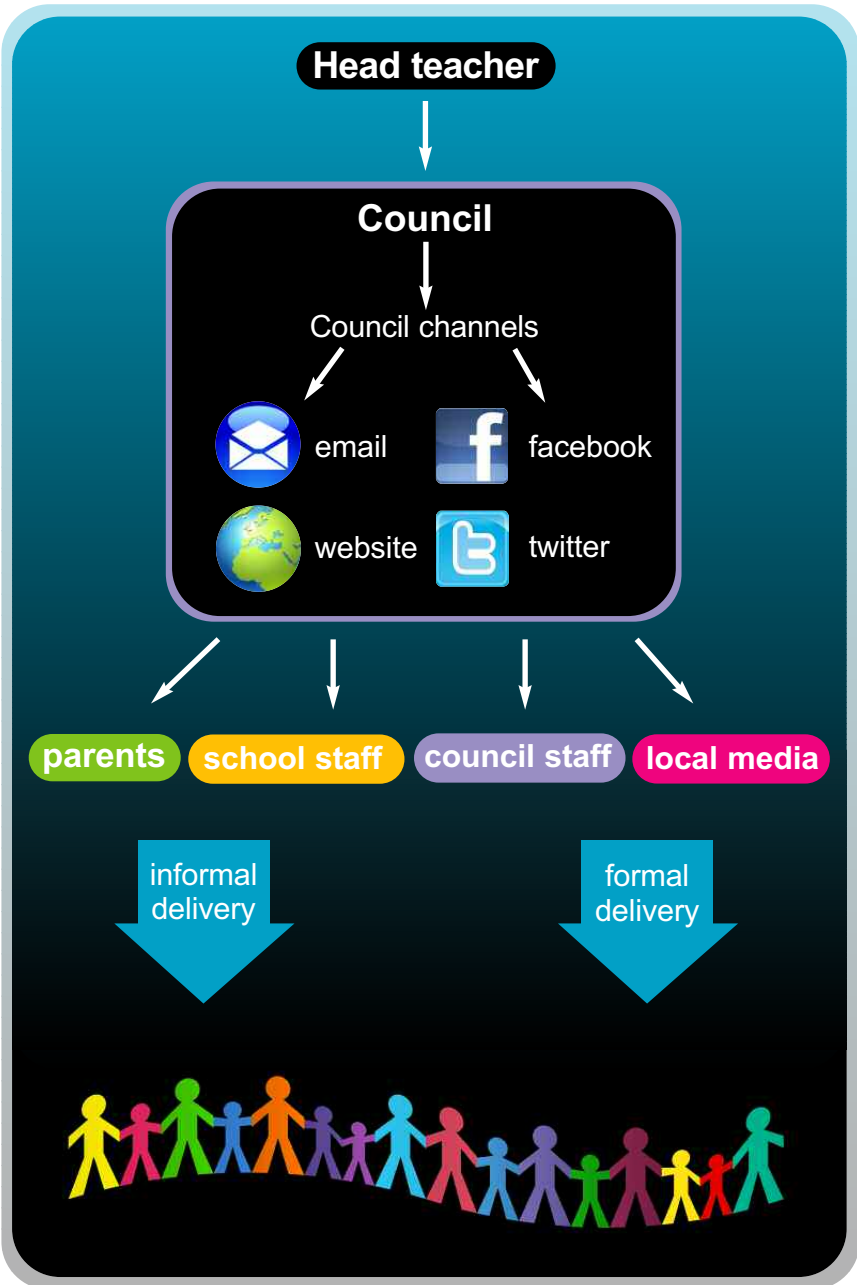
Are you snowed under?

Snow affects local authorities in many ways. A standard way for reporting a school closure due to snow is as follows:

- The staff at council contact centres start early to handle the increase in incoming calls from schools, parents, staff and other residents wanting service updates.
- Schools inform the council by phone and/or email if they are closed. Getting through on the congested telephone lines often delays announcements.
- Contact centre staff record all school closures and pass the details to the web team.
- The web team updates the list of closed schools on the website every 15 minutes.
- Local media receives messages from schools and council websites for their broadcasts.
- Parents overcrowd council websites and phone lines. This prevents a free flow of information.

This is not an efficient way of keeping residents informed. Councils should aim for a strategy that allows:

- the school to send an email to the council system with details of the closure
- email content that is automatically distributed to parents, school/council staff and local media
- a list of closed schools that is created automatically and displayed on the council website homepage
- a 'share this' options that allow parents to pass on the message to their individual networks.



So what should a council be doing?

When we talk about digital democracy we have to avoid being captured by the technological novelty of the methods at our disposal. At its core, digital democracy is about giving people better opportunities to take decisions and to shape the places they live in.

Council communications should therefore be fitted around the spaces citizens are already using to network with each other and the institutions around them.

In practice, this looks like a fusion of transactional email notifications and social media.

- 1 Use notifications to deliver the audience to where they need to be.
- 2 Use social media to join that group of people together.

This report suggests that councils offer residents a free opt-in personalised subscription platform. The service would allow subscribers to individually identify the information they receive from the council – and how they receive it.

Local authorities have potentially hundreds of items they could make available to subscription – from updates on bins and road conditions, to individual school closures and free summer activities for children. These would provide instantaneous delivery of information at a very low cost.

The council would own these relationships and be able to measure open rates and click throughs. This will allow officers to build an understanding of what works more easily than is possible on social media or through traditional methods of communication.

Benefits

Benefits to local people: residents receive only the information they want in a timely, personalised manner.

Benefits to officers and elected members: subscription service can also be used by councillors and officers to keep track of all information from across the council.

Benefits to council: analytical data allows councils to build a picture of what information citizens want.

Avoidable contact time – measuring savings in avoidable contact time is, by its nature, extremely difficult to do. Authorities in the United States using the GovDelivery service are estimated to be achieving savings of 10-20 per cent. This supports the estimations made by participants in our survey who said 15-35 per cent of avoidable contact time could be saved through a more integrated strategy of digital communication.

Issue for debate – such a personalised service may raise worries about creating a filter bubble effect . As people only know what they already know, such a self-selective service may cut people off from wider council services. This results in a series of judgements that councils will have to make about how interruptive they are.

We should remember that while automated systems allow us to save money and time, we still need solid leadership and evidence based decision-making, which can only come through human judgment.

Dartford Borough Council

Dartford Borough Council believes that it has derived many benefits from offering an email-led digital engagement strategy using a service branded *Dartford Direct* across its website.

As of August 2011, nearly 4,350 subscribers – residents and businesses – are signed up to receive personalised, real-time email and/or SMS updates from the council. Since the service was launched in April 2010, almost 170,000 messages have been sent.

Dartford Borough Council has succeeded in meeting the objectives it set for itself when it first adopted the system.

- The number of traditional paper processes has reduced.
- Council staff spend less time sending messages and keeping communication channels up to date.
- Councillors receive alerts when the latest committee reports are published – estimated cost savings of this are £20,000.
- Subscription rates have been increasing steadily.

According to figures from GovDelivery, which supplies the service to Dartford, email is by far the most popular communication channel with the general public. GovDelivery manages almost 20 million email subscribers and sends over two billion messages each year on behalf of government bodies.

Recommendations

Our analysis indicates that authorities can reduce communication costs whilst building a more effective and engaging communications strategy by undertaking work in three areas.

First, understanding the problem to assess what action is required. Second, improving content, delivery and reach of existing information produced. Third, signposting to council services, external providers, voluntary and charitable organisers to equip people with the information they need.

Understanding the problem

- 1 Conduct an audit of the local digital 'ecosystem' to discover who (people and businesses) is online and what communications channels they prefer.
- 2 Conduct an audit of digital use by council staff, both professionally and personally.

Improving content, delivery and reach

- 3 Open up the use of social media networks to all officers and elected members.
- 4 Designate a digital champion(s) who can run informal 'surgery' sessions with colleagues and promote collaboration and co-production with local residents and businesses.
- 5 Use services that allow residents to tailor the information they receive by opting-in to individual information channels.

- 6 Use multiple channels, integrated with social media.
- 7 Send updates at time-effective points.
- 8 Create content which can easily be shared and encourage the spread of key messages.
- 9 Offer easy feedback opportunities and space for comments and suggestions for improvements.
- 10 Show that you are listening and reply to comments.
- 11 Monitor local, citizen led websites for opportunities to assist the conversation.

Signposting to other services, both internal and external

- 12 Link all notifications to relevant pages on council website.
- 13 Highlight opportunities to engage on social networks.
- 14 Equip people with the information to help themselves.

We believe these proposals would considerably improve the delivery and engagement of a council's communications strategy.

Conclusion

Email has been the essential social and business tool of the internet. Amazon goes to great lengths to personalise email messages to include recommendations based on each user's individual profile. In the corporate sector, personalised email is working.

In considering how councils can make the biggest improvements in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of information delivery, this report advises authorities to use email alerts and newsletters that are opted-into by the resident. The figures on page 2 show the massive potential savings this shift can bring.

It is then through this relationship that councils can signpost residents towards more social engagement opportunities.

Local government should be both excited and optimistic about this transformation. Examples from Dartford and Oakland show how well planned, user-focused strategies can have a large, measurable and positive impact in the community. And initiatives like BwDWinter and Manchester's Leader's Blog demonstrate that people want to engage with government through technology.

In closing, it is worth reiterating that digital democracy is not, or is not only, about technology.

We would argue that digital democracy is essentially about giving people better opportunities to take decisions and to shape the places they live in. This means giving citizens the chance to choose the information they receive, choose how they receive it and the opportunity to share it easily with their friends and family.

The means may be new, but the aspiration is as old as democracy itself.

The LGiU is an award-winning think-tank and local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.

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