
LOCAL BY SOCIAL

How local authorities can use social media to achieve more for less

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FOREWORD

NESTA's Public Services Lab has been established to test radical new ways of delivering better public services for less money. As part of this work we are exploring how citizens and policy makers can work more closely to tackle some of our biggest social challenges. The IDeA is focused on helping local public services share their knowledge to support improvement, innovation and efficiency.

What we are both learning is that social media has a big part to play in this and used effectively can both inspire greater local engagement and help transform services to meet the needs of citizens.

Together we have produced this pamphlet in order to demonstrate how, in practice developments in social media might affect, and be used in, the work of local government. It illustrates some of the amazing possibilities and highlights some of the risks to councils if they ignore these technological advances and the people using them.

The ongoing challenge for us all is to take the tools currently being used by digital specialists and make them part of the mainstream. Councils and councillors are already innovators in their field and often champions of new ideas. We hope that this pamphlet will support the great work that is already going on and highlight the opportunities to work with digitally-aware citizens and third sector organisations.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media are changing the world in which we work, socialise and govern, and in many different ways. From Twitter to eBay, Facebook to YouTube, new tools are emerging every year that place the connecting power of the internet in the hands of every one of us. Marketing and sales teams are discovering lucrative new channels; staff and employers are experiencing a change in their relationships; the news and public accountability are swifter and more challenging; and the power of individuals to spread messages is now significant enough that no company or government can ignore it. This is happening here and now, and there is nothing we can do to change it.

In this context, the expectations are growing on councils to engage, work openly, be more accountable and move quicker on issues. Meanwhile, councils are facing the biggest ever post-war reduction in spending from 2011 – still more in discretionary spend – and are being asked to do more with less. Higher expectations combined with drastically fewer resources make the imperative to innovate critical. A new set of tools is needed to meet this challenge.

This pamphlet was commissioned by NESTA and IDeA in response to this changing landscape facing local councils. In 2009 NESTA published *Social by Social* (www.socialbysocial.com), an open resource explaining in practical terms how the public and third sector can use digital and social technologies to deliver services, engage stakeholders and campaign for change. This pamphlet does not attempt to reproduce the

content of that publication: more information on the various tools mentioned here, and how to use them, can be found in *Social by Social*. The purpose of this pamphlet is to take these new developments and apply them to the specific context of local government, to explore how they might practically affect, and be used in, the work of governing our localities.

Social media tools represent an extraordinary opportunity to innovate, to do things that weren't possible before, and we are only just beginning to see what is possible. More and more councils are beginning to use these tools to achieve real value against their objectives, by engaging citizens, listening more, harnessing local energy to help with public activities. Alongside this, the available toolset is growing, as national and international web tools are developed that offer local councils powerful new infrastructures for involving communities and delivering public services.

Certainly there are obstacles to engaging with social media. These tools present new challenges to the structure, working culture, staff management and technical strategy for councils. There are significant challenges to controlling messaging and reputation too, and difficulties in measuring and guaranteeing success. The technology is changing all the time, which means every project in this space is potentially a new innovation, a new challenge, a new risk.

The problem for councils though, is that not engaging now represents a far greater risk than engaging. Citizens will still use these networks to talk about you, whether you add your voice to the conversation or not. The national infrastructures being built to improve government and public services will still exist, and councils will be expected to engage with them. Citizens will expect their council to engage with them on their terms, via their channels, and to be openly available online. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that if councils don't use these tools, the citizens will do it for them, and bypass the council entirely.

The challenge for all councils now is to move social media off their list of challenges, and on to their list of opportunities. If they don't, they face moving into a changing world under equipped and under-resourced. If they do though, they may find that the solutions they seek are right under their nose.

PART 1: THE CONTEXT FOR COUNCILS

The political context

So much has been written lately about the pressures facing local councils that it hardly needs repeating here. Put simply, the level of spending cuts expected requires more than fire-fighting and belt-tightening: it requires a completely new approach. Public spending cuts across the board mean the situation is serious. Hardly the context councils would wish to be working in as they tackle issues such as climate change, population aging, social care or public health. Add to that the calls for greater transparency, better data sharing between partners and the public, more focus on local democracy, and rising support for localism and local communities, and the policy context for councils is indeed rich and complex.

New models are required to meet these challenges, not simply step changes and a few astute cuts. The radical innovation movement has been gathering pace for some time, and nationally and internationally presenting councils with a range of models from around the world for achieving more with radically less. From co-design techniques for creating services, to engaging individuals in local decision-making and budget-setting, the implication of much of the new research is that doing more for less can only be achieved by engaging citizens and harnessing individual responsibility; by doing things with people, not to people. As Sophia Parker argues in *More Than Good Ideas* (NESTA/IDeA 2009): *“slicing existing budgets ever more thinly is not good enough in today’s world.... An*

altogether bolder approach is needed, focused on searching out, incubating, and sustaining much more radical and game-changing innovations.”

The Smarter Government and Digital Britain white papers have set out the government’s ambition to create digitally-enabled public services used by a digitally-enabled population. Alongside the recommendations by the Department of Communities and Local Government in *Communities in Control* to bring more aspects of engagement and civic life online, there is a clear policy imperative for a connected government working alongside a connected population. *“We will embrace new technology to better inform the public; give citizens new rights to information; create a new dialogue between people and public service professionals; and reduce bureaucratic burdens. Public services will improve as they become more personal and more cost-effective, and at the same time they will strengthen democratic deliberation and control in local communities.”* - Prime Minister Gordon Brown, introducing *Putting the Frontline First: Smarter Government* (Cm.7753, 2009).

There is support for this from the opposition too. The Conservative Shadow Cabinet is getting advice on e-government from Tom Steinberg of MySociety, a leading proponent of open e-government and the founder of flagship services like FixMyStreet (www.fixmystreet.com). Shadow Chancellor George Osborne has long advocated open source IT for government. If the Conservatives do form a government, they have promised to put money behind these bright ideas by offering a £1 million taxpayer-funded prize for a website that can ‘harness the wisdom’ of voters for improving public services and saving money. The policy imperative is clear: the future is digital.

The technological context

Meanwhile, the power of the social web is changing the world in which councils work. The internet is essentially a huge collection of pipes, connecting everything together. At first, the web connected people to knowledge, with projects like Google and Wikipedia making it easier than ever to find the

information you sought. Social media are different: instead of connecting people to information, tools like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter connect people to other people. These sites aren't just about sharing knowledge or facts, they are about self-expression and relationships. The information on the internet has been 'socialised'. These social media have been supplemented by an explosion of rich media tools – podcasting, social video sites like YouTube and Blip.tv, web TV, photo sharing on Flickr – giving us a powerful new matrix of tools and channels for sharing knowledge and building communities.

The term 'social media' is actually quite unhelpful, implying as it does that these tools are not for work, merely for fun and socialising. In fact, 'personal media' might be more appropriate, because these tools place the power of broadcast and publishing into the hands of every individual, and enable massive, instantaneous, virtually free contact with and between everyone. At the moment, we mostly use them to poke each other, promote bands, and design peculiar meerkat-centered advertising campaigns. Yet these tools are far from frivolous. We can use them to talk to our government, organise our communities, elect representatives, vote on decisions, campaign, educate and inform. This is a large-scale phenomenon too. Facebook has almost 24 million user accounts in the UK, and throughout the UK more local residents are using social networks than are reading local newspapers. Like the railways, or the telephone, these tools are becoming part of the infrastructure for our society, changing how we do everything.

So in the midst of funding cuts and increasing delivery pressures, councils also face new possibilities, and new challenges. The days of councils writing letters to us, or demanding to see us, are already looking slow, antiquated and costly. In fact, the notion of councils talking to us at all without listening to what we are saying is looking increasingly outdated. Councils are not equipped for this. How does my council e-mail everyone in my building? Why does my council keep writing me letters when no-one else does? Why can I vote for who wins X Factor, but not on the future of my child's school? And how can my council deliver services that meet the needs of digitally-enabled people like me, but also serve my neighbour, who

doesn't even have a computer?

The challenges to councils are becoming increasingly obvious, but there are also opportunities: new ways of working, cost-savings, service improvements and greater democratic engagement. If we truly understand the new technological and sociological context in which councils and their partners must operate, it should also become obvious that it is only by engaging with these new tools that the risks can be managed, and the opportunities made to outweigh the costs. The choice for councils is stark: get on board, or get left behind.

PART 2: THE OPPORTUNITY

So the big question for councils right now is, how can social media help? And not just help to make new things possible, but save real time and deliver greater efficiency. In the face of radical spending cuts, the key question for most councils will be: 'Will this eat up my time and make me less productive, or make things more efficient?' How can social media actually help councils to do what they need to do, and not simply be the icing on the cake?

The mathematics is pretty straightforward. The Society of Information Technology Management's recent analysis of customer service interactions lists web transaction costs at 27p on average, compared with phone transactions of £3.22, and face-to-face transactions of £6.56. The web is cheaper, and quicker. Councils that find ways to shift their business online quickly will save money. Yet the really exciting cost-savings will come from restructuring the existing processes entirely. Social media allow far more people to contribute to solving a problem, which means potentially far greater efficiency overall, even given the increased burden on communicating and responding to the public. Many councils are, in little ways, trying both approaches, and there are enough early signs of success to suggest new models and point the way for how these tools might be used in a radically more efficient local government.

In a new field such as this, examples of successful innovation are still relatively fresh and we may need to wait a while before we have tangible evidence of these tools saving councils money and delivering better services. For now, it is up to us to imagine

the various ways in which councils might use these tools, to try them out in small ways, to watch what works and what doesn't, and model the savings which could be made. What follows is a collection of practical lessons learned from the best practice out there in the field today.

Informing citizens

If you are looking to keep citizens up-to-date with important, time-critical information about their area, then virtually-free tools that enable instantaneous broadcast to a vast number of people should be of interest to you. Many councils are realising that by making their public information notices available via social media channels, they can vastly increase their reach with very little extra cost. Firstly, most of these tools make it very easy to republish information to other sites, including a council website, meaning they can be used as a single, all-purpose newsfeed system which feeds all the existing channels. Secondly, the social nature of the medium means that other people can forward your messages on, so that important news travels faster, and further, than you could manage on your own.

The extreme weather of early 2010 saw many councils around Britain using social media to communicate snow updates directly to the public. Kirklees Council and Essex County Council were among those to set up a 'Gritter Twitter', giving 24-hour updates on the roads that were being gritted. In addition, the Essex County Council website featured a roadmap showing roads that were being treated, with live information being re-rendered in a more accessible form. *"Mobile technology is now crucial – it's real-time information, there's no spin. This will have lessons on where councils go next,"* says Giles Roca, Essex County Council Head of Communications. Chorley Council used both email and Twitter to send out their own photos of staff doing what council workers have been doing valiantly throughout the cold spell – trying to keep things moving. In Cumbria, a web chat hosted by the News & Star with representatives of the local police had 5,300 readers, according to their editorial director, Neil Hodgkinson. *"People want information – what schools are closed, what bus routes are available. People turn to us and it's important to do that,"* he said.

There is more to learn from the snow than just giving people information quickly too: the speed of communication makes new things possible. In January 2010, Brighton & Hove City Council issued an appeal on Twitter for 4x4 owners to help reach vulnerable residents and to ferry people to hospital. Their message was forwarded, or 'retweeted', hundreds of times, with many additions such as: "come on Chelsea tractor drivers, redeem yourselves!" The appeal was repeated the following day and similarly retweeted extensively. Over the next four days, a total of 12 volunteer drivers helped out around three or four times each with meals on wheels, accessing vulnerable adults and hospital transfers. The council was overwhelmed by the 'tremendous response' of the local community, and the project was also praised by Communities Secretary, John Denham. By giving real-time information to the public quickly, they created something new: they made it possible for their citizens to help. These tools enable councils to harness the energies of local activists and volunteers to solve problems in new and radically more efficient ways.

It isn't just in times of crisis that these tools are useful. Somerset County Council has started a 'daily menu feed' on Twitter (www.twitter.com/scsschoolmeals) updating parents on what their children are eating in school. Kent County Council has used a number of different tools to reach staff and the public, and their Twitter feed (www.twitter.com/Kent_CC) now has more than 1,000 followers. Newcastle City Council has even more, and has been using it not just to broadcast information but to respond to queries on-demand. *"We have also been able to respond through Twitter, answering questions on the new city library development and half-term activities for teenagers - on occasions responding to people who had not directed their questions at the council and hadn't expected a response. Twitter has become one of the top referrers to the council's main site,"* says communication adviser, Alastair Smith.

Reporting problems

If you could have a workforce of thousands spotting and reporting problems in your area and telling you exactly what your team should fix next - for free - wouldn't you be

interested? Social media are embedded into people's daily lives and behaviours, which makes it the perfect medium for encouraging citizens to report problems as they go about their day, and tell the authorities what they wish they were doing. Any council looking to improve general satisfaction with the local area, or increase civic participation, should be thinking now about how they can open up their offices to all the many channels available for citizens to tell them what their area needs next.

Love Lewisham (www.lovelewisham.org) was launched in 2004 to address specific community problems such as environmental issues and crime. The council recognised that the reporting process for residents needed to be simplified, and also that the process was one-directional. Residents would make a call to the council's environment call centre where it would be logged, but they could not quantify the size of the reported incident, or give quick feedback to the resident who had taken the time to report the incident – and there was a time delay between reporting a job and the street cleaning teams remedying it.

The council's Love Lewisham service allows residents to report issues and see live feedback on their and other people's issues. The whole process is public and this increased transparency has improved response levels. *"Sometimes, a job I report is done before I even get back to the yard,"* said one council staff member. The project has led to reductions in fly-tipping, graffiti, potential arson and dumped rubbish. The council also now has ten parks and open spaces which have been awarded green flags to recognise their high quality, and is continuing to improve more sites. Resident satisfaction levels have increased too: *"I'm still using the excellent Love Lewisham site, a wonderful interactive resource for generally improving the neighbourhood,"* says one local resident.

This service, and similar projects like Talk2Croydon (www.talk2croydon.co.uk), show what can happen if councils are willing to engage in conversation with residents about their area. However, building a website is only one way to do it: there are more than enough tools available to try this for free, right now.

One of the best examples has been developed in Spain, in

the small Catalan town of Copons. In the past, when a citizen had a problem, they went to the council to explain it, or filled out a form. They rarely received an answer though, and in such a small town it was often difficult for the council even to solve the problem. Ricard Espelt, their Technology Councillor, proposed a new path for taking decisions. Now, when somebody has a problem, they publish it on Facebook. Everybody can participate with their existing digital profile (meaning anonymity is not allowed), anyone can propose – and solve – a problem, and the council must always give an answer. The council also offers training sessions to avoid the digital divide, and shares the project with other villages to increase open government.

There are obvious advantages to this platform for residents, not least that the process is simpler, easier and more transparent. Yet there are major benefits to the council too. *“In a small town like Copons, problems are small but real ones, and the traditional solution would be that the citizen would shift the problem towards the city council, which might or might not solve the problem, given their limited resources,”* says Ricard. *“More citizens can get involved and give their opinion. It isn’t just seven people at the council giving solutions. Everybody can participate in solving a problem. Sometimes, citizens who have had the same problem in the past give their opinion and this is fantastic!”*

By opening up their platform to the public, Ricard and his small team have not only made the existing communications system more efficient, they have also brought the local community into the problem-solving process, enabling them to do more with less. Having such an engaged community also helps them to prioritise their resources. *“Another benefit for the council is to have a space to propose projects for the future, and see the opinion of the citizens,”* says Ricard. In a town with limited resources, getting the spending priorities right can make a big difference. Now 40 per cent of residents are members of the Copons Facebook group (typically the members are young people, with the average age of 30 overall), and they use this tool to report issues and talk to their local council. There is more dialogue in the village, better understanding of the needs of citizens and the limits of the local administration, more

people working to solve problems, and a higher level of digital literacy in the community. Not bad for a free service.

Bracknell Forest Council (www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk) has also been experimenting with most of the popular social networks to improve the access of residents to online services and the communication of council activities. Their Facebook page (<http://bit.ly/2TPHyd>) has made use of some simple coding to put a substantial amount of their online services inside the social networking platform, allowing anyone to gain the information they need in the shortest time possible. These services include access to maps of local leisure centres, an events directory, a 'do it online' directory lifted from their main website and the videos and photos they've uploaded on to YouTube and Flickr. With over 250 members of their page (and more people just visiting), it is clear the channel is appreciated amongst those interested in staying connected with the council without having to visit the main website.

Enhancing democracy

Local democracy and citizen engagement are important priorities for local government. Social media tools provide excellent opportunities to engage people in elections and government activities; they also offer the possibility of involving citizens at the heart of the democratic process, giving citizens a say in the detail of local government decision-making.

Derbyshire County Council used a mix of online channels to provide information and real-time reporting of the local and European Parliament elections in 2009. Their website (elections.derbyshire.gov.uk/2009elections) featured text and video content, and made use of both Twitter and Facebook as two-way communication channels with citizens. This delivered against two of the council's priorities: to improve access and encourage participation in council information, and to promote Derbyshire as a whole. *"It enhanced local democracy, citizens said they felt more informed and involved in the process,"* says Sarah Lay, eContent Officer for Derbyshire County Council.

Newcastle City Council claims to have been the first council in the UK to announce election results in real time through

Twitter. The results for the Fenham ward by-election were sent to 'followers' of the council through their Twitter page (www.twitter.com/newcastlecc) or on their mobile phones as soon as they were announced. *"We're always looking for fresh ways of keeping the people of Newcastle up to date with the things which affect them, and especially in engaging them in two way conversations when we do, and we think Twitter is a fantastic way of doing both of these things,"* said Peter Holt, the council's Director of Communications and Marketing. *"As far as we're aware no council has ever 'tweeted' an election before, so Newcastle really is leading the way both nationally and potentially internationally."*

In addition to engaging wider audiences in traditional voting activities, the power of the social web allows citizens to be directly involved in council decision-making, in a way that has never been possible before. Birmingham City Council used text messaging (SMS) as part of a street naming competition, which helped it record an increased number of entrants. The instant nature of SMS messaging meant residents could text into the competition wherever they saw the poster. *"SMS offers people the ability to enter quickly and effectively with minimal effort,"* says Tammy Palmer, communications officer for transportation and street services. *"Through offering this medium we have seen a greater level of participation in the competition and it has been commended as one of the most successful campaigns in terms of number of entrants at the council to date."* The council was able to reach a wide audience, fulfilling part of its mission to *"communicate effectively with the public and ensure local community involvement in local projects."*

Help a London Park (www.london.gov.uk/parksvote) took this idea a stage further. This was a simple competition run by The Mayor of London for people across London to vote for the park they thought deserved to receive £400,000 for improvements. The parks were broken down into five London sub-regions with a total of 47 parks to choose from, with ten winners receiving the money. The project got councils, voluntary sector organisations and community members working together to secure funding for the green spaces they cared about. This led to the creation of Facebook groups, YouTube videos, Flickr photos and numerous blog articles. Allowing voting by text

and online opened it up to a wider group of people than would typically take part in this kind of consultation. By the end of the project over 110,000 votes had been counted, with one park alone receiving 6,677.

This simple competition harnessed the power of the community to help local government prioritise its investment where the community felt it was most needed. *“This investment will make the capital’s open spaces cleaner, safer, greener and more enjoyable places for Londoners to use,”* said London’s Mayor Boris Johnson. Engaging the public in the process created greater public approval for the spending, and brought public attention to the value of these important local resources in the process.

Campaigning

Local councils are political environments, and social media offer powerful tools for campaigning and raising awareness of issues. Councils are increasingly aware of the need to engage with and respond to citizen-led campaigns and petitions, and the duty to respond to electronic campaigns is becoming more pressing. The 2007 campaign by HSBC’s graduate account customers shows the power of these tools to achieve impact. They used Facebook to complain about HSBC’s introduction of charges for overdraft facilities, and gained such a large following (and, crucially, told them all how to switch banks) that HSBC was forced to drop their proposals.

Many elected members have seen the power of these tools and are making smarter use of social media to campaign for office and engage their constituents. Councillor Daisy Benson of the Redlands area of Reading has been using Flickr to highlight examples of graffiti in her area and encourage residents to upload and share their examples too, under the strap line: ‘Tagging isn’t art, it’s criminal damage’. She currently has over 700 followers on Twitter (www.twitter.com/cllrdaisybenson) and has been blogging successfully for several years at www.redlandslibdems.org.uk. In 2010 she was a nominee for Online Councillor of the Year organised by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU). *“These tools also encourage councillors to listen more to residents, which I think can only be a good*

thing,” says Daisy. The 2010 winner, Ross Grant of Leicester, only embraced social media a year before but is already an enthusiastic blogger (leicesterpolitics.blogspot.com) and also a keen advocate of Twitter. *“I regularly meet people in the flesh after chatting on Twitter,”* says Ross. So many councillors are now joining Twitter that a website called TweetyHall has been set up to track them all and signpost citizens to their updates (www.tweetyhall.com).

How councils respond to this digital engagement from their elected members is becoming increasingly important. Smart councils can also use these techniques themselves to shift attitudes in the locality, such as encouraging local volunteering and civic participation, increasing satisfaction with the area, and targeting specific cultural issues such as racism. They and their elected members will also need to know how to respond to small campaigning organisations too, who can now achieve major political impact using just the enthusiasm of their supporters and some simple new media tools to organise themselves. Love it or loathe it, social media campaigning is here to stay.

Building communities

Social media are all about communities. They connect people together, help them share who they are, encourage conversation and build trust. They are 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 text messaging and social networking software can give councils a scaleable, 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 piece that makes everything in the community work better. Any council tasked with building a sense of belonging in a neighbourhood, increasing resident satisfaction levels, and reducing social problems like vandalism or racism, can do much with social media.

Harringay Online (www.harringayonline.com) was set up to strengthen the neighbourhood of the Borough of Haringey in

North London. The site was launched in 2007, built on the free social networking platform called Ning. The central idea behind the social network was to generate and provide neighbourhood information, by neighbours for neighbours, such as information about safety, health care, local businesses, community event planning and local news. *“Ultimately our goal is to increase the wellbeing levels of people in neighbourhoods,”* says founder, Hugh Flouch. The platform includes a busy discussion forum, member-led groups, photo and video sharing, events, planning updates, news and advice, and personal pages and blogs for each member.

The site now has over 2,300 registered users and gets about 300-500 hits a day from between 200-250 unique visitors. A community priorities survey hosted on the site received a remarkable response rate of 70 per cent of the users. The web site also hosted the largest petition ever signed in the neighbourhood in response to local traffic issues, and the local police have become active members of the site, providing safety information while listening to the concerns of the community. The community is now sufficiently established that members of the platform collaborated to clear the ice from Harringay Passage. The site has provided a bridge between individuals, groups of individuals and local government officials, making it a true community working together for the benefit of the neighbourhood. The practical and emotional support that the site has provided to its members has been a tremendous success. This clearly meets the council's vision – to be ‘a council we are all proud of’. The running costs for Harringay Online are currently around £250 per year, all funded by donation.

Another project, this time using mobile phone technologies, points the way for the future. Funded by NESTA, entrepreneur Andrew Wilson's Thumbprint City allows residents of Manchester and other cities to text how they feel about an area. It then tags the comment with an exact location to create a map on the site of people's personal experiences of an area. Signs on bus stops ask people, ‘How did you feel when you first came to Manchester?’ Residents and visitors use their normal social tools to connect with their neighbourhood as they walk through it, making it easier than ever for people to engage tangibly with their locality. They are also trialling a

local information service based on text messages to answer questions about local resources and recommendations. Harringay Online is currently looking at adding text message support to its service too.

Delivering services

We have seen many examples of how social media can be used to engage citizens in delivery of public services, and how technology can improve the efficiency of existing services. It is still difficult to justify delivering services entirely through digital channels when so many people currently do not have access to the tools; however social media are certainly part of the mix. Offering services through a range of channels, including the latest digital tools, means increased efficiency and greater engagement overall. Serving the digitally-enabled citizens in more efficient ways can save time and money which can be spent on reaching those who don't engage.

Social media can make traditional methods work more effectively. An excellent example of this is Southwark Circle (www.southwarkcircle.org.uk), 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. Not run, but supported, by the council, the service meets the council's aims to ensure Southwark is a place where people love to live, everyone achieves their potential, and which promotes healthy and independent living.

In his speech 'The age of austerity', David Cameron singled out Southwark Circle for special praise: *"In the London Borough of Southwark, a new social enterprise called Southwark Circle is delivering vastly improved care services for less money designed by elderly people for elderly people using local social networks to bring real improvements to people's lives. Our government spends nearly £400 million a year on advertising to reach sixty million people while Wikipedia, one of the largest*

websites in the world, spends about one per cent of that to reach 280 million people. Sweden's education department. Southwark Circle. Wikipedia. They're all delivering more for less."

As these tools evolve, they will open up the possibility of delivering services in a much more personalised way. For decades, delivering services to citizens has followed a mass production model, developing a standard 'offer' and delivering it as consistently as possible through a standardised bureaucratic framework. Now the possibilities for tailored services are far greater, and as social media are challenging the mass production models of television and advertising, so too they will challenge our assumptions that the best way to create a fair society is to give everybody the same thing.

Knowledge management and collaboration

In addition to using these tools to talk to citizens, social media tools also have many applications within councils. They can help improve communications among staff and also with suppliers and stakeholders. Within councils, wikis, discussion forums and micro-messaging tools like Yammer (www.yammer.com) can provide dynamic new ways to share information and retain knowledge in ways which require far less management than conventional hierarchical structures. Imagine how much e-mail traffic could be reduced if there were instant, Twitter-like methods for keeping in touch with what everyone is doing, and a shared council internal blog to post information learnt at meetings and on projects. Social media organise information around people, making it easier to find things within what at first appears to be a chaotic system.

The distributed, scalable nature of these tools means they can also be applied outside the organisation. Everything that can be achieved within the council can also be achieved with suppliers, key stakeholders and partner organisations. In fact, by using the free public tools to communicate activities, knowledge networks can be extended beyond the boundaries of the organisation very easily. There are risks here around confidentiality of information, but where councils have been sharing information in public they are usually finding that the benefits significantly

outweigh the problems. Councils and individuals who have large followings on Twitter, or engaged communities on Facebook or other networking platforms, have effectively gathered a group of people who want to help them achieve their objectives, and can help them with advice, research, introductions, recommendations and much, much more.

The IDeA's award winning Communities of Practice website (www.communities.idea.gov.uk) offers one successful example of digitally-enabled collaboration between councils and has significantly changed the way that councils share knowledge. Over 50,000 members of the communities of practice platform are sharing ideas and support across over 1,000 topics, from key strategic areas like performance, efficiency and workforce development, to important niche issues such as census preparedness where officers can often feel alone inside huge organisations. Alongside this, the Social by Social community (www.socialbysocial.net) provides a place for anyone involved in using social media for social good to share ideas via a free Ning network maintained by the community. IDeA has been supporting this platform too, so that council staff can share best practice with people outside the local government sector. More and more communities are springing up online that councils can use to train their staff, seek advice and learn from past projects.

Social media can also enhance traditional business processes, including face-to-face meetings. Twitter is now being used extensively in technology conferences and is increasingly taking root in the rest of the business world. For example, creating a Twitter 'hashtag' for an event – simply a keyword prefixed with a '#' symbol, such as #socialbysocial – enables event participants to comment on the conversation, share links, ask questions of panel members and talk to each other. It also enables people who can't be at the event to join in and add their voices to the conversation. This 'back channel' for the event can become a stream of content in its own right: Innovative events organisation, The People Speak (www.thepeeps.net) recently designed a visualisation system for Arts Council England that allows event producers to display a selection of the best comments from a Twitter stream throughout the conference, creating a polished, social replacement for the

old-fashioned Powerpoint. As the business world begins to embrace these tools and find new ways to harness them for productivity, the public sector can benefit too.

So what's next?

We are still in the very early stages of understanding what is possible in this field. Nevertheless, the examples we have discussed here point the way to what the future may look like, and should stimulate councils and their partners to invent new projects and try new things in pursuit of providing better services for less money.

Here are just a few of the areas in which councils might use social media to deliver their priorities:

- Recruitment, staff retention and strengthening professional relationships.
- Delivering technology projects and digital architecture.
- Public engagement and consultation, to a micro level.
- Reaching new, disengaged audiences, especially young people.
- Personalisation and co-design of services.
- Engaging citizens and service users to help with service delivery.
- Petitions and awareness campaigns.
- Social marketing and behaviour change.
- PR and reputation management.
- Public accountability and open government.

It is up to each of us now to imagine what is possible, to innovate in whatever way we can to test our ideas, and most importantly, to share what works so others can learn from what we are doing. An increasing number of councils are engaging with these tools already. With their work, and that of people in other countries and other sectors within the UK, the body of knowledge is increasing.

PART 3: THE OBSTACLES

So, if these tools really are so cheap and powerful, so beneficial for councils, why isn't everyone using them? With all these possible applications and with such a low cost of entry, shouldn't all councils be engaging with social media right now? What makes these tools so much harder for councils to adopt than they are for a small anti-racism campaign, or a group of disgruntled graduates?

The barriers to engagement are first cultural, second practical. Firstly, doing things in new ways requires a shift of mindset to see the potential of what can be achieved, and a new set of skills for staff and management to be able to deliver it. Secondly, using new tools in a systematic way requires a change of infrastructure and technical support, and has a huge impact on how councils work, communicate and govern themselves.

Here are a few of the key areas which you will need to address if you want to take advantage of these new tools to advance council priorities.

Space to innovate

In an environment where savings are required, it can become harder to find the time and money necessary to try new things. Yes, the web is cheaper and quicker, and can deliver real cost-savings over time, but using new tools also involves new processes, new structures, new skills, and there are no guarantees that the results will match expectations. The

technology is cheap and low-risk, but as the pressure on councils rises the likelihood is that their staff will find it harder to find the time amidst day-to-day fire-fighting to try new things.

But try they must. To quote William L. McKnight, Chair of the innovative technology firm (and Post-It note inventors) 3M: *“Management that is destructively critical when mistakes are made kills initiative.”* The best companies retain their research and development budgets even when resources are tight, and so councils – and the public sector in general – need to secure for themselves the space to speculate, experiment, and fail. *“Such work is often undertaken in a culture and policy that mitigates against disruptive innovation. Despite local government’s significant role in achieving the necessary step-changes in both public service outcomes and expenditure, the sector still lacks the necessary infrastructure – the investment, support, methods and relationships – to focus its innovative work in any kind of systematic way. We believe this kind of focus will be critical to local government’s capacity to fulfil its role as a leading voice for innovation in the future,”* says Sophia Parker in *More Than Good Ideas*. Councils need to see innovation as a core activity, because it is their future. Failure is only a waste of time if nothing is learned.

Reputation management

With the power of the social media comes more unpredictability. Social media are unusual in two ways: their speed, and also the decentralised nature of the communications. It only takes one person to spot a story and suddenly it’s everywhere, and everyone has a voice in how it develops. This can be positive as well as negative: in 2009 the Metropolitan Police were called to account by protestors filming on their mobile phones, whilst the #welovethenhs campaign on Twitter (www.twitter.com/search?q=%23welovethenhs) swamped the NHS with positive comments about its great services and special place in British society. From Christmas number ones to HSBC graduate overdrafts, information travels fast these days.

For organisations which are accountable to the public,

and to the media, this can mean bad news travelling faster, embarrassing stories leaking out, or staff saying the wrong thing on a sensitive issue. There's another dimension here too: almost everything we say online is indexed and stored forever, and can come back to haunt us later. How can councils monitor a vastly increased communications output and ensure that all its corporate communications remain 'on message'? Understandably, many chief executives and managers are reluctant to engage in any activity that is likely to expose their organisation and their elected members to risks of reputation and perception.

Like so much of what is happening at the moment though, the question is what is the alternative? News and opinions will be circulating about your organisation via social media right now. At the very least, you should be listening in with tools like Twitter Search (www.twitter.com/search) and Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts); and when bad news does travel, the best way to manage it is not to block it, but to engage. Oil firm Trafigura's attempted injunction to block reporting of its activities off the Ivory Coast was overturned after Twitter users swamped the web with comments and criticisms. As Usenet creator John Gilmore famously said in 1993, the internet *"interprets censorship as damage and routes around it."* The only way to control what people are saying about you on social media is to join in the conversation, not as the voice of authority shutting things down, but as a real person engaging openly and honestly with the criticisms. By positioning yourself in the conversations to begin with, and allowing your staff to build relationships with people there, you can reduce the risk of one lone voice, or one piece of bad news, dominating the debate.

Al Smith, working on behalf of Newcastle City Council, showed what can be achieved by engaging positively with a Facebook group that sprung up around the closure of the Cooperage bar in the city. The group was initially very critical of the council's role in the bar's closure due to noise complaints, but Al was able to establish himself as a member of the community, put the council's side of the story and shift the conversation in a positive direction. *"I introduced myself,"* he says. *"On Facebook there's not really an option to post as an entity on*

a [discussion] board and you can't really hide behind an alias. The avatar is a picture of me and it has my name next to it. I'm a communication adviser for the council so am trusted to act as spokesperson on behalf of the organisation". He set up a separate discussion thread and posted an official council response. The group organiser Dave Westfell then met with council representatives, posted a positive update about the council's role, and the council has since advised the co-operative that aims to buy the bar. As one comment on the group said: "it's easy to blame the council on this one but their room for movement will be very limited. It sounds like they are being positive about it all." Interestingly, there was some criticism of the council for spending public money on monitoring Facebook, but in the end the community came round on this too: "I am sure this is not his only remit and they probably see it as a cheap and effective way to keep large groups of people informed and given this group has nearly 1,000 members in under ten days that seems sensible."

The truth is, the media have always been a difficult place to navigate and social media need to be treated as another aspect of reputation management. As projects emerge like Will Perrin's Talkaboutlocal.org, which places social media tools in the hands of local community leaders and activists, many more local communities will start to develop social news services and local online communities. Pits 'n' Pots (www.pitsnpots.co.uk) is the home of independent news and discussion in Stoke-on-Trent. Initially run as a blog by volunteers, it is now the home of thriving discussions and has moved on to Flickr and YouTube too. *"Stoke-on-Trent is a very challenging environment. Within that, you've got a very strong paper alongside extraordinary local websites such as Pits 'n' Pots. It's counterintuitive and is something you wouldn't expect,"* says Will. This is a really good thing for the council. By invigorating the local community and bringing the conversation to a shared platform, Pits 'n' Pots makes it easier for everyone to talk to each other, saving the council time working out who is saying what, and how to reach them.

Getting personal

Social media are built around the individual, which means it's about people talking to each other rather than organisations broadcasting to the masses. This is not corporate PR. The personal structure of the tools means that responding to social media enquiries requires council staff to add their own voices to the conversation, and to connect openly with citizens using their real identities rather than hiding behind a 'corporate personality'. Your staff must develop their own voices in the conversation, and bring their personalities to the task of establishing themselves within the community. Talking to the public is fine, but getting to know people, building relationships with citizens, is different.

There are new soft skills required here, and practical skills too. More council staff will need to be trained to deal publicly with enquiries via social media channels – and this means they need to be trusted to use the tools in work. There will be many people in your organisation who understand social media, but how can they help you when the tools that are becoming so central to the lives of citizens remain blocked in the organisations that represent them? Just because it's called 'social' media doesn't mean it isn't work-related. Let your staff experiment with these tools and see if they can lead you to the innovations you need. If it starts affecting their performance, you will have detailed records of how long they have spent online and you can manage it in the usual way. If they're smart though, they might find ways to save you a lot of time and money.

Technology

There are practical considerations to using these technologies too. Issues of system integration, software procurement, management, ownership and access can get in the way of innovation projects and prevent councils from mainstreaming social media into their activities.

There are obvious advantages to using the cheap, well-engineered functionality of these tools to deliver more features and communications channels for less money. The Birmingham

News Room (www.birminghamnewsroom.com), a Birmingham City Council website, is a good example of how councils can make use of free tools to do more with less. *“Using Wordpress, the site incorporates news headlines and releases, blogs, video news (YouTube), photographs (Flickr) and has a growing following on Twitter,”* says Media Officer, Geoff Coleman. With the help of local bloggers like Nick Booth, Geoff has been able to deliver a rich set of functionality on the platform without building any technology, or spending much money.

The downside though, is that councils no longer own and control all their online channels and tools, their content is not integrated, and staff face a bewildering array of logins and accounts to update content. There are two main ways to manage this problem. Firstly, technical solutions can be implemented, such as using XML and RSS feeds to join up data streams on the main council website to create an integrated user experience, or drawing data from third party platforms into a core council data set for archiving and reporting. Secondly, there are management solutions, such as standardising all account usernames and passwords, creating clear processes for updating and checking content, and even appointing a social media manager to keep track of it all.

The bottom line is: if you want ownership and control, be prepared to pay for it. From a business perspective, the questions you should ask are firstly, what level of control do you need and why, and secondly, can you achieve this more cheaply by managing social media integration than you could by building your own toolset? The chances are that, unless you are Microsoft or Google, building your own versions of things that are already widely used by your staff, and your citizens, doesn't make much sense.

Measuring impact

It can be difficult to justify spending time and resources on new initiatives without clear indicators of what success and failure look like. You may think social media have helped deliver your objectives, but how can you prove success, set meaningful targets, or improve your approach to make it more effective? There are two aspects to this: what to measure, and how to

measure it.

There are lots of tools for measuring social media these days. Services like Twitter Search and Google Alerts can show you who is talking about you online (although they won't find mentions of you on Facebook). Statistics generated from Facebook, blogs and social networks will tell you about page views, visitors, how often people come back, and so on. The hardest thing is often having too much data, and particularly trying to work out how to integrate these statistics into the main organisational web stats. There is more to this than mere figures and online usage too. Social media make it easier to send information online, but they don't preclude people passing the same messages through other channels. A parent may hear about a school closure via Twitter and then call four others; news of your campaign may reach someone on Facebook, but then they may tell their family about it. Don't just measure what's happening online: measure what's happening offline too, otherwise you may miss a crucial part of the picture.

The most important thing is to identify what you need to measure in order to monitor progress and success, and this will depend largely on the aims of the project. If you are informing the public, you might want to measure how many people subscribe to your service, who reads your content, and how often it has been forwarded. If you are building a community, engagement might be more important: how many people are commenting and how often, how much user-generated content there is on the site. What you measure is defined largely by what you think is most important.

Consultant Adam Bailin has been working with The Central Office of Information (COI) to develop some common measures for all digital engagement and social media tools, and suggests the following: the number of relationships, the number of user-generated content items, and the number of referrals/recommendations. Yet digital engagement specialist Steph Gray is keen to stress the risk of oversimplifying: *“there's a real danger in picking a handful of measurable elements and defining - perhaps inadvertently - that that's what counts in a publicly-funded digital engagement project in the eyes of agencies and auditors,”* he says. He proposes a set of softer

measures, such as how useful the policy team clients found the project to be, the actual take up of the call to action, how the participants felt about the process, whether participants stayed involved, and what the return on investment was in terms of effort/cost to useful outcomes.

These are early days for social media projects, and part of the innovation process will involve councils learning how to track and evidence success for their projects in smarter, simpler ways. MeasurementCamp (measurementcamp.wikidot.com) has collected useful thoughts and links about the general topic. Futuregov (www.futuregovconsultancy.com) is exploring the specific needs of the UK public sector and has lots of useful questions and ideas to consider.

A word on the 'digital divide'

The business case for these new tools would be much more straightforward if we could assume that everyone is online and able to access them. This is not the case. Internet and mobile phone access has become truly mainstream in recent years, but there are still millions of people without easy access to – or understanding of – this brave new digital world. Doing your Christmas shopping online is still a far cry from using social media to make healthcare choices or deliver a child's education. We can alleviate pressure on existing services by serving those that have access through new, more efficient channels; but for practical innovations to replace the old methods, they must be accessible on an equal basis to all parts of society, and leave no-one behind.

However, having access to a car once began as a luxury, and for some it remains so, but as the benefits of cars became obvious, so too did hitch-hiking, and taxis, and buses, and the social convention of offering people a lift. Ask most people who aren't online why they don't have broadband, and they will say it is too expensive; and yet it is significantly cheaper than owning a car. If there is real value in these technologies, people will find ways to access them, even if it's by getting a social media 'lift' from a friend. It is always tempting to reach for stereotypes and say that certain groups will never use digital or social tools, but there are more and more projects emerging which prove this is

not the case. Besides, are the traditional technologies of public services – official letters, a fixed address, legal jargon, complex paper forms, expensive journeys to council buildings – any less excluding than a web browser or a mobile phone? Treating people fairly does not mean giving everyone the same thing: it means meeting them on their own terms.

Councils have a role in reducing the digital divide too. Sunderland City Council has placed digital inclusion at the centre of the city's ongoing regeneration and development. Technology, community engagement, empowerment and capacity building is threaded throughout the Sunderland Strategy 2008-2025, and their Digital Vision aims to help individuals and communities grasp appropriate technology and co-develop their own methods of engagement and development. Their projects include technological infrastructure, awareness raising, engagement and empowerment activities with communities, and partnerships throughout the city. Their e-neighbourhood programme involved electronic village halls and e-champions, they provide fair access to care through their Telecare services, and they support disadvantaged young people by providing technology at home. Digital technology is also at the heart of their vision for the schools of the future. It isn't enough to wait until citizens are online: councils can help them get there too.

PART 4: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Just as councils face big cuts in discretionary spending, so their constituents are acquiring more and more tools for organising themselves. These technologies represent radical new opportunities for local government, but they also raise expectations of what is possible, and make it easier than ever for active citizens to engage publicly with councils and public services. This connected minority is already influential in the media and our culture, and they are becoming increasingly mainstream. Ignoring them is not a good idea. What are the implications of these tools for democracy itself when we have more say in who wins X Factor than in how our councils spend our money. At what point does failing to engage with these channels stop being safe, and become plain rude?

Consultant Tim Davies has sketched out some of the expectations that might arise of organisations in our more connected age, including:

- Can I find full details of your organisation or project by searching for it on Google?
- Are there photos, videos or audio-content which explain what your project is all about?
- If I get in touch – will you reply within 24 hours? Will you reply within two hours?
- Can I leave comments anywhere? Or give you feedback? Are you going to respond to it?
- If I want to keep updated with what your organisation does

- can I link up with it through an online network?
- Can I take photos and video clips on my phone at your events - and then share them with friends afterwards?

Of course, not everyone in the country thinks like this yet. Yet as Tim says, “it is important to think about how projects and organisations developed to meet expectations in previous decades remain relevant and accessible to young people today,” and as these tools become more mainstream, the hopes of the few could quickly become the expectations of the many. Expectations will change and grow as society begins to adapt to the widespread availability of these technologies. Why are you posting letters to me when you can reach me in so many easier, cheaper ways? Why can't I access your services on my phone? Why do I need to come and visit you when we could just talk on video chat? As the technologies change, so do public expectations, and councils must be ready.

New services, new responsibilities

Expectations will also increase further as social innovators, interest groups and keen individuals build more tools to influence and deliver government. Communities like Social Innovation Camp and Rewired State, and charities like MySociety, are producing a growing number of web-based services to organise public activities in new and better ways. MySociety's tools alone provide an amazing set of extensions to government. FixMyStreet (www.fixmystreet.com) gives citizens a simple tool to report road problems such as potholes in their area, whilst WhatDoTheyKnow (www.whatdotheyknow.com) provides an integrated web service for making Freedom of Information requests. These tools are linked to councils' existing enquiry processes, meaning they effectively represent an improved front-end for the UK government. The question for councils is twofold: how to meet the increased demand these tools create; and how to integrate them into the services they offer to the public.

New sites and organisations are emerging all the time aimed at organising public activities and creating new channels of engagement. Patient Opinion (www.patientopinion.org.uk) is

a website that allows NHS patients to post feedback on the service they received. The NHS was reluctant to engage with it initially, fearing it would be swamped with negative feedback, but in fact the community is quite balanced and the feedback is usually constructive. The service redirects comments to the appropriate public officer, but the popularity of the site means public bodies will increasingly need to respond publicly online, and be part of this community or they may be perceived to be ignoring citizens and failing to act on service issues. A similar service is now being developed in Scotland for the police force. MyPolice (www.mypolice.org) won the Scottish Social Innovation Camp and is now working closely with police services to develop an independent feedback website for the criminal justice system. *“The police have to answer for what they do every single minute of the day – spending public money. MyPolice enables the police to listen and respond, increasing public confidence without extra cost,”* says co-founder Lauren Currie. *“It enables citizens and neighbours to work together to solve problems themselves, without having to go down the expensive, formal route of the justice system.”* Local councils will need to watch these developments closely, and engage positively with them, because they are sure to be the first of many.

The private sector and social enterprises are also developing tools that councils can use in their work. The education marketplace School of Everything (www.schoolofeverything.com – disclosure: I am a co-founder) has been working with Becta to integrate course information from local councils and adult learning organisations into its offer. Councils and local groups get a free, feature-rich web platform and new audiences for their courses, whilst School of Everything can offer more relevant content to its users. In future, services like Scraperwiki (www.scrapewiki.com) might be used to aggregate public data; Newspaper Club (www.newspaperclub.co.uk) could help bridge the digital divide by creating print circulations of important information online; Decisions for Heroes (www.decisionsforheroes.com) may save many more lives by organising data for the emergency services. The opportunity is there for councils to engage with these tools early and shape them to fit their needs, delivering more for less. As Daniel Ratchford, Sutton’s Strategic Director of Environment

and Leisure, says: *“There’s no need to develop sophisticated community engagement tools when Twitter, Facebook and YouTube can do this for us anyway.”*

Right now, engaging with these national services may seem like a further burden for over-stretched departments; but in the long term, it may save councils a lot of those most precious commodities, time and money. Lichfield District Council (www.lichfielddc.gov.uk) has shown just what it is possible to achieve with the national services now available to councils. The ‘My Area’ section of the council website is run using a combination of public data sources and the council’s own systems. *“There’s a wealth of data out there, spread all over the web, but often people don’t know where to find it. The council’s website is a perfect place for a lot of this information, and My Area makes it easy for people to find out local information quickly,”* says Webmaster Stuart Harrison. Information on councillors and MPs is harvested from Openlylocal and TheyWorkForYou, whilst data on reported issues is gathered from FixMyStreet. Schools information comes from Data.gov.uk, and parish council information is built through postcode lookups and matched to internal databases. The resulting service is seamlessly presented to users as one unified experience, but the maintenance of data is done using national and third sector resources, at minimal cost to Lichfield District Council itself. *“We’re also looking at allowing local websites to syndicate and republish this information on their own websites, as well as developing a printed version to go out to new residents with their council tax bills,”* says Stuart.

As these services become more established, citizens will expect their local councils to respond promptly on these sites, and to contribute their content to them. Working in partnership with these public and third sector services is likely to become part of the fabric of local government: council staff need to know how to use them, councils will need to have a presence and a reputation on those platforms in order to respond effectively to queries and complaints. More than that, if these services are being used successfully to deliver public benefit, councils should really be directing citizens to them. This may present something of a challenge when in 2009, according to the Society of Information Technology Management, three in five

councils didn't even refer out-of-hours callers to their own website.

Getting out of the way

In fact, one of the best – and most unnerving – things about social media tools is that it is often easier for individuals and informal groups to make use of them than it is for slow, cumbersome organisations. This can be turned to a council's advantage.

The London Borough of Sutton has recently seen several Twitter accounts set up by residents to share information and encourage conversation. For example, www.twitter.com/sutmoblib gives details of where and when their mobile library is travelling around the borough, but is not maintained by the council. Another example is www.twitter.com/stonecotparking which was developed by a group of businesses in one of the smaller district centres with timely warnings about the movements of traffic wardens and speed cameras. Such simple, free streams of information are gaining popularity and leading the way in meeting the council's core value of empowering everyone to 'take part and take pride' as active citizens and employees.

"These show how local residents, through the use of 'open' local data, can develop applications that contribute to the social outcomes that we are interested in – without the council actually having to do anything. There's no need for local government to do these things for itself, when it has residents and business who are better-placed (and often better-skilled) to do this for us themselves," says Daniel Ratchford, Sutton's Strategic Director of Environment and Leisure.

There are also many examples of public bodies trying these tools, putting more pressure on councils to monitor and engage via social media channels too. One school posted recently on Governor Forum about their success using Twitter to inform parents about news and notices. *"Our school has just set up a Twitter account for notices. It's been a huge success in the bad weather. The parents love it and we really can't believe how quickly it has taken off. We have a link to it on the school*

website now, but two parents found it within an hour of it being set up without any publicity! Best of all... it's free!"

Councils can, and should, support such activities. The most obvious thing they can do is of course to listen to what is being said, and contribute information and comments wherever they can. Another easy way to help is to make public data accessible to those who want it, in simple, free ways. The new government data site www.data.gov.uk is intended to make it easier for non-governmental groups to take and display public data in new ways – increasing transparency and accountability, but also harnessing the power of millions of potential volunteers to communicate public information. Making data more transparent and available to the public is swiftly becoming one of the government's top priorities (although the failure to include postcode information in this free offering remains a contentious issue).

Local data is such an important part of this project that some keen hackers are already working on it. Openlylocal (www.openlylocal.com) is a new project to develop an open and unified way of accessing local government information, by putting it in a structured form where anyone can access or use it. So far, they have more than 100 councils, 6,000 councillors, 4,000 committees and 19,000 documents on the site, and more are added all the time. Run by volunteer Chris Taggart, the site takes data from the web and turns it into usable streams of information that can be turned into Twitter feeds, social media content and even new websites. Councils might not be displaying their information on social media yet, but, thanks to services like this, other people can now do it for them.

2010 LGIU Online Councillor of the Year, Ross Grant of Leicester, took the initiative himself when his council staff told him they couldn't set up a Twitter account for council news announcements. *"Out of frustration I set up www.twitter.com/leicestercncl to take the news from the Council website (press release RSS) having been told how difficult it would be for the Council to do so. Reports needed writing, protocols devising and most ridiculously resources acquiring. Three days after I set up the RSS bot account [automated web feed] another official one was created. A bit of guerrilla councillor action."* Concerned

citizens bypassing official council channels present one level of challenge, but when the elected members start doing it too, that becomes rather more embarrassing.

The most remarkable example of what can happen when citizens take control has been seen in Birmingham. There, a collection of local bloggers, hackers and entrepreneurs built their own version of the main Birmingham City Council website, to meet their needs. The new community-powered 'Birmingham City Council DIY' site (www.bccdij.com) makes it easier to report problems, view planning applications and find out about the local area. It takes the content from the existing council website and reorganises it so people can find what they want, and adds data feeds and integration with national services like FixMyStreet. It's all editable too. *"We are making a tool a bit like a wiki where anyone can go onto a page and rewrite it - we are turning it on its head,"* says entrepreneur Stef Lewandowski. *"Whereas the council stuff is locked down, we are using the city's knowledge to change it where it's wrong."*

In a time of spending cuts and increased pressure to deliver more for less, the message is clear: engage with these new tools, or someone else will do it for you - and you may be forced to follow suit.

PART 5: THE ROLE OF COUNCILS

Of course, it would be disingenuous to present social media as the great ready-made solution to all local councils' problems. Not everyone is online, and there are a great many issues which the internet cannot solve. However, social media are establishing itself as part of our social infrastructure, and if councils are to engage with citizens on their own terms, and do business in a digital world, they will need to integrate social media into their work very quickly.

The biggest question for councils then is: what is their role in this brave new world? In a time of big spending cuts and increased expectations, when citizens and third sector organisations are increasingly acting independently to solve government problems, where do councils fit into this evolving public ecology?

Firstly, councils can be innovators. Resources may be constrained, but there are many cheap and simple ways in which councils can try out these new tools and find out what works. They have a rich set of data and activities to publish, and an engaged community of people who want to see it. They have a high public profile, a large audience, and position in the community that makes it possible to try out innovative projects at scale and for little cost, in a way that small charities and campaigners would find hard to match. Even as the budget cuts take hold, it is imperative that councils continue to try new things, and share the lessons learnt with each other and the wider community as much as possible.

Secondly, councils can be incubators for new ideas and projects

arising from the community. Many community organisations and small campaigns would benefit hugely from support and endorsement from their council, and by nurturing innovative projects councils can support the best to become more successful, and apply the lessons from other projects in their own work. It is important to treat local innovation projects with respect and commercial sensitivity though: even in a time of spending cuts, councils will still have the resources to deliver community projects on a much bigger scale, and it is important to protect the interests and livelihoods of the people who developed the ideas in the first place. Yet working in collaborative partnership with the community to develop and scale up successful practices could be a mutually beneficial relationship for both the public and the third sectors, one that creates a channel for good ideas to rise up and grow without councils needing to do everything themselves.

Thirdly, councils can be conveners, bringing together concerned citizens, campaigners, technologists, service users, business leaders and even national government, to explore how social media tools can be applied to social problems. The work of Social Innovation Camp (www.sicamp.org) and Rewired State (www.rewiredstate.org) show what can be achieved by bringing the technical, creative and commercial skills of the community together to tackle social and political issues. It is in the interest of councils to support these activities and create more like them, because from these communities may emerge many of the solutions to society's problems.

Finally, councils can be champions for this field of activity, sharing best practice, promoting excellence and spreading the word about what is possible. This is a new field of work, and it needs a new narrative to support it: one that everyone in our local communities can get behind and become part of. At present, this is the work of a small minority of people inside and outside government, chipping away at problems and trying out things in public services, community development, regeneration, campaigning, collaboration, information and participation. Yet if we are to achieve the level of transformation we need in local government, and if we are to make full use of the opportunities these social media tools present, this activity has to become mainstream. Local councils can do much, but

most of all they need to celebrate what is being done by all of us, and rally more people to the cause. If social media have taught us anything, it is that when we work together we can achieve remarkable things.

As David Cameron said in his Big Society speech in 2009:
“This, then, is our new role for the state. Galvanising, catalysing, prompting, encouraging and agitating for community engagement and social renewal. It must help families, individuals, charities and communities come together to solve problems. We must use the state to remake society. We must use the state to help stimulate social action.”

FIND OUT MORE

This pamphlet is designed to summarise the possibilities and policy context for local councils using social media. It does not, however, offer practical advice about how to do this, or explain the range of tools available. This is because in 2009, NESTA published *Social by Social: a practical guide to using new technologies to deliver social impact*, written by social media consultants Andy Gibson, Amy Sample Ward and David Wilcox, and Dr Nigel Courtney and Professor Clive Holtham of CASS Business School. It is our hope that if you read this pamphlet alongside *Social by Social*, you will find both the practical explanations of the tools available, and the specific information you need to apply them to local government.

'Social by Social' is a reference resource for anyone interested in using 'social' media to deliver 'social' impact. It explains in practical terms how to use the tools described here to engage a community, offer services, scale up activities and sustain projects. Whether you're a small charity wanting cheap web tools to support your work, a large organisation seeking to engage more effectively with your community, a civil servant charged with making public services more efficient, or just a concerned citizen on a personal mission, there is something in it for you. For local councils, it provides an excellent starting point for figuring out how to design and deliver the sort of social media projects we have described here.

'Social by Social' contains:

- A glossary of the technical terms and concepts that you need to know.
- A compendium of tools, resources and links to help you get started.
- Guidance on how to run these projects and make the technology work for you.
- Some more detailed stories showcasing the potential of social media for social good.
- A set of propositions which we believe underpin all the most successful projects.
- Thoughts from a few specialists on what all this actually means for us all.

The book is available free of charge to read and download at www.socialbysocial.com, and can also be purchased in hard copy from the site. IDeA and NESTA would also like to invite all of you to join the conversation and share ideas on the Social by Social community site, which is free to join at www.socialbysocial.net.

Welcome.

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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 NESTA

Our public services face unprecedented challenges, made more urgent by the impact of the current economic crisis. Traditional approaches to public services reform are unlikely to provide the answers we need.

NESTA is applying its expertise to find innovative ways of delivering our public services. More effective solutions at lower cost will only come through ingenuity. Our Public Services Innovation Lab is identifying, testing and demonstrating new ways of responding to social challenges and delivering better public services at lower cost.

Reboot Britain

Reboot Britain is part of NESTA's Public Services Innovation Lab. It aims to identify ways in which technology can aid moving towards a model of 'people-powered public services'. Further information about its experimental programme, including how to get involved, will be available at www.nesta.org.uk as the projects develop.

www.nesta.org.uk

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Andy Gibson is an award-winning social entrepreneur, campaigner and consultant specialising in the social applications of technology. He's founder and director of social technology consultancy Sociability, co-founder of education web start-up Schoolofeverything.com, and founder of the '5-a-day for your mind' campaign Mindapples.org. He's also an associate of Futuregov and The People Speak, and was a mentor and volunteer for Social Innovation Camp. In 2007 he was listed in the Courvoisier/Observer Future 500 'ones to watch' in the UK, and in 2009 was appointed a Fellowship Councillor at the RSA. Andy is co-author and editor of NESTA's 2009 publication, *Social by Social: A practical guide to using social technologies to deliver social impact*.

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