

## A White Paper on Social Media in Local Government

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### Summary

[A White Paper on Social Media in Local Government](#) considers what holds back senior council managers and staff from using social media more extensively, and looks at how West Midlands councils have used them to connect with the public, and “*open up traditional public sector silos*”. Some of the Paper’s key recommendations for local government in 2013 are to:

- *enable staff to access social media through an open access policy*
- *(2) enable communications to take overall responsibility for social media strategy across the authority; but to enable, not control*
- *(3) enable a digital communications officer to train, support and horizon scan*
- *(4) draw-up a media landscape to map how residents are using traditional and online media.*

Laced with humour and packed with links to Best Practice use of videos, blogs and Twitter, the Paper by Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (IEWM) is useful reading for all council elected members and staff and for organisations serving the public, in both urban and rural areas.

### Briefing in full

Social media statistics in the UK convey how important social media have become. Britons spend 62 million hours a day on social media. 80% of UK homes have internet although 54% of over 65s have none; 76% of UK homes have broadband.

In the UK, there are 30 million Facebook users and 10 million Twitter users. Facebook is no longer the preserve of teenagers as it may have justifiably been claimed two years ago. Two-thirds of adults in the UK state that technology has

changed the way they communicate. Smart phone and tablet ownership is higher in the UK than anywhere else in Europe.

To make its point about the power of YouTube, the Paper presents the video '*At work in Highways*' starring the Highways manager, Jon Fraser, dressed in a tuxedo, singing his very own version of Frank Sinatra's '*My Way*': It is hard to resist the humour of this amusing video: [Worcestershire County Council Highways YouTube](#)

It certainly establishes an immediate connection with viewers. Unsurprisingly, the video has considerably boosted staff morale.

### **West Midlands Survey**

The survey of all 33 communication teams and their councils arrived at the following findings:

- all West Midlands councils have at least one Twitter and one Facebook account
- 92.5% said it is very important to use social media in their roles; 47.5% of *communications* officers said that their personal use was high
- more generally, only 37.5% claimed that their council's usage was high and only 25% claimed that their council's use of social media was highly effective
- training and trust are the biggest barriers to greater use of social media today; only 15% of respondents said that there were no barriers
- 85% of councils have members who use social media but only 32.5% of (councils) have senior managers who use social media
- 42.5% of councils do not have an up-to-date social media policy or guidance; 97.5% of responding councils expect their use of social media to increase.

(Author's note: It is well worth looking at Council social media accounts for example, <https://twitter.com/ShropCouncil> to get an idea of how they can be used.)

When research was undertaken for the White Paper, there were 690,500 accounts in Birmingham city, 171,560 in Coventry 145,720 in Wolverhampton. The West Midlands lead in the development of 'hyperlocal' websites, for example, 23 in Staffordshire, 37 in Birmingham, and 4 in Shropshire. These websites are reached via social media, providing news or online content for a geographically distinct area.

### **Why council managers say 'no' to social media**

The '*Barrier Vaulting*' section of the Paper looks at the reservations holding back council managers.

One of the reasons why council managers say 'no' to social media is "*because people may say something bad to us*". Here's the counter-argument:

*“Here’s something for you to wake up to. They already are; on the bus; in the pub; at the breakfast table and at the water cooler. Social media is a conversation and those conversations are taking place anyway. By using social media we can see what people are talking about, what is really bothering them.”*

“Because it’s hard to evaluate” is another key reservation, the answer to which is:

*“It’s true. How do you work out the value of social media? But when you start to think of it as a two-way communications channel it starts to make sense. You wouldn’t monitor the effectiveness of a telephone but you can start to measure engagement and also what people do as a result of your digital campaign.”*

Another major personal reservation is expressed as “because I don’t like it”. The counter-argument is that “if there is an audience of people, we should be talking to them where they feel most comfortable...”:

*“...the use of social media on work time isn’t ‘messaging about’... Local government needs to reach a place where using Facebook to talk to 2,000 people is as important - or heck, let’s be bold - more important than turning up at a community centre to talk to 20”.*

Other reservations have to do with a fear of staff misusing social media, which the Paper ranks as a management issue. Linked to this fear is the risk of making mistakes using social media which the Paper argues is comparable to the risk associated with using the telephone or email.

The challenge of overcoming such reservations rests with local government communication teams. It is up to them to devise effective social media uses for frontline staff, and help staff win over managers. Organisations need to “grasp what social media is”. To do so, they need to appoint a person to the job of “allowing social media accounts to build and thrive within set parameters”.

It’s not a question of *whether* to use social media but *how* to use it. To overcome the barriers, it is important for its advocates at all levels of the organisation to show specific ways in which they can be used - alongside traditional means of communication.

Coventry City Council never had a ban on social media:

*“In an age when honest conversations about the challenges we face are more important than ever, being sensible about social media and the role it can play has to be the right way to go.”*

Coventry City Council’s current 28,700 ‘likes’ on Facebook required steady, thoughtful messaging and use of social media when it really mattered – for example, when snow might close schools.

Every manager who uses social media work and *learns by doing* sends a powerful message throughout the organisation. Sandwell Council chief executive and Board Member of Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands, Jan Britton, runs an internal blog encouraging a two-way conversation with staff. A platform such as 'Yammer', the internal communications platform offering both a free application and a fee-paying one provides a useful tool for this purpose.

A simple social media policy such as Walsall Council's list of golden rules is a more effective way of encouraging innovation than a 400-page document.

### **Best Practice in the West Midlands**

Making the case for social media use in public sector institutions, this quotation gauges how radical a change institutions must undergo:

*"Everywhere we look, we see change; breakneck change. From every corner of the world the old norms are not just being challenged, they are being destroyed. Local government is at the centre of some of the largest changes. But we'd be wrong to think these changes started with the global economic crisis.*

*These changes also started with the evolution of the internet and the growth of the social web. Euan Semple in his seminal book 'Organisations Don't Tweet, People Do' talks of how we are used to thinking in terms of big things like nation states, society and the media. We're used to those big things looking after us and protecting us but the internet breaks them apart, he says. What we find when we look closely are networks of individuals and each with their own voice."*

As agent of radical change, the internet enables local councils to open up conversations with the people they represent and serve, and to engage with their feedback, including complaints from disgruntled residents.

When it comes to the really big issues, the internet can help councils get across how they propose to deal with dramatic budget cuts, and which avenues they are considering - as a Birmingham City Council officer recently explained in a presentation at a meeting in a nearby ward which was filmed and posted on the Council's website. Complex issues and solutions can be far more readily presented - and understood - through YouTube.

The Paper includes a link to a number of Best Practice [Case studies](#) which help visualise the potential of social media.

Three Best Practice case studies are shown here:

1. [Blog: Shropshire Family Information Service](#)

This case study brings the reader to a page with a link to the Family Information Service Blog where parents write the most popular blogs, for example:

- *'a mum blogging about her experience of post natal depression – and what the books didn't tell her about becoming a mum*
- *a dad blogging about 5 Things dads should do before childbirth*
- *a mum with 5 Simple Tips to Keeping Primary Age Children Safe Online.'*

This tweet-like description for Shropshire Council Family Services is one of 26 examples provided by the White Paper:

Brilliant use of a blog by @ShropCouncil's @shropfamilyinfo by @katebentham <http://wp.me/P3vJ1V-h#bestbywm> #families #parents #support

## 2. [Twitter: Birmingham City Council Highways #wmgrit](#)

Highways informs the public via #wmgrit that bad weather is on its way and certain roads are going to be gritted. This initiative is a vehicle for disseminating gritting alerts and other winter information tweeted by local authorities across the West Midlands.

## 3. [West Midlands Police Emergency Planning](#)

After the 2011 riots, police officers learned how to use Twitter to immediately inform as many people as possible, often using photographs and allowing re-tweeting. The force uses it with the Walsall public sector bodies Partnership for maximum effect.

### **Returns from digital communication**

How to measure the returns from social media? Not by the number of Facebook followers but by what these followers *do*. Take a local park friends' Facebook page: what matters is not that it has 200 followers but that 30 followers join in on Clean-up Day.

For a council to enable a resident to obtain information, the costs of making it available from the web is 15 pence compared to £2.75 on the phone and £7.50 via the Council One-Stop-Shop Information Centre.

It is not possible obviously to count what has been avoided as a result of using social media, for example, the number of avoided phone calls from residents during a snowfall, asking whether their road will be gritted. However, engagement of service users via social media can be evaluated in real time, by finding out what users think and informing them about what appropriate intervention has or will be taken.

It is worth evaluating *'fun viral content'*, not forgetting that social media is meant to be *social*. Former journalist Tim Clark of Wolverhampton City Council did not have a specific objective in mind when he posted on the council's Facebook page a clip of cascading water down St Peter's Church steps after a flash storm downtown. The clip went viral. Nearly 20,000 people viewed it and 6,000 people liked it; they shared it and commented on it. They engaged through a local weather story and a connection with Wolverhampton City Council was established.

In one of the case studies, former journalist Tim Clark puts his finger on what makes social media channels hit the mark:

*“I think there is a danger that we can over-theorise how social media channels should best be used. Ultimately there is a simple truth that we would be wise not to forget – people react best to posts which are of the moment, give a sense of shared experience, surprise them, excite them, delight them or even simply inform them about something they find useful.*

*In other words, do everything you possibly can never to bore them.”*

### **Recommendations for local government**

These are 11 recommendations for local government in 2013 drawn from learning through the Best by West Midlands 2013.

- (1) Enable staff to access social media through an open access policy.*
- (2) Enable communications to take overall responsibility for social media strategy across the authority. But to enable, not control.*
- (3) Enable a digital communications officer to train, support and horizon scan.*
- (4) Draw-up a media landscape to map how residents are using traditional and online media.*
- (5) At public meetings allow and support the public to use Twitter and other social media channels unhindered.*
- (6) Enable an informal social media group to meet to help support and share innovation across the authority.*
- (7) Encourage attendance at low cost events that will share learning.*
- (8) Enable social media use to be devolved to the frontline.*
- (9) Encourage staff to learn from mistakes and realise that mistakes will happen as they always have.*
- (10) Encourage elected members to learn and adopt social media.*
- (11) Update and refresh annually a social media policy and guidance.*

Unfortunately, in the current economic climate, some authorities are so financially constrained that they cannot even risk a modest outlay of resources to innovate using social media.



## Comment

Once dismissed as a fad, it has become increasingly clear that social media instead represents an important new communication tool in today's society. The West Midlands' White Paper provides a useful snapshot both of the opportunities presented by social media, as well as the obstacles preventing its use within constituent councils. The case studies employed by the Paper provide important insight into how councils can use social media to reach out to new sections of the community and the emphasis of the preventative benefits provided by social media is also of interest at a time of limited financial resources.

However, the West Midlands White Paper also highlights a range of barriers, with use among senior council managers in the region proving particularly limited. Trust and training are the principal barriers to more widespread use in West Midlands, demonstrating the need for local councils to continue sharing learning, as well as establish clear guidelines for usage. Social media how-to-manuals, complemented by training workshops such as the [one facilitated by the LGiU](#), provide practical tools for taking on the challenge. The Young Foundation's 37-page report [Listen. Participate. Transform - a social media framework for local government](#) published in 2010, is one such manual. It pointed out then that the risks of 'going viral' loomed large in people's mind:

*"Good and bad examples, from councils using Twitter during emergencies, to politicians making inappropriate remarks, demonstrate the power of social media and provide lessons and inspiration to new adopters. But these high-profile successes and mistakes also distort the picture of both the opportunities and risks that social media presents for government. The fear of getting it wrong stifles many individuals and agencies from taking the first steps towards using social media to engage people as residents, services users, community groups and active citizens."*

Although social media use has spread, their general association with risks is unlikely to have lifted. As the West Midlands White Paper remarks, when social media is used for consultation purposes, for example, comments do not necessarily stop on the consultation end date. That is why a step-by-step approach to in-house use of social media is perhaps the prudent way forward.

Social media provides an important new platform through which councils can engage with their citizens. Not all tools will prove effective, but this should not deter councils from engaging with new digital tools as they seek to work out which methods of engagement prove popular with their constituents.

As councils become more confident using these tools, however, and better at understanding the benefits of their use, it will be important to keep in mind the digital divide that remains. Whilst 80% of UK homes now have access to the internet, only 46% of homes of those aged over 65 have access to internet. Social media must



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therefore be understood as an important complementary tool within a wider communications strategy as councils seek to better engage with their community.

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