



Scrutiny Report

Corporate Scrutiny Panel Review of Social Media in North Lincolnshire

October 2011



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FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Cllr Ivan Glover
Chairman of Corporate Scrutiny Panel

In my opinion, local government and the council in particular, should be both excited and optimistic about this upward trend usage in these digital applications. This is because appropriate digital user focused strategies have a large, measurable and positive impact on the community.

However, given human frailty, and the potential for social media council-wide to soak up large resources, the right policies should be formulated both to control and implement these applications.

This report seeks to address these issues, and in thanking most sincerely panel colleagues and all who have participated in the report's compilation, the panel commend it to Cabinet for consideration.

The prediction that the era of constant/instant communication, based on the solid foundations of email and the mobile phone, would generate new applications, now named social media, has proved correct.

Digital statistics show that worldwide email has 2.9 billion users, Twitter 145 million users, and that half of all adults in the US are now on social media. Email, therefore, continues to be the essential social and business tool of the internet, but social media is beginning to make advances.

BACKGROUND & SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

Reductions in local government grants have driven the need for improved efficiency in the operation of council services. This comes at a time when public expectations of the quality of services are raised and there is a climate in which the ability to 'do business' 24/7 is increasingly seen as necessary. This change has come against the backdrop of a significant shift in the way in which people communicate, and with the advent of low cost services such as Twitter and Facebook this activity has grown substantially over the last two years.

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics for 2011 show that 82% of households nationally have access to the internet. This focused the panel's minds towards scrutinising North Lincolnshire Council's use of existing communication channels through the use of social media in their service delivery and community engagement.

"The Web is no longer about technology. It is about delivering lower cost services designed around the user. Any public service organisation, therefore, which is not fully integrating the potential of the web delivery in financial and customer service strategies is likely to be under-performing in both areas."

As quoted by Society of Information Technology Management insight management company to over 300 local authorities (2011).

The scrutiny panel agreed that communication via social media is growing on a daily basis and that this growth is not exempt within the North Lincolnshire area, but agreed that as an authority communication with the community is key in the delivery of customer focused services. Members sought to investigate the potential for the use of social media in North Lincolnshire Council and the possible pitfalls associated with it.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The panel agreed to focus on a number of key issues. These were:-

- To establish the current policies and procedures for the use of social media in North Lincolnshire.
- To identify the pros and cons of using social media, and how it can be used to better engage with the community at large, in a more resourceful and efficient way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The final recommendations of the panel are summarised below:-

Recommendation 1

The panel recommends that the Director of Corporate and Community Services, carries out a social media audit that addresses/assesses the use of social media within the community and the potential for the council and councillors to engage with this.

Recommendation 2

The panel recommends that the council develops and consults on a social media strategy for North Lincolnshire Council. In particular, procedures and training for staff and councillors need to be devised. This strategy should act as the over-arching policy for the council, but each service area should be responsible for the creation of its own content, monitoring usage and any subsequent interaction.

Recommendation 3

That the Chief Executive and each Director nominate champions or interested employees in each service area who will be responsible for enhancing the use of social media, and keeping the community up to date on activity and issues of interest within their service area.

Recommendation 4

That the Director of Corporate and Community Services complete an assessment and maintain oversight of corporate service resources available to support and monitor the potential increase in the use of social media by the council. The panel further recommends that the Director also investigate the potential efficiencies that can be achieved as a result of more social media usage.

Recommendation 5

That all current and future use of social media across the council should adhere to the council's Internet Policy, Human Resource Policies and other relevant guidance and policy.

The panel is encouraged by statements from witnesses that much work has already taken place in anticipation of this report. We would therefore expect to see an action plan presented to the Corporate Scrutiny Panel and to Cabinet in January 2012. The panel intend to revisit this issue six months after this date to monitor progress.

FINDINGS

"Social Media" is the term commonly given to web-based tools which allow users to interact with each other in some way by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests on line. As the name implies, social media involves the building of online communities and networks to encourage participation and engagement. This includes blogs, message boards, online forums, social networking websites (such as Facebook, Twitter and Bebo etc), content sharing websites (such as Flickr, YouTube) and many other similar online channels.

The scrutiny panel is aware that these platforms open up many new and exciting opportunities for the council. However, the practical application of such technology by public sector organisations is in its infancy and there are many potential issues to consider - for individual employees and as an organisation.

Use in the community

Traditionally, the focus of the council has been to show how services will be provided to local residents. By employing the term 'access' a shift is envisaged from this approach, with the emphasis instead now placed on the importance of the council opening up to customers, and allowing them to engage with services in ways that suit their needs and requirements. This goes beyond the approach of simply 'doing things' for people and seeks to foster a culture in which people are given the means, information and support to do things for themselves. While in these changed circumstances, activities such as waste collection and street cleaning will

obviously remain as actions to be undertaken by the council, the self-service opportunities offered by the web in respect of council tax, planning etc will allow customers a massive opportunity to act for themselves in a more aware and relevant manner.

Social media

The panel was informed that Facebook has almost 24 million user accounts in the UK. Some have suggested that more local residents are using online networks than are reading local newspapers. Nearly two thirds of all UK residents are participating in 'social computing'; a number that rises to 87% of 18-24 year olds. 82% of UK households have access to the internet. Members were told during their review that taking part in social networks and interacting online is now a majority activity and one which many other local authorities are using. They were also informed that if local government does not keep up with the pace, it will increasingly seem less relevant and will not be able to fulfil its community leadership role.

North Lincolnshire Council - existing strategy framework

Unfortunately, to the knowledge of the panel the council has not set out a strategy framework or plan for the use of social media since 2007. There is currently no apparent direction in the formal sense. However, members were informed that a policy was being drawn up and the outcome of the scrutiny review was being awaited before it was to proceed through the formal decision making process.

The council is using social media to some extent. There is a 'generic' Facebook and Twitter page for North Lincolnshire Council, along with other social media sites. What concerns the panel is that none of the current sites are joined up and only a small number of officers and elected members have viewing or publishing rights to update them. Individual services and officers do not routinely have access to social media, and it is also blocked to the vast majority of employees. The current information streams tend to come from what is already published on the council's website, which members feel is also "out of touch".

As part of the review process the panel surveyed North Lincolnshire Council employees to obtain their views on the use of social media, asking if they felt it could be used successfully within their service, and what they thought of the council's current usage.

Many additional comments were provided as part of the employee survey, several covering the following areas:-

Comments from council survey

- 'If you're not a "digital organisation" in 5 years time then either you won't exist or the world will have changed around you so much you will struggle and be irrelevant'.
- 'It would be positive for the council to be on board. Due to the amount of social media users it would be very good to have all information in one place. This could be used to notify for school closures, term

dates, pictures, publicity of events, road closures/roadworks, dog warden, flooding, noise control etc instead of having to search for information using various other methods'.

- 'They think it is important that the council moves with the times and uses these methods of communication, particularly where young people are concerned, as the internet is a medium they use all the time and understand'.
- 'We would like more use of this, but feel held back. Would welcome any advice, provided it was with trained and responsible officers. More should be made of the likes of Twitter and Facebook to communicate with local residents. It should be advertised locally that the council is using these new methods of communication. Departments like Planning, this could be a major benefit to them as they have to advertise planning notices in the local paper which is proving very expensive. The likes of Twitter and Facebook could be used to get the information out to the public much faster and certainly a lot cheaper'.
- 'Apart from using mobile phones to text and email, I am totally disinterested in things like Facebook etc. as I think they are open to much silliness and possible abuse'.
- 'I am not convinced that groups such as Twitter and Facebook should be used by the local authorities to communicate with residents. Many elderly would not thank you for their use, many would rather have a hard copy to keep'.

- We are failing to embrace modern communication channels and compared with other councils our website looks dull and old fashioned, pretty much mirrors the use of technology within the council - limited. With more presence in social media channels the council could do a lot more to counter the negative and misleading things that are frequently circulating about the council in these mediums'.
- 'Whilst agree that the use of social media and digital contact is useful we must not forget more traditional forms. We live in an area with a great many people that have little or no access to such forms of communication'.
- 'Difficult to comment when as an employee I can't even see what we do as a council as IT department block all access to any streamed material or even the council's blog'.

There were several pages of additional comments made by employees and these can be viewed upon request. The majority of these indicated that more could be made of social media by the council and that we were 'a bit behind the times'. The statistics indicated that:-

- Only 11% of respondents knew that the council currently had an active Facebook or Twitter account.
- When asked if they felt it would be beneficial to use social media in their service area 45% agreed strongly, 32% agreed and only 6% disagreed.

- 79% either strongly agreed or agreed that digital technology can help design more personalised council services.

Personal adoption of social media has the potential to drag the council into the 21st century. Social media is a great tool for the public sector to engage with the community, but policies vary. The council uses some social media, but in a mainly 'broadcast' way, rather than interactive and it is acknowledged that there is scope to further develop usage and to agree a corporate policy. The council has a YouTube channel but comments are disallowed, and council employees can't view it as media streaming is restricted. Sites utilising Java, Flash and access to social media are blocked for the vast majority of service users. This raises its own concerns and it's increasingly possible for people to view social media content via their personal mobile telephones or tablets. The panel do not see that much has changed since the council began using Twitter in February 2009.

An internal social media site that was previously piloted called 'Yammer' was also recently discontinued. Yammer was designed for private communication for people within an organisation. The basic set up was free, easy to use and perhaps, most importantly, it provided a private and secure online space to enable people to communicate. The main aims of Yammer were to improve cross council collaboration, encourage sharing of ideas, help staff to be more connected and to help productivity. Unfortunately, this was not rolled out to all staff on a consistent level, and the majority did not even know that it existed.

Existing social media

- **Flickr**
This is a free online photograph and short video library that can be used by individuals, groups and businesses. Flickr could provide the council with a free resource that could be built and used by the local community. It could also facilitate the online reporting of grotspots, litter and fly tipping.
- **Facebook pages**
Used strategically this could support the council's campaigns and events. A lot of other councils currently have Facebook pages and Coventry is held as a shining example of how it can be used to good effect.
- **Twitter**
This is a particularly good tool for real-time updates used by other councils, for example 'Twitter Gritter' and election results. It is also an additional way to drive traffic to the council's website as well as helping local councillors to engage with their own communities.

The panel were informed of some of the Twitter feeds that the council could use in similar vein including:- Dog Wardens, Pest Control, Drainage, Flooding, Noise Control, Litterbusters etc. An increasing number of public sector organisations are updating local people on their work via Twitter and other social media, including attempts to reassure residents during the recent riots.

- **Email, mobile phones & applications**
Many local authorities are setting up databases where customers can sign up to regular mobile phone/email updates. Brighton and Hove City Council have a mobile phone application that provides an A-Z of their council services. Other applications include 'what's on' information in the local area.
- **Blogs**
This is a good way of providing a more human voice to council services. Examples can be found by many councillors using it across the country, but more effective examples could include those of frontline staff.
- **Email newsletter to residents**
Using the email database, regular e-newsletters could be sent out that could also be area-specific, depending on the issues.
- **Webcam streaming**
Preston City Council currently use this system to stream events online and it could be a good way to broadcast council meetings to the community. Council meetings or events can also be publicised on Facebook and Twitter informing the community what is to be discussed.

Other social media is being introduced all the time. For example, Google+ is increasing its market share daily, LinkedIn is a useful professional networking site which includes some council officers, and new sites and

media will appear in the coming months and years. It is important that the council has wide presence and visibility across as many of these as possible.

Implications of not implementing social media

Customers have high expectations of website usability and council websites need to match the functionality of other best practice sites in both the private and public sector. Failure to deliver this will result in poor customer service and a decline in the reputation of the authority. Encouragingly, the council's website has consistently been independently rated as one of the best in the country. However, cross-platform enabled 'sharing' of council content onto social media sites is an area for further development.

Without increased use of social media, the council risks not taking full advantage of a valuable opportunity to engage with its population and the opportunity to develop new, more relevant and efficient service provision.

Cost

The cost to the authority of transacting business varies considerably from channel to channel. Local figures from 2009 identify the average cost of transactions as:-

- Face to Face £12.55
- Call Centre £3.81
- Web £0.37

The active migration of service processes to web-enabled channels is clearly therefore the

most cost effective method of facilitating service access.

However, the panel appreciates that there are groups of people within the community who do not have access to internet-enabled IT, or the necessary skills or confidence to use social media. In such circumstances the move to use web enabled technology would be dependent upon parallel activity to raise the skills and awareness of the wider community of the value of web enabled access.

Important role for councillors

Councillors, as local leaders, will have a key role in these changes to the way people engage and communicate, if they take the opportunity. Enhancing local democracy through greater transparency and providing both a greater voice and a greater responsibility for citizens in setting priorities and delivering public services means that the nature of representative democracy may change. But as the Improvement and Development Agency quote 'there are tremendous opportunities for local leaders to use social media to engage with a wider range of people in a powerful, focused way'.

Members of the panel were informed that, as a councillor, it isn't necessary to have a Twitter account or a flashy website to participate. However, it is well worth councillors taking a look at what's already available - blogs, Facebook groups, local social networks - and seeing what people are saying about their area and their council, and maybe even joining in.

Examples of other public authorities using social media

Members heard evidence from Sergeant James McKellar-Main, Humberside Police Force Tweeter for North Lincolnshire.

Sergeant McKellar-Main informed the panel that Humberside Police launched a Twitter pilot on 8 April 2011. There are thirteen accounts covering the Force. Twelve individual officers covering the four divisions have accounts, as well as a corporate account for the whole Force.

The tweets are a combination of crime prevention messages, updates on ongoing incidents (all made anonymous of course), information on issues affecting the community and Police Federation matters. On top of that, some personal observations are made with the addition of humour to show that despite the nature of the job, we are all human.

Sergeant McKellar-Main added that he had almost 100% support from his followers on Twitter, who come from all walks of life. One or two people have commented about "tweeting instead of fighting crime" but he described that he had seen how the use of social media had solved crimes, heightened public awareness about crime trends and led to discussion about policing strategies. There are important considerations that Humberside Police worked through beforehand, including the need for officers to sometimes tweet or be available outside of their normal work hours.

In conclusion, the use of social media has enormous benefits for the police and wider community, providing each force has a sensible and flexible media policy to allow mature and free debate to be encouraged.

Potential risks and fears

A number of potential risks and fears were brought to the panel's attention. A number of the main ones are listed below, with possible ways to overcome these.

Risk & fears	Possible solutions
Criticism from the general public that use of social media may be seen as a waste of time/resources.	It is up to the council to establish clear reasons for using it, and make use of evaluation and metrics to show its value.
Technical security of the accounts and potential for hacking.	Use IT Services to restrict passwords to identify individual teams with key experienced officers identified as responsible for overview. Monitor accounts regularly.
Vandalism of content and unsuitable comments from other users or members of staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific in-house training courses should be provided before any individuals are authorised to use the sites. • Check accounts daily and be vigilant about this with a protocol for online behaviour. • Any unsuitable posts should be removed as quickly as possible.
Abuse of the system by staff	Human Resources policy should be drawn up and usage monitored. Individuals in services should be nominated officers.

Need to be meaningful

There is little point in people accessing the council's websites if the service sought is not provided in an efficient and speedy manner. This requires that the channel used to gain access engages with a service that is equipped to provide what is required at first point of contact.

In order to meet this aim, staff in service areas need to be trained and empowered to discharge their role, and supported with structures and systems that are properly integrated so that service requests may be discharged in a seamless fashion i.e. any internal bureaucracy should be kept to a minimum and, wherever possible, be invisible to the customer. This applies just as much in the case of self-service via the web as to more traditional channels.

CONCLUSION

The clear consensus of the panel is that the council needs to increasingly embrace the use of social media across all aspects of its work. The scrutiny panel strongly believe that, through increasing the use of social media, the council can take great strides in becoming more transparent, relevant, accountable and towards building a genuine dialogue with our residents.

To complement this need, the council must ensure that appropriate systems and safeguards are in place. Staff need to be trained and there needs to be appropriate cover for when people are absent from their computers or handheld devices.

Clearly, the council have already started thinking about how social media can be embedded in much of its work, and members are encouraged by this. However, the required policy and guidance needs to be implemented across the council as soon as is practical. Despite this, we are clear that social media usage needs to be delegated down to individual teams as far as possible. These teams are best placed to know their role and what issues would be of interest to the public. They would also benefit most from feedback from, and dialogue with, local people. Increasingly, this is how people will want to interact with organisations, so the council needs to respond to this, without forgetting those who may prefer traditional routes.

APPENDIX A

Membership of the Corporate Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Glover (Chairman)

Councillor Wilson (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Bainbridge

Councillor Eckhardt

Councillor Marper

Councillor Oldfield

Councillor Wardle

The panel conducted a number of evidence gathering sessions during this short review, speaking to the following people from the Council and other organisations.

- **Adrian Capon,**
Strategic Marketing Manager
North Lincolnshire Council
- **Sergeant James McKellar-Main**
Humberside Police B Division
- **Chris Skinner,**
Assistant Director - Communications
North Lincolnshire Council

The panel would like to thank them for their valued input and attendance. They also received and considered a range of written evidence, including local and national research.

