

# Councillors' Websites

An Analysis

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## Executive Summary

### The case for councillors to use the web

The drive for individual councillors' websites has emerged as part of a top-down initiative from Government. Some councils have already provided this facility for their councillors but are finding that take-up is slow and that encouraging councillors to use the sites is hard work. This paper explores why that is and what can be done to overcome their reluctance.

First, though, we examine whether the websites really do present any benefits to councillors and their constituents.

In an age where over 50% of UK adults have the internet at home<sup>1</sup>, and countless others can access it through their workplaces, public libraries and so on, it seems reasonable to expect to find some information about your councillor online. However there is more to the argument than information provision. Given current discussions about the potential of the internet to create a 'new politics' of two-way dialogue,<sup>2</sup> the capabilities of councillors' websites seem rather limited. They essentially transmit information downwards in much the same way as the traditional newsletter. At the moment, this is generally limited to contact details, surgery times, party affiliations and committee membership, provided on the council's main website.

If ward councillors' websites could become citizens' first port of call for information about the local area and about the work of the council, the implications for the profile of the individual councillor, for the role of councillors and for councillors as a breed are huge. This could be a way to begin to establish the councillor as community leader in the way that John Prescott's recently announced vision suggests.<sup>3</sup> The next step would be to combine councillors' websites with some of the other initiatives being explored in the Local E-Democracy National Project (especially online surgeries).

The scope of this study does not extend to any work on the ways in which members of the public use councillors' websites. This type of research is sorely needed to assess, from citizens' perspectives, how much value there really is in developing councillors' websites. It would also assist councillors in producing sites that are as useful as possible to the public.

Our working assumption, during the project and throughout this report, is that there is that the birth of individual councillor websites is a potentially important development with a lot of value for enhancing public engagement and member roles.

## Councillors and their websites

This chapter examines the results of our indicative survey of councillors who have the facility of an individual councillor website.

### How important is a website to councillors?

For the vast majority of councillors, websites have not yet come to play a major part in their day to day work:

- Only 2% of survey respondents said that a website is the most important way of communicating with their constituents.
- For the majority, it is a 'fairly important' part of their armoury of communication tools
- 39% say that it is either not very important or not important at all

Websites are not seen to be particularly relevant to the main aspects of a councillor's role. Unless councillors come to see more of a connection between their core tasks and the things a website can be used for, then updating their sites is never going to be near the top of their list of priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures were 53% in April 2004, The Ofcom Internet and Broadband Update. Available at: [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research\\_analysis/telecoms/reports/int\\_bband\\_updt/may2004/?a=87101](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research_analysis/telecoms/reports/int_bband_updt/may2004/?a=87101). It is likely that they will already be substantially higher than this.

<sup>2</sup> See particularly the work of Stephen Coleman

<sup>3</sup> ODPM, *Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity*, January 2005

### **Are councillors' websites widely visited?**

Councillors' websites receive very varied numbers of visitors. A tiny minority of councillors have very active sites, but the vast majority receive less than 70 visits a month. This may be because of particular local reasons, but on the whole there is a correlation between the number of times councillors update their sites and the number of visits they receive: the more frequently updated sites tend to be the most visited.

### **Updating**

- around two in five claim to update their site at least once a month, including 10% who claim to do so weekly or more often

The two things which are most likely to encourage councillors to update their sites are: knowing how many people have visited the site; and receiving feedback from website visitors. Of those councillors who said they updated their sites at least once a fortnight, 48% had received positive feedback from the public, compared with 27% of respondents as a whole. Feedback, when received, is overwhelmingly positive.

### **Time and efficiency**

- 32% of councillors say they find their websites time consuming.
- On the other hand, 30% find describe them as efficient.

If more councillors perceived that a website could cut down on some of their work (at least for dealing with their more technically-minded constituents), perhaps they would be more willing to spend time on them. At the moment, this is a minority perception.

### **Do councillors have the necessary skills?**

Most councillors seem to be relatively comfortable with using the internet but 69% said that the sites should be made easier to use. Given that all of the councils examined in this study are using a website package specifically designed to be as easy to operate as possible, this is somewhat worrying. And for some, the technical barriers can seem insurmountable.

### **And so?**

Councillors are busy people. They need to make the most of their time in order to achieve the things that they see as being the most important – namely representing people and making constituents get good services. There is no reason why the websites cannot be used to help them with these tasks.

Councillors are resentful of tokenism and things which they feel are imposed upon them with no real benefit to constituents. However, they are, on the whole, fairly receptive towards the use of internet technology.

- 59% see personal websites as a very important or fairly important part of their armoury of communication tools.
- a very small number (2%) rate their site as being among the most important things that they do.

It is incumbent upon policy makers – and perhaps the parties - to demonstrate that councillors' websites are vital to the councillor's core role as a community leader and representative. If this argument cannot be made convincingly, then we cannot expect councillors to devote their time to it. Having said that, it is the responsibility of councillors to be open and transparent, in whatever format and , in the long run, the need for – and success of – different approaches needs to be assessed on the benefits to the constituent, not to the councillor.

## **What makes a good councillor website?**

The only two quantitative ways we have of judging 'good' websites are the statistics on how often they are updated and how often they are visited by members of the public. Whilst these statistics are not perfect and do not tell the whole story, they can give an indication of trends.

The main message from this data is that there is a clear correlation between the number of times that councillors visit the administrative area of their sites and the number of public visits they receive. To evaluate the sites and attempt to identify good practice, we cannot rely on the statistics alone, and a fair amount of subjective judgement is required. When the research digs deeper, however, lessons are not so overt. For example, it is not always clear why certain sites receive more visitors than others.

In particular, we would expect good websites to contain transparent, interesting and useful material. What that material should be is open to debate and there is no reason to think that one uniform approach will be suitable for every councillor. Essentially, the websites allow the councillors to play the role of human intermediary between council and citizen; the things they choose to communicate will necessarily vary.

It is still very early days for councillors' websites and progress is being made. Some councillors are populating their sites with a great deal of information. However, for the vast majority, they seem to be little more than an access point.

Councillors' websites have the potential to fulfil several different purposes. They can be portals to local information, placing the councillor very much in the role of community leader. And they can be the citizen's link to the political sphere.

Councillors' approaches to their websites fall into several different camps, and in addition to the 'access point' type, there seem to be five broad models: explanatory; community hubs; informative; active; and political. Some examples of subjectively 'good' websites from each of these models can be identified.

### **Websites and politics**

The issue of political content on councillors' websites is a difficult one. The current ban on overtly political material (other than links to other websites) is easy to understand; it is based on the principle that councillors should visibly represent all of their constituents. In an age of disengagement from traditional party politics, this position chimes well with public opinion. However, if councillors were able to reveal the political debates behind the decisions they take, it would be one small step towards re-connecting 'real-life' issues and capital-P Politics in the public consciousness.

Perhaps a good middle road would be for councillors to use their websites to inform constituents about the process and the reasoning behind council decisions. This would help to break down the barrier of bureaucracy and incomprehension that all too often divides councils and citizens.

### **Citizens' needs**

Without information on how constituents would like to use the sites, it is very difficult to judge which websites are 'good' and which are not. We can look at hit rates to see which sites are being used most by the public but these statistics are very opaque. A great deal more research must be done on this before any definitive conclusions can be reached.

## **How can officers best support their councillors?**

There are practical ways that officers can support councillors in using their websites. The suggestions came from our qualitative work and include:

- ways of demonstrating to members the benefits of individual sites;
- ways of engaging members – particularly leading members;
- ways of raising the profile of the sites; and
- technical support.

## **Policy implications**

Websites alone will not change the nature of our politics or bring about the much longed-for revitalisation of the public-politician relationship. Coupled with progress in electronic service delivery, e-democracy could begin to affect the relationship between politics and governance. In the electronic sphere, the boundaries between the political and managerial arms of local government are not so easy to maintain.

Whatever the consequences of these developments, it is certainly clear that a refusal to use an increasingly ubiquitous form of communication can only alienate politicians still farther from their constituents. It is in their interests to get to grips with this technology as soon as possible.

The fact that councillors' websites are also (presumed to be) in the citizens' interests has added a little more urgency to proceedings. ODPM requires that all councillors should be provided with the facility to have their own website, but there is still a question about whether or not use of such websites should be compulsory.

It seems that the pressure for mandatory websites may begin to come as much from the political parties as from council officers. Some constituency parties in highly contested areas are beginning to require council candidates to agree to maintain websites and engage in email correspondence with constituents. However it will be a long time before this reaches every constituency.

As councillors start to use their websites, many find them to be a valuable communication tool. The second generation of councillors' websites may well include online surgeries, community discussion boards and photos uploaded by constituents. How much they are used by citizens remains to be seen.

## Next Steps

Councillors' websites are still very much in their infancy. Some of the progress has been encouraging, but there is now an urgent need to assess how the public, given the opportunity, would like to use the sites. The websites themselves could be used as one of the survey tools for this.

If there is found to be a clear demand for the sites, then steps should be taken to move them forwards. It may be appropriate to find ways to integrate them into other e-democracy initiatives, particularly online surgeries.

## The case for councillors to use the web

The drive for councillors' websites has emerged as part of a top-down initiative from Government. One of ODPM's e-democracy priority outcomes for 2005 is that every councillor should be provided with "the option to have an easy-to-manage set of public web pages (for community leadership purposes) that is either maintained for them, or that they can maintain themselves."<sup>4</sup>

Some councils have already provided this facility for their councillors but are finding that take-up is slow and that encouraging councillors to use the sites is hard work. This paper explores why that is and what can be done to overcome such reluctance.

First, though, we should examine whether the websites really do present any benefits to councillors and their constituents.

Given current discussions about the potential of the internet to create a 'new politics' of two-way dialogue,<sup>5</sup> the capabilities of councillors' websites seem rather limited. They essentially transmit information downwards in much the same way as the traditional newsletter. However, it should not be assumed that all members of the public wish to contribute to policy debates and so forth. The results of a 2002 *yougov* poll show that, for the majority of internet users, the most important thing is the ability to find out basic information about their elected representative and their activities online.<sup>6</sup>

In an age where well over 50% of UK adults have the internet at home,<sup>7</sup> and countless others can access it through their workplaces, public libraries and so on, it seems reasonable to expect to find some information about councillors online. At the moment, this is generally limited to contact details, surgery times, party affiliations and committee membership, provided on the council's main website. On their own websites, councillors can give details about their personal history and the work that they are doing on behalf of their ward. This presents obvious advantages to the councillor in terms of public profile and the ability to present themselves as the 'human' intermediary between citizen and council. The websites will be able to promote the councillor to constituents twenty four hours a day. And, unlike a newsletter, they do not run the risk of being thrown in the bin!

It seems odd that so few councillors are keen to take advantage of this opportunity. If their ward councillor's website could become their first port of call for information about the local area and council activities, the implications for the profile of the individual councillor are huge. This could be a way to begin to establish the councillor as community leader in the way that John Prescott's recently announced vision suggests.<sup>8</sup>

The websites can also help with more traditional aspects of the councillor's role; collecting problems and casework on the councillor's behalf and allowing them to respond at their own convenience. Whilst email, letters and answering machines can play much the same role, the added advantage of a website is that the message can automatically be copied to the relevant council department, cutting down the time that the constituent has to wait before getting through to people who can help and removing the need for councillors to respond to matters with which they are unable to help.

Of course, even if internet access becomes virtually universal, websites will never (and should never) replace the human contact that many councillors enjoy with their constituents. However as the use of electronic communication continues to grow, people will come to enter a new relationship with their representatives: one that takes place at their own convenience. This is natural in a world where virtual global communities are becoming virtual *local* communities (see, for example, James Crabtree et al, *Invisible Villages: techno-localism and the*

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<sup>4</sup> ODPM, *Defining E-Government Outcomes for 2005 to Support the Delivery of Priority Services and National Strategy Transformation Agenda for Local Authorities in England*, available at: <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pns/pnattach/20040112/1.doc>

<sup>5</sup> See particularly the work of Stephen Coleman

<sup>6</sup> *yougov* survey, May 2002, for Coleman S, *Technology: Enhancing Representative Democracy in the UK: A Report on the use of New Communications Technologies in Westminster and the Devolved Legislatures*, Hansard Society, 2002, p.22

<sup>7</sup> Figures were 53% in April 2004, The Ofcom Internet and Broadband Update. Available at: [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research\\_analysis/telecoms/reports/int\\_bband\\_updt/may2004/?a=87101](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research_analysis/telecoms/reports/int_bband_updt/may2004/?a=87101). It is likely that they will already be substantially higher than this.

<sup>8</sup> ODPM, *Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity*, January 2005

*enabling council* (NLGN 2004)). The next step would be to combine councillors' websites with some of the other initiatives being explored in the Local E-Democracy National Project, especially online surgeries.

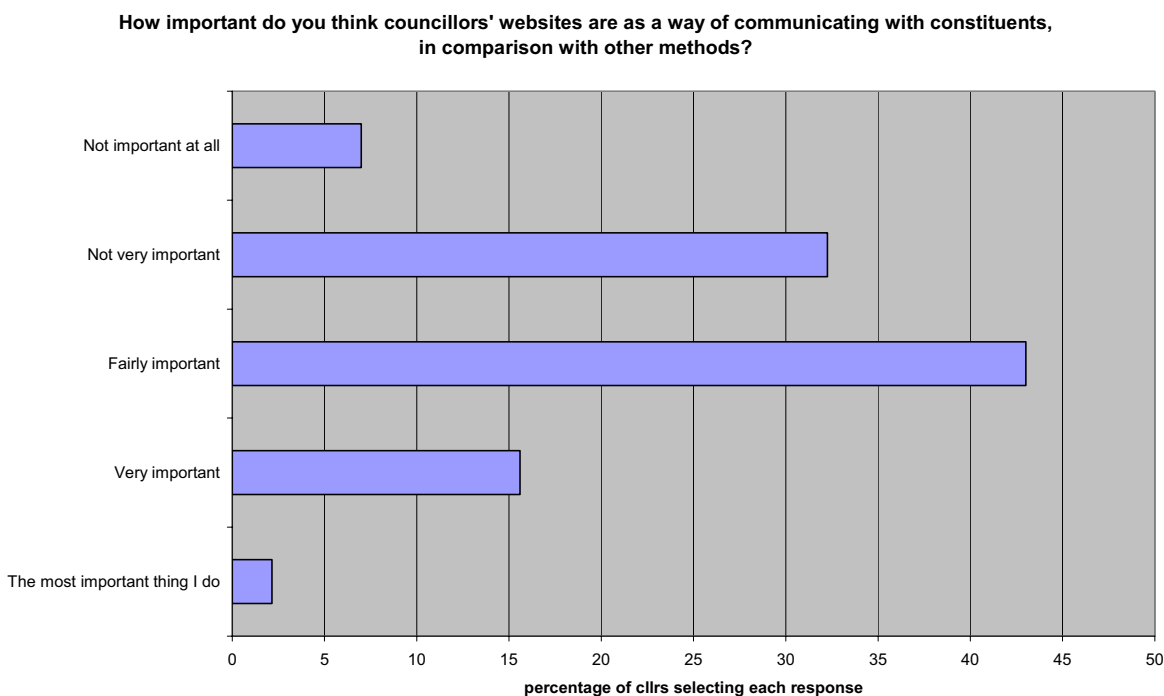
The scope of this study does not extend to any work on the ways in which members of the public use councillors' websites; the things they find most interesting and useful; and the impact that they may (or may not!) have on their impressions of their councillors, the council and perhaps even politicians more widely. This type of research is sorely needed to assess how much value there really is in developing councillors' websites. It would also assist councillors in producing sites that are as useful as possible to the public.

## Councillors and their websites

Councillors' websites are a new initiative and progress is encouraging. Some councillors have really taken the idea and run with it. A selection of their websites are detailed in the next chapter. For the vast majority however, the websites have not yet come to play a major part in their day to day work.

### How important is a website to councillors?

There is no point in pretending that updating websites is – or even should be – the most important thing for councillors to be doing. The results from our indicative survey (see appendices A and B) bear this out, with only 2% of respondents saying that it is the most important way of communicating with their constituents. For the majority, it is a 'fairly important' part of their armoury of communication tools but 39% say that it is either not very important or not important at all.



As the table below shows, when they were asked to identify the most important, most enjoyable and most time-consuming aspects of the councillor's role, respondents plumped for representing people; making sure constituents get good services; and attending council meetings, respectively. 'Explaining how the council works' received the lowest number of responses on all of these counts. Yet, along with 'informing people about council activities' (which also came in the lower third of responses to the other questions) it is this task that councillors believe having their own website will be most likely to help them with.

	What is the most important thing you do as a councillor?	Which aspect of your work as a councillor do you enjoy the most?	What do you spend the majority of your time as a councillor doing?	With which aspects of your work do you think a website could help?
Representing people	<b>61%</b>	47%	36%	39%
Making sure people in my ward get good services	60%	<b>48%</b>	30%	33%
Being the link between citizens and the council	57%	45%	27%	Survey error
Attending council meetings	42%	22%	<b>73%</b>	4%
Casework	40%	33%	50%	26%
Attending community meetings and local events	35%	36%	43%	15%
Portfolio/scrutiny work	26%	26%	34%	6%
Making strategic/policy decisions	24%	21%	16%	6%
Bringing different sectors of the community together	18%	21%	5%	27%
Liasing with external bodies	15%	15%	17%	12%
Informing people about council activities	12%	15%	11%	<b>75%</b>
Meeting people	10%	36%	18%	11%
Party political work	9%	11%	16%	13%
Explaining how the council works	3%	2%	27%	56%
None of the above	n/a	n/a	n/a	5%

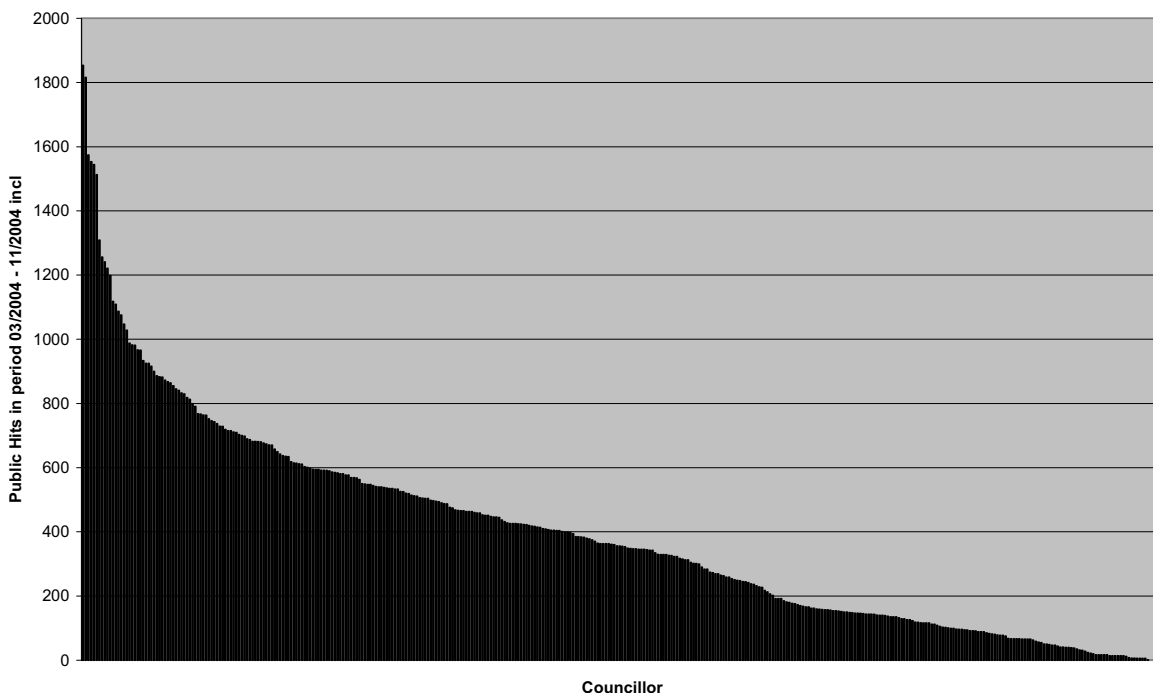
Unless councillors come to see more of a connection between their core tasks and the things a website can be used for, then updating their sites is never going to be near the top of their list of priorities. This is not impossible - some councillors, like Deborah Almey (featured below) are showing that websites can be used to help residents get better services - but it will take time.

## Is it fun?

Encouragingly, 39% of councillors with live sites say that they enjoy using their website, compared with only 14% who don't. 16% of total respondents describe the sites as 'fun' and 23% as 'exciting'. These figures compare very favourably with the 10% who think they are 'dull but necessary' and the 2% who say they are 'a complete waste of time'. This is a really good base to build on as it means that councillors should, on the whole, be well disposed to using their sites. It is now a question of identifying the key factors that either encourage or discourage them from using them.

## Are councillors' websites widely visited?

The short answer is no. The chart below shows the number of visits each of the councillors with a live website received over a nine month period. Whilst a tiny minority of councillors have very active sites, the vast majority receive less than 70 visits a month. It is worth pointing out however that very few councillors would get anywhere near as many surgery visits and although there is no data to benchmark against, it is beyond doubt that there is unfulfilled potential here.

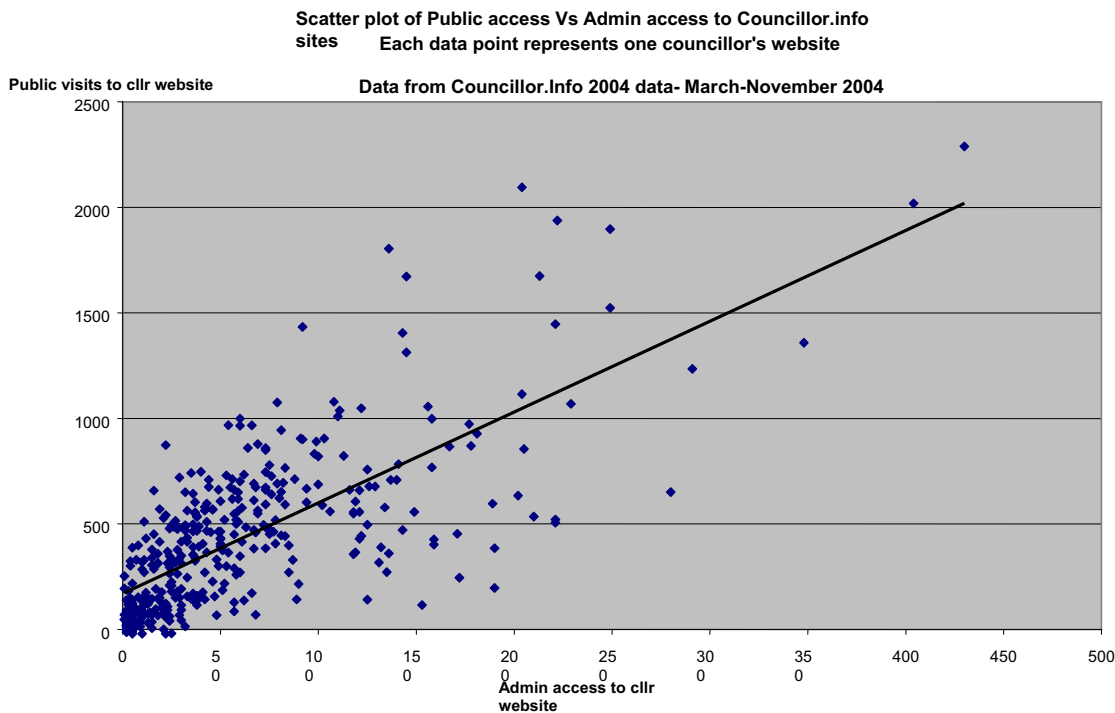


## Increasing the number of visits

Why is it that some councillors receive more visits? Evidence suggests a mix of factors, some of which are beyond the councillor's control, and some of which they can influence. For instance, it may be to do with very particular local issues – a councillor for a ward with a particularly contentious ongoing local issue may receive more visits than a councillor with a subjectively 'better' website simply because of this. A lack of navigation data

on how visitors use the websites and how long they stay on each page make it impossible to judge whether or not visitors find the information they are looking for.

However, there is clear evidence that the amount of effort a councillor makes pays off. The chart below shows a strong correlation between the number of times that councillors visit the administrative area<sup>9</sup> of their sites and the number of visits they receive. Each dot represents one councillor. The trendline shows that there is a clear relationship between the two factors.

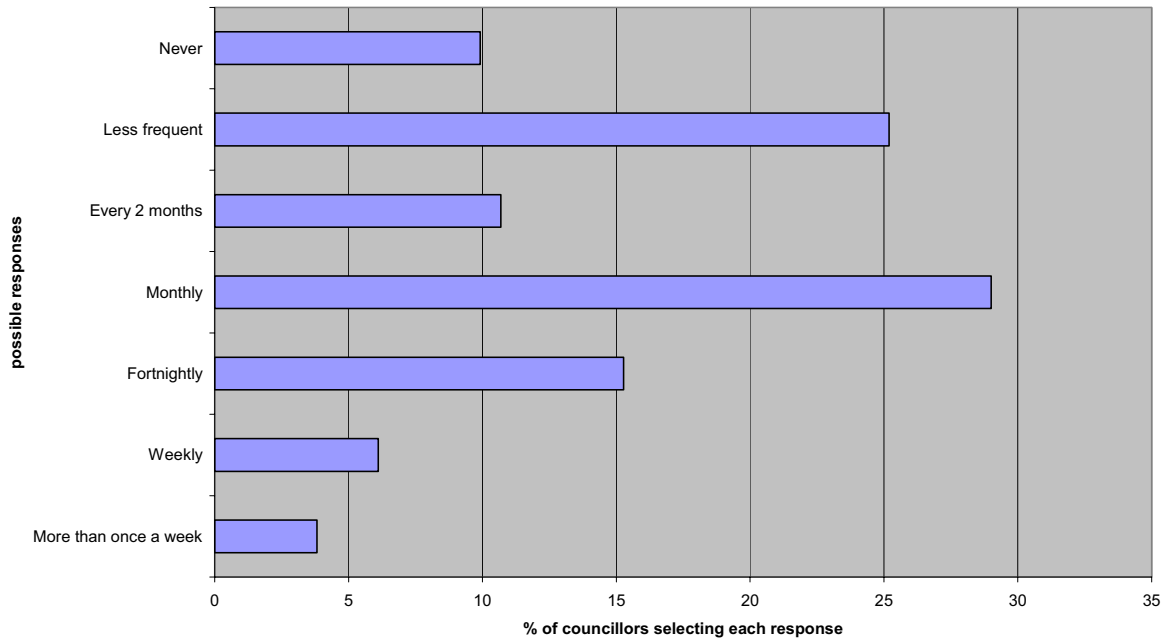


## Updating more frequently

Given the apparent influence of keeping websites updated, it is worth exploring councillors' views on this. 29% of respondents with live sites say they only update their sites once a month; 36% that they do so less frequently; and only 10% update them weekly or more often.

<sup>9</sup> Councillors log in to the administrative area of their sites to change or update the content.

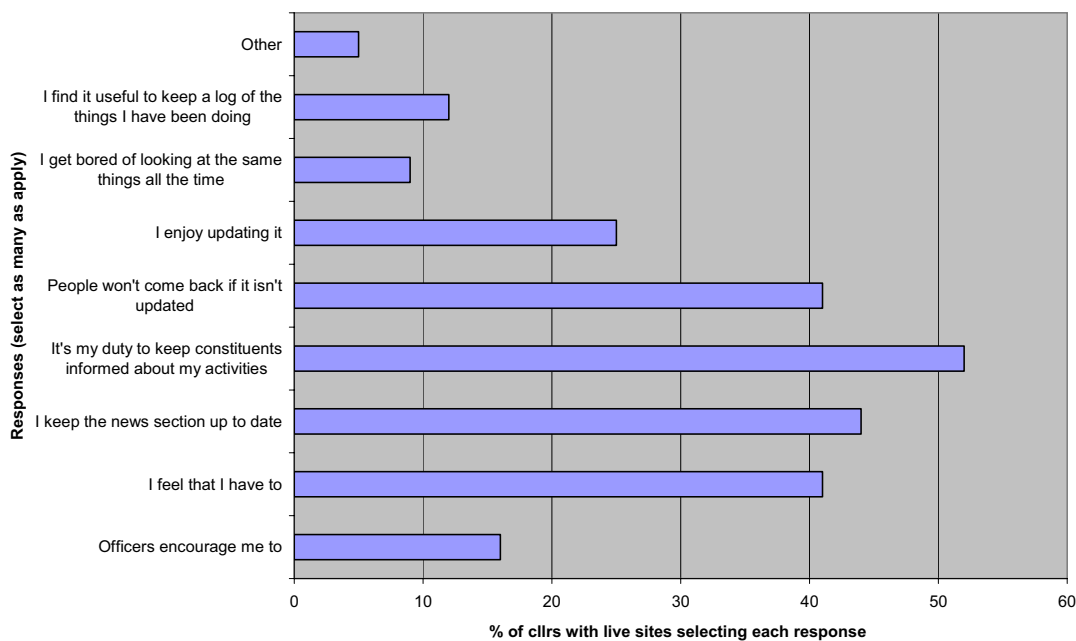
### How often do you update your site?



## Why do councillors update their sites?

The most common responses to the question 'why do you update your website?' were 'it's my duty to keep constituents informed about my activities' and 'I keep the news section up to date' (52% and 44% respectively). The reasons given by the most frequent updaters (at least once a fortnight) do not differ substantially from the total sample. 67% of frequent updaters said they keep their news section up to date, and 61% said it was their duty to inform their constituents about their activities.

### Why do you update your site?



The responses given under 'Other' include:

“When I have time, it is an opportunity to express the vision in my own way.”

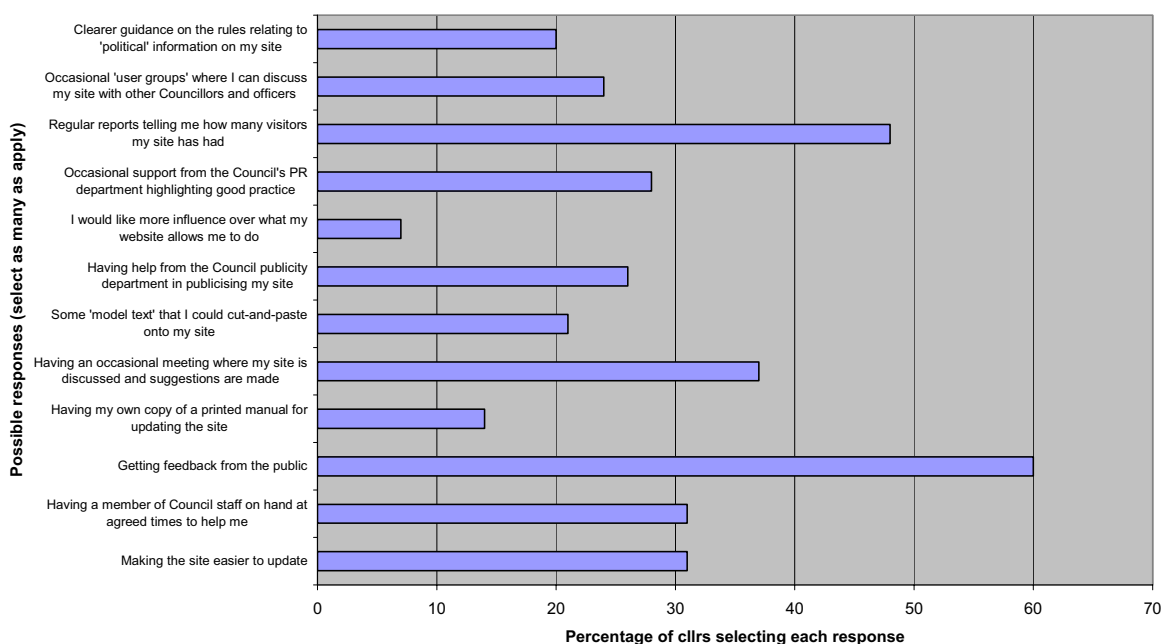
“There are important stories to display”

However, given that 65% of respondents say they only update their sites once a month or less frequently, this leaves some doubt over what is meant by 'up to date'.

Given the findings that show a positive correlation between updating the sites and the number of visits they receive, anything which will encourage councillors to update their sites more often would be welcome. The results of one of our survey questions (see chart below) show that it may be possible to create a virtuous circle, whereby the number of visitors boosts the councillor’s willingness to update the site, attracting more visitors and so on. Of course, this relies on councillors knowing how many visitors their sites have had. Perhaps a hit-counter could be incorporated into the front page. It is worth noting that of those councillors who said they updated their sites at least once a fortnight, 48% had received positive feedback from the public, compared with 27% of respondents as a whole.

Reassuringly, of those councillors with live sites who have received feedback from the public, all but one said the comments had been mainly positive. If councillors were encouraged to copy positive feedback to the lead officer, for circulation, it would help to illustrate the usefulness of the sites to other councillors and could well lead to more frequent updating.

**What might persuade you to update your website more often?**



## Time & efficiency

32% of councillors say they find their websites time consuming. This can be a real problem. Of those that do not have live sites, and do not intend to go live in the next two months, the largest proportion (38%) put this down to a lack of time. On the other hand, however, 30% found their websites to be efficient. This may come down to variations in technical ability but much of it seems to be connected to the expectations that councillors have of their websites. An hour spent on something you don't expect many people to see, is time-consuming. Spending an hour posting a message that most of your constituents can access is very efficient indeed. 69% of councillors say they produce newsletters and 74% that they engage in door-knocking or walkabouts. If councillors believed that a website could cut down on some of this work (at least for dealing with their more technically-minded constituents), perhaps they would be more willing to devote time to them.

## Do councillors have the necessary skills?

At first glance, it seems that they do. 76% have been trained on how to use their websites. Of those, 90% said the training was 'useful' (as opposed to 'too basic' or 'too difficult'). 46% have also received formal ICT training outside of their work as a councillor. Most seem to be relatively comfortable with using the internet: 29% say they book tickets online; 62% use the internet or email constantly or frequently in their personal lives; and 69% see the internet as 'just another way of working'.

However, 69% said that the sites should be made easier to use. Given that all of the councils examined in this study are using a website package specifically designed to be as easy to operate as possible, comparable to shopping websites like Amazon.com, this is somewhat worrying.

For some, the technical barriers can seem insurmountable. Some survey respondents were unable to use the online form without officer support. One would-be respondent emailed to describe his problems, saying that it had taken him 10-15 minutes to write and send the short email. Some of the councillors at this end of the scale are keen to use their websites and – in the interests of fairness and public access – it seems reasonable to suggest that extra officer time be devoted to aiding them. Alternatively, councillors could be paired up so that they can provide technical support to one another.

## And so?

Councillors are busy people. They need to make the most of their time in order to achieve the things that they see as being the most important – namely representing people and making sure people in the ward get good services. There is no reason why the websites cannot be used to help at least the first of these activities. The 'contact me' section could be used either to gather constituents' views on particular matters or to invite comments and suggestions in a more general manner.

It is understandable that councillors are resentful of tokenism and things which they feel are imposed upon them with no real benefit to constituents. However, they are, on the whole, fairly receptive towards the use of internet technology. Nine in ten of our respondents accept that internet technology will become more important over time (87%) and 59% believe that it is essential for an effective councillor to communicate electronically with constituents. And they do see the benefits of having personal websites: 59% of all respondents describe them as a very important or fairly important part of their armoury of communication tools. A small number (2%) are finding them to be among the most important things that they do.

It is incumbent upon policy makers to demonstrate that councillors' websites are vital to the councillor's core role as a community leader and representative. And more evidence is needed to demonstrate that this is the case and that it really impacts on public perception. If this argument cannot be made convincingly, then we cannot expect councillors to devote their time to it. Having said that, it is the responsibility of councillors to be open and transparent, in whatever format and , in the long run, the need for – and success of – different approaches needs to be assessed on the benefits to the constituent, not to the councillor.

It is striking that the 'good practice' websites featured in the next chapter come not from the youngest or the most technically enthusiastic councillors: many are not even regular users of email in their personal lives. Rather, they come from the councillors with the most need for them – often those with busy timetables and large or rural constituencies. They have found that having a website can enable them to fulfil certain aspects of their councillor role in a way that is useful to both themselves and to constituents. For instance:

- having links to council departments, reduces the number of requests for basic information from the public
- the press release facility means that councillors are more likely to be quoted in relation to local news stories

Websites can also be particularly useful for councillors who are not from the majority party group, and would not otherwise have many outlets to get their views across.

These councillors are more likely than the rest of the councillors who responded to our survey to say that having a website has changed the way that they approach the rest of their council work. The reasons they give include:

- the ability to post photographs, showing success in dealing with casework
- 'It makes me think more about what I am doing'

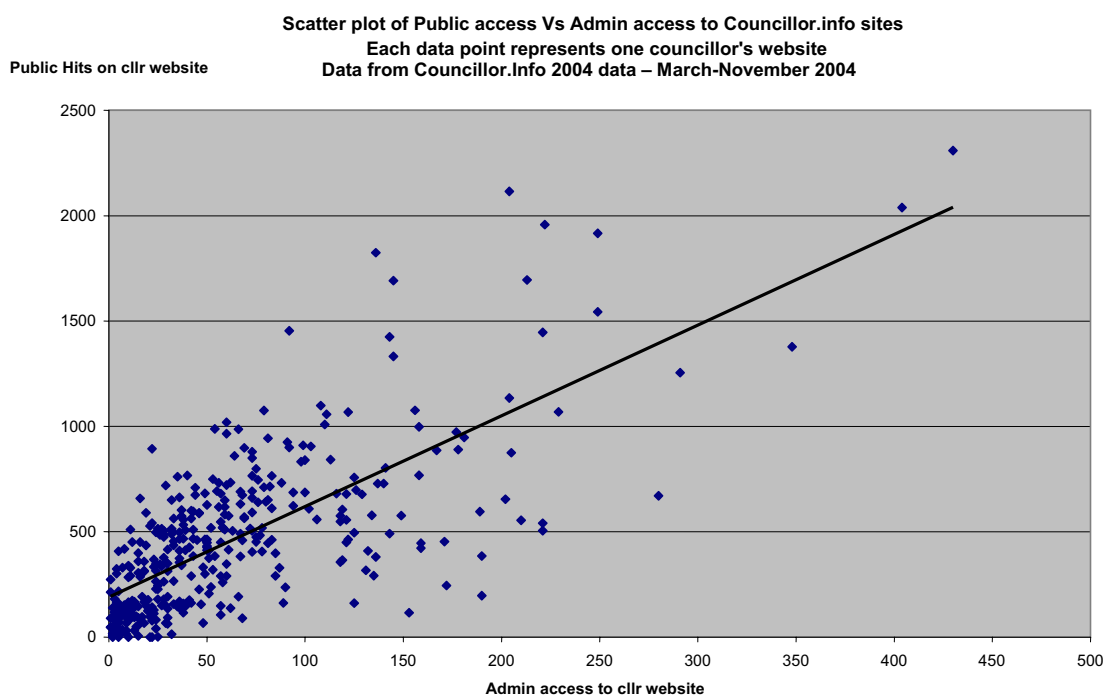
- 'It has made me far more receptive'
- Instant access in a large, rural constituency

## What makes a good councillor website?

What is a good councillor website? The only two quantitative ways we have of judging 'good' websites are the statistics on how often they are updated and how often they are visited by members of the public. Whilst these figures are not perfect (see Appendix A), they can give an indication of trends.

The scatter diagram below shows a clear correlation between the number of times that councillors visit the administrative area of their sites and the number of public visits they receive. If a councillor accesses the administrative area of the site, it can be assumed that they are at least reviewing the content of their site, even if they do not update it every time.

The trendline shows the *average* relationship between administrative access and public visits. This means that any websites which come in above the line are getting more visits for less effort. However, when we look at the sites, it isn't always clear why that is. Some of the sites which are very far above the line have nothing more than a welcome message, photo, and 'contact me' section. This could simply be a statistical anomaly (website statistics are notoriously unreliable) or it could be due to any of a number of 'real life' reasons. For instance, many people might have visited the site but did not find the information they were looking for.



In evaluating the sites, then, we cannot rely on the statistics alone. A fair amount of subjective judgement is also required. In particular, we would expect good websites to contain interesting and useful material. What that material should be is open to debate and there is no reason to think that one uniform approach will be suitable for every councillor – or indeed, every constituency. Essentially the websites allow the councillors to play the role of human intermediary between council and citizen, the things they choose to communicate will necessarily vary.

It is still very early days for councillors' websites and progress is being made. Some councillors are populating their sites with a great deal of information. However, for the vast majority, they seem to be little more than an access point and tend to include a photograph, 'contact me' section, surgery times and some 'news' that comes directly from the council's main site. The case for having this type of website is not strong. Most councillors have email addresses in any case, should constituents wish to contact them electronically, and this will be displayed, along with details of surgery times and a photograph, on the council's main website. Unless a councillor's website has something different to offer, it is difficult to justify the time spent on it. And the correlation between

administrative access and public visits suggests that visitors to the sites are not using them simply as a point of access. Content matters.

Councillors' websites have the potential to fulfil several different purposes. They can be portals to local information, placing the councillor very much in the role of community leader. And they can be the citizen's link to the political sphere. There are two sides to this, the first is a way of discovering what their councillor is doing on their behalf; and the second is as a place to find out what their councillor *thinks* about local, national or even, in certain cases, international issues. It is this latter point that is the most contentious. The current regulations do not allow councillors to post overtly party political material on their websites. The arguments for and against this position will be explored later in this chapter.

Councillors' approaches to their websites fall into several different camps, and in addition to the 'access point' type, there seem to be five broad models: explanatory; community hubs; informative; activist; and political. The best sites contain a mixture of all these.

These are just some of the examples of subjectively 'good' websites from each of these models. Most of them do come in above the trendline on the scatter diagram, but some do not.

## Explanatory

This sort of website seeks to demystify the role of the councillor. A particularly good example is **Cllr Nora Ward**, Chair of Lancashire County Council. Her site was built very much as a model for other councillors in the authority and she receives a great deal of officer support.

- guide to council buildings
- photographs

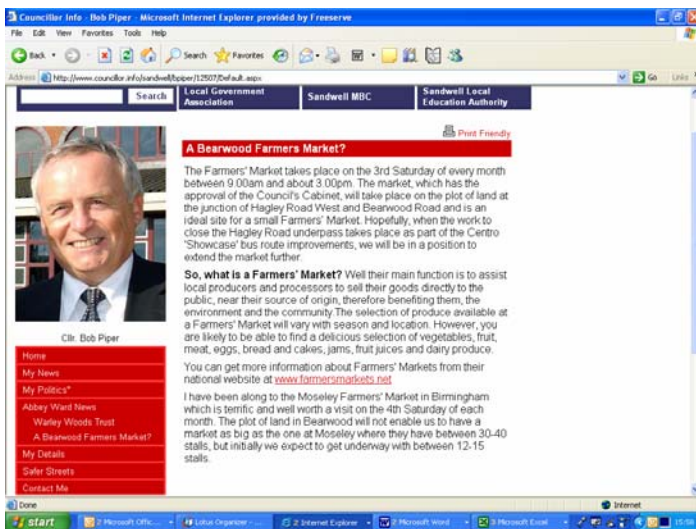


[www.councillor.info/lancashire/nward](http://www.councillor.info/lancashire/nward)

- detailed biography
- day in the life, including links to relevant websites

## Informative

The informative site builds on the role of the ward councillor as community leader, explaining local developments or collating local information. For instance, **Cllr Bob Piper** of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.



- regular council news updates
- news of ward developments
- information about schemes and initiatives within the ward

[www.councillor.info/sandwell/bpiper](http://www.councillor.info/sandwell/bpiper)

Cllr Paul Thompson of Middlesbrough Council uses his site to inform visitors about the local area.



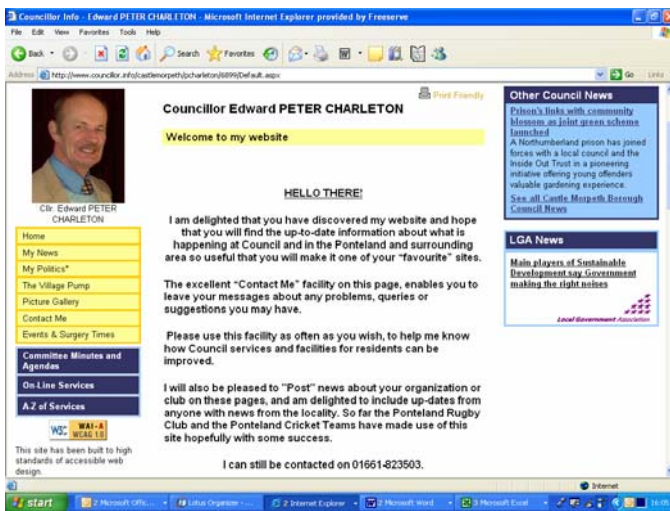
- Things to do in the ward
- Details of local schools
- Details of local facilities

[www.councillor.info/middlesbrough/pthompson](http://www.councillor.info/middlesbrough/pthompson)

It is interesting that these type of sites do not tend to include information that cannot be found elsewhere, for instance on the council's main website or on other local sites. However, the fact that they are collected on ward councillors' websites in this way, re-inforces the position of the councillor at the heart of their community. These sites also tend to receive the most visits.

## Community Hubs

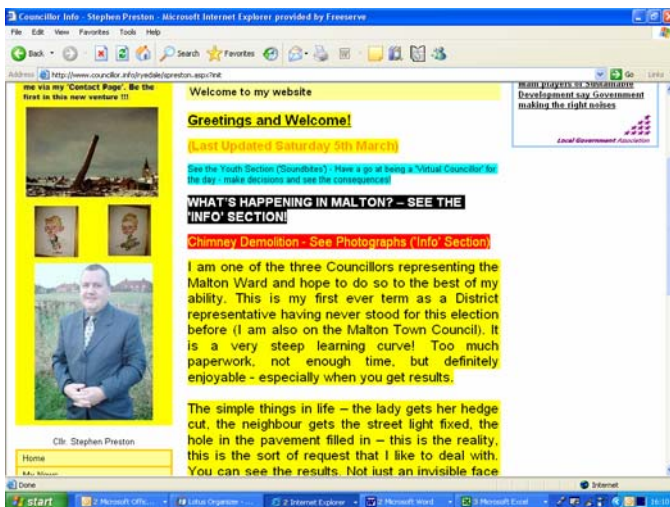
The community leadership role has been taken a little further by another two councillors, who encourage local groups and individuals to use the sites as a community notice board. For instance, **Cllr Peter Charleton**, of Castle Morpeth Borough Council.



- posts about local clubs and events – e.g. local sports teams
- useful telephone numbers and websites (not just local – e.g. telephone and mail preference services)
- encouragements to contact him with suggestions and ideas
- ‘Village Pump’ – local news and events – some connected to the council and some not

[www.councillor.info/castlemorpeth/pcharleton](http://www.councillor.info/castlemorpeth/pcharleton)

**Cllr Stephen Preston** of Ryedale District Council has decided to focus on engaging young people and has tried to encourage them to see his website as a focal point for local activities and also as an access point to voice their opinions to the council.



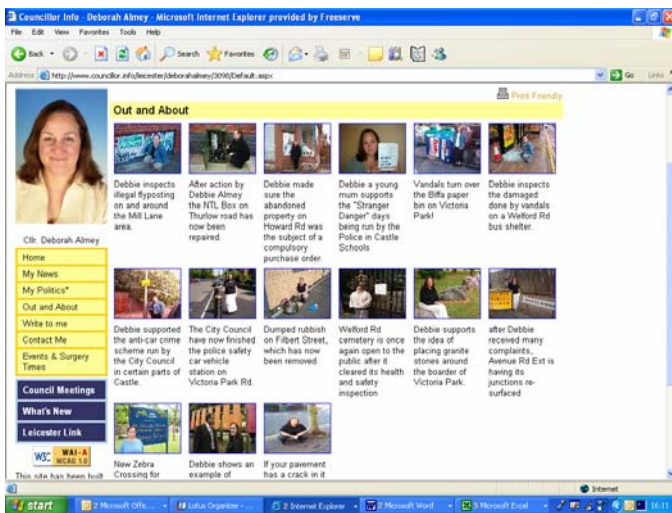
- youth section, including postings supplied by local youth groups and individuals
- transcript of a telephone conversation with some local young people, about the improvements they would like to see in the area.
- Photographs of the ward
- A questionnaire inviting opinions on the location of a local sports centre. This is a page of text which Cllr Preston asks respondents to paste into an email to him, indicating their preferences.

[www.councillor.info/ryedale/spreston](http://www.councillor.info/ryedale/spreston)

Cllr Preston also advertises his website on posters in the local chip shop.

## Activist

**Cllr Deborah Almey** of Leicester City Council uses her website to pressure council officers into taking action on problems in her ward. She posts photographs of graffiti, cracks in the pavement and similar issues, with a short comment about action taken (or the lack of it!)



[www.councillor.info/leicester/deborahalmey](http://www.councillor.info/leicester/deborahalmey)

## Political

Even though the websites are not allowed to be explicitly party political, some councillors are pushing at this door. As **Cllr Nic Best** of Castle Morpeth puts it, "it's a pilot scheme - so I feel I have a duty to test the system".



- personal views on various political topics such as regional government and the council's scrutiny activity. These also include a good deal of explanation for the non-initiated.
- local information which reflects his political interests as a Green Councillor (recycling, tree watch & farmers' markets)

[www.councillor.info/castlemorpeth/nbest](http://www.councillor.info/castlemorpeth/nbest)

Similarly, **Cllr Martyn Smith**, of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, is testing the boundaries of the Acceptable Use Policy, declaring:

*...Finally, it says at the bottom of this home page, (as part of a common template for all Councillors' websites), that Councillors will represent you irrespective of your political persuasion. Generally this is true... However, if somebody approaches me to put forward a case that is grossly illiberal, (for example blatantly racist), I shall not help. It is one thing to help a supporter of my political opponents with a personal problem, it is quite another to assist a wicked political campaign.*

He also makes a point of distinguishing between the areas of his site over which he has control, and those which are part of a common template. He is not a member of the leading political group and his website features political discussions about local issues, including rent arrears and the distribution of resources between different parts of the borough.

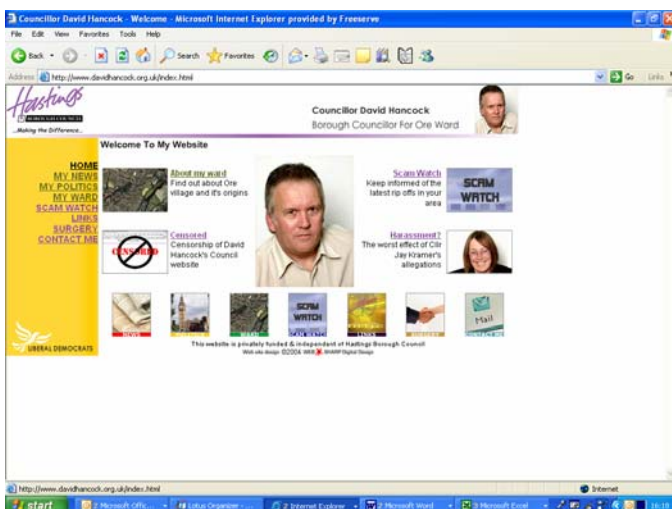


Between March and November 2004, Cllr's Smith's site received 2039 public visits - the third highest of all the websites from the councils examined for this study. He attributes this to the political content of his site:

*When people discover that my website is critical of shortcomings in Council services, I am sure they feel it worth visiting again. They know they are getting an honest opinion untainted by public relations.*

[www.councillor.info/sandwell/msmith](http://www.councillor.info/sandwell/msmith)

Factual information that is already in the public realm can be perceived to be political when it appears on a councillor's website – especially when it concerns the activities of either the council itself or other councillors. For instance, **Cllr David Hancock**'s website was taken down by Hastings Borough Council when he included information about a court case involving the Deputy Leader of the council. Cllr Hancock has now set up his own website which includes details of this controversy as well as useful local information.



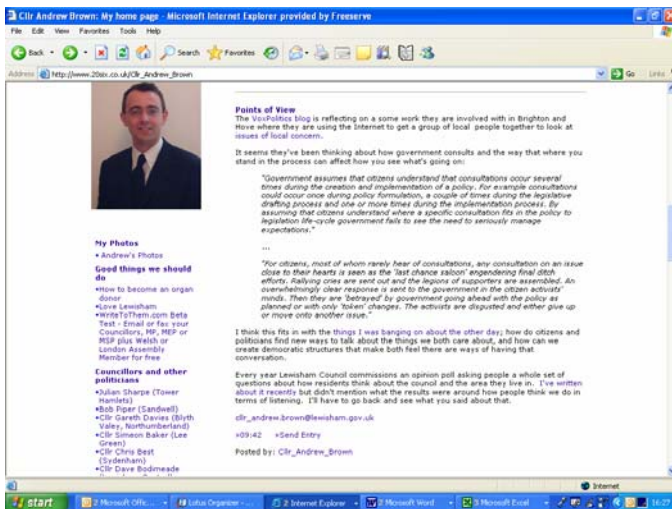
- a history of the ward
- council news
- warnings about current local scams

[www.davidhancock.org.uk](http://www.davidhancock.org.uk)

Some councillors, such as Bob Piper (see above), have chosen to set up their own websites to run in parallel with those provided by the council. Typically, these are blogs<sup>10</sup> and allow the councillor space to be more political.

**Cllr Andrew Brown**, of the London Borough of Lewisham, is one such councillor. His council-provided site includes only a detailed list of his recent news and a link to his blog. The blog includes his take on national and, occasionally, international political stories, but the major focus is on his work as a ward councillor, and as Lewisham's Cabinet Member for the Environment. It is interesting that he chooses to post this sort of information on his own website, rather than the one provided by the council. He explains this by saying that:

<sup>10</sup> A blog is web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Usually updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.



*I can say things on the blog that wouldn't be acceptable on the [council-provided] site and it's easier to use...I've used the blog to help me think out my position on some of the issues that I'm grappling with. It's also the place where electors can debate with me. The [council-provided] site is a distraction; I don't put the same effort into it at all.*

[www.20six.co.uk/Cllr\\_Andrew\\_Brown](http://www.20six.co.uk/Cllr_Andrew_Brown)

Cllr Brown updates his blog almost daily and it has far more information on it than any of the council-provided sites. Whilst we are not suggesting that all councillors should have to put in this level of time and energy, it is perhaps worth considering that the more informal style of blogs can be better suited to some councillors. This could be incorporated within the current website, with councillors including a commentary on recent council activities. An ongoing discussion about the limits of the Acceptable Use Policy (see textbox) could help to ease fears.

## Acceptable Use Policy

The Acceptable Use Policy defines the purposes for which the councillor cannot use the site. In summary, these are:

the introduction of content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages processing personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture

- the promotion of any political party or campaigning organisation
- the promotion personal financial interests or commercial ventures
- personal campaigns
- using the site in an abusive or hateful manner

## Websites and politics

The issue of political content on councillors' websites is a difficult one (see *Legal issues for councils in e-democracy* **INSERT REF**). The current ban on overtly political material is easy to understand; it is based on the principle that councillors should visibly represent all of their constituents. In an age of disengagement from traditional party politics, this position chimes well with public opinion. However, this sort of attitude can only compound the problem. If councillors were able to reveal the political debates behind the decisions they take, it would be one small step towards re-connecting 'real-life' issues and capital-P Politics in the public consciousness. At the very least, this deserves further consideration.

One unintended advantage of the political restrictions has been that councillors have to find neutral and de-politicised ways to express their opinions of council decisions. Whilst they might not like doing this, it undoubtedly means that they sometimes come across much better to the public than they would do if their passions were left unchecked.

Perhaps a good middle way would be for councillors to use their websites to inform constituents about the process and the reasoning behind decisions that are taken by the council, for instance, planning applications and budgetary prioritising. This would help to break down the barrier of bureaucracy and incomprehension that can separate councils and citizens. All too often, decisions are taken with the very best of intentions but a lack of explanation leaves citizens feeling cheated and bewildered.

Of course, there would still be room for disagreement and some councillors may interpret events differently from others but that is, in the end, what politics is all about. Other councillors would have every right to present a different point of view on their own sites. It wouldn't perhaps be necessary for every decision to be documented and discussed. Perhaps a couple of case studies could be used to illustrate how the decision making process operates and the type of consideration that goes into it. Rather than a document of current affairs it would perhaps be more interesting – as well as less controversial! – if the websites could be built up into an explanation of councillors' work more widely.

An interesting example of this type of website is Scott Neal, City Manager of Eden Prairie, Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> Scott uses his site to detail both the process and the thinking behind council decisions. He details his day to day activities and also explains decisions. For instance, after a local facility was burned down, he gave estimated costs for repairing the damage and repairing the building and explained why they decided to rebuild it from scratch.

There are a couple of ways in which this website differs from councillors' websites: in the first place, it is a blog; and secondly Scott Neal is an officer, not a politician. But these differences don't prevent it being a useful model. There is no reason why the same type of information couldn't be included in a traditional website; and the drive towards transparency should fall more naturally into the role of councillors than officers.

## **Citizens' needs**

Without information on how constituents would like to use the sites, it is very difficult to judge which websites are 'good' and which are not. We can look at hit rates to see which sites are being used most by the public but these statistics are very opaque. They don't tell us what the visitor was looking for; whether they found it on the site; or even whether they were actually a constituent (they may have been, for instance, a fellow-councillor). A great deal more research must be done on this before any definitive conclusions can be reached. Councillors themselves recognise the value of this. The survey data, examined above, showed that the two things which would be most likely to encourage councillors to update their sites more regularly are: information on how many people have visited their websites; and feedback from the public.

## **How can officers best support their councillors?**

### **Is it worthwhile?**

Councillors are busy people who cannot and should not be expected to devote much time to something that is not central to their key role as a councillor. The survey suggested that this is how councillors' websites are often seen but that should not be the case. It is up to officers to demonstrate the ways in which websites can help councillors to reach constituents and build their public profile.

- Show how the sites can be relevant to councillors' concerns. Ask if there are any groups of people with whom they would like to have more contact, e.g. young people or the elderly. Find ways to use the websites to this end. This may involve linking the councillors' website project to other e-engagement initiatives. For example, the London Borough of Lewisham is using its councillors' websites as part of an e-democracy programme based in schools.
- Councillors are primarily concerned with ensuring that their constituents get good services; representing people; and being the link between citizens and the council. Demonstrate to them how the websites can help them in all of these tasks. For instance, they can collect and publicise photographic evidence and personal opinions on local problems; explain how the council operates; and put constituents directly in touch with council departments.
- Stress the transparency value. It is the councillor's duty to be as accessible to constituents as possible. And this doesn't just mean those constituents who want to initiate contact (by phone, email or in person), some may simply want to know who their representative is. A website is a perfect medium for this kind of one-way contact. It is especially important that the views of independent councillors are represented on their websites as, between elections, this may be the only way for the public to find out what they stand for.
- Find ways to save councillors time – stress the benefits of asynchronization. Their site can be working for them 24 hours a day and they can keep up a dialogue with constituents at a time which is convenient to both of them.
- Explain how the website can help councillors to build a higher profile – not just in the eyes of their constituents but also among local stakeholders, their peers, the media and their national parties. This may be particularly useful to politicians in the opposition party – or in small parties with a low profile – who might struggle to get noticed by traditional means.
- Encourage councillors to think hard about the sort of information they put on their sites. What purpose is it fulfilling? How is it aiding either themselves or their constituents?

- Emphasise that website management is a worthwhile and transferable skill

## Engagement

The councils examined for this study have had real difficulties engaging councillors and encouraging them to use their websites. They have tried a number of different approaches to address this problem.

- Try to get a couple of high-profile councillors engaged early on. If these can be leaders of the political groups, so much the better. If these councillors will spread the word for you, the battle may be half-won. For instance, despite having no technical background, Cllr Stephen Preston of Ryedale District Council became enthusiastic about his website very early on. He relentlessly encourages his colleagues to take up the scheme – and has even offered to share his new-found technical experience with them.
- Use the early enthusiasm of newly elected councillors.

Leicester City Council's Members' Services Department set up a stall on the first day after the election. When councillors came to the City Hall for their first orientation, they could have a look at the websites. By presenting the websites as a new facility available to them, rather than as a duty, officers were able to capture the attention of new councillors.

- Use peer pressure & political competition to encourage councillors to update their sites. Remind them that members of the public will be visiting their sites, whether they are updated or not.
- If possible, it can be useful to tie the launch of the websites to another event. For instance, Kennett District Council launched the first of its councillor websites during Local Democracy Week.
- Don't expect councillors to update their sites regularly without encouragement. Usually this will be from officers but if the political groups or enthusiastic councillors can be persuaded to help, so much the better.
- Some of the pilot local authorities are developing ways to actively encourage councillors into updating their sites. For instance, letting councillors know how many members of the public have looked at the sites each month (whether there is any information for them to see or not); or selecting one site each month to be featured on the front of the council's main website on an alphabetical basis and letting councillors know in advance when it will be their turn. Others – notably Leicester City Council – have taken the approach of giving all of their councillors live websites to begin with and then focussing officers' attention on making sure that councillors use the sites. This has the effect of ensuring that members of the public can look at a website for each councillor, but that some (in fact most!) may have little or no information on them. The website visitor can then draw his or her own conclusions about the councillor in question.

## Make it exciting

Our survey showed that councillors who have live websites tend to enjoy using them, but qualitative evidence suggests that this enjoyment is often hampered by a lack of ideas.

- Provide councillors with ideas for new features on their websites.

Lancashire County Council has developed minority language sections for its councillors' sites. They are also piloting a 'talking head' video of one councillor. Andy Wilkinson, Lancashire's lead officer on councillor.info, has found that rather than becoming less labour intensive as time goes on, the sites are now taking up more and more staff time as councillors request help adding new features to their sites.

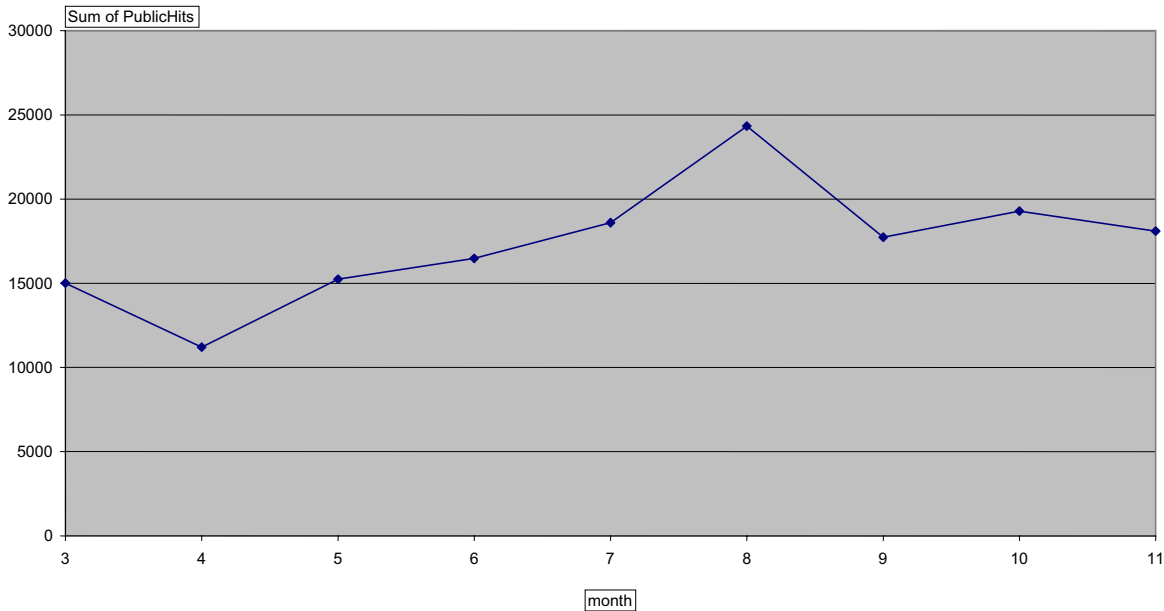
- Encourage councillors to set up their own political sites as well. This may enthuse them more about the possibilities of the medium for reaching voters.
- Emphasise that websites do not have to be a finished product. They will evolve and develop over time and do not have to be perfect when they first go live. For instance, the London Borough of Lewisham has found that showing councillors examples of good and bad sites at the initial training session can be off-putting as councillors then feel pressured to perfect their site before letting it go live.
- Don't update sites for councillors without engaging them in the process. There is no point in them having a site unless they feel some ownership of it.
- A more informal style may suit some councillors, for instance some may enjoy updating a diary page in which they comment about their recent activities.

## Publicity helps

The survey showed that councillors will be more likely to update their sites if they know that they are being used by members of the public. Partly this is about giving them feedback on the numbers of visitors they are currently attracting but the other side is to attract more visitors through publicity.

- Encourage councillors to include a 'let me know if you like my website' section. The positive comments will encourage them to update their sites more frequently.
- Circulate positive feedback from the public to all councillors. As well as generating competition, it will show less active councillors that constituents value being able to view their websites
- Link from the front page of the council website, with a large, clearly visible icon, or postcode search facility. Every councillors' site should be just one click away from the homepage.

In July 2004, Lancashire County Council put a large button on the front page of their website that led straight to the councillors' websites. The chart below shows what a difference it made (July is month 7).



- Encourage councillors to have their URL printed on business cards, letterheads and newsletters. This will reinforce the idea of websites as another tool in the kit.
- Advertise the sites to the public. Some councillors may also want to seek their own publicity.

## Technicalities

The website package used by councils in this study has been specifically designed to be easy to use. It is no more difficult to operate than popular online shopping sites. Yet 69% of survey respondents said that it should be made easier to use. The practical answer to this is to look at the ICT training that councils provide to their councillors.

- Most councils provide training manuals with lots of diagrams and screen grabs. These are undoubtedly very useful. However, some councillors report being put off by the sheer volume of paper.



Blackburn with Darwen Council has developed a step by step CD for its councillors to follow through as they learn to use their websites. It has a series of photographs of each screen the councillor will encounter with very clear instructions pasted over the top. However it is worth remembering that by its very nature a CD format could be even more intimidating for technically inexperienced councillors, who may still prefer to use handbooks.

- Adapt training to match councillors' ability levels. Although this is easier in one to one sessions, it may also be possible to stream groups. Councillors with a decent level of computer literacy probably won't need training at all; a brief orientation session should be enough.
- Encourage councillors to go online at the end of their first training session.

The London Borough of Lewisham asks its members to read and sign the Acceptable Use policy and to prepare a welcome statement and a few news stories in advance of training. They find that councillors who do not go on line straight after training can forget everything they have learned before they get around to wanting their site to go live.

- If officers' time is limited, consider pairing councillors up to provide technical support to one another. If this can be done along party and/or ward lines, it may be more effective.
- Include website management in introductory IT training. Don't make it seem like a bolt-on.

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council have added a tenth module (website management) onto their existing computer literacy course. The councillors that have been through this training have a noticeably different attitude to those in earlier cohorts that were introduced to their websites at a later stage. They are more keen to use their sites and come back regularly to the officers to ask questions. There may be an argument for doing it even earlier than this – straight after an induction into email and word-processing. Backbench councillors are far more likely to want to use their websites than to need to do PowerPoint presentations, for example.

- Some councils are finding that one to one training sessions work much better than groups and that councillors who attend one to one sessions are more likely to keep their sites updates afterwards. But this is not universal. For others, the group dynamic (particularly if done along party political lines) can be very productive. The key is to constantly assess the training sessions and be willing to move to a different format if it becomes necessary. In particular, a new cohort of councillors may have different needs and different relationships with one another than their predecessors.

## Quality

Quality can be a real problem. In some senses, this is simply a matter for the councillor – a poor website can portray a sloppy image to their constituents. However, officers do not generally like to stand back while the councillors make themselves look bad. Some officers say that they tend to have a quiet word with political group leaders about sites that are not as good as they could be. Others say that once the task of getting all or most councillors online is accomplished, then they will move onto training councillors in design and layout.

## Don't be scared

The pilot councils were understandably nervous about potential legal liability and placed a lot of emphasis on that. However, across all of the councils in this study, only one has received a complaint from a member of the public.

- Don't overstress legal problems
- Upfront and ongoing discussions about what is and what is not allowed may help to ease councillors' fears.

## Policy implications

Websites alone will not change the nature of our politics or bring about the much longed-for revitalisation of the public-politician relationship. e-democracy coupled with progress in electronic service delivery, could begin to affect the relationship between politics and governance. In the electronic sphere, the boundaries between the political and managerial arms of local government are not so easy to maintain. Links between official council pages and councillors' own websites can be seamlessly navigated; emails sent to councillors via their websites are automatically copied to relevant officers; and official council news items are posted on councillors' websites. Whether or not citizens previously distinguished between official material printed and distributed by the council and that from councillors and the party groups, is unclear. The convergence of electronic politics and electronic services seems to be moving us into new territory.

Whatever the consequences of these developments, it is certainly clear that refusal or reluctance to use an increasingly ubiquitous form of communication can only alienate politicians still farther from their constituents. It is then in their interests to get to grips with this technology as soon as possible.

The fact that councillors' websites are also (presumed to be) in the citizens' interests has added a little more urgency to proceedings. ODPM requires that all councillors should be provided with the facility to have their own website, but there is still a question about whether or not the use of such websites should be compulsory. As we have seen, some local authorities are finding ways to actively encourage councillors into maintaining their sites. They are, in essence, saying that the ability (and inclination) to maintain a website is one of the criteria on which a councillor's performance should be judged. In an age of ever-increasing internet usage, this is not unreasonable, but if we choose to go down this route then it will have to be made explicit.

In fact, it seems that the pressure for mandatory websites may begin to come as much from the political parties as from council officers. Some constituency parties in highly contested areas are beginning to require council candidates to agree to maintain websites and engage in email correspondence with constituents. In which case, the current restriction on political content may be working against wider take-up. In most constituencies, though, it is a struggle to find enough candidates to contest each ward – let alone requiring them to be computer literate and active in e-democracy.

Nevertheless, the early-adopting councils have shown that as councillors start to use their websites, many find them to be a valuable communication tool. As other councils come to establish websites for their councillors, it seems certain that more and more of those councillors will become convinced of the benefits. Experience suggests that they will also begin to explore other ways of using the sites to bring them still closer to their constituents. The second generation of councillors' websites may well include online surgeries, community discussion boards and photos uploaded by constituents. How much they are used by citizens remains to be seen.

## Next Steps

Councillors' websites are still very much in their infancy. Some of the progress has been encouraging, but there is now an urgent need to assess how the public, given the opportunity, would like to use the sites (or, if they would like to use them at all). Policy makers and practitioners then need to develop challenging but achievable expectations of what can be achieved. This work should include:

- developing more sophisticated ways of measuring public visits – including navigation data;
- moving towards an understanding of what councillor websites could achieve and how many visits councillors should expect to receive to their sites ; and
- carrying out qualitative work with different user groups (e.g. different age groups) to assess the sites in more depth.

The websites themselves could also be used as a surveying tool. For example:

- include a feedback section with room for visitors to suggest things they would like to see on the sites. It may work best if this is a pop-up, activated when visitors exit the site. It could also include optional sections for them to state their age and whether they live in the constituency;
- for councillors whose sites are not live, consider having a page with a voting system saying:

*I am currently deciding whether or not to establish my own website. Please let me know whether or not you would find this useful, using the contact sheet below. Any suggestions of things you would like to see on the site will also be much appreciated.*

This would give an indication of how many people have been trying to access that councillor's website, but (rather than the embarrassment techniques described above) also makes the councillor appear receptive to public opinion.

If the feedback is either negative or non-existent, we should be prepared to accept that. If however (as recent research on MPs' websites suggests<sup>11</sup>), there is a clear demand for the sites, then steps should be taken to move them forwards. The websites are still very much a one-way communication tool. Once they are more firmly established, it may be appropriate to find ways to integrate them into other e-democracy initiatives, particularly online surgeries.

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<sup>11</sup> Coleman S, [\*Technology: Enhancing Representative Democracy in the UK: A Report on the use of New Communications Technologies in Westminster and the Devolved Legislatures\*](#), Hansard Society, 2002

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Methodology

The research is all based on one councillor website project (councillor.info), so that we would have a ready-defined research group. Although councillor.info was used as a research tool, and all our statistics are drawn from there, the findings should be broadly applicable, whether councils are using the councillor.info package or not.

- Qualitative Research

Interviews with 14 lead officers from the councils involved and 8 councillors identified through these interviews (mostly those featured in the paper but also some less- and non-active councillors). The councillors' interviews were used to hone the survey questions.

A seminar for lead officers was held in January to discuss the website statistics and a small discussion group of councillors, officers and other interested parties was used to test the survey findings in early February.

The micro-case studies were drawn from the initial interviews with officers and from the first seminar. They will be compiled from follow-up telephone interviews with the relevant officers over the coming weeks.

- Quantitative Research

Data on administrative hits and public visits to the website was drawn from the councillor.info sites by Poptel Technology. The way the site was set up - as one large website, rather than multiple individual ones - means that it is not possible to collect navigation information that would tell us where visitors come from, how long they stay of the sites, how they move around and how they exit.

A link to an online survey was emailed to 650 councillors on 13 December 2004 and 189 responded (29% response rate) by January 31. Survey data is unweighted and should be considered as indicative, rather than representative, of councillors' views.

## About the Author and the New Local Government Network

Emily Robinson is a Researcher at NLGN, where she has worked since April 2004; having previously been at the New Politics Network and ippr. She is the author of *Living with Regions: making multi-level governance work* (NLGN, 2004) and co-edited the recent collection *New Localism in Action* (NLGN, 2005). Emily's other publications include *Local Leadership for Better Public Places* (with Warren Hatter, NLGN/CABE, 2004) and *The Benefits of Community Engagement: a review of the evidence* (with Ben Rogers, ippr/Home Office, 2004). She has also written on anti-social behaviour and the health and future of political parties, and is a regular media commentator.

The New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. In October 2004, NLGN was awarded Think Tank of the Year by *Prospect* magazine.

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