East of England
Local Government Association

The Networked Councillor

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Improving the East

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Executive Summary

This report articulates the challenges and opportunities that face local politicians operating in an increasingly networked and digital society.

The suggestion is that such a society requires a Networked Councillor embodying key qualities of: openness, digital culture and co-production, in order to reach and respond effectively.

It was created following questionnaire and field research with councillors across the East of England, which examined their current use of social media and their ideas for how it could be used in the future. The report was then tested with focus groups and follow up interviews before the creation of this final report.

The research suggests that the emphasis should be on ensuring that elected representatives are deeply networked with their communities. Social media is an important part of this but Networked Councillors will be effectively working with online and offline networks.

Any discussion of Networked Councillors also needs to address the support function and integration with the work of officers in many different areas of the Council.

We include practical suggestions as to how to support an ambition that all councillors are able to be effective in the online world.

The most important suggestion is the need to start developing 'social' and not just technical skills online.

Further suggestions for support include: better use of peer mentoring; more effective training and greater emphasis on the social media monitoring; and, analysis that we suggest should be provided by officers.

We suggest that a better understanding of their current 'digital footprint' and online presence will help councillors navigate the digital world more effectively.

We are not simply advocating a shift to 'digital by default'. The report looks at the ways in which councillors could use digital technologies to create better relationships offline as well as online, and to become central to the network of networks which can describe every community.

The report also starts to address some of the many challenging questions within this ambition: how to protect privacy, how to ensure discretion within the negotiation process and how to protect important processes in a more agile and immediate digital environment.

This report is the starting point for a larger discussion and we welcome comments and challenge to these ideas, so please get in touch:

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① Introduction

The ways in which we communicate and consume information have fundamentally changed with the advent of digital technology, and we live in an increasingly Networked Society which is more likely to organize in loose networks than traditional hierarchical organisations. This report suggests that such a society requires a Networked Councillor, embodying key qualities of: openness, digital culture and co-production in order to reach and respond effectively.

As befits a report about online activities we released it first in 'beta' in order to get comments and inputs from a wider audience. This process has enabled us to refine some of the messages in the report and also to add additional nuances. The main point that was repeated to us was the need for councillors to be networked as taking precedence over the need for them to use digital tools. Everyone we spoke to agreed that increased use of social media and other new technologies is important but technology adoption is not a smooth curve. We consistently heard from councillors who see an increasing need to be visibly and actively networked with their communities with or without the assistance and 'amplification' that social media would provide.

Our beta work also emphasized the importance of including officers in this discussion as we cannot expect to change the role of councillors without changing the role of the teams supporting them. Finally the beta discussions showed how different the online experience can be for elected representatives and the need to make sure that they are properly supported in this role. Much of the report remains the same; however we have drawn attention to the new ideas presented and we would like to thank everyone who has participated both online and offline.

This report considers how to increase the effectiveness of councillors in the online world beyond the current mixed picture, with contrasting examples of superb use of digital and complete lack of adoption. There are both risks and opportunities in this ambition, but this report lays out the evidence to support the idea that we need all our elected representatives to be comfortable and effective in the online space.

The shift to making greater use of digital technologies is more than a channel shift towards being 'digital by default'. Rather than simply substituting online for offline methods, this report looks at the ways in which councillors can take advantage of the behavior changes we see online and become central to networks which are more participatory, open and collaborative than we

might find offline. Many councillors already think in this way and we were frequently told about councillors who use no technology but are central to the networks in their Wards. What we also found is how digital tools can accelerate and make more visible this kind of activity. This is not a pipedream; constant growth of online activity and the boost to this which is evidenced when people move to mobile devices for Internet use have shown that online actions can drive real-world change.

Alongside this ambition, this report presents better ways to support councillors as they explore this new environment, including: peer-group mentoring in order to develop digital skills, development of a curated 'digital footprint' by councillors and improved content management skills as well as better analysis support. To a great extent this is about letting go of much of the control that has been implicitly or explicitly placed on councillors in the digital space and replacing it with more demanding expectations, better quality information and support so that councillors navigate these waters for themselves but with active support from officers.

The beta testing discussions highlighted the need for these issues to be addressed by councillors and officers together – any change to the role of the elected representative should drive changes to the support function offered by officers. To date discussion of the use of social media can be seen to have been siloed in organisations with councillors and officers addressing it separately – this report recommends that these discussions are brought together.

There are many challenging questions within this ambition and this report has been designed to highlight issues of political sensitivity, how to have private discussions in public spaces and asks where we need to ask the online space to bend to the needs of democratic engagement rather than assuming it is always the other way round.

② Background

Local democracy is facing serious challenges. The spending power of local government has been greatly reduced at the same time that the costs, and extent, of areas like social care are rising. Councils are being called upon to make radical changes to the nature of their service provision at a time when democratic participation is dropping.

Low participation in terms of voter turnout generally at local elections is described by some as a democratic deficit. Particular sections of society have very low participation rates, and following the riots in 2011 there are genuine concerns about large parts of our population becoming permanently disenfranchised. While we are not suggesting a magic bullet, the fact that digital networked technologies are growing increasingly dominant in our society does offer an opportunity to create a different kind of relationship with the public. Can we use the way in which digital networked technology has become embedded in our society and behaviours to address the challenges faced by local democracy? Can we encourage a more networked, and as a result more effective, councillor?

The potential for digital technologies to dramatically alter the processes and services of local government is well-documented. Less attention has been given to the way in which technology is fundamentally changing people's behaviour and attitudes, and how they interact with each other and with decision-makers. Even less attention has yet been paid to the practical considerations involved with examining how our elected representatives, particularly at a local level, are using these new technologies and how we support and encourage them as they change.

This report has been written from the perspective that a more networked and open society is being formed as more people have the ability to connect, share and take action independently of traditional institutions and structures - but that we need to raise the level of support that we offer our elected representatives to ensure that they can participate fully in this. The evidence for this social shift is outlined in section 8. The research work here has been commissioned to examine whether innovations within our representative democracy have been slower to adapt to and make the most of this behavioural shift that accompanies new technologies and explores possible factors that are inhibiting the democratic potential of technology with respect to local communities and their representatives. The report is very positive about the potential of social media to improve the relationship between representatives and the public - a view which is also evidenced in the research responses. However, there is a gap between this potential and current practice, and one of the purposes of this work was to start to create a more sophisticated debate about the use of social media beyond the black and white debate that is often seen between technological evangelists on the one hand and the more cautious majority on the other.

This report was written following an exploratory piece of research with a select group of councillors in the East of England. It is intended to shine a light on the way elected councillors relate to and use technology to reach their constituents, and to draw out some important questions that we should be asking in order to fully appreciate and act on the democratic potential of new technology and to support our elected representatives.

The report is intended as a starting point for a wider conversation about what it means to be a councillor in a networked and digital age.

? Please let us know what you think

If you have any comments or responses to the points raised in this report, please get in touch:
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③ What is the Networked Society?

To understand the Networked Councillor, we first need to understand what we mean by the Networked Society. We live in a digital age where anyone with the most basic of computer or telephone equipment can create and share content with anyone they choose. At time of writing over 80% of the adult population are online and 92% have mobile phones. Around 50% (Ofcom, Kantar Worldpanel[1]) of the UK population own a smart phone. These technologies give us the ability to create connections and networks to share information and power in different ways.

As well as more people getting online, increasing numbers are using technology in a different way. People can create content and distribute it freely through their networks. They are able to comment on, review or 'like' what others create and they are always able to click 'more' and follow links down a rabbit hole of information. They find and share information on their terms, and to their timescales.

The Oxford Internet Institute runs a bi-annual study of online behaviours in the UK. Their latest report from the 2011 survey breaks the population down into Non-Users, First Generation Users and Next Generation Users. First Generation Users connect from fixed location PCs while Next Generation Users connect from multiple and mobile locations, weaving their use of the Internet more deeply into their lives. First Generation Users are more likely to see the Internet as just another channel to provide 'one-to-many' top down communication. Next Generation Users understand and expect more openness. For them, the Internet enables many to speak to many, and they are accustomed to a multiplicity of voice and opinion. It is with these Next Generation Users that we see more social behaviours and content creation.

Next Generation Users are active members of a digital space with a more participatory culture. This culture has qualities of collaboration, openness and the potential for co-production embedded within it. These are valuable qualities to offer in the debate on how to renegotiate the relationship between the public and its local representatives.

As the public create content and networks we can start to see these being used to effect real-world social change. Groups with shared interests or goals are flourishing as the cost of and the barriers to forming them are dramatically lowered by technology. These networks might be focused on a single task, for example the #riotcleanup after the 2011 summer riots that saw thousands mobilised online to clean up the streets after the unrest, or the

campaigning work of 38 Degrees which has been lobbying parliament on a number of issues. The designation of the 'Networked Society' signals the centrality of this network effect with respect to the changes we see happening. It was striking at the time how few elected representatives were part of these online conversations and the whole incident has raised the profile of what it means to be civically active online.

The public are also creating local websites and communities which enable them to connect and network in their neighbourhoods. These sites and networks are appearing all over the country and growing in size and influence. They use online technology to garner or mobilise actions offline in different institutions and settings. In some cases elected representatives are active and involved in these communities, but in the majority of sites that have been explored it is the exception and not the rule to see councillor involvement in hyperlocal sites.

One does not have to necessarily be a Next Generation User to feel the effects of the action they create. You could have participated in #riotcleanup without being a Twitter user, and you would have been participating in a new form of non-hierarchical, community-centered organisation. The effects of networked behavior are felt beyond those of us who are active online as content creators, as we see changes in the way the media works and participate in collaborative or networked activities such as those described above. Next Generation Users are significant, however, in that they accelerate the growth of active participation in the Networked Society. We suggest therefore that it is significant that we are not seeing elected representatives active in these digital civic spaces.

Co-production

Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change (Definition by NESTA, Challenge of Co-production report[2]).

The beta discussions repeatedly stressed the fact that not all communities are at equal stages of online participation and also the frequent differences between rural and urban areas. A networked councillor does not necessarily need to be active online, but does need to be aware of the ways in which the local community prefer to engage with their elected leaders.

The significance of the Next Generation User

Understanding the First Generation/Next Generation distinction is critical to understanding the Networked Society, and thus the role and position of a Networked Councillor.

Their significance does not just lie in the fact that they are a growing group, but because they mark a social and cultural shift that goes way beyond the question of how to communicate better with more people, and starts to describe the expectations and demand that this influential group have in their relationships. Understanding this shift will help us with other thorny issues faced by representatives in both local and central government.

Key facts from Oxford Internet Surveys

According to the OxIS 2011 survey:

"A Next Generation User has two characteristics: (1) they use at least two Internet applications on their smartphone (i.e. email and weather) and (2) they own at least two of the following devices: a tablet, a reader or three or more computers. This new pattern of access is reshaping the use and impact of the Internet.

Next Generation Users have emerged across all age groups and comprise 44% of online British population. Yet, they did not appear overnight. Once we identified them we could find them in prior waves – their proportion grew from 20% of Internet users in 2007 to 44% in 2011."[3]

1. http://www.bcs.org/content/conWebDoc/43809
   http://www.itpro.co.uk/641770/ofcom-survey-sheds-light-on-popularity-of-mobile-devices?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=itpro_newsletter
2. http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/Co-production-report.pdf
3. http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/oxis/publications

④ What is the Networked Councillor?

There is little doubt that the evidence around public take up of digital technologies such as social media is persistently increasing and likely to continue to do so. The question posed in this report is if we are creating a more digital and more networked society then we are only just starting to explore what this might mean for any of us, including our representatives – so in an increasingly participatory and self-managed culture, what role should our elected representatives play?

Our working assumption, explored in this work, is that a more Networked Society will need a more Networked Councillor, able to represent and respond to people acclimatised to a collaborative and networked way of making decisions and taking action.

There is little evidence that the public want to dispense with representatives, but there are indications that the public would like a more open and more direct relationship with their politicians.

With a deepening concern about a growing democratic deficit, there is no shortage of drivers pushing us to find ways to reconnect the public with their politicians.

The qualities that the Networked Councillor should embody are found in the way in which Next Generation Users are approaching and using technology. We suggest that the following qualities, which can already be evidenced online, will be inherent:

➤ **Open by default:** This is open not just in terms of information but also in terms of thinking and decision making

➤ **Digitally native:** Networked Councillors will be native in or comfortable with the online space, not in terms of age but in terms of the individual adopting the behaviours and social norms of the digital culture

➤ **Co-productive:** Co-production is a way of describing the relationship between Citizen and State which brings with it an expectation that everyone in the conversation has power to act and the potential to be active in the outcome as well as the decision-making process

➤ **Networked:** A Networked Councillor will be able to be effective via networks as well as hierarchical power as a leader

The spectrum on which councillors will adopt these qualities will vary on the individual and the community they represent. Some of the qualities will feel natural and obvious, others will seem more challenging. The intention with this report is to

help councillors think about technology in terms of how it can help apply these qualities and thus affect and improve their relationship with the public, as opposed to thinking about technologies as a broadcast communication tool.

This marks a shift in perspective and one which will require skills and support which may not be readily available to councillors at the moment. This research started to examine the skills and support which would be needed by the Networked Councillor, and we will pick up on these in section 8 and 9 after looking at the current relationship councillors have with technology, and the barriers – both real and perceived – to greater take up.

One of the points emphasized during the beta testing of the report was the need to focus on the networked behaviours rather than the technology itself – though other participants did also emphasise how much the digital technologies can open up networks to make them more open and accessible to people and this is an important point with respect to building trust.

Evidence from Hansard reports

While the 2011 Audit of Political Engagement described the public's discontent things were better at the local level:

"People are far more positive about the efficacy of getting involved in their local community than they are about getting involved in politics. Around half of the public (51%) agree that 'when people like me get involved in their local community they really can change the way their area is run', while one in five people (21%) disagree. This compares favourably to the one in three (30%) who agree that they can change the way the UK is run by getting involved in politics and 44% who disagree."[4]

4. http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament_and_government/archive/2011/03/30/audit-of-political-engagement-8.aspx

(5) Councillors today

Standing as an elected representative within local government can be both time-consuming and hard work. That, combined with an overall drop in levels of democratic participation, means that we have fewer and fewer people standing for election.

For many people this raises a concern that our councillors are not always representative of the areas in which they serve. In particular there is difficulty in attracting younger people to participate in local government (the average age in England is 58.3 years and only 13.5% of councillors in England are under 45, with just 3.5% under 30) and this was reflected in our group of respondents. In general women are underrepresented, making up only 29.3% of the total, as are people from ethnic minorities who make up 4.1% of councillors and 9.5% of the adult population. Councillors are most likely to be retired or self-employed.[5]

In terms of technology use, there are many examples of councillors who are making extensive use of social media and most Members will have a digital presence.

However there is little systematic adoption of new technologies, with usage being inconsistent within groups of Members. Choice of communication channels is and should be a matter of personal choice for the individual; however the divide between what we see in the general population and what we see Members using is one of the motivations for this research.

Who took part?

36 questionnaires were returned, 24 by councillors and the balance from Officers. The gender balance was 18 male / 14 female, and while ages ranged from under 25 to over 65 the modal class of respondents was 46-55. 7 councillors took part in in-depth interviews over the phone.

While we ensured political balance when inviting people to respond to the questionnaire, the majority of respondents did not include information about their party membership. This reflects our informal observation that many councillors who are already active online do not see this as a party-political issue but instead something that every party is grappling with.

" I think social media is still very much used by some people who are very technologically aware and when it comes to local politics that interest is just not there on local politics as it is there nationally. I think that there is a deeper meaning to that in terms of the young who don't feel that they have much of an influence by getting involved in local politics whereas national politics has more of an impact. Or at least there is more of a perception that national politics has more of an impact so it is easier to get people signed up to causes and petitions." *- Councillor*

5. Representing the Future: Report of the Councillors Commission, DCLG 2007

# ⑥ What people use: different tools and channel choices

With respect to technology use, the study participants were fairly typical of the overall councillor population. They each access the Internet more than once a day and reported being as likely to use social media for personal reasons as for professional reasons.

When asked about the type of tools that they use the overwhelming favourite was email, with a fairly even distribution between mainstream social media tools Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

The respondents' approaches to channel choice were varied. For example some preferred to keep Facebook as a social medium where others liked the reach that it gave them to their communities. Some of the respondents appreciated the immediacy of Twitter while others found the short nature of responses to be restrictive.

Which digital tools, if any, do you currently use? This can be for personal or professional purposes

■ Officer ■ Member ■ Cabinet Member ■ Other (please specify)

"
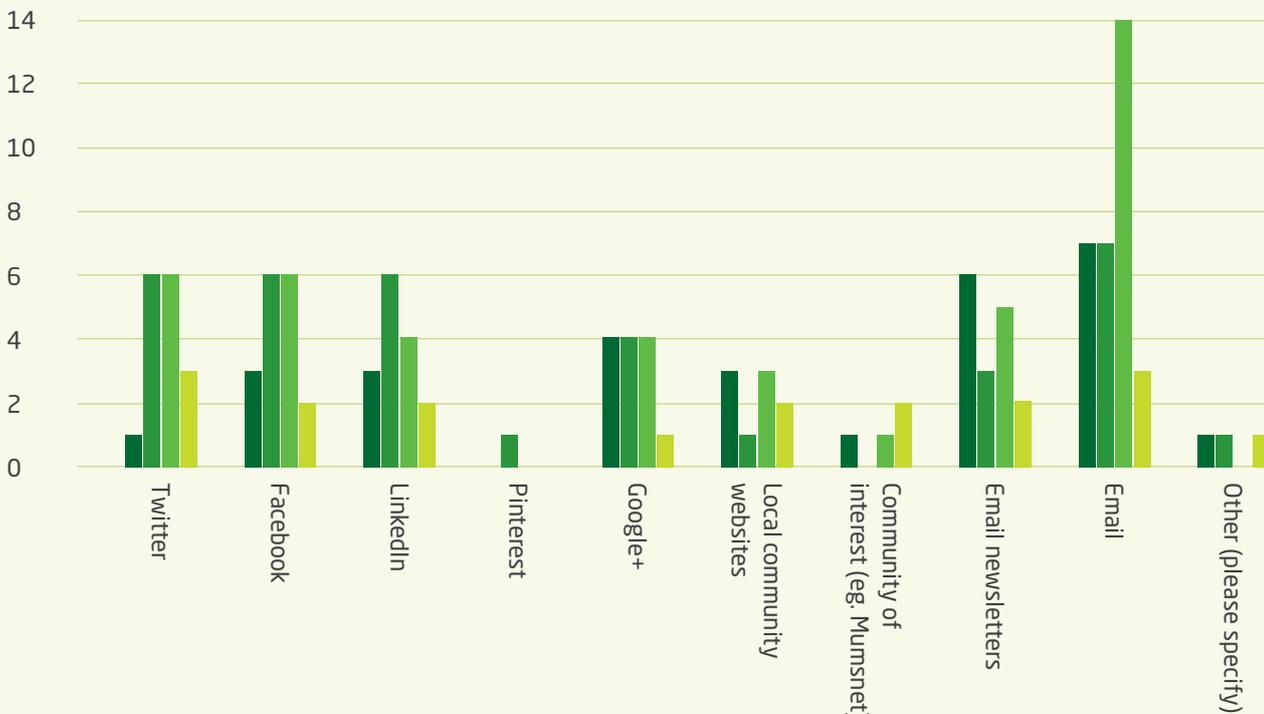
I can't have a meaningful conversation with people using Twitter about things that are too complex for the number of characters that you can have on Twitter." – *Councillor*

"

At the moment I use Twitter, then Facebook and my Twitter automatically loads Facebook. I also use LinkedIn which also automatically updates. It is quite interesting about the different people on each social media network. On Facebook, I tend to have mainly local residents. Whereas on Twitter, it is also local residents but also other partner organisations that I also engage with. So there is quite a broad range of things that I update people on, I tend to say what I am up to or what I am working on, or if there is an issue that I can tell people upfront to avoid people moaning at me or emailing me about issues. I try to get in first." – *Councillor*

"

I made the decision that I could only use one and if I was going to do it I wanted to do it properly and on that basis I decided to use Twitter because of its nature." – *Councillor*

Why people use social media

We found mixed reasons for using social media, which again we would expect given the profile of the group.

Why do you currently use social media?

■ Officer ■ Member ■ Cabinet Member ■ Other (please specify)
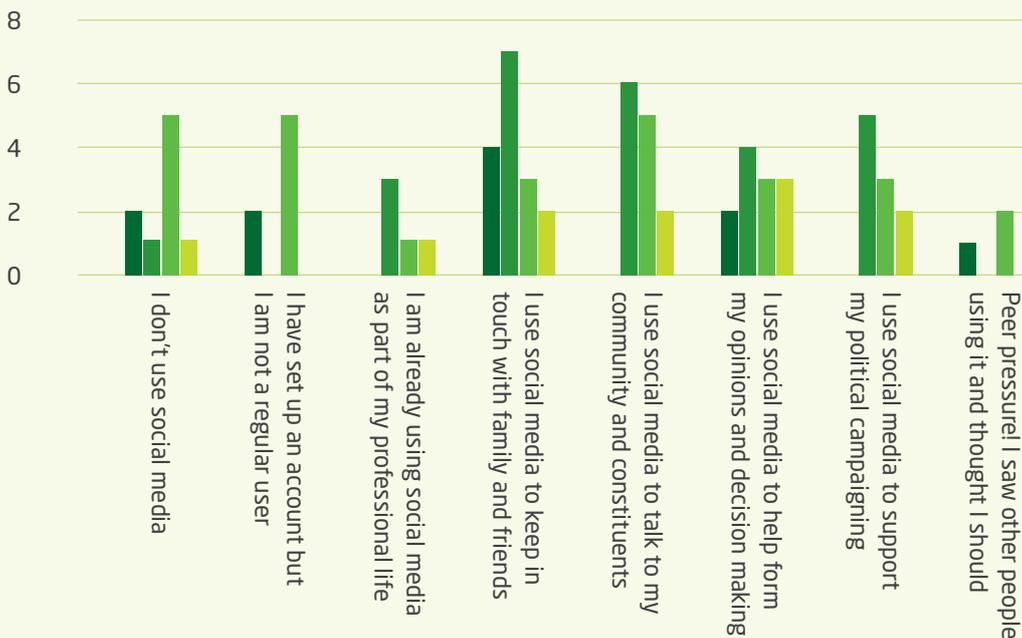
We can see that there are a handful of active users who are using social media to aid decision-making and opinion forming and to talk to their community. However there are many who limit its use to personal relationships or getting messages out when campaigning.

There is a strong sense from the group that there is a need for local politicians to be active online, and an acknowledgment that social media is an important channel for reaching a younger audience in particular:

" If we are going to contact younger people we've got to be up on that. They will do everything on their mobile phones they aren't going to wait come home and sit in front of a desktop. If we are going to be in touch with our constituents, especially our younger constituents we have to be ready to do it." - Councillor

We asked our respondents why they started using social media in the first place and many of them were introduced to it by colleagues, friends or family with only one respondent citing some kind of formal training. While many councils have made training available, the pattern from our survey group was for personal exploration and learning rather than taking part in formal training.

Their understanding of their online audience was fairly basic though, for example none of the respondents were doing much analysis of their online reach. However, there was a general sense in which they felt they were attracting a younger audience:

> "The reason I started was actually that when I was telling my friends that I had become a councillor they asked what a councillor did. I thought that this would be a really good way of keeping my friends up to date on what I was doing. So that was around the time I became a councillor and it has really gone on from there." – *Councillor*

> "I think the most interesting thing that I have found is that I have a lot of younger followers and a lot of followers who are social housing tenants who might otherwise find approaching a councillor a bit scary. They are unlikely to phone up a councillor and would be worried about doing so. Also younger people tend to use Facebook and Twitter and so I have a lot of younger people following me. So if councillors are struggling to engage with younger people then social media is definitely helpful."
> *– Councillor*

What is their perception of relationships formed through social media?

It is clear that for some of the respondents online communication is 'real' and for others it is not.

> "   No, if I'm talking to any forum I would only do it in person. If you are saying something and someone is saying something back to you, you can tell from the intonation of their voice and their body language what they are actually saying to you, you can't know that when you are speaking to someone through technology. For me its about they have elected me and I'm a real person and I need to be accountable to them physically in their place." *- Councillor*

There is a concern about the 'clicktivism' that sees responses on channels such as Facebook as being less valid than those in other mediums:

> "   When you deal with people individually you get to get real feelings on things. What you get on Facebook, a view will be expressed and anyone else who wants to falling behind. You don't get that individual knowledge. You also can get one strong negative view to an issue and someone who makes an awful lot of noise on Facebook but when you get proper consultation responses in, the outcome is much more positive..." *- Councillor*

These are, of course, valid concerns as it can be difficult to identify who you are interacting with on platforms such as Facebook. But it also perhaps indicates the subtle difference between First and Next Generation Users' relationships to social media. Next Generation Users are more likely to trust online contributions and are better able to sift through the 'noise' of social media.

Who are you talking to?

We asked respondents to estimate their online reach and, where they were able to answer, the reach was relatively small in terms of social media potential, and many did not have an idea of the number of people they were reaching.

Some local examples of reach online

➤ Coventry Facebook page has 28,382 'likes'[6]

➤ Leicestershire Police and Download Festival Facebook page has 3,691 'likes'[7]

➤ @CllrTim on Twitter has 1,969 followers[8]
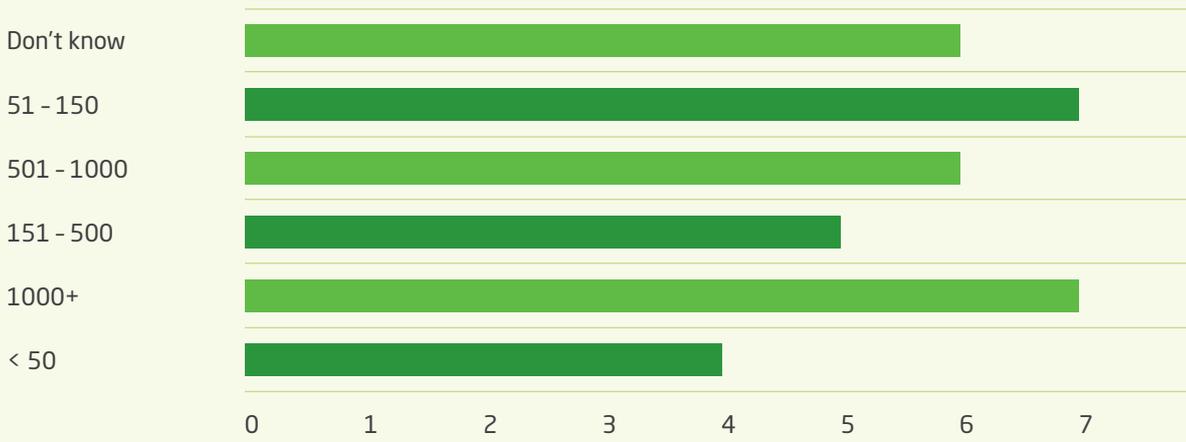
This is not to say that some of the respondents do not have a sophisticated view of reach:

"
I have about 180 followers on Facebook. The majority of them are local residents from my ward but some of them are more general. On Twitter, I have 800 followers but a lot of those are, like we have a university that I work closely with, so I have those so I can retweet what they are saying and they can retweet what I am saying. So we can reach a far greater audience because the university has 12,000 people that come to Hatfield so they can retweet what I am saying about various things. On Twitter there are various MPs, Councillors, other organisations that I work with, other councils as well as individuals." *- Councillor*

6. https://www.facebook.com/coventrycc
7. https://www.facebook.com/downloadcops
8. https://twitter.com/CllrTim (Research accurate February 2013)

However this appeared to be the exception rather than the rule, with many of the respondents being uncertain of the communication efficacy of social media:

> "I stumbled upon Facebook some years ago, socially. I rarely use it but do log-on occasionally to check on what my 'friends' are up to. Apologies if I appear curmudgeonly, but do find the information shared pretty banal mostly and spurious friend requests are rejected. I have yet to be convinced my constituents' support or opinions would be influenced or indeed appreciative of Facebook or Twitter messages by me, but I do have an open mind. Email and well-crafted, easy to use websites are now an essential and effective form of communication, obviously." *– Cabinet Member*

There is an abiding belief that the active online audience are not interested in local politics – we need to be aware that this could become a self-fulfilling prophecy if we do not seek to engage people through these platforms. Contradicting this belief, however, is a feeling from the respondents that there is an online audience but this is made up of pressure groups and campaigners:

> "The communities that are out there are mostly interest groups so they are generally focussed on one issue or one area of concern. So I have and do engage with some of the local interest groups, there is an anti-incinerator group for example in Hertfordshire, they are quite sophisticated in corresponding out to members in various forms. But again that is around a single issue. As it is only one view rather than a series of views from across the community which is really what I want to engage with. I don't think that the interest groups are as important for a local councillor unless it is something which is having a specific impact on your ward." *– Councillor*

What might be happening here is that there are active community members both on and offline who are not part of formal campaign groups but who nevertheless are engaged and interested in their community.

The challenge for councillors is to find these active members of the community. A lack of knowledge about how to seek people out online might be inhibiting their ability to connect to the groups who are online but self-contained and satisfied with their interactions with local government. This group, the 'Willing Localists' described in the last Hansard Audit of Political Engagement10 are a considerable asset to local democracy if they can be connected to the local democratic conversation. It may be that councillors need more help to reach and respond to these 'pro-social' residents as opposed to the audience which seeks them out more immediately.

Talking to each other

Many of the respondents cited the fact that they use social media to talk to colleagues and that this is an excellent source of both learning and support. It may be worth considering this with respect to councillor training and embedding links to a community of peers within the training process.

(7) Concerns for Members about being Networked Councillors

David Cameron joined Twitter on 6th October 2012 and now has over 200,000 followers – despite having only 'sent' 75 tweets at time of writing. At this scale it is impossible to imagine any meaningful interaction between him and his followers. A more relevant examination of Councillors active online in the West Midlands, an area with a lot of social media activity, indicated average numbers of followers estimated at 3,589[9] – a more manageable number.

However, for a Non- or First Generation User, even the West Midlands figures are daunting in terms of the scale of interactions. This is another major factor which inhibits more councillors from participating fully online, and in fact the scale of potential interaction can be seen as a risk of engaging online.

Our research with councillors uncovered a number of important other concerns about the risks of using social media as a means of democratic engagement.

The first was a concern about the lack of representativeness within the online audience, bringing us back to the point made earlier by a councillor about strong yet singular views capable of attracting support taking prominence on sites like Facebook. To some extent this risk is related to the lack of knowledge about who is being engaged with online and could be mitigated by better analysis. It remains a difficulty for elected representatives and will require further support and discussion to be addressed.

This is perceived in terms of the fact that the demographic make-up of the audience that are being engaged with in the main part was not understood by the group in this study. It is a good assumption that this audience would not be representative, however the lack of detailed knowledge about who is being engaged with is clearly inhibiting progress towards connecting their comments and participation with the decision making process.

Another major concern, as discussed above, was the amount of time that social media channels might demand and the worry that this was not proportionate to its value.

9. This estimate was calculated in February 2013 based on research carried out 6 months earlier into top tier council activity in the West Midlands. The list can be found at https://twitter.com/public_i/west-midlands-councillors

> " If I could put three days down to work with someone to build me a website and train me to use Twitter and to use Facebook in a more public way I would do that but I just don't get three days on the trot like that. Furthermore the electorate are predominantly over 50 and that's not to say that they don't use the internet, Facebook and Twitter. But they are not as dependent on it as the younger generation are. That is an issue and there has not been really huge support by authorities, there have been a couple of high profile cases where people have been Tweeting quite inappropriate stuff. Hopefully you wouldn't fall into that but you do need to be mindful of that and the bear traps." *– Councillor*

Active users do not seem to share either of these concerns, perhaps because of experience or because of a different way of viewing and using social media. Their experience and qualities need to be effectively communicated to potential users to prevent people being inhibited by what, it could be argued, are unfounded worries. However, as was stressed in the beta work, there is a high level of concern around confrontational and abusive behaviour online by both members of the public and peers. It was suggested that different forms of social media have different behavioural cultures and that the immediacy of the interactions online stops people from thinking. Participants agreed that abusive, confrontational and politically charged actions by both members of the public and councillors themselves posed problems, and agreed that the solution is to attempt to set norms collectively. There was some discussion of how a culture of respect could also be fostered by good leadership by Council Leaders and Chief Executives and this is something that will be explored more in future work. Carl Whistlecraft captured the need for this balance in this quote:

"In particular [councillors] want to better understand the rules of engagement in instances where they are interacting with "anonymous" users and those who are "challenging" – trolls. I would hope that, as the Networked Councillor work progresses, thought is given to striking a balance between equipping councillors with the confidence and support to be effective whilst not binding them with protocols or frightening them off completely."

The final risk is with respect to the quality of the debate and interaction online, with many respondents being concerned about either banal or, of greater concern, abusive interactions.

It is perhaps telling that the last respondent is reporting the experience of colleagues as opposed to personal anecdote. The more experienced social media participants tended to be more robust about the nature of interaction online. This is not to say that there are not considerable reputational and personal risks to going online - more open interaction with the public will bring with it the potential for abuse which will become part of the digital footprint of the politicians concerned. However, it can be argued that this is a risk that needs to be actively managed by means other than non-participation, as non-participation merely creates a vacuum where the democratic representative voice should be. This is an area in which better peer support for councillors might help in terms of mitigating this risk.

In terms of managing this risk it was notable in the responses that it was only officers who were in favour of managing or limiting online interaction by councillors. This may be a natural tension between councillors and officers, but if we are to see greater use of social media (as the questionnaire respondents would indicate is necessary) then this is an important issue to be addressed through more joint discussion with officers and members – one thing that was emphasized in the beta phase was how often these two groups discuss these issues in separate

> I have poor experiences of social media, listening to colleagues who suffer abuse on sites, and hearing of domestic disputes and it does not encourage me. I understand them to be unregulated. They are time-consuming to monitor and keep up-to-date."
> *– Cabinet Member*

Digital footprint

Your 'digital footprint' is the online content that can be connected back to you. It will include your own content such as social media content or blogs as well as content created about you in the form of newspaper articles or blog posts. If you dig slightly deeper it might also include your book purchases, your online reviews or even photos of you within other people's content. Most of us have some kind of digital footprint, however for a public figure such as a councillor it's important to understand what that footprint contains.

places. This could perhaps be done with a more grounded discussion of the risks of councillors being active online, drawing on longer-term experience of representatives or other high profile users displaying the 'Next Generation' qualities described in section 3. However, all parties we spoke to acknowledged that officers should not be inhibiting councillors going online and that the risks need to be managed by councillors themselves – assuming they have the right support.

Only one respondent talked about political risk in terms of offering up important or sensitive information to the opposition.

One of the points raised in the beta work was that in general current councillors are less affected by their digital footprints because many have just begun being active networking online – they have very little footprint which predates their democratic role and as a result less complexity to manage. Concern was raised that the next generation of councillors are likely to have grown up sharing their life experiences on websites such as Facebook, and may need support with managing their digital footprint, particularly in terms of reputation management.

Further to this, the beta discussions looked at how councillors could manage the different aspects of their online identities and there was discussion about what tools of communication councillors used and the different personas they adopted in multiple online settings. Issues were raised about how the public interacted with the various personas councillors used in the public domain and how to manage personal, political and professional identities online.

? Discussion questions

➤ How can we manage the political risks of having previously private political debates in public spaces?

➤ How do we reintroduce the idea of 'discretion' into this public dialogue?

⑧ Creating a Networked Councillor perspective

In this section of the report, we make the case that the risks – real and perceived – which inhibit the take-up of social media could be alleviated by taking the perspective of Next Generation Users and thinking about how they view and manage relationships and risks.

We have already sketched out the qualities of a Networked Councillor, and our respondents are clear on the need to be more networked and use technology differently. So how can we help councillors become more like the Networked Councillors they need to be? As a starter for discussion, we propose that an understanding of the following things will help:

➤ Digital skills

➤ Digital footprints

➤ Managing content

Digital skills

What skills will Councillors need beyond the practical ability to send a tweet or update a blog? These can be broken down into:

➤ The ability to create a clear and authentic persona online

➤ The ability to meet people online and create meaningful relationships

➤ The ability to interact with and curate other people's content, not just creating their own

➤ The ability to filter and interpret large quantities of interactions to understand what their audience is saying

Some of these abilities are already present with councillors and others will need to be developed over time. All of these skills appear to be inherent in Next Generation Users and help them navigate and build effective relationships online in the same way in which they can build relationships offline.

Alison Hernandez (reference) pointed out to us the importance of considering these skills as part of the councillor selection process – and we have also had a number of comments about their importance to councillor induction as well. Within these points seems to be a desire to set a new 'normal' with respect to members skills and their use of technologies and to match our councillors'skills and communication preferences to be representative of our society as whole.

? Discussion questions

➤ Are these the right skills?

➤ Do we need to consider other skills or do we need to emphasise pre-existing 'traditional' skills more?

> " On the grand scale of things I would like to engender more belief in actually we don't do it to be on television all the time or radio on the time. We are not part of the X Factor fraternity, I want to do it for the authorities' sake, but I am not thinking of myself as a star, I am there to advocate for the authority and actually advocate for the workforce. Engender more perspective both ways. We need to improve our reputation [after the expenses scandal]. All that bad stuff has been created and we now need to work on getting that back." *– Councillor*

Digital footprints

What is your digital footprint? Creating a sense of who you are, the curated self, is difficult if you have not had the chance to experiment with the medium of social media. While most people who become active online have the chance to do so with relative anonymity over a period of time, elected representatives will often launch themselves into a very public space immediately. In doing so they miss the opportunity to reflect on some of the building blocks of online identity, such as the degree of personal openness you wish to adopt or your views towards anonymity in others. It was clear in the interviews with councillors that there is a breadth of views on these issues within the group, ranging from those who believe that there is value in all forms of interaction with the public and those who will not interact with anonymous participants. There is as yet no clear right answer to these questions; some discussion and consensus between councillors might be helpful in developing thinking and best practice in this area.

Managing content

The emphasis in social media use from the respondents was in the broadcast of information outwards. There was little discussion or comment on how they might use social media to find out what other people are doing or thinking - except with respect to the issues that they are instigating or gathering views on. In many ways this reflects the political process which provides little space for the public to participate in agenda setting. However, it is profoundly different to the way in which people behave online where they have a great deal of control over their environment and are able to communicate with many people, and join conversations at will.

A broadcast view of the Internet is much more commensurate with First Generation Users as opposed to Next Generation Users, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the respondents emphasised these skills over more participatory ones.

? Discussion questions

➤ How open do you think you should be with the public about personal information, ongoing decisions, plans for the future?

➤ Do you think about your digital footprint?

➤ What do you think is included in that?

? Discussion questions

➤ Do we want our representatives to be part of this participatory culture?

➤ Do we think it's a good use of their time?

> " I will not have a discussion with an anonymous person." *– Councillor*

(9) Enabling Networked Councillor behaviour

As well as encouraging a shift in perspective in order to more fully understand and engage with the democratic potential of new technology, respondents pointed out some practical things that would enable more Networked Councillors to develop. Practical equipment, capacity building and peer learning and support were all mentioned.

Practical stuff

If we wish our Members to be Networked Councillors then we need to support them with the right tools. This is a discussion for council IT departments as much as for Members; however to ignore the importance of infrastructure choices in this debate is to ignore a major driver of behaviour change in users. As we consider what a Networked Councillor might look like, their practical equipment needs cannot be ignored.

This is a big topic area in its own right but perhaps the focus needs to be on whether our Networked Councillors either have the knowledge or access to the knowledge that they need to be effective commissioners of this equipment. It has also been emphasized in the beta discussions that much of this support is really driven by how 'switched on' to this agenda senior staff such as the CEX, Head of PR/Comms or Head of IT are as Alison Hernandez says "everything else falls into place when these people are engaged." We could consider Networked Leaders rather than simply Networked Councillors as being essential to changing the democratic landscape.

> "We also need the tools to do it and at the moment councils aren't adaptable enough and are tied into contract for IT. Some are thinking about it but our council is thinking of trialling the use of iPads but others think it is a waste of money and that councillors should be paying for it through their allowance." – *Councillor*

> "If all the council information was on a cloud storage system it would make life much easier." – *Councillor*

What support is needed?

There was a clear preference from within the respondent group for peer rather than officer support for learning in this area. This is not to say support from officers was not needed but in terms of learning and development the preference was for help from other representatives rather than from officers. Again, this mirrors the sort of behaviour and attitudes found in Next Generation Users, where peer to peer support and sharing is an inherent part of activity. It was also suggested that we should be setting expectations for new Councillors rather differently and embedding these tools from day one.

Some formal training was suggested to get a general overview of the tools but with the specific objective of helping to develop a web presence - not just in how tools are used in isolation. There was concern about the ability of local authorities to offer this kind of training.

A number of responses talked of their colleagues being 'scared' or nervous about becoming active online and there was a belief from respondents already online that their non-active peers were yet to see the relevance or importance of online interaction. In creating support and training, the immediate need was seen to be demonstrating the benefits and impacts of online activity, not on demonstrating tools.

That is not to say that teaching tools was not important – but this was suggested as a follow-up action to providing the motivation and best done in a one-to-one setting. Again it was officers who talked about the need to educate councillors about what is 'appropriate' in terms of online content and this was not a concern raised by councillors. This is another area that perhaps needs a more open debate within local government, to explore how governance of the online space might work in the future.

> " I had a recent council meeting where they were talking about generally getting more about what councillors are doing out in the world and maybe trying to get articles in newspapers. But you don't need to rely on the newspapers because you can write your own articles and publish them yourself. I think some education about how easy it is and giving them the tools to do it." *– Councillor*

> " But it seems with residents that form of communication needs to be done by word of mouth, social media doesn't seem, certainly from a council level, to have got things moving in terms of getting people to do things purely by speaking to them on social media. I think that it is better on the national and international stuff but I don't think that it has really caught on in terms of council work certainly from my experience." *– Councillor*

Analysis support

The risk of not knowing who you are interacting with is a real one and the absence of this knowledge is clearly inhibiting growth of the democratic use of social media. Analysis tools do exist, however, and are frequently deployed in a commercial context. While these are not perfect for democratic use they are a considerable advance on what seems to be the current standard of analysis by or for councillors. This is an area of support or skill development that should be discussed as part of the development of this agenda.

> "I don't think that it should be a techy person, techy people just baffle you. I think that it needs to be peer challenge. You also need to be able to have a go in a safe environment, where you can practice without it going out to the world." – *Councillor*

> "In some ways it is helpful having it from a peer, but if the peer is from your own party but from a different council. I think people are better at taking information from someone outside. We don't currently get training at the borough or the county. I think at the county they are just starting to talk about it. At the borough we have started up this task and finish group it's called 'technology and improvement in community engagement'. So they themselves are looking at ways of doing this." – *Councillor*

> "Also I have been concerned about the poor quality advice and understanding given to Councillors as to their use of Twitter and Facebook - leading to several I know using the media for inappropriate messaging. Also my objection to both Facebook and Twitter – they are "ME"-inspired, and seem to be preoccupied with both personal trivia and risqué sentiment." – *Councillor*

Learning together

Starting out on this journey can be understandably daunting for someone not steeped in the sometimes rapidly changing world of technology and culture. As mentioned before, many Next Generation Users have had time to slowly build up identities, behaviour and understanding of the norms of digital space, but elected representatives may find themselves having to act fast in unfamiliar environments. Councillors tend to figure it out by themselves:

> " [The learning process was] absolutely personal. I tried it out to start with wasn't really sure how I should be using each one. I originally had a personal Facebook account as well as a councillor account and I wasn't sure what I should say or not to say on each account. It was purely around trying it out and seeing what reaction I got."*– Councillor*

> " I think that the thing is, and a lot of people have said to me that I don't do that and I don't understand it, its new and strange and I'm not quite sure how it is going to work for us. That's because they haven't had the benefit of the conversation that I had around the bar with the other councillors who were so into it. I don't think that they see what is in it for them."
> *– Councillor*

As councillors currently share many traits and the majority are in the same place with regards to technology, creating action learning networks could be very valuable here. Different to training or support, a neutrally facilitated network would provide a safe space to reflect and learn whilst experimenting with new technology. This would help build confidence at the same time as gaining hands-on experience of using tools.

10 How do we build new relationships for the Networked Society?

From this small exploratory study, and from our understanding of the cultural and behavioural shift engendered by the social web, we have drawn a number of conclusions. Firstly, that we live in an increasingly Networked Society, and such a society requires a Networked Councillor embodying key qualities of: openness, digital culture and co-production in order to reach and respond effectively. We have gone on to suggest ways in which councillors and officers could create conditions and develop abilities for Networked Councillors to grow and flourish, in line with a growing and influential proportion of the population.

The research also leads us to more questions that need to be asked in order to fully develop a vibrant, representative and participatory democracy using social technology. These questions are a long distance from the usual preoccupation of how to get more councillors on Twitter, and take us into a deeper discussion of local democracy and the democratic potential of technology:

➤ How can the way in which people behave online inform the way in which we create our democracy?

➤ How do we create more power in our communities and yet preserve representative democracy?

➤ How can we make sure that councillors are part of the conversations which are already happening online?

And, as an essential element to all of the above, how do we support our representatives in order to ensure that they can be effective in the online space?

Our initial thoughts our outlined in this section.

How can the way in which people behave online inform the way in which we create our democracy?

As services deemed non-essential are withdrawn by local authorities, new rights to take over assets and services are being brought in. Communities are being asked to be more self-sufficient which will represent a big shift in the nature of the relationship between residents and councils. They themselves will make use of networks to reach out and form decisions with as many councillors as possible.

Participation may be falling in terms of voting at the ballot box every four years, but in contrast we are seeing a huge rise in participation in online campaigns and discussions, as well as the co-production and sharing of content as discussed in sections 2 and 3.

> " One of the things about both the care issues is that they don't engage people until they are personally involved. That will fire up that individual and they may have a good or bad opinion on how the authority deals with that issue." *– Cabinet Member*

Is there a problem with participation, or a problem with the current mechanisms?

These contrasts and contradictions were reflected in councillors' responses. Many councillors felt that the public were not interested in local democracy, or if they were interested it is in specific issues which concern them personally. For example:

To say that social media is going to 'fix' this issue is naive at best, however a more participatory environment will effect the relationship that politicians have with the public:

"
It needs to improve in the first instance so that it is on an equal footing. It is still, and when I speak to councillors I still feel this happening, where there are some members feel that although they are elected by residents they are not speaking on behalf of them. Therefore although they are answerable to their electorate, they don't necessarily have to follow what their electorate are telling them and I think that that needs to change for some Members. So that goes on to the engagement side of thing and it is about making sure that that is on an equal footing or making sure that we as elected Members are responding to concerns and communicating issues and things that are going on in the area in the same way that residents are communicating at the time. So however it is that they are communicating in ten years' time, it may be in the same way but in ten years time I imagine it will be quite different." *- Councillor*

What can this tell us about reinvigorating local democracy? First we need to look, as best we can, to the future, something our respondents understood well:

"
Who knows what will happen in ten years time, I don't think it is as simple as that for me it is that the 21st century councillor is nothing like the councillor I need to be in 2007. It is not just about social media it is about being a community leader. And it is about how you develop yourself personally and technology is part of that but it isn't the whole. For me it is about – this is my life and my passion and my vocation – we need more of that and we need to harness the technology to enable us to be a 21st century councillor. It is part of the overall package." *- Cabinet Member*

Planning for the future

The table below shows analysis from the OCSI[10] which shows us the prevalence of First and Next Generation Users across different socio-economic groups: The table shows the eight groups for which we have prevalence of Internet use figures. These are taken from a combination of the Oxford Internet surveys and Ofcom's Technology Tracker survey.

	% Non-users	% First Generation Users	% Next Generation Users
Students	1%	47.5%	51.5%
Retired	63%	34%	3%
Employed – in social class AB	13%	39%	48%
Employed – in social class C1	13%	40%	47%
Employed – in social class C2	13%	45%	42%
Employed – in social class DE	13%	52%	35%
Unemployed	27%	43%	30%
All others	27%	42%	31%

The overall picture is of overall growth in internet take-up and usage as can be seen by these figures on Internet and mobile adoption from Ofcom:

Take-up of Internet, digital video recorders and mobile phones, by age

	Internet		DVR		Mobile	
	2005	2012	2005	2012	2005	2012
All adults	54%	80%	11%	47%	80%	92%
16-24	60%	90%	19%	45%	92%	98%
25-34	62%	90%	10%	51%	91%	98%
35-44	71%	91%	16%	55%	91%	97%
45-54	70%	85%	15%	52%	84%	97%
55-64	59%	75%	7%	47%	75%	91%
65+	24%	46%	4%	31%	47%	68%

While digital exclusion remains an issue the vast majority of the public are online, active and becoming more social.

The evidence for this is the OXII surveys as well as the work that Hansard have done with respect to political engagement. Ofcom's review of the communications market found that more than one in every five hours spent by UK users on the Internet was on social networking sites. As of April 2011, 46% of all UK Internet users reported using a social networking site in the past week, up from just 1 in 5 three years previously[11]. Peer to peer lending sites such as Zopa are booming, lending more than £125million since 2005 and rising by 80% between 2010 and 2011. We have seen large shifts in who we rely on for information, with 51% of consumers saying they trust online customers far more than an organisation's website[12].

Engaging the Next Generation User

Next Generation Users are a minority group that is growing. As pointed out earlier, they are significant in that they mark a social and cultural shift which will have a major impact beyond just this grouping. As more and more people start to use the Internet from mobile devices, they are becoming more social in their use of it - more used to creating and managing their own online experience in a dynamic way. These attitudes and expectations will filter down to everyone because they are about more than just technological expertise, they represent a shift in how we understand the relationships and structures in our society.

This group will have high demands and expectations of their relationships which will not be met by current democratic structures that allow for influencing local democracy once every four years. This will seem (and perhaps already does) anachronistic and limiting. If councils want to engage these users then we need to explore how to enable them to participate in the experience of decision-making, at the same time as preserving the core elements of representative democracy.

How do we create more power in our communities and yet preserve representative democracy?

Ideas about the nature of representation and the representative in the 21st Century are only starting to be discussed, and yet the pace of technology and social change is fierce. We cannot 'know' what will be needed in the future but we do have clear indications that lead us to suggest the importance of certain qualities:

➤ Open by default

➤ Digitally native

➤ Co-productive

➤ Networked

Most of the respondents recognised the scale of necessary change, though few mentioned the rapid pace of that change.

At the heart of this debate is a discussion about the balance between representative and participatory democracy, but we cannot let this perhaps esoteric debate remove the need for swifter action with respect to councillors becoming comfortable with the online world – because only by being comfortable will they be able to participate in shaping it.

How can we make sure that Members are part of the conversations which are already happening online?

We need to create a framework for councillors in terms of levels of ambition, with respect to the assumptions about the nature of the relationship between the public and representative as mediated by technology. That ambition needs to be informed by the way in which our communities and citizens are using networked technologies, and also with an awareness of the rapid growth and changes in these technologies. It also needs to be informed by our desire to preserve and modernise our representative democracy and the relationship between citizen and state. We can imagine communicative, collaborative or even co-productive relationships in the future, our level of ambition is what will start to inform where on this spectrum we plan our relationships with the public to rest.

> " Everyone is different and we need to have a portfolio of options. We can't ignore any forms of communication. People do like to see you and in ten years time with social isolation and more reliance on technology it is going to be more important but that might be through video conferencing etc but you still need eye ball eye ball contact."
> – *Cabinet Member*

> " That's a difficult one. I think advances in technology mean that people will be contacting us more and more by things like Facebook and Twitter. The days when people mostly did things by letter have almost gone; I only get a few letters now. I see it going through more by mobile technology. I would like to see more done by Skype or Facetime so we can have face-to-face time. But we need to have the decent technology to do this." *– Councillor*

10. OCSI, http://www.apccs.police.uk/fileUploads/APCC_Social_media_guidance_FINAL_WEB_version_211112.pdf
    i. Ofcom, 2011, Technology Tracker Survey data tables, http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/statistics/
    ii. Hutton, W. & Blank, G., 2011, Next Generation Users: The Internet in Britain, OxIS, www.oii.ox.ac.uk/downloads/index.cfm?File=publications/oxis2011_report.pdf
    iii. Note these categories do not cover all people. We have taken the 73% internet users from OxIS page 9 for all people who are not retired, students, employed or unemployed.
11. Ofcom, The communications market (2011)
12. BT Global Services and Avaya (2011) The autonomous consumer: understanding the challenges of dealing with informed, demanding and networked customers.

⑪ Recommendations for discussion

The following recommendations were developed as part of the original report and have been tested with the beta discussions.

➤ Networked behaviours – including being more open and accessible – are needed irrespective of technology choices.

➤ The digital environment is often a difficult or hostile one as well as a welcoming and positive space. As more councillors participate online some thought should be given as to how we actively shape the digital environment to support democratic debate.

➤ It is essential that discussions about the changing role of the councillor are undertaken with officers and not in isolation with each group.

➤ Councillors need to be shown how to create a whole digital presence and not just be introduced to tools in isolation – this presence needs to fit both their personal work style as well as their skills.

➤ Councillor training in this area needs to include peer mentoring and action learning rather than 'chalk and talk'.

➤ If we wish our councillors to be Networked Councillors then we need to support them with the right tools – and this should include mobile equipment as well as access to analysis tools.

➤ We need to ensure either that our Networked Councillors have the knowledge or access to the knowledge that they need to be effective commissioners of this infrastructure – if this is not available within the authority then it needs to be provided elsewhere.

➤ A neutrally facilitated learning network should be created to share peer learning and would provide a safe space to reflect and learn whilst experimenting with new technology and approaches.

➤ As this is an exploratory study more work should be done to test these recommendations on other groups of councillors.

As a next step this project is going to pilot a new model for councillor development with a number of authorities in order to test out some of the ideas described here. This programme will have three main features:

➤ An action learning approach to the 'social' skills described in this report

➤ One to one support to provide technical skills

➤ A parallel discussion with offers about the changes needed to the support function

We will publish the results of this programme in a follow up report and also continue to publish updates on the Networked Councillor website: **www.networkedcouncillor.info**.

We would value and welcome any comments you may have on any of the points raised either here or as you start to explore these issues yourself. Please get in touch:
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#NetworkedCllr

Thank you for your help

About us

East of England LGA

The East of England LGA is a politically led, cross-party organisation which works on behalf of the 52 local councils in the East of England to harness their collective strength to shape and serve their communities and localities.

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Public-i

Public-i develops innovative ideas and digital solutions to improve democratic relationships, bridging the gaps between technology and its social context, underpinned by robust research. As Chief Executive, Catherine Howe leads with a unique combination of expertise. With a background in technology delivery, she has worked with online communities and social networks for over 15 years, and since 2001 has been advising local government on the strategic and organisational implications of public engagement within the new communications landscape. She is currently writing up her doctoral thesis on the civic impacts of new technologies.

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