

Local 2.0

How digital technology empowers local communities

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Introduction

Local 2.0 was a Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funded project that aimed to learn how local communities can be empowered through social media and other digital technologies. Between April 2010 and April 2012 we supported communities in three local authority areas of England: testing different tools and methods to learn more about the role that social media and other digital technology plays in connecting and supporting people in low and middle income neighbourhoods.

The Local 2.0 project emerged from the Young Foundation's broader work on neighbourhoods. During the two years preceding the project, council officers and elected members were increasingly interested in how the web could be harnessed to help them deliver various outcomes, including: meeting demand from residents to engage through more convenient platforms; engaging with wider audiences; improving communication between residents, councillors and agencies; supporting employees who worked on the ground; gathering rich local information; and the need to find efficiency savings.

This interest was intensified by high profile examples like President Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign, the emergence of hyperlocal websites such as www.harringeyonline.com, and a handful of councils like the London Borough of Redbridge, whose [Redbridge-i](#) website offered residents a significant level of interactivity.

These examples provided much needed inspiration and helped to demonstrate the possibilities that advancements on the web created for local communities. The Local 2.0 project sought to build on this by providing further inspiration and insight.

In this report we bring together the insight from our work, drawing on our practical projects with a number of communities in three areas of the country: Kirklees, Kensington and Chelsea, and King's Lynn and West Norfolk.

Section 1: Our practical work

We worked in partnership with three local authorities – **Kirklees Council, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea**, and **King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council** – to identify and support communities to use digital technology. Over the course of two years we trialled and supported a series of practical projects with the following groups:

- Notting Barns Live – a group of active residents and local councillors in the Notting Barns ward of North Kensington, London
- The Colville Community Forum – a community forum covering a ward in North Kensington, London
- The Fairstead Neighbourhood Management partnership – a partnership of agencies and residents on the Fairstead estate in King's Lynn, West Norfolk
- Newsome Ward Community Forum – a local community group in the Newsome ward of Huddersfield, Kirklees

- The Rawthorpe and Dalton Neighbourhood Management Partnership – a partnership covering two low-income wards in Huddersfield, Kirklees.

Our practical projects were varied. Some required intensive support from Young Foundation staff, whilst others were supported by local authority employees with light touch support from the Young Foundation. The projects we supported were:

[Fairstead.org](#) – working with residents and agencies to develop a social network website to improve communication between those living and working on the Fairstead estate in King's Lynn

[Notting Barns Live](#) – working with local residents and a local councillor to develop a social network website to build connections between residents in Notting Barns

[The Colville Community Forum](#) – advising and training residents in the Colville ward of North Kensington, who wanted to develop their own social networking website

[Newsome Grapevine](#) – holding a series of community-based drop-in sessions for local residents and groups to help each other learn how to use all kinds of technology, and developing a website which aggregates local content (such as blogs and twitter feeds) into one site

[Get Wired](#) – a [Social Innovation Camp](#) where council officers and young people came together with designers, web developers and marketing experts to explore how technology could tackle local issues in Downham Market, West Norfolk

Hands-on Social Media workshops – designing and facilitating social media workshops for council officers in Kirklees

[Community Reporters Programme](#) – a training programme run by an organisation called People's Voice Media for residents in Rawthorpe and Dalton who learnt how to tell their own stories in text, video, audio and images

SMS message engagement – supporting council staff and community organisations to use [www.thumbprintcity.com](#) – a web-based SMS messaging service to connect with local residents in areas of Huddersfield.

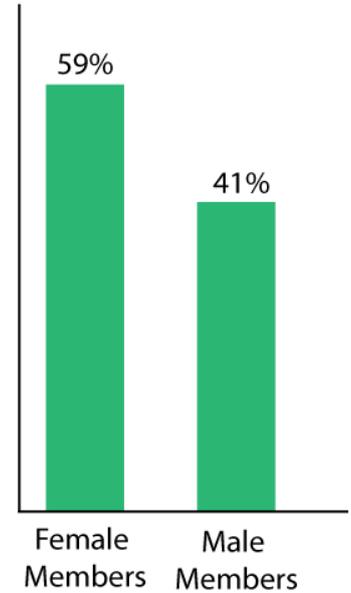
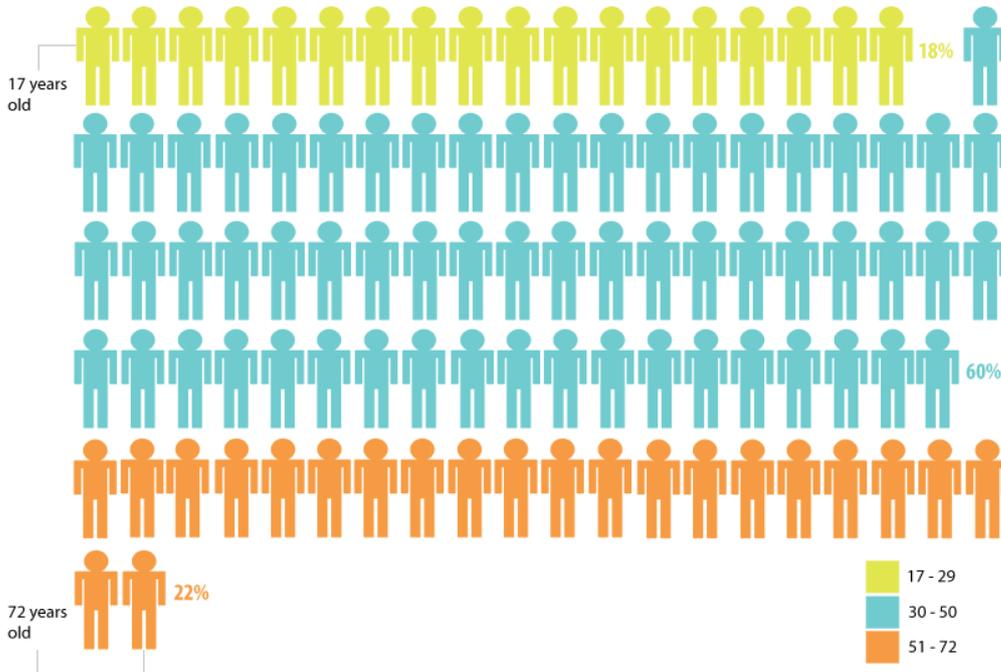
Some facts about our projects

Our three main projects – [www.newsomegrapevine.org.uk](#), [www.nottingbarnslive.com](#) and [www.fairstead.org](#) – are all websites. Therefore, we have access to a range of data that tells us how the websites are being used. The headline data, which is captured from September 2010 to April 2012, is presented below.

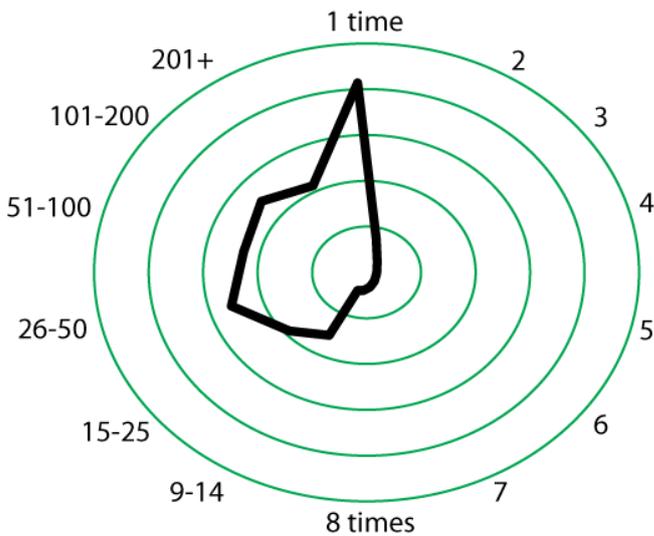
Fairstead.org - 143 members

7,500 visitors (22% unique)

www.fairstead.org:
age of members



Number of visits by visitors



188 conversation threads

Gritting of pavements

(most popular conversation with 44 replies)

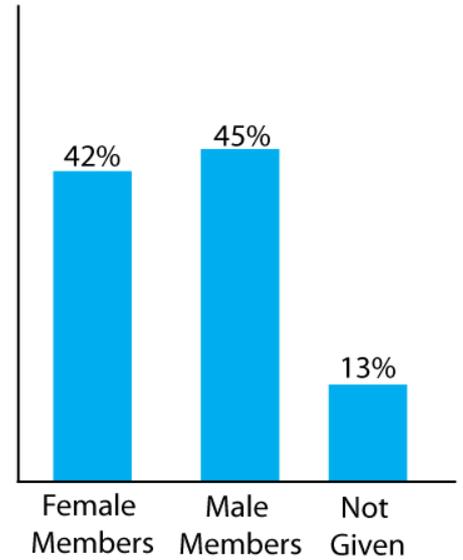
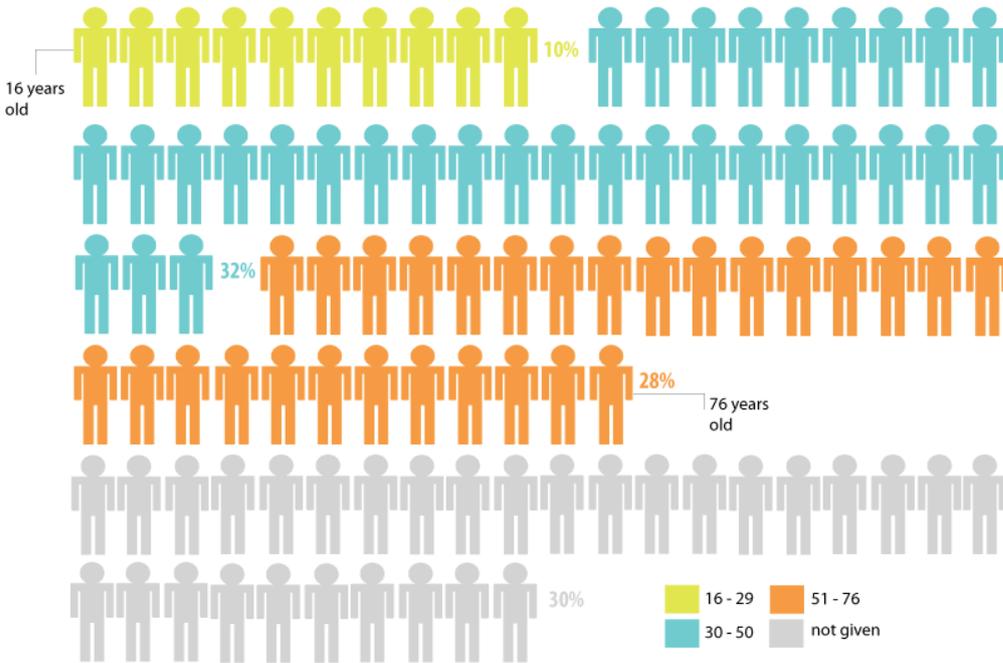
Missing dog

(2nd most popular conversation with 36 replies)

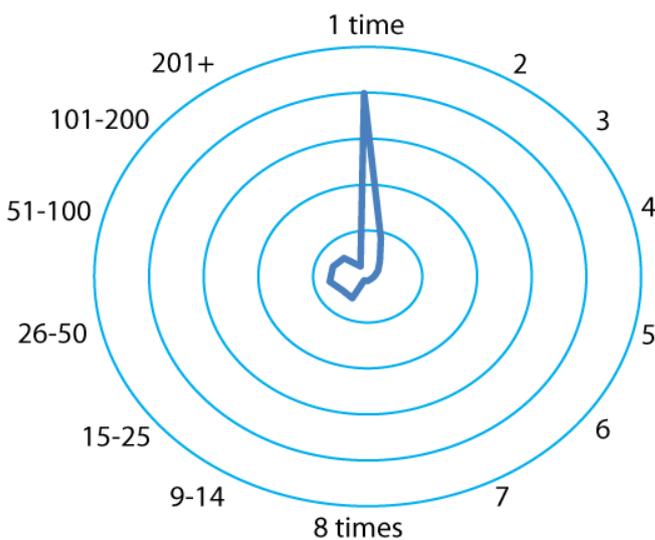
Nottingbarnslive.com - 187 members

5,500 visitors (42% unique)

www.nottingbarnslive.com:
age of members



Number of visits by visitors



78 Conversation threads
Controversial local development
 (most popular conversation with 12 replies)
Under-used local asset
 (2nd most popular with 11 replies)

Newsome Grapevine: Monthly Website Hits (Total: 8,950 visitors)



204 email bulletin subscribers



125 Twitter followers



54 text message subscribers

Plans to open a charity shop
Demolition of a property
(the two most commented blogs - both with 8 replies)

Notting Barns Live has approximately 24 per cent more members than Fairstead.org and nearly twice the amount of unique visitors; however, there is considerably more conversation on Fairstead.org. The goal of signing up more members, which was a key indicator at the start of our work, has not resulted in greater levels of conversation – a key outcome that we wanted to achieve. Instead, the strength of existing relationships between registered users has been a greater predictor of activity on these sites.

Newsome Grapevine – which is a blog rather than a social network – has more visitors than both Fairstead.org and Notting Barns Live but less discussion. This suggests that local residents use the website as a source of information rather than a space for discussion and debate and is in keeping with the design of the site and the various channels of communication it operates.

The future of our projects

To accompany the statistical data, we asked participants what they thought had been achieved through these websites. Out of the three websites that were created, [Fairstead.org](#) and [Newsome Grapevine](#) have emerged as the most active and sustainable. They are both sustained through local volunteers, who are developing their own content and act as moderators with support available on request from the local authority. The residents who are setting up [The Colville Community Forum](#) continue to explore how it can get off the ground, and community workers and active local residents in Huddersfield are still actively using [Thumbprint City](#).

The ideas from [Get Wired](#) have fed into youth work in King's Lynn and West Norfolk, whilst some of the [Community Reporters](#) in Huddersfield continue to develop content about local events and news.

Kirklees Council and the Thumbprint Co-operative hope to stimulate further use of hyperlocal media through [Shared Spaces](#) – a practical guide for community groups and activists. Shared Spaces brings together examples of the different digital tools local groups are finding useful and shares learning about the way that they are being used.

In comparison to the other websites, [Notting Barns Live](#) continues to struggle. Content is sparse and attempts to stimulate active engagement from residents have largely failed, although new members are still signing up. All of those involved in the development of the website agree that it has not been a success; however, they have committed to keeping the website online for at least another year to see if it develops into a useful resource for the neighbourhood. The perceptions about why the site has not worked vary. Some believe that the name of the site, which is an administrative ward rather than a natural neighbourhood, has severely hindered the take up. Others believe that the lack of activity on the site reflects the transient nature of the area, or that people prefer to get their local news from alternative sources like email bulletins sent out by charities.

Section 2: What we have learnt

Our early, ambitious thinking about how digital technology can empower local communities has developed into a more nuanced appreciation of how the technology works in practice – particularly in neighbourhoods where community participation and empowerment are perceived to be low. In this section, we will share our reflections which have been shaped with the input of our project partners.

Setting expectations according to context

When we started our project, inspirational examples made it easy to envisage the technology transforming a community's ability to communicate and collaborate. As a consequence, amongst the varied goals of the Local 2.0 partners, the desire to get more people to participate in community activity became the most important. This goal was not just articulated by local authorities; local residents who we worked with shared the hope that the technology would stimulate more of their neighbours to get involved.

Our experience suggests that social media reflects the conditions of a neighbourhood: if a community is active offline, it is reasonable to expect that this will translate into online. If a community – or certain sections of the community – are not very active offline, it is unlikely social media alone will change this. The technology makes participation easier for most, but it does not affect the underlying behaviours and values that really motivate people to get involved.

This is reflected in how several of the projects we supported evolved. For example, on [Fairstead.org](#) the majority of visitors observe, rather than contribute towards conversations about the estate. Content is created by approximately 15 members, all of whom are involved with offline community activity. Whilst the website has anecdotally resulted in more people being aware of what is happening on the estate, it has not resulted in significant numbers of new people becoming visibly involved in either online or offline community activity.

Increasing the visibility and effectiveness of active local residents

Whilst the websites we have helped to create have not resulted in any significant increase in the numbers of residents participating in online or offline community activity, they have created value in other ways.

The flow of information amongst those who are active in their communities has become quicker and more convenient. Newsome Grapevine, which collates various sources of information concerning the neighbourhood into one site, has become a key source of information for active local residents. Fairstead.org has become a space where active residents talk to each other outside of formal meetings or chance encounters on the street.

Conversations between residents who are the most engaged with decision making are much more visible to the wider community and the issues that emerge on these sites are also much more likely to be raised in offline meetings or forums. In both of these areas, the websites have supported local elected representatives' efforts to be informed and respond to local issues.

These websites have helped to connect residents in need with active local residents who are willing and ready to help. On several occasions members have signed up to Fairstead.org in order to raise a specific issue with regular users of the site. One of these – where a new member requested help to find her missing dog – resulted in the second most popular conversation on the site and several residents supporting the search effort.

Supporting the development of content

The provision of training helps local residents and council officers learn how to use social media and digital technology more effectively. However, training is only the first step on the journey, particularly for residents. Support needs to be on-going and principally geared towards the development of content. Local authorities and their partners are well placed to do this by providing aspiring content creators with information about their areas, as well as opportunities to attend and cover community events. However, these opportunities are not enough in themselves – building people's confidence is a key factor in enabling the development of local content.

In Huddersfield, the Community Reporters programme equipped residents with a variety of skills that enabled them to tell stories about their area through words, pictures, video and audio. Whilst the training gave residents the skills they needed, they required help both to find the opportunities to use their skills and to feel confident in doing so. Kirklees Council tasked the reporters with gathering local people's views on the 2011 and 2012 local elections, and supported them by organising access to polling stations and working alongside the reporters at the election count. The project, called [Election Tales](#), resulted in several videos, audio files and blogs that were created on a standalone blog that was promoted through the council's homepage.

Combining different channels of communication

Once it is up and running, the urge to rely on social media is compelling. However, it is likely that multiple channels of digital communication will be required to ensure that different sections of the community have the best chance of receiving and sharing information.

Throughout our project, the importance of emails kept on emerging. One of the key reasons attributed to the failure of Notting Barns Live is that most people received their local information through an email bulletin sent out by a local voluntary organisation. This bulletin is rich in content and delivered through a channel that people find comfortable.

In Huddersfield, where Thumbprint City is being used to send text messages to local people, it has become an important channel for engagement. In Rawthorpe and Dalton, it is the preferred medium for engaging with members of the Asian community who would not use social media.

SMS is perceived to be an effective medium as all mobile phone users read the text messages they receive and view it as a more personalised form of communication – one they usually use to communicate with friends and family. In addition, text messages force agencies to communicate their message succinctly, conveying only the most vital information.

Developments in the functionality of Facebook since the start of the Local 2.0 project have had implications for stand alone hyperlocal websites like Fairstead.org and Notting Barns Live. Facebook's Pages function has vastly improved and has become much more suitable for people wishing to setup hyperlocal networks. This is reflected in Rawthorpe and Dalton, where a hyperlocal website similar to Fairstead.org and Notting Barns Live is gradually being supplanted by Facebook, which people find much more convenient to use than a stand alone website.

Out of all of the projects we supported, Newsome Grapevine is the most effective at utilising multiple channels to communicate with local residents. The Grapevine helps community groups and activists to create online content in whatever format is most appropriate, then aggregates this content and shares it in different formats. For example, content is posted via blogs, Google calendars, Thumbprint City and Twitter, then displayed on the Newsome Grapevine website and shared via the Newsome News email bulletin and SMS mailing lists, as well as being shared at community meetings and events.

Social media-based engagement – demand and supply

One of the main advantages of social media over traditional media is the ability to easily engage in dialogue with your audience or community, rather than just broadcasting messages to people. It is this shift towards dialogue which helps build relationships within communities, as well as between citizens and institutions.

For this to happen, the supply of social media – such as council Twitter or Facebook accounts, or hyperlocal websites – needs to correspond to a demand from citizens to engage through these channels. Thus far the focus has predominately been on the supply side – encouraging local authorities to take up new technologies, or training residents to setup blogs or social networks. The demand side has often been assumed given the rapid rise of social media and trends set by big brands, celebrities and public figures.

In our experience, whilst there is some demand for dialogue, the majority of residents are not interested in cultivating a relationship with local institutions and many are ambivalent about forming relationships with their neighbours online. They are using the technology as a convenient means of keeping informed about what is happening in their area, which informs their decision to participate or not.

The challenge for local authorities, charities and community groups who want to engage with citizens via social media remains as it was prior to the technology: how do you transform people's interest in local

news and events into deeper forms of participation? The technology in itself does not seem to provide the answer.

Conclusion

The Local 2.0 project came out of a wave of optimism and intrigue into the role that social media and other digital technology could play in empowering local communities. Our intention was to explore this through practical projects with local residents and local agencies, testing a range of different approaches and technologies to see what would happen.

Throughout our project we have seen hyperlocal media have a positive, although not transformative, effect on the residents and communities we have worked with. It is helping to strengthen relationships between active local residents, whilst making their activities more visible and transparent. It is providing information to interested local residents and broadening, if only marginally, the audience for community news and information. In some cases, it has been a resource for disconnected local residents to request help from their neighbours.

For most community groups and local authorities, it will not be long before social media or hyperlocal media are as normal as having a website or email address. Agencies should support communities and individuals to make this transition, not only through the provision of training (which can be done using volunteers) but by acting as conduits for information and providing opportunities for people to develop content.

In doing so, the temptation is to judge success against predefined goals or against grand aims such as revitalising local democracy. This is a mistake. Each community will get something different from the technology and value can be created in multiple ways. Success, therefore, can only really be judged in the local context.