

State of the Market Survey 2015

Use of Social Media in Local Government



Use of Social Media in Local Government

State of the Market 2015

In 2015, APSE conducted an online survey, inviting local authority officers and elected members to submit feedback on the use of Social Media within their organisation.

The survey was designed to identify the purpose for which Social Media is used within local authorities, to gain further understanding of its impact and to illicit examples of how it is being deployed UK-wide to enhance and deliver public service provision.

The results were fascinating and what follows outlines the feedback we received. 93 responses were received in total.

How are you using Social Media?

One striking aspect of the responses was how **multi-faceted the use of social media was across almost all local authorities** represented in the survey. The average respondent indicated their authority was making use of social media in 8 of the various ways listed in figure 1 indicating a typical UK local authority will be employing social media to serve various organisational aims.

Most social media use is outward facing and typically relates to day-to-day communication regarding service delivery and responding to customer enquiries. This reflects the immediacy and instantaneous nature of the messaging made possible through Social Media. Social Media naturally lends itself to the dissemination of short, specific messages and regular updates and is adept for handling customer enquiries, where immediacy of response is required or desirable. In particular, several councils particularly reported finding the channel useful for communications during severe weather events and in the instance of road closures.

Another function of Social Media, indicated as fairly common within local authorities was to 'Enhance public opinion and awareness of the role and function of the organisation'. Comments related to this referred to the aim of **developing a more personable response to the public.**

Here's what you said about the role of Social Media in handing customer comments and enquiries:

"We are using Facebook for our 3 leisure centres and have built up a good rapport with customers, in particular for communicating changes to classes/courses due to holidays, services changes etc. and for promoting new activities such as our Aquafun for kids, which also uses video promotion".- North East Derbyshire District Council

"We have found Twitter and Facebook to be a really effective way of publicly changing attitudes towards the council, and this is often done through responding to complaints/questions".- Tewkesbury Borough Council

"Some of our best engagement rates were achieved through using Facebook as a hub for winter-related school and road closures. On one particularly snowy day in January, we received a barrage of abuse from Twitter users angry at what they perceived to be a lack of gritting. We used Facebook as a tool to educate social media users of our processes and explain why certain routes are prioritised for gritting. We also posted an editable list of school closures on FB which enabled us to update it when new information came in. This link was posted to Twitter and resulted in one of our most successful posts which helped to drive up engagement and likes on our page" – Anonymous council (Northern region)

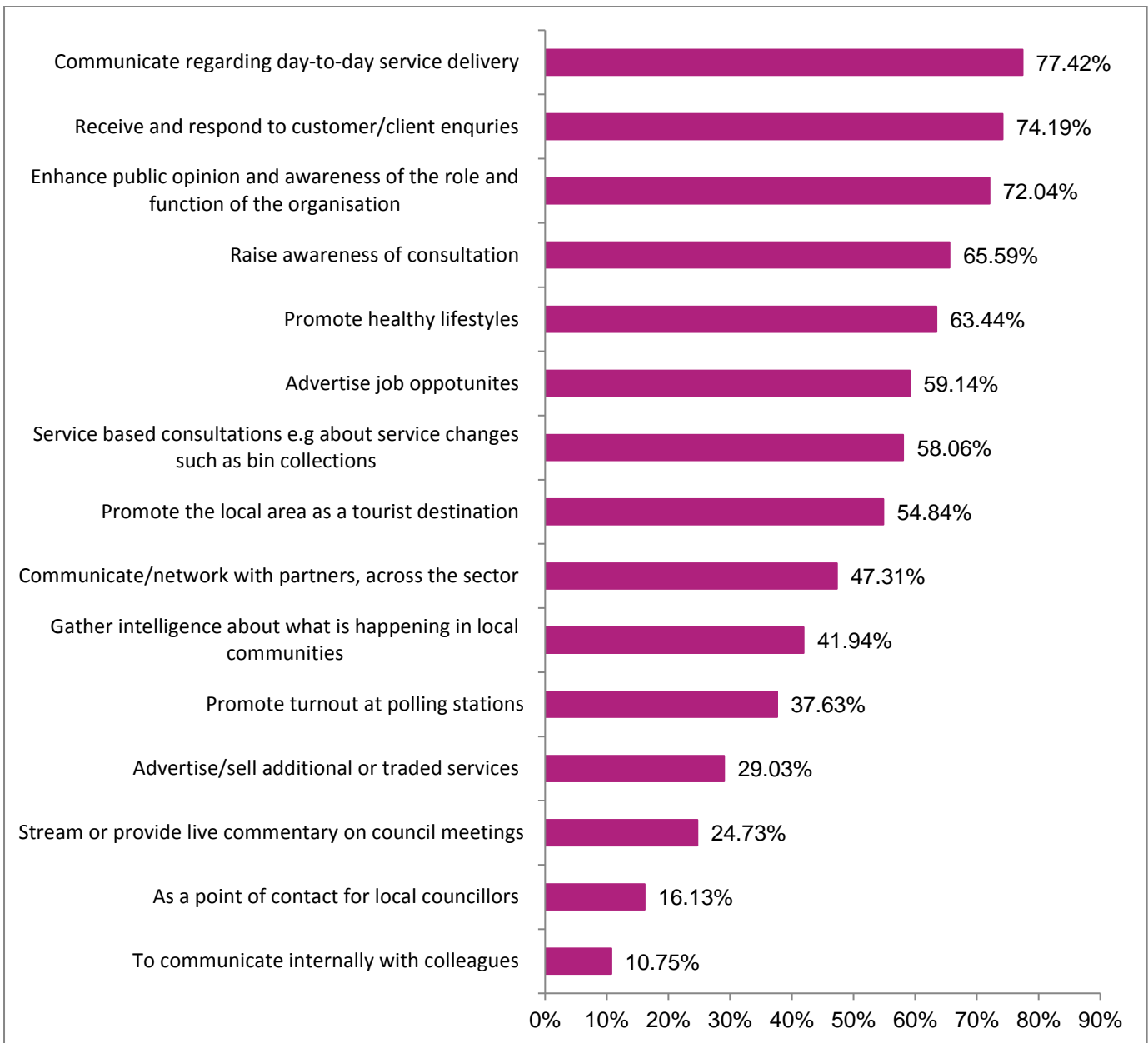


Figure 1

Two councils referred to the **forging of links between the council’s communications team and Customer Services team**, essential if customer enquiries are to be recorded and handled in a consistent fashion.

“We also respond a lot to customer queries on Twitter. This function currently sits with the Communications Team, but will soon move over to the Customer Service centre, to integrate into other reporting systems” – North West Leicestershire District Council

“Our communications team has built up an effective relationship with customer services where we bring each other's attention to matters which arguably require the input of both teams. Customer queries which are played out publicly (in view of the media) carry a certain reputational weight & this has led to comms using social media to have conversations/provide assistance rather than using it simply as a promotional tool. We have had some successes where we have turned angry complainants into satisfied residents – basically nipping a potential problem in the bud before the media become involved. I.e. fly tipping, diversion routes during roadworks etc.”- Anonymous Council (Northern region)

Many councils are using Social Media to increase democratic engagement. 61 respondents indicated their council was using Social Media to raise awareness of consultations, 35 reported their council was using Social Media to promote turnout at Polling Stations and 23 to stream or provide live commentary on council meetings. Several councils noted that they used Social Media to encourage voters to register and some reported generating significant feedback on Local plan consultations (see below).

Consultation on the Local Plan

“Our planning department was engaged in one of the consultation stages of the Local Plan. As a Communications team we worked with them using social media to promote:

- The 25 year Plan and its associated documentation
- 15 drop-in consultation events

The documentation and details of the drop-in events were featured on the council's website and their presence promoted via Twitter. We set up a blog to encourage engagement, list the location of the drop-in events and display pictures of the drop-in event. Images from the drop in events were posted on Flickr. We also featured the main 96 page document on the blog and website using magazine reader software rather than just expecting people to download it.

Attendance at all of the drop-in events was covered live on Twitter with posts featuring comments and pictures from the event. We ensured that any messages held links either to the blog, website or a picture, so that people were able to access the information in as many different forms as possible.

Outcomes: Although a very time-consuming exercise it was successful. We could prove that messages on Twitter resulted in increased traffic to the blog and website. The document presented as an online magazine attracted hundreds of views whereas the downloadable version was hardly viewed at all. Although nobody actually posted a blog in response to anything we posted, we could track that posts were being read and topics covered were raised during the drop-in sessions. People attending the drop-in sessions were interested in what we were doing and, in some cases, had attended due to the conversations we had with them on Twitter. As a result of the activity on social media, we increased the level of interest in the consultation and people subsequently attended further sessions and registered for information.”

- Anonymous council (Central region)

How has your use of Social Media affected your budget?

Pleasingly, a high percentage of authorities indicated that their use of Social Media has helped to create savings or generate new income for the council.

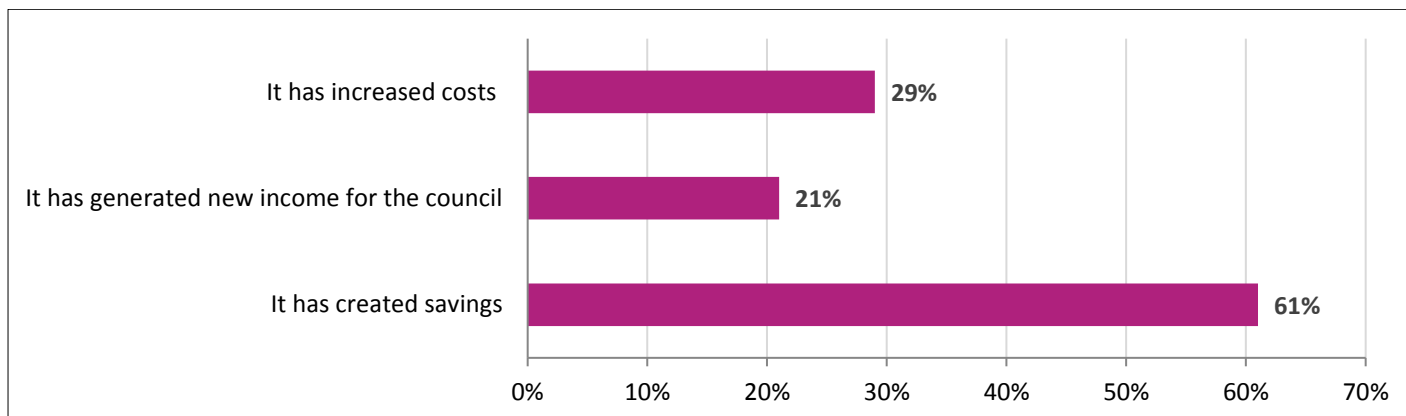


Figure 2

Within associated comments, the two key ways in which local authorities identified savings through their use of social media were **reduced spend on costlier forms of advertising and a reduction in spend on less cost-effective customer contact channels**. Authorities reflected that their use of social media is drawing enquiries away from the call centre and increasing digital interaction, through both sign-posting to the council website and direct interaction through social media platforms.

Councils who reported that they had generated income through their use of Social Media indicated that they had done so through the **promotion of council services such as Pest Control, Garden Waste and Bulky items collections**. Authorities who indicated their council had found their use of Social media had increased costs cited increased demand and necessary staff time to manage it.

Within figure 1), we see that a relatively low proportion (30%) of councils are using Social Media platforms to promote traded services and so there seems to be an opportunity to increase income generation if more authorities seek to promote commercial service provision through social media platforms.

Where are you excelling in its use?

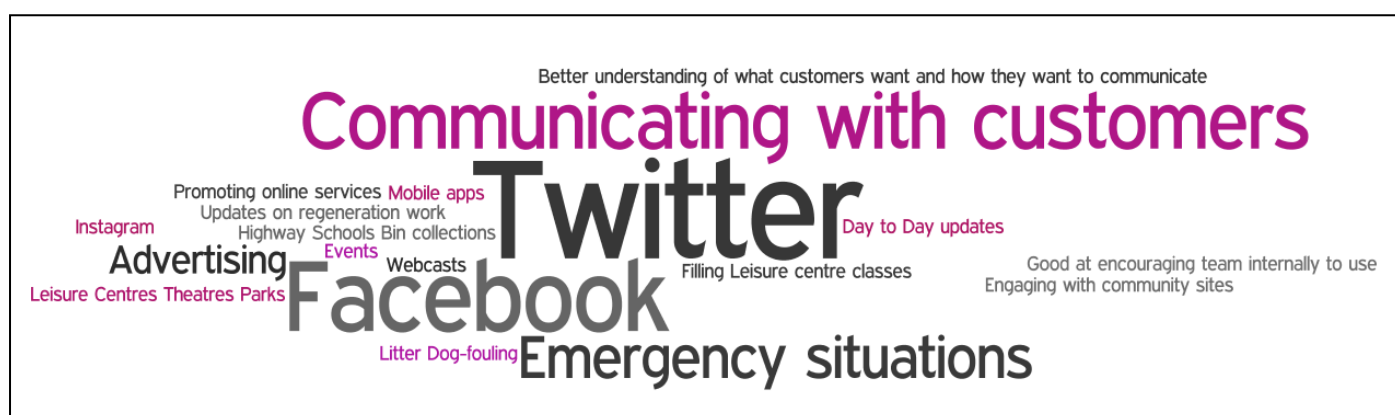


Figure 3 (Frequency of response shown by font size)

A picture emerges that **many local authorities are established and confident in using Twitter and Facebook and in particular, reporting success in the use of Twitter**. This may be because a higher proportion of Twitter users use Twitter to access news about Government than Facebook users. Similarly, a higher proportion of Twitter users access 'breaking news' through the site such as that disseminated by local authorities when providing updates on day-to-day service delivery and in communications related to emergency scenarios including road and school closures.¹ Facebook is reported as a means through which local authorities are successfully developing community engagement work and many local authorities report they are excelling in their handling of customer enquiries through Social Media.

"Our updates on regeneration work via Twitter and Facebook initiate a lot of conversation and engagement. Our 'likes'/'followers' increase most when something impacts a day-to-day service - most recently, our accounts followers/likes grew significantly when there was road works in a certain area and when a school had to close for a day."- Anonymous council (Northern region)

"Customers use it so we are using it to connect with customers" – Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

"Facebook use by our leisure centres seems to have the best response with a community feel building up." – North East Derbyshire District Council

¹ Molly, R., 2016 Social Studies: Twitter vs Facebook [online] Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/gadfly/articles/2016-02-12/social-studies-comparing-twitter-with-facebook-in-charts> [Accessed 29/07/16]

What is on the Horizon?



Figure 4 (Frequency of response shown by font size)

In the future, many local authorities are looking to diversify their use of Social Media channels, both in the number and nature of channels utilised and in the range of service areas and staff members involved in delivery. Accordingly, some are reporting that they are looking to review their approach and take stock of their social media strategy, perhaps to prepare for and manage this expansion within resource and ensure adequate monitoring arrangements are in place.

With regards to use of new channels, there appears to be particular emphasis on developing the use of social media channels accessible through Smartphones such as Whatsapp and Snapchat and also developing the use of Video.

“Investigating new channels and planning how to increase our reach on existing ones” – Renfrewshire Council

“We're currently auditing the different accounts held within services and making sure they're working as we want them. This work will involve deleting some accounts, merging others and promoting others more widely. We hope this will encourage use of social media within services and by our customers.” – North West Leicestershire District Council

“Greater use of infographics and self-produced video to help tell stories. More services embracing social media, support to drive channel shift and greater customer service via social media” – Telford and Wrekin Council

APSE Comment

Social media is increasingly providing a voice for local authorities to engage with residents regarding day-to-day service delivery, to communicate disruptions and changes to service provision, to handle customer enquiries, to promote use of digital self-service channels, to engage with and build communities, to foster a personable interface with customers and to present the work of the council and key messages in new and engaging ways to different effect, through video, infographics, photography and through interaction and conversation with other users.

It also opens up a channel of risk to the council's reputation as users are free to post negative comments and as Social Media increasingly becomes a means of handling customer comments, compliments and complaints, procedures for effective handling of customer enquiries should extend to facilitate social media use, councillors and officers should be well versed in how to manage reputational risk as they post on social media sites and colleagues should feel free to take conversations off-line as they would feel would enable them to best serve the customer who raises an enquiry.

As with other functions of the council, use of Social Media should be folded in to the strategic purpose of the authority and support corporate objectives wherever possible, from public health messaging, to promoting democratic engagement and marketing traded services. The impact of its use should be understood and monitored and developed according to evidence, sourced internally and elsewhere on how social media can most effectively influence behaviour and communicate key messages.

Social Media is an ideal channel through which to reach young people. The Oxford Internet Survey 2015, which monitors trends in Social Media use indicated that up to 95% Britons under 25 are on Social Media. Overall, the survey indicates that the use of social media is disproportionate by the wealthy, educated and young and so, for messages to reach the elderly the poor or the uneducated, councils will need to use alternative means to engage with these demographics in their community. ²

Questions to ask:

- How are we monitoring the impact of our use of Social Media? What difference does it make?
- Are there any key messages we're not using Social Media to disseminate which are important for a particular service area? Are there any corporate objectives we're not serving through the use of Social Media. If not, why not?
- How does our use of Social Media fold in to our overall strategy for communications and customer contact? Is customer contact handled and recorded consistently across different channels, on and off-line? Do customers receive the same quality of customer service on and off-line?
- Does staff and councillor training effectively meet the needs of those engaged in representing the council on Social Media? Do staff and elected members feel confident in its use?

Lorna Box
APSE Principal Advisor

² Blank, G., 2015, The Internet in Britain; Oxford Internet Survey and Social Media [Powerpoint presentation] Available at: <http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Dr_%20Grant%20Blank%20-%20Session%201.pdf> [Accessed 29/07/16]

Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is owned by its members and, working on their behalf, maintains and develops a network of local government officers, managers and councillors from local authorities across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Working on a not-for-profit basis, APSE is dedicated to promoting excellence in the delivery of frontline services to local communities around the UK.

APSE provides a united national voice for these authorities, as well as showing them the way to move forward and develop strong, sustainable frontline services.

For more APSE Briefings, please visit: <http://apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/members-area/briefings>

For details of the following APSE Training courses, please click below:

[Social Media for Councillors](#)

[Using Social Media Effectively](#)

For any further enquiries, please visit www.apse.org.uk or e-mail enquiries@apse.org.uk