



## The author

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# Utilising Web 2.0 in local government

How and why should local authorities be planning to exploit the collaborative features of Web 2.0 technologies? **Stephen Dale** investigates.

## What is Web 2.0?

The term 'Web 2.0' has been attributed to Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media, which he used to describe the applications and software that facilitate interaction and the sharing of information between users. It has come to represent a group of technologies which have become associated with the terms: blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds etc. These facilitate a more socially connected web where everyone is able to add to and edit the information space. If there is a Web 2.0 then we might assume there must have been a Web 1.0. A simple definition of the difference is summarised as follows:

\* **Web 1.0** relied upon specialist skills to compose, format and publish content to the web, and consequently was limited to people and infrastructures that had these skills and capabilities. It was also primarily (though not exclusively) used as a broadcast medium for the dissemination of information.

\* **Web 2.0** technology enables anyone to become a web publisher by hiding the (web) complexity behind simple and easy-to-use interfaces, resulting in the proliferation of personal blogs (short for 'web log'). It also facilitates creativity, collaboration and knowledge sharing through web-based communities and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook).

In this article, Web 2.0 is used synonymously with the terms 'social networking' and 'social media', and all these terms refer to people, software and applications.

## Web 2.0 and local government

Take-up of e-government services in this country, compared to others such as Scandinavian countries, has been slow. The switch by customers to electronic

delivery channels in large numbers is deemed to be more efficient and cost effective. There is evidence (Willem Pieterse and Jan van Dijk, 2007) that trust in an organisation is a factor in consumers choosing to use new channels. Use of social media is one way in which a local council could become more transparent, accountable and possibly increase citizen/customer perceptions of trust.

Levels of trust and transparency in political institutions can explain the decline in voting and uneven rates of participation in civic affairs. This has led to the development of the theme of community empowerment. The government clearly anticipates that Web 2.0 will facilitate access to the "... new forms of community out there which government is unable to talk to..." (Tom Watson MP, Minister for Transformational Government, 1 April 2008). Alongside introducing new statutory duties for local authorities to engage with its citizens, it has launched a Power of Information Task Force to consider how public servants can use the new social media to engage with its citizens and enhance local democratic representation.

Web 2.0 is also being promoted as the democratisation of voice, conversation and opinion. It is no longer necessary to be elite or famous, or have a newspaper, TV or production company behind you in order to be heard. The cost of participation is trivial, where anyone can blog, or upload their clip to YouTube, or their photos to Flickr. However, this is not to trivialise the difference between having a digital presence, whether it be a blog or a video clip, and actually being heard. This is where local councils can make a real difference, by utilising Web 2.0 technologies to enable the voice of the community to be

heard. This promotes the ideals of citizen empowerment, as endorsed by the recent CLG White Paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power'.

## Examples of Web 2.0 usage

One exemplar of how citizen's opinions can shape policy or modify behaviour is the initiative Patient Opinion ([www.patientopinion.co.uk](http://www.patientopinion.co.uk)). The objective here is to encourage hospital patients to comment on their experience in their local hospital. These comments are then collated, categorised and aggregated before being automatically directed to the relevant manager in the NHS. Though each comment may focus on some micro aspect of the service – e.g. "The ward orderlies never knocked", or "The consultant never once washed his hands", collectively they have the same power as a highly organised lobbying group.

Patient Opinion is a private sector, not-for-profit social enterprise that generates income via subscriptions from Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities. Other examples of where social media innovators in the private sector have been busily active in creating citizen-centric solutions around Web 2.0 are sites such as MySociety ([www.mysociety.org](http://www.mysociety.org)), with services such as FixMy Street and PledgeBank demonstrating how the technology can be used to engage directly with citizens. The entrepreneurial spirit is also evident with freelance individuals developing sites such as Local Gov Glossary (a wiki in the spirit of Wikipedia) and LGSearch, but the question remains as to why these sorts of services are not developed, sponsored or supported by local authorities. Perhaps they will be in time.

On a positive note, there is growing evidence that more councils are becoming





actively engaged in developing online community techniques within councils' own web services, with Redbridge ([www.redbridge.gov.uk](http://www.redbridge.gov.uk)) being a notable example. Their use of online polls for getting feedback on post office closures, and use of interactive forums is pretty much ground breaking

stuff for local government. The whole site has that 21st century look about it, and many other councils are now beginning to see the potential for integrating or enhancing their services using Web 2.0.

One emerging trend is where councils are using Web 2.0 to engage with a wider

demographic. By using social networking and social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, they can engage with a younger, harder-to-reach audience who would not normally read council publications, and it is a lot cheaper than other alternatives. Durham County



Council recently used Facebook in an effort to get residents to leave their cars at home for a day. The 'Do it different day' was part of a collaborative initiative with Channel Four.

Essex County Council used Facebook to lobby for support in its fight against post office closures. The group 'Fighting for Essex's Post Offices' was set up by the council to encourage residents and anyone opposed to post office closure to have their say when the Post Office Ltd announced plans to close 31 branches throughout Essex.

Chorley Borough Council is using Facebook for the Chorley Smile campaign. The promotion aims to help improve their neighbourhoods and celebrate everything great about Chorley. The council recognised the potential of Facebook for getting younger people involved in the campaign.

There is also growing evidence of more councils having blogs. Norfolk County Council established a campaign - Civicsurf ([www.civicsurf.org.uk](http://www.civicsurf.org.uk)) - to get councillors blogging. Chesterblogs is a blogging portal for Chester city councillors. Uttlesford District Council has a blog focusing on the Stansted Airport inquiry.

However, councils need to be wary of how they manage these sorts of facilities. Opening up a council or councillor blog to comments from the public doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to get a good indicator of public opinion. Despite the statistics from organisations such as Technorati that 100,000 blogs are created everyday (worldwide), this is still quite a niche activity, and those most likely to contribute are the individuals with the most passionate views. There is also the risk of extreme views being publicised via the council blogsite. This can be addressed by having a 'moderated' blog, where all comments are vetted before publication, but this takes time and resource. This is also why councils need to ensure they give careful thought before setting up a council blog, to make sure it is an enterprise strategy rather than just for a few keen individuals.

## Employee access to social media sites

On a slightly depressing note, there

still appears to be a fairly cautious approach across the sector on the policy for allowing council employees to access social media sites, such as Facebook or YouTube. The main concern is that employees may be wasting time in the use of non-work related websites, combined with the related security and organisational image concerns. Managers want to know what their employees are doing, and quite often the only way of bringing about greater control in the workplace is by getting ICT departments to block access to these sites.

Encouragingly, there do appear to be some enlightened managers working in local government, and to quote David Wilde, chief information officer at the London Borough of Waltham Forest, "For managers it can be difficult to know what exactly their employees are doing. But the organisation needs to be outcome-based, and I don't think we should be using technology to prevent access to [social networking] sites. If there are staff performance issues we should address them directly."

## Summary

So, in summary, the use of Web 2.0 sites and techniques in local authorities can be categorised as follows:

- \* Use of third-party websites which use interactive or peer-to-peer techniques to try and improve public services, such as the problem-reporting service 'FixMyStreet'.
- \* The use of services such as Patient Opinion to collect and aggregate citizen's e-conversations to support evidence-based policy making.
- \* The use of commercial social media websites such as Facebook and YouTube to reach out to a younger demographic.
- \* The use of social networking or online community techniques within councils' own web services to directly engage with citizens.
- \* Employee access to social media websites for learning, sharing and facilitating connections with similar domains of interest.

Web 2.0 is opening up new opportunities for local and central government to provide more citizen-centric services using cost effective technologies. Innovation in the private sector is making Web 2.0 tools easier to use and cheaper to deploy. Social networking and use of social media tools is fast becoming ubiquitous; the question that most councils now face is when, rather than if, to embrace Web 2.0 facilities.

## Simple guidelines for Web 2.0 deployment

1. Don't think about Web 2.0 or e-government as being just about technology. It is about saving time and making life easier and more efficient for citizens.
2. Make sure you are resourced to cope. No point setting up a blog that encourages comments if you can't respond to each comment.
3. Carefully plan your strategy if using blogs. If it's a council blog, make sure it's part of a wider communications strategy and not the domain of one or two keen individuals.
4. Consider the reputational risks of publishing un-moderated citizen comments in online forums or blogs. Don't assume comments represent universal opinion.
5. Identify the audience you are trying to reach and use the appropriate channel. Not everyone has an account on Facebook, Myspace or Bebo, and not everyone has broadband. Know who you are excluding and plan for this.
6. Ensure there is a staff policy for using social media sites during working hours.
7. Most Web 2.0 solutions are relatively cheap to deploy. If you are planning to spend more than £100k on an enterprise solution you're doing something wrong - or you have particularly complex requirements.