

**REPORT BY WORKING GROUP TO CONSIDER THE USE OF ONLINE MEDIA TO
PROMOTE THE WORK OF HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

1. INTRODUCTION

The working group was established initially to look at ways of better promoting and communicating the work of the Council's overview and scrutiny panels. The working group's remit was subsequently expanded to consider the broader issues of using information and communications technology to promote the work of the Council generally and to foster greater citizen participation in local democracy. In carrying out its remit the group has looked particularly at the use of personal web logs (blogs), online discussion forums and online petitions. The group discovered that this path (of using such media for such purposes) was already fairly well trodden by others. Pilot studies have been carried out in some local authorities and the advice of those authorities was particularly helpful in reaching the recommendations contained in this report.

The body of the report considers four separate areas: blogs, online forums, online petitions, and other means of external communications. Some of these areas might serve to better promote the work of the scrutiny panels and the Council generally, while others are more concerned with facilitating citizen engagement in the democratic process.

2. BACKGROUND

An initial report dated 3 November 2006 was prepared by Councillor Gilbert and presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) on 14 November 2006. Councillors Dew and Thorpe subsequently joined the working group. The group met on 22 February 2007 to discuss matters further. A meeting was held on 29 March 2007 between the working group, Councillor Simpson, Chris Hall, Joe Bedingfield and Christine Deller. This meeting was helpful in ascertaining the views of officers and for better understanding some of the resource implications surrounding use of online media.

A brief verbal report was presented to the scrutiny panel by Councillor Gilbert on 12 June 2007. Following that report contact has been made with Kingston Borough Council and Bristol City Council and their experiences of using online petitions have been summarised in this report.

3. BLOGS

A blog is essentially an online journal detailing the musings of its author. Weblogs are increasingly being used by elected representatives and local government officials keen to communicate more effectively and efficiently with citizens, staff, media and other tiers of government.

The aim of blogging for civic leadership is to encourage two-way communication between councillors and local residents. Blogging councillors use their online diary to offer an insight into their day to day role as a local representative. Local issues are explored and residents are invited to give their comments and opinions.

Weblogs that work best are highly individualistic. Some blogs that encourage comments actually receive them (although there is currently no facility for doing this on the HDC member sites), but ultimately this is the personal online space of the owner. It is already possible for HDC members to use their existing personal website space (once set up) to host a blog. At present only a few members have a personal HDC website and none is currently using it to blog.

The group thought that blogs were best left to individual councillors to instigate if they had a specific desire to do so. If blogs are to be done well they require a lot of time to update. The facility already exists for members to organise a simple blog on their HDC webspace if they want to (although there is no interactivity function).

RECOMMENDATION

Councillors should try to make use of the personal website facility on the Council's website as a means of communicating with ward residents, but the decision whether to maintain a blog should remain an individual one.

4. ONLINE FORUMS

An online forum is a web-based facility whereby anyone can post an idea, ask a question or otherwise enter into debate over issues. The goal of online forums is to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy-making. They also provide a forum for decision-makers to receive immediate feedback from the community on issues that must be decided or voted on.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recently provided funding to pilot online forums in Brighton & Hove and the London Borough of Newham. These forums are loosely associated with the local authorities in their respective areas, although they are not hosted or moderated by those authorities. Councillor Gilbert's report of 3 November 2006 contains further information on the operation of the Brighton forum. Initial interest in the forums was at a fairly low level. There is evidence which shows that in Newham the local authority have distanced themselves from the forum and some councillors do not consider that it makes any valuable contribution to local debate.

The working group is concerned that a dedicated forum linked to, or hosted by, the Council site is not a viable option. For legal and ethical reasons it would require full-time monitoring by an officer and would duplicate the facility provided by other privately operated local forums. This would clearly have substantial resource implications which would probably go beyond the potential benefits any such forum might offer. This view is shared by Chris Hall and Joe Bedingfield.

However, we did think that it would be useful to have on the Council website the function to post comments (after they have been checked by an officer) in response to specific news items, consultations etc. This would create a type of mini, subject-specific forum which would encourage public participation in the work of the council. Officers thought this idea would be feasible and would not involve significant resources to implement. It was also noted that the Council's website already offers a degree of interactivity. Joe Bedingfield has now brought together many of these interactive elements at www.huntsdc.gov.uk/haveyoursay.

RECOMMENDATION

Due to the substantial resource implications of hosting an online forum on the Council website, it is not recommended that the Council pursues this matter further. However, officers should continue to look for cost-effective ways of increasing the opportunities for meaningful citizen interaction through the Council's website.

5. ONLINE PETITIONS

Online petitions (or e-petitions) are simply petitions which are commenced, hosted and submitted via a website. They are being used by the Scottish parliament and some local authorities, notably Bristol City and Kingston Borough councils. Bristol and Kingston have been using e-petitions for about three years and they appear to be a successful way of providing another medium through which concerned citizens can raise a petition. In fact Bristol say that it is the most successful and most self-perpetuating e-democracy tool they have. (Information from Bristol City Council has been circulated separately to Members of the Panel).

It seems that having the online petition facility does not necessarily lead to an increase in the number of petitions submitted to a local authority. The online facility does not replace traditional paper petitions, but exists alongside it. Citizens who were not able to add their name to the petition online would still be able to sign a paper version. The technology merely enables people to organise the petition online. However, the Bristol and Kingston systems also allow for the submission of supporting documents (such as plans or photos) and there is the facility to post comments so that some debate about the subject of the petition can take place online. This requires some moderation but, according to Bristol, this is not an onerous responsibility. Once submitted to the Council the petition would be dealt with in the usual way as set out in the constitution.

The evidence from both authorities is that online petitions have enhanced citizen engagement in the democratic process and even influenced decision making. This has not come without cost. For the system to run effectively an officer needs to be available to advise potential petitioners on the wording of their petition, and whether the issue can indeed be the subject of a petition. An officer would also need to moderate any comments left on the website (if such a facility were provided) and the facility would need appropriate IT support. The original software cost £7,000 (but attracted a subsidy of £3,000). However, it seems that alternative software will be available later this year at a vastly reduced cost. Overall it seems that online petitions would provide a useful additional medium through which Huntingdonshire residents can raise matters of public concern.

RECOMMENDATION

The Council adds an online petition facility to its website in the most cost-effective way possible.

6. OTHER FORMS OF EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The group also considered how traditional forms of external communications could be used to promote the panels' activities. We thought greater use could be made of District Wide and the website to highlight the work of scrutiny. We also thought that panel chairs should look to further develop press contacts and to supply them with regular news releases.

RECOMMENDATION

Scrutiny panel members and chairmen to be more proactive in utilising in-house methods of communication and engaging with external media.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

**CONTACT: Councillor A Gilbert
(01480) 219283**