**Digital Cultures Research Centre**
**University of the West of England**

## On-Line Papers – Copyright

# Keeping in Touch Review Report

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**1 RESEARCH TOPIC**

Keeping in Touch was framed by two questions:

- What can we learn about people's everyday use of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?

- How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technology in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?

**2 SCOPE**

The *Keeping in Touch* review began by looking at 100 community based communication initiatives which appeared to have a goal of 'strengthening communities'. This broad range revealed a wide range and variety of practices and sites (see *Keeping in Touch* Sample: Appendix A p 25). We narrowed our sample to thirty projects for analysis of their public claims then conducted a further three in depth case studies.

**3 GOALS**

We can classify goals of the projects in our sample under these headings, with the understanding that they are often overlapping:-

- building up people's digital skills eg the Community Reporter scheme in Kirklees

- creating shared digital spaces for users to publish community information eg Raw Connections in Dalton

- promoting goals specific to a sector or service eg Newsome Grapevine

- creating bespoke technologies to meet specific needs, where originality and innovation create new applications for specific community needs see eg Thumbprint City.

(All the examples taken from Appendix B: Case Study Kirklees p29)

**4 METHODS**

Organisations deploy a number of methods to achieve the goals above. The range of organizational structures (eg from one-volunteer operations to projects set up as part of larger organizations) reflect variable approaches and technologies. However we can classify methods, again frequently overlapping, as follows:-

- Peer learning, with an emphasis on inclusion where everyone has knowledge to contribute

- Building and expanding on existing contacts and connections by supporting the expansion of existing networks.

- Mentoring, matching skills and resources through a process of 'curating' the network.

- Skills building, with an emphasis on continuous learning processes.

- Information gathering and sharing, research and dissemination for community benefit.

- Open data approaches to the co-creation and sharing of information as a public good.

## 4 TYPES OF PROJECT

Projects in the review can be broadly classified as

- social-led – community projects /organisations that introduce or adopt technologies and related practices in order to further particular social goals or service delivery

- technology-led – projects /organisations that work to enable access to technology or foster technological development in order to further social goals or economic development

- emergent – uses which have emerged informally and gradually through the widespread availability of increasingly affordable devices

## 5 FINDINGS

The scoping review pointed to the following findings:

- Unlike in business, education or government, standardisation is not necessarily useful or desirable in community settings. Approaches which respect and respond to differences in age, gender, interest, literacy and affluence are better suited. A flexible approach is needed which works across multiple channels and practices.

- The use of communication technologies needs to connect into existing means of communication and across different networks.

- Project outcomes are shaped by who is involved, existing practices, affordability, access, and who owns, uses and controls which technologies.

- Underlying values underpin communications strategies. Different understandings of what constitutes strengthened community / social change for social good were informed by different values, political positions etc.  The combinations of ideas about a) what change is needed and b) how it could be brought about, inform how and what technology is used as well as who owns and determines its use.

- Nurturing communication technology for community strengthening is about people having access to the technology and the freedom to explore its potential for their purposes whether that might be to coordinate a trip to the allotment or a protest.

- There is an unexplored potential to facilitate dialogue, collaboration and mutual support, through using one of the simplest and accessible forms of technology that is widely available – the text

message capabilities of the mobile phone.

- There is also huge potential to create shared spaces where people can develop and explore the uses of technology to send and receive information relevant to their own lives.

- While everyday communication technologies show great potential for strengthening communities and building connections, without attention to who is involved and who is not, they can serve to further dis-empower and exclude community members who are not part of existing networks or cannot or choose not to access these communication spaces. Networks create exclusion as well as connectivity.

- There was little or no Private Sector involvement in our sample.

## 6 STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

As part of our Project we developed a set of guidelines in collaboration with staff at KWMC for the *Keeping in Touch Handbook for Digital Inclusion* available alongside this report. Both Keeping in Touch and Knowle West Media Centre projects demonstrate the use of the following basic strategies in devising and planning a socially engaged project that aims to nurture greater digital inclusion:

- Take your time in order to develop mutual trust and understanding between all involved.

- Map out the context you are working in.
    - find the key connectors – people and projects - and the relationships between them.
    - consider the digital and non-digital communication methods in use.

- Listen to what people say about what they want.
    - make space for exchange and dialogue.
    - try and talk to people who aren't already part of the dialogue, who might be currently overlooked - ask yourself "Who is missing?".

- Find out what everyday technologies people are already using; find out what they are familiar with and build on that first.

- Understand when you need to give one-to-one support to people.

- Ensure that your staff and volunteers are
    - approachable, friendly, supportive, understanding, trustworthy, and able to listen and respond to what the local community tells them.
    - aware of the potential of everyday technologies
    - aware of how technologies can be adapted to fit individual needs or know who to ask about this.

- Remember not to leave behind the old ways that people use to connect, such as posters, notice boards and face-to-face conversations.

- Remember that people need to see how any technology is relevant to their own lives before they invest time in learning how to use it and that it will be relevant to different people for different reasons. For example, for many people the trip to the post office to get their car tax sorted is preferable to doing it online because of the social interaction they have when they visit the post office: "If I did those things online I wouldn't see people and catch up." What online equivalents are there?

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# Keeping in Touch

## 1. Introduction

This report outlines findings from the scoping review for the Keeping in Touch project, a collaborative research project involving academics from the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England, community partner Knowle West Media Centre and independent consultant Dr Clodagh Miskelly.   Keeping in Touch consisted of a scoping review of UK based projects, visits to three projects to generate  interview-based case studies and a small interview-based study with people who are active in Knowle West in Bristol. The project asked two questions:

- What can we learn about people's everyday use of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?

- How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technology in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?

We focused on projects which seemed to be going with the grain of what people are already doing in their everyday lives, rather than introducing completely new technologies or activities.   We do not attempt to define what is meant by the term 'strengthening communities' but instead accept the different understandings of this that we encountered in the research and attempt to map and understand people's uses of communication technologies to achieve their goals.   There are many ways of defining community; we have kept our focus here on locality, looking at projects that operate at local scale in some way, whether as a local project or working across different localities.

We intended through this project not only to contribute to academic research and understanding but through the process to synthesise and share good practice in community technology projects that might be useful to others working in this field. To this end we are producing a handbook for community practice.

This scoping review is a beginning that has generated more questions than answers, as well as pointers to good practice.

## 1.1 Scoping UK based projects

To learn about how everyday use of mobile media does or can support community strengthening we first needed to find examples, a tricky process since everyday uses such as texting are by definition so mundane as not to feature in community project descriptions. Technology is often mentioned when there is development of a bespoke application or where a particular technology, practice or device is introduced to people who previously did not have access. It is difficult to access relevant information through the general reviews of project descriptions and short case study visits which make up this scoping study.

The ubiquity and quasi-invisibility of mobile phone use in the UK can mean that it is hard to access and identify when and how it plays a role in community strengthening. Furthermore, any sharing or keeping in touch involves one of many combinations of hardware, communications infrastructure and software and the mundaneness or otherwise of a technology varies within and between communities and changes overtime as technologies and devices become more affordable or common place.

The boundaries between what is and is not mobile communication are increasingly blurred now that it is relatively easy to access and share media from even a fairly basic mobile device.   Mobile phones can be used to record and upload photographs, text or video to online community spaces as well as read what is already there.

Here we use three rough distinctions to characterise the examples and uses of mobile media and communications technology for community strengthening that made up the scoping review:

- emergent – that is, uses which have emerged informally and gradually through the widespread availability of increasingly affordable devices

- social-led interventions – that is, community projects/organisations that introduce or adopt technologies and related practices in order to further particular social goals

- technology-led interventions – that is, projects/organisations that work to enable access to technology or foster technological development in order to further social goals

These distinctions emphasise the degree of intentionality or importance afforded to technology. In practice, however, the distinctions are often blurred and intersect. Whether more focused on the technological solution or the social goal, all these projects are to greater or lesser degree reliant on the emergent uses of widely available devices and technologies. These create the conditions on which new uses can be developed and the networks through which communication can be built.

This review had two parts:

A snowballing approach was used to identify projects using mobile media and communications technology for community strengthening and keeping in touch. From these examples, we mapped different of practices and contexts. Any verification or evaluation of the activities undertaken by these projects was beyond the scope of this short study. We looked only at how these projects described themselves and therefore focused on the rhetoric of community technology use for community strengthening,

Three interview-based case studies were undertaken (see appendices). These allowed us to consider the role of communication technology in community settings within the realities of a particular practices and contexts.

# 2. Looking at Rhetoric

## 2.1 the snowballing approach

We used a snowballing approach to identify examples for our research, starting with projects or organisations known to the team then asking key contacts involved in community-based and/or technology work to identify projects or further contacts. A snowballing study is always skewed to researchers' networks, especially at the beginning but was seen as a useful way to get started quickly due to the time constraints of the scoping study. The research team included a practitioner and researchers who are also practitioners, which widened our scope. In addition we conducted searches on google using combinations of the words community, strengthening, communication, technology. When we had just over 100 examples we stopped and reviewed themes. We looked in more detail at 30 examples which represented the spectrum of activity and intentions that covered the range of the 100 examples that related to our research questions. This is not a representative sample but rather indicative of the vast range and variety of practices. These were all projects with an online presence. Project descriptions such as a website 'about' section were the main source of information. It was not feasible in a short scoping study to verify the activities and goals described by these projects and thus we only examined the rhetoric of communication use for community strengthening as outlined in how these projects described themselves.

The website descriptions varied significantly in terms of focus and detail and it was not always possible to find the information we wanted. The projects are listed in appendix A.

There are many factors which may influence how and why particular technologies and practices may be adopted for purposes of community strengthening or which can lead to community strengthening. By focusing on projects and organisations which are doing this in some intentional way rather than an ethnographic study of everyday practice we are necessarily focusing on interventions with some element of socially oriented practice and purpose using communications technology.

We start by considering who is involved, then what technologies are involved before considering the models of change underpinning the interventions.

## 2.2 uncovering different kinds of projects

To understand how media and communications technology are being used it is important to understand the context of use. Who is initiating, managing and leading these projects, how are communities and individuals involved and what kinds of technologies are being used?

Organisational type and/or structure can give some indication of the scale, resourcing, formality and goals of an intervention. We use 'organisation' in a broad sense here. There were big differences in formality. Anyone can set up an online presence in the name of their local community.

The sample includes organisations from different sectors including public, voluntary, community, academic, social enterprise and co-operatives working distinctly with communities or in collaboration including:

- academic led with partnership with public sector, arts or media not for profit and or community organisation
- public media arts led
- community media/arts not for profit
- social enterprise
- public sector services
- cooperative

There were also volunteer led projects which might be a lone enthusiast or a collaboration and few of which work to more horizontal organisational structures. There were few examples of private sector initiatives.

For large public sector organisations usually delivering services (and in a few cases initiating projects as part of academic research agendas) these interventions were one activity amongst many or might be a project that sits across various services or locations. The small volunteer-led projects in contrast would be working locally or trying to introduce or support a particular communication activity within a particular constituency.

Thus there are significant differences in the degrees of formality of organisational structure, of decision making and accountability, and in the degrees of autonomy and of funding. While some organisations might be well established, few of the projects were: most were established in the last few years; were pilots; in a set up phase; or were time-bound interventions.

From website descriptions it is difficult to establish where actual leadership/organisational structure in projects lies and how this plays out in practice. A number of examples claim collaborative or participatory approaches in the intervention but this does not necessarily extend to their organisational structure or decision making about what and how to work.

Examples with a focus primarily on a social goal include those that work with communities but are not from

within those communities;  for example, delivering services as a public body or independent agency.  Some work with local communities, some are issue focused and some work with people who have professional roles within a community setting, such as mental health workers.

Amongst projects and organisations who are more technology-led, there were also organisations that work with communities but are not from within those communities, including specialists in, for example, community media, or design. Some projects aim to train communities in digital or media skills but also included umbrella groups who work nationally to connect and support lots of community- based organisations.

As the different organisational structures suggest, these projects also range in geographical scale.  There are hyper-local projects operating at street or village or ward level, projects across a whole town or a London borough, through to city-wide projects.  Rural projects might extend from a village through to across a moor or county with a number of villages or region-wide but in total might involve fewer of people.  A number of examples work with different communities  (local or of interest or minority groups but working on local scales) regionally, nationally or internationally.   A few work on different scales according to project, from street level to national.

The range of actors and the number of collaborative projects raise questions about how different sectors can work well together, where community voices lie, and what different collaborators bring to projects.  For example:

- how does the degree of involvement of different actors in public and private sectors affect or even stifle or enhance the value of these technologies to communities?

- Do  more powerful actors still place a more traditional emphasis on message-based communication to a community in spite of the new potential of social and mobile media?

- Do different sectors see good practice differently?

## 2.3 Which community actors are involved and how?

Since all local communities differ and are made up of groups with different interests and different levels of local power, different projects engage with communities in different ways.

Examples include local residents wanting to do something to improve their lot: local interest groups organised around a shared identity or concern; cooperative or association members; artists; craftspeople; people who want to support a local economy by buying locally produced products; media producers. They might contribute by writing or commenting on local forums and blogs. Some connect with projects that are introduced from outside the community where people might also receive training or engage with local services and service providers.  People working with them might be artists, media producers, trainers, public sector staff, designers, elected representatives, coders, mentors, social entrepreneurs.  There were many different configurations just within our sample.

Within these configurations and roles there are many different reasons for using media and communications technology, though keeping in touch, sharing information and producing media are prominent.

There are three rough trends:

*Meeting goals with a general or geographically defined constituency*

for example:

- farmers use a website to stay connected across a large rural area so they can keep in touch with each other and local issues and information in spite of relative geographical isolation

- people living in a local area keep in touch with each other & with locally focused information about services and local democracy using text messaging
- infrastructure is provided by a co-operative to meet the communication needs of different groups in a geographical area

*Communication technologies are used for specific social purposes and particular groups*

for example:

- people made redundant from the same company stay in touch with and support each other and other people going through similar experiences
- local makers wanting to sell their wares are connected to local people who want to buy locally.
- people involved in supporting and safe guarding vulnerable individuals are enabled to stay in touch with each other and that individual

*Specific technology development for meeting goals with local communities*

for example:

- connecting local communities to useful public data so they can make more effective use of information about and from their local authority
- involving people in design interventions so there is greater contact between service users, design and providers . Some other resulting services enable people to stay in touch with each other and to or via public services.
- community reporters developing social media skills so they can report on local issues

In different projects local community members are cast in different roles whether as producers or receivers of information, co-designers, service users, community reporters etc.

The success and focus of these uses and choices of communications technology are shaped by who is involved, existing practices, affordability, access, and who owns, uses and controls what technologies. These are connected to wider social, economic and cultural patterns in any community that on the whole are not discernable from brief website descriptions of projects.

A closer study of some of these projects which looks at the communication ecology in detail might generate more detailed observations on what, if any, are the repeated patterns in the use of particular technologies for particular purposes and how these emerge or spread across communities.

## 2.4 what media and communications technology are being used

Some media and communications technology were referred to in project descriptions. Although they do not give us a complete picture, particularly of everyday uses, they are evidence of the breadth and variety of communication technologies which are considered to have value for community-strengthening.

Where technology is specifically mentioned it tends to be where a bespoke use has been developed or a very specific use for a particular purpose. They are mentioned because they are considered to be different, innovative, unique.

As we are using the online descriptions of projects to examine their rhetoric then clearly all the projects we have looked at have websites or blogs. However these do not necessarily equate to the main activity of the project. For example, Homeless SMS, one of our case studies, uses a blog to describe and provide updates on the project but the activity of the project lies in twitter feeds. Even where the site is the heart of the project, such as with local news sites, other technology use that feeds into these sites is invisible in the description but necessary to its success. Media and communications technology and, it can be assumed, mobile technologies are being used to collect, edit and produce content for these sites and to access them.

References to mobiles tend to be within the more technology-focused examples, for example, developing or promoting some form of mobile application or channel.

Social media/ web 2.0 tools are common, especially in local sites, for exchange of community news and views – often using blogging software and sometimes linked to Facebook and Twitter. A few use web-casting, live blogging, interactive time-lines and feeds from, for example, Flickr. Umbrella organisations focus more on the technologies behind the sites because they are helping local communities build their sites and build up an online presence and get to grips with tools like word press and other free blogging tools. Websites are sometimes portals to other sites and a few bespoke websites offer particular services such as online marketplaces.

Community media organisations introduce a range of tools into their projects and the communities they work with, including video testimony, mobile media, location sensitive media, film-making, animation, web tv and other digital media production tools and platforms as well as data visualisation. A few projects produce bespoke tools for either web-based or mobile phones, a few use RFID tags and some use collaborative tools such as wikis or have introduced crowd sourcing or other aggregation tools. Some projects provide infrastructure such as broadband.

## 2.5 In what ways are these projects intended to be community strengthening

To learn about how everyday use of mobile media and communication is or can support community strengthening we need to understand how these examples **intend** to strengthen community. The expression 'community strengthening' was rarely used in project descriptions. The examples were suggested or identified by people who perceived them to be strengthening projects. They were then included in the sample if they were clearly contributing something to local community life or held a social change agenda which operated at local level.

The sample highlights how different groups and sectors use different language to address similar issues from different angles. For example design focused projects talk about 'wicked problems' [1] where some community media organisations might talk about social change and others might talk about well-being.

The different language reflects the different ways of addressing the same concerns with a range of methods (design, arts, services, information exchange etc., citizen journalism). The different understandings of what constitutes strengthened community / social change for social good were informed by different values, political positions etc. The combinations of ideas about a) what change is needed and b) how it could be brought about, inform how and what technology is used as well as who owns and determines its use. Some project descriptions are explicit about some or all of these aspects whereas for others any political stance and understanding of what is social good is implied.

### 2.5.1 a range of values

All projects are explicitly or implicitly underpinned by values. These wide ranging values include: equality of opportunity; accountability and transparency in democratic processes and in service delivery; inclusion

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[1]      "Wicked problems can not be tackled with a traditional approach in which problems are defined, analysed and solved in sequential steps. The main reason for this is that there is no clear problem definition of wicked problems" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem

(social and digital); the right to be heard; pluralism; freedom of expression; civility; social and environmental responsibility of the individual; openness.

Further examination is needed to map how values integral to a project shape decision-making about what communication technology is adopted for different purposes. One preliminary conclusion we can make is that projects with clear values about openness and a belief in open access to public knowledge advocated and/or developed open source tools.  This is an unusual example of a value set which is closely aligned to a technology movement.

## 2.5.2 a range of agendas

A whole range of agendas were identified in this scoping study.  These have greater or lesser emphasis on technological intervention as a means to change and can also be distinguished by how targeted the uses are:

- Are they introducing a form of communication as part of addressing a specific issue?
- Are they creating communication spaces where people can determine the uses of that space for their own purposes?

*Some projects focus on capacity building of communication or technical skills*

*Some projects focus on creating spaces for community-defined uses*

- to increase community awareness and cohesion.
- to provide a space and communication tools for mutual support
- to help people find a voice online for their community
- to connect disadvantaged communities to the internet.
- to enable people to establish and develop community based communications media for empowerment, cultural expression, information and entertainment.
- to support the regeneration of the city- region through technology focused projects.

*Some projects have more specific sectoral goals or a specific approach*

- to improve public services through better connecting individuals and organisations.
- to reach young people at risk of social exclusion to enable them to articulate their experiences
- "to bring together local communities and world-class designers to work on projects that improve how we live, work and play."
- to share important local news

*Some projects are about very specific bespoke technology uses to meet a specific need*

- developing mobile applications to enable the support and /or autonomy of a vulnerable person
- to make local authority data available to everyone in an accessible form

## 2.5.3 a range of methods attempting to meet an agenda

The range of methods that people are using to meet purposes of community strengthening include:

- Approaches intended to strengthen contact between individuals who already know each other or collaborate on some activities.

- Approaches that expand local connections and contacts, for example, through information sharing, building local networks in person and online, holding networking events, online dialogue, using free web 2.0 tools and linking what people create in their own spaces to connect people and connect people and institutions. These approaches might also be used to build links between professionals and communities, young people or individuals or to strengthen partnership working or to build use of an online local market place.

- Approaches which aim to develop skills within community, for example, mentoring for digital skills development, reporting, media production and uploading skills. They might involve using themed projects or arts interventions to encourage engagement with digital tools and skills development.

- Approaches to information gathering and sharing, with projects providing mutual support through provision of information, information exchange and dissemination, information exchange to support peer learning, volunteer editors/writers drawing on ideas and suggestions from local people to produce local news and events information, local people posting on a local site in a way similar to putting a card in a shop window.

- Approaches to creating content intended to influence change such as stories and testimonies, curating and commissioning, media production and even co-design. Some projects aggregate community content. Developing technological infrastructure or tools to support some or all of the purposes of local community communications.  This might the production of mobile applications, or open source tools, scraping and sharing data to inform local democracy and accountability or providing broadband and hardware.

There were also examples of lobbying, advice, events, consultancy, strategy development, training, service design consultancy and social business incubation.

## 2.6  a range of different understandings of how change happens – with media and communications technology

The different methods and technologies that are being used in projects point to a number of different understandings of how change happens using communication technology.

It is not possible within this short scoping study to evaluate how effectively these projects achieve desired changes. However it does reveal a diversity of approaches and understandings of how change happens. The projects are mainly addressing specific but different aspects of community experience and doing so using different methods and tools so we are not comparing like with like.

The  types of sector or organisation do not map neatly onto models of change.  There are different starting points and understandings of change which are drawn from wider models such as public sector service delivery, social enterprise or cooperative models.

There are trends or preferred methods that cut across sectors, some of these fit with current favourites in social policy such as nudge[2] or co-production[3].

*Some projects focus on the social changes needed to improve local community, where community*

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[2]  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nudge_(book)
[3]  http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/coproduction

*technology plays a useful supporting role through amplifying messages, increasing flexibility and reach, allowing new models of contact and so on*

- sharing experience and mutual support can serve as a means to gain and provide emotional support and as well as advice

- community based provision of local information will increase civic engagement with an area which in turn improves the quality of local life

- transparency and engagement with citizens are important to democracy and tools that make information easily and freely accessible contribute to this...

- creative approaches to self expression can help drive social change

*Some projects consider communication technology to be a key enabler of change*

- user centred service design can create social and economic change

- working with young people to build communication and media production skills and to produce media expressing their views enables young people to envisage and contribute to social change.

- sharing information about local life is a valuable service to the community, improves community life for readers and contributors.

- Social issues can be addressed through innovative design processes which combine tech development, co creation and a focus on tackling wicked problems

- local economy and community can be strengthened through an online marketplace

- local currency can serve as a means of supporting community development and cohesion

*Some projects are focused on improving communication resources in a community*

- by providing solid digital infrastructure and tools through open access you can promote regeneration through economic development and things like flexible working ..

- web based systems can provide people with simple tangible benefits in the community aspects of their lives and better uses of the internet for social value can be learned through example.

## 3. Case Studies

We chose three projects to study in more depth, using the following criteria. We wanted projects where:

- we could talk to participants and users to find out what is working rather than where we just hear from project implementers

- projects going with the grain of what people are doing rather than or as well as introducing new technologies and activities.

- projects with a focus on people connecting to the people they want to be connected to , that are about strengthening their belongings to a community in their own terms

## 3.1 Kirklees

This case study looks at Kirklees, West Yorkshire where different community groups and agencies are using communications in a range of ways to strengthen local communities. Key individuals are involved with more than one project which helps build and develop relevant and effective communication use.

There is a mix of technology choice and ownership including community led and local authority led neighbourhood technology projects using bespoke social networking sites, as well as Facebook and alongside SMS mailing lists and a community-focused open data initiative.

The combination of technology choice, purpose and community practice is closely tied to the roles of key individuals who have seen and continue to see and develop the potential of certain technologies for certain contexts and work in collaborations that bring a mix of skills and local knowledge. Each local area has different approaches which consider the existing communication practices and preferences as well as potential new interventions and recognise that multiple ways of communicating are needed in any area.

## 3.2 Homeless SMS

Homeless SMS is a project in London which uses basic accessible mobile technology to enable homeless people to access information on services and opportunities to support them. HSMS launched in 2011 by trying out a prototype version with support from organisations working with homeless people.

The project uses the SMS functionality of Twitter to maintain contact with a network of people who are homeless, work in services for homeless people or are concerned by the homelessness. Most homeless people have a mobile phone and all mobiles can receive SMS even when there is credit on the phone.

The service pushes out a range of information for homeless people and also aims to respond to their requests for help or information by forwarding these through the network of people subscribed to the Twitter accounts. It is designed to be low cost but does require people's time either voluntarily or resourced to locate and send out information regularly.

## 3.3 Bristol Neighbourhood Partnership websites

Knowle West Media Centre is working with Bristol City Council to develop websites for each of Bristol's 14 Neighbourhood partnerships. Neighbourhood Partnerships are intended to " *bring public sector decision making to a local level where local residents can influence how they would like to see their neighbourhood improve*" (http://www.bristolpartnership.org/neighbourhood-partnerships )

The sites are based on a template but are intended to be developed and shaped by the local community representatives who are supported with training. This has developed in different ways according to the needs, interests and skills in different areas and with different degrees of success. There have been challenges in getting local people engaged with need to be seen in the context of the wider programme of devolving local decision-making and engaging people in that programme too.

Alongside the basic sites and training, the media centre have used the Knowle West community site as a development site to inform the development of the Neighbourhood Partnership sites. This includes not only testing additional functionality but also approaches to engaging the wider community in different ways.

# 4. Discussion

Some patterns and observations from both the wider scoping and the case studies point to key considerations for good practice in community based uses of media technology and raise questions for further investigation.

## 1.Flexible Approaches

*"You have to get down to the individual and what each individual wants to do and what's the right technology for them and it takes quite a while to figure it out sometimes and maybe you try the wrong thing first. But, you know, people sort of measure these things by what's your traffic on that site. And for me it's not about that. It's saying well ,you know, this is this person and this is the difference that it's made. And the more you start to get a few of those individuals who are suddenly connected then that's half the battle really."*

(Diane Sims)

Multiple and diverse approaches are part of the landscape of mobile media and communications use in community contexts. We have identified diverse combinations of individuals and organisations, uses of technology and activities, scale, different values and understandings of what constitutes community strengthening, different technology preferences and degrees of familiarity with technology as well as different starting points (local enthusiasts, academic, activists, services, technologists etc.).

Furthermore, there is a diversity of approach within any local community and it is clear from the case studies that a diversity of approach is part of what goes on within a community project too.

While the role of ICT in businesses and institutions has often been to enable standardisation, communities function differently, more organically, so standardisation is not necessarily useful or desirable in community settings. The case studies suggest that approaches which respect and respond to differences in age, gender, interest, literacy and affluence are better suited. Standardisation may be needed to some degree to enable connections on a practical, technical level but not at the expense of inclusion. A flexible approach is needed which works across multiple channels and practices.

### *4.1.2 understand **existing** practice*

In Kirklees, a diversity of technologies and uses of those technologies was considered a strength in engaging, working with and building connections between as many local people as possible. It is not about one size fits all approaches but rather weaving the potential and opportunities provided by technology into community activities in ways which best suit individual communication practices and preferences and group purpose.

There is a commitment in Newsome, an area in Huddersfield, Kirklees, to expand the range of technology and channels without replacing old ones.

*" it's amazing some of the benefits of this networking in the community and just keeping people in touch with each other and it doesn't matter which way you do it because everybody's going to need different ways of doing it. But you're going to need the whole spectrum of things available to you because you can't keep everybody informed all the time so you use as much as possible and you find that one thing works for one person and something else for another. The texting works for me I love the texting because I'm into texting and that and also looking through the website when I'm looking for something in particular but we still have members of our community who prefer just to go up to the community noticeboard and see what's going on through that. So we've got a whole spectrum of things .*

(Julie Stewart Turner, Chair of Newsome Community Forum)

Technology uses and preferences vary and are shaped by, for example, culture, age range, income levels, and existing community interactions. This is illustrated by contrasting approaches used by community

workers in different areas of Kirklees.  In Dalton and Rawthorpe a combination of a social networking site and a facebook page are used, which suggests that people have access to broadband and laptops or high end phones.  Different channels are needed in Birkby, a predominantly South Asian community, where facebook is hardly used by women. Most women there do have a mobile phone and as a result a set of different Thumb Print City SMS mailing lists are being used to share local information.  Preferred or available or affordable channels need to be used but then the channels shape what kinds of communication are possible.

## 4.1.3 understand **emerging** practice

Those examples from Kirklees suggest the need to understand existing practice but while also being open to noticing emerging practices and building on recent technological developments.   Homeless SMS has developed by learning about and from existing and emerging practice with mobile phones and then building on that by introducing Twitter.   Will Brayne, the developer,observed that most homeless people in London had mobile phones and even if they had no credit to send a text or make a call they could still receive SMS. He was also aware of the significant innovations in SMS use for social change in Africa.  Homeless SMS developed its information channels for homeless  people using the SMS form of Twitter to build on a powerful but under-exploited piece of technology in their pockets.

Introducing the potential of technologies can also be about keeping doors open, creating opportunities, reviewing and being aware of sometimes rapid change.  The challenge is to keep continuity and sustain communications through rapidly changing technology, practices and trends.

It should not be assumed that because someone does not engage with a particular technology  they do not want to, or cannot.  Tailored IT drop in sessions like those in Newsome can lead to people developing new ICT skills and confidence when an appropriate opportunity arises.  Increased affordability of hardware, uptake of software or being exposed to what peers or offspring do, can lead to shifts in practice too.

*"People want us to be using technology in the neighbourhood but they don't want it to be just one technology they always want the options there.  Someone wants to write in on a piece of paper. They want the link to someone who's typing something in on the computer and that's something I hope we've been able to do with the neighbourhood stuff [...] So it's those ways where we can join the different types of technology together but also link that in with what people are really doing."*

(Diane Sims)

## 4.1.4 Who is missing?

It is important to build on existing links and practices within any community to make sure that people are aware of the channels that have been created and then to work across multiple channels to ensure wide involvement.   It is also important to think about who is being overlooked.  People may be using the same technologies but be communicating on different channels, or the available channels may have little of value for them.

In all the case studies the issue of partial reach was mentioned.  This is in part to do with new technologies, the progress of fairly new projects, and with people being unaware of what is available; but this also includes concerns such as mistrust of new communication spaces and different parts of communities using different parallel communication channels.

A hyper-local website can be invisible to sectors of a community if they are not already connected into networks that feed information into that site and share information about its existence.  Barriers can be reinforced and sites become walled communities if particular kinds of social and cultural capital and technological proficiency or access are needed to take part.   So a hyper-local site may appear like a vibrant local resource where in fact there are sections of the community completely uninvolved.  This could have negative consequences if information becomes concentrated in those sites rather than shared in a range of

ways and, for example, where these sites equate to more affluent members of a local community.

Different people with in one local area may be connecting on different channels. Some on a local website, others through twitter and others again on Blackberry Messenger and people also perceive different communication options as more or less safe or trustworthy. Some local residents in one area of Bristol are reluctant to blog on their local neighbourhood partnership site in case they get aggressive comments. It can also be the social and political context of the technology. Twitter has been uncritically associated with the Arab Spring in 2011 as a force for good, for example. Applications like Sukey which helps protestors to locate and avoid 'kettling' on demonstrations may be for some a community strengthening technology linking activists together in a trusted network while for others it may be considered a divisive use of technology which thwarts law and order.

These considerations in regard to practice and participation lead to a number of considerations for good practice:

- The success of communication technology in helping strengthen communities to some extent lies in its relevance to the particular context; the relevance of the technology to the people in question and their daily lives and the relevance of the information that is shared via various channels.
- A multiplicity of practices and range of skills are needed from community activists and workers and these practices and skills need to be regularly updated.
- The activists and workers need to understand the needs of their community, the existing practices of that community and what technology can be used to support their agenda.

When working with communication technology in communities it is important to ask:

- How manageable is this for the individual and the project?
- How can transitions be managed if technologies or channels change or are lost?
- How best can you keep track of what practices work?

There is a lack of useful needs analysis tools and ways of making sense of the communications landscape.

Experiments and trial and error are part of this fairly informal landscape of community practice, but an experimental approach requires solid relationships of trust if involvement or connection is to be maintained when technology doesn't work for that person or purpose or doesn't work at all.

## 4.2 Using mobile media and communication technologies to support the aim of strengthening communities

*"When I started working people still had telex and then you had faxes and then you had emails and then you had pagers and then you had mobiles. My first laptop was a big fat heavy thing that only did one thing I used it to turn out these quotes that it did for the organisation that I worked for and every time something happened, there was a new innovation, you got rid of something that was worse. So emails were obviously better than faxes and faxes were obviously better than telex. This stuffs not like that ,young people are using facebook to do this stuff that thumbprint can do but in an organisation working with staff it would be a nightmare to try and do that through facebook. [...] when it's incremental people can't see the benefit of it"* (Alan Williams, United Response).

The speed at which new tools and devices are produced makes it difficult for any project to make informed choices about which technology to use for a particular purpose and even what is possible with different

technologies and devices. Increasingly, mobile and pervasive media can be of great value in local and community contexts in myriad ways, but this still requires understanding of how to use these technologies and seeing the potential.

We live in an upgrade and applications-focused culture. Technology is always changing and we cannot neatly map specific technologies to aspects of community strengthening. However we can identify patterns, indicators and questions that might help to make choices about how to use media and communications technology to strengthen community.

Drawing on the case studies in particular we can consider aspects of the adoption of a technology, the reach of communication technologies and channels in different contexts as well as observations about functionality and considerations about sustainability.

## 4.2.1 Uptake and choice

How do you make choices about which tools and technologies to use in particular community contexts?

As well as the social, economic and cultural make up of a community, there were four aspects of decisions making around communication technology choices that came through in the scoping study.

*It matters who makes decisions about the technologies that get used.*

Someone makes decisions at some point about what technology to introduce /use. The decision may depend on what is available and used already, what resources are available to support its use or develop new systems / tools / content / online spaces, and what technical knowledge and skills are available. It will also depend on the confidence and knowledge of the decision-maker about communication technologies and the context of use.

The scoping study suggests different degrees of formality with regard to how choices are made. Local Authorities may require sign-off by their IT or PR departments. Community groups decisions may be shaped by what funding sources are available. Technologists might opt for producing something new rather than using what is available since their passion is, for example, application development. An individual enthusiast might make decisions based on what's free and what others are using, maybe creating a facebook page or a word press site.

The recent growth in social media tools such as facebook has provided huge potential for quick and easy adoption of online spaces and spaces where people are increasingly already present. Sometimes this is because people are unaware of other options. In some cases a widespread social media tool is chosen because it is the best fit to their purpose in terms of functionality. For example, Dalton and Rawthorpe in Kirklees, a local community development worker has set up a community social networking site, Raw Connections. This site hosts a range of community content but was invisible to most local people. By linking this site to a facebook page the content from the Raw Connections site could be made more visible as people came across the facebook page or were more likely to go to Facebook as it is familiar to them and they already use it. Similarly Homeless SMS is using Twitter as the platform for its different channels. Twitter may be new to most of the people that are being signed up to make use of the service but by anchoring it in a widespread social networking environment allows links to a wider collection of people with greater or lesser connections to supporting homeless people. However it is also the functionality of Twitter, in particular that it works in SMS that makes it a suitable tool for this community.

*It matters how communities are involved*

It's important to pay attention to how community members might use a site or application but also to pay attention to their concerns and needs. People may not articulate their needs in terms of how technology could help them. It is the role of the intermediary, be it a local technology enthusiast, a technologist or a social change oriented project, to make the connections between local needs and useful communications

technology that might be of value.  In the case of the Bristol Neighbourhood Partnership sites, Knowle West Media Centre have attempted to play this role at scale by both offering training and support to each NP but also by using the Knowle West Community website as a demonstration site to explore different potential uses of social and mobile media technologies to engage people in different ways.  The different NPs can look to this site for ideas and to the KWMC team for support in developing those ideas to work in each context.

The Knowle West website and its gradual development as well as that of the different NP sites also illustrates that the value of a technology or application might take time to become obvious to local residents. They need time to see relevance of the technology or the information it provides,  as well as support to explore how it might be of value to them.

Another approach is iterative development or refinement of a tool or site in partnership with community organisations. Who Owns Your Neighbourhood involves the development of tools not just to share information on land ownership but to enable community stewardship and knowledge sharing about local land.  These aspects were designed in to the project because of an understanding of how the lack of information about land ownership hindered community plans and activities. The plan is to add further functionality and kinds of information as use of WOYN grows and matures.

*It matters how technology choices impact on autonomy*

The **kind** of application and who **'owns'** it shapes the degree to which it can serve a community's own purposes.  Some projects, usually services or local authorities, adopt a more traditional one-way communication model of sending out messages to a community.  The technology or channel may not be designed to respond to what community members have to say or to allow them to decide what those messages might let alone be a space that they can use or appropriate for their own purposes.  Some uses and designs may shut down any potential for community ownership and dialogue.

Social media technologies have participation designed into them, they require people to produce content and take part in order to be living communication spaces.  For these to be a success in communities, other skills and support may be needed to build capacity and confidence.

With new developments in web 2.0 and mobile technology there is greater scope for local areas to shape their own communications.  This may be more flexible technology but it also requires  financial and time investment from the individual as well as community access and skills development.

In the case studies there are examples of a kind of iterative process between what people do and how technology supports that. Introducing a technology leads to changes in what they do and that in turn changes the technology use or technology choices.  As people gain confidence they find new uses for technologies and begin to explore them.  This kind of process can take time but is of value to ensuring that community members can use communications technology for their own  and  varied purposes.

Some uses have impact that relates to how they were originally intended.  Others lead to unexpected learning and uses that can then be built on to develop use further.

One challenge is to enable quality engagement.  Online spaces can be rich resources and opportunities to share local data, learn about your community or engage in debate.  They can also be highly controlled spaces dominated or edited by one interest or even a single enthusiastic individual.

Texting tools may provide short constrained communications but these can be aggregated into something richer (survey data or poems) or they can be powerful and flexible tools in coordinating activities face to face.

*Economics Matter*

In the UK the increased relative affordability of communication devices and infrastructure has impacted

significantly on what it can be used for in community contexts.  A £15 phone with pay as you go sim card even without credit can allow a homeless person in London access to a whole range of support and information just by signing up a twitter account and following a few Homeless SMS channels.   Cheaper media production tools, broadband access and free to use web 2.0 tools allow quick, fairly easy and cheap ways to contribute content to hyper local websites.

Neighbourhood partnership sites in Bristol are based on a basic structure of pages on a word press site. This requires less investment in a system and minimal hosting costs compared to a local digital TV system like In Touch in Kirklees.  However in both cases significant publicly funded human resources are needed to support local residents to discover these channels as well as to help them shape their own content.

In spite of the potential of this technology it is important not to over play the cheap and free.  A 2011 Office of National Statistics points out that a quarter of UK residents do not access the internet at all. Many of the people who cannot afford to keep credit on their phone or to access broadband or own a computer are the people who most need the kind of information that is shared increasingly through these channels at the expense of others.

Free tools such as facebook sit in fact within a complex set of access costs, power costs, tariffs, and hardware costs.   And some of these free platforms like facebook limit significantly our control over content and form.  They also sit on fragile financial models which have seen some platforms succeed on a free to use model and others revert to charging.

## 4.2.2 Reach, scale and replicability

Whether or not a communication technology gets used can depend on awareness,usability, access to technology as well as knowledge, awareness, ability to use or interest in certain channels.  It can be a balance between having access and being familiar with the devices involved and having functionality to be able to achieve what you want to achieve.  For example, Kirklees local digital TV service  is delivered through the TV which means that it is widely accessible and familiar but it has limited functionality and media content.  Thumb Print City has a narrow but clear set of functions which are just a small step away from how people commonly use SMS.  On the other hand a community website or social networking site may allow much greater options for creating and sharing content but may be difficult to introduce into people's everyday practice as they have to remember to look at the site.

It is important both to think about the reach of existing tools and how they might be used to serve other purposes and how best to introduce new channels or technologies and to assess how they might be useful or relevant.

Some projects like Homeless SMS and Thumb Print City demonstrate the value of building on cheaper, easy to adopt and use and increasingly widespread technologies.  They demonstrate that small shifts in existing practice can be powerful.

*"Organisations of that size, little groups who almost never get access, it's a very blurry line between what people would actually be doing with their own mobile phone sending out many texts saying don't forget to come out tomorrow afternoon and making that slightly more formalised and with an online way of managing that and does that slight shift make any difference"*

(Andrew Wilson, Thumbprint City)

Diane Sims described how one local resident started to turn up and get involved in tending the community allotment after being added to their mailing list. This slight shift in the mode of contact had a big impact on the individual.  This resident used to have an allotment but was driven away by vandalism and has bad memories from that time. It was difficult for him to return to the site.  By receiving texts that go to everyone rather than a personal text or phone call takes "the pressure off him".  Everyone can just choose to turn up or not.

*" In the past, either me or Rachel would phone to ask him and he'd feel bad if he couldn't make it, and the whole thing became like an obligation that he couldn't handle. But now he keeps turning up and digging (and drinking lots of tea and chatting to the other people on the site). It's a big achievement for a little text message."*

(Diane Sims)

Examples from case studies suggest that effective practice relies on building tools into other opportunities and processes and existing networks or in response to voiced concerns. They also suggest that the scale of use is not necessarily the best way to establish or measure success. Some examples are of relatively small groups of people being connected but with significant impact on those people and their community. They are, often, people who also meet face to face and the size of their mailing lists match the human and local scale of their endeavours. In these cases it is replication of what works in other contexts rather than scaling up that is useful. It might be for example a proliferation of small distinct groups using a tool like Thumb Print City.

### *4.2.3 Sustainability*

Community based processes take time. Technology can play a role in supporting and perhaps accelerating processes for example, where they can amplify connections and communication but they themselves also take time to embed. Furthermore attention needs to be paid to those who are least likely to access technological solutions so they can engage or engage in other ways.

*"I get very frustrated and I have these conversations endlessly with my councillor hat on that short term projects and short term funding don't work. It takes time to have a difference in a community because it takes time for people to have confidence that you're going to be there, that it isn't just a flash in the pan and it takes time for people to challenge their own fears and build up their confidence"*

(Julie Stewart Turner, Chair of Newsome Community Forum and local councillor)

Identifying where technology can assist in these processes is valuable but the technology needs to be part of people's everyday life or they need to be able to see where it can be used/appropriated for their purposes.

Projects need to take into consideration the continual changes in the technology including frequent upgrades and the increasing affordability of increasingly sophisticated devices while not forgetting existing technologies and older systems and devices still in wide use.

Business models for community technology look difficult to achieve in low income contexts and where many applications are free to use. While these tools can be a means of designing out costs they also have significant implications in the ownership of content and in how information is structured and stored. Furthermore these free technologies are only free to those who have access to the hardware and infrastructure that allows them to be used.

## 4.3 Focusing on Relationships

Communication is key to relationships and communities can be understood though the lens of the relationships that hold them together including those between local people, people and services, groups and others in community, groups and services. Looking at how relationships play out also helps identify inclusion and exclusion from particular activities or resources. Communications technology plays a part in shaping, enabling and restricting those relationships and thus how communities function.

Through this scoping study it has become clear that effective use of media and communication technology for community strengthening requires understanding how relationships play out in communities (including existing relationships), how they are shaped by power, authority and resources, as well as the potential for fostering other connections.

Understanding communities as built up from sets of relationships and connections seems for our research more useful than considering communities in terms of shared place or interest. In the case studies, community life is described in terms of activities, encounters, collaborations and meetings or online or SMS connections. It is not just **where** people are but **how** they are relating to or connecting with one another within that locality or with people and agencies involved in that locality that matters.

The term community of interest describes a shared identity or concern but not the connections within that group or to other groups and wider community. People tend to adhere to a range of communities and groups relating to professional, family , cultural, age, gender etc. They may use different communication practices for each.  Initial research for any project would usefully involve a mapping of these overlapping sets of relationships, connections and communication practices to identify the ecosystem of overlapping communities, what can be built on, where the gaps are and how they can be bridged.

Using the notion of communities as a set of relationships as a way of understanding the varied everyday practices of community strengthening with media and communications technology means thinking about **who connects to whom** and how that might inform choices and good practice. Homeless SMS through the medium of twitter channels has built relationships in a community which has no or little physical space in which to meet or which could be called its own. The different channels and loose connections to other users makes for relationships of support on a functional level, such as sharing information about services, through to an emotional level by sending out motivational quotes or personal messages of support when people tweet at difficult times. It has also built connections of mutual support between different homeless people.

Diane Sims pointed to the potential of communication technology to foster relationships through making lots of little connections in Newsome:

 *"often its the case not that there aren't things  going on but that people don't know what's going on so it's that thing of just trying to make these little connections here and there suddenly has a massive potential to help people get things done and it's a place where people will help each other to get things done"*

Technologies like texting can be used to amplify the impact of and strengthen those connections, to enhance relationships, connectors, activities and opportunities. Technologies are needed that can work on interpersonal and inter-group level easily and effectively now.

In the case studies the connection has often started face to face. Some one gets talking to their neighbour or chats to the person sitting next to them at a meeting, for example. In the case of HSMS – homeless people are introduced to the project through an encounter at a homeless support organisation. The technology amplifies connections and opportunities, and maybe bonds and opportunities lead to further opportunities. These relationships are made out of many and personal connections.   Projects that start with face to face can move beyond it and the connection is developed online. For example, when someone chats at a meeting then points someone to an online site or adds them to a list which then leads to them receiving information or making further connections of significance.

This is not always the case though. Sometimes less immediate or direct contact is of value as in the case described above of the allotment group member who felt less pressure to attend when part of a group message rather than a personal phone call and was more likely to come along as a result.  Another example of a successful project with no face to face contact is the very successful and long established reading circle in Kirklees that is made up of members, many of whom have never met, who communicate via email, post and the local digital TV services.

## 4.3.1 Connectors

Strengthening communities through the use of technologies seems to involve a mix of different kinds of connector: people, media, technology. Key individuals such as community activists or service staff can be that connector. A community worker might be the connector and connect people to local authority information by posting and responding as well as connecting to other people who are made visible through contributing to the page. Content can also serve to connect, for example, about shared interests, or useful information about events or local services. Functionality can be the connector; SMS mailing lists enable coordination of a group of people or a facebook page.

All the case study projects rely on people in key roles. These include community figures and leaders, technology enthusiasts who see the potential of technology in particular contexts, connectors and mediators within a community, service professionals who show initiative outside the usual parameters of work and people who bridge a few of these roles.

Voluntary commitment is at the heart of all community strengthening and this is no different in regard to uses of communication technology. People develop or manage uses of technology because they want to make a difference, try something out or meet a challenge. Overlaps between personal and professional commitment also came up in the case studies. Voluntary work that builds on people professional skills, or where sometimes due to social media and mobile communications a community professionals work bleeds out into their non work time.

People within agencies or community groups, or as individuals have different perceptions of how community relationships function, which determines how they see community technology and what role it is assigned. Perceptions of how community works can shift through use of technology too.

## 4.3.2 Power, inclusion and community relationships

It is important not to assume that all connections are strengthening or that they are flat or equivalent. Reasons for connection can be for destructive purposes as is the case for example with text bullying, or may be strongly shaped by relationships of power and authority which may determine whether people feel they can communicate on their own terms.

It is therefore important not to equate communication technology use with potential to strengthen community but consider the quality or nature of the relationships and activities and then consider how different kinds of communication might support that.

Furthermore it is important to attend to all the relationships and and to identify where there are none or where they are weaker or lacking. The time-banking activity initiated by United Response in Newsome works to build connections between people with mental health or learning difficulties who are supported by United Response staff and other people in the area, through the time-banking activities being open to anyone and valuing everyone's contribution.

The use of texting mailing lists supports this and enables coordination between the less formalised organisation of activities in the area and the formal working schedules of support staff, but without having built up the time-banking approach the mailing lists would hold less value.

*"I suppose my fear is that when you talk about connected communities you go to the bit that is connected already as a community because that's where you can demonstrate the value and find the thing that you are talking about. That's not the same as saying I'm going to deliberately reach out to the most marginalised people and create something for all of us so that's what we should be trying to be about "*

(Alan Williams United Response)

He goes on to explain:

*"it's not about organisations big bad and communities good, it's about how do you get the balance in things right, how do you do the things that an organisation's good at doing that way and how do you use how a community operates, that networking approach and what it's good for?"*

### 4.3.3 Relationships between agencies and communities

The time banking approach that United Response has developed with Newsome Community Forum is one of many examples of the relationships between individuals, communities and services in the scoping study. These relationships are important for the functioning of local communities but historically communication technology and media have been used to deliver information about services to communities, for example using mailing lists, posters, posting on a website or receiving information from communities through narrowly defined channels under control of the service or local authority, for complaints logging or public meetings.

Shifts are happening in the ways in which services, and in particular local authorities, make use of communication technologies and the emerging potential of social and mobile media . This includes how they might make use of community owned and defined communication spaces to respond to community needs. These could mean easier, more timely or relevant relationships with authorities and agencies. But this also leads to new questions about who owns these spaces and where does decision making lie; whose information and views count or should be favoured?

Social media tools which have participation built into their design open up possibilities for greater involvement and influence for residents and the potential for engagement and accountability from local authorities. But pages may still be owned by local authority staff who keep editorial control. Text lists owned by community managers are different to those owned by community members. But there are also some examples of shifts to engaging with community owned communication spaces. Newsome has created its own information sharing structures and uses and the area and neighbourhood coordinator for Newsome is working with her team to support local residents to engage with these resources and tools as well as to join them up with other initiatives. She is keen to look at technology as a way of increasing opportunities to engage with local decision making.

This contrasts with other areas where there are fewer or no existing initiatives and champions and where local authority neighbourhood managers and community workers are informally taking the initiatives to create lists, sites, facebook pages or where these are introduced as part of local authority initiatives.

The perception of local authorities as information provider remains although these authorities may be shifting to more open practices but there is a culture shift for local people and staff. There remains a tendency to talk about communications technology as a delivery mechanism as well as the messages imparted being established according to institutional priorities even though community workers are also working to see that these match up with community concerns or to hand over or encourage the ownership and development of spaces by communities. The challenge remains of agencies taking notice of these and responding to what is discussed on these sites.

There are also economic reasons for the renewed interest in using communication technologies as part of service delivery. Agencies are currently under pressure of cuts to local authority budgets, this translates in reduced services and very directly in reduced numbers of community development staff in local authorities. Staff are under pressure to reduce costs and work to efficiency agendas. Communications technology is a key part of this given the significantly reduced costs of communicating on line as opposed to on the phone or in person.

Alan Williams again, on introducing Thumb Print City: "*It's not just some you know something to keep people in the neighbourhood it's actually something that can be quite a cold hard headed business model as well because you can reduce coordination costs.*"

This efficiency agenda could run the risk narrowing engagement and impact. It also relies on residents to be equipped with or community groups to provide the technology needed to access these services or take part

in debate. There is a cost imperative for local authorities but that ignores the continued digital exclusion or disconnection of different groups in communities. There is also cost to the individual, albeit of different degrees depending on what kind of technology is used.

# 5. Enabling dialogue, collaboration and mutual support

New and emerging communication technologies hold potential for enabling dialogue, collaboration and mutual support;  important aspects of community strengthening.  However the potential needs to be understood and nurtured within the specific contexts of different communities and the wider context of resources and public policy and decision-making and social and economic circumstances that shape community life and access to technology.

In this scoping study there are projects that have grown out of enthusiastic individuals seeing potential and relevance, and  projects where effort and time is put into trying out technologies and demonstrating the potential or letting people discover it for their own purposes.  There are other projects which try to introduce potential and skills and local exchange across many different communities.  Within the case studies it is also possible to see how dialogue and mutual support can develop through both these routes.  This is reliant however on access to the technologies, as well as individual or local confidence in using them and on an understanding of or discovering of that potential and its relevance to individuals and communities.  In this way communication spaces can be created that are locally owned and are open to be used for people's own purposes and priorities.

While these technologies show great potential for strengthening communities and building connections, without attention to who is involved and who is not, they can serve to further disempower and exclude community members because they are not part of existing networks or cannot or choose not to access these communication spaces.  The use of communication technologies need to connect into existing means of communication and across different networks .

It is  important not to underestimate uses of powerful technology for modest everyday practices.  While seeming modest to the outsider, these practices are in themselves significant as simple ways to support emotional and social well-being through many little connections. This may be the power of a text quote or the possibility to aggregate data for community use or activism. At it most basic nurturing communication technology for community strengthening is about people having access to the technology and the freedom to explore its potential for their purposes whether that might be to coordinate a protest or a trip to the allotment.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A:

### Projects included in the scoping study

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|---|---|
| 1 sq mile /Visiting Arts | http://www.square-mile.net/ |
| Access Space | access-space.lowtech.org |
| Arc space | www.arcspacemanchester.org.uk |
| Bespoke | Bespokeproject.org |
| Bijlmer Euro | http://www.bijlmereuro.net/?page_id=25&lang=en |
| Blog Preston | Blog preston.co.uk |
| Bold Creative | http://www.boldcreative.co.uk/en/about/ |
| Bourneville Village | http://bournvillevillage.com/ |
| Brighton and Hove Community Reporters | http://bhcr.scip.org.uk/ |
| Brockley Central | http://brockleycentral.blogspot.com/ |
| BT Community Website Builder | http://www.btck.co.uk/Default.aspx |
| Building a Community Map \| WEA West Midlands Region | http://www.westmidlands.wea.org.uk/building-community-map |
| C space | http://www.cspace.org.uk/ |
| Chamberlain Forum | http://www.chamberlainforum.org/?p=1062 |
| Community Archives Wales | http://www.ourwales.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1&lang=en-GB |
| Community Media Association | http://www.commedia.org.uk/ |
| Community Reporters | http://communityreporter.co.uk/ |
| Culture Lab, University of Newcastle | http://culturelab.ncl.ac.uk/home |
| Cybermoor | http://www.cybermoor.org/ |
| Digital Birmingham (civic dashboard) | http://www.digitalbirmingham.co.uk/blog/make-it-local-the-birmingham-civic-dashboard |

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| Digital Inclusion in South Yorkshire etc.. see hannah's blog | http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&sqi=2&ved=0CCcQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amusinghannah.com%2F2011%2F01%2F27%2Fdigital-inclusion-activities-in-south-yorkshire%2F&ei=EL7oTcPnIYmn8QP7-_S8AQ&usg=AFQjCNG_tmb76BO9vCeH0dzZsVhyW9op2Q&sig2=7-A2TDi9o8R5E4AJwb315A |
| The Digital Villages Research Network | digitalvillage.org.uk |
| DOTT Cornwall | Dottcornwall.com |
| Digital World Research Centre | http://www.dwrc.surrey.ac.uk/ |
| East Dulwich Forum | http://www.eastdulwichforum.co.uk/forum/read.php?12,11 |
| The Enabling City \| The Power of the Everyday | http://enablingcity.com/about |
| Fenland Farmers | http://fenlandfarmers.wordpress.com/ |
| Foleshill fields | http://foleshillfields.org/ |
| Fruit City | http://fruitcity.co.uk/about-2/ |
| Harringay Onlie | http://www.harringayonline.com/ |
| Helix Arts \| Projects | http://www.helixarts.com/pages/home.html |
| Hi8us | http://www.hi8us.co.uk/ |
| Hitchwiki: the Hitchhiker's guide to Hitchhiking | http://hitchwiki.org/ |
| Citymined | http://citymined.net/ |
| Homeless SMS | http://homelesssms.squarespace.com/ |
| HUBS Brighton | http://www.scip.org.uk/hubs/ |
| INtouch | http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/community/intouch/intouchmobile.shtml |
| Knowle West Community Website | http://www.knowlewest.co.uk/ |
| Knowle West Media Centre | http://www.kwmc.org.uk/ |
| KITE | http://di.ncl.ac.uk/blog/kite/ |
| Lamb Bank BBC Cumbria | http://www.bbc.co.uk/cumbria/lambbank/ |
| Local Wiki | http://localwiki.org/ |
| Locality | locality.org.uk |
| Madlab | http://madlab.org.uk/about/ |
| Makerhood | connect.makerhood.com |

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| Manchester Digital DevelopmentAgency | http://www.manchesterdda.com/ |
| Mosi-Along | http://mosialong.wordpress.com/ |
| Multistory, a community arts organisation | http://www.multistory.org.uk/about/who-we-are/about-multistory/ |
| Multi Story | http://www.multi-story.org/ (Glasgow) |
| My Tunstall | http://mytunstall.co.uk/about_my_tunstall |
| MySociety | http://www.mysociety.org/about/ |
| NESTA (Make it local) | http://nestamakeitlocal.wordpress.com/ |
| NESTA neighbourhood challenge | http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/neighbourhood_challenge |
| Networked Neighbourhoods | http://networkedneighbourhoods.com/?page_id=631 |
| Newsome Grapevine blog | http://newsomegrapevine.wordpress.com/ |
| Openly Local | openlylocal.com |
| OurSociety | http://oursociety.org.uk/page/6345285:Page:934 |
| Our Wales | http://www.ourwales.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1&lang=en-GB |
| Participle | http://www.participle.net/projects/ |
| Patchwork | http://safeguarding2point0.com/2011/04/introducing-patchwork-the-safeguarding-app/ |
| Pitnpots – Stoke on Trent Political News | http://pitsnpots.co.uk/ |
| The Prayer Companion | http://www.alexwilkie.org/?p=693 |
| Precare | http://www.precare.org/Website/Precare/Le%20projet.php |
| Radioyouthology.net | Radioyouthology.net |
| Retooled | http://retooled.co.uk/ |
| RSA Connected Communities | http://www.thersa.org/projects/connected-communities |
| Say Hello | http://sayhelloblog.hellodigital.net/?request= |
| SCIP | http://www.scip.org.uk/ |
| Side Kick Studios | http://sidekickstudios.net/ |
| Social Media Manchester | http://socialmediamanchester.net/ |
| Social Media Surgeries | http://socialmediasurgery.com/ |

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| Social Reporters | http://socialreporter.com/ |
| St Albans Blog | http://stalbansblog.co.uk/about |
| Street Level Photoworks : Education and Collaboration | http://www.streetlevelphotoworks.org/streetlevel/about/about.html |
| Talk About local | talkaboutlocal.org.uk |
| Tenantspin | http://www.tenantspin.org/ |
| Thumbprint Co-operative: | http://thumbprint.coop/products/ |
| Tidy Street | http://www.tidystreet.org/index.php |
| Todmorden Egg Map | http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/projects |
| Trashwiki | http://trashwiki.org |
| Ventor Blog | Ventnorblog.com |
| Who Owns My Neighbourhood? | http://whoownsmyneighbourhood.org.uk/about |
| Young Foundation: Digital Activism | http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/Young_Foundation-_Digital_Activism.pdf |
| Young Foundation: Local 2.0 | http://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/web/building-local-activism/building-local-activism<br>http://yfweb.wordpress.com/<br>http://local2point0.wordpress.com/ |

# Case Study: Kirklees

This is one of three case studies produced as part of the Keeping in Touch project - a collaborative research project involving academics from the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England, community partner Knowle West Media Centre and independent consultant Dr Clodagh Miskelly. Keeping in Touch consisted of a scoping review of UK based projects, visits to three projects to generate interview-based case studies and a small interview-based study with people who are active in Knowle West in Bristol. The project asked two questions:

- What can we learn about people's everyday use of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?

- How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technology in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?

## Introduction

This case study looks at community-based uses of media and communications technology with different local communities in Kirklees, West Yorkshire where we were hosted for a two day visit by Diane Sims and Andrew Wilson. The projects and activities included in this case study take place mainly in four areas of Huddersfield: Newsome, Dalton, Rawthorpe and Birkby.

Diane Sims is an interactive communications officer at Kirklees Council where she supports residents, community groups and service providers with using all kinds of communication technologies. Her role includes editing the INtouch kirklees digital TV site ( http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/intouch) and developing the council's Social Media Guidelines ( http://socialmedia.kirklees.gov.uk/ ). Diane is also active in her local community, Newsome, where she applies her knowledge and experience of communications technology to support local projects and activities (http://www.newsomegrapevine.org.uk ). Diane recently has been involved in the Young Foundation Local 2.0 project which worked in partnership with Kirklees and two other local authorities "to test how hyper-local media and web 2.0 can give communities a voice" (http://yfweb.wordpress.com/about/ ). Local 2.0 shares Diane's emphasis on community technology work being focused on place rather than on a particular technology. The partnership with the Young Foundation led to a year of neighbourhood-focused work using different technologies, as well as social media surgeries, IT drop-ins and training of community reporters with People's Voice Media. These projects are discussed in more detail below.

Andrew Wilson is founder of Thumbprint Co-operative, "which uses text messages and the internet to make spaces for public participation and civic engagement" ( http://thumbprint.coop/ ) and director of Foldup, a community interest company that uses technology to tell "handmade stories" ( http://foldup.org/ ). Experienced in using mobile technology for creative participation, more recently Andrew has moved into developing software intended for use in everyday contexts by local authorities and community and other groups. He developed Thumbprint City – a tool for creating and using text message mailing lists and, with Diane Sims, 'Who Owns My Neighbourhood?', which enables people in Kirklees to find out who owns local land and to help take responsibility for land, buildings and activities in their neighbourhood ( http://whoownsmyneighbourhood.org.uk/ ).

With Andrew and Diane we met and interviewed people from different community groups and agencies who are using communications in a range of ways to strengthen local communities.

Julie Stewart Turner, Chair of Newsome Ward Community Forum
Alan Williams, Development Manager for United Response
Sarah Mitchell, Area and Neighbourhood Co-ordinator, Kirklees Council
Chris Chinnock, Community Worker, Kirklees Council
Janet, Jean and Rob, residents from Newsome involved with Growing Newsome and other local activities and have trained as community reporters.
Shawnna Clough, a member of Raw Connections, a local group who organise creative adult learning

activities.
Cheryl Smith, Area and Neighbourhood Co-ordinator, Kirklees Council
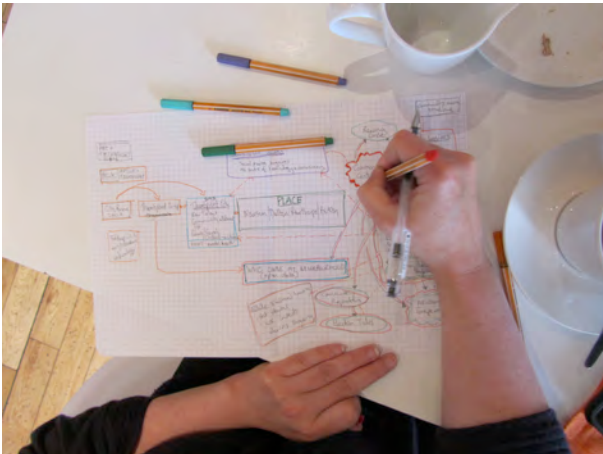


There is a good deal of interconnection or overlap between different projects. In some cases either because of different technologies being used in the same area or because of the same technology is being used in different ways in different areas. There are also a number of key individuals involved with more than one project, in particular Andrew and Diane, who mapped out some of these looser and tighter connections between people and projects and places.

## Examples of Communication technology projects in Kirklees' communities

### Websites, portals and social media

*Newsome Grapevine*                                                 (http://www.newsomegrapevine.org.uk)



Newsome Grapevine is a community portal site run by Newsome Ward Community Forum.  It is "*your way of finding out what's going on in the Newsome Ward – and sharing what you know yourself*". It links to or has feeds from other local web sites and blogs, has videos, photos and other materials about the Newsome area and works in conjunction with text message mailing lists, email mailing lists and twitter, as well as drop-in sessions where local people help each other with technology. There are tools for co-ordinating local activities such as an events calendar and a lost and found section.   The site was created in December 2010, and was first promoted in February 2011.  It was developed and is currently updated by Diane Sims who is gradually adding other editors as people show interest.   Diane also advises other local websites/bloggers on technology or formats use if they want to be a feed on the grapevine, and helps local volunteers to set up new sites to extend the network.

Newsome Grapevine is led by the activity (online or offline) of local voluntary groups.  Service providers do not take a lead in this community owned endeavour but can engage with it if they want to.

*Who Owns My Neighbourhood?*                                   (http://whoownsmyneighbourhood.org.uk)

Who Owns My Neighbourhood? is a Nesta funded open data project developed by Kirklees Council (http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/ ) and Thumbprint Co-operative (http://thumbprint.coop/ ). (www.guardian.co.uk/local-government-network/2011/oct/17/councils-delivering-public-services-digital-age)

Launched in early 2011 the site makes available council information about land ownership and can be used to find out who owns a particular piece of land.  However the project does this from a community involvement perspective by building its design around identified community concerns and needs and potential uses of the

information.

*"Land ownership is one of those things that determines what happens (and what doesn't happen) in our neighbourhoods. It can affect our lives in many ways - yet ownership itself is often invisible. You can't usually see by looking at a field, a yard, an empty building or a woodland who actually owns it. So if you'd like to use that field for a community picnic, paint a mural in that yard, find out the history of that empty building or set up a friends groups for that woodland... where do you start?*

*Who Owns My Neighbourhood? aims to give people a starting point for getting things done in their own neighbourhoods. We hope this service will make it easier for people to have conversations about their local area and for us to answer each other's questions by sharing what we know. We want people to think about what personal responsibility we are each willing to take for the place where we live, and how we might be able to help each other to look after it."* (text from the Who Owns My Neighbourhood? website)

Personal or community responsibility is designed into the site. "*This is a shared space – what grows from it is up to you*". Local residents can sign up to become a 'community contact'. They can keep in touch with other people who care about the same location and can add further information such as local history and place names.  The project is not only about opening up public data but also about opening up and sharing other kinds of knowledge about places and their actual and potential uses.

*Raw Connections*                                                 (http://www.rawconnections.org.uk )

Raw Connections is a social networking site for people living in Dalton in Huddersfield to share information about what goes on there and what they think about it.  The site was set up by Marilyn Browne, a former web development officer for Kirklees Council. The site is now maintained by Sarah Mitchell, an area and neighbourhood co-ordinator for Kirklees Council, who leads on content development and manages its use along with a small group of local people who can also edit the site.

Some local groups have a presence on there and there are links to other local sites and council information is pulled into the site using feeds.  The site has discussion spaces, twitter and Facebook feeds, photos and video of local life and activities.  There is not a great deal of activity on the site but it is linked to a Facebook page which has regular daily postings sharing activities and views on the area.

## Tools, methods and technologies to support community scale communication

*Thumbprint City*

Thumbprint City helps groups keep in touch using SMS based mailing lists.  Groups with an account can use the Thumbprint City website to send out messages, create and manage lists of mobile numbers and manage or read replies.  It costs nothing to receive messages and the sender pays the standard cost for a local text message.  There is an annual fee for the service which allows the sending out of messages.

Thumbprint City is used by a range of groups in Kirklees and further afield including community groups in Newsome and Rawthorpe, community and neighbourhood workers and with users of mental health services. It aims to be simple to use so that group members, community managers or development workers or anyone who wants to can make use of it. It has been tested and developed over the last six years.

Using text message lists allows people to build on many existing small connections between individuals. With the smaller groups it is a blurry line between what people would be doing with their mobile phone anyway, perhaps sending out many texts and making that slightly more formalised where they can send out one message to many people from the Thumbprint City site.  It is a flexible and simple tool for local communities and groups, who don't have to sign up for anything. People just give their phone number,  and join different targeted lists for different interests. It does however have to work within the constraints of 160 characters.

A range of uses of Thumbprint City are developing in community contexts including for coordination, support, creative practice, dialogue and logging information.  Small groups like Raw Talent use Thumbprint City to coordinate their activities, sending out messages about the time and place and theme of workshops, for example.

Hoot, an organisation that works with people living with mental health problems or emotional distress, uses Thumbprint City to send out messages. This includes sending out regular messages with inspirational quotes which has proved popular. Mobile phones can be quite personal technologies which we carry with us and through which we often receive personal messages. The quotes are messages that express care or support and which suggest, even though it is a mass mail out, that someone is listening or thinking about the receivers of the text.

Ordsall writers group in Salford using Thumbprint City for creative writing.  They send out a question once a week and get messages back, for example: "How do you feel about where you live and why?"

While some organisations like Ordsall Writers have used Thumbprint City to collect responses and create dialogue, this has been slower to take off than other uses.

*"the model of getting messages back, having a conversation almost, is  a little harder for organisations to grasp  […] it's easier to explain to people that you can send out information that's an easier model to get started in some contexts.  You collect some mobile numbers and you send out information. It's more interesting and more valuable to collect stuff back. Then there begin to be questions about who's listening, what comes back and who's responsible for having that conversation really and organisations find that hard."*

(Andrew Wilson)

Thumbprint City has also been used to inform local authority decision making for participatory budgeting.  One council worked with Andrew to produce a leaflet which detailed 5 options for spending £10,000 and asked local residents to text in which option they would prefer and why.

Some of the reasons why this appears to work well are to do with the immediacy and convenience of SMS and the interrupted or interrupting nature of this technology.  It is convenient as mobiles stay with you, and they draw your attention (through beeping or vibrating) to each new message.  But it can also be a less pressurised way of keeping in touch and keeping people involved as the message is a group one not an individual one and the communication is asynchronous. You don't have to respond on the spot, if at all.

*Community reporters*                                       (http://communityreporter.co.uk/ )

People's Voice Media have been working with Diane and Kirklees Council to introduce community reporting in Newsome and Dalton as part of a partnership project with the Young Foundation Local 2.0 project.  It is likely that this will lead to different outcomes in each area as Newsome has strong existing community owned structures to build on whereas in Dalton these do not exist and the work would be more service led.

The community reporting programme "gives people a platform to have a voice and challenge perceptions about their communities and the opportunity to describe their own reality."  It involves a 12 day training programme which includes communication and confidence building skills, and social media skills, editorial and media production management skills and works to create self-managed groups who can continue to engage beyond the training. (http://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk/working-with-you/community-reporter-programme )

At the end of the training, the participants reported on the local elections in May 2011. They produced a blog about the elections, interviewed people outside the polling stations and attended an election night count where they interviewed candidates and the presiding officer ( http://electiontales.wordpress.com/ ).  By learning these skills people can report on what's happening in their local area, they can produce content about what is important to them and share it and this can be pulled together on the main community reporter site so that everyone can learn from it. ( http://communityreporter.co.uk/search/node?keys=Kirklees )

We met some of the people who had participated from Newsome.  Clearly they enjoyed the training and the experience on election night. Some were thinking of what local events they might report on but one challenge seemed to be that they are people who are already very active in local events as well as wanting to report on them.

## Local authority owned project

*INtouch Kirklees*                                              (http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/intouch)

The INtouch kirklees digital TV site contains information provided by local services, local people and community organisations. Residents can add  information, make comments and ask questions.

*"This interactivity is an important part of INtouch. It allows residents to stay at home yet still learn, question and be heard."*

It has over 5000 pages of information from the council as well as other public and voluntary sector organisations and local residents. It is also available via mobile phone, including an iphone app and via game consoles.

Developed in Kirkless, INtouch has also been redeveloped as a national system called Looking Local. Diane Sims worked initially to pilot the system in 2001 to look at the value of digital TV for local information services and the service launched in 2002.  Initially content was very focused in those neighbourhoods where the pilot activity had taken place but as time has gone on it has become a Kirklees-wide service. As the system has expanded the focus on generating community content has diminished.  There is other information through which the user drills down to find more local information.  This is less immediate than the hyper local focus that there was in the pilot phase but there are significant cost issues associated with creating tailored local content.  Expanding the system makes it more cost effective or affordable for a council but the model is now more one of council broadcasting.  Diane suggested that this loss of local focus had a bigger impact than just information sharing as there had been projects that were generated out of using the system that had a wider local benefit.

One such example is the Reading Circle, which was started by a woman in her seventies who was mostly housebound.  Each month Carol chose a book and posted a form via the INtouch system so other people could use their digital TV to send back comments about the book.  She saw a way of making something social out of the service. She had never used a computer or the internet but this she could use.   The Reading Circle has developed into using email and post and web. Carol spent the last six years of her life running the circle.  After she died there was a group of people who had never met but who were all connected and who wanted to continue as a reading circle. In the end, Diane's mother took over coordinating the circle, which now has approximately 70 members who don't meet but are in touch through different modes of communication. There's a monthly publication made up of content produced by the members, including poetry and book reviews, and they have published a book of poetry. The monthly pages are available on the TV and via mobile, by email, by post and on a website. Contributions are sent via those different routes.

One important aspect of the digital TV service is that it reaches people who do not use or have access to the internet due, for example, to lack of income, interest in computers or opportunity to access computers and/or the internet. This includes full-time carers and older residents who may be isolated.  Furthermore the benefit of a TV service is that people can use it right away since TV is a familiar technology, not even thought of as a technology by some.  People may not know about the interactive service but once they are shown they can come up with their own ways of using it.

The service is extending to Nintendo Wii and Diane has conducted a pilot with people with long-term health conditions and older people who might be using the Wii because it can benefit their health.  This group have different needs and much of the current content was not relevant for those living in supported housing.

*"They don't need all the bin collection stuff, the hot topics for the average council news site are irrelevant to them because someone else deals with all that stuff.  But the specific things they need is like the people who come out to do chiropody.  People who come to them because they are largely in one place all the time and*

*we didn't really have anything about that.*"

<div align="right">(Diane Sims)</div>

All the participants in the Wii pilot were interested in using the technology to connect with other people – this was the aspect that appealed to them most.

<div align="center">Social media</div>

Additionally there is use of generic platforms like Facebook and Twitter as well as everyday uses of email, texting, phone calls, letters, community noticeboards which are used in conjunction with the more hyper-local community media and technology discussed above.

## How communication technology is strengthening communities in Kirklees

Examples of community media and technology use in Kirklees demonstrate different ways in which a combination of technology, community activity and services contribute to strengthening local communities.

*Newsome Ward Community Forum*

The various projects and technology uses connected to the Newsome area of Huddersfield and in particular its community forum show how a range of tools can be used to support different groups and networks.

The community forum was established in the late 1990s and has seen a steady growth in membership and activity over the last 6-7 years. There has been a shift in control and organisation of the forum from community workers to local residents although still keeping community worker involvement.   The forum has about 200 people on its mailing list, some of whom represent organisations. Newsome is a very large ward and the forum represents and involves some parts of the area more strongly than others.   Newsome also has a tenants' association which overlaps in some of its activities with the forum, as do local church groups and youth organisations etc.

Through the forum people and representatives of different groups can meet and share knowledge and experiences and concerns "and just try to help each other out".   The forum runs a range of projects and activities including play days, healthy eating or local food projects, and environmental projects.  The chairperson Julie Stewart Turner believes that the local community should shape what happens locally and involve services to meet their needs and agenda based on their knowledge and experience rather than external services setting the agenda and telling people how to address problems. She also sees changes as happening over time and through small steps.

"*short term funding doesn't work. It takes time to have a difference in a community because it takes time for people to have confidence that you're going to be there that it isn't just a flash in the pan and it takes time for people to challenge their own fears and build up their confidence.*"

<div align="right">(Julie Stewart Turner)</div>

The forum creates space for individuals to follow their interests and concerns and develop sub projects.  For example, a play programme has grown out of a local woman's concern about anti-social behaviour and the needs of children.  She built up a play scheme by building links with parents, people who shared her concerns as well as services and schemes that could support them.

Tailored communication tools have proved valuable for sharing information and improving co-ordination of activities both through the Newsome Grapevine website and through Thumbprint City mailing lists.  However it is still important to use the whole spectrum of communication methods from noticeboards and leaflets through to twitter to ensure that everyone has access to information in a familiar and accessible medium.

As well as introducing new communications tools, residents are supported to learn how to use information and communication technology.   ICT drop in sessions help build local skills and take place in local spaces like the scout hut.  They use 3G dongles to access the internet and people can bring their own laptop so that they learn how to use it rather than learn something more generic and then go home and find out that it is different on their own machine.  A local drop-in means learning in a familiar place and with people you know.

The drop-in sessions sometimes take place in local sheltered housing, where Diane has helped get funding for some IT equipment. This builds up relationships between some of the sheltered housing residents and local people. The drop-in has clear benefits for Newsome residents, for example enabling one resident to fulfil her course work for a leadership qualification which has helped her in her role as chairperson of the local tenants' association. Getting to grips with the basics like downloading and printing has significant impact on what people can do and how useful or relevant computers and the internet are to people. The drop-ins make use of local volunteers with digital skills to help others.

The forum chair described some of the ways that community networking reaps benefits both through technology but also importantly through face-to-face encounters. Talking to someone sitting beside you at a meeting can lead to being invited to an event or getting involved as a volunteer and that in turn leads to other activities and links. Communication technology to support local communities needs to be flexible enough to work with these kinds of informal structures.

Diane's dual role as interactive communications officer at the council and local community activist, and her skills and knowledge both of the technologies and how to work with them in different community contexts, has clearly had significant impact on how these different technologies and practices are combined in Newsome.

*Texting and Timebanking*

The use of Timebanking in combination with Thumbprint City mailing lists has served to enhance volunteering and involvement in local community activities. United Response (UR) is a national charity that supports people with learning difficulties and mental health problems principally to live in their own homes. During their 40+ year history they have moved through significant changes in policy and practice most recently with the introduction of personalisation of care.

United Response supports about 20 people directly in Huddersfield; most of whom live in Newsome. Alan Williams, the local development manager, is interested in working to enable the people supported by United Response to move from just being present in their local community to being participants.
Alan saw Timebanking as a means of achieving this. (http://www.newsometimebanking.org.uk). Timebanking is a method for cultivating voluntary and reciprocal activity in local communities.

*"Participants 'deposit' their time in the bank by giving practical help and support to others and are able to 'withdraw' their time when they need something done themselves."*          (http://www.timebanking.org/)

The emphasis on everyone having something to offer seemed appropriate to what United Response wanted to achieve, using Timebanking to not just work with marginalised individuals but with everyone in the community.

 *"if we just supported what was important to people in that neighbourhood that naturally yielded up opportunities for people that we supported to get involved"*
(Alan Williams)

United Response have funded a Newsome Ward Timebanking coordinator since 2008. Alan estimates they have a reach of about 300 contacts, some of whom may be passing on information to others. Timebanking has proved useful because it makes links between different people and activities and because it has changed perspectives on how to involve people.

*"it is about working with the most marginalised people. People who haven't got any communication and have profound learning difficulties and you have to find something that they can contribute to get people to adapt what they are doing. It's a bit like you wouldn't think twice that a building would have a ramp and an accessible toilet so it's been a shift that's happened in neighbourhoods and communities that you can see physically for people with physical difficulties but there hasn't been the corresponding shift in the way people do things to welcome people with learning difficulties."* (Alan Williams)

Timebanking has allowed for new and different types of volunteering – involving people who do not necessarily want to be part of the usual groups, one-to-one volunteering, helping out neighbours and boosted involvement locally in Newsome. Timebanking cuts across a whole range of activities, such as a

lunch club and looking after local amenities, which have involved different community members including those who are supported by United Response. This has meant local residents getting to know people supported by UR for the first time.

Thumbprint City in Newsome has been useful for United Response support workers and the people they work with in connecting with activities via Timebanking. A community does not organise itself around a rota in the way that care staff do. So it could be difficult to ensure that UR staff knew when things were happening and it was not always the right kind of support worker for a particular activity such as digging a garden. Staff can organise themselves around activities if they know what is going on. Receiving messages from, for example, the community allotment list allows them to do this more effectively. The information is timely.

SMS mailing lists have proved valuable to the Timebanking co-ordinator. Sending out a text to lots of people is less time consuming and does not single anyone out. It is less direct or pressured than calling someone to see if they can or will do something or than calling someone to make sure they have not forgotten. It leaves the choice with people without them having to explain why they chose not to get involved.

Timebanking has influenced Diane's approach to neighbourhood media work. She no longer thinks of it as one person providing something for another but as everyone having something to contribute. This also works in terms of information; everyone has information to contribute of value to local community. This way of thinking moves away from the tradition of formal information provider such as local authority and recipients of information in the community.


*Community Allotment and Growing Newsome*

The community allotment group in Newsome makes use of Timebanking and texting. (http://www.growingnewsome.org.uk). The Growing Newsome project grew out of concerns about both preserving the local character of the area and a lack of allotments in the area. Over some time people had approached the community forum because they wanted an allotment but there were none available. At the same time allotment plots had become inaccessible. In order to demonstrate a need the group worked with Information by Design (University of Hull) to design a door-to-door survey and nearly 500 responses were collected by local Timebanking members and volunteers. There was value in having local volunteers doing the door-knocking because they heard the stories behind what would be recorded in the survey. Over half the respondents were willing to help other people to grow their own food, so there was a shift of focus from individuals wanting allotments to a community growing its own food. Growing Newsome has since developed a range of activities around food growing and a community allotment.

The group uses a text mailing list mainly for getting people to meet to tend to the community allotment. It depends on the weather and what people are doing whether they go there. There is rarely a lot of notice and a key is required to open the gate so people need to coordinate. It can be time consuming to phone round, not everyone uses email, so texting works better.

*"Diane sends me texts cos I'm rubbish at remembering appointments. I have a 7 month old daughter so I'm not getting a lot of sleep and I just forget so it's useful because you could phone me at home but the chances are that I'll not answer it but I'll have my mobile phone with me so it works really well."*

(Rob)

These are, on the face of it, quite mundane and simple uses of technology to keep in touch but they can make a big difference to how individuals are able to engage with local activities. These various ways of keeping in touch strengthen community and the technology helps this precisely because it is useful but unobtrusive. Diane Sims described how one local resident started to turn up and get involved in tending the community allotment after being added to their text message mailing list. He used to have an allotment but was driven away by vandalism and has bad memories of these experiences. It was difficult for him to return to the site, so even when he got phone calls to remind him from Diane or the Timebanking coordinator, he would rarely show up. By receiving texts that go to everyone rather than a personal text or phone call takes "the pressure off him". Everyone can just choose to turn up or not.

*"In the past, either me or Rachel would phone to ask him and he'd feel bad if he couldn't make it, and the whole thing became like an obligation that he couldn't handle. But now he keeps turning up and digging (and drinking lots of tea and chatting to the other people on the site). It's a big achievement for a little text*

*message."*

<div align="right">(Diane Sims)</div>

## Local Authority led projects

Media and communication technology are also being used across Huddersfield to engage with public sector services in a range of ways. We met three community development staff from Kirklees Council and heard about different approaches in different areas; each intended to work well for a particular local context. The neighbourhood and area staff have faced staffing cuts in recent years which mean that they now have to cover much larger populations and geographical areas in their work. They are now relying more on communications technology to reach and engage with people or thinking about how they can make use of it.

### *Social Networking in Rawthorpe and Dalton*

In Rawthorpe and Dalton there are very low levels of community engagement and low perceptions of what services can deliver. It is difficult to get people to come to meetings. Sarah Mitchell, the local neighbourhood and area coordinator, recognised the need to find new ways of communicating with local residents. Marilyn Browne, a web development officer for Kirklees Council, supported Sarah and her colleagues with trying out a range of different technologies in the area. Sarah then started using Facebook, as well as a local social network site called Raw Connections, which Marilyn created based on feedback from residents and service providers.
http://www.rawconnections.org.uk )(https://www.facebook.com/rawthorpeanddalton ).

Sarah put a lot of energy into encouraging use of the Raw Connections site, supporting content production, explaining what it was and why it was useful. However, she recognised that people are not just going to come along to or find that site but that many local residents of all ages use Facebook. So she moved to a strategy of linking to the Raw Connections site through Facebook and set up a page for Rawthorpe. She can post links to content on Raw Connections on Facebook and get messages and comments about these on the Facebook page.
Material is still hosted on Raw Connections, which is better for storage and building up an archive. The immediacy of Facebook feeds can be used but without losing the material as it moves down the feed. By leading people to the Raw Connections site they might look at some of the other material there too.

Sarah tells people about the sites as she goes out and about in the area and has been able to support local residents through the Facebook page. She encouraged a woman she talked to at a meeting to join the page. When Sarah posted information about a training course for teaching assistants, this woman got in touch for more information. Subsequently she took that course as well as a confidence-building course, which were her first steps back to employment after having children. Sarah was able to build on a face-to-face encounter through the Facebook page which maintained the contact and link to information in a way that would not be possible just through occasional face-to-face contact.

Using online sites means more flexibility in managing how and when information is shared. Sarah can post to the page when it suits her or when she sees something useful as "*it only takes a minute*". There is, however, a question as to how this kind of contact and brokering could be managed with much higher traffic on the page. She would like to see other local authority services more engaged so that they could respond directly to posts, comments etc that relate to their service. At present this is not happening.

### *Thumbprint City SMS mailing lists in Birkby*

Chris Chinnock, a community worker with Kirklees Council, works with different services on a range of community engagement issues such as environment, crime, health, education and housing. He also helps local community organisations to get projects funded and works with them on other community development issues.

Working with Sarah, Chris has adopted a different approach in Birkby to that adopted in Rawthorpe. Facebook is not widely used in Birkby and few women in this predominantly South Asian community use Facebook. However, most people do use a mobile phone, so Thumbprint City mailing lists have been

introduced as a means of keeping in touch with this community.  This service has the advantage that you do not have to sign up and it is simple to use, that is, if you can use SMS on a phone then you can use Thumbprint City.   This is useful in communities where there is low engagement with local services and politics.

They did a trial of a Thumbprint City list with a small group of people and after getting good feedback rolled out its use more widely.  There are now around 50 local residents on the Birkby text message mailing lists.

They split the texting according to their roles. Sarah sends more official council information about services and Chris send out texts about community messages and events.  They use different lists, some of which are targeted around special interest groups such as a healthy living project or information about playschemes and some of which are more general.

They considered segmenting the lists by age, for example, but decided against this.  If a message is not of direct interest to its recipients, they can forward it to someone else who might be interested or they can just tell others about it.  Chris and Sarah encourage people to share the information more widely. Andrew Wilson describes it as people becoming sub-editors.

They gave a good deal of thought as to how many messages to send out and based on the feedback from the pilot they decided on two per week as they want to avoid people feeling  bombarded.

They get numbers through existing community contacts such a local community groups or from people attending local meetings.  It's "a constant battle to make sure you're getting the numbers" - and they feel at present they are still scratching the surface. They are producing posters and fliers that will go up in all the services and community buildings and slips to hand out in the community by rangers or police officers, for example.   The slips and posters have instructions about how to send a text to be added to the mailing list and also how to stop receiving messages.  They also use sign-up sheets at meetings. Although this is more time consuming, they are happy to sit and add numbers themselves from these sheets in order to boost the number of people receiving messages.

They still want to improve on getting information from people to send out and the immediacy of text can be valuable.

"*the amount of times that you walk past somewhere and you think oh something going on there and nobody knew or you find out at the last minute. But then that's why text messaging is good again isn't it because within 10 minutes you could have sent 100 text messages to people*"

(Chris Chinnock)

They need information from residents about what issues are of concern so they can follow up with texts related to these issues. They have full support from the councillors who are also providing messages to be sent out.  They use a multi-agency group meeting which has elected members and services in attendance to identify content for the next few weeks. They want this group to agree priorities such as hotspot issues and key events at each meeting.   They can also send ad hoc or emergency messages on top of this.

In future they plan to extend trialling of Thumbprint City lists in different areas and encourage community organisations to manage their own list. They also want to get a more established list of people in Birkby and get better at how information is sent out so it is more effective. Having piloted the system, Chris and Sarah are passing on how to use it to other people in their teams.

 Using SMS does have some constraints in particular with being limited to 160 characters.  Messages have to be concise and are not suited to more logistical information such as children's play activity timetables.


*Connecting to existing community based uses of communication technology in Newsome*

 Cheryl Smith is area and neighbourhood co-ordinator for Newsome and two other wards.  Each ward is very different; one has very few local resources to build on whereas Newsome has comparatively strong community resources especially for residents who are connected to the community forum.

The local neighbourhood manager can see the value of engaging with the Newsome Grapevine site and

there is a plan to support front-line workers in engaging with the site and other community owned communication tools that the Grapevine comprises.

Cheryl wants to see how she can maximise engagement with residents and services to actually interact with the tools that local residents and Diane in particular have developed or introduced in Newsome ward.  She is working with Diane to see how her staff can not only contribute to these resources but also  be more proactive in engaging with them.  They are planning a front-line worker session to help them navigate around some of these tools and start to think about taking it out to the public.  The packages in the area are well established but many people still aren't aware of what they can do for them or how they can engage especially people not involved with the community forum.

Alongside this Cheryl is working with local residents to see how their activities can connect. For example, meeting with the high school to see how young people can engage in wider community activity and how they can be brought into using these tools.

One of the key things for Cheryl is to join things up for people, for example, making connections between the job club, the IT drop-in and a scheme for getting PCs into people's home.

If community workers get to know these different tools they can make use of them in their work.

"*it becomes a culture shift, it's part of their psyche, it's part of the job description, they have a responsibility to submit certain types of information every so often, they have a responsibility to actually channel people to the right place at the right time if that's the right tool for the purpose.*"

This supplements rather than replaces the traditional community work of going out and visiting a network, attending activities or meetings and understanding the specific infrastructure within an area.


## Media and communication technologies to strengthen communities

The combination of technology choice, purpose and community practices is important for successful uses of communication technologies for community strengthening. In Kirklees this seems closely tied to the roles of key individuals who have:

- seen and continue to see and develop the potential of certain technologies for certain contexts
- work in collaborations that bring a mix of skills and local knowledge.

Successful introduction of new communication technology uses is related to sound community development practice.

Successful projects respect and are aware of variety and diversity within and between local communities.

The examples point to people needing space and time to explore and develop their own uses for a technology which fit context and local relevance and cannot be pre-determined by agencies, developers etc.

Mobile communication technologies show potential for a range of community based uses both because of the flexibility of the devices and granularity possible through using targeted mailings lists (as demonstrated by Thumbprint City). In spite of the personalised design of most communication devices, they can be used to build connections and for community strengthening, coordinating, building solidarity or empathy

There is a need for ongoing experimentation, appropriation and adaptation of technology if it is to work for people. A place-focused approach to using communication technology in communities can be effective as it pays attentions to the needs of a community. This is in contrast to a focus on a particular technology though this can also work well when time is given over to local appropriation.

**Appendix Three:**                       **CASE STUDY: HOMELESS SMS**

This is one of three case studies produced as part of the Keeping in Touch project - a collaborative research project involving academics from the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England, community partner Knowle West Media Centre and independent consultant Dr Clodagh Miskelly. Keeping in Touch consisted of a scoping review of UK based projects, visits to three projects to generate interview-based case studies and a small interview-based study with people who are active in Knowle West in Bristol. The project asked two questions:

- What can we learn about people's everyday use of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?

- How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technology in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?

## Introduction

Homeless SMS (HSMS) uses " *basic accessible mobile technology to provide the homeless with useful mobile tools. These tools will enable them to access information on relevant services in their area and to stay informed of opportunities encouraging their social and psychological re-integration with society."*

*(*http://www.homelesssms.com/the-idea/ *)*

HSMS launched in London, in 2011, trying out a prototype version with support from organisations working with homeless people including Shelter in the Storm and Connections at St Martins. (www.connection-at-stmartins.org.uk/ ).

The project has been developed by Will Brayne and Ohyoon Kwon and was co-designed with a core group of homeless users.  We interviewed Will during the prototype stage of the project. Unfortunately it was not possible during the short KIT scoping study to meet with users of the service. However, some videos of homeless people talking about how they use HSMS are available on the project blog



(http://www.homelesssms.com ).

Will Brayne is the  founder of HSMS.  Will works as a marketing and communications consultant in the technology industry with particular experience in the emerging mobile sector and runs and develops HSMS on a voluntary basis.  He is enthusiastic about the potential that lies in the growth and development of mobile communications.

"*What I love about mobile is that it's all the complexity of computing taken out and it's very very simple […] It's such a democratic device and such an intuitive device that almost everyone knows how to use the basic functionality of a phone. Ok they're maybe not going to be whizzing around on smart phones yet but every phone user can send a text message […] with every month that passes even the most untechy users become more technologically capable so we're getting an ever increasing capability of people to use the channe*l."

(Will Brayne)

Ohyoon Kwon joined the project during 2011 as part of his studies at the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering at the University of Technology in Delft, the Netherlands.  Ohyoon worked with Will and very intensively with the homeless people themselves to co-design and test the HSMS prototype through the Summer of 2011. This then formed the basis for his master's thesis.

The policy of HSMS is to work with anyone who thinks that what the project does is relevant without

considering blurred distinctions around what constitutes homelessness.

## Starting points

HSMS emerged as the result of a friend of Will's difficult experience when he attempted to help a homeless man find a bed for the night.  As he rang round different hostels he discovered how difficult it can be to access hostels and temporary housing.  It is not just a case of finding an available bed, there are also the various criteria for access.  He talked to Will about the possibility of setting up a system not unlike a hotel booking system to make this simpler.  Will looked at open source hotel booking software, working on an initial idea that all the shelters could put their empty beds on an adapted booking system and people with smart phones, such as passers by or staff in services, could help homeless people to find beds.

Will describes this as a '*text book wrong solution*'.  The starting point was wrong. He was working to develop his friend's idea without talking to any shelters, homeless people or service providers to see if this was relevant or useful.  So he began to consider if homeless people owned and used mobile phones. He talked to homeless people and discovered that most own phones, which meant that they have a piece of technology with the potential to help them access many of the things that they need.  At the same time Will had been following developments in applications of mobile technology in Africa.  He was interested in the potential for reverse innovation and bringing the learning from African contexts, where applications have grown out of need and pragmatism and limited resources, into a UK context.

Will developed these ideas with the support of a scheme run by Bethnal Green Ventures (http://bethnalgreenventures.com/ ) which supports the development of early stage social ventures. He talked to more people involved with homelessness, volunteered at a night shelter and went out with Sockmob (http://www.meetup.com/thesockmob/ ) a group who talk to homeless people on the streets and hand out socks.

As a result he gained greater understanding of the complex nature of homelessness, which goes beyond just seeking a bed for the night.  However, even navigating the procedures for accessing a bed is complex.  For example, there are people who do want to be in a shelter but cannot access one, there are people who do not want to be in shelters. There may be beds available, but mostly these are only available to people in receipt of benefits which excludes, for example, a migrant who may not have worked enough in the UK to receive benefits. Some of the more open door policy shelters such as those run by churches have less consistent opening times due to inconsistency of funds and volunteers and other resource issues. Beyond the street homeless there are the invisible homeless; people who are in temporary accommodation or sleeping on the sofas of friends and relatives.  There are many other problems they face beyond simply a bed for the night; from locating food and specific services, to maintaining contact with key workers, attending meetings, looking for training courses or simply keeping their brains active by finding things to do.

After Ohyoon joined Will on the project, HSMS's development accelerated dramatically. Ohyoon's focus was very much on the value of co-designing the service with homeless people and service providers themselves. This quickly steered the project down a more relevant path and was vital to its success.

## How HSMS works

During the research phase it became clear that SMS was probably the most suitable and simple way to support the information and communication needs of homeless people.  SMS is available on all mobile phones. Even without credit, you can receive SMS messages.

"*Frankly, SMS is the one thing we know works and because it's interruptive media it's very powerful.  When your phone beeps you reach into your pocket.  That works extremely well for this group. It's very suited to the frustrations and difficulties inherent in just being out and about, being moved on, just trying to find a place to sit […] If you send them an email they might not read it for 2 days, if you send them an SMS they've got within 10 seconds*"

(Will Brayne)

The functionality of HSMS is designed to enable users to:

- "receive regular updates on specific topics relevant to their circumstances

- receive alerts of new/temporary services in their area.

- receive notifications of activities and courses that may interest them.

- request answers to questions regarding local services.

- interact with other homeless users to foster and informal support network

- interact with specific services they use regularly or have an interest in.

- interact with non-homeless people"                    (http://www.homelesssms.com )


To achieve this HSMS uses "*the easiest channel possible*"; SMS, with Twitter.  Twitter is a powerful one-to-many platform that allows rapid sharing of information with large numbers of people. Twitter, now widely used via a web interface, was originally an SMS application. The SMS functions remain which means Twitter can be used via SMS to follow other Twitter users; to read, send and reply to tweets and also to send direct messages.

Each HSMS user is set up with a Twitter account and using this they can follow some or all of the HSMS Twitter accounts. This starts with the hsmsWELCOME account from which they are pointed to other HSMS channels and supported to use Twitter.

There are a number of accounts that can be followed according to the users' interests or relevance of the information including:

*hsmsTIPS sends tips and advice for homeless people living in London.*

*hsmsNEWS provides weather forecasts and relevant news for the homeless in London*

*hsmsFIND provides a SMS based homeless services directory in London. You can find services text your postcode then the type of service you want e.g.*@hsms FIND N1 Hostel

*hsmsENJOY provides updates on free entertainment opportunities for the homeless in London*

*hsmsDO provides updates on free outdoor activities for the homeless users in London*

*hsmsLEARN provides updates on education/training opportunities for the homeless in London*


There are also channels targeted at particular issues, for example: information about health, drugs, alcohol and immigration.

As well as these 'push' services which push out information to homeless users of HSMS, the project is also working with 'pull' features.  The account @hsmsHELP is used to send out questions from homeless people using HSMS to reach an audience (followers) who might be able to help.  The question can be read by anyone who follows hsmsHELP which might include other homeless people or people involved in services for homeless people or others who are interested or concerned. The question can be forwarded on through the Twitter networks of the people following hsmsHELP too or people who see the message can consult other people in person, check online etc.  Thus Twitter works as a kind of 'megaphone' for the query. Answers can come back to the @hsmsHELP account from which they are shared with the questioner and others through the relevant Twitter channels.  This is dependent on who follows the @hsmsHELP channel

and their ability to find answers to the questions.

There are also examples of homeless users supporting each other; for example with finding work:

*"@hellboy2009 approach ETE dprtmnt of day centrs etc 2 help wiv paid/unpaid work;dat's hw i got my unpaid job & its bn ovr a yr i've bn w"*

<div align="right">@Twinbbiecs</div>

The weather report that is sent out in the mornings has proved popular. By receiving information about that day's weather early in the morning, someone staying in a shelter can decide, for example, whether to leave their belongings in a shelter or luggage depot that day.

The hsmsENJOY channel takes into consideration that homeless people can get very bored during the day as they have little to do. This stream sends out details of free and easily accessible things to do in London. Homeless users of HSMS find this valuable:

*"t4h_tips thank you very much for karate session on saturday, also any IT stupf these days?"*

<div align="right">@Walkeran_darazu</div>

The service also sends out inspirational quotes each day to help people get through the day and theses have also proved very popular.

@hsmsCONNECTION allows Connections to communicate directly about their services and only goes to people who are registered with the organisation.

When sending out messages, care is taken not to use abbreviations and to write long form, friendly messages that everyone can understand (assuming their English & literacy is good enough).  They try to get as much information into the 140 character limit as possible and avoid sending too many messages as that could be annoying.

### Learning

HSMS trialled its prototype service during two months in Summer 2011 with over 25 people who are or have experienced homelessness. Positive outcomes included:

• One user received a message informing him of the availability of free eye-tests. He used the contact number, booked an appointment and now has glasses.

• One user tweeted about looking for odd jobs because he needed to raise funds for his visa application. He worked for few days wallpapering a house, which was offered from an individual following the service.

• One user applied to be a Big Issue dealer but decided not to when he was asked to pay £15 for the required jacket. He tweeted his frustration and one individual responded that it was a deposit rather than payment. He returned, got his jacket and is now a Big Issue dealer.

• Numerous supportive conversations between homeless users were observed including messages discouraging one user from begging.

*(*http://www.homelesssms.com/blog/2011/11/30/positive-outcomes-from-the-prototype-service-and-user-testim.html *)*

The project is reliant on having people to sort, source and send out information.  During the prototype stage, it was Ohyoon who provided the regular feeds of information and managed the flow of incoming information and queries.  Since Ohyoon completed his thesis, HSMS has been developing a partnership with Connections at St Martins who could fulfill these functions and Will continues to maintain and develop the service in a voluntary capacity.

At present the model is one of service and users.  The service sends out messages from different accounts and users choose to follow all or some of these accounts.  If a user asks a question then volunteers of HSMS can answer it, but this requires HSMS to service that query.

A second step has been to take inbound questions to the service and retweet them in the hope that other people who are following the HSMS lists will be able to answer.  This part of the service moves closer to a model of a community of support rather than a service.  In this case the mediation role might decrease.  However, to make this work requires partnering with services or involving groups concerned by homelessness.

It is an informal model and as such there is no guarantee of an answer to any particular query or of the accuracy of the answer but it is another channel through which to get support.  It would be unworkable to make it a service which validated responses because it would be slow and difficult to scale-up. The service is based on trust and

*"if you're going out of your way to respond to a query the likelihood is that you either know the answer or you're invested personally and will find out the correct response."*

(Will Brayne)

The service also provides emotional support.  For example, one rough sleeper sent tweets through a difficult night and Ohyoon was able to send encouraging messages back to show support.

*"So for me Ohyoon is representing the potential of this space; of another homeless user.  So that's really when it gets quite interesting - with these types of people and this type of situation it's a really important interaction **and it might seem silly and it might seem small but it can make an enormous difference** to someone at their lowest ebb "*

(Will Brayne)

Some homeless people may be wary of the involvement of public services and so the involvement of any services needs to be handled with extreme care. Although these are public channels, users can maintain some privacy by blocking unwanted followers from seeing their messages and preventing people sending them messages. Will sees the use of mobiles as being governed by relevance and permission.  HSMS is shaped by thinking of mobile as a channel that is permission based; that is, the user agrees for the service to contact them through that channel.  The focus is less on privacy and more on permission.  In the case of homeless users, if they receive any unwanted approaches via HSMS from, for example, social or probation services, then they might throw the phone or sim card away.  That would mean loss of any contact with that individual.

The longer term plan is to design costs out of the system. Currently the only cost is time. There are no development costs.

*"I don't think there is a business model because I've tried not to design a business, HSMS is a methodology. There's a shortage of money as it is . There are millions of people who will use cost as reason not to talk to you; a reason not to do something so as far as possible we have eliminated costs from the service design. Twitter pay for all the SMS messages and if we build this methodology as a kind of template then pretty much anyone should be able to take it, replicate it and adapt it.  It's not even open source. It's just there. It's about using channels in a different way and my dream would be that if we can make it work here, we could make the templates available to others. Then any organisation working with hard to reach groups such as young parents or ex offenders   can share relevant information by way of a structured approach through mobile."*

(Will Brayne)

When we interviewed Will he was considering next steps for the project including seeking funding to do a pilot based on the prototype.  Out of this pilot a full report would be produced and all the information would be hosted on a website so that other people can use it and adapt it easily to their context.

## Media and communication technologies to strengthen communities

Homeless SMS is an interesting example of what can be done with devices that are affordable to almost

everyone and with common platforms. It is the combination of cheap mobile phones, SMS and free use of the Twitter service that is powerful in this case and which shows clear potential in the context of service cuts, and developing trends policy in social intervention in the UK which emphasise co-production approaches to care and service delivery.

The use of a free service such as Twitter means no or minimal development costs. It brings benefits from its scale and availability but also there are risks. There is no control over functionality, changes, closure or the introduction of costs by the service.

The project demonstrates the degree of trust and collaboration and iterative development needed to make communication tools work in resource-poor and complex contexts. The project evolved from an initial well meaning idea to something that goes with the grain of a group's ways of functioning and assists with a range of their needs. It is managing to do so because of involvement **with and of** those affected and persistence alongside expertise in mobile use and interaction.

The project also highlights the difficulties of sustaining community based media and communications projects. This kind of project does not fit with a commercial model. The main cost is time and that is either time of a volunteer or needs to be resourced. The volunteer effort could be spread through a network of people but it remains to be seen how this could work over time.

# Appendix D:    Case Study: Bristol Neighbourhood Partnerships Websites

This is one of three case studies produced as part of the Keeping in Touch project - a collaborative research project involving academics from the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England, community partner Knowle West Media Centre and independent consultant Dr Clodagh Miskelly. Keeping in Touch consisted of a scoping review of UK based projects, visits to three projects to generate interview-based case studies and a small interview-based study with people who are active in Knowle West in Bristol. The project asked two questions:

• What can we learn about people's everyday use of mobile media and communication technologies that would support the aim of strengthening communities?

• How do people already use mobile media and everyday communication technology in their daily lives to 'keep in touch' with significant community networks?

## About Neighbourhood Partnership Websites

The original objective of Neighbourhood Partnership websites was to collect and promote the work of Bristol's neighbourhood forums and act as a repository of information from the forum meetings. It was also seen as a way to engage people in dialogue by setting up a communications channel with the city council, and serves to create an identity for each neighbourhood partnership.

Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) (http://www.kwmc.org.uk/ ) is working with Bristol City Council (BC) (http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ ) to develop websites for each of Bristol's 14 Neighbourhood partnerships (NP).
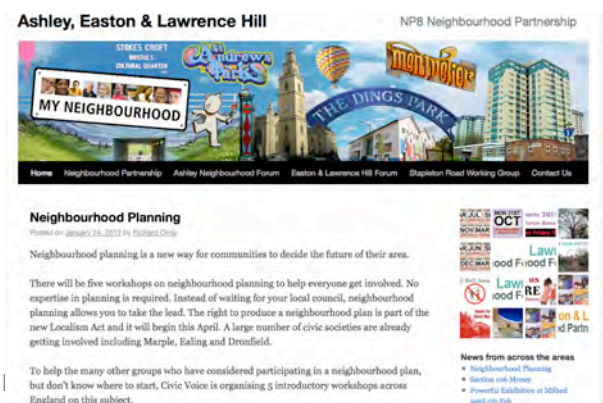
Neighbourhood Partnerships are intended to "*bring public sector decision making to a local level where local residents can influence how they would like to see their neighbourhood improve*".

(http://www.bristolpartnership.org/neighbourhood-partnerships )

They are decision-making bodies which meet regularly in the local community and are generally made up of a mix of councillors, representatives from local residents, community and voluntary groups, NHS Bristol, police and the fire services.  They make budget decisions and have influence over some public services.

Neighbourhood forums, held quarterly, are meetings where local residents can set the agenda, raise ideas and suggestions and where agreements are made about actions to address local issues. Each neighbourhood partnership hold regular meetings of public and voluntary community sector representatives to coordinate how to address issues raised and each has an Area Coordinator who supports the running of the partnership.

*"Everyone who lives and works in the Neighbourhood Partnership area can be seen as a partner, because everything the Partnership does should be for the benefit of the neighbourhood".*



KWMC have been working with BCC and the 14 neighbourhood partnerships to develop the websites. Basic word press sites were set up with a standard template and design with a set of pages to cover NP business as well as sections for links to other local authority and community websites.

KWMC staff have been training representatives of local partnerships to maintain and develop and adapt the

sites to suit their needs.  This has involved both members of the partnership from the local community and some support to council staff.

The aim is for the different groups to maintain their own sites independently but it has been hard for most of the groups to find people with expertise. This has led to the majority of technical maintenance for the websites still being carried out by the support team at KWMC. The sites have all been combined and have automatic back-up so that people feel less worried about experimenting with their sites. The groups that want more speed and control over their sites have been allowed to "break free", and the current plan is for feeds from all the sites to be collated on a BCC website as a way of seeing what news there is from all the NPs.

BCC has also been redeveloping its own website and online presence with the intention of using more social media and based on an open platform which means that data can be shared between for example the NP. sites and the BCC main web presence. (http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ )

**How the websites have been developed**

Each site was set up from with a Word Press template.  Word press (wordpress.org) is software to enable customisable self-hosted blogs. As a blog it can be fairly easily updated with basic technical skills and additionally different functionality can be added into the site through different widgets.  It is a popular format for community websites and local blogs and promoted, for example by Talk about Local, an umbrella organisation which supports community led blogging (http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk/ ). It is reasonably easy for a beginner and it is an affordable option.

Initially the sites all shared a generic URL but were differentiated by the number rather than the name of the NP.  Some of them have now changed their URLs to represent their NP differently.  For example, http://www.myneighbourhoodbristol.com/3/ which is NP3 representing Henleaze, Stoke Bishop and Westbury on Trym became http://www.activenp.co.uk/ **.**

The initial content on some of the sites is close to that on the council site with meeting times and minutes and explanations of the neighbourhood partnership structures and processes. Each site has developed differently; some have stayed close to this reporting function on the business of the NP, others have developed more with a local identity and with more variety of functionality and content.

*Support and training*

Staff from KWMC have supported community workers and local representatives in each NP to start to develop their site. This includes basic training in how to add content and to use features such as a flickr feed or calendar that can be added to the site as well as training or encouragement in blogging about the neighbourhood and local activities. Some areas already had websites so needed less support with the techniques, it was more about helping them to connect existing sites to the NP website.

The NPs are different to the traditional local areas, which can be an issue, as well as the fact that these sites are being introduced into communities rather than emerging as part of a community initiative. For the sites to be used they need to have local relevance and be used and developed by local residents, not just council staff. KWMC are therefore encouraging those involved to work where the energy is in the local community and involve people who are interested rather than staying within what might be council boundaries.

*Demonstration site*

The community website for Knowle West which is designed and maintained by KWMC has been used as a test and demonstration site for the NP sites. This community based site has no formal connection to the local authority (Knowle West is not a Neighbourhood Partnership but is part of one).  Because KWMC want this site to work well in Knowle West and be of value to and involve local residents, there is already a commitment to trying out different ways of engaging them. They are also trying different ways of creating and presenting useful and interesting content, in ways which make it possible for local residents to produce content easily for the site.

Different components tested on the KW site are being built into the NP sites, including flickr feeds (footnote), twitter feeds, RSS feeds, calendars. KWMC also pay attention to what happens away from the website and how people can feed information about what they are doing easily into that space; for example using cameraphones set up to post photos to the Flickr account for that area and that generates content that automatically goes to the website. These photographs can also be geo-tagged, so there is the potential for a photograph to be taken which automatically records its location and then can be used to identify an issue, whether illegal dumping or local wildlife.

As well as functionality the demonstration site can also help with ideas about useful content which will bring people to the site. For example including a local weather forecast, or using the site to share information about the local vegetable bag scheme.

KWMC have also paid attention to other representations of the area which are linked into the site. They have taken care to edit the wikipedia page for the area, and encourage tagging photos on flickr for Knowle West so that a broad range of images and content can be found about the area which is representative of what happens there.
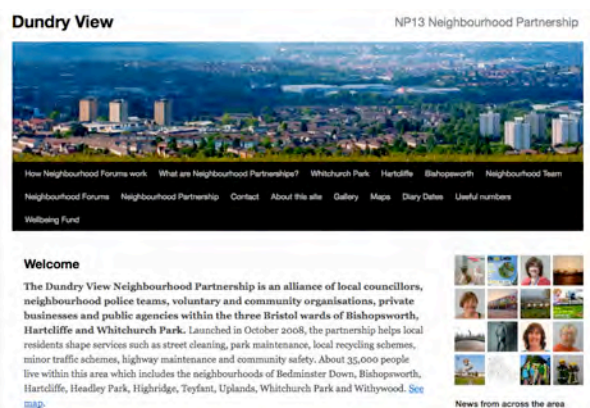
## Different areas have different needs and approaches

The websites have developed in different ways in the different neighbourhood partnerships. Some have not used the sites at all. Some started to develop the sites soon after they were set up, adding different pages and information about the business of the neighbourhood partnership but did not keep updating the sites for long. Others have developed on the template and continued to develop and update content of the site.

Some, like http://www.activenp.co.uk/ have continued to add information about the NP business including local grants, but also including local events, other complementary activities, blogs from local representatives, and contacts for key people.

Some have invested in the design of the site; keeping the basic template but, for example, customising the banner design with local images and changing the name of the site as can be seen with NP13 which has a site called http://www.dundryview.org.uk/ .



How the sites have developed is to some degree shaped by the available support and volunteer or paid time available. For example, Dundry View, which covers the Whitchurch Park, Hartcliffe, and Bishopsworth areas of Bristol is updated by local community workers, including Hartcliffe's dedicated neighourhood communications worker who brings skills and experience with digital media. The site has lots of photographs and material about what is going on locally. In other places where the site is more reliant on neighbourhood representatives who may still be learning the necessary digital skills in their own time, it is more difficult to develop an up to date and vibrant communication space.

Furthermore different NP areas have different constituencies, ranging in affluence, key issues and demographics. A representative from one NP where there is on the whole an older population, saw this as a difficulty when trying to engage people with the NP site. She was at the time the only person who blogged on the site and felt their site was underused. Partly this was a trust issue. Local residents had seen unpleasant examples of bloggers being verbally abused on, for example, the site of the Bristol Evening Post and were concerned about leaving themselves open to aggressive comments if they blogged on the site. This was the case with some people who were usually vocal and confident to talk about local issues.

In some NP areas the site has been redesigned by local residents. For example, http://www.myneighbourhoodbristol.com/2/ has been redesigned by a local web site designer. It contains occasional updates on different community events but does not have any information about the

neighbourhood partnership business.

Others use the site only to point to other pre-existing local websites which already deal with local issues and have incorporated the issues around the NP. The Greater Bedminster NP (http://www.myneighbourhoodbristol.com/10/ ) links to an existing local community site which addresses community issues, local funds and budgeting and the NP (http://www.greaterbedminster.org.uk/ ). The area also has a separate e-democracy forum site encouraging online dialogue about local democracy in addition to the information supplied on the website (http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/bemmy-forum/ ). The current plan is to find a way to amalgamate these to make one site for people to go to. The difficulty is that this will entail merging content from sites built in different ways.

One area, Bishopston, Cotham, Redland (http://www.myneighbourhoodbristol.com/6/) has opted to use a facebook page to keep people up to date with NP activities rather than updating the website. (https://www.facebook.com/groups/125686560808755/ )

## How is it working?

The sites were established in 2010 and training started. In July 2011 KWMC held a half-day event for people involved with the sites to review progress and share ideas and talk about next steps. Some local representatives, council staff and KWMC staff who have been involved with the development of the NP sites discussed their experiences so far and their ideas for taking the sites forward.

*Training*

The training worked well for some. It was noted that people unfamiliar with web development need more time to understand what they are doing. Some suggested taking more time to talk to local people about what the sites were for and how they might work in that area, then to design with them using pens and paper before getting to grips with the technology training. It was also clear that Word Press training needed to be approached in different ways to suit people with a variety of skills, backgrounds and experiences. Training seemed to work well where people had a focus or a reason for using the tools rather than starting with the tool.

*Involving others in developing and contributing to the site*

It has proved difficult to involve other people in contributing to the sites, but there were a range of ideas and approaches to addressing this.

It can be hard to explain to people why they might be involved because it is hard to explain value. Some of the local representatives were working on or keen to start a peer mentoring process as a means of engaging other people in contributing to the sites. They recognised that you need to understand a good deal yourself before being able to demonstrate the value of the sites to others. "Showing by doing" can be valuable. It can help people see the relevance, get past the fear that they might break it or feeling vulnerable to criticism for something that they post publicly.

As mentioned above there was some reticence in some areas to get involved as people feared public exposure and receiving aggressive comments on their contributions. This can be managed by moderating comments, although this means that someone has to take time and responsibility for moderation. Some ideas for addressing the lack of engagement included:

- engage young people (and others) through digital skills training so that they are using the site as a skills development tool
- involve people through their passions – so that they might blog about their passions or learn how

to use photography to other data collection tools to document their interests and share them with others.

*Reaching out*

People were unsure if the sites were being looked at. One representative said that she feels that she's blogging to herself.

It was acknowledged that:
- a range of media and communication tools are needed to involve different people in the area, including, for example, SMS mailing lists like Thumbprint City (http://thumbprintcity.com/)
- people could add to the website in different ways by sending an email or a text or a photograph and it would be useful to know the different preferred methods of communication in different areas
- adding share buttons would enable people share what they find interesting on, for example, Facebook and in turn that would raise awareness of the site through different social networks
- the sites need to be publicised more, including putting the URL on all printed material and linking to the BCC website. The BCC site now has a map showing the NP regions that link to the websites.

*Keeping up*

Some of the representatives and community workers felt they had too many things to update and that information was spread across different sites and not well linked together so it was difficult for residents to know where to find what they were looking for.  They discussed using automatic feeds from different sites as one way of easing both these difficulties.

In Knowle West they are experimenting with how website integrates with the printed newsletter, using #kwnews as a hashtag that directs people's tweets to a box on the front page of the website. They then use the website when planning the topics for the newsletter, rather than having to print and share people's emails.

In a short interview Russell, the main trainer for the project, identified some other learning from the project so far.  Interest and involvement in developing the word press websites has to be seen in the context of their introduction as part of a new approach to local democracy.  The sites on their own will not be used or make neighbourhood partnerships work, they need to be part of a wider communication initiative that connects with local people around the NPs and lets them know that the site is there, why it's useful to them and how they might use it.  This is a wider issue for the local authority and neighbourhood partnership representatives in building local communication and connections.   How people engage with, are informed about and see the value of these sites will determine **whether they lead to greater representation of the community or are a platform to enable those already with a voice to shout louder**.

## Media and communication technologies to strengthen communities

For the sites to be of value in enabling local people to have a say in how public money is spent and in decisions about their local area then they **need to connect with existing local structures and activism**. This is a challenge with any new initiative and it takes time for processes to be understood and for people to get involved. This, as Russell points out, requires good communication on the ground, using a website can support this but not substitute for it.

The different ways that the sites developed show the need for an iterative approach to developing community based communication spaces.  Having an initial template that is adaptable, where people can take ownership or do something else that suits their community better is more likely to lead to something of value to local people.

Time is needed to get to grips with both the technology itself but also the value, purpose and potential of an online space.

While there seems to be much scope for sharing information in different ways and building sites as a resource, building dialogue through forums and comment streams seems more of a challenge.

The sites and the discussion with community representatives and workers developing them show how difficult it can be to encourage community engagement and also to move beyond sharing information to creating dialogue. It's important not to underestimate both the time and support needed for people to develop confidence and skills with online tools beyond the very controlled sites such as facebook.

Websites or blogs of this kind are only as good as what happens around them.  There need to be on the ground relationships and connections before these sites have resonance or generate interest.

Wordpress sites are a relatively cheap way of potentially reaching and engaging with large numbers of people, the time and effort is as much in engaging with people to find how and why they might want to be involved, how they might like to communicate and to helping them develop media and communication skills such as blogging or using Flickr.

If the goal is to engage people as widely as possible in local decision making, then it's important not to over invest in one form of communicating but to **consider the whole local communication ecology, both digital and other communication methods**.

While the sites have developed differently to suit the needs and contexts of different areas and in some cases the preferred communication spaces, it is beyond the scope of this case study to establish what impact they may be having in enabling the work of Neighbourhood Partnerships in widening local involvement in decision-making.  This is likely to become an increasingly important issue as local authorities continue to devolve decision making while at the same time relying increasingly on cheaper digital communications in the face of significant cuts in resources.