

Interview with Alasdair Mangham, Head of Information Systems and Development, London Borough of Camden

The use of social media has exploded in recent times. Social media are certainly now high profile on the radar of ICT managers, if often for the wrong reasons - a recent survey of public sector organisations in the UK showed that 90% of public agencies restrict the use of social media by their staff and 67% even have a total ban on use. Security and concerns about potential time-wasting by staff were the main reasons given in the 2010 Socitm (www.socitm.net/insight) social media survey. Interestingly, however, a Computer Weekly survey suggests that 80% of private firms do not block access.

The London Borough of Camden has taken a very pro-active approach towards the social media to reap the benefits as an early adopter. As Alasdair Mangham says, *“we found it very useful to engage with citizens in a cost-effective way. Finally, we can listen to what they are actually saying about us”*.

Elke Loeffler: Are social media just another hype or will this transform local government?

Alasdair Mangham: In Camden social media have completely changed the way we communicate with the public. In the past, our conversation was based on the idea that we need to push our message out – either through leaflets, flyers and other paper-based information or through the website and emails. Since we have been using social media, we now engage in on-going conversations with citizens on a more-or-less permanent basis, which is very different.

Elke Loeffler: How do you use social media in Camden?

Alasdair Mangham: We use social media in a variety of ways. For example, our complaints management now uses Twitter to listen what people say about us and to feed-back quickly what we have done about complaints. So, for example, when we had a lot of snow this winter there was a man on Twitter who complained that his local park hadn't opened that day. We sent him a tweet explaining that some parks staff hadn't been able to get into work because of the snow but that we were working to get the parks opened anyway. When his park was open, we tweeted him back to tell him – and he retweeted this message to all his followers, adding that he thought this was super service and how impressed he was. Invaluable!

But we also use social media to launch campaigns. For example, last Christmas we ran a very effective 'Love Camden' campaign to urge shoppers to do their Christmas shopping in Camden. We used 'crowdsourcing' to generate ideas on how to support the campaign and won over some local celebrities to back the campaign.

Elke Loeffler: Where do you see the limits of social media?

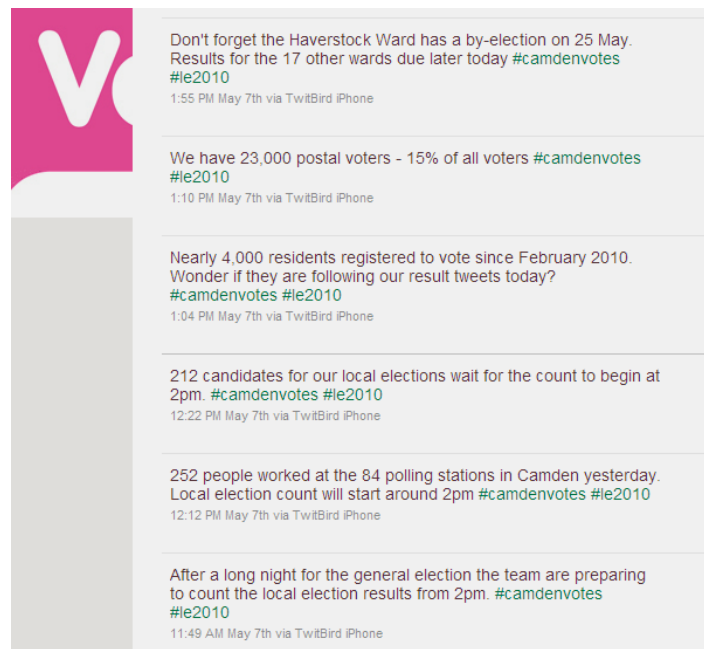
Alasdair Mangham: Of course, social media does not overcome the digital divide. Today, more than 70% of residents in Camden have access to a PC – but obviously we need to keep in touch with the other 30%, too. Actually, social media also opens up a new digital divide, since their use is very uneven in the e-literate population. For example, we know that not many 20-30 years olds use Twitter, so we need to invest in a mix of media to engage with various groups.

Elke Loeffler: How do your colleagues who are less ICT-literate embrace social media?

Alasdair Mangham: I have always been very open about the advantages and disadvantages of social media to my colleagues. It is important that they are aware that people may say uncomfortable things in the open environment of social media - and they therefore need to be trained to deal with negative feedback. We have therefore agreed a policy that all managers need to undertake a risk assessment first, by completing a check-list, before we introduce them to social media. Clearly, most also see the advantage of tapping into conversations which are already happening, rather than setting up user groups or other forms of feed-back which is always very costly and only gets the 'usual suspects' on board.

Elke Loeffler: What is your next social media project?

Alasdair Mangham: Our communications team recently won a funding award from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to work with tenants and leaseholders to explore how social media can be used to engage with them around improving the process of housing repairs. We also had a great success recently in our local elections where we used social media as part of our Camden Votes subsite to encourage people to register for voting in the local elections and keeping people up to date with the local election results as they came in. This generated a lot of positive feedback amongst other social media users.





paulstpancras @CamdenVotes Thanks for keeping me in touch - osley had a meh moment - have greatly appreciated all you do

11:25 PM May 7th via Snaptu in reply to CamdenVotes



northernheckler Camden local election results apparently on Twitter as they arrive- follow @CamdenVotes

4:54 PM May 7th via Echofon



ChrisSomeone @LadiesSaladRan awaiting Jackson news along with my MP Dobson from @CamdenVotes - she's due 4ish, he's due about now

3:33 AM May 7th via TweetDeck in reply to LadiesSaladRan

Reply Retweet



Stelly68 @CamdenVotes @camdentalking Just been and voted! Never seen the polls so busy! It was exciting! Go and make your vote count everyone #HSP

8:42 AM May 6th via TwitBird iPhone



c4marcus Great to see councils ready to Tweet results... @CamdenVotes and @IslingtonCounts among them #ge2010

11:08 PM May 6th via UberTwitter