

WISING UP TO TWITTER  
HOW ARE UK COUNCILS DOING?

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## INTRODUCTION

This brief report is the second in a series exploring the relationship of UK public authorities to the set of web tools often referred to as Web 2.0. The first examined business networking site LinkedIn and is available on the HelpGov Ltd. web site. This report looks at the amount and effectiveness of use by the UK's largest councils of social networking site Twitter. It concludes with recommendations for councils.

## BACKGROUND

Twitter is part of what is commonly called Web 2.0, a phrase in use since the mid-1990s and associated with web applications that support interactive information sharing, user-centred design, and collaboration on the world wide web. Apart from Twitter, examples include:

- web-base communities of practice, exemplified by the Local Government Improvement and Development networking web site Communities of Practice for Public Service, currently hosting over 1,500 communities and sub-communities
- blogging, or web logs (diaries) – as increasingly used by chief executives on intranets and politicians publically, but available through free software and web-hosting such as WordPress to anyone
- sites that allow data to be downloaded, re-used and mashed up (combined by users with other information). Pre-eminent in the UK public sector is the [www.data.gov.uk](http://www.data.gov.uk) web site, launched in January 2010 and already containing over 4,600 datasets
- image-sharing web sites like Flickr (photos) and YouTube (videos), already being used by some public sector organisations to communicate with a wider public
- social networking sites like Facebook where people link online with friends. Organisations can also set up their own page on Facebook.

All these examples are distinguished from more traditional web sites where users are mainly limited to the passive viewing of information provided to them.

## A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF TWITTER

Twitter is a short-message service in which messages of 140 characters or less are used to communicate with other users by text message or over the web. Users register on the Twitter web site with a name beginning “@” and can then post messages to and receive messages from other users. Users can be organisations as well as individuals. Any user can “follow” any other user, which simply means that when they send a message (a “Tweet”) the follower receives it automatically as a text message or on their computer through the Twitter web site. This also means a user can be “followed” by other users.

Much of the power of Twitter comes through the fact that a message can include links to the addresses of other web sites, photos, or videos. Messages can also be “Re-Tweeted”, which means recipients forward any incoming message to their own followers. Messages can be “tagged” with a “hash tag” as a form of simple indexing. For example, searching for

#CSR will list all the messages that people have sent about the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and chosen to tag as being about that subject.

Twitter is sometimes described colloquially as holding a conversation online or as mini-blogging.

Like many conversations, much of what flows through Twitter is both trivial and ephemeral. Much of the publicity surrounding it has concentrated on this aspect as well as the indiscretions of public figures who tweet. But it would be a major mistake to dismiss Twitter for those reasons. It played a significant part in pro-democracy protests in Iran in 2009. In the UK 1.7 million users follow the official Twitter channel for Prime Minister David Cameron's office (@Number10gov).

In total Twitter says it has 175 million registered users who send 95 million Tweets every day.

## UK COUNCILS AND TWITTER

A brief survey was carried out during November 2010 of the largest councils (ranked by population) in the four nations of the UK to establish:

1. whether they had a Twitter presence
2. the scale on which they tweeted and when they most recently tweeted
3. the number of followers they had and how many users they followed
4. why they used Twitter
5. examples of the use of Twitter.

The results are shown in the appendix and may be summarised as follows.

### Twitter presence

Fourteen of the 15 councils had an identifiable official or main Twitter presence. Some have more than one user. For example as well as a main "news" presence an individual service like libraries may be a user. The appendix shows information for what appears to be each council's main user. The unique form of government in Greater London leads to both the mayor and assembly tweeting and results are shown for both.

### Scale of use

The appendix shows the number of Tweets published by each council as shown on Twitter. The figures come with a health warning. They do not necessarily show the all-time volume of activity. Some users' Twitter pages say that Tweets before a particular date are no longer available and the appendix indicates these. The essence of Twitter is its currency. Twelve of the 14 councils had tweeted on the last day of the survey, 12 November, and the other two had tweeted within the previous two days.

### Followers and following

Councils may use Twitter for different reasons (a point discussed below) but as a means of communication they would probably wish to build up as many followers as possible. The appendix shows their number of followers, from an exceptional 100,000+ (the Mayor of

London) to just over 100. A more balanced view is given by the number of followers per thousand population.

	<u>Followers</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Followers/ '000 pop.</u>
Greater London Mayor	109139	7753600	14.08
Belfast	2271	268400	8.46
Edinburgh	3769	477700	7.89
Cardiff	2536	336200	7.54
Glasgow	2704	588500	4.59
Norfolk	1945	853400	2.28
Birmingham	2132	1028700	2.07
Kent	2679	1411100	1.90
Essex	1988	1399000	1.42
Hampshire	1503	1289400	1.17
Staffordshire	738	828700	0.89
Surrey	685	1113100	0.62
Hertfordshire	423	1095500	0.39
Greater London Assembly	902	7753600	0.12
Lancashire	101	1165800	0.09

Disallowing the exceptional case of the Mayor of London (a high profile personality surely followed for many reasons apart from people's interest in the governance of London) the "penetration" of council Twitter accounts varies enormously, from the almost 8.5 followers per thousand population for Belfast to the less than 1 follower per ten thousand for Lancashire.

Although these rates may seem low, some at least have been growing rapidly. Our report on LinkedIn (see Introduction above) was published in May 2010 and mentioned in passing the number of followers two of these councils had then:

- Birmingham had about 1300 followers, now grown in six months to nearly 2150, an increase of 64%
- Glasgow had about 2500 followers, now grown in six months to more than 3780, an increase of 50%.

Councils vary greatly in the extent to which they follow other Twitter users. At one extreme, Birmingham follows 2011 other users, at the other Lancashire follows only 19.

### Why councils use Twitter

Councils seem to be using Twitter for a variety of reasons, for example to:

1. convey basic information about the council, its activities and services
2. provide a link to their press releases
3. stimulate interest in events in their area
4. provide information about current problems, whether or not related to the council

5. seek people's views on the council
6. respond to people (not necessarily followers) who tweet the council with questions
7. retweet information about the council and areas tweeted by others
8. engage in a conversation with their followers.

### Examples of the use of Twitter

The appendix includes recent examples of Tweets by councils in the survey carried out for this report. They exemplify why councils are using Twitter and contain a number of learning points.

The Mayor of London's Tweet "*Ding ding!*" plus a web site address is about as short and simple as it can get. By itself it tells readers nothing but as part of the persona of the mayor it is very effective. There could be no one seeing that who did not ask "*What is he up to now?*" and was not tempted to click through to find out (the answer – he was launching the design for a new double-decker bus).

The London Assembly is publicising the chance for people to watch senior officials questioned live about budget cuts. On similar lines Cardiff is letting people know that they can watch a council meeting online that has just finished.

Glasgow and Staffordshire are both warning people of disruption due to road or public utility problems, Glasgow rather more effectively as they actually say in their Tweet which areas will be affected (in the Staffordshire example readers have to click through to a web site to find out).

Belfast is using Twitter to encourage people to contribute to a survey it is carrying out on living in the city.

Essex, Hampshire and Hertfordshire are all promoting the achievements of services in their areas by retweeting messages from other users – another council department, a local newspaper, and one of their district councils respectively. That arguably saves them some effort marginally but also shows they are alert to the contributions that others are making to communication in their area.

Kent and Lancashire are thanking others. Kent is thanking their followers on the back of promoting their 1000<sup>th</sup> Tweet. Lancashire is thanking two other councils for mentioning them (the technology means readers can click through and look for the references in the other councils' Tweets).

Norfolk is retweeting a message from someone else about the progress of the Tour of Britain cycle race through the county – "*Wow the #NorfolkToB has just streamed over the bridge in an amazing streak of colour and movement - whoosh indeed!*" This was one of a number of Tweets about the event where the council was clearly trying to build and contribute to an obvious sense of excitement at what was a major event locally. It exemplifies the use of the hashtag (#NorfolkToB) where anyone interested can click through within Twitter to find all the messages people have posted about the subject.

A number of messages exemplify the use of Twitter to answer or direct people who post queries or complaints online – for example, Hampshire's "*@BournemouthAC No we didn't, will give it a go, thank you*" and Belfast's "*@rogk79 - good luck with your training - only 177 days to go!*". The "@" symbol means anyone can click through to find out what comments

or questions are being responded to. They make the point that one aspect of Twitter is its ability to carry out a conversation online.

Some councils do not use Twitter as effectively as they could.

All Surrey's Tweets are in the format of the example shown, with the subject "News:", "Event:" or "Job:" followed by a single sentence or part-sentence and a web site address for further information. The council also does not retweet anyone else's messages. The overall impression is at odds with the more conversational and informal style that make Twitter effective as a means of communication.

Edinburgh also does not quite hit the mark with its "Cllr Brock welcomes Lonely Planet's praise for Edinburgh as number one city for artistic inspiration - <http://bit.ly/cMO0EV>". It's a great achievement for a great city and worth promoting. But readers are unlikely to know who Councillor Brock is or want to know. The same news could have been conveyed more effectively with a lighter tone to get over why it's number one for artistic inspiration.

### Smaller councils

The survey did not attempt to look at the use of Twitter by any other than the largest councils in the four countries of the UK. As a brief test of whether smaller councils might be behaving differently, basic statistics were compiled for a random sample of ten smaller councils across the UK.

<u>Council</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Twitter ID</u>	<u>Tweets</u>	<u>Latest Tweet</u>	<u>Followers</u>	<u>Following</u>
Renfrewshire	169,900	@RenCouncilNews	81	11/11	150	9
Charnwood	165,000	-	-	-	-	-
Bedford	158,000	@BedfordTweets	99	11/11	172	39
Flintshire	149,900	@FlintshireCC	600	12/11	431	23
Knowsley	149,400	@KnowsleyCouncil	2375	11/11	1048	639
Redcar & Cleveland	137,500	-	-	-	-	-
North Ayrshire	135,500	@North_Ayrshire	184	5/11	358	6
Gloucester City	117,300	@GloucesterCity	205	12/11	274	52
Brentwood	73,800	@Brentwood_BC	128	11/11	269	340
Christchurch *	47,000	@dorsetforyou	1383	12/11	1920	1194

\* - Christchurch has subsumed its web site and Twitter account in a county-wide partnership. Figures shown are for that wider area

As might be expected councils with smaller populations tend to be less active on Twitter than the largest councils. The seven smaller councils with their own Twitter accounts had an average of just under 390 followers compared with over 1700 for the largest councils. It is possible that Charnwood and Redcar & Cleveland do have Twitter accounts as many councils do not promote their accounts on their web sites and sometimes use Twitter names that are not easy to find.

Three smaller councils illustrate additional aspects of the use of Twitter. Christchurch has joined with other Dorset councils to have a single Dorset-wide account @dorsetforyou. Flintshire publicises its planning application notices on its account. Less positively, North Ayrshire has a number of Tweets that contain only a short-form web address, as in

<<http://fb.me/NspnfSWA>>, making it impossible to know what the message is about without clicking through to another web site (short-form addresses were devised to replace lengthy addresses that take up a lot of space and can “break” in some e-mail systems).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the high profile exception of the Mayor of London, council use of Twitter is relatively modest in scale and not all councils use Twitter. But its use is growing rapidly and it has great potential as a tool for promotion, communication and engagement. There is some interesting practice that makes good use of the strengths of Twitter but also some dull and perfunctory examples. Some councils seem to find it difficult to adapt to the informal and rapid conversational style that characterises Twitter and that its users expect. Analysis of the Tweets of other users about a council and its area has the potential to contribute to understanding of people’s perceptions about the organisation and area, and thereby to improvements that may be needed.

If they have not done so already, councils are recommended to do eight things:

1. if they do not use Twitter reach an understanding of its potential and commit to using it
2. agree, or if already using Twitter review, what they wish to achieve through that use
3. allocate resources and responsibility for maintaining and contributing to their Twitter activity, ensuring that staff with responsibility for communications are centrally involved
4. ensure their activity is appropriate – up to date, frequent, speedy where responding to questions and comments, conversational in style, re weeting other users’ Tweets where relevant, ensuring that they follow and monitor other appropriate users (for example, neighbouring councils, partners, local media, local individuals who Tweet)
5. if they think it appropriate to maintain more than one Twitter account be clear why they are doing so and agree the role of each account
6. publicise their Twitter presence widely, for example through their web site, intranet, on publications, letterheads, business cards and notice boards
7. regularly monitor and review their own use of Twitter and what their followers and other users say about them and their area, and take any necessary action arising
8. allow their own staff to access Twitter at work (evidence from elsewhere suggests that although they tweet many councils block access to Twitter. Staff regard this as a sign of lack of trust and it foregoes the chance for them to see what the council is saying through Twitter).

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APPENDIX: USE OF TWITTER BY LARGER COUNCILS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, NOVEMBER 2010

<u>Council</u>	<u>Twitter ID</u>	<u>Tweets</u>	<u>Latest Tweet</u>	<u>Followers</u>	<u>Following</u>	<u>Examples of Tweets with learning points (see text)</u>
<u>England</u>						
Greater London <i>Mayor</i>	@MayorOfLondon	1237	12/11	109139	2749	Ding ding! <a href="http://bit.ly/a6gHpJ">http://bit.ly/a6gHpJ</a> <a href="http://twitpic.com/35uear">http://twitpic.com/35uear</a>
<i>Assembly</i>	@LondonAssembly	172	12/11	902	875	Watch the <a href="#">#LondonAssembly</a> question Met Police Chief and London Development Agency about budget cuts live <a href="http://london.gov.uk/who-runs-londo...">london.gov.uk/who-runs-londo...</a>
Kent	@Kent_cc	1154	12/11	2679	1189	We've broken the 1,000 tweet mark! Thanks to all our followers for sticking with us. If you ever have any questions let us know.
Essex	@Essex_CC	469	12/11	1988	146	RT @EssexLibraries Essex County Council Libraries win contract to manage library service for Slough Borough Council <a href="#">#pling</a>
Hampshire	@hantsconnect	1017	12/11	1503	770	RT @portsmouthnews News: Adoption service is raising its profile in Hampshire: Hampshire County Council is... <a href="http://goo.gl/fb/SDHMc">http://goo.gl/fb/SDHMc</a>  <a href="#">@BournemouthAC</a> No we didn't, will give it a go, thank you.
Lancashire	@LancashireCC	165 *	12/11	101	19	Thanks for the mentions <a href="#">@prestoncouncil</a> <a href="#">@ChorleyCouncil</a>
Surrey	@SurreyCouncil	17 *	12/11	685	33	News: Line-up confirmed for debate on future of Surrey's public services <a href="http://tinyurl.com/2f9ralp">http://tinyurl.com/2f9ralp</a>
Hertfordshire	@hertscc	175 *	12/11	423	65	RT @EastHerts The council has been awarded Green Flags for its pristine parks:

<u>Council</u>	<u>Twitter ID</u>	<u>Tweets</u>	<u>Latest Tweet</u>	<u>Followers</u>	<u>Following</u>	<u>Examples of Tweets with learning points (see text)</u>
						<a href="http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=14993">www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=14993</a>
Birmingham	@BCCNewsRoom	2166	12/11	2146	2011	I posted 3 photos on Facebook in the album "Exercise Orion 2010" <a href="http://fb.me/FlivdvHI">http://fb.me/FlivdvHI</a> Reminder: Birmingham hosting major training exercise today <a href="http://birminghamnewsroom.com/?p=13846">http://birminghamnewsroom.com/?p=13846</a> <a href="#">#brum</a>
Norfolk	@NorfolkCC	427	12/11	1954	302	RT Wow the <a href="#">#NorfolkToB</a> has just streamed over the bridge in an amazing streak of colour and movement - whoosh indeed!
Staffordshire	@StaffordshireCC	1515 *	12/11	738	68	Short diversion is to be put in place while essential work is carried out: A short diversion route is due to be ... <a href="http://bit.ly/c8eTOB">http://bit.ly/c8eTOB</a>
<b><u>Scotland</u></b>						
Glasgow	@GlasgowCC	583	11/11	3784	86	Power outage in G32 and possibly G21, G33 and G34 areas could be affecting schools in these areas. More info - <a href="http://tinyurl.com/2d8mxx2">http://tinyurl.com/2d8mxx2</a>  Watch live video streaming of the event online from 7.30pm <a href="http://tinyurl.com/37nnumq">http://tinyurl.com/37nnumq</a>
Edinburgh	@Edinburgh_CC	589	10/11	2546	64	Cllr Brock welcomes Lonely Planet's praise for Edinburgh as number one city for artistic inspiration - <a href="http://bit.ly/cMO0EV">http://bit.ly/cMO0EV</a>
Fife	-	-	-	-	-	<i>An extensive search of both Twitter and the council's own web site does not identify any council Twitter accounts</i>

<u>Council</u>	<u>Twitter ID</u>	<u>Tweets</u>	<u>Latest Tweet</u>	<u>Followers</u>	<u>Following</u>	<u>Examples of Tweets with learning points (see text)</u>
<u>Wales</u>						
Cardiff	@cardiffcouncil	706	12/11	2287	158	Council meeting is over. Missed it? You can watch archived meetings here <a href="http://ow.ly/2XfES">http://ow.ly/2XfES</a>
<u>N Ireland</u>						
Belfast	@belfastcc	2076	12/11	2717	42	Live in Belfast? Fill in our quick 5 minute survey and give us your views about living in Belfast <a href="http://ow.ly/2PsWv">http://ow.ly/2PsWv</a>  @rogk79 - good luck with your training - only 177 days to go!

*Notes: Survey undertaken during week ending 12 November 2010*

*Councils are ranked by size of population served*

*\* - Older Tweets are unavailable*