



# CivicSurf Evaluation Report

## Background

Gallomanor and Norfolk County Council were awarded a grant of £14,500 to produce the CivicSurf project (originally known as Cllr2.0) to get civic leaders blogging.

The project involved the production of a film, booklet and website and a series of events to show the film.

This report is a final evaluation report to record the main activity carried out as part of the project and to indicate the results we are achieving. *Learning points are recorded in italics.* Although the funding for the project is finished, Gallomanor will continue to maintain and improve the [www.civicsurf.org.uk](http://www.civicsurf.org.uk) website. On that site we will post our learnings and updates to the successes that the project has and will have in the future.

## What happened?

### Coaching

We started in October 2007 with a group of six Norfolk County Councillors. This was later than the July start we had envisaged. *July through September are not good times to engage with Councillors.* The group of six were all started on the training programme and not unexpectedly one councillor withdrew before Christmas and a couple of others never really got beyond setting up a blog. *On reflection we realised that we launched too quickly into starting a blog and didn't spend long enough discussing the reasons for blogging.*

Coaching took place primarily online using BaseCamp as a platform. This was the best method as Cllrs in an authority as geographically large as Norfolk tend not to be together often enough to maintain momentum in a coaching project. A series of screencasts and bespoke coaching notes took the councillors through the skills required to blog. One-to-one coaching and a couple of face-to-face sessions complemented this work. *More of this would have been preferable.*

### Filming

Filming started in earnest in November and follow-up visits in January, March and April ensured we got the changing attitudes to blogging throughout the training stage of the project.

Filming was very successful. The councillors were accommodating and flexible. *It would have been helpful to have more time to allow the councillors to develop their campaigns from their blogs but the need to move on prevented us from getting a fully rounded story. We approached a number of experts to appear on the film. All but one responded positively (a conservative councillor was the only one not to respond). Inevitably there was an enormous amount of excellent material that ended up on the cutting room floor. It would have been good to have budgeted for editing the material into longer pieces for use online.* Gallomanor are working through the footage with the aim of publishing it on the CivicSurf site.

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## Booklet

The booklet was written before the film was completed for scheduling reasons. As such it was not possible to tie them together as much as we would have liked. However it does mean that the booklet was able to follow its own plan. We now have a concise guide to effective blogging for Civic Leaders. In 32 A5 pages we give readers the basic steps required to set up and start blogging along with plenty of advice on how to be an effective blogger.

## CivicSurf Blog

At the start of the project we set up a blog to record the project progress, to highlight good blogging practice and provide a repository of resources for the project and for civic leader blogging in general.

Over the project period (to 18<sup>th</sup> December 2008) there have been 83 posts, 69 comments and 4,313 views. The blog is at [www.civicsurf.org.uk](http://www.civicsurf.org.uk) and Gallomanor will continue to maintain the site for the foreseeable future.

## Norfolk Blogs

The three bloggers who kept going all consider their blogs to be successes.

Cllr Tony Tomkinson, <http://tonytomkinson.wordpress.com/>, has experienced the most obvious success with his post about gravel works at Haddiscoe. Within a week he had received nearly 400 visits and by the end of the month 40 comments. As Tony put it in the film:

*"I couldn't possibly hold a surgery and see that many people, speak to that many people or listen to that many people. And listening is what it is about."*

Jenny Chamberlin, <http://jennychamberlin.wordpress.com/>, has had less success with on-site comments, but has been emailed by people who have seen the site and wanted to get in contact. She remains a strong advocate of blogging.

Peter Harwood, <http://peterjohnharwood.wordpress.com/>, has run a number of campaigns on his site and as an opposition member he sees it as a way of publishing his residents' concerns and without his blog those issues would not get any publicity.

We wouldn't expect any of our bloggers to feature in a list of the UK's Best Bloggers but they are using the blogs to serve their constituents in ways they previously couldn't.

The three main councillor participants from Norfolk County Council gave a presentation to their fellow members on the success of the project. Key points they made were:

- Visitor numbers had been good - several hundred a month in one case. "I used to have a web site but very few people visited - this gets far more people learning what I do than I could ever meet face to face"
- The quality of the responses was good "I got ideas and feedback which helped me make a case to council officials based on evidenced views of local people"
- Local newspapers had picked up stories from the blogs "They take more notice than they have done of press releases or phone calls"
- Once the initial work was done it was easy to maintain.

## Promotion

We are still in the promotion phase of this project. With funding of only £14,500 we do not have enough budget to make a big push that is effective quickly.

The plan was to send out DVDs out in June and combine it with a big PR push. In the event a replication problem with the DVD set us back three weeks and we weren't able to send out the

DVD's in good time before the summer. The first wave went out in late August. This affected the promotion as the project was already well known amongst the web community and therefore less of a story.

However we still got and continue to get coverage for the project both off and online. The Birmingham Post carried a story, Headstar featured an article and many blogs and sites link to our site including from SOCITM web forums and the National Computing Centre newsletters.

In terms of Google Searches we are 1<sup>st</sup> for "advice for blogging councillors", 1<sup>st</sup> for "Civic Leader Blog", the Birmingham Post article is no 3 for "How to get councillors blogging", and we are 4<sup>th</sup> for "Councillor blogging advice".

The film was uploaded to YouTube and promoted on CivicSurf and other sites in August. It is in two parts. The first part has been viewed 122 times to date.

510 DVDs were sent out to CEO's of local authorities in late August. Each package included a covering letter, DVD and three booklets.

We have paid for an advertisement in Government Technology Magazine in January 2009 which should result in a few more requests for the DVD.

## Events

The documentary was premièred at the eVoice conference in May 2008 held in Norwich. An audience of approximately 40 members and officers were there.

We have no way of knowing how many other councils have shown the film to their members but we have been informed of the following:

Dundee City Council

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors

St Albans District Council – scheduled for November and postponed until 2009

Wyre Borough Council – uploaded onto Intranet

Norfolk County Council

Bristol City Council – to be scheduled

We will continue to push authorities to host events over the coming months.

## Outcomes

In addition to the events mentioned above we have received requests for the DVD's from a range of places: DIUS, DFID, DCLG, Australia, numerous European authorities, and 16 other Local Authorities. For example Hertfordshire requested 100 copies of the booklet for distribution around the Local Strategic Partnership; Cambridge City Council Sports Department have started a blog to record the activity they are doing towards 2012; two Cllrs in Wyre started as a result of seeing the film; Kirklees Council requested 70 copies of the booklet. Steven Tuck, the Senior Web Development Officer at Kirklees, emailed us to say:

*"Coincidentally I've been in a meeting this morning with a representative from our legal team regarding councillor blogs. Initially sceptical and only wanting councillors to maintain heavily regulated blogs about their personal lives, he left the meeting with a far greater understanding of the possibilities and potential of councillor blogs. He is now also in a very positive frame of mind regarding the use of council provided equipment by councillors to maintain their blogs. We are making good - and rapid - progress in enabling our councillors to engage with the online community. In bringing together a wealth of very useful information and providing real world examples civicsurf and the help we have had from you and others involved is an invaluable resource for us."*

## Feedback

We recently conducted a short survey about how useful people felt the project has been. Although the response rates are low (due to the short deadline allowed for responses) the general message is clear.

Item	Very useful	Quite Useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Don't know / Haven't seen that	Total
Project in general	64% 7	36% 4	-	-	-	11
Documentary Film	75% 9	17% 2	-	-	8% 1	12
Booklet	42% 5	50% 6			8% 1	12
Website	36% 4	36% 4	18% 2	-	9% 1	11
Average %:	54.30%	34.80%	4.30%	0.00%	6.50%	

Five out of ten respondents said they had got people in their organisation blogging as a result of the project. The number varied between one and four and averaged two. Although we would have liked to have seen more bloggers we recognise that Local Authorities often move cautiously.

## Key Learning Points

1. Timings – when dealing with councillors work out the worst possible scenario on timings and then double it. Councillors are volunteers. They volunteer for lots of things and find themselves very short of time which means things tend to move more slowly. It was always optimistic to complete this project in twelve months, but we are determined to continue the project through the website.
2. Events – we were too optimistic in our proposal about the willingness of council officers to involve their members through organising events. Although many want copies of the DVD few are willing to commit to an organised viewing.
3. Barriers to blogging:
  1. Legal considerations – council legal departments are still very cautious about what support can be given to councillors to set up a blog. Some officers report issues about the legality of councillors using council provided PCs to post articles on their blogs. Others worry about what sort of link can be provided from council pages to councillor blogs. The new DCLG White Paper includes a section on the Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity and they have just launched a consultation on it. We will be responding as the CivicSurf project in the New Year.
  2. Councillor inertia – a common barrier is the claim that Councillors think they don't have anything to write about. In general we find this incredulous considering the workload and job they do, but more specifically we have found some very inviting opportunities pass large groups of councillors by. One recent example was the Greater Manchester Area "Congestion Zone" vote. We spoke with one council affected. As a council they were very much in favour of the initiative and lamented the well-funded No campaign. However as a council running the vote they were

unable to officially support a Yes campaign. Their councillors were almost all in favour of the scheme too, but felt constrained by the neutrality of the council and were not able to campaign effectively. If ever there was situation for large numbers of councillors to be blogging that was it – an issue that affected virtually all members of your community that you couldn't use council resources to campaign on.

We intend counteracting this with ongoing examples of good blogging from councillors and through targeting councils with issues similar to the Manchester scheme where councillors are unable to campaign.

3. Councillor workload – the usual story of councillor's not having time has arisen time and time again. We will continue to post advice and tips on the CivicSurf site and build pages of resources that can save members time.

## Summary

The feedback we have had from people seeing the film or reading the booklets has been very positive. The film does inspire people to try starting a blog, the booklet is written at a level appropriate for councillors, the website is being acknowledged as a useful resource.

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