

State of the Market Survey 2017

Use of Social Media in Local Government



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In November 2017, APSE conducted an online survey, inviting local authority officers and elected members to submit feedback on the use of social media within their organisation.

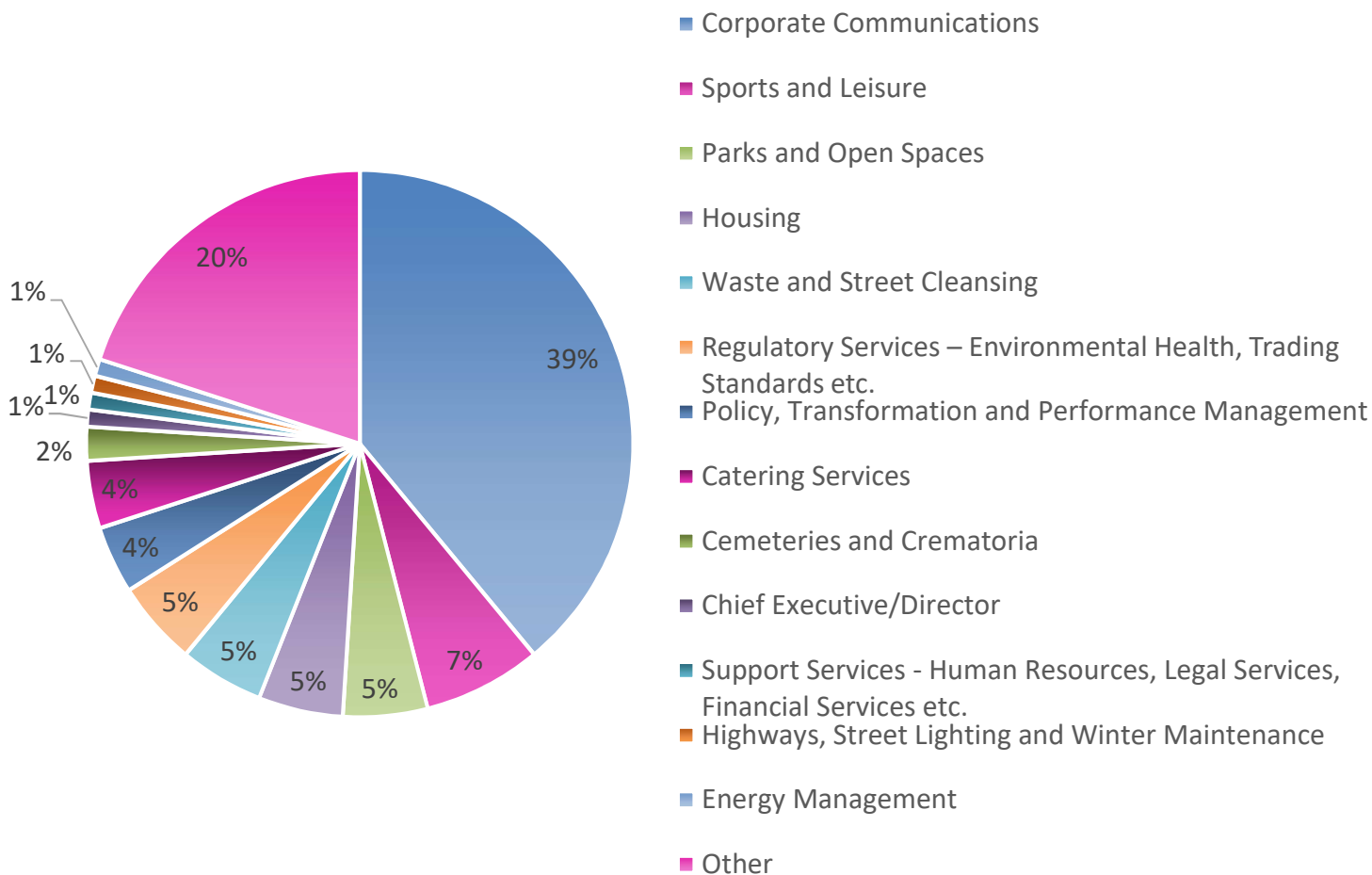
The survey was designed to identify the role, nature and impact of social media in the delivery of local authority services. It also sought to identify examples of good practise and offer a horizon scan of where local authorities are seeking to develop their work in this area.

The first such survey was completed in 2015, for which the results are summarised in [APSE Briefing 16-39 – State of the Market Survey 2015 – Use of Social Media in Local Government](#).

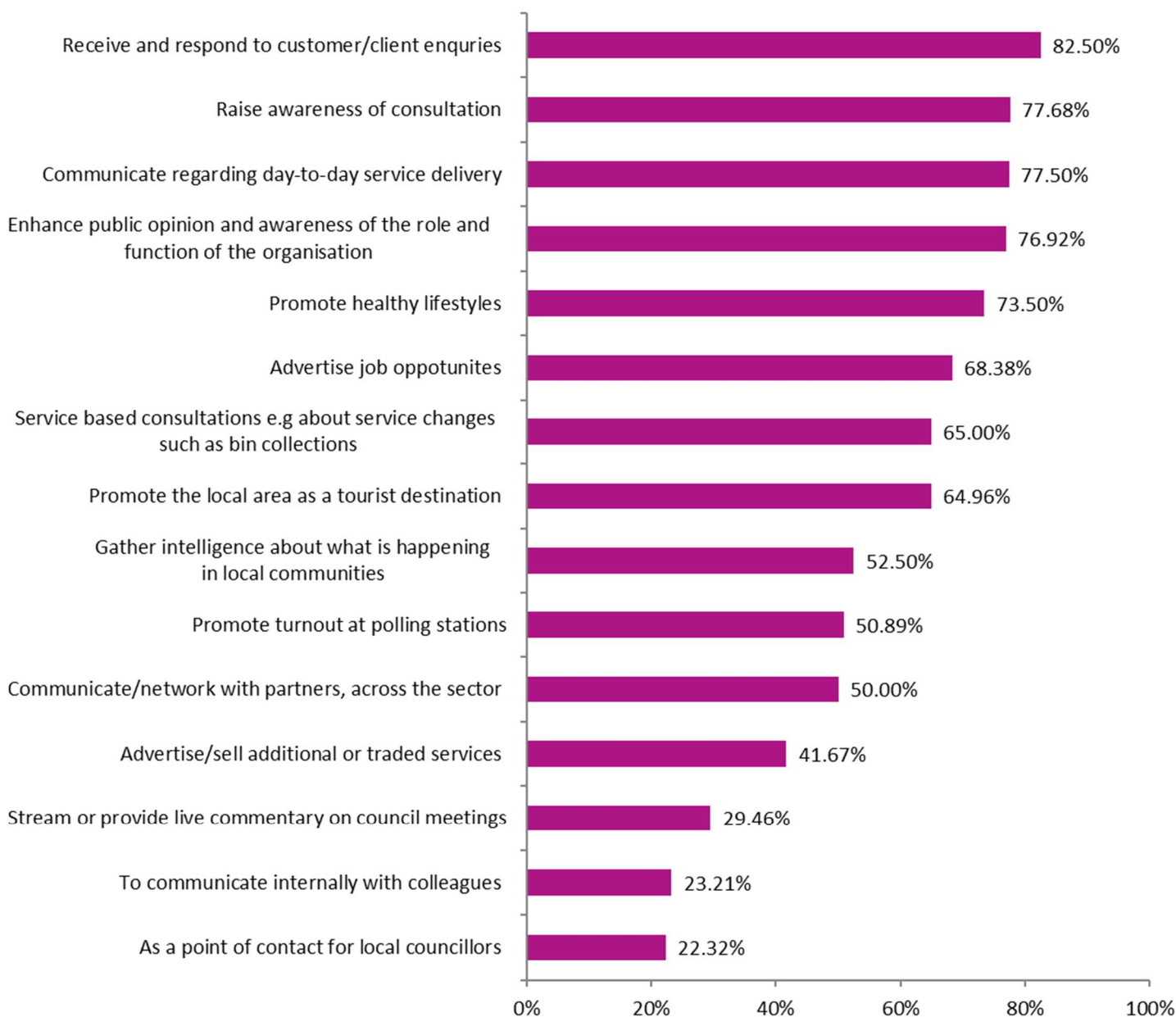
In what follows, we outline the feedback from the 2017 survey, reflecting on what’s changed since 2015.

Who?

Of those who supplied their contact information, approximately 40% (39.3%) worked within Corporate Communications. Further responses were supplied by colleagues across 14 different service areas, including some elected members. 122 responses were received in total.



How are you using Social Media? (Questions 1-4)



The use of social media in Local Government continues to be multi-faceted and varied. Reflecting on the results of the 2015 survey, what is striking about these results is that the proportion of survey respondents indicating their authority is making use of social media in each of the ways outlined in Questions 1-4 has increased across the suite of answer options. Those that saw the highest increases are noted below:

Promote turnout at polling stations (+13.26%), Advertise/sell additional or traded services (+12.64%), To communicate internally with colleagues (+12.46%), Raise awareness of consultation (+12.09%), Gather intelligence about what is happening in local communities (+10.56%), Promote the area as a local tourist destination (+10.12%), Promote healthy lifestyles (+10.06%), Advertise job opportunities (+9.24%)

Further ways in which local authorities are making use of Social Media were referred to in additional comments and included *Advertising local events, Promoting council services to businesses and Providing updates on local news and information.*

Question 4 provided respondents with the opportunity to expand on their answers and to offer one or two examples of the use of Social Media in their authority. Responses centred mostly on those areas which have seen the largest proportional increase in Questions 1-4:

"We are currently using social media to engage communities in our consultations more. Boosting content on Facebook and providing 'likes' where people are commenting, and actively encouraging them to fill in surveys. We trialled this with a transport consultation and had over 900 responses, this was benchmarked against the previous consultation, which received just over 300 responses." – Sefton Council

"LinkedIn has enabled us to target applicants for hard to recruit vacancies, and Facebook has been effective in sharing generic roles to people in and out of the District. This online presence has enabled us to grow our 'brand' as a Council and as a place to work" – Warwick District Council

"We used social media to consult and then implement our new garden waste scheme which we implemented at the beginning of 2017. We started promoting the register your interest in September 2016. Our first post gained a reach of 22,296 people, 104 shares, 95 comments and 55 likes. It proved one our successful campaigns on Social Media. It grew from then on and as the service went live we had over 5000 take-ups"

"We have a....#CECjobs hour each Tuesday to highlight jobs in the council (and our wholly owned companies)." – Cheshire East Council

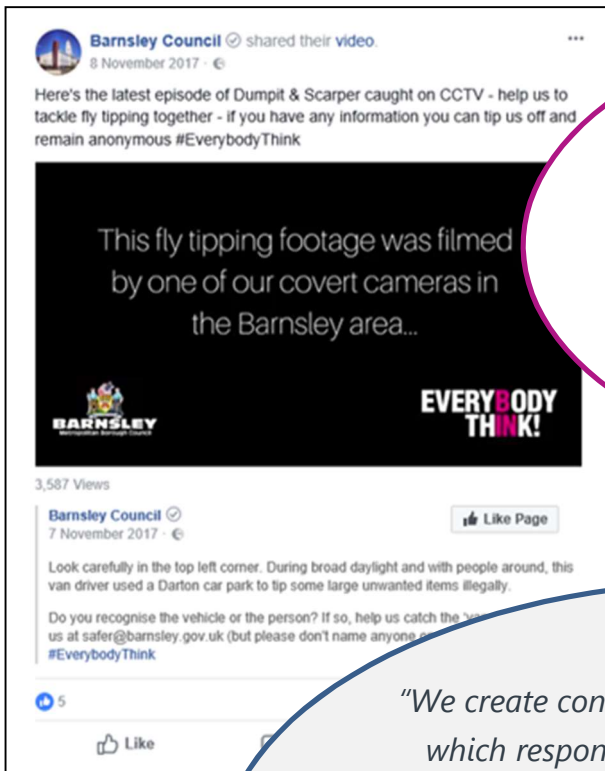


"Our twitter account has definitely helped us with attracting new businesses to sponsor with us." Sheffield City Council

"Leisure Services have developed an app which allows customers, both direct debit and pay on day, to book and pay for services. In 6 months the service has attracted 3,200 customers to download the app [from a local authority area with 140,000 residents]. The key benefits have been improved customers service in terms of booking and cancelling activities, particularly around exercise classes and reduced telephone calls to the reception staff time to deal with face to face queries."

Many other responses focused on *Communicating regarding Day-to Day Service Delivery*:

"We provide live coverage of the Planning Committee meetings...We used to just tweet the results but there was no context; all of a sudden, people's timelines would be full of random reference numbers, addresses and decisions. Now, we tweet beforehand to advise that we will be live tweeting, mentioning some of the cases being heard that evening. The committee services officer will then tweet the reference number and result with #PlanningCommittee at the end, and a link to the web page showing this application. We'll then send a final tweet advising that the summary of decisions is available. Our monthly stats show that the planning committee generates the highest number of click-throughs to our website, highlighting the importance not only of this committee, but also the way in which we are communicating the results to residents."- Warwick District Council



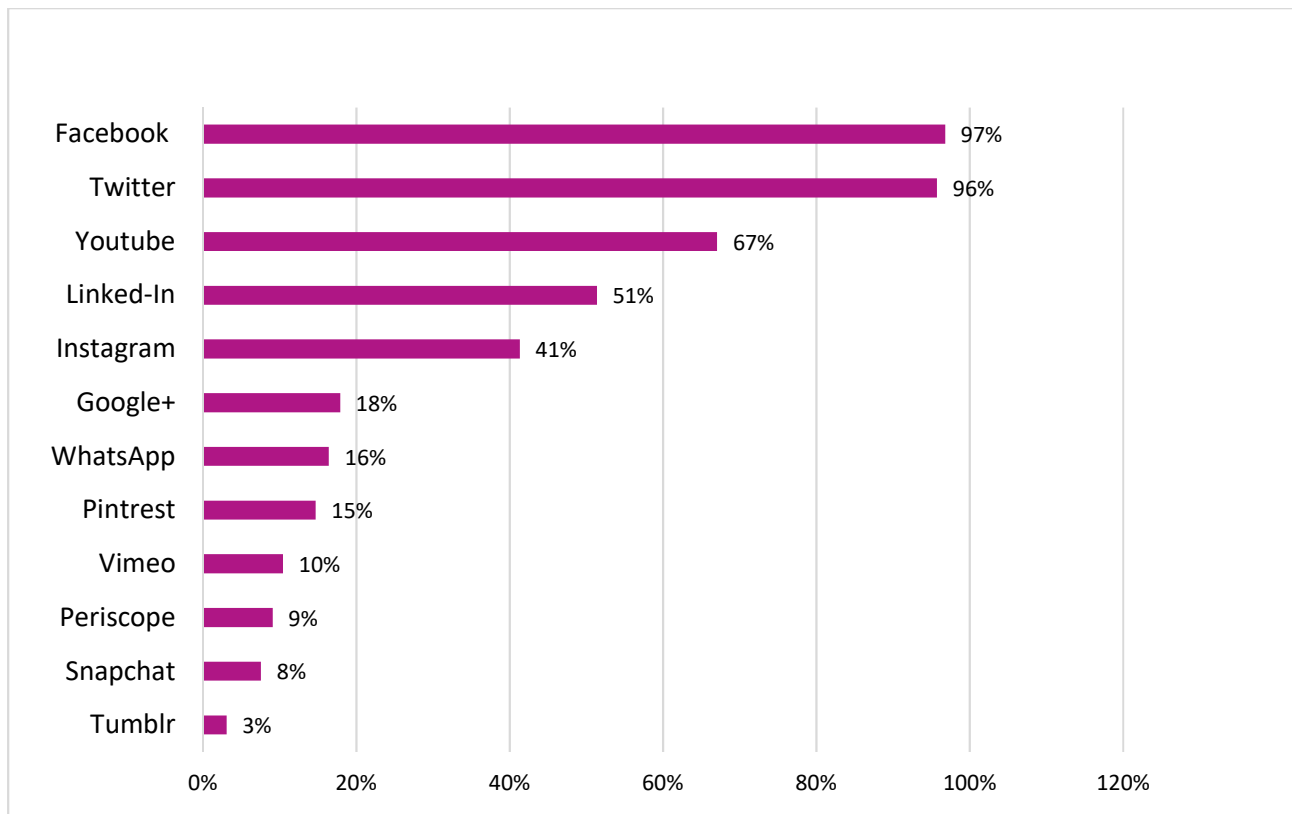
"We run an award winning flytipping campaign called #everybodythink. This has its own Facebook and Twitter account called Dumpit and Scarper which is used to post awareness raising messages and CCTV footage."- Barnsley Council

"We create content for our social media channels which responds to what the public are asking us/talking about online, and often tackles common gripes. At the moment we are focusing on roadworks. [This video](#).. [is an example] of how we're creating digital content to improve our relationships with the customer" – Kirklees Council



"We have created an online bin calendar for our residents across North East Derbyshire and Bolsover District Councils so they can see what bin is collected this week and the next few weeks" – Bolsover District Council

5. Which of the following channels are used by your organisation? Approximately how often is new content added? (Please include all forms of posts - comments, replies etc.)



	20+ times a day	11-20 times a day	1-10 times a day	Daily	Every 1-2 days	Weekly	Fortnightly	Monthly	Less than monthly
Facebook	1%	11%	37%	29%	11%	5%	1%	1%	3%
Twitter	4%	10%	44%	23%	9%	6%	1%	0%	1%
Youtube	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	24%	8%	35%	33%
Linked -In	0%	0%	0%	6%	15%	33%	9%	12%	24%
Instagram	0%	0%	0%	21%	29%	32%	4%	11%	4%
Google +	10%	0%	10%	0%	10%	20%	0%	0%	50%
WhatsApp	0%	0%	0%	40%	0%	20%	0%	0%	40%
Pinterest	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	22%	22%	44%
Vimeo	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	38%	63%
Periscope	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	17%	0%	83%
Snapchat	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	80%	0%	0%	20%
Tumblr	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%

Respondents also referred to the following channels in additional comments: *Flickr, Yammer, Trip Advisor, Workplace (Facebook at Work), Mixlr & Soundcloud, GovDelivery*

6. How are your social media channels monitored? (For example, do you check them several times daily or monitor them 24 hrs? If so, how do you monitor them through the night? Where this differs for each channel, please indicate)

In response to this question, the majority of respondents indicated that social media channels are monitored several times daily during working hours with some form of out of hours support in place, either formally or informally at least in the case of an emergency.

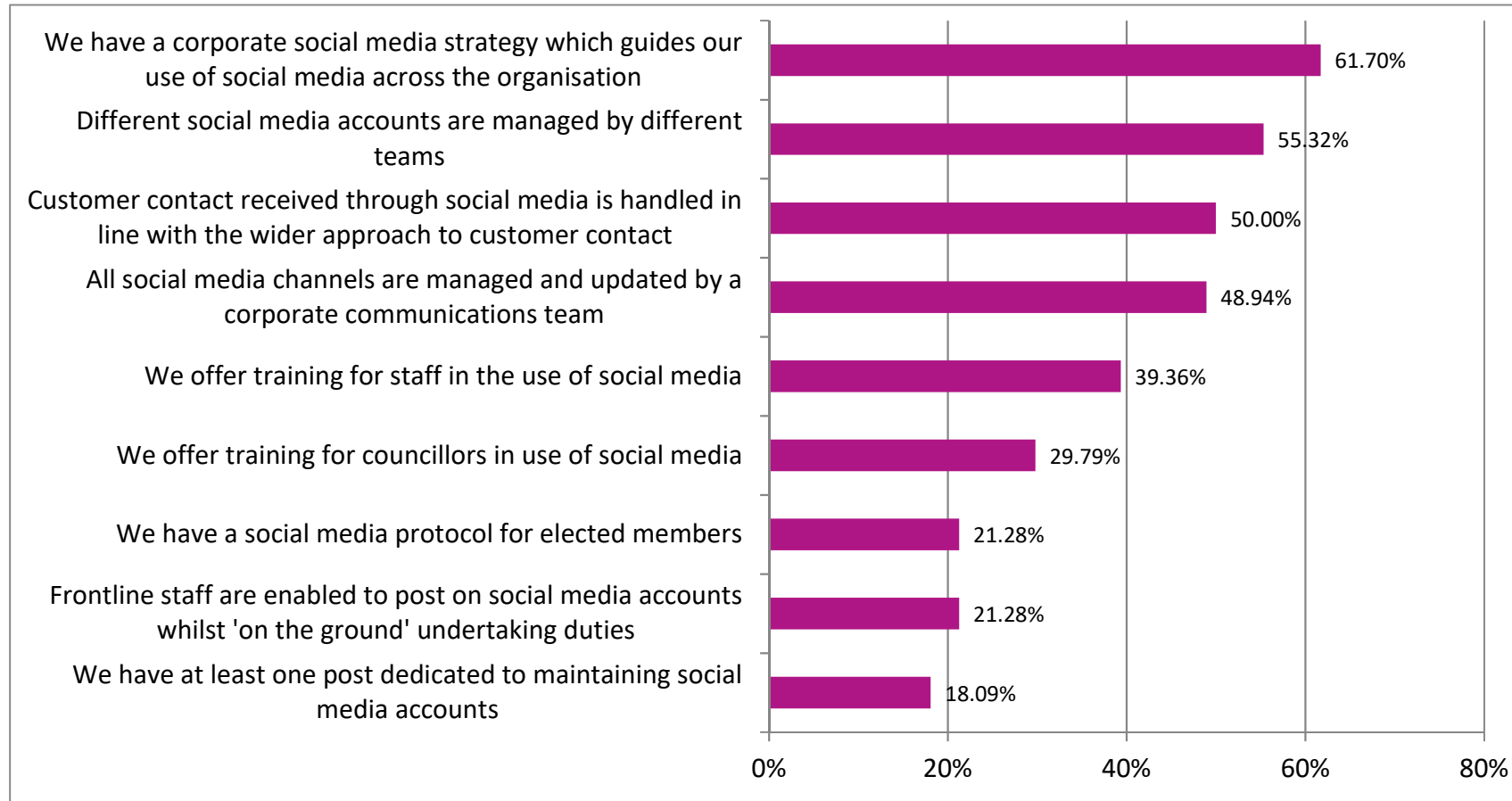
Of the 51 Respondents who indicated the hours within which the Council's Social Media channels are monitored, 16 indicated they are monitored in working hours only, 28 referred to an additional lighter touch version of monitoring in evenings, weekends and overnight and 7 indicated that arrangements are in place to monitor social media channels 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Of those who referred to a lighter touch monitoring in evenings and weekends, 10 respondents indicated that they monitor social media channels out of hours during emergencies and special circumstances only or if it is anticipated that controversial issues and concerns may come through on social media or in one case, if the Council is holding an event out of hours. Whilst five respondents indicated an on-call rota was in place with some roles having responsibility for out of hours cover, more described informal arrangements such as team members keeping an eye on activity in evenings and weekends through a smartphone device. Several have a 'statement of interactivity hours' on their accounts.

Some described the platform used to monitor social media channels with four indicating they use Hoot Suite and another two, SocialSignIn. Others simply indicated who handles their social media communications, referring in most cases to the corporate communications team. Two referred to the Council's contact centre.

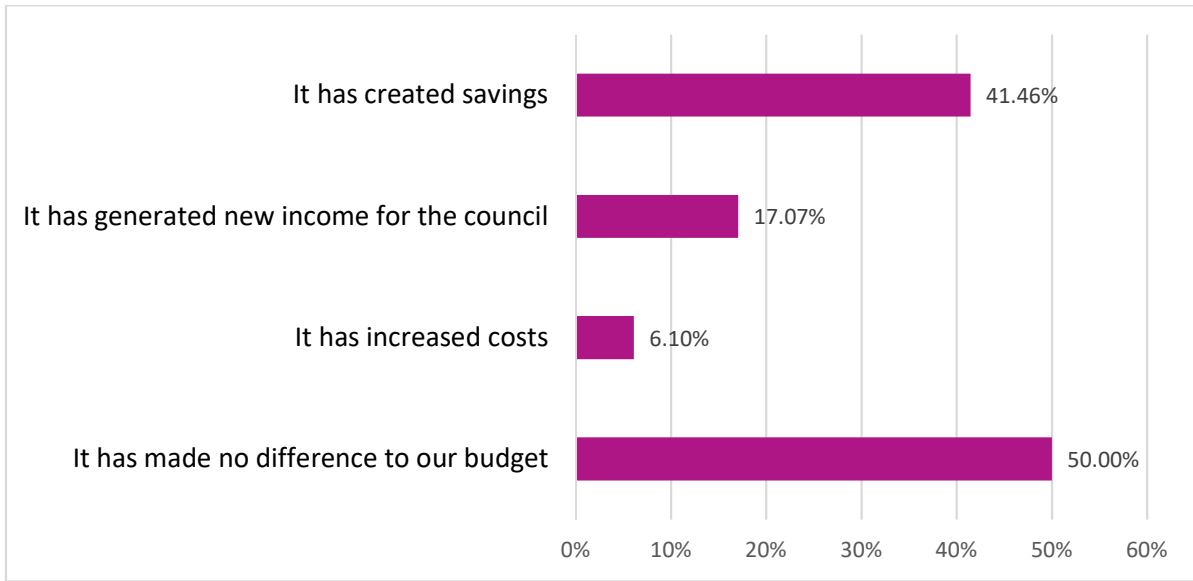
One council included in their response that they provide monthly reports regarding reach and engagement while another commented that their social media accounts are regularly subjected to an audit as part of their monitoring processes.

7. How does our organisation manage its Social Media?



In additional comments, several respondents highlighted that dedicated staff within specific teams, work with the Corporate Communications team to either publish content related to their service area or manage a channel specific to their service area, another that they 'employ a company to manage their social media'. With regards to training, one respondent indicated that staff are trained on the possible workplace impact of their personal use of social media, and another that training is made available to volunteers, supporting Parks services to enable their involvement in creating content for social media channels related to Parks.

8. How has the way you've used social media affected your budget? (Please tick all that apply)

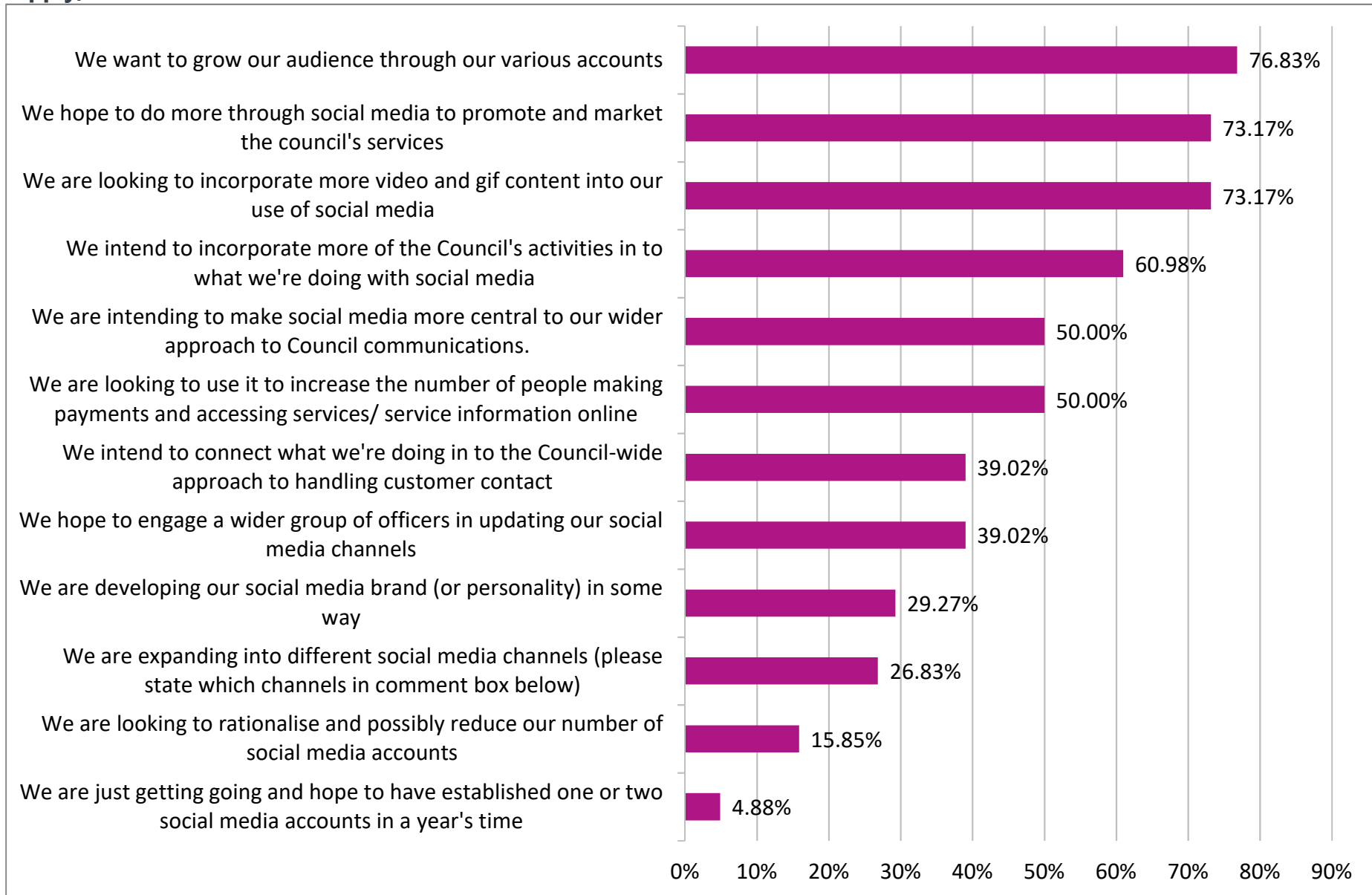


Within associated comments, the key means through which respondents identified savings through their use of social media were reduced spend on printing costs and costlier forms of advertising, particularly for recruitment and a reduction in spend on less cost-effective customer contact channels. Councils who reported that they had generated income through their use of Social Media indicated that they had done so through the promotion of paid-for services.

"Sales of services such as hanging baskets have been increased by promoting them online through Twitter and Facebook. Engagement through Facebook posts and adverts led to online sales of £13k (previously this was an exclusively offline process). Bulk waste collection is now available to book and pay for online with over 20% of bookings made online, reducing contact costs. Providing online resident parking with a virtual permit system has helped to reduce face to face contact by 17% year on year"

"Through our Social Media campaigns to encourage people to sign up to our online My Account, significant savings have been generated, particularly with regard to receiving online council tax bills"

8. How are you developing your use of social media for the future? What differences do you expect to see in a year's time? (Please tick all that apply)



When invited to expand on their answer and indicate any new channels the Council would be exploring in the year to come, a number of respondents indicated that they intend to establish an Instagram account.

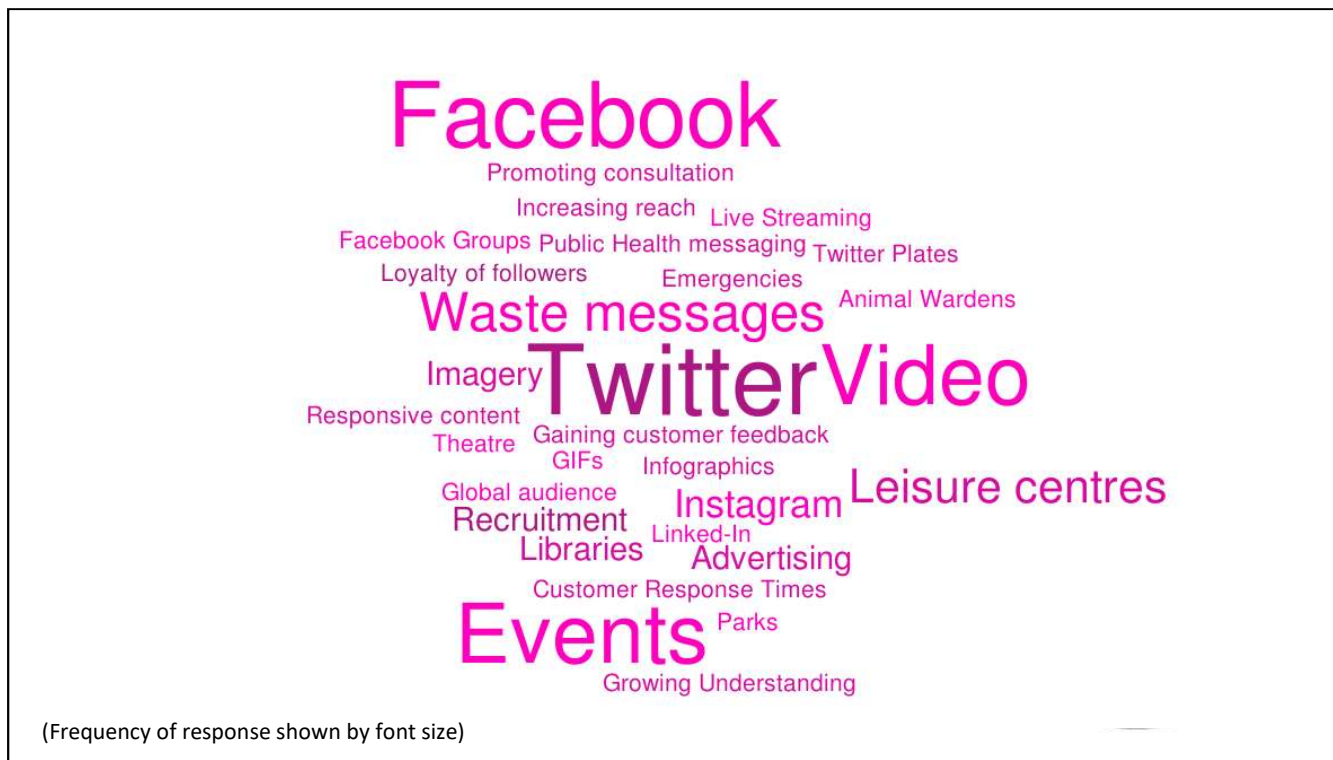
'Developing new Instagram account with intention of engaging with a younger demographic than Facebook and Twitter ... encouraging students to participate in local elections' – Aylesbury Vale District Council

Other channels referred to include Twitter, LinkedIn Snapchat and finally, YouTube, reflecting the high proportion of respondents who indicated they are looking to incorporate more video and GIF content into their use of Social Media.

'We are expanding further in to Facebook by setting up a 'News' page for the Council, as a way of us sharing more good news stories with our residents. YouTube will also see an increase in content as we aim to produce more video to tell our stories. We will use YouTube to host the video, and share it further and wider on other social media platforms' – Warwick District Council

Among other comments, one Council indicated they were looking to build a business support presence on social media and another that they would be looking to develop a consistent online brand across the Council's online communications channels in the year to come. One respondent commented that social media is now the customer contact channel of choice and that in light of this, they are developing an approach that will facilitate increased customer contact through social media and another that they are developing a business plan to help shape their services' engagement on social media.

9. Where are you excelling in the use of social media? Where are you reaching a wide audience? Are you particularly strong in delivering through a particular technology or within a particular service area? If so, please tell us more below.



As in 2015, many councils are reporting successes in their engagement through Twitter and Facebook and more generally in securing positive engagement with customers. Emerging areas of success, not prominent in the responses to this question two years ago include the use of video and promoting events, indicating that this is where Councils have invested resources and strengthened in-house expertise in recent years.

Some respondents referred to content related to particular services or subject matter. Among such responses, services referenced included parks and libraries, promoting the work of the Council’s animal wardens was also referenced and good results with content containing public-health messages were reported. However, it was content related to waste messaging and leisure activities, which was most frequently referred to indicating that these are areas of Council activity and strategic interest for which social media campaigns may be particularly effective.

10. Where have you struggled in the use of social media? Have you been able to resolve the problem? If not, how have you moved on or found an alternative?



Unequivocally, the most frequent response referred to a lack of staff time and resource to create engaging and original content for the Council’s Social Media channels. Related to this several respondents referred to difficulty sourcing content.

‘Finding the time and resources to create truly compelling original content’

‘Taking the time to schedule posts and source original content - other aspects of the job take over - end up sharing only in real time’

‘Putting the time into make sure the content is both on-message and shareable. We try not to be finger-wagging’

Several respondents referred to challenges around growing the Council’s audience on social media. One referred to difficulty attracting followers on Twitter and another, likes on Facebook. One respondent commented that they had particularly found it hard to gather a significant audience for live streaming of events.

There were some concerns around utilising specific channels; One respondent particularly referenced the difficulties caused by recent changes to Facebook user profiles where corporate accounts are unable to interact in the same way as personal accounts. Others referred to challenges arising from the fact that their social media channels are not integrated into the council CRM system and to the challenge of handling negative and critical comments. Two respondents

referred to a sense of a lack of expertise in what they're doing and another to the difficulty of keeping track of user training records and user access to accounts.

Further responses referred to challenges around staff engagement in appreciating the value and nature of communications through social media channels with one respondent communicating a sense that senior managers don't appreciate how much time is required to create compelling content. A few further comments related to the challenge of securing buy-in to the idea of releasing and trusting frontline staff to take accountability for the management of social media accounts.

APSE Comment

There is a sense in reviewing the outcomes of the 2017 survey that local authority communications through social media has become further embedded and established across the council activities since our last survey in 2015. This is seen in how the varied purposes for which social media is deployed have increased in frequency of their use across the board.

New areas of focus that have emerged since our 2015 survey appear to be recruitment campaigns, use of video, promoting events, Instagram and engaging with businesses through social media. This latter theme may reflect increased focus on engaging with businesses as customers to supports council commercialisation and income generation strategies.

An area of concern appears to be a lack of time and resources to maintain services at the level of expectation in this area. In response to a question about where colleagues within local government are struggling to deliver many referred to concerns around the sufficiency and originality of content. Naturally this may relate to reducing resources within local government but may also reflect a sweeping focus and related societal pressure on the beauty and appeal of content created for social media more broadly.

APSE will seek to continue to share good practice in this area and examples of success in utilising social media to underpin local success in delivering council services. Further we will seek to provide training that will support colleagues in developing communications through social media. The recent [APSE Communications and Social Media seminar 2018](#) featured a number of examples of interesting approaches to promoting council services online and engaging with customers effectively through online channels for which the presentations can be viewed on the APSE website. Regular training courses related to Communications and Social Media are advertised throughout the UK. Our next '[Using Social Media Effectively](#)' course is on Tuesday 2nd October in Manchester.

We will also seek to share successful posts and interesting content posted by our member authorities on our own social media channels and would encourage colleagues within local government to follow us on Twitter and on LinkedIn to catch examples of content that may inspire ideas or indeed be replicable for your own use.

Lorna Box, Principal Advisor