LGcommunications:

Guide to Social Media

May 2011

LGcommunications

Contents

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Foreword

Why social media matters for local government

The last few years have witnessed revolutionary change in the way people, businesses and organisations, in the public and private sectors as well as everyday life, communicate with one another thanks to the rise of social media. The new social networks of today effectively facilitate the sharing of content, thoughts and ideas, providing the means for rapid broadcast to vast audiences, stimulating discussion and dialogue.

The importance and power of social networks as a communication and reputation marketing tool cannot be overstated. The transparency afforded by social media means that communication strategies and policies have to adapt to ensure that teams can positively influence opinion, and act upon and change any negative communications.

The success of social media is a fact. Whether at the cutting edge of social media development or just starting out, conversations about your organisation are happening. The digital audience of today expects your involvement and the only way to influence positively or negatively the outcome of those conversations, is to be in the game.

CrowdControlHQ is proud to endorse LGcommunications' Guide to Social Media. It provides an educational introduction to social media and acts as a catalyst for the development of social media activity helping you to understand the challenges, opportunities and considerations through the use of detailed insight, shared best practice and illustrative case studies.

James Leavesley,
CEO and co-founder CrowdControlHQ,
the control centre for social media marketing and brand protection.

Introduction

The rapid take up of social media is forcing a transformation in public relations. From Twitter to Facebook and from YouTube to Flickr, social media tools are creating a new communications landscape and layers of influence. People now have a far greater role in not only reading and disseminating information but also how they share and create content for others to participate in.

In this context, local government is faced with increasing expectations to engage and be more transparent and accountable than ever before. In the face of these challenges, councils are experiencing the biggest spending cuts since the Second World War but are still being asked to do more with less.

Local authorities, therefore, need to innovate in the way they communicate with their residents. Social media provides an opportunity to do this and to listen and engage with huge numbers of people on a level that was previously not possible.

While there are of course examples, often reported in the media, of councils using social media where serious reputational mistakes have been made, the risks of not using this new technology should not outweigh the benefits.

Simply put, local government is not in a position to ignore social media. People will still use online networks to talk about your council whether you take part in the conversation or not.

The challenge for all councils is to change from the traditional broadcast model of communication to using these new tools to converse and engage communities to improve the delivery of local services.

This guide, however, is just a starting point.

Your communications team should be developing new ways to use social media to drive this medium forwards.

What is social media?

Although there is no one universal definition of social media, there is general agreement among leading new media PR practitioners that its key characteristics revolve around providing a new set of internet tools that enable shared experiences both online and in person.

For the purposes of this guide, however, the Central Office of Information (CoI) provides a useful definition:

"Social media is a term used to refer to online technologies and practices that are used to share opinions and information, promote discussion and build relationships."

The context for local government

The world is changing and the way we communicate with it has to as well.

The economic events of September 2008 triggered a financial crisis that changed the nation. All councils will have to operate in a way to deliver better for less.

Add to this pressure for greater transparency, more focus on local democracy and rising support for localism and the political and economic context for councils is rich and complex.

In terms of the wider context, the public perception trends of recent years – scepticism in the role of government, declining trust and a suspicion that additional tax has not delivered a permanent improvement in public services – means that 'Government' at

every level needs to rebuild trust, act prudently and help neighbourhoods connect.

Councils need to prepare for this new world – a poorer, more cautious, sceptical, and divided Britain.

In a digital age, social media can be a crucial tool in responding to these challenges.

3.1. How should councils respond to this new context?

Our response as local authorities has to recognise and respond to these trends. Our task should be this:

• Be clear about our story, to provide leadership and create trust in public service.

- Use social media to be relentless in our pursuit of the delivery of great service, which means being more responsive and at a cheaper cost.

- Do it seriously, with purpose, to provide communication that genuinely engages and uses public ideas to improve services, and in some cases deliver services.

- Fundamentally to help deliver the 3Rs – improved **reputation**, **retaining** good staff and winning **resources** for the authority.

Why does social media matter to local government?

First, social media usage generates a major slice of online traffic. Figures from Experian Hitwise at the start of the year show that social media sites accounted for over 12% of all UK website traffic. In this period, there were 2.4 billion visits to social networking sites solely by UK internet users. These figures, as well as the fact that the interaction occurs in real-time, illustrate the potential that social media channels have to effectively engage and collaborate with a large section of the UK public and to give them input on how their public services are run.

Secondly, Google has now confirmed that links shared on Facebook and Twitter directly impact on your website's search engine rankings. Increasingly, this is something that is becoming a key consideration for many public sector organisations who have spent much time and effort on creating effective, accessible and engaging websites.

Thirdly, mobile devices are also increasingly being used to access the internet. One in seven people have 'Smart phones' and 4 million people have downloaded mobile applications. Just under half of mobile phone users access the internet through their phones.

To illustrate further the popularity and reach of social media, one only needs to consider the following statistics:

- 24 million Facebook accounts in the UK.

- 13 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute.

- 100 million YouTube videos viewed every day.

- 13 million articles on Wikipedia.

- 4 billion photos archived on Flickr since June 2009 – more than one photo for each person on the planet.

- 110 million – number of tweets posted a day on Twitter.

- 1 billion – the number of people with Smart phones by 2013.

How can social media benefit councils?

Nesta (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) and the IDeA have outlined a number of key areas on how social media can benefit councils in their "Local by Social" pamphlet:

These can be broadly broken down into five categories:

Deliver savings: Digital media can deliver savings for councils. An analysis by The Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm) on customer service interactions lists web transaction costs at 27p on average, compared with phone transactions of £3.22, and face-to-face transactions of £6.56. Councils that find ways to shift their business online quickly will save money.

Increase communications reach:
Social media tools can broadcast information to huge numbers of people almost instantaneously. Making public information available via social media channels can increase reach with very little extra cost.

Boost democratic engagement:
Social media tools provide opportunities to engage people in elections and government activities; they also offer the possibility of involving citizens at the heart of the democratic process, giving citizens a say in the detail of local government decision-making.

Increase civic partnerships: Social media represents a measurable way for councils to connect residents and build communities in their local areas.

Boost staff collaboration and communication: Social media can help improve communications among staff. Within councils, discussion forums can provide new ways to share information and retain knowledge.

Obstacles and barriers:

A report last year also by Socitm revealed that most local authorities block social media sites. The report suggested that 90% in some way restrict access and around two-thirds revoke access completely. A year on, some authorities still have a total block on access.

While a survey by Communicate magazine says that over 80% of PR practioners say that social media is important, and 70% say they regularly use it, but only 14% say that they have "excellent" social media skills.

Moreover, research by Westminster City Council, found that most social media channels about the council never

reached more than 5% of its resident population. Many scarcely got over 1%. And while Facebook was widely used – by 38% of Westminster residents – the impact on the council's reputation was limited. The council found that big numbers were still in traditional print and broadcast journalism.

Other facts to consider:

- Most blogs lie unread.

- 10% of Twitter users generate 90% of the content.

- Around 70% of people aged 65 or over in the UK have never been online and do not have access to a computer.

- The Local Government Information Unit has pointed out that e-democracy can be "unfocused, unaccountable and inconsistent".

- It's not a miracle cure and won't deliver free communications.

However, this doesn't mean you should ignore social media. Instead, it means that you have to work harder to understand which niche groups would benefit from communication via social media.

Critically, it also needs to be part of a wider communications strategy and not as an end in itself. For examples of successful use of social media see the case studies at the end of this guide.

Areas that may need addressing

Once again, according to the Nesta/ IDeA Local by Social report:

Reputation/Issues management: The speed of social media can mean news travelling faster and further than before. A rumour about your organisation on Facebook can go round the world before your press office is even aware.

Technology: IT issues around ownership, procurement and management can get in the way of communications teams leading on social media.

Tone of voice: The instant and personal nature of social media requires staff to add their voices to the conversation and to connect with residents rather than hiding behind a 'corporate personality'.

Managing usernames and passwords: With a growing number of accounts and users requiring access to multiple websites the management of usernames and passwords can quickly spiral out of control. Sharing passwords and a lack of audit trail has to be managed.

Freedom to experiment: Social media requires PR practioners to experiment and try new things. But in an environment where budgets are being scaled back this is not always possible. Equally, while the web can deliver cost savings it also involves new skills and new processes and there are no guarantees that the results will match expectations.

Issues to consider before putting social media into practice

Your starting point should be based on these six key principles:

GOVERNANCE: You need to have clear objectives, strategy and governance elements in place at the outset to measure success and offset any potential problems.

CHANGE: Accept that councils have to continually adapt to change. Communication channels and audience behaviours will change and so councils must respond, adapt and evolve. The era of the five year communication strategy, published and put on the shelf is over.

ENGAGEMENT: Not engaging is not acceptable, which means conversing, feeding back and demonstrating action. Consultation and engagement teams should be a core part of corporate communications.

HONESTY: The proposition you claim to be true has to be verifiable, which means building a network of advocates and allies.

BUY IN: Your council's political leadership and senior officers will need to support your organisation's use of social media and not shy away from using new tools to communicate.

OPENNESS: You can't hide, lie or hope that your views and comments won't go global. Comments and statements can also stay on the web permanently. Social media requires a new realism.

You should also be clear about your objectives:

Here are two approaches.

First, the European Association of Communications Directors. They say that organisations identify five key reasons for utilising social media:

• To demonstrate innovation.

• To target consumers.

• To stimulate new ideas.

• To create a dialogue.

• To establish new relationships.

Second, the CoI. They have a model guide which recommends varied, frequent, human and timely engagement and outlines four principle benefits for government:

• Environmental scanning for trends.

• Public information provision.

• Creating a conversation – reputational push.

- Improved internal communications through communities of practice.

Councils should use these as models as a starting point but should go further and also use digital and social media to:

- Raise awareness of and access to services.

- Shape policy development.

- Change behaviour for the public good.

- Community consultation.

This in turn will:

- Create advocates.

- Strengthen the brand.

Before you enter the social media jungle you should also consider the following:

RESEARCH: Is the audience there? How will they react? What do you want to do? What do you want to achieve?

OWNERSHIP: The communications team, not the IT department, should spearhead your social media approach, both in terms of operation and tone.

STRATEGY FIRST: Absolute clarity about the goal – increase access to services.

EVALUATION IN PLACE: You need to have tested evaluation tools in place.

TARGET: Work in those areas where you will reach your audience. Most social media channels are great for active communication where you have a call to action – events, product warnings and new offers but less good at routine work. So choose where you want to reach.

COMMIT RESOURCES: The process for staff engagement with social media should be made clear and agreed – a permissive approach as long as people are open about their involvement. And it's a huge mistake to think that this is about technology. It's about people, and interaction with people. This isn't cheap, isn't quick and will take time. Building a credible online presence by joining in conversations will take considerable staff time and corporate effort.

TELL A STORY: Like any other channel social media should be used to tell a compelling narrative about your council and its services. Media officers need to focus on getting the story across in digital channels, getting to know bloggers and monitoring for emerging stories.

USE EMAIL: As a campaign tool, email is still the most effective application. (Barack Obama was able to raise $500 million for his presidential election campaign just by sending out emails asking for donations). Plain text emails and SMS have the highest open-rates of all digital media. They can be prepared in advance and allow instant segmentation. Westminster City Council's e-newsletter, for example, is sent to 47,000 residents and has an open rate of 27.3% – above the industry average of 22%.

RESPONSE: Have a strategy for response. There isn't a single policy for responding to comments, but you can't respond to everything. Be selective. Ignore ranters and jokers, consider if they really want you to reply or if they are just letting off steam. If facts are wrong, correct them. If from an unhappy customer, correct the situation.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: It is imperative for organisations to have a clear crisis management plan for social media as they would have with any communication channel.

REMEMBER: Social media is not an end in itself. It should be an integral part of every campaign plan.

Putting social media into practice

The CoI has drawn up a useful guide in putting social media into practice for the main communication disciplines which council communicators can also use. Reproduced here, the key points are:

Marketing communications staff should:

- Make the most of social media opportunities to gain insight into their audience, identifying them and the channels they use before determining how they use them.

- Engage creatively with user-led online communities to inform users, generate insight or use these communities as regular forums for campaign planning.

- Monitor social media for discussion about your organisation, its proposals, campaigns or the services it delivers.

- Track influential brands or voices that may compete for your audience time.

- Set up groups on social media channels or start discussion threads in communities. Remember to inform your press office of groups or discussions that you are initiating.

- Create video, audio or data content that can be published simultaneously across diverse channels.

- Create useful tools and applications that users can incorporate into their site, for example, an online body mass index calculator to support a branded health campaign.

- Be transparent and evidence-based when setting up partnerships.

Internal communicators should:

- Exploit the new opportunities offered by social media to engage staff across departments.

- Take advantage of social media tools and channels for collaborative working. Strengthen delivery of, and encourage two-way commentary on, key messages regarding initiatives affecting staff.

Research officers should:

- Be aware of the new ways in which social media initiatives can help them engage with and consult the public, stakeholders and peers in government.

- Effective monitoring and use of social media channels can, for example, give research teams an inroad into networks of consumers, citizens and service users – vastly increasing the quality and quantity of data gathered.

- There is evidence to suggest that using online engagement techniques encourages participation by those who do not normally interact with government or respond to consultations.

- Research officers should actively seek out opportunities to engage with existing stakeholders online and consider the value of initiating involvement with other relevant communities.

- Research officers can intervene to correct inaccuracies on social media sites, but remember to inform your press office if you do so.

Media officers should:

- Identify relevant sites and use them regularly in order to gain an understanding of users' online behaviour and their opinions.

- Gauge how effectively other sites engage your target audiences.

- Map key channels that opinion-formers use so that you can use them early in the news planning process.
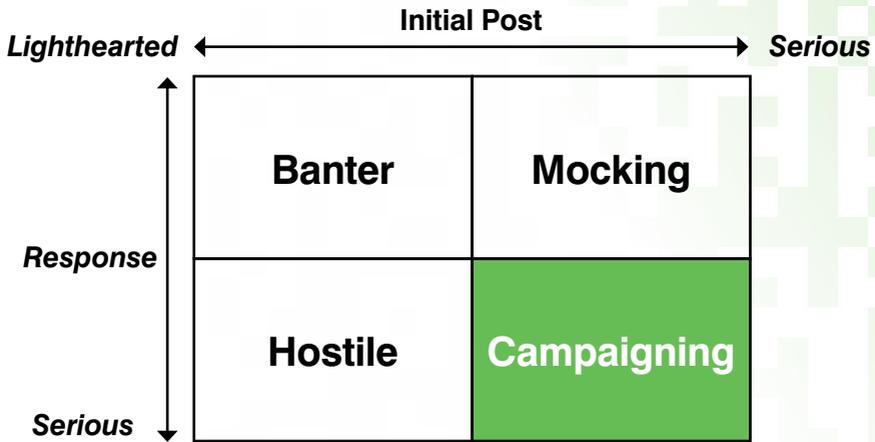
In addition, communication managers should:

- Use social media to link the various parts of the organisation.

- Have a crisis plan that covers social media and understand how social media can support crisis communications.

Impact of social media

Abbey Road case study

In August 2009, The Daily Telegraph ran a story reporting that Westminster City Council was planning to axe the iconic Abbey Road crossing featured on the Beatles album of the same name. It included a quote from a councillor seemingly confirming the reports, but the member was in fact describing work to another, nearby crossing. It also included a rebuttal provided by the media team.

That did not stop the false story being picked up by social media sites.

Initial Post

Lightheared ←———————————→ *Serious*

Banter	**Mocking**
Hostile	**Campaigning**

Response

Serious

Abbey Road commentary quickly became banter

The matrix above sets out how comments posted on a number of different web sites about this story developed from the lighthearted through to the more serious. This provides a model on how stories picked up by social media can escalate into more pressing reputational issues with people campaigning against your organisation.

BANTER: When the initial post is light-hearted and so are the responses. These are general comments, often lacking in real substance, that amount to 'banter'. These tend to go-away quickly or people move on to another topic.

MOCKING: When the initial post is serious but the responses are lighthearted. It is often the case, as frequently seen on news sites like the Daily Mail, that people commenting are simply ridiculing views already posted. Conversation soon goes away.

HOSTILE: When the initial post is lighthearted but the response is serious. If you are tracking social media, this is the point – building negativity – where alarms bells should sound.

CAMPAIGNING: When the initial post is serious and the response is serious. This is the danger. People join together and campaign against a particular issue. This is something that can quickly formulate through social media and it is when communications offices should be most concerned about social media content.

Employees and social media

Arguments against employees using social media tend to focus on the potential impact on productivity and the risk that a member of staff may post something inappropriate online.

In June 2009, Plymouth City Council, for example, decided to end staff and elected members' access to Twitter following verbal complaints received about the language used by two of the city's councillors on a Twitter page. The ban made the national news and in response, a local councillor pointed out that "Not even the Iranian Government has sought to ban Twitter."

While it is right to ensure that staff remain within your organisation's employee code of conduct and IT policy, councils should not seek to ban the use of social media. Doing so can be seen as censorship and will most likely result in negative media headlines. The solution should therefore lie with the effective management of people, rather than the restriction of technology.

Some councils such as Merton and Devon County Council have produced specific guidelines on staff use of social media which represent a good starting point for other authorities wishing to follow suit.

Evaluating social media

Evaluation is critical to using social media and represents a serious challenge in being able to analyse and track the thousands of posts, comments, tweets and other content that may impact on your council.

Local government PR practitioners must go further, however and work to identify what online conversations councils should participate in and to also understand how all of these interactions impact on their organisation.

A milestone in social media evaluation was also reached following the formation of the "Barcelona Principles" on communication evaluation. These principles represent the first global standard of PR measurement as drawn up by the world's experts in research and public relations measurement and evaluation under the umbrella of AMEC (the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication).

The principles state that 'social media can and should be measured' followed

by 'measuring outcomes is preferred to measuring media results (outputs)'.

In other words, the evaluation principles that apply to online communication are the same as those for traditional communication channels.

In summary:

- Test the market for an evaluation approach that suits your organisation – there are a number of social media evaluation tools such as subscription-based CouncilMonitor or SocialMention.com which is free. Free Google alerts can show who is talking about your council online. Other organisations which specialise in social media evaluation such as CrowdControlHQ can also provide expertise and advice.

- Understand the impact of those who are talking and who they can influence – one key influencer can have more impact than 1,000 Facebook friends.

- Evaluate outcomes not outputs – piece together how the conversation led to the outcome, don't just measure the amount of 'noise'.

- Social media should be an integral part of your campaign and communications, not a separate thing to do.

- Build into your evaluation tools the ability to respond quickly as an early warning system – for example using Google Analytics to monitor positive/negative mentions of your council on particular sites.

Case studies

There are many good examples of councils embracing social media. Here are a number of examples:

Twitter:

The extreme weather of early 2010 saw many councils around Britain using social media to communicate snow updates directly to the public. **Kirklees Council** and **Essex County Council** were among those to set up a 'Gritter Twitter', giving 24-hour updates on the roads that were being gritted.

Also during the cold weather in early 2010 **Brighton & Hove City Council** issued an appeal on Twitter for 4x4 owners to help reach vulnerable residents and to ferry people to hospital. Their message was forwarded, or 'retweeted', hundreds of times. Over the next four days, a total of 12 volunteer drivers helped out around three or four times each with meals on

wheels, accessing vulnerable adults and hospital transfers.

In March last year, **Walsall Council** used Twitter to give real time updates to give a snapshot of what they were doing across a 24-hour period. Starting at 6am, staff tweeted that the litter pickers were out, that a noisy cockerel was being investigated by environmental health officers and that roads were being resurfaced. The Guardian had a rolling blog, so did the BBC and the local daily paper the Express & Star. They gained 116,273 followers, a 10% rise.

Sutton has several Twitter accounts set up by residents to share information and encourage conversation. For example, www.twitter.com/sutmoblib gives details of where and when their mobile library is travelling around the borough, but is not maintained by the council.

Facebook:

Coventry City Council www.facebook. com/coventrycc: Coventry maintains a Facebook page that asks users to become fans of the city, rather than the council as an institution. By doing so, the council has asked people to connect with something that resonates with their everyday life, as opposed to an organisation that they might feel has little relevance to them. As a consequence, the council has gained nearly 12,000 fans, all of whom can be kept up-to-date and comment on local activity.

SMS:

Birmingham City Council used text messaging (SMS) as part of a street naming competition, which helped it record an increased number of entrants. The instant nature of SMS messaging meant residents could text into the competition wherever they saw the poster.

Help a London Park www.london.gov. uk/parksvote took this idea a stage further. This was a simple competition run by the Mayor of London for people across London to vote for the park they thought deserved to receive £400,000 for improvements. The project got councils, voluntary sector organisations and community members working together to secure funding for the green spaces they cared about. Allowing voting by text and online opened it up to a wider group of people than would typically take part in this kind of consultation. By the end of the project over 110,000 votes had been counted, with one park alone receiving 6,677 votes.

Community Portals:

Haringey Online www.haringeyonline. com was set up to strengthen the neighbourhood of the Borough of Haringey in north London. The site was launched in 2007 and provides information by 'neighbours for neighbours,' such as information about safety, health care, local businesses, community event planning and local news.

Cambridgeshire County Council

http://wisbech.shapeyourplace.org: Set up to improve community cohesion with the Fenland town of Wisbech and the surrounding area. The site, developed in 2009, allows residents to raise issues which a member of the local council, police or fire service who will respond within 10 days.

Useful links

AMEC:

www.amecorg.com: The International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communications is the global trade body and professional institute for agencies and practitioners who provide media evaluation and communication research.

Central Office of Information:

www.coi.gov.uk: The CoI's guide on social media features advice for press officers, marketers, internal communicators and research officers on how to use social media.

CrowdControlHQ:

www.crowdcontrolhq.com: The social media engagement, management, monitoring and protection service that provides organisations with the ability to effectively manage and execute social media campaigns and strategies, in a risk-aware environment, while retaining total control, across all social media platforms.

IDeA:

www.communities.idea.gov.uk: The IDeA's communities of practice for local government has members dedicated to sharing practice to improve local services. The social media and online collaboration community is specifically dedicated to helping councillors, local government officers and partners use social media to enhance democracy and improve services.

Local Government 3.0:

www.lgcplus.com: This site features a collection of essays from the Local Government Information Unit on how councils can respond to the new web agenda covering everything from sustainability to democratic engagement.

NESTA:

www.nesta.org.uk: The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts – is an independent body with a mission to make the UK more innovative. They operate in three areas – economic growth, the public sector and the creative industries.

Openlylocal

www.openlylocal.com: A project to develop an open and unified way of accessing local government information, by putting it in a structured form where anyone can access or use it. So far, they have more than 100 councils, 6,000 councillors, 4,000 committees and 19,000 documents on the site, and more are added all the time.

Socitm

www.socitm.net: This is the membership association for all ICT professionals working in local authorities and the public and third sectors. It provides a widely respected forum for the promotion, use and development of ICT best practice. It is also plays a leading role in ICT-facilitated local government transformation in the UK.

Tweetyhall

www.tweetyhall.com: Uses Twitter to connect people with their local politicians. It allows users to track local politics in real time and find and follow their local politicians and prospective candidates so they can communicate with the elected representatives in their local area.

Finally, the flowchart on the following page gives a broad guide of where and when not to respond to social media. It has been created by Michael Grimes, online communications manager at the Citizen Foundation and taken from his blog http://citizensheep.com/blog. It was inspired by a similar blog assessment guide used by the US Airforce.

Someone has written about you online.

Is it positive?

YES

Accurate
It is a factual, well researched item. Even if it disagree with you, it is responsible and not negative.

Do you want to respond?

NO → **Don't respond**

YES

NO

Malicious?
Is the site devoted to attacking and degrading others?

YES →

Monitor
Avoid responding, but keep track of relevant activity on the site.

NO

Victimising?
Is the writer ranting, raging, joking or satirising?

YES

NO

Misguided?
Has the writer used incorrect evidence or misunderstood your work?

YES

NO

Unhappy?
Is the writer complaining about you or your service?

NO

YES

Join in
Get involved in the discussion. Share your success, story and mission.

Evaluate
Consider the situation, the influence of the site in question, and any affect on individuals. Decide if you'll respond.

Restore
Rectify the situation. Respond efficiently and reasonably.

Fix
Respond directly to the post with factual information.

Before you respond...

Be transparent
Be honest about your connection to the story.

Cite sources
Be clear about your sources and, include links to them.

Don't rush
Take time to make your response a good one.

Get the tone right
Reflect your organisation's richness and test your response on colleagues.

Focus
Focus on your most influential online activity.

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www.lgcomms.org.uk/resources/industry-knowledge**