

# Developing South Australian local government engagement through digital connections



# PREFACE

This report was prepared by project group 3 as part of the 2017 Local Government Professionals' Emerging Leaders Program.

We would like to acknowledge the Local Government Professionals and Executive Education Unit at the University of Adelaide for providing the program.

We would like to thank our team leaders, managers, general managers and chief executive officers for the opportunity to participate in this program, which has challenged us, given us a greater understanding of leadership, a deeper appreciation for the skills and work delivered by local government across the state, and importantly, increased self-awareness and confidence.

We appreciate the time people took to share their knowledge and insight, the support shown and encouragement given along the journey.

The images provided within this report are courtesy of the City of Onkaparinga.

Alisha Gangell, Alyssa Todd, Catherine Loder, Clint Watchman, Glenn Searle, Jonathon Smyth and Nicholas Goss.



Local Government  
Professionals  
AUSTRALIA SA



ALEXANDRINA



City of  
Charles  
Sturt



The Rural City of  
MURRAY  
BRIDGE



CITY OF  
ONKAPARINGA



CITY OF  
Salisbury



Wattle Range  
COUNCIL

Gawler





# CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The requirement for local government to engage with the community .....	3
Accessibility and use.....	5
Digital local government .....	9
Case studies .....	13
Benefits and challenges .....	21
Recommendations .....	25
Conclusion .....	29
References.....	31
Appendices .....	33



# INTRODUCTION

The question *“what is the one thing local government in South Australia can do to improve?”* leads to many conversations amongst peers, industry colleagues and the community.

One topic that is common is how councils are adapting to new technologies. This has led the authors of this report to investigate the implementation and uptake of digital platforms by South Australia local government and how this can enhance local government’s ability to engage with its communities.

This report will consider a review of literature, case studies, and surveys to establish an understanding of the uses of digital platforms, the various engagement methods used by local government - in South Australia, interstate and internationally, and the risks and opportunities associated with this new way of engaging.

Finally this report will recommend how the local government sector can implement a strategy to allow the sector to become a leader in online/digital engagement, allowing it to flourish and become a truly connected government.



# THE REQUIREMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO ENGAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY

The fundamental relationship in any system of democratic government is the relationship between the community and that government (NSW Ombudsman's Office, 2000).

The *Local Government Act 1999* sets the framework within which councils must operate. Included in the objectives of the Act are the requirements to: “encourage the participation of local communities in the affairs of local government” and “provide a legislative framework for an effective, efficient and accountable system of local government in South Australia”. It is worth noting that while the *Local Government Act 1999* is the primary legislation that councils operate within, there are a number of other Acts that prescribe requirements for public engagement and notification.

Until recently, council engagement with communities has been promoted and undertaken using traditional means such as newspaper advertisements, letters, community noticeboards and newsletters. However a shift in technologies, communication, communication behaviour and digital platforms is opening new opportunities for local government to engage and encourage participation in the affairs of council. While a large percentage of councils recognise this change and the significance of this, many have been slow on the uptake (Objective, Australia and New Zealand Local Government Maturity Index, 2017).



# ACCESSIBILITY & USE

The movement toward online tools and new platforms including mobile devices, social media and apps has changed the way people communicate and use the internet (Georgescu, 2012).

These changes are expanding the possibilities to interact, participate and collaborate and are allowing users to create and distribute content, and this is one area that local government should be capitalising on more.

A report by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) captured how Australians are engaging with digital technologies and changing communications practices (Figure 1).

It shows technology is now an integral part of everyday life with 92% of Australians using the internet. We are more connected, more often and from different devices. Whilst there was an estimated 1.1 million who have never accessed the internet (2014), this number has significantly decreased over the years (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2014).

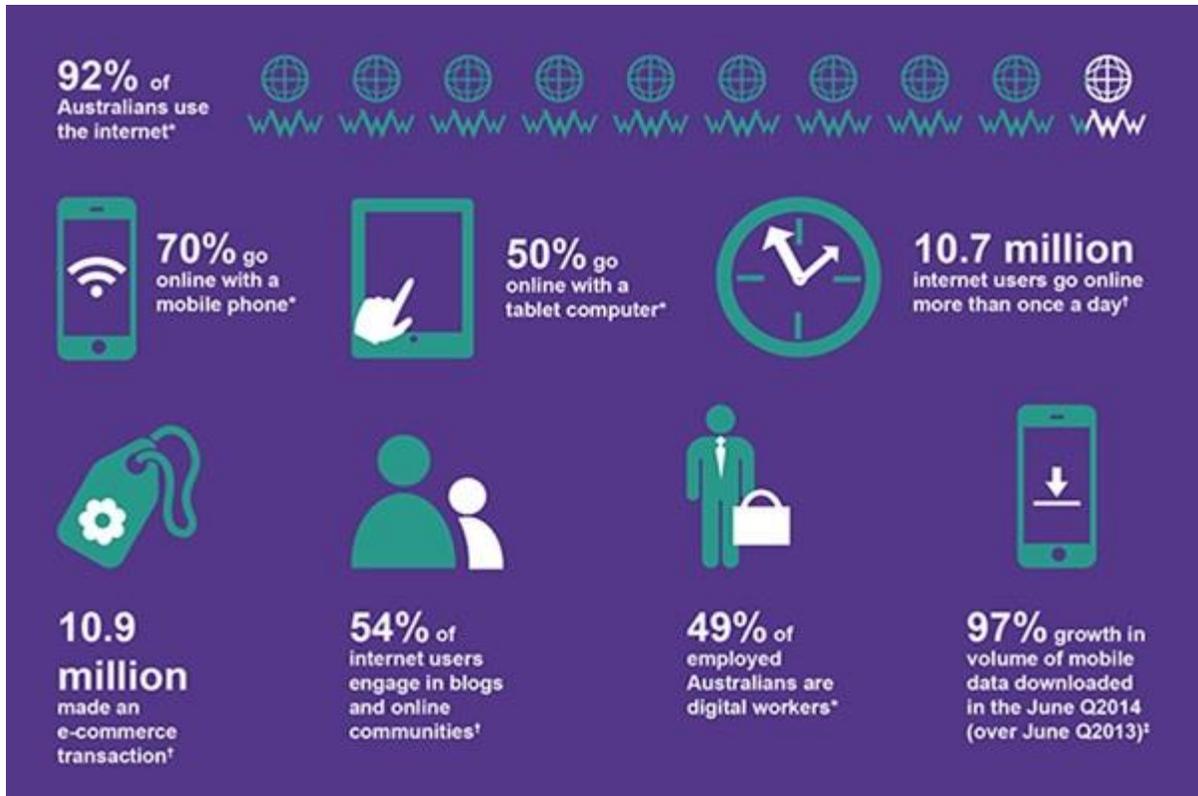
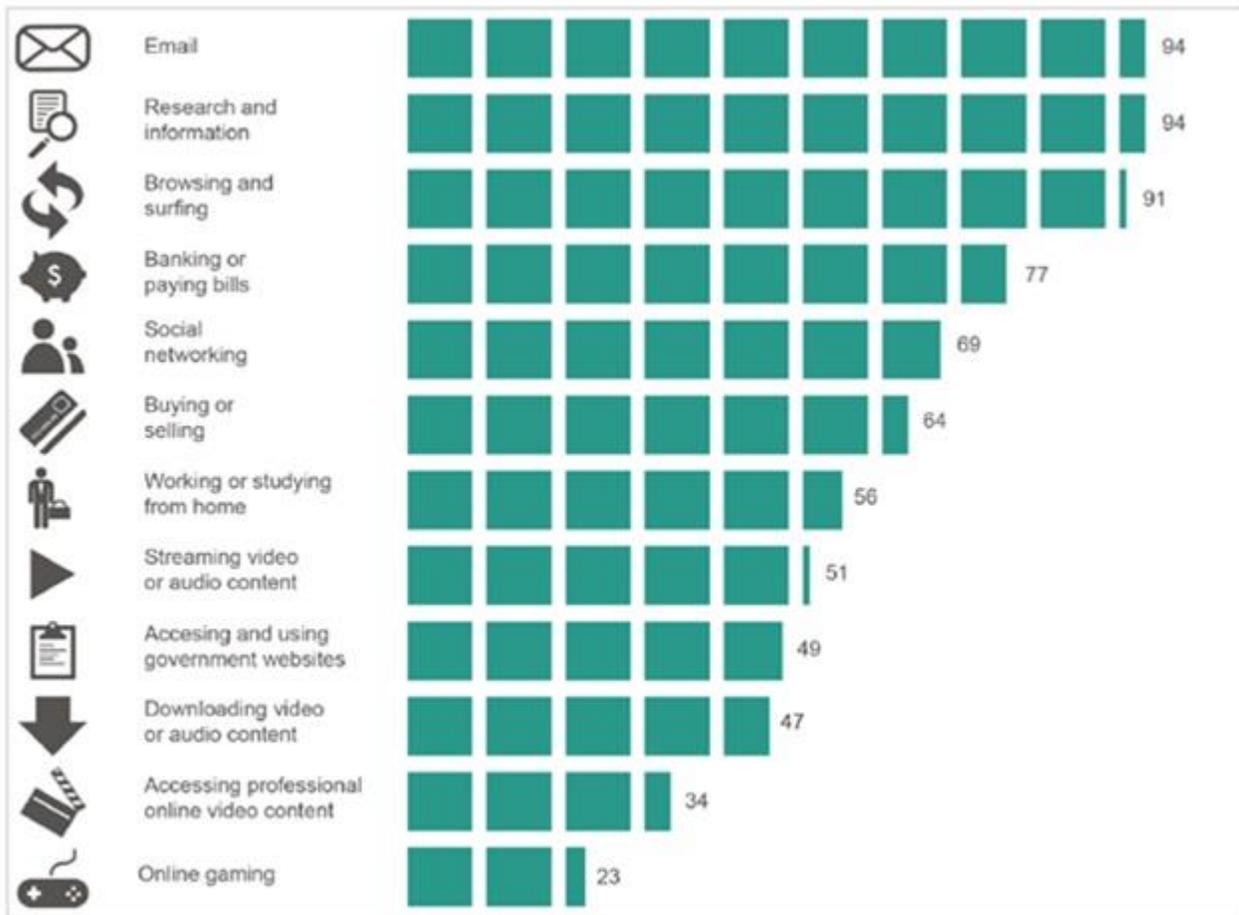


Figure 1: The 2014 ACMA snapshot of digital life in Australia

Source: ACMA, 2014

Activities performed online are diverse (Figure 2), with the primary use being email (94%), research and information (94%), browsing and surfing (91%), and banking or paying bills (77%) (ACMA, 2014). Data also shows that accessing government websites rates in the lesser activities performed. Social media use in Australia continues to rise with 79% of internet users using social media, however only 7% use it to “engage with a government representative or department” (Sensis, 2017).



Base: Percentage of internet users aged 18 years and over.

Figure 2: Activities performed online (six months to May 2014)

Source: ACMA Communications Report 2013-2014

This low level of engagement with government is concerning and further research is required to understand why this occurs. Possible contributing factors may be that:

- the platforms are not effective, efficient or user-friendly;
- methods of engagement/consultation are not compatible with new technology;
- people aren't aware or don't see the value in engaging with local government; and/or
- people only engage with local government when they have a question or potential issue to resolve.

It should also be noted that despite this current low level of engagement, expectations of local government engagement and service provision are being influenced by new technologies and this is compounded by the increasing use of technology not only within the community, but by other sectors that are using it to improve their service delivery standards and engagement.

# DIGITAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Digital change has been rapid and diverse. Since the 1990s, technology has shifted from an internal focus to external. Many governments and businesses are using technology for service delivery, business process improvement, economic development, policy-making and engagement with communities, other government organisations, and businesses.

Technology offers local government opportunities to speed-up work processes, increase effectiveness and efficiency, provide improved and more customised services, and reduce bureaucratic rigmarole (Prins, Broeders, Griffioen, 2012). The use of technology also allows for more efficient and targeted communication direct from council. Technology also supports the desires of communities who say they want more convenience, choice, ease of access, personalisation, value for money, accountability and they want it fast (ACT Government, 2008).

*“Digital platforms are enablers of public sector service delivery programs and initiatives, and that digital services are a fundamental part of the service mix,” (ACT Government, Connected Communities, 2008).*

Research into practices in online engagement in local government indicates some councils are developing in-house capacity to create online engagement platforms that suit their needs.

They are doing this through a combination of approaches including:

- purchasing online platform software that is maintained by an external provider with pre-determined deliverables

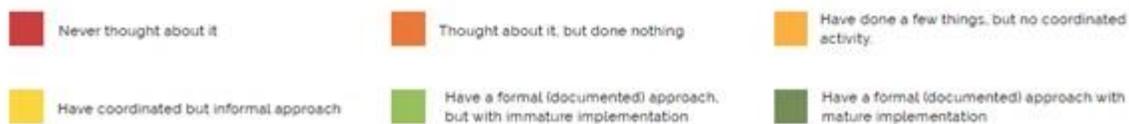
- purchasing online platform software that is maintained by staff in-house with support from an external provider
- in-house set up and maintenance of an online platform available through the internet that is used in a distributive approach across council, i.e. all departments in council take responsibility for contributions to the content on the online platform and social media tools in compliance with a social media policy and guidelines.

Many interstate councils are developing a strategic approach to digital transformation to guide their engagement with communities using various platforms. This is underpinned by digital policy and other initiatives, however as shown in the graphs below (Figure 3), the majority of these policies and strategies do not have a coordinated approach.

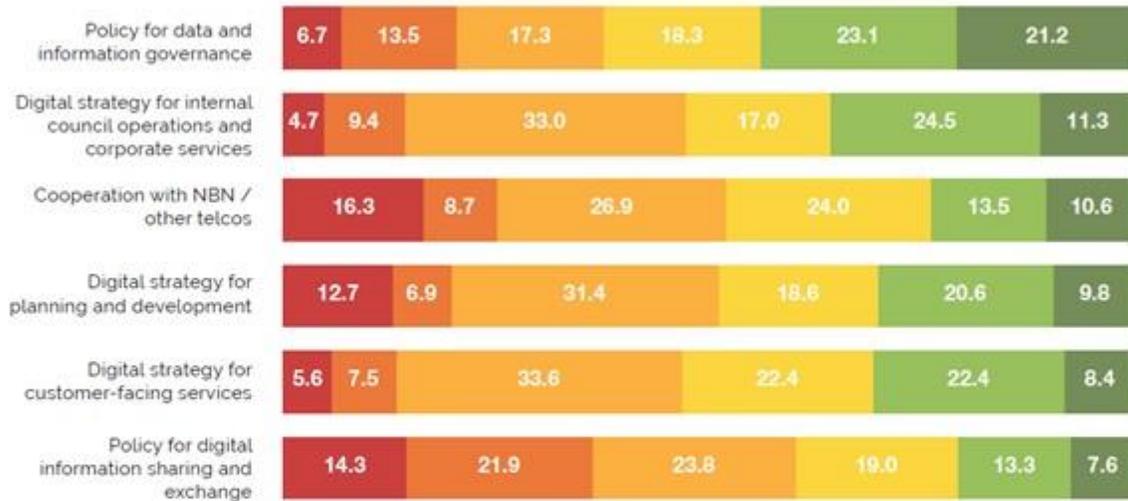
### STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS



*"To what extent does your council have a strategic approach in these areas?"*



## DIGITAL POLICY & INITIATIVES



*"To what extent has your council implemented these digital initiatives?"*

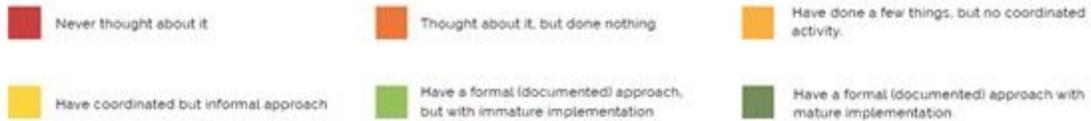


Figure 3

Source: Objective, Australia and New Zealand Local Government Maturity Index, 2017



# CASE STUDIES

Whilst our research shows that the digital uptake by councils has been slow, there are a few examples where councils have piloted a digital platform to engage with their communities with great success. Below are a few case studies have been chosen for their best practice in digital communication and engagement.

## **United Kingdom**

Further abroad, councils are providing a number of enhancements to their digital offerings. Buckinghamshire County Council in the United Kingdom aims to “create a set of digital services so good people prefer to use them” (Buckinghamshire County Council Digital Strategy 2015-18). In addition to social media and web services, they have integrated digital tools into their main publishing platform including an e-commerce platform which enables customers to undertake multiple transactions; a customer account platform enabling customers to check the progress of a request; and a telephony platform to handle webchat, phone calls and instant messaging. All of these improve the way the communities engage with the council.

## **Moreland City Council**

One way Victoria’s Moreland City Council connects with those in their community who are isolated or unable to access physical council locations is through using video conferencing (Attentive Consulting (2017)). This online engagement tool provides a platform for businesses

and families to talk directly to council from their home or office. This tool is more convenient and efficient for those seeking services from their local government.

### **Brisbane City Council**

Social media is another way councils are communicating and engaging with communities. Brisbane City Council has been acknowledged for their exceptional use of social media (Facebook and Twitter) by the independent Flood Enquiry Review Report (Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG), 2016). Their Digital Communication Team devised and implemented a highly successful social media campaign to communicate vital flood information through a rapidly changing situation which saw residents turning to digital platforms for information (Figures 4 and 5). The council also used this as an opportunity to obtain useable intelligence from the public which was then fed back to the Local Disaster Coordination Centre.

According to a report by the ACELG (2016):

“Within the first 48 hours of the flood event, social media channels proved to be a preferred communication channel for a very large number of Brisbane residents and businesses. The ubiquity of social media in people’s lives allowed rapid engagement with a large cross-section of the community, whilst also granting the ability to share messages from other trusted authorities.”

“The most critical success factors of Brisbane City Council’s use of social media during the floods were being organised; having dedicated resources that understood the social media space; working in conjunction with existing communication areas; and adopting a conversational, open tone with residents.”

 **Brisbane City** ✓  
@brisbanecityqld Follow ▾

Latest detailed updates on road closures, flood maps and more. Please RT. <http://bit.ly/RoadCI>

6:14 PM - 10 Jan 2011

99 Retweets 1 Like 

  99  1

Source: Brisbane City Council Twitter

 **Brisbane City** ✓  
@brisbanecityqld Follow ▾

Your councillor wants help! 250 volunteers, 8am, Oxley State School Hall - 8-6 this week. <http://on.fb.me/ii8OZk> #bnecleanup

2:04 AM - 16 Jan 2011

26 Retweets 

  26 

Source: Brisbane City Council Twitter

## Facebook metrics during Flood event

Comments on Council Facebook	17,546
“Likes” on Council Facebook	12,635
“Likes” on Council Facebook PRIOR to floods	757
Total people reached during floods (measured as post views)	4,798,156

## Facebook active users

New Likes? **12,767** ↑ 13,062%     
 Lifetime Likes? **12,640**     
 Monthly Active Users? **37,333** ↑ 5,028%

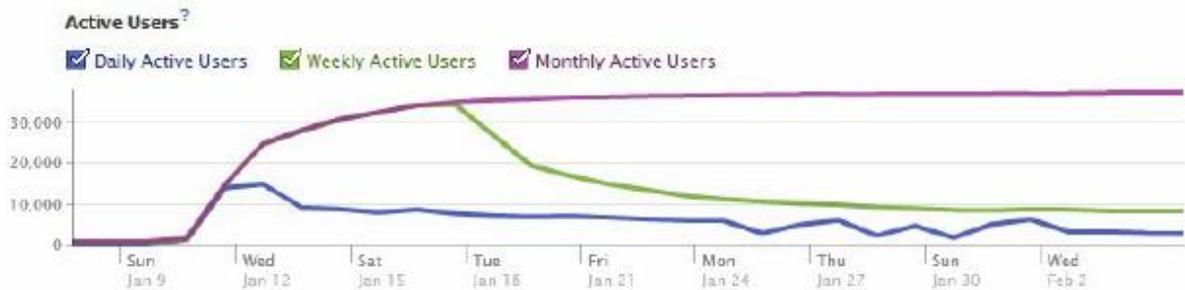


Figure 4: 2011 Brisbane Flood Facebook Metrics

Source: [www.pria.com.au](http://www.pria.com.au)

## Twitter metrics

Tweets Sent in January	987
Followers post Flood event	8,302
Followers pre Flood event	3,003
Total number of retweets	Approx 3,700
Total people reached during floods (impressions)	8,500,000
Clicks on links posted on Facebook and Twitter (bit.ly)	105,306

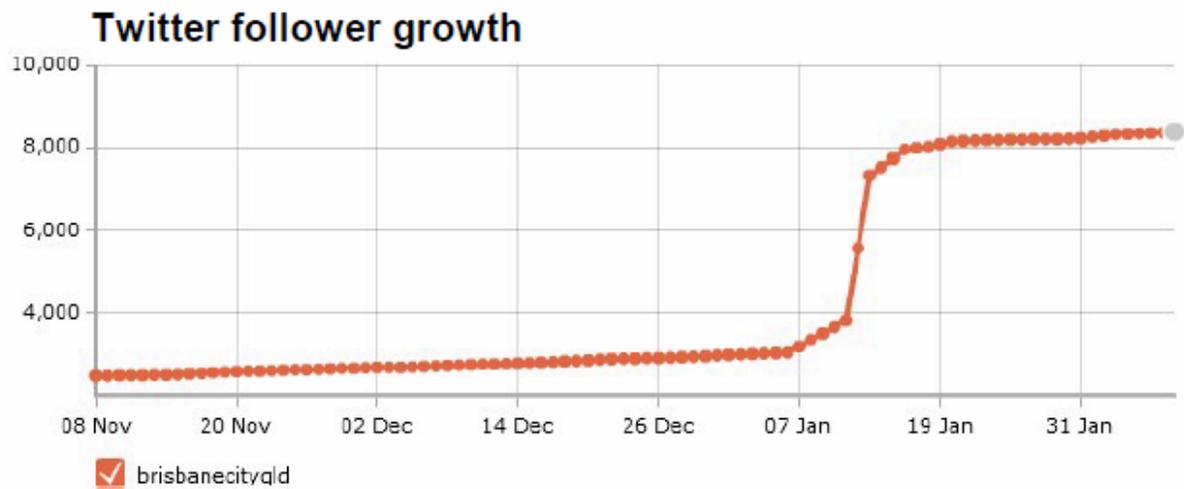


Figure 5: 2011 Brisbane Flood Twitter metrics

Source: [www.pria.com.au](http://www.pria.com.au)

## South Australian Councils

The uptake of different digital platforms by South Australian councils is not as established as interstate or international councils and is still very much in the development stage with no clear indication of satisfaction with any one online platform (Appendix 1). But, the use of online tools to engage the community and resourcing is increasing with many using the more popular online tools such as website and Facebook (Appendix 1). This is despite a lack of strategy and no coordinated approach which was highlighted as concerns by local government staff (Appendix 1).

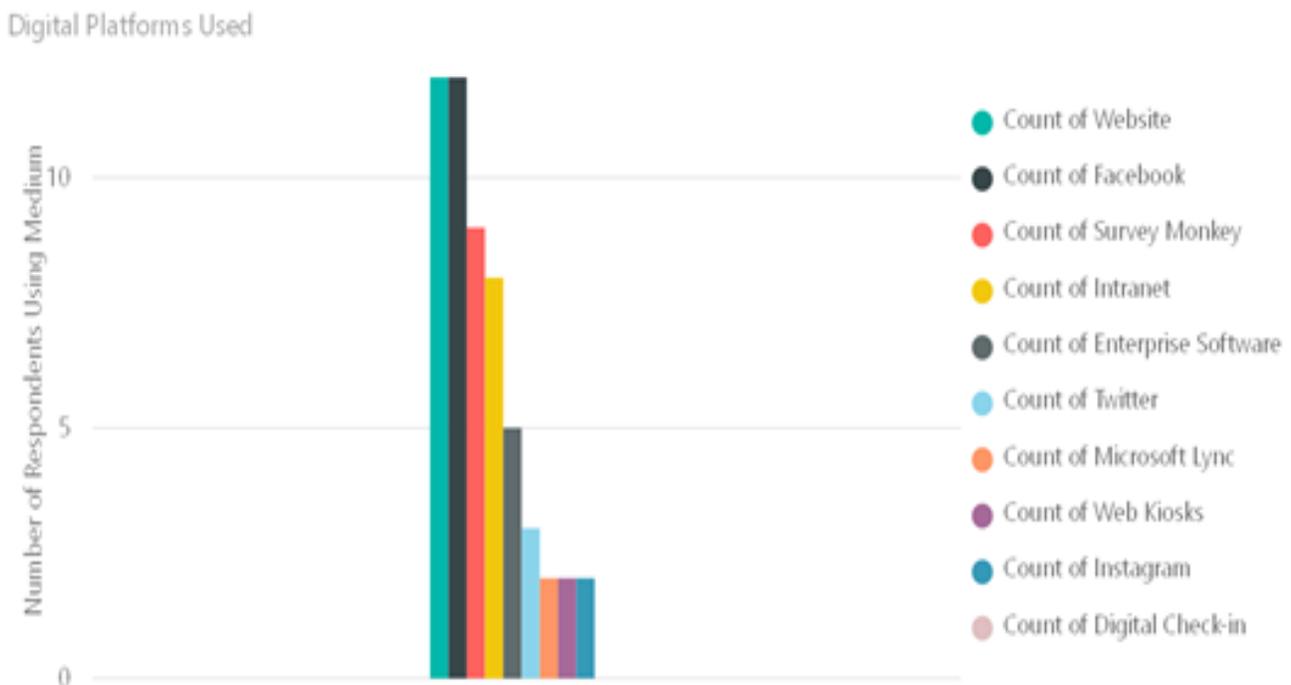


Figure 6: Use of digital platforms by South Australian councils

Source: Extracted from Appendix 1

Many South Australian councils have an entry level, or basic, digital presence, namely a website. This is unsurprising given that this is the most popular form of digital media used by councils to communicate to its communities. What was surprising is that all respondents (100%) listed Facebook as a form of digital communication and engagement, with the

second highest application used (75%) being Survey Monkey (Figure 6). This indicates these councils have had success with using these tools to engage with their communities. Many other forms of digital communication were listed (Figure 7), but this varied considerably between councils and was dependent on each council’s expertise and budgets.

<b>Other digital tools used include, but not limited to:</b>
Social Media apps such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Youtube and Pinterest
State government engagement platforms, e.g. YourSay
Council community engagement portals, various web based platforms
Hootsuite (social media monitoring tool) and Stix ( to describe cyber threat information)
Spatial mapping tools such as ArcGIS web maps, storey maps etc
One Card - Library services (Local Government platform providing state-wide access).

Figure 7: Extracted from Appendix 1

This range of tools and platforms currently used reveals a lack of coordination with no industry standard in how South Australian councils interact with their communities online.

However, councils have found that communication via local newspaper, council publications and direct mail is still a preferred form of communication for the majority of the community. Reasons for this slow adoption of digital communication and preferred use of traditional tools could be that the platforms used are not considered to be user friendly, there is a lack of council confidence, resources and budget, and no clear benchmarking measures across South Australian local government.

## **City of Salisbury**

The City of Salisbury has just completed an engagement case study for the development of a masterplan for the paddocks at Para Hills West (Appendix 2).

In developing the engagement strategy the project team assessed the “audience” using social atlas data and local knowledge. Both elderly people and people without access to the internet were important to engage with.

A hybrid engagement approach was used to ensure a broad reach and included:

- online survey (Survey Monkey) available to the entire community
- mail out of the survey to 6500 surrounding residents and businesses, costing \$10,000
- Facebook posts
- project web page for the life of the project
- four drop in sessions on site and at the local Library
- surveys made available at the local community centre and on site
- contact number for people who wish to call with feedback
- direct one-on-one engagement with sporting clubs and other user groups.

The key finding of the engagement case study was that of the 6,500 mail outs, only 50 responses were received, whereas, over 300 surveys were completed online. There were also over 70 groups that attended the drop in sessions.

This case study shows that online engagement was more favorable, in terms of active participation by the community and the cost to council. The data obtained through the online surveys can also be used for future projects.

# BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

## **Benefits**

As illustrated in the case studies, the benefits of implementing digital platforms are far and wide, and many councils across Australia are exploring the use of digital platforms in an effort to engage communities and deliver a better customer experience.

There is a strong desire for progress and digital transformation to become a more connected government with an overwhelming number of councils acknowledging that digital communication and engagement is the way of the future (Objective, Australia and New Zealand Local Government Maturity Index, 2017).

Digital technology can engage people who traditionally may not participate in council decision-making processes because of their age, job and family demands, their preferred style of communication and their stage in life.

As demonstrated in the Brisbane City Council case study, digital platforms are a great way to disseminate information quickly and cost effectively, especially in situations where immediacy and large reach are critical.

The analytics behind digital platforms can also give councils better insight into their communities and what's of interest to them, key influencers in matters, allowing for more

targeted engagement. This data can be used across other council platforms to create a 'single view' of individuals, which in turn can help councils provide a better customer experience.

## **Challenges**

The challenge for councils is that technology is developing at a rapid rate and most local government digital initiatives are still in the planning stages and transformation activities are generally uncoordinated.

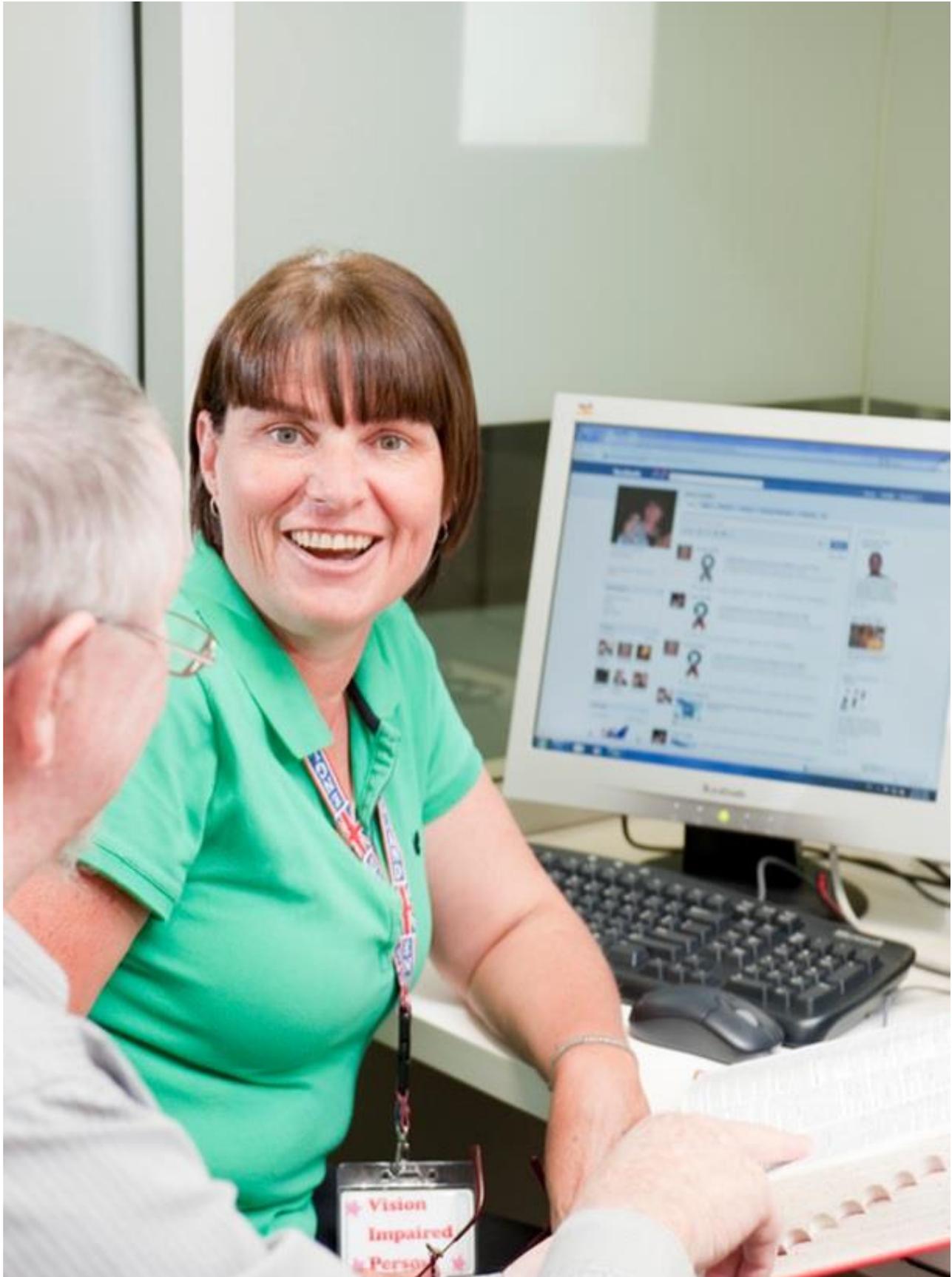
In many cases, the larger the council, the more a council is going to invest in digital technology and the better the result they will get (Objective, Australia and New Zealand Local Government Maturity Index, 2017). The capacity and skill to analyse data – which are critical to the success of successfully engaging with communities using digital platforms - are two areas of concern to SA local government employees (Appendix 1).

Furthermore, there is no clear leader in digital engagement in South Australia, no coordinated approach or existing measures to benchmark. This makes it incredibly time consuming and resource intensive for individual councils who are separately researching and implementing digital platforms with no clear guidance or vision.

Another key consideration is intellectual property laws, privacy and record keeping. With technology constantly evolving, and councils having such a different approach, legislation has not caught up making some areas of digital connections very grey.

While it's believed digital is the way of the future, the transition and understanding our communities are important. For example, online may not be suitable when demographic statistics indicate low rates of internet access among a target audience, however it's important to look at trends and how this may change in the future. In addition, online tools used in

isolation may exclude people from participating in an engagement process where they do not have the digital literacy skills to participate, but this could be addressed through community education programs offered in community centres or libraries.



# RECOMMENDATION

It's important to recognise that different people have different needs and expectations when it comes to how they engage with council and the services they deliver (City of Ryde, 2014), and that councils have different capacities to deliver such services. It is for this reason that councils must clearly identify their goals with engagement and thoroughly research their communities before undertaking any rapid digital changes or an uncoordinated approach.

As can be seen from the literature review, case studies and the survey of South Australian councils, other jurisdictions are well in advance of South Australia in implementing digital communication tools and strategies.

Currently there is no coordination between South Australian councils and there has been no direct leadership from the state government or leading bodies. This has resulted in a fragmented approach to digital communication strategies across councils. It is recommended that short and long term measures are put in place.

## **Short term**

In the short-term, while research is being undertaken, it is recommended that local government continue to engage with their local communities through free digital platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter).

By doing this they will not only increase their capacity to move to a greater digital presence in the future but will also encourage online interactions with their local communities which will see the digital space become the preferred method of engagement and interaction. To help facilitate this there will be a need for greater collaboration between councils through the Local Government Communicators Network. This could pave the way for shared resourcing, benchmarking and joint purchasing arrangements.

### **Long term**

Prior to implementing any significant changes in the use of digital platforms, a sector-wide study should be undertaken. This would include research to understand the following aspects of our communities:

- demographics
- accessibility and use of online/digital platforms
- behaviours around news consumption and level engagement with councils
- a needs analysis including the issues that are of interest to them, what communities want to be engaged on and at what levels
- their views on the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of councils' current engagement practices
- the online conversations that are and are not happening regarding council
- the types of community members who are and are not engaging with councils, and the reasons behind these.

Research should also address councils' use of digital platforms for engagement including:

- methods for how councils are currently engaging with their communities online and whether they are working
- resourcing and budgets, and whether these form an integral part of project management

- integration of digital engagement platforms with other software
- skills analysis and opportunities for development
- past and current online campaigns and the strengths and weaknesses of these
- best practice models utilised by other councils interstate and overseas.

From this research, a sector-wide strategy should be created, setting a vision for how South Australian local government can become more connected with its communities by using digital platforms. It could include a tiered action plan to set the foundation for best practice online engagement. This tiered approach would allow councils to adopt the elements that best suit their size, needs, resourcing, capacity and capabilities.

This would be underpinned by a solid social media policy, opportunities for employee education and upskilling, targeted campaigns to drive and maintain engagement, a set of measures to benchmark progress, and details on the risks of creating digital connections and how to best mitigate them.

The advantages of a sector-wide approach also may have benefits in terms of:

- Procurement – together councils will have stronger buying power for any technology and better opportunities for funding.
- Resource sharing and skill development – supporting all councils, regardless of size and budget, and providing opportunities for building the capacity of council staff.
- Unified messaging - consistent and complementary messaging across all councils may help to strengthen the reputation of local government, establish greater trust in government and build the confidence communities have in the role and work of local government.



# CONCLUSION

With greater access to the internet and more of our everyday interactions being undertaken online the use of digital platforms by local government to engage, communicate and deliver services has never been more important.

However it is clear from the research that South Australian local government has only just begun the journey to becoming a leader in digital communication. There are many examples from interstate and overseas where digital platforms have successfully been used to engage local communities, leading to more connected and responsive councils.

To help develop South Australian local government engagement through digital connections, this report has presented several recommendations over short and long term periods. It's important to highlight that a successful plan is built on a strong foundation of research and data, and a coordinated approach that considers councils' digital platforms, software, resourcing, budgets, skills, strategies, community plans and policies.

However local government needs to be aware of the challenges in moving greater resources in to an online environment and ensure that it achieves value for money, integrity of information, high level of customer service and inclusion of all communities.



# REFERENCES

ACT Government (2008), Connected Community, Connected Government, ACT

Attentive Consulting (2017), Moreland City Council to deliver new online customer support for their community, <http://www.attentiveconsulting.com.au/index.php/easyblog-2/entry/115-moreland-city-council-to-deliver-new-online-customer-support-for-their-community>, New South Wales, accessed 6 November 2017

Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (2016), New South Wales, date accessed 6 November 2017

Australia Communications and Media Authority (2014), <https://www.acma.gov.au/theACMA/engage-blogs/engage-blogs/researchacma/Australians-embrace-a-digital-life>, accessed 12 September 2017

Australia Communications and Media Authority (2014), Communications Report 2013-2014, Victoria

Brisbane City Council Twitter

Buckinghamshire County Council (2015-18), Digital Strategy, United Kingdom, <https://www.buckscc.gov.uk/services/council-and-democracy/our-plans/digital-strategy/>, accessed 15 November 2017

City of Ryde (2014), Communications and Engagement Strategy, New South Wales, <http://www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/files/assets/public/publications/communications-and-engagement-strategy.pdf>, accessed 15 November 2017

Georgescu, M (2012), 'E-government: New perspectives on the future of government digitisation', *Annales Universitatis Apulensis Series Oeconomica*, 14(2)

Local Government Act (1999),

<https://www.legislation.sa.gov.au/lz/c/a/local%20government%20act%201999/2016.05.18/1999.62.un.pdf>, accessed 6 November 2017

NSW Ombudsman's Office (2000), *Better Service and Communication Guidelines for Local Government*, New South Wales

Objective (2017), *Local Government Maturity Index*, Australia, date accessed 4 November 2017

Pittsburgh Today, Julia Fraser - April 24, 2017, <http://pittsburghtoday.org/news/bridging-digital-divide/>

Prins, J, Broeders, D, Griffioen, H, *Computer Law and Security Review* 28, 2012, pp. 273-282, *iGovernment: A new perspective on the future of government digitisation*

Public Relations Institute of Australia, Brisbane City Council - January 2011 Flood Crisis Communication (<https://www.pria.com.au/documents/item/5234>)

Social Media Report, Australia

# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX 1

Survey of South Australian Councils – Use of digital platforms for communication and engagement – 18 October 2017.