



Community Forums: Seeking To Engage With Communities through the Web

This document was commissioned as a result of a meeting between representatives of Northumberland County Council, the East Tynedale Community Forum and the Central Tynedale Community Forum and seeks to identify ways in which a community forum may establish a web presence. Its purpose is to inform the East and Central Community Forums' decisions in each establishing an appropriate local web site to serve their respective communities. It was, however, felt appropriate that it should be shared with other community forums within Northumberland and possibly other regions.

The research and writing was undertaken by TalkingHat Associates, a Tynedale based consultancy with considerable experience of using web technologies within communities particularly in rural areas.

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Summary

The objective of this brief piece of research was to identify ways in which community forums (in Northumberland) could make effective use of web technologies to engage the interest and participation of residents.

It began by describing the role of a community forum in Northumberland and using this definition, identified and explored a number of web sites representing community forums in other parts of the country.

A variety of search terms were employed to seek community forum web sites. These included combinations of the terms community forum, Facebook, CMS, social network. Employing the words 'community forum' presents its own difficulties. Both 'community' and 'forum' are commonly used words for web features and have long established meanings in the web world; using them in a search engine returns a plethora of distinct communities and forums which are unrelated to the definition used here.

From this initial trawl of web sites claiming to represent community forums it seems that there is very little encouragement for residents to make worthwhile contributions and little evidence that many community forums are making use of social networking features. Where there is any encouragement it is through the use of either a feedback form or a discussion forum (a well established feature) although it's worth remarking that most of those seen are not well used.

Those that are most active and current are the ones where there is a degree of interaction between the constituted forum (often just a web master) and the local population. Most of those that were viewed were either moribund or simply static web sites serving information to residents.

Clearly, those which presented the greatest opportunities were those where local people were actively encouraged to contribute. A particular example of this is the Haringay online web site which is dynamically and vibrantly presented. Registered users receive regular email updates and notices of events and activities and there are clearly signposted areas for participation. It should be noted, however, that the site is managed by two people who, on average, spend up to 2 hours each day maintaining the site.

It is inevitable that the scope and content of each viewed web site will reflect the broad-ranging definition of a community forum. There is no single lesson to be learned from this research. There is, however, a number of features which appear to work, and by combining these a satisfactory solution may be achieved.

Given their broad brief and limited funding, identifying ways of communicating with the public is a high priority for the forums in these mostly rural areas. The cost of mailing paper based information is prohibitive; advertising is expensive and local newspapers cannot always be relied on to print stories at appropriate times. For many community forums, using the Internet can be an attractive proposition although there will almost certainly be some associated costs and finding advice on the best way to employ web technologies may be difficult.

The document discusses some of the Hosting and technology options and the associated costs of establishing a free or almost free web presence and examines the compromise inherent in 'free' web hosting. Community forums should, of course, bear in mind that there really is no such thing as a 'free' web presence; there will always be some cost to someone – maybe a volunteer who acts as webmaster or a local business who is sponsors some part of the package.

A web presence can take many forms. The BBC has a web presence; a local corner shop has a web presence. The BBC's web site is vast, comprehensive and interactive. It informs on a huge range of topics, is ever-changing in its content and invites participation in many different ways from many of its users. The corner shop's web site, on the other hand, is perhaps no more than a Yellow Pages entry; it simply waves a flag to say that 'here is a local shop and here is a range of products that it sells'. It has an address and contact details and probably has no need to alter its content from one year to the next. In broad terms the BBC site is a dynamic web site whereas the corner shop site is a static web site.

Community forums must consider the nature of their web presence. Is it sufficient to have a web site which just lists those concerned in its management, its constitution and some contact details? Should it include appropriate, downloadable public documentation? Should it display current and archived minutes of meetings? Should there be features to encourage public discussion and debate, features to

encourage the simple expression of opinion on matters of local interest? Should there be an element of social networking?

Young people in particular have embraced the concept of social networking through web sites like Facebook and Twitter. More recently, businesses have adopted the use of these sites to enhance their web presence and already it is evident that politically they have role in the electoral process.

There is already some existing local web site provision in parts of Northumberland in the form, for example, of parish or town council web sites and it is perfectly feasible for a community forum to take advantage of the established hosting arrangement in order to reduce its costs, whilst maintaining its own web identity.

A number of software options are available; creating a simple static web site in HTML satisfies the need for a web presence and has few additional implications although it clearly limits the amount of interaction that may be possible with residents. A more dynamic web site, based on a Content Management System (CMS – see Appendix II) might include polls to invite simple views on topics of local interest, a discussion group or forum where more detailed views may be published, or a full blown social networking component like Facebook to encourage dialogue between the forum and its residents. Once a static web site is established it needs very little in terms of maintenance and upkeep. On the other hand a dynamic web site will require an investment in time to monitor the content and ensure a degree of currency.

The list of features which could be integrated into a community forum web site is enormous. Members of the Central Tynedale Community Forum created a list which is discussed at length. Community forums should carefully consider the implications of maintaining these before employing any of them.

There are long term implications for maintenance and upkeep although this will depend on the nature of the web presence

What is a community forum?

Community forums in Northumberland are a recent innovation. The county's web site offers the following definition:

An introduction to Community Forums

The new unitary council, Northumberland County Council has the opportunity to step back and re-assess how residents can have a real say in making Northumberland and even better place to live and work. Community forums will be set up in various localities across Northumberland to get together and discuss local issues.

What is a forum?

- *It is a gathering of people and organisations who are willing to work together to improve the quality of life in their towns, villages and neighbourhoods, for the good of all residents.*
- *Forum work is an attempt to link the views and ideas of local people with the decision-making processes of the local authority, parish and town councils and those involved in delivering services.*

What might a forum look like?

It could look like a group of people, individuals, members of voluntary and community groups and parish and unitary councillors meeting around the table to talk, or it could take the form of a gathering in the park or particular housing estate if the issue is particularly relevant to the local people there.

There is no fixed definition of what a forum is or should be, but there are a number of features that community forums in Northumberland will have in common.

Distinguishing features of a forum

- *They are open to involvement by all organisations and individuals who has an interest in the future well being of that locality*
- *All participants in forum activities/meetings have the same rights to give their views and to be heard*
- *Each forum will have a chair. As well as chairing meetings of the forum, the chair or his/her deputy will represent the forum on the Northumberland Strategic Partnership's Area Partnership.*
- *Each forum will develop ways of communicating with and involving the residents of their locality.*
- *Forums will add value to the work of democratically elected representatives by helping them to be fully informed about the issues in their areas.*

Forums are not

- *A substitute for parish councils*
- *Exclusive to particular groups of residents*
- *Hindered by geography – forums are able to work together across localities on issues that effect more than one forum area*

What are the benefits of this way of working for people living and working in Northumberland?

- *It allows one council to be better informed about the issues for the different communities of Northumberland.*
- *The wider community can come together to share local knowledge and concerns and meet with Northumberland County Council and other service providers to work together to tackle local issues and suggest solutions*
- *It will provide another way in which communities can communicate with the unitary council*

Facilitation

Organisations are currently being identified in each locality that are capable of hosting community forums. These might be a local development trust, parish council or local partnership.

Northumberland Strategic Partnership offers a similar definition (Community Forums - A voice for your Community) and adds:

Although supported by the County Council and other public service providers, Community Forums are 'hosted' by organisations that are grounded within that local community - these might be a local development trust, parish council, or local partnership.

This very broad definition allows community forums to develop in a way that meets the needs of individual communities.

A sample survey of existing community web sites to determine broad scope and content

In spite of the fact that the concept of community forums is relatively recent a significant number have established a web presence. The broad brief for the role and purpose of community forums is reflected in the style, features and content of those with web sites.

A UK Google search on 'community forum' returns over one million suggestions, many of which are forums for distinct and sometimes ethnic communities (for example, an Irish community in Birmingham or older people in Barnsley) rather than a collection of local parish representatives.

Orsett Community Forum, in Kent (<http://www.orsettcf.org.uk>) clearly matches Northumberland's definition. Its main menu includes links to pages covering a range of issues from very local to county wide. Meeting minutes are posted, there is a copy of the constitution and it is possible to register with the site and receive email notifications when a selected page is updated.

- Home page
- Meeting Dates
- Job Progress
- Meeting Minutes
- Playground
- Planning Applications
- Safer Thurrock
- Local Info
- Environment
- Web Links
- Contact Us
- Forum Constitution
- Disclaimer

Leicester North West Community Forum (<http://www.inspiredresidents.net>) takes a more graphical approach on its home page. The concept is interesting although it might present accessibility problems for some visitors and many of the links which were sampled had been redirected to a schools portal web site or were unavailable. The displayed links, however, represented a wide range of community interest.

Sharrow Community Forum (<http://www.sharrowcf.org.uk>) is a multi-ethnic locality in Sheffield based in an old school and has employees. Its main menu suggests a range of information about projects and activities in the area:

- Home
- Build a Better Community
- Distinctive Sharrow
- Joining In
- Learning & Volunteering
- Room Hire
- Sharrow Today
- Shipshape

- Sharrow Health Champions

Handsworth Community Forum (<http://www.handsworthforum.org.uk>) takes a graphical approach and includes pages where residents can report items of concern, a newsletter, notices of activities, a community directory and a feedback form but no social networking function.

- Home
- About Us
- News And Events
- Directory
- Adult Learning
- Report It
- Links
- Children And Young People
- Join Us
- Contact Us

It is also linked to HECNET which appears to have a broader brief with a wide range of page topics covering health, history, societies, pubs & clubs, training, local campaigns and a BBC news feed.

Small Heath Community Forum (<http://www.shcfltd.com>) represents a mostly BME community in Birmingham. SHCF is a company limited by guarantee. The web site is largely static and offers little in the way of community participation.

The Alferton Community Forum web site (<http://alfertononline.co.uk>) claims to have 60,000 hits per month. There is a good range of links to pages and strongly features a discussion forum containing a wide range of local interest topics. The main focus of the site appears to be on informing the community about events and local facilities. There seems to be little or no evidence of the activities of the forum.

Raynes Park Community Forum in London (<http://www.merton.gov.uk/community/communityforums/raynesparkcommunityforum.htm>) is a subset of the local authority web site and appears to be maintained by Merton Council. It is directly linked to a Facebook page. The main site is informative and current with 8 main sections.

- Living
- Working
- Community
- Neighbourhood
- Learning
- Leisure and culture
- Visiting
- Your council

The home page has downloadable agendas and minutes for CF meetings. The Facebook site is a little lightweight with only 10 'fans' and not a deal of networking in evidence (for example there have been no topics posted since January 11 this year).

Beeston Community Forum (http://www.beestonforum.btik.com/p_Home.ikml) in Leeds has a comprehensive but basic web site including a link to a Facebook page. The Facebook page has little content other than a link back to the main web site. There are 3 'fans' and no apparent community involvement.

Leicestershire County Council, researched by Jim Bolland (NCC), has a combined approach of providing information centrally on the council website, grouped by forum location on a dedicated community forum website, while encouraging the actual engagement locally via established community sites.

There is a link from their council website at: <http://www.leics.gov.uk/forums.htm> ...to a dedicated website for all forums at: <http://www.leicestershireforums.org/> Find your area by clicking on maps, or choosing from a list.

The area pages contain basic information: <http://www.leicestershireforums.org/mowbray/> and in this case a link to an external discussion forum on a site that covers many local aspects at: <http://www.meltononline.co.uk/forum/>
But... closer inspection shows little new activity: <http://www.meltononline.co.uk/forum/active.asp>

Jim Bolland also identified **Amble Community Forum**'s Facebook web site. While this is in the Northumberland area, the fact they are using Facebook as a tool to engage with the community made it interesting.

Jim comments that the site could not be found without signing up for a Facebook account and logging in, although a more recent attempt has allowed access without logging in. For many people this would have been enough of a barrier to lose interest and go elsewhere. It may be that this can be resolved by tweaking the permissions of their site.

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Amble-United-Kingdom/Amble-Community-Forum/186650117484>

The site has 38 'fans', the home page appears to be dynamic, populated mostly by feeds of topical items from sources such as the Newcastle Journal. There is local CF news, local photographs and encouragement for residents to participate. It's an interesting concept and appears to be supported by at least 2 local politicians. An annoying feature is a pop up insurance page which appears from time to time.

Hosting and technology options and costs for local CF web sites

The community forums in Northumberland have limited financial resources which will inevitably affect the nature and choice of web site hosting, but not necessarily the web technology choices.

In brief, there are limited options for hosting on a low or no cost budget. There have been discussions about Northumberland Council providing hosting for the community forums, but budgetary restrictions have prevented this being pursued. It is possible to purchase hosting on a commercial server for a small monthly payment. Some of these who claim to specialise in hosting community web sites provide a service at a cost of less than £5 per month.

Free hosting is an option. There are a number of hosting companies who offer free hosting, some without any advertising 'nags'. In the main these are US based servers from companies who provide a robust service. The downside is that at times USA based servers can be subject to heavy native user demand which can result in a slower service. It's unlikely to be a problem, however, given the relatively low volume of traffic on a community forum web site.

A recommended example of free web hosting is www.byethost.com.

With a free hosting account it is unlikely that the data will ever be backed up by the hosting company and it is the responsibility of the web site manager to keep back ups.

Hosting for local (to Tynedale) parish council web sites is provided by Deshosts (a local Northumberland company), Kantara (a UK company) and Freeola (a UK company). The **annual** hosting costs for these three companies are in the region of £90, £60 and £free.

An associated database will probably be a fundamental component of a community forum web site. Deshosts and Kantara both include at least one database in the hosting contract; Freeola charges £36 per annum for access to a dedicated database.

Deshost's servers are located in Portsmouth, Kantara's at an undisclosed UK location and Freeola's servers are also in the UK.

Deshost's web data is backed up; Kantara and Freeola back up their systems, but not the data. Keeping a current backup is not an arduous task. All the local parish council web sites maintained by TalkingHat Associates are remotely backed up on a regular basis and whenever there are significant upgrades of content or systems.

Additional costs (setting up and maintenance) to consider

Whilst it is possible to obtain a free domain name for a web site, it is usual and preferable to purchase the use of a domain name that reflects the nature and purpose of the organisation. A free domain name is usually a sub-domain of the hosting company. For example, if an organisation called '**ourcommunity**' arranged hosting with a company called '**besthosts**' it is likely that the sub-domain name might be

ourcommunity.besthosts.com. Given that the cost of domain names is relatively low (usually less than £10 per annum), purchasing a unique and relevant domain name is preferable for marketing purposes if nothing else. A domain name like **www.ourcommunity.org** is shorter to type, more memorable and reflects the function of the organisation. In general, a **.co.uk** domain is the least expensive option; a **.com**, **.org**, **.net** or **.org.uk** domain might cost as much as £20.00 per annum. The cost of domain names varies enormously depending on where and how it is registered. It's worth researching the best deal.

It's worth noting that a **.gov.uk** domain name might seem appropriate but these are reserved for the exclusive use of UK government and devolved administration departments and agencies, executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies and appropriate projects, and local and regional government bodies (including properly constituted town and parish councils). It is unlikely that the Registrar would allow it to be used for a community forum.

The cost of software to achieve a web presence should not be a hurdle. There is a vast range of Open Source software available for use at no cost. Open Source Software (OSS) is often developed by a team of skilled programmers brought together by a common interest in software development. Individuals in the team may be located in countries scattered around the world and communication is almost exclusively via the Internet. They do not take payment for their work and make it freely available for use. In some instances OSS is developed by businesses for whom distributing the software is a marketing tool.

There may be some additional costs involved in designing an appropriate logo and creating a collection of graphics/images for the web site. A further cost may occur in customising the web templates (page layout and appearance).

Analysis of existing community web site provision and opportunities for 'piggy-backing'

An alternative to arranging independent web hosting would be to host the web site on an already established web site of another organisation. Some local areas may already have web site provision made by a parish council or an existing community group. For example, in Hexham there is a Town Council web site, a Community Partnership web site and an adjoining Parish Council web site. Any of these organisations could provide hosting for the Community Forum web site and still allow the use of a unique community forum domain name. Providing host sharing would not incur any additional hosting costs. There could, however, be some negotiation on cost sharing which would be beneficial to both organisations.

Commercial organisations could be approached with a similar offer. A local newspaper might see the benefit of an alliance with a community forum by hosting a web site on their server.

Hexham Community Partnership has its own web site (www.hexhamcommunity.net). Two projects within the partnership have required their own web identities. A unique domain name for each was purchased and hosting arranged on the same hosting server as the Partnership. The domain names were then 'pointed' to this server and the projects web pages stored on that server. A visitor to the project web site will enter the project domain name (www.number28.org.uk) in a browser and will be taken to the projects home page. (Note that at present the project home page diverts back to the Partnership web site. In due course it will have its own suite of pages). A 'piggy-back' arrangement like this can be beneficial in administrative and cost terms.

It's interesting to note that Hexham Community partnership has already established a contract to provide administrative services and support to the Central Tynedale Community partnership and extending this arrangement to include some web support would be straightforward.

Software options; 'social networking' options, (wiki, blog, forum, discussion group, Facebook etc), associated costs and practicalities

It is evident from the short review of community forum web sites that a combination of web features is desirable. Already Central Tynedale has produced a wish list of the features it believes to be desirable in its web presence and these include a social networking option. Any of the social networking options listed above (or others) will certainly contribute to an interactive site giving local people the opportunity of a sense of ownership through their involvement. The question is which is most suitable for the purpose and for the abilities of the community. There are very recent examples of local councillors adopting Twitter or Facebook as a means of communication

(<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/c/3762078/doclib/document->

display.do?backlink=ref&id=3861655&themeld=3780214) and these are to be applauded – where the community is sufficiently aware of social media technologies. This raises the issue of who are the predominant Facebook users and the most recent research (UK – www.clickymedia.co.uk) suggests that there are 23 million UK users of a 2001 census population of over 61 million. Of these, over 13 million are under the age of 29, 5 million between 30 and 39, 3 million between 40 and 49 and 2 million aged over 50. Other research suggests that there is a growing use of social media web sites by the older age groups and increasingly businesses are exploring how to capitalise on selling their products and services to these groups. Twitter, for example recently announced that they would be introducing new tools to “help publishers and brands monetise their presence on Twitter.” On the basis that popularity is growing it would not be unreasonable to adopt a social media component. The unknown in all this is how a community forum might engage these groups in local affairs. Clearly, harvesting email addresses is a very fundamental way of opening a line of communication and encouraging local people to engage and participate. To do this it will be necessary to develop a strategy for obtaining email addresses and the permission of their owners to use them.

There is a perception that some people are wary of Facebook and fear the exposure that a Facebook presence may present. It is possible to incorporate social media content without resort to Facebook or its equals by using software that is based on the hosting server rather than a proprietary service like Facebook. Other less threatening alternatives (in order of greatest threat first) include blogs, wikis, forums and discussion groups. The advantage of all these (including Facebook) are that they can all be configured as private networks where participation is by invitation only. The down side of this, of course, is that it will be difficult for non registered visitors to view the content. These alternative forms can all be easily integrated into a web site.

Examples of Open Source Software (OSS) social networking software include Ning, Elgg and various plug-in components for Content Management Systems (CMS) like Joomla and WordPress. Ning is an excellent product in many ways but needs some careful consideration before being adopted. For example, Ning obliges you to carry advertising of their choice, not yours) unless you upgrade at a cost of about £25.00 a month. Elgg was initially developed for the education sector but is almost infinitely adaptable to other purposes – if you have access to an accomplished programmer. Both of them will work ‘straight out of the box’ if you simply want the core features. Joomla is also excellent although it’s a heavyweight – many people consider that the Joomla developers did it for the sake of challenging their programming skills rather than for the ease of use by the end user. WordPress is a very popular CMS, is very straightforward to use and has a good range of built in features and add-on components.

For organisations where there are no programming skills available and the web site manager will be a person with a good level of word processing skills and a basic understanding of web technologies, Website Baker is to be recommended. For the end user (web site manager) it is straightforward to use has a solid and proven range of add-on components that are easily integrated into the web site. It also has a strong community of users who provide a robust support mechanism through a discussion group.

Features and options appropriate for a CF web site.

Mark Benjamin and David Clegg from the Central Tynedale Community Forum (CTCF) thoughtfully prepared a wish list for their forum’s web presence. The following are extracts from the document together with some additional features and comments on appropriateness and the ease with which they might be incorporated.

The comments in bold type are additions or comments on the submitted lists below.

Purpose

An interactive website would serve the purposes of the CTCF by providing:

- Attractive, energetic presentation of the Forum’s current themes; **A Content Management System with enthusiastic & trusted authors and editors will provide this. There should be well designed and appropriate templates for each web page.**
- Opportunities for residents to interact, with views, opinions, preferences etc; **a bolt-on forum or discussion group will facilitate this.**
- Capacity to post issues/proposals and seek brief responses (Twitter-like); **if the responses and comments are to be publicly displayed, the solution would be an add-on forum or discussion group component.**
- Periodic updates on developments in periods of high activity on key themes by lead steering group members or officers (blog-like); **the site could have an integrated blog.**

- Capacity to seek and allow residents to give opinions on specific proposals, briefly (yes/no) or at some length (customised questionnaires); **a facility for online opinion polls (instant, visible responses), and/or more in-depth research questionnaires from which responses could be analysed prior to publication.**
- Referral links - where to seek info/get advice on residents' concerns. **This would simply be a links page on the core web site.**

All of the above relate to the features and content of a basic web site, controlled by a content management system and everything in the list is achievable.

Further considerations

- Issue of access: access can range through closed/moderated/membership/publicly open; **a content management system will provide a high level of control over the people designated to manage it. A hierarchy of permissions to access various parts of the site can be established and maintained. This is a normal feature of a CMS web site.**
- Recommended: access to view open, for all members of local community and beyond; **normally it would be expected that the majority of pages would be on view to the public. Username and password controlled access to specific pages (downloads of information or access to a forum for example, might be restricted to residents who are registered users. This is a normal feature in a CMS web site.**
- Opportunity to contribute and respond defined/managed membership, e.g. post-code eligibility; postcode or some other unique identity can be used to validate registered users. **Quite normal in a CMS web site.**
- Moderation (oversight of responses before they appear) may be desirable (site owner retains liability). **It would be wise to exercise some form of moderation of posted messages. There are a number of ways of doing this; messages can be forwarded by email to a web site manager (or editor) who can then approve them for publication or messages can be stored in a folder awaiting review, approval and publication. Risks can be minimised by acceptance of Terms & Conditions.** Who would do this – and take general responsibility for upkeep of website? **It is essential to clarify who will be responsible for this. Potentially, it could be more than one person.**
- Opinion poll facility (yes/no, for/against), giving quick gathering of opinions on specific themes/proposals, will be very useful. **See an earlier comment**
- Form filling, for more substantial collation of views, if possible with electronic aggregation and report function, will be useful, and is provided in simple-to-produce manner by Word. Questionnaires can be either downloaded, saved and returned as email attachment or completed online with immediate auto collation/aggregation/report (latter most desirable). **This needs some clarification. A simple solution can cost little or nothing to implement, but will not offer the degree of sophistication suggested above. It is worth mentioning here that whilst some reporting is desirable it's unlikely (on historic and present evidence) that in Tynedale it is unlikely that there will be a level of response sufficient to warrant auto collation or aggregation. There are a number of 3rd party solutions that do offer some collation/aggregation and produce an instant response for site visitors. (SurveyMonkey is an example). This may not be the case in other areas. Without a doubt, the best way to find out is to try it.**
- Homepage and subsequent issue-based pages, maintained while issue is active and deleted thereafter, should be clear and easy to navigate. **Quite normal for a CMS web site to allow this. Most CMS web sites allow the manager/editor to enter start and expire dates for any web page on the site. Such web pages will not be published on the site until the start date (when they will simply appear) and will become hidden when the expiry date is reached.**
- Consideration should be given to possibility of attractive presentation of current themes, including photos etc, but must be aware of expense; **there is unlikely to be any expense associated with the presentation. It is sometimes necessary to purchase images, but in general images from stock photo libraries are not expensive. Where local and community web sites are concerned the need will almost certainly be for local images which in many instances can be obtained from local sources at no cost.**
- Must host PDFs, giving access to docs and executive summaries to download. A CMS will provide one or more document storage areas where files in most popular formats may be up and

downloaded. Access to such 'libraries' may be publicly accessible or available to registered users only.

- Forum 1: Immediate, restricted responses can be enabled by add-on Twitter, but 140 characters only - on its own not substantial enough (and not acceptable to many). Is it possible to have a "closed" Twitter group? **Perhaps the use of the word 'Forum' is misleading in this case. A Twitter type add-on may offer an instant response facility but a proper forum or discussion board allows not only instant responses, but also threaded conversations which are probably more appropriate.**
- Forum 2: Lengthier contributions Facebook group: working within access parameters dictated by Facebook is an issue, and must be aware that Facebook retains ownership of all content; so conversational capacities similar to Facebook but under CTCF authority are solution. **Perhaps this is a moment to suggest that it might not be necessary to create yet another means of communication.** Might be an idea to maintain a skeleton Facebook page referring enquirers to full website as FB is now a recognised information-seeking route. **This is a better solution to consider**
- Maintenance, support, hosting: **There are plenty of free (or very low cost) hosting offers although few offer a data back-up service – usually this is done manually by an appointed web master – particularly where a database is involved. Almost all free hosting imposes advertising on the web site. The better alternative is to use a local hosting company at a cost of about £100 a year. The peace of mind is invaluable and if there is a real problem someone is close at hand.**
- Some social networking platforms (e.g. ELGG, used by many British universities) are available free of charge, for others (e.g. SocialGo, very flexible and attractive) there is a hosting and maintenance fee (usually monthly). **ELGG would be totally inappropriate for this purpose. There are comments elsewhere in this document which refer to ELGG**
- **Domain name: It's really important to have a domain name which is the exclusive property of the organisation and reflects its nature and purpose.**
- **In the longer term it may be desirable to consider enriching the web site with more sophisticated features, particularly those which embrace the digital media and in turn may attract a younger audience of visitors to the site. Video streaming, podcasts of meetings or project descriptions would serve to widen public participation and a mobile version of the site for web enabled mobile phones could be considered. Email and SMS (text messaging on a mobile phone) alerts and reminders to registered users could be employed to generate and sustain an interest in the activities of the forum.**

Associated issues

Logo etc? For CTCF website and generally. **Essential!**

Hexham Courant: could be an opportunity for synergy, shared objective of wider involvement with the community etc.

Jim Bolland (NCC) also contributed a list of appropriate features, from which the following have been extracted.

- Statistics - allows the monitoring of the growth and effectiveness of each site. Google Analytics is free and would be fine. **The collection and analysis (from time to time) provides an immeasurable wealth of data to inform the future direction and content of the web site.**
- RSS (in and out) - Allows the sharing of content and (relevant) auto updating of content between websites
- Page creation - ability to easily create new web pages of information. **A CMS web site will provide exactly this feature.**
- Newsletters - create a regular news bulletin people can subscribe to (see above) or read when they visit the site. Newsletters are an excellent way of promoting the organisation and particularly its web site. As well as being visible on the web site, a newsletter can be emailed (at no cost) to a robust email list of registered users.
- Security - web sites must be backed-up nightly and continually patched (updated) to minimise the chance of the website being hacked (mutilated). The server must be located in the UK, in a secure data centre. **Applying security patches and backing up the data (the structure and the content of the web site) are essential tasks although nightly back ups are perhaps a**

little over enthusiastic. Hosting the web site on a secure UK server has a cost implication and is discussed earlier in this document.

- SLA - guarantee that the website will be online 99% of the time. **An SLA is a Service Level Agreement. An SLA on uptime is more of a marketing tool and not worth much as it isn't possible to insure against loss of business, only against the rental cost of the hosting. There are cases of web managers who have had their sites moved around as a result of a third party merger or upgrading the server infrastructure and have been unable to access their databases on and off for weeks. It's difficult to determine the value of an SLA in that situation.**
- Ad free - web site should be free of generic advertising such as Google adsense or similar networks. The revenue generated will be negligible and there is a danger of showing bias (at best) or displaying very unsuitable adverts (at worst).
- Accessibility – for those with poor computer skills, disabilities, impaired vision etc, there are ways of making web sites more easily accessible and compliance with W3C (the World Wide Web Consortium) 'AA' standard would ensure that all residents could participate equally.
- Content sharing - if several community forums were to use the same software, could they share content where appropriate, so that if it's updated on one site, it's updated on them all at the same time.

Long term implications for maintenance and upkeep

It is appreciated that many community forums exist on a minimal budget and some may have uncertain financial futures. This document has attempted to demonstrate that it is possible to create a web presence on a severely restricted budget. At a base level it is possible to establish and sustain a community web site at no cost, and with the support of well intentioned, trusted and enthusiastic volunteers it is possible to maintain it at no cost. But this is probably not without some degree of compromise. Server level backup, secure UK based servers, unique domain name would not be features of a no cost web site, but bear in mind that it may be possible to overcome some of this compromise by piggy-backing on an existing hosting arrangement.

Community forums which have established a budget, obtained sponsorship or some grant funding may develop a more sophisticated web site and may wish to pay for some web management. For a small web site this can be arranged locally for a figure of less than £100.00 a year based on updating simple pages and backing up the web site once a month.

Apart from the general weekly or monthly maintenance tasks it is worth considering an annual review of the web site appearance, features, layout and templates to ensure a level of vitality that attracts returning visitors.

For a community forum web site to have any lasting value its owners should consider the features and suggestions described in this document in the demographic context of their local population and the purpose they have in wishing to engage with them.

Further reading and/or research

Mashable – the Social media Guide:
Worth reading: pages on Social media
<http://mashable.com/>

Communities & neighbourhoods:
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/onlinesocialnetworks>

Northumberland Community Forum Support Group (registration required)
This site has been developed as a talking shop for those who are interested in Northumberland's Community Forums. It's a space where ideas, guidance, expertise and experience can be shared.
<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/landing-home.do?id=3762078>

Improvement and Development Agency (I&Dea):
<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=17797214>

Northumberland Strategic Partnership:
<http://www.nsp.org.uk>

Worth watching:

- Developments in media streaming as broadband speeds are increased
- Emerging technologies as the mobile web is developed
- Improvements and enrichment of social media technologies
- Increased adoption of social media (including networking) by older people
- Transfer of iPhone features to mainstream mobile phones
- Impact of Apple's iPad on the design and development of PCs and the ways in which PCs are used particularly by early adopters of emerging technologies
- **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)** has an excellent web site which monitors emerging and new technologies and their application in the real world. The three sections of the web site to watch are 'Computing', 'Web' and 'Communications'. It is possible to get a daily (or weekly) digest by email of current items. Many of the ideas are astonishingly sophisticated, but about one in three has some relevance to the mid term future of computing technology.
<http://www.technologyreview.com/>
- **FutureLab** - transforming the way people learn through innovative technology and practice. Futurelab's web site is a treasure trove of information and ideas about using technologies in education. The education sector is, after all, just a community – one which closely parallels the structure of community forums in many ways. Read it in the context of an ideas bank rather than about the ways in which education could make use of technologies.
<http://www.futurelab.org.uk>

What is a Content Management System?

A content management system is software which provides authoring, editing (and other) tools designed to allow users with little knowledge of programming languages or markup languages to create and manage the content of a web site with relative ease. The software resides on a server provided usually by a hosting company. Usually, all the pages are visible to the public. In some instances it may be desirable to permit authorized users to view pages with sensitive or private content. These are referred to as 'registered users' and are issued with a username and password to allow them access to the private pages.

Most systems use a database to store the content which is needed by the system and is displayed on the web pages. Content is stored in the database and brought to the screen as required by the user or visitor to a particular page.

Each web page is based on a template which determines the position of text and images, colours and lines. A presentation layer in the template displays the content to web-site visitors in a specific part of the web page.

Administration - creating and editing new pages is typically done through a normal browser – Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox for example. Most CMS web sites use a variation of a simple online word processor (just like Microsoft Word) to edit the text. If you can open a web browser and connect to the Internet, you will be able to contribute to a CMS web site! Administrators, editors, and authors may access the administration pages using a unique username and password which permits them to make authorized changes to the pages.

Unlike static web sites where the pages are built using programming code, a CMS allows non-technical users to make changes to a website with little, or often no, training.

A CMS typically requires an experienced coder to set up and add features, but is primarily a web site *maintenance* tool for non-technical administrators.

Most CMS software provides the tools for a basic working web site. There are usually a wide range of add on or plug in components to augment the features.

Much CMS software is Open Source and does not have a formal technical support mechanism. Almost always there is a community of users associated with a CMS who are willing to provide support through online forums or discussion groups