

Story: Keeping it fun with social media engagement

Using social media as a means of direct engagement is sometimes tricky. While it works well as one feedback mechanism among many, there is a balance to be struck between giving social media users a voice and allowing the discussion to be driven by platforms that are not representative of the wider community.

The recent trend among councils for giving residents a say on lighter issues is a good way to address this. A particularly strong example is the increasing number of social media driven campaigns, run at many councils, to name gritting lorries.

Oldham Council was among the first to gain publicity by doing this, allowing local children to name council gritters in 2016. A number of councils have followed suit, including Doncaster, Kent, Cumbria and the East Riding of Yorkshire.

These initiatives either used social media as the central channel for engagement, or as the main way of promoting other channels. In most cases there were high numbers of responses, with 500 potential gritter lorry names put forward in Shropshire, and over 2,000 people voting on the final outcome.

Clearly, these examples are a long way from the sharp end of engagement, and relate to decisions which carry little real-life consequence. The role of social media is by no means restricted to naming gritting lorries.

But the success of the exercises reveals a public appetite for positive dialogue, and lets the council demonstrate a broader ethos of interaction and engagement. Council staff can show their human side, generating positive news coverage and building relations with local people.

These factors support genuine consultation processes. By giving people a say and by recognising the role of social media as the everyday, human face of the council, they lay some of the foundations for more serious engagement.

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