

# How to make councillor surgeries more digitally connected

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*For me, technology has enhanced my work and provoked a channel shift in the way residents choose to contact me.*

- Cllr David Harrington



We now live in a world where for many local residents, almost all aspects of their lives are connected and experienced through the web. From shopping to socialising, through to community engagement and organising — for many residents, communicating, engaging and building relationships with one another through digital channels rather than face to face, has become the norm.

Many councillors have responded to this trend by setting up virtual surgeries targeted at more digitally-savvy groups, with great success. If that's something you feel you'd like to have a go at, that's great. But we also shouldn't overlook the importance of seeking out opportunities to make our in-person surgery events more connected and digitally interactive.

Read on to learn more about:

- key reasons why it's worth integrating digital into your in-person surgeries
- top tips for creating more connected surgery events

## Key benefits of using digital technology at surgery events

Thinking of ways to make your in-person surgeries more digitally connected can enhance them with new interactions and possibilities, such as:

- allowing residents to instantly look-up supporting information or evidence in relation to their concerns
- giving you the ability as a councillor to 'there and then' educate residents on useful online sources of support or demonstrate how to complete a useful task online
- bridging the gap between physical and virtual surgeries, by mixing in-person questions and interactions with questions fielded from online channels or vice-versa, bring the physical discussion to online channels.

## Top tips for creating well-connected surgery events

### Provide Wifi

The ability to always be connected — not only in the home but out and about — has become more an expectation than a 'nice to have'. These days, our decisions over whether to use public places such as cafés, bars or even a library can rest on whether they have a decent Wifi connection.

Some residents may expect the same from your surgery venue. If you host surgeries in spaces such as libraries, community halls, or schools, it's quite likely that they'd have a reliable Wifi connection available.

Get in touch with your contact at the venue and ask if it's okay for their Wifi network to be used. If so, request connection instructions, such as the Wifi network's name and the access password. Hand out those details to residents as they arrive or put up a temporary sign displaying Wifi details.

### **Consider providing computers or other connected devices**

It could be beneficial to have public computers available for residents to use during your surgery. Especially for more digitally-excluded groups, it may be an opportunity to educate them on ways of engaging with you or completing useful tasks online, beyond face to face meetings. Again, check-in with the venue to see if it would be okay for residents to use computers to look up information.

Alternatively, if computers aren't available at the venue, you could consider bringing a device or two along with you, such as a laptop or tablet. Being able to instantly look into supporting information in relation to a particular discussion or to demonstrate something online could be something that your residents really appreciate — however, do bear in mind the security implications of doing so and be careful of handing over your own devices.

### **Bring 'virtual' engagement into the room**

If you have a presence on social media, encouraging your networks to share their thoughts during the course of your in-person surgery can be a really great way of merging online and offline participation.

For instance, if you use Facebook or Twitter, you could invite anyone who can't make it in-person to post their questions and feedback over the course of the event. You could then put aside time to read out a selection at the venue and respond accordingly.

Online neighbourhood websites such as [Nextdoor](#) are also becoming increasingly popular and may provide a good source of discussion material in the room.








The benefits of doing this are two-fold. It's a superb way of bringing remote participants from social media 'into the room' and part of the physical discussion. But also, the process of making social media engagement part of the in-room discussion can be a nice way to demonstrate the power of digital to any excluded groups present in-person.

You could make this an informal reading out of online comments — or if you had the equipment to do so, you could even connect a laptop to a screen or projector and have all comments displayed on a screen behind you.

### **Conclusion**

The world has changed and digital interaction is now an everyday reality for many residents. Not only considering dedicated virtual experiences for these audiences but also considering ways of making your existing in-person surgeries more integrated with digital tech is an effective way of bridging the gap between web-savvy residents and more digitally-excluded groups.

### **Next steps**

-  [A guide to cyberbullying](#)
  -  [A guide to internet security](#)
  -  [How to set up and run your Facebook page](#)
  -  [How to build and manage your Twitter following](#)
  -  [How to signpost residents to digital skills support](#)
  -  [How to run a virtual surgery](#)
  -  [How to build and manage your Twitter following](#)
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