

How to run a virtual surgery

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Besides speaking to me whilst out in the community on a daily basis or at meetings, my residents largely contact me via email, social media and Skype as I hold regular online surgeries.

- Cllr David Harrington



As digital technology has reshaped how the world communicates, many councillors are taking up new ways of engaging with their residents via the web.

One particular initiative that many councillors are adopting to complement in-person surgeries, is the idea of running a 'virtual surgery' via popular web applications and social media.

Many virtual surgeries have been well-received by residents and have added a new dimension to councillor's community engagement and relations.

Read on to learn more about:

- what a virtual surgery is and why they're worth considering
- the most common online channels through which you could run a virtual surgery
- top tips to effectively promote and run your virtual surgery sessions effectively

What is a virtual surgery?

They have gone exceptionally well. In fact we have had more people tuning in to these (virtual surgeries) than have ever turned up to off line meetings where it is generally the same faces that attend. It has helped extend our reach into the community and get a wider set of viewpoints from residents.

- Cllr Paul Deach

Virtual surgeries are basically a dedicated online feedback and communication channel set up by councillors for residents to engage with them in the exact fashion as would be expected at in-person surgeries.

Some of the benefits of setting up online surgeries in addition to offline surgeries, are that they

- reach a far greater volume of people than is usually possible at in-person events
- increase choice and flexibility for residents who wish to engage with their councillor but might struggle to attend in-person
- create a greater diversity of feedback from a wider range of social groups and backgrounds than would be traditionally expected in-person.

Even if you don't consider yourself to be a digital whizz, setting up a virtual surgery needn't be complicated. In fact, many would argue that they're far easier to set up than in-person surgeries. Let's take a look at some of the typical channels and techniques for getting a virtual surgery up and running...

Key options to consider

Skype surgeries

[Skype](#) is probably the most common channel of choice for councillor virtual surgeries, owing to it being low maintenance to set up and feeling slightly more closed and controlled than public-facing social networks such as Twitter and Facebook.

Setting up a Skype virtual surgery is as easy as:

- [registering a Skype account](#) (if you don't already have one)
- deciding on a convenient time to allocate for your virtual surgery
- promoting your virtual surgery time to residents via your website, social media accounts and wider channels, with joining instructions (some councillors book individual appointments in advance, others take more of an ad-hoc approach and tell residents, "I'll be available to talk on Skype between the hours of x and y, every Thursday evening")
- Remember to log-in and make yourself available on Skype at the allotted time.

Facebook surgeries

[Facebook](#) can be a great tool for engaging with your residents on a more flexible ad-hoc basis. In some ways, if you set up a public Facebook page, then you're essentially setting up an ongoing 'virtual surgery' with the community, as anyone is welcome to leave comments and feedback at whatever time they feel like.

There are some obvious pros and cons to that. On the one hand, going down this route allows for far more flexibility than Skype, where you have to promise to 'be there' at a particular time, whereas with Facebook, there's less of an expectation for responses to be immediate.

On the other hand, choosing a far more public forum does leave you more exposed to public criticism and comments you'd prefer not to have shared with wider audiences. However, for many residents these days, public figures willing to open up discussion online can be seen as an act of transparency and a show of accountability to the people they serve.

Setting up a Facebook virtual surgery is as easy as:

- registering a Facebook account (if you don't already have one)
- setting up a Facebook page and promoting it to your residents
- regularly post on your page, including regular invitations for feedback or a dedicated 'virtual surgery' post for residents to post their concerns (either at a specific time, or over the course of a particular day)
- regularly monitor the page's activity, including all public comments, and respond accordingly.

Twitter surgeries

In a similar vein to Facebook, [Twitter](#) is a good option for more flexible, ongoing engagement with your community if you're comfortable with using an even more public channel (including both the rewards and challenges outlined above, that come with it).

In fact, Twitter is used as far more of a real-time communication tool than Facebook, so do be prepared for the expectation of prompt responses to incoming comments, if you opt for Twitter.

Setting up a Twitter virtual surgery can be as easy as:

- registering a Twitter account (if you don't already have one)
- regularly tweeting from your account, including regular invitations for feedback from residents, which could take the form of a 'Live Twitter surgery Q&A' at an allotted time, or more of an informal ad-hoc approach to engagement with your followers
- regularly monitoring activity, including any tweets directly addressed to your account or messages, and responding accordingly.

Top tips on running virtual surgeries

The (virtual) surgeries have gone well. They don't require complicated kit — just a laptop or tablet and a wifi connection is all that's needed. The best location to run them from is somewhere comfortable.

- Cllr Anthony McKeown

Before you get going, here are some key things to consider:

- **Choose a channel you're comfortable with and can easily maintain:** if you've never really used Facebook and Twitter, it's probably best to get started with Skype and build online engagement options from there. Social media accounts require ongoing monitoring and maintenance, so it's always sensible to first assess the resources you have available to keep on top of an online community, before committing.
- **Strike the right tone and style of communication online :** web communication is often going to be less formal and more conversational than in-person meetings. Obviously, as a public figure, you're expected to maintain an air of authority and professionalism — however, do try to strike an approachable tone. Sounding overly formal can be perceived by some seeming 'stiff' or 'not real', especially on social media networks.
- **Moderate and be safe:** one of the most obvious risks to running virtual surgeries is being vulnerable to attacks, in terms of both the content of comments you may receive along the way, and security breaches. Ensure you use a secure password and internet connection. And if you feel that any inappropriate content is being posted on your channels, always flag it and moderate if necessary. See our guides on internet security and cyberbullying for further guidance.

Conclusion

As more and more residents turn to online channels as their primary form of communication, providing online alternatives to the traditional in-person surgeries are becoming increasingly necessary.

The idea of setting up a 'virtual surgery' might at first seem a little bit daunting. But hopefully this guide has provided some pointers on how to get started.

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 make councillor surgeries more digitally connected](#)
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