

Briefing: Building trusting citizen relationships with the help of AI: Open Council Network case study

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Summary

How can AI be harnessed for the public good? That's one of the key questions on everyone's mind as we consider AI's potential for the future of local government.

[The Open Council Network](#) offers a powerful example through its pioneering approach to increasing transparency between councils and citizens. It's all about rebuilding trust.

Founded by Toby Abel, the Open Council Network uses AI to transform how council information is shared and consumed, ultimately strengthening democratic participation at the local level.

In this case study, you'll discover a practical example of how AI can solve a social problem. We'll cover the wider context, goals, approach, and results. Plus, you'll learn a few practical lessons of AI use for councillors.

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Briefing in full

AI for the public good

There's a lot of hype about AI, but what does it mean for public services? In a recent speech, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer suggested the potential is to not only deliver productivity promises but also to [humanise services](#).

Yet questions remain about how AI can be used ethically and responsibly. The recent [Public Attitudes to Data and AI](#) survey found that while people believe it has the potential to benefit society, there's growing scepticism about how it will actually be used.

The [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#) calls out the chance to 'shape the AI revolution on principles of shared economic prosperity, improved public services and increased personal opportunities.' At a deeper level, the race for AI is a scramble to ensure it's used in line with the British values of democracy.

The state of democracy

This links to bigger questions about the state of democracy in 2025. In a recent speech, Vice President of the United States, JD Vance accused the UK and Europe of [backsliding on free speech](#) and its democratic values. While his remarks were [criticised](#) by European leaders, they touched a raw nerve. According to the [British Social Attitudes](#) survey, trust in British politics is at a record low. These issues of democracy, transparency, and trust are central to the vision behind The Open Council Network.

The challenge: A growing disconnect

Communication is at the heart of the relationship between councils and residents. Yet Abel noticed a growing disconnect. "While there is a legal duty to publish council meetings, the materials are often inaccessible." Crucial decisions are buried within lengthy transcripts or hours-long video recordings.

Wider social changes have negatively impacted communication. Traditional reporting on council activities has declined with cuts to local journalism. Plus, this information has to compete with thousands of other demands on people's attention. Cutting through the noise is increasingly difficult.

Abel founded The Open Council Network to bridge that gap. "Local authorities

spend about 12% of the UK government budget or roughly 5p of every pound that's earned in the UK, yet the vast majority of people have no idea who their local councillors are, or what they're currently doing," says Abel.

"I felt this situation was bad for democracy. It creates a sense of powerlessness – that government is done to people. Transparency and the ability to hold councils to account is good for councils and the public alike," he adds. The aim of the Open Council Network is to address the feelings of powerlessness and resolve that disconnect.

The approach: AI-powered transparency

AI's capabilities in quickly transcribing and summarising information presented a potential solution. There was an opportunity to turn council meeting minutes and videos into more digestible formats for modern audiences.

Drawing on his technology background, he developed a solution to make information about councils accessible to the public. It features:

1. **Comprehensive data collection:** The Open Council Network platform scrapes information from council meetings across the UK, including video recordings and report packs.
2. **AI-generated summaries:** Instead of wading through hundreds of pages of transcripts, citizens can read a 300-word summary in two minutes.
3. **Targeted distribution:** Rather than expecting citizens to seek out information, the Open Council Network considers where they are already consuming it. The approach includes:
 - Weekly email newsletters that people can subscribe to for their council;
 - Regular Reddit posts targeting local community groups with short one-line summaries for quick consumption;
 - Engagement with local journalists to give them the resources and information they need to stay informed about council activities across their beat.

The approach recognises that effective transparency isn't a box-ticking exercise. Instead, it produces information in formats citizens can easily consume.

The implementation: From developing to scaling

There were three main stages to the implementation:

1. Planning

The Open Council Network started by engaging with councils and local journalists. The initial phase also focused on laying the right foundations for the technology.

2. Development

The next stage was about testing the AI model. It was important to check the accuracy of the information as errors risked undermining trust. At first, The Open Council Network noticed issues with hallucinations and made tweaks to the system to mitigate the risk. This soon became less of a problem thanks to rapid developments in the underlying open-source AI model.

3. Deployment

The initial deployment started small with a focus on a few London councils. The Open Council Network's reach continues to expand, with residents and councillors submitting requests to cover their area.

Results: Rebuilding trust in democracy

While still in the early stages, the Open Council Network is already showing impressive results.

Approximately 30,000 people read these local council summaries each week. Citizens report feeling more informed about local authority activities. Reddit communities have responded enthusiastically, with comments like:

'This is awesome [...]The councils are the most direct arms of government that citizens see. Having better visibility into what they are doing and being able to influence their decisions will make a difference in the outlook and perception of how things are going.'

'You're doing fantastic work here! I've shared this with all of my friends and family, and they feel the same. People need to feel more connected to their government, and this is definitely helping.'

Working with University College London, the Open Council Network is developing new measures of transparency and participation that focus on outcomes rather than inputs.

‘Transparency shouldn’t mean counting how many things are published. Instead, we should measure whether people affected by a policy know about it, understand it and have had the opportunity to shape it,’ says Abel.

Feedback suggests that providing information in a digestible format helps residents better understand the nuances of council decision-making. For example, one person commented on Reddit:

“Upon further reading of [the] council planning decision, the news isn’t as negative as it seems [... it’s] a good use to turn grey/industrial land into new property. Interesting call-out on how the council is challenging developers.”

Greater transparency can strengthen relationships, even in scenarios where councils are making difficult decisions.

The Open Council Network continues to evolve its services with plans to expand its reach. It’s also looking at developing AI-powered tools to help councillors quickly gather information and support decision-making.

Challenges and lessons learned for councillors

The Open Council Network project offers valuable insights for councils with ambitions to use AI for the public good:

1. **AI for social good:** Technology can strengthen democracy when applied thoughtfully to solving social problems. It’s important to get clarity about your goals and align with companies with shared values.
2. **Meet citizens where they are:** Publishing materials on council websites only reaches the already-engaged. It’s essential to meet citizens where they are to avoid the echo chamber effect. Forums like Reddit can help councillors reach new groups.
3. **Information is not enough:** The amount of ads people see each day is overwhelming. It’s not enough to publish information – councils must present it in digestible formats to engage citizens or risk becoming disconnected.
4. **Measure outcomes, not activities:** A narrow focus on counting how much information is published risks missing the point. New measures need to be developed that consider the extent to which citizens feel they have a say over what happens in their area.
5. **Lay the right foundations:** It’s essential to get the right processes and systems in place to use AI ethically and responsibly. It’s about doing due diligence and checking the results to build trust.

- **Replace, not augment human capabilities:** It's essential to keep a human in the loop to maintain public trust. In this example, AI was used to produce digestible information at scale and help journalists hold councils to account.
- **Managing risks:** The risks of using AI should be weighed against the risks of not using it. In this case, the possibility of losing the connection with residents represented a far greater threat. The Open Council Network used technical checks to mitigate against inaccuracies.

Conclusion: Strengthening democracy with AI

As AI transforms society, the Open Council Network demonstrates how this technology can strengthen democratic institutions. It provides an example of how councils can effectively manage the risk of inaccuracies and use AI responsibly and safely.

AI can rebuild trust between citizens and local government by making council activities more accessible, transparent, and engaging. For councillors looking to improve engagement and trust with residents, this approach offers a promising model that puts technology in service of the social good. As Abel notes, 'You don't want to feel like you're underneath a power you have no control over. Knowing what's going on changes the relationship and builds trust.'

Find out more

- Find out more about how The Open Council Network can help you rebuild trust with residents on their [website](#).
- See more AI [case studies and resources](#) for local government.

Share your examples of AI in local government

Are you pioneering the use of AI in local government? [Share your story](#) for the chance to get the recognition you deserve. We'll showcase the best ones on our website.