

## Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy: Digital Scrutiny

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I am submitting views based on evidence, and experience, gathered by [streetlife.com](http://streetlife.com).

Streetlife is a London technology company operating the UK's largest local social network, [streetlife.com](http://streetlife.com). Having begun as a start up in Battersea in 2010, Streetlife now has 11 full time employees and over 125,000 users.

The website groups and connects all users by postcode, thus recreating real communities, online. Users can view, contribute to, and start pan-community conversations, enabling them to engage their community, and keep up to date with what is going on, without the need for existing neighbourhood networks or relationships.

Streetlife conversations are all about local topics and issues –with this being the only subject that users know is guaranteed to be relevant. Examples range from recommendations for local businesses; to conversations about the future of the local pub to discussions about access to council houses or concerns about GP practices.

As we all know, debates about local problems and solutions are the fundamental basis of all politics – the first principle from which all institutions, ideologies and powers extend. This is why 15 MPs are currently using the site to listen and talk to their constituents.

- **The role of technology in helping Parliament and other agencies to scrutinise the work of government**

Streetlife is used by MPs to crowd source feedback, experiences and opinions about local services. This allows them, along with local authorities, charities and other organisations, to better scrutinise government's work, armed with relevant and wide ranging evidence of the impact it is having in communities.

This is best illustrated with an example. In January 2014 Douglas Carswell MP asked his constituents on Streetlife for their views and experiences of GP practices in Clacton to help inform his ongoing discussions with ministers. His post took only a few minutes, went to nearly 1,000 constituents and, within a few days, generated 41 responses from Clacton residents.

<https://www.streetlife.com/conversation/2ptwlmypvpzw/>

We have seen our technology making it possible to have more conversations, reach beyond traditional community leaders and engage people who are not actively involved in local politics – but who have views on matters that are relevant to government. Better still, technology means this can be done faster, and with greater convenience for all parties and groups.

- **The role of technology in helping citizens to scrutinise the Government and the work of Parliament**

Streetlife connects constituents to MPs, and other government bodies, without relying on the citizen to consciously decide to first contact, subscribe, Follow or Like a particular politician. This makes it easier for citizens to see, and appreciate, the work being done by their MP which in turn makes them feel closer to their elected representatives.

Community wide conversations on our site frequently centre on problems, issues and ideas that are pure politics – that is, local issues to which a solution needs to be agreed, coordinated and implemented. Examples include concerns with local housing, hospital closures, boarded up high street shops or the provision of rural bus routes. These are all seen by MPs using our site, who can in turn join in and respond. Not only does this make it easier for local representatives to understand the issues at the fore of constituents' minds, but it gives them a fast and far reaching platform from which to join in the conversation and, importantly, tell the community what is being done about it.

Scrutiny of the work being done by government and parliament is offered readily on Streetlife, as our platform allows communities to share experiences and spread information. Since this is being done at a local level, feedback, criticism and praise is specific and relevant. This makes it easier for MPs to respond and take action – be it to correct a problem or extend good practice. Since these scrutinising Conversations are seen by thousands of people in the community with, sometimes, hundreds of contributors, it has a weight and prominence that gives it real traction.

An interesting feature of the political conversations and interactions on Streetlife has been all users' almost complete focus on hyper-local matters. There is little interest in national policy or party politics. Instead, conversations are all about real local issues – pubs closing, dangerous road layouts, poor GP surgeries – which makes it much easier for an MP to respond and discuss the specifics of the problem and explain their solution.

The focus on local extends to MPs themselves. For example, all MPs using Streetlife have turned down the chance to use any sort of bespoke MP profile. This is because they all realise that their impact is greatest when they are seen on the site as just another resident, whose job it is to represent his or her neighbours in Westminster, instead of being an agent of Parliament in a particular community.

We have seen plenty of evidence to show this is true. When MPs join in a Conversation as a local offering solutions, they get a generally great response, regardless of peoples' party loyalty or view of national politics. Their presence on site, contribution to the issue and hard work for the constituency, is widely appreciated. This makes Streetlife a terrific way of re-engaging those users disinterested in national politics, as MPs are able to show the real and relevant work they are doing locally.

Technology, like ours, has a great role to play in empowering voters, increasing cross community citizen scrutiny and showing MPs as real residents working hard for their neighbours, instead of generic politicians. The more MPs who use Streetlife, the more this impact will be spread across the country.

- **The nature and format of information and data about Parliament and government that is published online**

Streetlife makes it easier for MPs to disseminate information about their work to people whom they know live in their constituency. Our users are often unaware of the hard work being done in their name by Parliament and government, which often fuels an avoidable feeling of apathy and contempt amongst voters.

Relevant local information about the work going on in Parliament, and government, explained through real dialogue online has already been well received by Streetlife users. A great example of this can be seen below, where Sadiq Khan MP explains to Streetlife users the powers available to reduce the growth of betting shops in his constituency, and the work he will be doing to with government on the matter.

<https://www.streetlife.com/conversation/2vta0dm7uq6gg/2/#comment-28>

Mr Khan explains this information in a way that is easy to understand, relevant and locally specific. As a result, dry content that would have gone unnoticed by busy voters becomes something that has meaning. The engaging, conversational, nature in which this is explained should be applied to more of government's and Parliament's data and information.

Voters do not have the time, inclination or know how to seek out relevant information published in obscure locations – however they are interested in the content. Therefore, now the technology exists, sites like ours should be used by Parliament and other bodies to make local and relevant information available to those citizens who are most affected, in a context they can relate to.