

InTransition Episode 69 – Catherine Staite

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've been able to spare some time to spend with me today. Today, we travel to the UK to speak to one of the most influential people in local government in the UK. Before I introduce her, as we do each week, I will speak about the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the public sector. It's important that we do define just exactly what content marketing is so we can understand what the practice is all about.

Content marketing is a strategic, measurable, and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent contents. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and or stakeholder outcome. Our guest today is Catherine Staite who is the director of the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham in England. The mission of her university's department is to bridge the gap between local government research and practice. Prior to working at INLOGOV at the University of Birmingham, Catherine was the director of Organisational Development and Policy for OPM, an independent research and consultancy institute for public sector leaders, policy makers, and regulators.

Catherine has held roles including non-executive director of a high-security British hospital, vice chair of a healthcare trust, and a member of the board of visitors for a local prison. In 2015, Catherine Staite was ranked in the top 100 most influential people in local government in the UK by the Local Government Chronicle. Catherine Staite, thanks very much for joining us in Transition.

Catherine Staite: Thank you.

David Pembroke: Catherine, what is it that intrigues you or compels you to be so interested and work in local government?

Catherine Staite: I think local government has a huge amount of potential to work with local people, to enable everybody to make their lives better. In the past, local government has been somewhat trapped in the old paternalistic model of public services. In recent years, particularly in the UK with austerity and a shortage of funding, local government had to get better at working with local people to co-produce and co-create services and to make local areas better places to live. I've always been impressed by the capacity of local government to adapt and change to changing circumstances.

In UK, it is the most efficient part of the public service, much more efficient for example than the NHS. It's often underrated by central government who liked to hold the reigns and the purse strings and therefore, local government is often frustrated in what it can do but then, it continues to impress me about how it makes the best of that situation and still can have a really, really huge beneficial impact on people's lives.

David Pembroke: What is it that drives that particular productivity or efficiency and effectiveness in that relationship between local government and the citizens?

Catherine Staite: I think some of it is driven by austerity. I think it isn't possible anymore for local government to provide all of the services it used to provide. Those services which are ... It isn't obliged to provide by statute. It's looking at innovative ways of working with local people to deliver them and that includes, for example, libraries, many of which are now run by volunteers. Without those volunteers, the libraries would simply have to close because there just wasn't enough money to keep them going.

I'm working with local people to improve areas doing some environmental clean-ups and that sort of thing. Local authority can provide a little bit of money and a little bit of leadership. Often, that's all that's needed to galvanise people interaction and in the past wherein it seemed as though the local authority was responsible for everything, there wasn't much space for people to make a contribution. Now, everybody knows that times are hard in terms of local government and therefore, it seems much easier to get people involved because they appreciate how important it is. If it's a service that they really value like libraries, for example, they will put their heart and soul into helping it survive.

David Pembroke: Are you surprised by that paradox that with less money has come stronger communities?

Catherine Staite: No, I'm not surprised at all because necessity ... They were saying necessity is the mother of invention. Also I think in the past, there was a sense almost that it was the job of the local authority to provide everything and therefore there was no space for people to use their creativity. Often, people in need of services were viewed as a bundle of needs and lacks of things and now, there's much more recognition that even in relatively deprived communities, there may be a huge amount of community capacity that made really, really strong community links which can be used to enable people to reach out to, for example, the elderly isolated or families with small children.

There's better understanding that you don't need professionals to do everything. Lots of the work of making a community better can be done by the community itself although I do feel that many of the core services from local government have really suffered through central government cuts. For example, especially social care for older people. I do think that some of the pressures the austerity has brought has led to some greater creativity, but it's still patchy. There are pockets of excellence and there are areas where people would still look at you blankly if you said something like you could co-produce better outcomes with your community. They would simply think it couldn't be done.

One of the good things about local government in the UK is they do share knowledge and good practice with each other. Often, one local authority may be

behind a curve with picking up ideas from another and working about how they can do it. Local authorities do welcome other authorities to go and visit them and find out how they're doing it so that they can learn. We still suffer a little bit from the old not invented here syndrome, so sometimes people are resistant to change because they didn't think of it first. I think that the way in which local governments shares means that there's really no way to hide now for local authority that isn't starting to think in an innovative and creative way.

David Pembroke: Catherine, you're painting a very vivid picture of how things are changing and obviously, these changes are also taking place at a time of dramatic change in terms of technology and the ability of councils to communicate with citizens and citizens to communicate with councils. Obviously, that is the focus of this podcast where we're trying to look at best practice and the way again, that 2-way communication can take place more effectively. What are some of your observations as to how communication has been able to be employed in order to improve or achieve some of these improvements?

Catherine Staite: I think it's still very early days. I think local government is still very much in transmit mode rather than receive mode. I think some of the way in which social media and technology is being used is for giving information and alerting people to things they need to know. Also, it's being used for some of the basic everyday things like reporting faults online and that sort of thing. It's not yet being utilised very effectively, in my opinion, to underpin a dialogue between local government and the people it serves. I think in some ways, there's some good beginnings but I think there's still a long way to go.

David Pembroke: What would you put down that reluctance to adopt that dialogue as opposed the transmission approach?

Catherine Staite: I think it's because if you think about elected members, elected councillors in the UK, they tend to be much older than the average population. I think the average age of an elected member is in the 60s somewhere so they are ... Being older, they tend to be more reluctant to adopt new technologies and new ways of working. Because they're nervous of using it, they're resistant and because they lack confidence, they don't see the potential.

Also, I think there's a fear that a local issue may get completely out of hand. It may be trending on Twitter or a group of people will set up a Facebook group and all of a sudden, instead of having conversations with individual people, I think some of those older members feel they don't know how to deal with that. They don't know how to respond to it. They're quite defensive and they're on the back foot. They're reactive rather than proactive.

Even though the service providing side of a local authority is getting it better at engaging with people about practical everyday things, members aren't very good at engaging with people and using the technology. For example, they will live stream council meetings but that's a very, very passive thing. A member of the public

couldn't dive in and ask a question. I think they need to better understand the advantages of social media in order to be able to use it because members get very, very busy. If they were better at using social media, we'd actually probably save them time but somewhere along ... They have a steep learning curve and many of them are so resistant to change that it is very, very hard to get them to do it.

David Pembroke: In your research and in your conversations with these elected members, this notion of resistance, it obviously sounds like it's pretty strong.

Catherine Staite: It is because a lot of people come in to local politics to make a difference and they think that they will make a difference by influencing the way that services are delivered. To use a really, really basic example, in the past, members have been approached by residents when the rubbish bin hasn't been collected which is something very, very trivial but members would then think right, I will go find the office of concern and I will say somebody needs to send out another van to collect this bin. Then they would feel they've done a good job. In actual fact, all they're doing is managing a little bit fairly demand. They weren't making any real difference, but that was the sort of thing they thought that made them useful and made them feel good about themselves.

If you say well, actually we've got to have to really difficult conversations with people who live in this area because we cannot do, we cannot repair all the roads or we cannot keep all these libraries open, we have to make a choice. Instead of being able to use social media to engage in a much more deliberative dialogue with people, then often what members do is they retreat to a point of view where they think, "Right, we'll make a decision and I will just deal with the fallout afterwards." That misses an opportunity, first of all, to make a better because they may not really understand the impact of the decision if they don't talk to people. Also, it loses them an opportunity to engage with people who might well have been happy to come forward and offered some assistance or at least would've understood better the difficult nature of the choices.

I think that one of the big problems we have in the UK is recruiting people to become local authority members and it's difficult for somebody to do who as a full time job. There's a tendency for it to be people who are retired and older. Until we can get more younger people into it or until we can give some of those older members the confidence to use social media, I don't think this problem will be resolved.

David Pembroke: Do you think it's just a point in time and that the education will come and as older people adopt social media and adopt new technologies further, that that may accelerate and that problem could be addressed?

Catherine Staite: In theory, that makes sense but because a lot of these members will carry on until they're in their 80s or older, and so I don't think they're going to change. In a way, I think it will be a very, very slow transition. The only other, I think, thing which might make a difference is if local authority officers get better at using it for

dialogue and then they relay those messages to members and our members see the value of it. At the moment, it's quite difficult for officers to make a whole scale change unless members are willing to go along with it.

I remember a few years ago when local authorities decided that they would go paperless and they would give all their members iPads or laptops and email out all the papers to meetings because some of the big planning applications and so forth could be stacks and stacks of paper. Some of the local authorities that I worked with, several members seemed to refuse to do it. They seemed to refuse to use a laptop. They insisted on paper. It is very, very hard because the relationship between officers and members is such that it is often very hard for offices to tell members what to do because technically, the members are in charge. This sort of change can be very, very difficult to do but I do think that it's really up to officers to take their lead and where they have, I think they found it extremely useful.

David Pembroke: Do you find that amongst those officers that there is that sharing of best practice that you are mentioning before?

Catherine Staite: Yes. Oh yes, I think so because local government is recognised by our trade press as it were, the Local Government Chronicle and the Municipal Journal, and some of the more academic journals that are around, they like to highlight best practice. The Local Government Chronicle and the Municipal Journal run competitions every year with a number of categories including about local government communications with its residents. If people are doing good work, they will put themselves forward for an award and that will showcase what they've done. In some ways, it becomes self-evident as it becomes done more.

David Pembroke: It's interesting now, isn't it, that given the ubiquity of technology and the abundance of channels and the usefulness that it can play that perhaps it's not reaching its potential because of some of those areas that you outlined before. Are there any other ideas that you might have to how you could accelerate that adoption so that you do see some of the best practice or could you describe some of those better practices that you have seen and you have researched?

Catherine Staite: We actually teach because we teach postgraduate programs. We teach master's in public administration and an MSA in public management. We actually do teach a module which is managing in the digital age which is all about how technology can support the work of local government. That's a very popular course and we're actually considering running that not a sort of master's module but opening up more widely as an executive development course. Anybody who works in local government could take the course.

We're also taking our teaching online. We run an online MPA and an online MSA. We are running programs using that technology and so that means that we are opening up the knowledge that we have and sharing it much more widely with people all around the world. I think that we learn from our students and they bring their best practice to us and share it with our fellow students and also share it

through us. We hope in our small way that we are actually going to be able to provide people with the knowledge and the confidence that they need in order to make the best use of technology in the interest of the people they serve.

David Pembroke: It's an interesting point and I just wonder, what are your observations then around the skills of the council offices in their ability to be able to create the video and the audio and the photos and the text and the graphics and their ability to distribute that? Are you seeing improvements in that area?

Catherine Staite: I think it's very hard because I think it's often what the things that people are learning themselves almost in their spare time. My husband's a local authority chief executive and he spent a lot of his time online trying out new things. I think it's just an excuse to avoid housework and stuff. Nobody's teaching him. He's finding his way himself. I think also that because a lot of the support services that have been cut in local government have been around communications whereas in the past, you might've hired somebody you could turn to and say, "Oh, I need to make a video of this thing or I need to upload some audio explaining something. His first language isn't English so that they can hear it in their own language and this sort of thing." The people who used to be there to do that sort of thing for you aren't there now.

I think there is a bit of a skills gap. Lots of people like my husband who is not in the first flush of youth, I must say, are learning how to do things differently. I've been on that learning journey myself because of developing the online material. I have to learn how to make short videos, how to make a short audio, how our teaching materials are turned into animations, and how short videos and all that sort of thing and the use of infographics. We've had to learn how to do that and so I think I understand how difficult that can be.

I do think having a core set of people within an organisation who it's their job to support people to translate their material into messages or content which is going to be of use either in terms of information or other purposes to the people who live in an area. I think that that would be hugely, hugely helpful if there was a pool of those people that offices could draw on.

David Pembroke: It's the eternal lament of this podcast really though that communications is not particularly valued or not understood in terms of its ability to understand the needs of citizens from that behavioural science point of view but in that production and delivery of useful, relevant, and consistent content. Would you agree that it's not a priority and it's unlikely to be priority anytime soon?

Catherine Staite: Oh, absolutely. In fact, I think it's even worse than that. I think comms people are often treated with distrust by their own organisation because often, they're telling people things they don't want to hear. Recently in the area where I live, the county council made an enormous faux pas as they decided that anybody who wanted to take their rubbish to the local tip, they had to be registered online. There was no information in advance about why the change is being made and there was no

evidence that people from neighbouring areas were sneaking into Nottinghamshire and dumping their stuff in Nottinghamshire. There was no good reason for it. It was a huge, huge hassle and the technology didn't work and they've had to abandon it but they have lost so much public goodwill because of it because it's such a ... They made so many stupid mistakes.

Now, if they've had gone to their comms people and said, "Look, we want to make a difficult change. We want to change behaviour. How do we understand what's driving the behaviour currently and how do we work out what are the changes that might help us get people to dump their rubbish differently?" Then they would've started from the right starting point, but what they did was they started from this furious solution to a non-existed problem and then try to apply technological solution to that non-existent problem and cause people no end of bother. That's something that's just happened in the area where I live in the last couple of months. That's not historical example, it's still going on.

I think the county council probably got rid of most of its communications people as part of the austerity measure because it would never have understood just how important those people were to it doing a good job as an organisation. What you end up with not is often what's left in communications functions in local authority are fairly junior people who maybe doing it as part of another job and they may have done graphic design level or something so they maybe ... The person doing leaflets or posters but they're not actually ... They don't have any fundamental understanding of communications and PR at all. I think as long as people don't recognise the importance of the function, they'll carry on making expensive mistakes because of their lack of that specialist expertise which who could've helped them do the right thing.

David Pembroke: A beggars belief really when you consider that most of these people who you speak about in these leadership positions are very intelligent people and they understand generally what's going on and they understand the impact of technology and they're in leadership positions, but then there is this lack of respect and there is this suspicion. I find it difficult to bring the two together.

Catherine Staite: Yeah, I think that's right but I think you've got to remember the dichotomy between the political and the managerial. A chief executive of a local authority would want to have kept their communications people because they would've seen the value of them. The politicians would've thought we've got to make cuts first where our voters won't notice. Before we cut street lighting or road repairs or bin collections or services to older people or children's day centres, before we cut any of that, we'll get rid of everything that we call back office. We'll get rid of as many of the support functions as we can and then doing that, we'll be saving some money. That's the mistake, was not understanding that some of those back office functions actually support the really important things. You can't dispense with them at no cost and have no problem as a result. I think the offices, the paid staff will have had that argument with the members and they will have lost it.

It's the same in terms of investing in talent, spotting talent management, retaining good staff. The math shows you that that is always worth doing but the members will think that money spent on training and developing and supporting their staff in the use of social media or other things is a waste of money because it isn't directly impacting on services because they cannot see the connection between the value that having talent, retaining talent brings you as an organisation.

Now that's not true of all. Many local authorities are exemplary in a sense in the way in which they develop and support their staff and maintain a support services so that they have a balanced organisation. For many, particularly the smaller ones, the district councils, the politicians don't get that at all and they feel that they're making the right decision in getting rid of those functions because they're thinking doing that, they're actually saving services. In the long run, they're actually making it harder for those services to function.

David Pembroke: What's the way back or what's the way forward? I suppose from what this reality of where you say many in those smaller district councils, where is the path back for communications?

Catherine Staite: Well, I think more and more of the smaller councils are beginning to share services so that where skills were in short supply or they don't have enough money to employ a person themselves, what they're doing is looking at how they can work across a number of a number of cluster councils, number of councils together and maybe share a communications facility. That's one way forward. Another is, I think, just seeing the change. I think it's challenging for local authorities that are behind in the curve, they certainly see other people in neighbouring authorities or other places like them elsewhere in the country are doing interesting things and I think that creates a pressure for change.

Then I think champions. There are a number of leading chief executives who are really champions of the use of technology and social media and they are often called on speaker conferences. They're getting their message out. I think things are changing but we also are going through another process of upheaval and change in the UK, particularly in England which is around the devolution of powers to clusters of local authorities. In places like Manchester and around, but all of the local authorities around Birmingham are now part of a combined authority. Now, the combined authority does have a communications function because those people recognise the importance of it.

I think as local authorities come together more and share more, I think it will have more impact because I think people will recognise the importance of it. At the same time, it's likely that we may end up with another round of reorganisation which will mean that a lot of those small authorities will cease to exist and larger unitary councils will be formed. Again, once you get in of a critical mass, it's much easier to be able to afford the support services that you need.

David Pembroke: Indeed, but you get further away from the people.

Catherine Staite: I don't think so at all.

David Pembroke: Oh, you don't. Okay.

Catherine Staite: I disagree. I think that that's a myth because I think a local authority which is really, really good at communicating with its people can be big and efficient. It doesn't have to be remote. Social media is actually, and technology, is what helps that to be true. It was harder in the past if you had a large local authority. It might seem remote and the way that the authorities used to try and overcome that would be by having local residents' forums, local officers that people could go in to pay their council tax and that sort of thing.

Now, it could all be done online. You can actually communicate with somebody who is many miles away from you instantaneously, and so the local authority should seem closer to you because it's in your living room or in your car or whatever. I'm a really, really strong proponent and the evidence, I think, backs this up that large local authorities need not be remote at all. I think that the area that they cover has to mean something to people. There has to be some sort of historical or geographical relevance to the area that they cover. Basically, I don't think it's necessary for them to be small in order for them to feel local and relevant.

David Pembroke: Sure, but you're not arguing that it's time to do away with face to face communication. There still has to be that face to face component to any sort of engagement with the citizens.

Catherine Staite: Oh, absolutely. I think that's right and I think we use a source of a development ... to look at the types of communication that local authorities have with people from a long spectrum from giving them information through to a situation where they actually delegate responsibilities to citizens. The further you get towards the delegation under the spectrum, the more important it is that you have really that strong face to face connections with the residents who are working alongside the council. Also, I think people who are vulnerable, people with learning disabilities or other disabilities, people who have complex needs, I think they will always need somebody to sit down with them face to face and talk to them.

For the vast majority of the population, they would choose, these days, they would choose to engage through technology because we've now got such a 24/7 culture. The old days when you went to pay a council tax and the office was closed because it was a Wednesday afternoon, those days are gone. Also, people need to talk to each other and local authorities can set up groups of people to support each other and work out how they want to make their area better. Those people can keep interaction with each other and share ideas via social media as well because you shouldn't always have to go to meetings in order to get things done. Although often, in my experience, it's meetings, it's those physical face to face meetings and discussions that start things off. Once you got those relationships established, you can get an awful lot done through social media.

David Pembroke: It's certainly a fascinating time in the UK, isn't it? This whole change driven by austerity, driven by renewal, driven by the need to reorganise the place. Just looking forward if you might just into the next say 18 months to 2 years, what are some of those other changes that are going to continue to take place and what role can communications have in ensuring that there this is greater success as these moves to clustering takes place.

Catherine Staite: I think there will be more combined authorities and that leaves a challenge for those areas that don't become part of combined authorities because they won't be getting the delegated powers and the resources from central government the combined authority areas are getting. I think that will bring a real challenge. I think for the combined authorities, as they become more ambitious because at the moment, they're focusing a lot of it on infrastructure but as they become more ambitious, I mean for example, the West Midlands Combined Authority is looking at the mental health of the population across the whole of the West Midlands. Well, that isn't about pouring concrete or putting out girders. That's actually about understanding people's lives. It's about ethnography. It's about really, really good quality insight into these pressures and strains that are damaging people's mental health and how civil society can be better organised in order for that not have such a negative impact away from the big ticket capital investments through to a much more personal and human area of services.

Then I think social media and engaging with people through advocacy organisations and voluntary sector organisations reaching out to people through social media, I think there will be a huge amount of opportunities for that and I think that will really change the discourse. It will change the way in which people think about the people who use services because once you give people a voice, you can never go back to the paternalistic narrative. Once you give people a voice, you have to have a citizenship narrative in which they have rights and duties and they are not just grateful recipients or whatever local authorities and other services decide to dole out.

I think the balance of power in services will change a lot through that discourse and I think before long, it will become the norm to be engaging with people in a really open and inclusive way. We're not there yet but I think the seeds have been sown and I think in the next couple of years, we'll start to see a real development in that area of work.

David Pembroke: Well, Catherine Staite, on that very happy and optimistic note for communicators because I think that's obviously the sweet spot where the communications people can bring their skills in terms of that engagement with citizens in order to strengthen the communities and improve the lives of people who can work there. I'm sure that you will continue to study and follow this very closely. What is the best way that people might be able to access some of that training that you mentioned and also some of your research? Where are the best places to find that?

Catherine Staite: Obviously, we have a website, the University of Birmingham's website which is www.BHAM.ac.uk/inlogov. If anybody's interested in any of our online programs, if you look at Birmingham.ac.uk/public-leadership, then you'll be able to see our programs there.

David Pembroke: Fabulous. Well Catherine Staite, thank you very much for giving up some of your day to share your insights, your experience, and your wisdom with our audience. I know they will have appreciated that and you've taken us on a great journey looking back, looking forward, and best of luck with all your work and keep at it.

Catherine Staite: All right. Thanks, David, so much. Lovely to talk to you.