

e-Easy: The Internal *Digital Divide* - The Development of e-Government Within Local Government

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Abstract: The era of e-Government will emphasise the role local councils play in helping people access electronic services to involve voters in local decision making. Local government will offer a range of channels, so that the citizen can make a “channel of choice” Key to the programme is that public sector employees need to be involved, not just confronted with it. This paper will discuss the issues relating to public sector staff and the *internal digital divide* offering practical examples within a Local Authority in Hampshire.

Some of the difficulties of suitable levels of skills in Information Technology which could result in the risk of inadequate skills will be developed by examples, from a practitioner's point of view. Further examples will include, against the backdrop of e-Government per se, the need for a better understanding to help reduce some of the uncertainties faced by public sector employees. System Training in the public sector is often an 'add-on' with no input from the people who will work with the processes. Often addressed after new technology is purchased, this makes employees anxious about the changes to their work environment. The paper will also include practical examples of the successes and failures

Keywords: IEG, e-Government, channel of choice, local government, internal digital divide, targets

1. Introduction

For the United Kingdom, the introduction of the *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999) committed central and local government to improving service delivery. A more dramatic term, coined by the *E-Envoy* in 2002, was *e-revolution* indicating that the process was more about providing citizens with easier access to services rather than just installing computers and offering information on a web site. (Pinder, 2002) These initiatives have been paralleled elsewhere in the European Union (EU) such as at the Spring European Council held in Lisbon, March 2000. European Heads of Government and States pledged themselves to a ten-year strategy of reform for Europe's labour, capital and product markets. The UK Department of Trade and Industry states “we committed ourselves to becoming ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social inclusion’ by 2010.” (DTI, 2005). These actions and targets are known as the [Lisbon Agenda](#), cutting across a spectrum of issues, including entrepreneurship, social enterprise, employment, sustainable development, innovation, and corporate governance.

Development of a more sophisticated set of measures were made a requirement to the commitment of *e-Government* in which (in the original *Modernising Government* White Paper) the goal was the establishment of a target 100% of services being delivered online by 2005 (Cabinet Office, 1999). This target was subsequently accelerated to a revised target date of 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2000a). To assist with monitoring and improvement, the Department of Transport and the Regions which became the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Audit Commission created a new performance indicator, *Best Value Performance Indicator* (BVPI) 157 in 2001 to measure, monitor and improve local government services (ODPM, 2004a).

Two commentators have contributed to the contemporary discussion of *e-Government* Kate Oakley takes the view that successful companies have learnt that simply introducing Information and Communication Technologies to a process without changing the surrounding business environment does not work. (Oakley, 2000) She indicates that *e-Government* will have failed if the structures of government remain untouched and the processes simply get faster and easier to use. In a similar vein, Janice Morphet, a member of the *Modernising Government Team* at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, in her presentation to the Planning Research conference April 2003 at the Oxford Brookes University counseled that there is a difference in perspective for central and local

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government. Central government concentrate on *e-business* plans to provide *e-enabled* services via the web or telephone. Local government would offer a range of channels, so that the citizen could make the “*channel of choice*”. (Morphet, 2003). In addition much has been written about the *Digital Divide*, often documented as the “information rich” and the “information poor”, or the technology “haves” and “have not’s. (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999). This paper discusses the *Internal Digital Divide*, a point elaborated in a British Telecom commissioned report which indicates “... problems of engagement whereby people do not see the need to engage with new technology and do not perceive the benefits of the online world.” (British Telecom, 2004) We might refine and apply this concept further by arguing that an *internal digital divide* is also discernible in all modern organisations including local authorities. It will be the case that some organisational members are at the forefront of technological advance and feel confident and assured in Information and Communications Technologies usage whilst others feel less confident in their own knowledge base and skill levels.

2. Financial aspects of e-Government

Financing of *e-Government* is one of the most prominent characteristics of e-Government as central government and local councils have invested large sums in new methods for providing services. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has secured significant resources, £675 million between 2000 and 2005 to support local authorities in implementing electronic local government. However, the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM, 2002) indicates that the total Information Technology budget for *e-Government* to 2005 will be around the order of £2 billion. The SOCITM survey also reported that local authorities do not know how almost half of this will be funded (SOCITM, 2002). The Office of the Deputy Prime Ministers own figures based on Implementing *E Government* statements shows that the estimated total cost of implementing local *e-Government* over the five years to 2005 is of the order of £3.1 billions (ODPM, 2003a). Much of the funding has to come from mainstream funding, with shrinkage of budgets planned from 2004 as indicated by the Gershon efficiencies (Gershon, 2004). Is this, as Dunleavy and Margetts (2000) suggest, a case of ‘*policy mess*’?

For local government the implications of *e-Government* are not only concerned with the financial aspects, there are other considerations to take into account. The advance and development of *e-Government* requires leadership, training for officers and members, considerations about social inclusion, the provision of information and ultimately to reach the ideal of processing *e-transactions*. Two surveys were carried out for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003 (ODPM, 2003a, 2003b). Both reports identified areas for evaluation and characteristic perceptions, these attributes are discussed below with comments on the potential implications for local government. Financing *e-Government* is also discussed, as is the main measurement tool central government uses to gauge the effectiveness of the funds expended.

3. Leadership characteristics for the introduction of e-Government

Leadership is an identified factor in the surveys. All councils have an officer *e-champion* and 97% have an elected member *e-champion*, which are laudable statistics. Most authorities (95%) have a central *e-Government* team or taskforce to provide leadership. *e-Government* officers were drawn from a range of positions and departments (and different nomenclatures and internal organisational structures make consistent analysis difficult). There is a general preponderance of officers drawn from central strategic departments (Chief Executive’s Department, Corporate Planning, Corporate Services) although a substantial number came from directly Information Technology related departments (Information Technology, Information Systems or Finance Information Technology). Of more concern is that relatively few came from service providing departments. Here is one of the dilemmas of the *Internal Digital Divide*. If service departments are not included, then the *e-Government* implementation becomes a separate entity. Service departments do not have ownership of *e-Government*: rather, it becomes an extra to the core work or even, in some cases, an optional extra.

4. The provision of training for e-Government

The assessment of officer skills, needs and training received prominence in both surveys. Whilst the May 2003 survey states “94% of local authorities provide some sort of *e-Government* training for their officers”, the November 2003 report states “Almost three-quarters (72%) of local authorities report that their officers and/or members lack sufficient skills and understanding in relation to *e-Government*: 69% have identified skills gaps amongst officers” (ODPM, 2003a, 2003b).

These statistics indicate an alarming discrepancy. If in May 2003 (ODPM, 2003a) 94% were receiving training, it is disturbing that in November 2003 (ODPM, 2003b) 72% lack sufficient skills. In reality, as revealed in both surveys, the practice is that *e-Government* training is decided on an *ad hoc* basis between individuals and managers. Only 7% of local authorities overall provide a dedicated, comprehensive training programme for *e-Government*. Here the core of the *Internal Digital Divide* is unmasked. If employees in service departments are not engaged with *e-Government* and they have only received *ad hoc* training, then the implementation will become fragmented and will not be thoroughly effective.

Training for Members is in an uncertain position. Previously, much has been made of appointing *e-champions* yet the May 2003 (ODPM, 2003a) survey asserts “It seems that slightly fewer local authorities provide some sort of *e-Government* training for their members – 79% of local authorities do so”. As one would expect, few local authorities (9%) provide support for members to seek professional qualifications in relation to *e-Government* – probably because elected members tend to be less likely to have a hands-on role in the implementation of *e-Government*. Consequently, if the ‘*channel of choice*’ option suggested by Morphet (2003) offers *e-Government* as a new channel for stakeholders to access the democratic process, it seems remarkable, by offering what is effectively a new service to engage the citizen that limited support is offered to Members. In reality, more *ad hoc* time is spent advising councillors on how to use the systems available which could be profitably better used with more formal training awareness sessions.

5. The reservations about Social Inclusion and the Digital Divide

Currently much concern is raised about the *digital divide* and social exclusion, making it harder for some people to access services with the possible reduction in participation in the democratic process (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999; British Telecom, 2004). Staff voice the view that the public do not have access to, cannot afford, do not know how to use, or are intimidated by computers or prefer other ways of talking to their council. Again the argument for providing *e-Government* returns to the ‘*channel of choice*’, not only for the public but also for employees. There is no reason why the provision of *e-Government* cannot be used in a face-to-face scenario, *Customer Relationship Management systems* explicitly encourages this option, operators would use such a system linked to back office applications to provide data and information in a user friendly way. It is exactly what the Public Access (WCC, 2005) online planning application system does by displaying information and documents in a way that frontline staff or customers can view without having to become specialists in the back office planning applications processing system.

6. The evolutionary stages for e-Government

6.1 Evolutionary stage one - Provision of information

Of the six evolutionary stages for *e-Government* the initial stage, was concerned with information publishing and dissemination (Morison, 2002 Figure 1 p13). Methods of access were discussed, much was made of digital TV and kiosks, a survey carried out by NTL recorded that citizens were not bothered about creating alternative means of access other than via a personal computer (NTL, 2004). Therefore council web sites are the main format used to date. The public are becoming increasingly vociferous and demanding in their requirements and ability to view information. The 2003 surveys (ODPM, 2003a, 2003b) showed that 34% of Local Authorities considered that *e-Government* had an impact on increased time spent by staff, whilst only 14% offered such staff time decreased in provision of information. It must be stressed, at the time, local government was still engaged in providing systems and information that were reliable. However, it is true to say that

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most local authorities (91% and 76% in the 2003 surveys, respectively) see *e-Government* as improving accessibility to local authority information and services. The view was presented that no local authority reported a decrease in accessibility, but some (6% and 19% respectively) indicated that information and services are no more accessible as a result of *e-Government* (ODPM, 2003a, 2003b). This indicates that Local Authorities were providing information but had not yet incorporated the more difficult concept of *e-transactions*.

The provision of information for *e-Government*, from the outset, was going to incur both financial and resource costs. Much of the base data in local authorities, up to the late 1990s, was held in paper format. Moving towards an electronic format proved a difficult initial phase. Questions surrounding ownership of the data became issues between service departments and any central *e-Government* team. In 2000/01, much time and effort was invested in purchasing or constructing in-house back office electronic systems. The May 2003 (ODPM, 2003a) survey observes that 35% of local authorities see *e-Government* as having brought about a rise in these costs and only 12% report a reduction. A prime example is one of the key components in the *e-Government* agenda, the provision of a Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG). Most local authorities, prior to commencing, *e-Government* had many individual property databases, for example Revenues and Benefits and Planning. Often maintained by departments, it has been calculated that up to 35 staff across an authority could be updating the same address each day. To enable a '*joined up*' approach, the creation of an LLPG is essential so that officers from departments (e.g. a Planning Officer and a Building Control Officer) can view property related data. By making the commitment to creating the LLPG the payback is significant, both in hard savings and especially in terms of soft savings. Whilst the LLPG itself could be built and maintained by a single department, the key advantages of the concept will not be realised unless there is buy-in across the authority. Due to the complexity and investment demands it is essential that the project be approached corporately. Once created and operating, '*joined up government*' can be introduced by "feeding" the LLPG data to the National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) part of Project Acadia (Harrison and Keith, 2002). To link into the NLPG, each authority LLPG must be BS7666 compliant. In terms of the *Internal Digital Divide* there are complications, especially for planning departments. Areas of land to be developed can have notional or even no address data, meaning a Unique Property Reference Number (UPRN) has not been created for the site. Delays in processing a planning application can occur if it cannot be recorded. More often than not, the problem concerns the site holding many 'known as' names. Planning Officers have difficulty understanding that applications cannot be entered each time under the various 'known as' addresses. This action degrades the ability to join up property information for other users of the system.

6.2 Evolutionary stage two - Processing transactions

A fundamental requirement of Implementing Electronic Government 4 (ODPM, 2005) and as Morrison (2002 Figure 1 p13) suggests that evolutionary stage two adopts two way transactions. One obvious choice is *e-payments* systems, for example, to enable online payment of council tax and parking fines. Planning departments had the task of providing '*end to end planning*' a complete service of electronic submission of a planning application, including payment. Central government initiated a joint working partnership approach with the Planning and Regulatory Services Online (PARSOL, 2004a) and the Planning Portal, (Planning Portal, 2005) both initiatives were aimed at enabling Local Planning Authorities to make *e-transactions*. As the Planning Portal states "(the service provides...) a seamless integration with a local authority back-end systems while maintaining local brand and identity". (PARSOL, 2004a) By the beginning of 2005, 288 of the 370 Local Planning Authorities in England have signed agreements to work with the Portal to effect improvements in planning services online. As the first online applications were arriving, concerns by staff were expressed about the increase in workload. Whereas in the past paper copies of plans would have been submitted by the applicant, now it was the Local Planning Authorities responsibility to do so. A comment from the 2003 surveys suggests that "35% of local authorities believe their *e-Government* programme has had no effect on their ability to work flexibly". This offers more evidence on the reality of the *Internal Digital Divide*.

With the milestone target of December 2005 for 100% of local government services to be delivered online approaching. There are still ongoing concerns for *e-Government*, not least in the public take-

up of online information and services. There has been an increase in the take up brought about by the increased availability; however, no national statistical information is available, in early 2005, to provide evidence that citizens are using the services already available. There is a noticeable increase in contact to the service departments about the usability of the enabled services. The public have yet another service area to “complain” about, current examples include the lack of web browser interface and consequent support for the end user. Assessing the impact of *e-Government* on the levels of public involvement is a developing process. 57% of local authorities reported, in 2003 (ODPM, 2003b), that they are developing some arrangement to monitor the impact of *e-Government* on levels of public involvement. Given that there ought to be a rise in take-up of information and services, it should not be overlooked that the projected increased use of *e-Government* will lead to additional demands and increased costs on local government.

7. Aspects of the current situation of e-Government

Today there is still an awareness shortfall for the public to realise that service information is available online. This has been demonstrated with the *Freedom of Information Act* that came into effect in January, 2005. The public are making requests for information that is freely available. However, as the requests have been initiated under the *Freedom of Information Act* procedures, the local authority is duty bound to supply the information, often taking the data from the *e-services* that anyone can use. *e-Government* does allow local authorities to consult and involve people in local decision-making, for example by enabling planning application representations online. This helps to engage those who cannot, or do not want, to communicate or express their views via traditional means. The dilemma of *e-Government* is that the representations can now appear online with more immediacy than by using the more traditional means. The process is problematic as representations can be an individual's views, not necessarily concerned with the planning application. Therefore the local authority has to be more circumspect in vetting what is published.

8. The future environment

The *E-Easy* environment will not end with the introduction of 100% e-services by December 2005. This brave new world will move forward with more joint working between departments and outside organizations. There will be further requirements to deconstruct the internal *digital divide* to engage service departments into accepting responsibility and maintaining ownership of their datasets. For the public and stakeholders, there needs to be a realization not only that this new channel of choice is available but that central government is reducing its financial support, with the efficiency savings suggested in the Gershon public sector efficiency savings report (Gershon,2004). Accordingly the costs of maintaining and improving services may well have to be borne at a local level. This will certainly open the debate as to whether the local population will want to increase their financial contribution to continue investing in *e-Government*.

It is imperative that the progress made to date does not come to a close. The voyage of *e-Government* must travel from *e-information* to *e-transactions*. Providing information electronically will help citizen identify with their local council. However, only by providing the ability for interactions to take place will the key to engaging the population result in true *e-Government*.

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