E-Easy: The internal *digital divide* - The development of e-government within local government.

Peter Byrne
Winchester City Council
Avalon House
Chesil Street
Winchester
Hants
SO23 OHU

pbyrne@winchester.gov.uk

Mike Hart
Professor of Business and Informatics
University College
West Hill
Winchester
Hants
SO22 4NR

Mike.Hart@winchester.ac.uk

Peter Byrne is employed as the Information & Communications Technology (ICT) Systems Manager at Winchester City Council Development Services Directorate. The Division covers the service areas of Planning, Building Control, Engineering, Traffic & Transport and Estates. Winchester City Council is a local district Council located in Hampshire England.

Mike Hart is Professor of Business and Informatics at University College, Winchester.

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

The paper will conclude with a live demonstration of where the Authority is today and where it should be tomorrow

E-Easy: The internal *digital divide* - The development of e-government within local government.

For the United Kingdom, the introduction of the *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999) committed central and local government to improving service delivery for stakeholders and customers. A further government White Paper even makes use of the term *e-revolution* (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005). These initiatives have been paralleled elsewhere in the European Union (EU) such as at the Spring European Council held in Lisbon March 2000. The 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 has also indicated that "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). This set of actions and targets has come to be known as the *Lisbon Agenda*, cutting across a spectrum of issues, including entrepreneurship, social enterprise, employment, sustainable development, innovation, and corporate governance.

The Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit sets more sophisticated measures for e-government, revising the target for all local government services capable of electronic service delivery to 100% by 2005 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2000). To assist with monitoring and improvement, the Department of Transport and the Regions (DETR) 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.

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 Communication Technologies (ICT) 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 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 Telecomm, 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 ICT usage whilst others feel less confident in their own knowledge base and skill levels.

The most obvious, if not necessarily the most important, kind of resourcing activity is the allocation of finance. 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. This suggests a large sum available, yet the Society of Information Technology Mangers (SOCITM) indicates that the total Information technology (IT) 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 Minister own figures based on Implementing E

Government (IEG) 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. (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003a). Much of the funding has to come from mainstream funding, with shrinkage of budgets planned from 2004 with the Gershon efficiencies (Gershon, 2004). Is this, as Dunleavy and Margetts (2000) suggest, 'a case of policy mess'?

Two surveys were carried out for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003a, 2003b) Both reports identified areas for evaluation and perceptions, some of which are discussed with potential implications for a local council.

Leadership is an identified factor in the surveys, e-champions at both senior officer and at member level. 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 IT related departments (IT, Information Systems or Finance IT). Of more concern is the comment 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.

The assessment of officer skills, needs and training has 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" (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003a, 2003b)

These statistics indicate an alarming discrepancy, If in May 2003 94% were receiving training, it is alarming that in November 2003 72% lack sufficient skills. In reality, as revealed in both surveys, the practice is 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. It is here that 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 such *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 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. The question to be asked is whether the *channel of choice* option suggested by Morphet (2003) offers e-government as a new channel for stakeholders to access the democratic process. Yet it is remarkable that by offering what is effectively a new service to engage the citizen, 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.

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 most authorities up to the late 1990s was held in paper format. Moving towards an electronic format proved a difficult initial phase. Questions such as ownership of the data became issues between service departments and any type of 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 survey make the observation that that 35% of local authorities see e-government as having brought about a rise in these costs and only 12% report a reduction. A typical 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 many departments (eg. 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. It is essential that the LLPG project be approached corporately. 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. The complexity of the project and the investment needed demands a corporate approach from the outset. 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. Therefore, the planning application cannot be recorded, giving rise to delays in processing the planning application. More often than not, the true problem is the site holds many "known as" names and Planning Officers find it difficult to understand that applications cannot be entered each time under the various "known as" addresses thus degrading the ability to join up property information for other users of the system.

The first phase of e-government for local authorities was the provision of information. Typically, this meant updating or creating a web site. Much was made of digital TV and kiosks yet the council web site has been the main format used to date. With the move to third generation mobile phones, there are trials currently being held on allowing clients to make payment via mobile phones. The public are becoming increasingly vociferous and demanding in their requirements and ability to view information. The 2003 surveys, provided for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 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 that at the time, the local government environment was still engaged in providing systems and information that were reliable. However, it is true to say that most local authorities (91% and 76% in the 2003 surveys, respectively) see e-government as improving accessibility to local authority information and services. The 2003 surveys presented the view that no local authorities 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. At that time local authorities had reached the stage that they were providing information but had not yet incorporated the more difficult concept of e transactions.

There is much current concern 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). Many council officers voiced 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 staff. There is no reason why the provision of e-government cannot be used in a face-to-face scenario. The use of Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) explicitly encourages the option. Operators would use a CRM system linked to back office applications to provide data and information in a user friendly way. It is exactly what the Public Access online planning application system does by displaying information and documents in a way that front line staff or customers can view without having to become specialists in the back office planning applications processing system.

Until early 2004, district councils were more concerned with the provision of information. The second phase of e-government and a fundamental requirement of IEG4 was that the emphasis switched to processing transactions. One obvious choice is e-payments systems, for example, Revenues and Benefits and Parking departments, 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 and the Planning Portal, both of which 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 authorities back-end systems while maintaining local brand and identity". (PARSOL, 2004) 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. The new services had received considerable publicity, at a local level, yet as the first online applications were arriving, staff were concerned about the increase in workload. Paper plans would now be required to be printed off. Whereas in the past copies 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*.

To conclude, there are still, as the final December 2005 target comes into view, 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, this has led to a rise in contact to the service departments about the usability of the enabled services. The public have yet another service area to "complain" about, a current example being 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, that they are developing some arrangement to monitor the impact of e-government on levels of public involvement. Given the 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.

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 request has 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.

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 report (Gershon,2004). Hence the costs of maintaining and improving services may well have to be borne at a local level. This opens the debate as to whether the local population will want to increase their financial contribution to continue investing in e-government.

References

British Telecom (2004) "The Digital Divide in 2025 An Independent Report for British Telecom". Available: http://www.btplc.com/Societyandenvironment/PDF/Digitaldivide2025.pdfT [14-Feb-2005]

Cabinet Office (1999) "Modernising Government" White Paper, London:HMSO

Department of Trade and Industry (2005) *Background to Economic Reform & Lisbon Agenda - Opportunities for Candidate Countries"* Available: http://www.dti.gov.uk/ewt/reform.htm [14-Feb-2005]

Dunleavy P. and Margetts H (2000) 'The Advent of Digital Government Public Bureaucracies and the State in the Internet Age' Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the American Political Science Association Washington DC USA 4 September 2000

Gershon, P. (2004) 'Releasing resources to the front line -Independent Review of Public Sector Efficiency', Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Harrison, A. And Keith G (2002) Project ACACIA: "Final Report from Independent Consultants - An Assessment on the Suitability of the National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG) for Inclusion in the Initial Acacia List of Definitive National Addresses". Acacia Technical Project Team Available: http://www.idea.gov.uk/transformation/acacia_report2002.pdf [14-Feb-2005]

Morphet, J. (2003), *Planning Research,* Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Conference presentation, Oxford Brookes University, April 2004

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (1999) "Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide". http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn99/execsummary.html [14-Feb-2005]

Oakley, K. (2000) "E-Government - Making the Connection". London: Cable & Wireless

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2000) "E.gov, Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century". Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000 Available: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/source/odpm_locgov_source_605195.doc [14-Feb-2005]

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003a) "Local e-Government A survey of local authorities May 200" Available: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/page/odpm_locgov_030285.pdf May [14-Feb-2005]

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003b) "Local e-Government Process Evaluation of the Implementation of Electronic Local Government in England, November 2003". Available: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/page/odpm_locgov_030286.pdf [14-Feb-2005]

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) "Modern councils, modern services - access for all" Available: http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/source/odpm_locgov_source_605195.doc [14-Feb-2005]

PARSOL (2004) "SP22 Submitting Planning Applications Online Guidance Note". Available: http://parsol.gov.uk [14-Feb-2005]

SOCITM (2002) '46% of local authorities will achieve the 2005 e-targets with 39% unsure and 15% choosing to focus on their own targets says Socitm's IT Trends survey 2002/3' (Press release,11 December) Available: http://www.socitm.gov.uk/Public/press+releases/20021211.htm [14-Feb-2005]