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Local E-Government and Devolution: Electronic Service Delivery in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT There are billions of annual transactions between citizens and government; most of these are between citizens and local government. Both central and local government share the same target for electronic service delivery: 100% of key services online by 2005. In Northern Ireland, however, district councils are being left behind on the e-government agenda. The Northern Ireland Assembly, currently suspended, has no provisions or recommendations for local e-government, although many transactional services of interest to ordinary citizens are provided by local councils. The absence of a strategy for local e-government means that district councils are left to their own devices, and this contrasts with the rest of the UK. A snapshot of local councils is used to assess the extent of provision of electronic service delivery, highlighting examples of innovation, and indicating significant challenges for Northern Ireland local e-government during a period of suspended devolution.

The European Commission defines e-government as ‘bringing administrations closer to citizens and businesses’ (Information Society, 2002), while the UK government emphasises ‘better services for citizens and businesses and more effective use of the Government’s resources’ (Office of the e-Envoy, 1999a). UK E-government is essentially concerned with electronic service delivery, it is focused on the citizen, and it is organised around four guiding principles: building services around citizens’ choices, improving accessibility to government and services, promoting social inclusion, and making better use of information (Performance and Innovation Unit, 1999). So it is the citizen who lies at the heart of the e-government agenda.

This study examines the nature of transactions between citizens and government, with a particular focus on local authorities, tracing the development of local e-government strategies in the UK, and drawing comparisons with initiatives in the devolved administration of Northern

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Ireland. A snapshot of local council websites is used to assess the extent of provision of local service delivery across the province, examples of innovative practice are highlighted, and conclusions are drawn concerning the challenges for local e-government under devolution.

Citizen–Government Transactions

The office of the UK e-Envoy estimated that there are 5–6 billion annual government-related transactions (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003) and the majority of citizen–government transactions take place at the local government level (Socitm, 2001). Of the five billion annual interactions with government, four billion (or 80%) are local rather than central (Office of the e-Envoy, 1999b). This applies to businesses as much as to citizens: after the Inland Revenue, most small businesses contacted local authorities more often than other government departments (Central Information Technology Unit, 1998). Funding to enable local e-government varies across the UK: in England, central government funding is available to councils at a flat rate on submission of acceptable Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statements; in Scotland, matched funding is available as part of a competitive process; in Wales there is no specific funding for councils but there are policies in place as well as supported credit approvals; and in Northern Ireland there is funding available for central government and special projects, but in the main councils fund their own initiatives.

Like central government, local authorities in England have a target of achieving 100% electronic service delivery capability by 2005. However, there are particular challenges for the 388 individual authorities: they offer hundreds of services which need to be linked to databases at a local level, and often at a regional or national level to services from other local authorities, or to central government services. Procedures for implementing and measuring e-government are most advanced in England. Councils in England are required to produce an annual Implementing e-Government (IEG) statement; those who produce an acceptable IEG are eligible for additional funding from the Local Government Online (LGOL) fund, managed by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), and there is further funding available for innovations and examples of working partnerships. In a bid to assist local councils in meeting the 2005 target of 100% capability in electronic delivery of priority services in ways that customers will use (ODPM, 2004), the ODPM identified priority outcomes in seven shared areas agreed by local and central government, as well as in areas such as the delivery of web-based transactions and out-of-hours access.

So the UK approach is driven by central government, which sets targets and guidelines, while local governments elaborate strategies and implementation plans (expressed as IEGs). Once these are approved, funding is released, and progress is reviewed every six months. The statements

indicate that local e-government plans will cost £2.5 billion, so even with additional funding to complement the £350 million from schemes such as Invest to Save, and Local Public Service Agreements, there will be a considerable shortfall. In addition, there are 25 Pathfinder pilots involving more than 100 councils, with a total budget of £25 million. These are local government projects, which will be rolled out on a wider basis if they are successfully implemented. The Audit Commission reported in 2002 that 78% of local government respondents felt confident of meeting the 2005 target (Audit Commission, 2002) while a more recent UK Online annual report indicated that English local authorities expected over a third of services to be online by the end of 2002, and full coverage by 2005 (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002).

Central government initiatives which affect the United Kingdom as a whole are funded separately from local government initiatives which affect England. Central government initiatives have been allocated the bulk of funding, despite the fact that the majority of citizen-government transactions are at the local level, and that the UK government aspires to putting the citizen at the heart of its e-government strategy. Central government agencies offer a small number of services, such as licensing drivers and vehicles, while local authorities are estimated to offer at least 100 services (from cemeteries to dog licensing), and most of the services of interest to citizens are at this level (*Guardian*, 2003).

A recent survey from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) found that almost 90% of all council transactions with the public were in the areas of leisure and recreation, public libraries, or refuse collection (Thornton, 2003). While these might be considered lightweight, they are obviously key services for citizens: the top service by transaction volume was leisure and recreation booking of recreation and sports facilities (332 million bookings annually), followed by public library renewals and enquiries at 53 million. The report observed that such transactions serve to build social cohesion since they enhance participation and a sense of belonging to a community and so should be considered in e-government plans, since a total of 681 million contacts are made to councils every year, at a cost in staff time of £521 million.

Devolution and E-Government

The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have the responsibility for deciding their own approaches to e-government, but any strategies should remain fully compatible with the UK approach.

The first UK e-government strategy was produced in April 2000, entitled *E-Government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age* (Office of the e-Envoy, 2000). Central to this framework was the concept of citizen-focused government, with central and local government working in partnership. It was acknowledged that the devolved regions had

contributed to the elaboration of the strategy, and a wish was expressed that a common strategy might be adopted by all.

By 2000, the devolved regions were beginning to elaborate their own strategies for the Information Age: Scotland was the most advanced, with a strategic vision for modernising government, accompanied by a £25 million fund; Wales was planning to publish an Information Age Strategy; while Northern Ireland had an Information Age Initiative which was tasked with the elaboration of a Strategic Framework and Action Plan to drive the knowledge-based economy. The initiative resulted in the publication of *Leapfrog to the Information Age* (Information Age Initiative, 2000) focused on e-commerce and designed to enable Northern Ireland to benefit from global developments in information technology, electronics and communications.

Meanwhile, at central government level, a comprehensive strategy entitled *e.Gov: Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century* (Cabinet Office, 2000) was published by the Performance and Innovation Unit in September 2000. This report explicitly concerned local and central government in England: departments, agencies and local authorities were urged to bring 'some key services online' (ibid.: 12), and four local authorities were singled out for examples of initiatives which were already underway. The report urged the development of incentive and support structures for local government which were similar to those at central government level. Developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were to be in the hands of the devolved administrations, which were 'responsible for deciding their approach to developing and implementing electronic service delivery in respect of devolved services ... and for the preparation of appropriate IT strategies' (ibid.: 16). However, the devolved administrations were requested to ensure that strategies would remain compatible across the UK.

By 2004, the devolved administrations had moved in different directions with respect to local e-government. The Scottish Executive is working in line with the UK-wide objective of 100% of government services online by 2005. To this end, it established a 21st Century Government Unit which has developed an e-government strategy and action plan (Scottish Executive, 2002). A progress report on electronic service delivery in 2004 (Scottish Executive, 2004) indicated that there was steady progress in local e-government in the devolved administration, with councils providing information online for 82% of services, and with access to 63% of services at the transactional level. However, only one of the 23 transactional sites identified by the Better Connected 2004 report (Socitm, 2004) was Scottish (West Lothian). Funding for initiatives in Scotland differs from arrangements for England. The Scottish Assembly manages the Modernising Government Fund (MGF) which differs from the English system based on IEG statements. The MGF is based on matched funding, and unlike the LGOL it does not award a flat rate to all councils. This has led to delays where matched funding from councils and from the MGF have not been in

the same financial year. Work on developing a reporting framework covering agreed service definitions, and the measurement of take-up, is ongoing (IDeA, 2004).

In Wales, the National Assembly established an Information Age Advisory Group (IAAG) to advise the Minister for Assembly Business and the e-Minister of the National Assembly for Wales in the development of a strategy for e-government, and a website (*Cymru Ar-lein*) was set up. The Welsh Assembly allocated additional capital resources to local authorities, including £9.7 million to develop broadband infrastructure and other e-government initiatives in the form of supported credit approvals. The Assembly has an explicit policy that all local authorities' websites should be fully transactional by 2005 (National Assembly for Wales, 2001). One local authority site in Wales, Wrexham Borough Council, was considered to be fully transactional in the Better Connected 2004 report (Socitm, 2004).

E-Government and Northern Ireland

It is difficult to ascertain how high a priority e-government has been for Northern Ireland. Certainly, all initiatives and strategies emanating from the Northern Ireland Assembly relate to the electronic provision of services at the level of the devolved administration: there is no linkage drawn with local council initiatives, and this is in stark contrast to the UK central government approach. The first Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government suggested in vague terms that Executive Programme Funds (EPFs) might be available to cover certain policy issues in relation to service modernisation: 'actions that might be included are e-government ...' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2001). No further specification was provided, although there was a commitment to develop these actions in the Corporate Strategic Framework for delivering government services electronically in Northern Ireland, which was published by the Central IT Unit (NI) in 2001.

This framework was citizen-focused and pledged to ensure consistency and integration with central government initiatives. Although the framework applied explicitly to the core Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments, it was intended to be 'applicable to the entire Public Sector in Northern Ireland' (Central IT Unit (NI), 2001: 5). The section in the framework of most interest to this study relates to connecting with the citizen or business, 'improving the way in which government interacts with its customers, and meets their needs' (*ibid.*: 5). For the Northern Ireland Assembly, this presented an opportunity for modification of the Prime Minister's 2005 target: 'in keeping with the principle that services should be designed around the needs of citizens (rather than the organisation) Departments will be identifying those interactions which if delivered electronically would significantly improve the quality, effectiveness and responsiveness of government services' (*ibid.*: 8). In other words, not all

services would be implemented fully by 2005; instead, 'key' services would go online. Northern Ireland was taking a very different approach. So, in July 2001 the Executive Committee approved electronic service delivery targets to deliver 25% of key government services electronically by the end of 2002, with 100% capability by 2005. No mention was made of the applicability of this target to local government.

But how can one define a 'key' service? Definitions were formally provided much later in a set of *Guidelines for the Initiation of e-Government Pilot Projects* published by the CITU(NI) in 2003: criteria included those services which resulted in a high number of transactions (such as road fund licences), services which might be highly valued by users (such as payment of rates), and services which are obligatory public sector transactions (such as notifying agencies of address changes), although this was open to interpretation: discretion was left to each department.

By 2002, it was possible to identify the existence of a digital divide in the province. Although Northern Ireland could be considered successful in terms of enabling e-business, for the citizen the picture is rather different: the digital divide has left 53% of citizens at a disadvantage, and particular groups affected include the disabled, those over 50 and the lower-earning socio-economic groupings. The 2002 report recognised that this digital divide was a barrier to citizens' enjoyment of electronic delivery of government services (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, 2002).

Devolution was suspended in Northern Ireland at midnight on 14 October 2002, and at that time elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were suspended. Fresh elections were held on 26 November 2003, although these elections did not result in the Assembly being re-constituted, so the political process has stalled again. From 2002, the Secretary of State assumed responsibility for the 11 ministerial departments, assisted by a group of Northern Ireland Office ministers. This was not the first time that the Assembly had been suspended, but it has been the longest period of suspension. Direct Westminster control was re-introduced on 11 February 2000, but the Executive and its institutions were re-established on 2 May 2000. There were also two 24-hour suspensions in 2001. With little movement at the level of the devolved administration, the focus moves to local government.

There are 26 District Councils in Northern Ireland, and while they share some of the duties of councils in the rest of the UK ('roads, rates and rubbish'), they are more limited in scope. The main areas under council control are community services, building control, dog licensing, environmental health, housing fitness and standards, leisure and parks, refuse collection and waste disposal, registration of births, deaths and marriages, and street naming and postal numbering. Northern Ireland councils are responsible for just 4% of public expenditure, compared with councils in Wales, for example, which account for 46% of total expenditure. The gap

in expenditure is filled by non-departmental public bodies and quangos. Consequently, councils in Northern Ireland can be considered less powerful than their counterparts in Wales or Scotland (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2003).

The Northern Ireland e-Government Unit replaced the Central IT Unit and it manages an e-government fund of £6 million to be spent on projects such as broadband and digital inclusion. However, most of the initiatives relate to central government; even the 2003 OnlineNI strategy document makes no provisions for local government initiatives (Northern Ireland e-Government Unit, 2003).

Methodology

The investigation followed the criteria for service typology set out in the Strategic Framework, using scenarios based on the Better Connected surveys (Socitm, 2003; 2004), and a rating system elaborated from the KEeLAN project (KEeLAN, 2003). The analysis was based on councils' websites surveyed in September 2003, as these are a key strategic tool for local authorities: they can be used to communicate information and provide services, and can assist in the process of modernisation, since they offer an opportunity to streamline services.

Websites are important as a strategic tool: they communicate information and provide services in new ways and can thus be considered important in terms of the improvement and modernisation of public services. Chris Leslie, MP (Socitm, 2003) also observed that their value is not just restricted to those with internet access; sites can be made available in contact centres or community-based information and advice services, to assist what might be termed as heavy council service users.

Of course, there is more to e-government than websites; e-government goes deeper than the obvious provision of online services, encompassing back- and front-office activities, such as IT security, changes in work routines as a result of digital projects, administrative and document handling systems, and external communications, among many other aspects. However, at this stage of e-government maturity in Northern Ireland, it is the website which is the most obvious manifestation of e-government to the citizen, and it is for this reason that this survey focuses on local e-government websites.

The Strategic Framework introduced the basic service typology in line with central government documentation, where services were offered at different levels from simple to complex: publish, interact, transact, and integrate. This is broadly in line with the typical evolution of an e-business.

At the most basic level, publishing entails establishing a website which has the goal of providing information which flows in one direction; interacting allows for the input of information on the part of the user (such as form filling and submission); transacting requires the use of an authentication

scheme and relates to an interaction which is personal and unique to the user; and the final level, integrating, refers to electronic services which cross organisational boundaries. An example of integration given in the framework relates to the registration of a birth at a district council office, which triggers a transfer to the Child Benefit branch to initiate allowance payments. It is to be noted that this example starts at local government level, although local government is given no consideration in the framework report.

The *Better Connected* reports (Socitm, 2003; 2004), which provide a snapshot of all local authority websites, developed an overall rating system for local authority websites: promotional sites provide information but offer little possibility for interaction; content sites provide sophisticated information and some interaction; content plus sites offer very useful content and more advanced self-service features; and transactional sites are accessible, complete, and offer more than one type of online interaction (such as payment, applications and bookings). It is this taxonomy which was applied to the results of this study.

Twenty scenarios were tested, reflecting local council responsibilities in the areas of general administration, corporate services, economic development, environmental health, leisure services, and environmental services. These scenarios were based on those identified by the *Better Connected* report, with modifications to take into account the fewer responsibilities of local councils in Northern Ireland. Of the 20 scenarios, seven were capable of being taken to full transactional status, while ten had potential for two-way interaction, and three allowed for one-way interaction. Sample scenarios included the following:

- Purchasing a wheelie bin;
- Making a complaint about some aspect of environmental health;
- Finding out the names of local councillors;
- Booking a sporting/leisure event managed by the local authority;
- Enquiring about rates payments;
- Purchasing a dog licence; and
- Finding out about council recycling initiatives.

Council websites were assessed on a scale from zero to four. The total possible score was 64. The rating system is outlined below (see Table 1) and is a modification of the scoring system applied by the Key Elements for Local Authorities Networking (KEeLAN) initiative, an EU-funded project (KEeLAN, 2003)

This snapshot did not attempt to measure usability or download times; it concentrated on whether the services were delivered electronically, and the nature of the interaction with the user. Similarly, there was no attempt to measure conformance to accessibility guidelines, as these would merit a separate study.

Table 1. Rating system

| | |
|---|---|
| 0 | not online |
| 1 | information: basic information is posted on public services and relevant themes for interested parties |
| 2 | one-way interaction: one-way electronic exchange of information enabled by a standalone system, for example, downloading of forms to apply for services which can be submitted offline (by mail or fax, for example) |
| 3 | two-way interaction: two-way electronic exchange of information enabled by means of a system which is linked to the back-office, enabling electronic processing of forms to apply for services, such as online submission of application forms for services |
| 4 | transaction: online service delivery enabled by a secure website linked to the back-office, enabling full online transactions including payment and delivery |

Results

The council websites were varied in the extreme, and overall service provision was patchy: some sites were showcases for web designers, or promotional sites for the area with little or no detail on services which would be of use to citizens. Seventeen out of the 26 sites had no information about rates; 12 did not have a section to advertise council vacancies; and all the functioning sites carried tourism information (in the case of one council's site, Limavady, this was the only scenario it fulfilled). Levels of detail varied too: Only six councils (Antrim, Coleraine, Derry, Newtownabbey and Omagh) showed current tenders, ten councils presented minutes of council meetings online, four councils had webcams, and one council, Coleraine, even published the attendance record of councillors at meetings.

Total scores for the 26 councils are displayed in Table 2, in descending order, out of a possible total of 64. Summary ratings are also given according to the Better Connected taxonomy (promotional, content, content plus, and transactional).

While all but one council had a functioning web presence, scores varied widely. The average score was 19/64, and the top scorer, Strabane District Council, offered the possibility of secure online transactions, although Craigavon and Coleraine, which also scored highly, only went as far as Content Plus. Over half of the councils' websites had achieved Content status (sophisticated information and some interaction), but generally most sites lacked very useful content and more advanced self-service features.

Three councils offered the possibility of conducting transactions: Ballymena allowed for the purchase of wheeled bins and dog licences; Strabane also offered these as well as skip hire, by making use of the WorldPay secure transaction facility; and Down offered a specially designed electronic application service for building regulations applications. Some of the above-average sites offered no services at a level higher than one-way interactions, but they did offer a wide range of services at either information level, or one-way interaction; these included Antrim, Ards, Castlereagh, Coleraine, Derry, and Newry and Mourne.

Table 2. Overall rating of council websites

| Council | Score | Rating |
|-------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Strabane District Council | 37 | Transactional |
| Craigavon Borough Council | 32 | Content Plus |
| Carrickfergus Borough Council | 30 | Content Plus |
| Moyle District Council | 28 | Content |
| Down District Council | 27 | Content |
| Ballymena Borough Council | 27 | Transactional |
| Coleraine Borough Council | 27 | Content |
| Belfast Council | 26 | Content |
| Fermanagh Council | 26 | Content Plus |
| Antrim Borough Council | 22 | Content |
| Newtownabbey Council | 21 | Content Plus |
| Ards Borough Council | 21 | Content |
| Castlereagh Borough Council | 21 | Content |
| Derry City Council | 21 | Promotional |
| Newry and Mourne Council | 20 | Content |
| North Down Borough Council | 19 | Content |
| Cookstown District Council | 17 | Content |
| Omagh District Council | 17 | Promotional |
| Armagh City Council | 13 | Content |
| Lisburn Borough Council | 13 | Content |
| Magherafelt District Council | 13 | Promotional |
| Larne Borough Council | 8 | Content |
| Banbridge District Council | 6 | Promotional |
| Ballymoney Borough Council | 5 | Promotional |
| Limavady Borough Council | 2 | Promotional |
| Dungannon District Council | 0 | Zero |

There were some innovations identified, mostly in the area of searchable databases: Strabane, Moyle and Fermanagh all offered searchable minutes of council meetings; North Down provided a searchable property database; Lisburn provided a comprehensive online property certificate search; and Magherafelt offered an online graveyard name search (located by clicking on a link for the local leisure centre!). Newtownabbey advertised a texting facility to complain or contact council workers.

Overall, there were a few examples of what could be considered reasonable levels of electronic service delivery, and a number of sites which offered a variety of services at different levels of interaction, but there were significant differences between council sites and a general inconsistency in the selection of services available. Few of these councils would be considered as capable of delivering key services online by 2005, unless there was significant investment in technology, and a strategy for choosing which key services to provide online.

There was considerable duplication of services across councils, and many of the paper forms are similar (if not identical, with the exception of the council crest), so councils might pool resources to prevent duplication of effort in the development of electronic systems to provide these services (such as dog licensing, wheeled bin purchase, and building control

applications), Indeed, this may have already occurred to an extent, as some of the online forms were the same across sites. In the absence of a strategy, the various councils are interpreting e-government and online provision differently, which leads to inconsistencies depending on the particular council. The recognised digital divide may be compounded by such an approach, as the availability of online services may now depend on where a citizen lives (rather than on social or economic factors).

Conclusions

Most citizen–government transactions are conducted at local government level. The UK government has recognised this by allocating some funding to local authorities in England to enable them to meet their targets of 100% electronic service delivery by 2005. (Despite this, the bulk of the funding has gone to central government initiatives.) Strategies are in place and targets are being actively pursued; progress is measured against Implementing Electronic Government statements. The most recent *Better Connected* survey (Socitm, 2004) found that there had been improvements in sites since 2003: while only ten sites achieved transactional status in 2003, there were 23 at this level in 2004, representing 5% of all sites. Of the rest, 12% were at promotional level, and the majority at 45% (or 209 sites) were at content level, with 38% at content plus. The survey also observed that many users do visit local e-government sites: traffic in December 2003 was estimated at between 3.8 and 5.7 million visitors, but the report noted that there are substantial challenges ahead if councils are to meet the 2005 targets. In Scotland, there is matched funding available for local e-government, based on a bidding process. In Wales, the Assembly has developed policies regarding the development of local authorities' initiatives, and has allocated funding in the form of credit support.

Here in Northern Ireland, the Assembly is suspended, and e-government at the local level has not been an explicit consideration for Assembly members; indeed, e-government as a whole is not a major consideration for the current administration. The most recent documentation from the Secretary of State, the *Programme for Government*, was published in 2003. The term 'e-government' is not mentioned anywhere in the report, although there are two commitments: 'by 2005, ensure that all key public services are capable of electronic delivery' (Northern Ireland Executive, 2003: 19), and the delivery of a portal by 2003 which would offer a single electronic point of access to government information and services. Even the 2003 OnlineNI strategy document makes no provisions for local government initiatives (Northern Ireland e-Government Unit, 2003).

Local government has been left behind in all of this, and provision of electronic service delivery, and selection of key services, has been left to individual councils. The snapshot survey highlights some examples of innovative service delivery, but there is much work to be done. Levels of

service delivery are very much a function of individual councils, and even the highest scoring sites failed to satisfy the full range of scenarios which users might wish to request.

So there is a distinct absence of central support from the Northern Ireland Assembly for local e-government; this has been compounded by the current state of suspended devolution. Direct Westminster control has not led to any consideration of local e-government in the province either. Local authorities have been left largely to their own devices to steer themselves through the process of developing e-government policies and initiatives.

The absence of policies and strategies for local e-government is reflected in the variety of quality and range of services the sites offer. There is inconsistent and patchy provision across the province and access to electronic services depends on the individual council. There are opportunities for collaboration among councils to develop systems to handle similar procedures, but until a province-wide strategy is elaborated to agree on which key services are suitable for electronic delivery, local e-government will be beyond the reach of many of the citizens of Northern Ireland.

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