

Councils and E-government

Research So Far ...

Setting the Scene

Introduction

This paper reports preliminary findings from phase one of the Audit Commission's (the Commission) e-government project. The project addresses three issues: why e-government matters, how well councils are positioned to deliver, and how they can move forward. Our research has been divided into two phases. Phase one focused primarily on the first two issues, while phase two (currently underway) is focusing on the third issue: identifying critical success

factors for councils in delivering this agenda. In this paper we raise some challenges for key stakeholders and signpost the next phase of our research. The Commission will publish a full report on its findings in July.

Work in progress but challenges are already emerging

Mid way through our research our findings raise some key issues for both councils and Government. We will explore these further during the second phase of our project.

Having Your Say

The Commission consulted on its e-government project in May 2001 at a time when councils' interest in e-government seemed to be growing. The Government's 2005 deadline for the electronic delivery of all government services (the 2005 target) (Ref. 1) was not far off, councils were preparing their first Implementing Electronic Government statements (IEGs)¹, and many key decisions around Government funding and support were still to be made. Consultees from central and local government welcomed the Commission's proposal to share project findings at the half-way stage to inform the debate. We also saw this as an invaluable opportunity to understand whether our preliminary story was recognisable to those at the frontline, to explore further the emergent issues and to sharpen the focus for phase two of our work.

We presented our findings from the first phase of research at a workshop in December, attended by over 30 key stakeholders from central and local government, the voluntary and private sectors and academic institutions. We thank the individuals who took part on the day and draw on their contributions throughout this paper.

¹ Councils were invited to submit an Implementing Electronic Government statement to the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions by 31 July 2001. These statements set out the actions that councils propose to take to meet the Government's 2005 target.

Key Issues for Second Phase

Councils agree that successful e-government requires fundamental change, yet few existing e-projects require such change.

Do councils understand what changes to make?

Councils and Government say that e-government is important and can deliver real benefits, but for many councils is it a top priority in practice?

Councils say that benefits to local people are the most important outcomes, yet it is national targets that seem to drive what they do.

Will local people see significant benefits?

Will councils meet national targets, yet not achieve significant benefits for local people?

Research so far

Our interim findings are drawn from:

- a telephone survey, commissioned from MORI, of 179 council officers from a representative sample of 62 councils in England conducted between 19 September and 25 October 2001. In each council interviews were conducted with the Chief Executive, the lead officer on e-government (e-champion) and a departmental officer with involvement in the e-agenda;¹
- six site visits of between three to four days and one site visit of one day in seven councils across England involving interviews with officers and members, focus groups and document reviews;
- four focus groups with local people facilitated by MORI in two site visit councils; and
- an analysis by the study team of a sample of relevant inspection reports.

The study team also held discussions with colleagues in audit and inspection, the Improvement & Development Agency (I&DeA), the Local Government Association (LGA) and central government departments and has drawn on the findings of various published reports and articles examining e-government issues. We also sought views from a wider network of advisors, including council officers.

¹ In 7 of the 62 councils only the chief executive and e-champion were interviewed.

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1 Why Does E-government Matter?

1. To different people e-government means different things. But despite this there is seemingly universal agreement in Government and councils that it is a good thing. What is e-government and why is it a good thing? We look at this question from three perspectives: local people, Government and councils.

Local people

2. What do people want from public services? Do they want e-government?

3. While people feel that contacting and dealing with public services is becoming easier, over two-fifths of people now think that there is no real difference between private and public sector customer care, expectations are also higher (Ref. 2). People want local public services to be more accessible. When directly asked about which aspects of public service are most in need of improvement, 47 per cent chose being able to contact them at weekends and in the evening (Ref. 3).

4. People prefer face-to-face and telephone contact. In a recent Which? Online Survey (Ref. 4), when asked which method of communication they generally prefer to use, 47 per cent of respondents supported face-to-face meetings and 36 per cent telephone calls. In a recent public sector survey (Ref. 5), when asked how they would prefer to contact their council in the future, 73 per cent of respondents said by telephone, followed by 15 per cent citing face-to-face contact.

5. Local people also want public services to be more responsive...

'If you write to them and phone them you speak to someone else and they say they have not seen any correspondence so you have to start again from scratch every time you go...'

(local resident, focus group, site visit A)

'...we had a job getting through to the right person. I understand the (planning) process and that you need to speak to a specific person but it is a frustrating experience.'

(local resident, focus group, site visit C)

...and their expectations focus more on the quality of contact rather than the means.

'I think it is easy enough to contact them but getting them to do anything is another question.'

(local resident, focus group, site visit C)

6. Many people, when asked directly, remain unaware or unconvinced of the benefits of electronic channels¹ (Ref. 2). E-government in itself is not meaningful to many people. However, when benefits are cited they revolve around convenience: being dealt with more quickly at more convenient times in more convenient places, making it easier to obtain information, and saving the customer time. So, while e-government is not meaningful to people, the service improvements it can help to deliver are.

Government perspective

7. What lies at the heart of the Government's e-government agenda?

8. In 1997 the Prime Minister announced that, 'by 2002, 25 per cent of dealings with Government should be able to be carried out by the public electronically' (Ref. 1). Although targets were subsequently revised, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the improvement of public services was already on the agenda. It emerged as a strong theme in the Government's White Paper, *Modernising Government* (March 1999) and in the more recent White Paper, *Strong Local Leadership, Quality Public Services* (December 2001). In this the Government states that:

'New technologies have the potential to transform relations between local people and their councils.'

9. The Government outlines the possibilities offered by new technologies. In summary these are integrating services around customer needs, increasing customer participation in council activities, providing more and better information to customers, conducting more efficient transactions and improving access to services. The Government makes clear that councils need to take advantage of these opportunities if they are to meet peoples' rising expectations.

10. This 'citizen first' ethos underpins the Government's four guiding principles of its e-government agenda [BOX A].

BOX A

The four guiding principles of e-government

- Building services around citizens' choices.
- Making government and its services more accessible.
- Social inclusion.
- Using information better.

Source: Office of e-envoy (OeE)
E-government, a strategic framework for public services in the Information Age, April 2000

1 MORI reports that this is especially the case for those from lower socio-economic groups and older people.

Councils' perspective

11. Councils share the Government's views.

'The real driver is about customer focus, not about ICT. It's about a new relationship between the council and the customer.'

(Head of ICT, site visit A)

To improve the continuity and co-ordination of support to customers, a county council is improving its knowledge management through a unified casework customer database. As a result one client's 26 separate files can be converted into one secure and accessible file.

To improve local access and the current situation, which is that 20 per cent of customer queries cannot be resolved without a meeting of 'professionals', a London borough has set up community access points and video links.

To provide a more prompt and accurate service to its customers, a county council established a customer contact centre with a target to resolve first time 80 per cent of the 1 million telephone queries received each year.

12. Evidence from the Audit Commission/MORI survey (MORI survey) strongly indicates that councils recognise that e-government is integral to the wider modernisation agenda. Over 80 per cent of chief executives see e-government as essential or very important in helping them to deliver the modernising agenda and over 75 per cent of e-champions see improved or more accessible services as key objectives of their e-government strategies.

In summary

13. People have rising expectations of public services: rising expectations of both quality and access. However, people know little about how e-government can help to deliver some of these improvements. Government and councils claim a better understanding of this. They acknowledge the e-government agenda not as a stand-alone agenda but as a framework for taking advantage of the opportunities new technology presents. The next section looks beyond this acknowledgement and these aspirations to identify how councils are translating this framework into action.

2

Are Councils Rising to the Challenge?

What is the picture one year on?

14. In spring 2001 the New Local Government Network reported that:

‘The most likely outcome is that by 2005 only a limited number of local authorities will have made significant improvements to the way their services are accessed and delivered; perhaps half of them, if we are optimistic.’ (Ref. 6)

15. Councils face a number of challenges as they modernise and improve services, most significantly perhaps those posed by the best value regime that requires councils to achieve continuous improvement in all their services. The previous section identified the shared ethos of central and local government that e-government is a vital part of improving customer focused services. This ethos is no different to that of best value.

16. The e-government agenda also brings its own challenges: e-government is open to wide interpretations and because of this a diverse range of activities is included under its umbrella.¹ Council officers cite a lack of ICT skills and knowledge among staff and difficulties with engaging senior officers and members among the key barriers to success. This suggests that perhaps the greatest risk is that technology will be sidelined as many do not understand its potential and the benefits that it can bring. This section explores how councils are responding to this agenda.

¹ Council e-government plans and activities are diverse and include website development (including putting payments online, live webcasts of councils meetings and online voting), smart cards, contact centres, kiosks, one-stop shops and e-procurement.

Encouraging signs

Ready to take on the challenge

17. In its Spending Review 2000 the Government earmarked £350 million of new money to support councils in meeting its 2005 target. Twenty-five million pounds was allocated in 2001/02 to support 25 pathfinder projects.¹ The balance is to be allocated over two years with 398 councils receiving a capital grant of £200,000 in each year. Additional funds have been made available through Government schemes, such as Invest to Save and Beacon Councils. To inform funding decisions the Government invited councils to submit IEG statements by July 2001 setting out how they proposed to deliver the 2005 target. The Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) provided guidance to assist councils in producing these statements and all but three councils did so (Ref.7).

18. Councils are confident and optimistic about delivery. From the MORI survey 78 per cent of respondents (who cited it as relevant to their council) feel confident of meeting the 2005 target. The majority of councils are planning for activities (to deliver their e-strategies) to be completed in the next three to four years. In addition, 45 per cent of interviewees say that they have made a lot of progress compared with their peers.

‘(The) time is right to be bold and imaginative.’

(Leader, site visit A)

‘If we say we will do something then it usually happens... we have not failed in the past.’

(Head of ICT, site visit B)

‘(The council) is open and willing to consider radical solutions to improve service delivery.’

(Audit Commission inspector)

Knowing what underpins success

19. There is overwhelming agreement (both between and within councils) that the e-government agenda requires fundamental change and an understanding by staff. When asked, over 90 per cent of interviewees agreed that successful e-government projects depend upon re-engineering business processes and that these projects would fail if staff do not understand the need for change. The engagement of senior officers is also perceived to be an important factor.

¹ In February 2001 the DTLR invited expressions of interest from councils wishing to become pathfinders. Pathfinder councils work with other councils, public service agencies, the private sector and their communities to develop national projects and disseminate the learning from these projects. There are 25 pathfinder projects involving more than 100 councils.

‘Personal enthusiasm from officers past and present has pushed the e-government programme onwards.’

(Private sector partner, site visit C)

‘The Chief Executive is driving the (e-government) vision, making the management team interested.’

(Head of ICT, site visit A)

20. Councils also strongly agree on the factors that should be driving these activities, most significant is benefits to local people [EXHIBIT 1].

Interpreting local people’s needs

21. If benefits to local people should drive what councils do then councils need to understand what local people want and need.

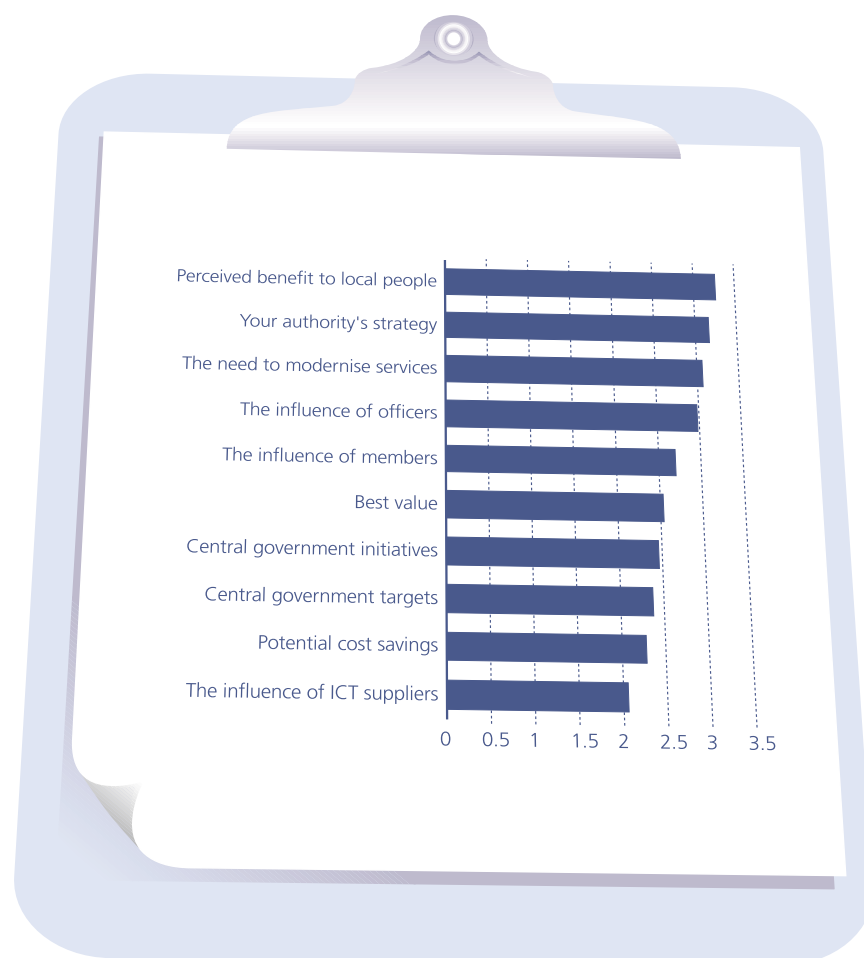
‘If people’s views are not used and ignored then consultation has been a wasteful experience.’

(Attendee, December workshop)

EXHIBIT 1

What factors do councils see as important in driving e-government activity

Councils unanimously agree that benefits to local people should drive the local agenda.



Note: Mean scores derived from 179 interviewees. Question: I am going to read out a list of factors which may or may not help to develop e-government. For each one I would like you to tell me how important you think it is to the development of e-government in your authority. Scale 1 = Not at all important to 4 = Essential.

Source: MORI survey commissioned on behalf of Audit Commission

22. Best value has encouraged councils to consult more with the public and to learn about what they want. Because many people remain unaware, or unconvinced, of the benefits of e-government, councils need to be able to consult people in a way that engages them. Some councils recognise this and are making headway [BOX B].

‘We are concerned about how we access user views in a meaningful way... it is difficult to know how to match technology to user expectations.’

(Executive director, site visit D)

But still a long way to go?

Still early days

23. However, against this backdrop of optimism, evidence suggests that most e-projects have only recently begun and few benefits have yet been realised. While some councils seem to be acknowledged leaders among their peers and are frequently cited as having made more progress than is reflected here, our survey finds that over 50 per cent of work to deliver e-strategies only started in the past 12 months. When asked to reflect upon their most successful project to date, as many as 18 per cent of e-champions said that there had been none.

‘It is too early to anticipate what the changes might be.’

(Assistant chief executive, site visit C)

‘The biggest challenge is to move from talk base to action base.’

(Head of ICT, site visit A)

BOX B

Case example – Site Visit A: Engaging users

One council held a number of public meetings and smaller workshops with local people to consult on its e-vision. The council used existing local community networks to help to attract representatives from key community groups. A key message emerging was that people needed support from the council to access computers cheaply and to be able to use them. There was strong local support for community access points in places that people already used and felt comfortable in. The development of community access points and cyber cafes in local buildings, such as libraries, day and community centres, are now key projects within the council’s overall strategy.

Source: Audit Commission site visits

24. Of the work that is underway, much is focused around preparing strategies and developing websites (including putting payments and some services online). When asked to describe the type of project that they are involved in, over 40 per cent of service heads said strategy work and over 30 per cent said websites. This is perhaps unsurprising. Councils were asked to submit their first IEG statements by 31 July 2001. A website is often perceived to be a useful gauge of e-government progress and good practice guidance on websites is available.¹ Councils seem to be responding to Government requirements and are starting with perceived quick and easy solutions.

Some cracks under the surface

25. E-government is a new area for most (if not all) citizens, for the Government and for local councils alike. Councils need to develop not only their own understanding of the opportunities presented by new technology but the understanding of service users and the public as well. Councils also recognise that there are additional barriers that need to be overcome. Notably, the two most commonly cited barriers in our survey – capacity to manage the change process and a lack of ICT skills and knowledge of staff – correspond with the two most commonly cited success factors. Given this, it is unsurprising that councils are making slow progress and that some contradictions are emerging. We explore these contradictions in section 3.

¹ Website guidance includes Office of e-envoy, *Guidelines for UK Government Websites, Framework for Senior Managers, 2001*.

3

Emerging Contradictions

26. Councils see e-government as important and they recognise that local people's needs should drive what they do. They understand that success requires fundamental change and not just the delivery of existing services online. However, progress is slow and councils share concerns about the barriers that are impeding progress. In this section we identify three key contradictions that are emerging and raise challenges for local and central government [EXHIBIT 2].

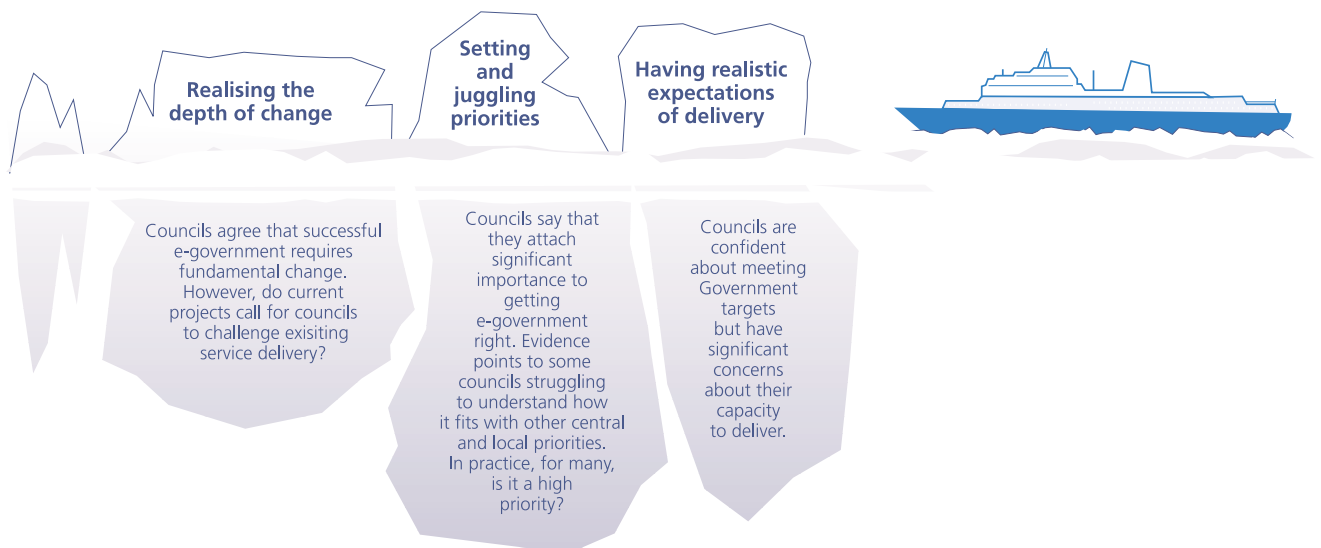
Realising the depth of change

27. Councils agree that successful e-government requires fundamental change. However, do current projects call for councils to challenge existing service delivery?

EXHIBIT 2

Emerging contradictions

Three key contradictions are emerging from a picture of overall optimism and recognition that success requires fundamental change.



Source: Audit Commission analysis

28. Our survey showed that over 30 per cent of projects relate to website development. While some councils have made progress in developing transactional websites, many websites still only offer the user an information service (Ref. 8). At our December workshop we contested that content only websites can be developed without any real service changes or improvements. Only 6 per cent of current projects are customer access related (including contact centres and one-stop shops) yet, arguably, this type of project provides the only means by which councils can change and improve services.

29. A number of factors are influencing councils' early efforts. We have already mentioned the opportunity to produce an IEG statement and the existence of good practice guidance on websites. However, evidence suggests that some councils are unclear about what changes are necessary to deliver successful e-government and, for some, e-government is marginal to improving core services. Only one of the councils we visited had a plan to show how it will achieve its objectives and clearly made the connection between its own objectives (informed by the needs and wants of local people) and its priorities for change.

'We've not seen clearly enough what we're trying to do.'

(Chief executive, site visit C)

'There is a lack of corporate overview about why we are doing things...'

(Council officer, site visit B)

'It was not clear how the vision for improved public access and better customer care would be put into practice.'

(Audit Commission inspector)

30. This challenges whether councils are making the connection between the opportunities that new technology presents and service needs. The need to make this connection was emphasised as critical to success by people attending our workshop.

'There is a huge gap in understanding and knowledge about what people want and how things should be done. More research is needed on how to connect with people before we start trying to find solutions.'

(Attendee, December workshop)

Key challenge

Councils agree that successful e-government requires fundamental change, yet few existing e-projects require such change.
Do councils understand what changes to make?

Setting and juggling priorities

31. Councils say that they attach significant importance to getting e-government right. However, evidence suggests some councils are struggling to understand how it fits with other central and local priorities. In practice, for many, is it a high priority?

32. From the MORI survey, while over 90 per cent of chief executives feel that the e-government strategy contributes to the overall objectives of their councils (and over 50 per cent feel that the contribution is great), almost 60 per cent say there are more important priorities.

‘E-government is not a pressing concern for citizens and therefore not a concern for members.’

(Chief executive, site visit B)

33. Some councils have still to agree on priorities within their IEG statements. There was some ambiguity apparent around individual projects and this was often illustrated by a lack of staff conviction and unclear accountability [BOX C, overleaf]. We also found a lack of clear activity and outcome measures and this was supported by our survey – only 5 per cent of councils cited local targets being used to measure success.

BOX C**Priorities and accountability are often unclear and staff seem unconvinced**

Projects have no priorities... in the past the authority was trying to do too many projects without priorities.

(Audit manager, site visit E)

Matching members' short-term views with the longer-term e-government agenda has proved difficult. Only projects for the first year have been identified, based on what is useful now and easy to achieve.

(Council officer, site visit F)

E-government work is not integrated into the 'day job' and staff find it difficult to do it in addition to other duties.

(Council officer, site visit F)

The e-vision is not shared at the moment. The IEG statement has been produced but who knows about it? No-one is telling staff it exists and where they can find it.

(Staff focus group, site visit B)

We've not seen any significant change take place before (at the council) so are unconvinced that change can happen here.

(Council officer, site visit F)

Source: Audit Commission site visits

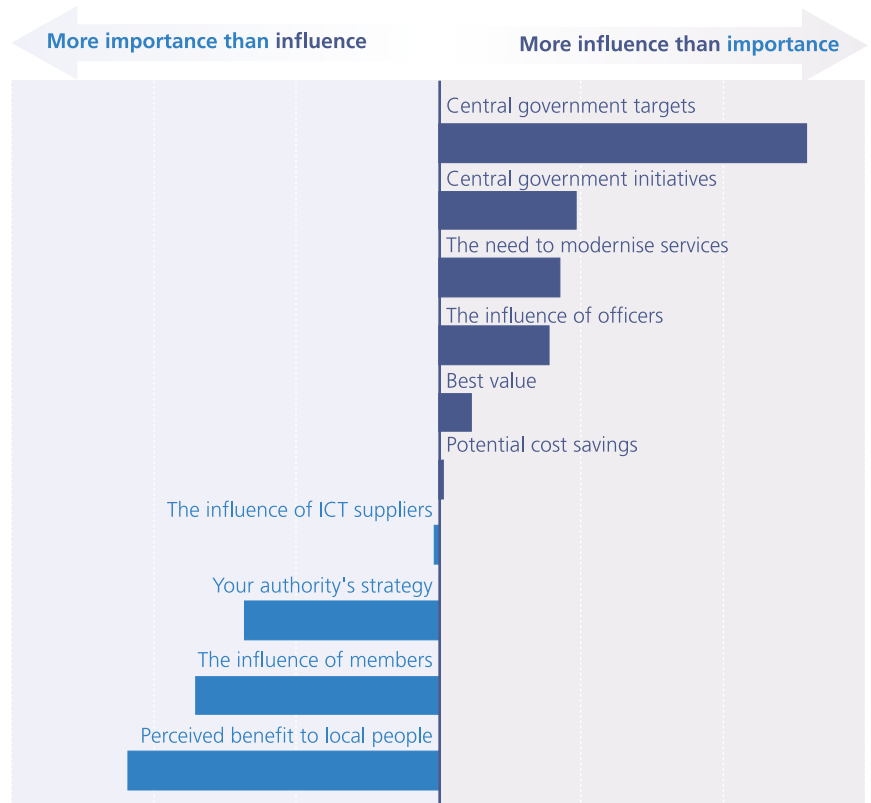
34. Several members and officers observed that they would need to make some tough choices between the demands of core service provision and the e-agenda. Often the need for tough choices was related to a lack of money. However, while we recognise that there are difficulties in undertaking cost-benefit analyses in such a far reaching area, all of the councils visited lacked robust cost information on their proposed e-activities to inform these choices and few could give details on the conflicting service needs.

35. Where councils place e-government in their priorities is perhaps best illustrated when we contrast the relative factors councils cite as most important in driving activity with their reported influence to date. While councils overwhelmingly agree that benefits to local people should drive the agenda, the strongest influence is the need to comply with Government targets and policy [EXHIBIT 3].

EXHIBIT 3

What is influencing local e-agendas?

Government targets are setting local agendas rather than the needs of local people.



Note: Derived from 179 council officers across up to 48 councils. Questions: How important do you think it is to the development of e-government in your authority? How much has each done so far to develop e-government in your authority?

Source: MORI survey commissioned by Audit Commission

Key challenges

Councils and Government say that e-government is important and can deliver real benefits, but for many councils is it a top priority in practice?

Councils say that benefits to local people are the most important outcomes, yet it is national targets that seem to drive what they do.

Will local people see significant benefits?

Having realistic expectations of delivery

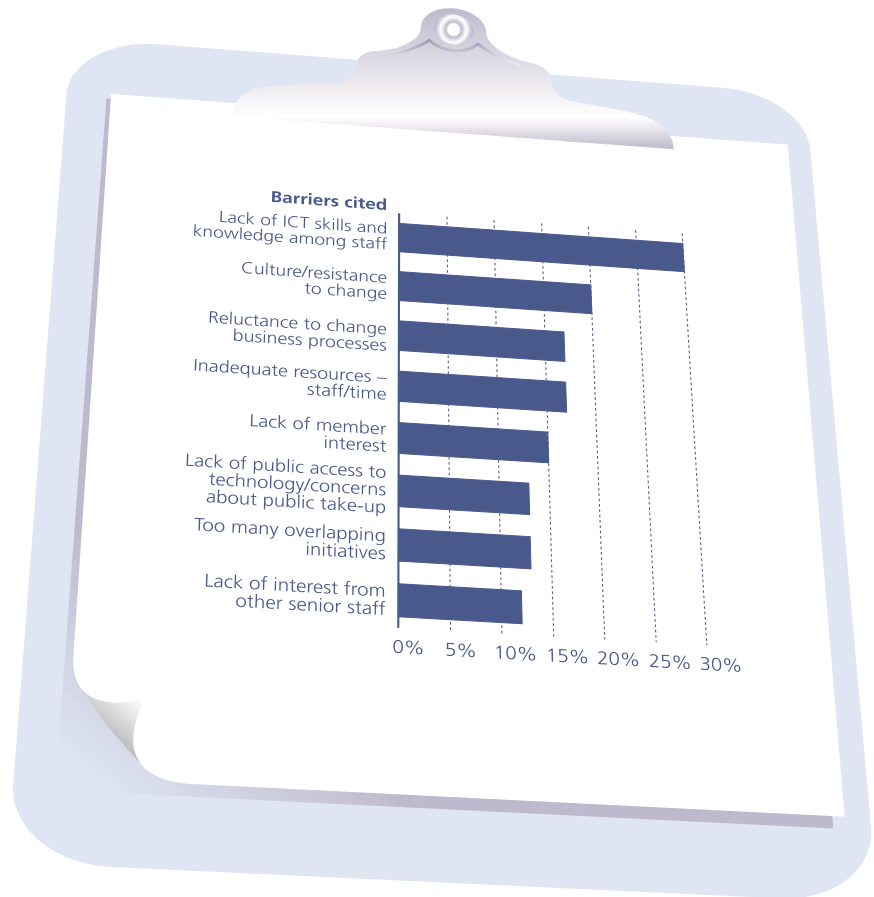
36. Councils are confident about meeting Government targets despite the fact that many are still at the planning stage. Arguably, this is because for many councils Government targets are driving activities and activities are not yet ambitious. Councils have concerns about their capacity to deliver.

37. The MORI survey showed that nearly 40 per cent of chief executives and e-champions think that the agenda is too broad to tackle alone and as many as 61 per cent of chief executives and e-champions think that it is too costly. Councils see financing the agenda as the most significant threat to delivery, despite (or maybe because of) their poor understanding of the costs of implementation. In addition, councils cite several other barriers to delivering the agenda [EXHIBIT 4].

EXHIBIT 4

What do councils see as the main barriers to delivering the e-agenda?

Capacity to manage change and the lack of ICT skills of staff are commonly cited.



Note: Derived from 179 council officers. Open ended question: Which two or three barriers do you see as doing most to prevent progress towards e-government in your authority? Respondents were asked to exclude financial barriers.

Source: MORI survey commissioned by Audit Commission

Key challenge

Will councils meet national targets, yet not achieve significant benefits for local people?

4

Moving Forwards

38. Early responses from councils to the e-government agenda offer some encouraging signs but the evidence also highlights contradictions that raise questions for councils and the Government. How can councils use these challenges to help them to move on? It is now important that we get beneath these issues to understand their impact at the local level. This section sets out how we propose to do this in our second phase of research.

What lies beneath?

39. The Commission has identified four critical success factors present in councils that are delivering best value: ownership of problems and willingness to change; a sustained focus on what matters; the capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement; and integrating best value into day-to-day management (Ref. 9). The Commission reports that these building blocks ‘identify the underlying causes of the problems that different councils face. Using the building blocks it is possible to see why some councils are responding better than others.’

40. E-government is also intended to drive service improvement and it is likely that its critical success factors will not be too dissimilar to those of best value. A better understanding of the characteristics of councils having success with e-government would help to identify what the building blocks are and, through doing so, help to pinpoint areas that struggling councils must address.

41. Our research already shows that a range of different characteristics is emerging.

42. Council X [SEE BOX OVERLEAF] might see e-government as peripheral to the improvement agenda and so fail to understand how opportunities provided by new technology can help to meet its community needs. Council Y has the will but simply lacks (and recognises this) the capacity to deliver the agenda alone. Council Z has ambition (reflected in its overall vision) and confidence in its capacity to overcome barriers and to deliver. It is seeking ways of delivering e-government that connects with local people.

43. It is still too early to say with certainty what key factors underpin these characteristics and what these differences mean. However, we have been able to identify a number of generic building blocks that we will test further in the second phase of research.

44. These views were shared and debated at our December workshop. Stakeholders strongly recognise the different characteristics (and that different councils display these in different measures) and there is a consensus that further exploration of these characteristics might help to

engage councils further. These views are tempered with concerns that the Commission does not simply restate the problems and label councils. We agree that councils need to recognise (and identify with) the characteristics for them to be helpful in moving councils forward.

COUNCIL X

Members want to get core services right first... (they) don't want to put money into IT development.

(Chief executive)

Limited progress to date but does provide internet access in libraries, is piloting one-stop shops and is thinking about the electronic delivery of services through best value reviews.

Understands local people's priorities but is not using new technology to help to meet these.

Wants to be seen to get e-government right but feels that the agenda is moving too quickly and is waiting to see what others do first.

Has internal resources and is confident about attracting external investment.

Source: Audit Commission site visits

COUNCIL Y

There is a danger that we can't or won't afford it and therefore will opt out (of delivering the e-agenda).

(E-champion)

Thinking about using new technology to deliver what they do now.

Enthusiastic officers driving agenda.

Experiencing difficulties in prioritising initiatives.

Reliance on external funding. Internal resources are not released or are not available.

Progress is limited to developing a website and thinking about a call centre.

Source: Audit Commission site visits

COUNCIL Z

Providing a single point of access is about new relationships, not new technology.

(Head of ICT)

Imaginative in thinking about what it wants to achieve through e-government and has positioned this within a broader strategy for service improvement.

Open to new ideas and challenges.

Wants to be a leader among peers.

Works with external partners to boost capacity but has also freed up internal resources.

Still early days for delivery but has widely consulted with local people and has a number of projects underway to deliver its vision, for example, a network of learning centres.

Source: Audit Commission site visits

Where do we go from here?

45. The second phase of our project is now underway and we intend to focus on helping councils to move forward by substantiating our building blocks and identifying how some councils have got these in place.

46. Site visits and a survey will form the key components of phase two, as they did for phase one. We would welcome any additional good practice case examples and would be particularly interested in the following areas:

- The management of internal change processes: what changes needed to be made within the council or particular service(s) and why? What were the key factors that enabled the council or department to successfully implement these changes?
- Engaging citizens: how did the council understand the needs of local people and what did it decide to do as a result? What are the key differences for local people (or what differences can they expect)?

47. If you have any good practice examples to share or any queries regarding this paper please contact the project team on e-government@audit-commission.gov.uk. For further copies of the paper, please visit our website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/itc/egovernment.shtm/

48. A full report on our findings will be produced in July. You can register your interest in this report by phoning the Communications Team on 020 7396 1494, faxing on 020 7396 1448 or emailing at communications@audit-commission.gov.uk

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