

Delivering UK Public Sector eService

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Executive Summary

As eGovernment targets move closer they look increasingly challenging: despite the proliferation of technology and usability of web sites to convey council information, citizens persist in face-to-face and telephone contact.

Could this be because public sector web sites do not meet the actual needs of the citizen? While many councils have recognised the need to deliver transaction based services, a failure to provide true interaction undermines the citizen experience.

For many councils, the challenge is exacerbated by low technology adoption levels in their communities—most notably for rural councils. Therefore, the need arises to enable cost effective telephone-based services that can leverage the online investment to deliver information across all council touchpoints.

Council business processes require interaction not just browsing. There are six standard business processes that form the basis of all front office local authority activity. Ranging from the provision of information, to booking a service, all of these business processes require both transaction and interaction between the citizen and organisation.

Yet, the goal is to deliver these services efficiently and effectively without requiring substantial personnel overhead. The public sector requires intelligent technology that can interact without human intervention to deliver citizen-focused eGovernment.

Here we will outline the role an intelligent, self-learning information source plays in supporting call centre staff, delivering online access to information and services and improving the perceived value of the organisation. By creating this information source that supports all citizen interactions, councils can begin to attain a return on investment from eGovernment initiatives without being dependent upon high levels of Internet adoption within the community.

Challenges

The challenges facing the public sector in delivering eGovernment are widely documented. While complex in detail, when it comes to delivering information and services to the citizen they simplify to two key targets: the e-enablement of services by 2005 and the ability to resolve 80 per cent of citizen enquiries at first contact.

Despite technology advances and the widespread prevalence of Internet use, it has become apparent that achieving these bold targets is far from simple. Indeed, public sector organisations are reporting that even when eService is enabled, the public continues to opt for face-to-face or telephone interactions rather than self-service via the Web. The challenge is not just to deliver eGovernment but also to promote these online services and ensure they are used. Without this critical promotion, government will not achieve the required citizen interaction online. Indeed, unless the citizen is aware of the quality of services available online, government departments and agencies will actually incur a dramatic increase in costs and manpower to manage face-to-face and call centre-based citizen interactions—a cost that will be incurred on top of the Web-based development expense.

Ineffective Web Sites

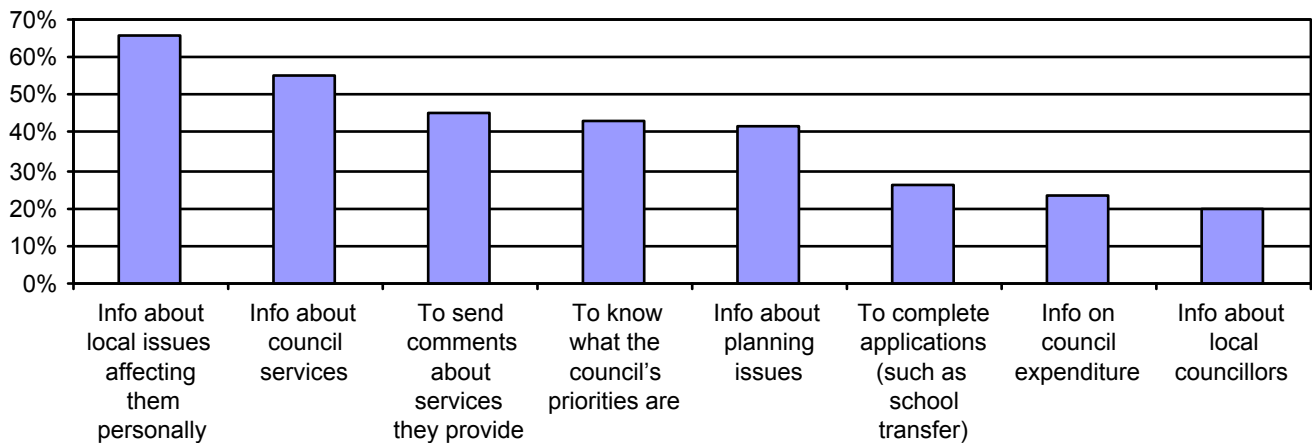
The web offers infinite opportunities for improved service and reduced costs for the public sector. But why is the population continuing to avoid public sector web sites?

Almost a decade into the online revolution, Internet users are savvy. They know what they want and are not prepared to waste hours trawling through unfriendly, inefficient sites to find information—a phone call is quicker. Indeed, citizens come onto a public sector web site with a specific question in mind, not for generic browsing. And when it comes to the public sector, the UK citizen wants more than an online brochure.

According to Jupiter Communications, too many organisations are failing to exploit their web sites; ignoring customers by not replying to customer Internet enquiries, taking too long to respond or not being accessible by email altogether. Ken Allured, group director of Jupiter's Site Operation Strategies went on to say, "Answering thousands of questions per month is an enormous challenge for sites offering complex products and services, especially if they never had a traditional call centre. Yet, companies that delay responses to user questions instantly lose a significant degree of credibility, and not responding perpetuates the consumer notion that using the Web site is not a reliable method of transacting with that organisation."

Citizen Requirements

When local residents were asked by Market & Opinion Research International (MORI), on behalf of the Improvement and Development Agency, about their preferences for using a council's web site, it became immediately apparent the main demand was for citizen specific rather than council generic information (see results of research below).



Source: MORI

And the information requirements are from real-time citizens, they want to know how to submit a postal ballot or find out whether the police are planning to close roads during the forthcoming rally. However, current web-based information provided by the public sector is hard to find, if it is there at all. Indeed, on too many public sector Web sites citizens find simply bland promises about service delivery, comparisons with other organisations and profiles of officials, with pictures.

Government Jargon

One problem is web sites use government language and jargon, which many citizens find inaccessible. There is also widespread confusion about which part of the public sector is responsible for what service—particularly at the local level. For example, many people are confused about the delivery of library services, trading standards, sport and leisure facilities and public transport.

Although, as the recent MORI poll revealed, the majority of people correctly pinpoint the likely source of responsibility between district council, county council and central government, a significant percentage of people fail to do so. Indeed 39 per cent incorrectly believed the district council provides support for elderly/mental health and disabled people—only 35 per cent were correct with county council.

The combination of government jargon and confusion over responsibility also makes the use of Web site search engines, where available, a frustrating task and time consuming process of trawling through countless irrelevant links, before, possibly, finding the right information.

Such a failure to meet the requirements of the online citizen demonstrates clearly why today's eService has failed to capture the public's imagination. With service like this, a trip to the local one-stop shop is likely to be faster and more efficient. Yet the cost to the council is significant.

Opportunities

If this information/service provision is to be delivered cost effectively, and in a manner that appeals to the citizen, the public sector needs a different approach. The citizens' ability to ask questions in their own language is critical. Should information not be available, there must be an automated prompt to interact directly with the organisation.

To deliver the right service, it is essential to understand how the citizen could use the web site. At any given time the public will either be:

- **Transacting**
 - Requesting a service and assessments
 - Booking a service
 - Paying in (revenue, goods and services)
 - Paying out (grants and benefits)

- **Interacting**
 - Giving information
 - Receiving information (including feedback and consultation)

- **Browsing**

These seven business processes are the basis of all front-office public sector activity and require more than a basic browsing option. As research organisation Forrester identified at the beginning of the Internet revolution there are three components to successful electronic presence; content (display of information), transaction and interaction.

Online Interaction

In essence, to find the right information/service the citizen has to know where to find it and have a means of comparing/assessing options. Without the ability to interact online, the citizen will continue to rely on face-to-face and telephone interaction.

Of course one option is to request direct communication with the call centre while online. However, not only does this undermine the concept of self-service it also relies on a level of technology that is not universal. Alternatively, asking the user to log-off and then call for further information/clarification has a further detrimental impact on the perceived level of service.

The answer is clear. If the public sector is to deliver eGovernment solutions the citizen will use, the requirement is for intelligent technology to interact without human intervention.

Critically, this citizen support tool should support both eGovernment and council officers interacting with citizens across normal channels to maximise resources and ensure consistency of information.

eService in Practice

An eGovernment solution needs to be more than a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) posted intermittently by the web design team. These tend to be static, out-of-date and contain limited input from the relevant experts.

Recognising the lack of value of these FAQs, some organisations have decentralised responsibility to individual departments, enabling them to create their own individual information sources. But, again, this presupposes the citizen knows which department has information ownership, replicating the problems previously highlighted. Furthermore, neither solution provides the facility for monitoring the citizen's use of the FAQs, information key to driving the eService strategy.

Nor does individual ownership help the one-stop shop and call centre agents answer questions across up to 800 service lines at first resolution. Without a central pool of consistent information, front-line staff constantly refers to departmental experts to resolve citizen enquiries—making the 80 per cent first resolution target hard to achieve and adding significant cost to the process.

Of course, some of the larger call centres have their own centralised information resources. However, these are not integrated with the web, leading to the danger of inconsistent information/service provision.

Consistent Information

Instead there is a need for a central, single data source supporting the provision of consistent eService through multiple information views meeting diverse requirements. One single knowledge source ensures consistency of information and meets cross-organisational enquiries.

However, to ensure its creation and maintenance is not a burden resulting in out-of-date information, the eService solution needs to be intelligent, easy-to-administer and self-maintaining.

Systems that grow as a by-product of new questions asked are key to rapid growth of the data source. When a 'new' question is asked, an email will automatically be raised to the relevant department. When completed, the answer is emailed to the citizen and added to the knowledge base. It is essential the citizen is kept informed of the process and when to expect a response. And, as the Jupiter Communications study outlined, the response must be timely.

The same procedure occurs when the question is asked at the call centre or one-stop shop. The key is this information seeding process occurs as a by-product of the standard business practice. Questions to which the knowledge base does not have an answer are automatically referred to the appropriate department. The response is both provided to the citizen via the call centre or letter, and is automatically added to the data source, further populating the knowledge base with relevant information.

Knowledge Growth

Using this intelligent technology, it is possible to start with a set of question and answer pairs, 50 say, and rapidly build-up to several hundred. At Nottinghamshire County Council, for example, the knowledge base grew to 400 questions within six months; while at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council there were almost 700 within a year. The result is a knowledge base that rapidly grows with relevant content, yet in a cost effective manner.

This does require the right processes and culture to be in place and organisations need to adhere to best practice implementation guidelines to maximise value. Best practice includes the need to advertise the availability of web-based information—for example a message on hold music pointing the citizen to the web site as an alternative.

The use of self-maintaining technology ensures the quality and relevance of the growing information source. By using algorithms across the information source to monitor answers, check how often answers are viewed and assess satisfaction ratings from users, the system decides where in the list each answer comes. This is a constant process to tune the quality and efficiency of the information and highlight any answers viewed unsatisfactory by the citizen.

Improved Service Delivery

The benefits associated with eService are significant, encompassing improved self-service, enhanced staff morale, broader information provision and improved value perception.

- **Improved self-service**

A responsive, effective eService solution encourages self-service by the citizen and reduces reliance on human interaction. With calls typically reduced by 60 to 80 per cent when implemented to best practice guidelines, organisations see a rapid cost reduction alongside the service improvement. For public sector organisations, such a solution supports the 80 per cent first-contact resolution target without incurring significant additional costs.

- **Improved staff productivity**

With the same information available to staff within the contact centre there is an immediate improvement in responsiveness. Training needs are reduced and new staff becomes more self-sufficient, reducing their reliance on colleagues. Furthermore, as repetitive questions are minimised, staff focuses on more complex, challenging issues, improving their morale and self-worth.

- **Virtual Unitary Authority**

This web-based model also provides the opportunity for different organisations to co-operate within a *virtual unitary authority*. This supports the growing trend within the public sector for authorities to partner with many county, district, borough and city councils, to create a single information source and cooperate virtually, while maintaining individual identity without the requirement for operational change.

In Bedfordshire, the County Council and Mid-Bedfordshire District Council are working together as a virtual unitary. There are two interfaces to the single knowledge base and each organisation creates and maintains its own knowledge. The citizen has one, consistent, broad source of information without any need for the councils to directly interact.

- **Improved Service Value**

There is a clear opportunity to improve perceived value of service, which is a key objective for any public sector organisation. Studies across both the public and private sectors have revealed citizens have a good perception of organisations despite ineffective business processes if their communication processes are good. According to MORI, the less people know about an organisation the less likely they are to rate it highly, irrespective of actual performance. The ability to communicate well is the key to perception of value, a fact realised by

those local authorities beginning to merge the communications and customer service departments. Standard communication tools such as leaflets and newsletters need to be supported by effective interaction to provide good communication and improve public perception.

Best Practices

Effective use of the web as a customer service channel requires more than just the right technology. It also requires the thoughtful implementation of appropriate best practices. These best practices encompass people, design and technology.

Management strategies are key to ensuring rapid time-to-benefit and optimum long-term results.

- The web channel needs a champion, someone who owns it and understands its relationship to other customer service channels.
- Customer service providers within the contact centre should also play a key role in defining content to optimise the effectiveness of the Web channel based on their daily experiences with the citizen.
- Organisations must demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement to drive up service levels. Use Web feedback mechanisms, such as traffic statistics, to increase content effectiveness.

Good design and navigation radically improve self-service rates—yet this is often overlooked by customer service managers unfamiliar with the subtleties of web site development. Key design points include: minimal clicks to attain required information, information located in one place, the use of interactive tools, multiple links to other information and letting customers know about the web site—by using a contact centre ‘hold’ message, for example

In addition to implementing good process management and site design, it is also important to fully exploit the capabilities of the software. Appropriate system configuration can make a dramatic difference in the percentage of people who successfully solve their problems online. Best practice deployments include:

- Auto suggestion of answers to customer email enquiries before they are sent to customer service
- Use of reports and feedback mechanisms to improve content
- Use of escalation and workflow rules to ensure citizens receive a response within the stated timeframe
- Leveraging knowledge items to speed phone, email and chat responses
- Incorporating the web into a total multi-channel contact centre strategy

By adopting these best practice approaches to deployment, organisations can attain significantly improved customer service and a faster return on investment.

Hosted Solutions

With cost a major consideration in the delivery of eGovernment service, the availability of a hosted solution is becoming critical for many UK public sector organisations. A multi-tenancy hosted application environment allows multiple organisations to be hosted securely on a unified host, delivering control within a scalable environment. These solutions can be deployed more quickly and easily and cost far less to acquire and own than conventional in-house applications. They also offer flexibility in regulating the length and provisions of the contractual relationship with the vendor and allow organisations to try the software prior to purchase.

Compared to conventional environments, a multi-tenancy hosted application environment:

- Significantly accelerates time-to-benefit from years to a few months or even *weeks*;
- Decreases investment dramatically—up to a 50 per cent or more savings with customer service and support software; and
- Relieves the customer burden of steep investment costs related to infrastructure, licensing, deployment and integration complexities, and shifts any headaches to the vendor.

Critically for the delivery of 24x7 services, a hosted environment can provide the maintenance, support and upgrades as well as proactive server monitoring and security provision to ensure high availability.

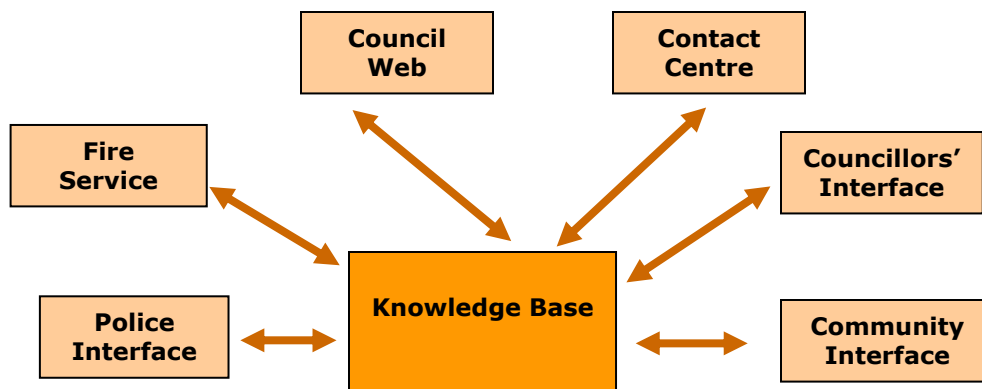
eService in Action

A Federal Government agency in the US receives more than 60,000,000 calls and almost a half-million emails a year. The self-learning knowledge base was implemented with 284 question and answer pairs, and within two weeks, more than 200 new items were captured and added based on visitor enquiries. The result was an extremely rapid, low-cost knowledge base that effectively met the needs of a very large user population. In addition, because citizens typically have the same questions when they visit an agency site, the web site draws from a central repository of information to provide immediate solutions. Thousands of enquiries are answered simultaneously. And with web-based self-service helping more citizens with most of their queries, the agency handles 12,500 fewer calls each day and is expecting a daily savings of \$62,500—more than \$16 million annually.

The agency's eGovernment strategy makes routine, but timely, information more accessible to better serve citizens, while reducing the flurry of inbound calls and emails and increasing staff costs.

Conclusion

As everyone in the public sector is painfully aware the deadline for meeting eGovernment is getting closer. Those public sector organisations that fail to enable self-service interaction at the web site will suffer both from failure to meet the targets and a drop in perceived value of the service to the citizen. Creating a single pool of knowledge enabling self-service, within call centres and one-stop shops, ensures consistency of information and services and enables cost effective achievement of required targets—all while improving perceived value. Critically, by supporting one-stop shops and call centres, it enables the public sector to achieve a return on investment from eGovernment initiatives irrespective of the Internet adoption rates of the citizen.



Councils can also extend this central pool of knowledge to collaborate within a *virtual unitary authority*, a requirement highlighted within a Cabinet Office eGovernment document some three years ago. "When people interact with government they want to do so on their own terms. They want high quality services that are accessible and convenient. People shouldn't need to understand how government is organised, or to know which department or agency does what, or whether the function is exercised by central or local government." With no requirement for operational change, by using this model, councils can further leverage their investment, delivering unprecedented breadth of citizen service while maintaining individual identity.

About RightNow

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