Public libraries as e-government intermediaries? UK policy development and the role of the public library in the networked society

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the potential for public libraries to act as e-government intermediaries (EGIs). EGIs are defined by the UK government as 'organisations from the private or voluntary sectors offering services targeted at groups of customers' (Cabinet Office, 2003b: 18). Intermediaries can assist people with their e-government use in recognition of the fact that although governments around the world are establishing e-government services, usage remains low in certain geographic areas and among disadvantaged sections of the population. In this paper, the characteristics of successful EGIs will be identified with the aim of establishing good practice in breaking down the digital divide and opening up e-government services to those who may benefit the most from them.

Introduction

The British Government's determination that the UK would climb aboard the 'information superhighway' was first articulated in print in *Our Information Age,* a policy document detailing how it intended to harness the potential of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) to ensure they benefited the economy and, more generally, British society as a whole (Central Office of Information, 1998). The Government called for more people to interact with its services through the Internet, believing this is a productive use of the technology which can improve the efficiency, convenience and quality of public services. Public libraries were among the first local authority services to take advantage of Internet technology to publicise their services and offer online access to facilities such as their catalogues and enquiry services. They have thus been involved in developing e-government services from a variety of perspectives: as designer and host; as transaction service provider; and as facilitator through the provision of free ICT facilities with which citizens can access a wide range of e-government services - from paying local taxes to reporting vandalism and graffiti. Additionally, public libraries are well-placed to act as EGIs as they have long been

perceived as trusted institutions. Yet, this is something they have not yet fully exploited. Indeed, recent research by the UK polling organisation MORI stated that 'half of [internet] users mention the library as a point of access although they don't personally use it' (MORI, 2005).

In this paper, the authors begin by investigating the development of e-government policy in the UK – and how the government's priorities shifted from provision of services online to harnessing ICT to deliver specific policy outcomes. In this context, the promotion of EGIs is considered. It is noted that, whilst intermediaries may be well-suited to 'deliver[ing] effective e-government services in a customer-centric way' (Cabinet Office, 2003a: 8), they could be hampered by the perceptions of those working in government and by the inflexible back-office systems of large centralised Departments. The subsequent two sections of this paper consider the roles public library services can play in the delivery of e-government services in the UK. Three are discussed: electronic provision of services; content management; and the potential of public libraries as EGIs. Particular attention is given to People's Network machines, mobile libraries and the knowledge of professional librarians. Dr Goulding is currently bidding to the Nuffield Foundation for funding to develop this research as a case study project.

E-government

Electronic government has been defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as 'the use of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government' (OECD, 2003a: 11). Silcock, a UK academic, stated that: 'e-government is the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees' (Silcock, 2003: 88). This interpretation more clearly captures the aim of the UK administration when it began to think seriously about e-government policy in the late 1990s.

Context

Some of the earliest developments in e-government occurred in Scandinavian countries, where utilization of ICT was stimulated by public administration reform and advancement of the information society agenda. The latter proved particularly significant. In the case of Finland, the OECD reported:

> 'The government's desire to make the opportunities of the information society available to all and the demonstration effect of ICT use in the economy, have provided a strong case for developing e-government and for integrating the e-government strategy in a comprehensive information society vision.' (OECD, 2003b: 2)

As a result of its success in planning the information society, the Finnish government obtained a degree of public confidence, reinforcing its ability to incorporate e-government into its overall ICT strategy. Examples of long-standing e-government schemes in Scandinavia include Finland's citizen portal, initiated in 1996 (OECD,

2003c), and the Nordic 'Green Corridor' system (OECD, 2003a), in which the electronic sharing of information helps manage cross-border trade at greater speed and reduced cost.

It was not until the beginning of the current decade that inter-governmental bodies such as the European Union (EU) and the OECD began to assess e-government progress of their own members, however. Whilst the EU has produced documentation relating to the application of ICT to public service provision since the mid-1990s, the publication of *eGovernment Indicators for Benchmarking eEurope* (European Commission, 2001) introduced a methodology for assessing e-government initiatives in the member states[1]. In order to measure the degree to which a service was available online, four stages of e-government were identified:

(i)   *Information*: online information about public services;
(ii)   *Interaction*: downloading of forms;
(iii)   *Two-way interaction*: processing of forms, including authentication;
(iv)   *Transaction*: case handling; decision and delivery (payment). (European Commission, 2001).

Indicators were provided for a list of twenty basic public services, twelve for citizens and eight for business, enabling regular overviews of member states. The most recent survey was published in November 2005 (Chevallerau, 2005).

The OECD established its 'e-government project' in 2001, with the aim of contributing to 'the understanding of the potential and implications of e-government and sharing the result as widely as possible'[2]. To date, their most prominent publication has been the 2003 flagship policy paper *The e-Government Imperative* (OECD, 2003a). This highlighted policy lessons from member countries and suggested ten guiding principles for e-government implementation. More recently, the OECD has focussed on developing solutions for more integrated public service provision (dubbed 'seamless government') and conducting e-government country peer reviews.

E-government in the UK

In the UK, the momentum for e-government accelerated following the election of New Labour in 1997[3]. *Our Information Age* (Central Office of Information, 1998) set the tone, stating that ICT could improve educational effectiveness, combat social exclusion, improve individuals' economic position and, of particular relevance to this paper, facilitate the smooth running of democracy through e-government services. The 1999 *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999), built on this, committing government to having 25% of services available electronically by 2002 and 100% by 2008. A detailed plan of action was outlined the following year in *E-government: a Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age* (Cabinet Office, 2000). This strategy was underpinned by four guiding principles:

(i)   Building services around citizen's choices;
(ii)   Making government and its services more accessible;
(iii)   Social inclusion;

(iv)   Using information better.

The document challenged all public sector organisations to innovate, committed all central government departments to developing new e-business strategies and to providing services accessible via government portals and other sites. Finally, the target to have all services available electronically was brought forward to 2005. This document was just one element of the broader *UK Online Strategy*[4], aimed at making the UK the best place in the world for e-commerce by 2002, and ensuring that everyone who wanted it had Internet access by 2005[5].

In November 2005, a new e-government strategy, *Transformational Government – Enabled by Technology* (Cabinet Office, 2005), was launched. It called for three key 'transformations' towards:

(i)   *Citizen and business centred services*, including the creation of a Service Transformation Board to define and enforce common service design principles;

(ii)   *Shared services* across the public sector, including human resources, finance, data sharing, information management and customer service;

(iii)   *Professionalism* in terms of joined-up leadership and governance, portfolio management of technology programmes, supplier management and a focus on innovation.

In this strategy, the emphasis was on better usage of technology to deliver public services and policy outcomes. One route, initially proposed in 2000, was through the involvement of intermediaries from the private and voluntary sector (Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), 2000).

E-government Intermediaries (EGIs)

A report by the Performance and Innovation Unit, published in 2000, foresaw the possibility of private and voluntary sector portals competing with government portals in a 'new mixed economy of government service delivery' (PIU, 2000: 59). However, the important policy work in this field did not commence until 2003. In May of that year, the Office of the e-Envoy published a draft policy framework to promote a 'mixed economy' supply of online public services (Cabinet Office, 2003a). The framework was formalised in *Implementation Guidelines* published in December 2003 in which intermediaries were defined as:

'…organisations from the private or voluntary sectors offering services targeted at groups of customers. They do not offer services on behalf of the public sector, and shall not represent themselves as so doing. The intermediary is acting as an agent of the end customer.' (Cabinet Office, 2003b: 18)

In the UK, intermediaries have been used by a number of government departments since the late 1990s. For example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) have used farm agents in the e-tracking of cattle since 1998 (Cabinet Office, 2003b: 32-4). Other examples include the Inland Revenue in self-assessment and the

Department of Work and Pensions in their pension planning programme (Cabinet Office, 2003a). The government's rationale is that intermediaries, due to their existing relationships with customers and insight into their needs, 'are well-placed to deliver effective e-government services in a customer-centric way' (Cabinet Office, 2003a: 8). In particular, the *Implementation Guidelines* stated that EGIs can:

(i) *Improve take-up* of e-government services by making additional connections between customers and public services;
(ii) *Improve service resilience*. An example is cited from 2002, where access to online self-assessment was suspended through the Inland Revenue gateway, but was still available via a financial services company;
(iii) *Potentially reduce service cost*, by offering additional, complementary ways of delivering front-end public services;
(iv) *Increase compliance*, due to existing relationships with their customers;
(v) *Improve perception of government*. The delivery of more citizen-centric services through intermediation will allow government to reconnect with citizens and improve its responsiveness. (Cabinet Office, 2003a: 14-15)

There has been some interest, with voluntary organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) working with the Inland Revenue and the Department of Work and Pensions to deal with benefit and tax credit claims, although the CAB complained that 'insufficient progress [had] been made' (Wheatley, 2005). In part this was due to back office systems in government, in particular departmental IT systems that did not support third party access. Yet, it was also due to the perception of many in government of the intermediary as a convenient means of achieving departmental targets, rather than as an independent body in their own right (Wheatley, 2005).

E-government and Public Libraries

For public libraries, the British Government's e-government strategy and its increasing focus on the use of intermediaries has a number of important implications. Of particular relevance is the People's Network, the National Lottery-funded project that has connected all public libraries in the UK to the Internet[6]. Public libraries have featured large in government initiatives to extend Internet access beyond those connected at home or through work. In response to concerns about the digital divide, which can leave some people lacking the information resources available to others and exacerbate existing social divisions, the UK Government took steps to try to ensure that access to ICT, and the Internet in particular, was available at low or no cost in various publicly accessible community locations. As a result of the People's Network, there are more than 4,000 public libraries across the UK offering free or low cost broadband Internet access and other services through over 30,000 computer terminals.

The key to public libraries' engagement with the Government's e-government agenda is whether they can successfully move beyond merely providing public access to ICT facilities through the People's Network, to developing services which exploit opportunities to deliver key local and central government policies, including those related to e-government. One of the themes of *Framework for the Future*, the

Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS[7]) long term vision for public libraries in England published in 2003, is digital citizenship (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003). The document highlights how public libraries enable access to electronic information and services and how they are central to the delivery of government services available online. Public library services are considered to have an important and multi-faceted role to play in the delivery of e-government services in the UK, therefore. Firstly, the public library can provide many of its services electronically and, in fact, was one of the 20 target services identified by the European Commission for e-delivery alongside others such as income tax returns, car registration, careers services and enrolment in higher education (European Commission, 2003). Secondly, public library services have considerable expertise in the collection, organisation and dissemination of information and can therefore play an important part in the establishment and maintenance of local authority e-government services. Thirdly, public libraries can overcome the digital divide by providing public access to ICT and delivering training activities which ensure that people have the facilities and skills to take advantage of e-government services. The first two of these roles are discussed briefly below before a more in-depth discussion of the potential of public libraries to act as e-government intermediaries.

The Electronic Provision of Public Library Services

Public libraries were among the first local authority services to take advantage of Internet technology to publicise their services and offer online access to facilities such as their catalogues and enquiry services. The UK Public Libraries Page run by Sheila and Robert Harden lists the URL of every British public library website and awards commendation marks for those considered to be making the best use of the Internet, not just for publicising their services but also adding value through the implementation of new web-based services and facilities[8]. Library services offer users the facility to undertake many transactions online; they can check their borrowing records, for example, renew materials, make reservations and check the catalogue via the Internet. Electronic service provision is reality in public library services throughout the UK, therefore, and is enabling many library services to remodel their provision so that it becomes increasingly virtual.

Content Management

Some library authorities have also been successful in playing a leading role in the design and maintenance of the local council's website. Froud and Mackenzie (2002) give the example of Leeds public library services which is responsible for running the council's website and developing it for e-government services. In other areas, too, the public library service is often at the top table when e-government decisions are taken. Sommerlad et al. (2004) report that the library service is often seen as a key pilot site and contributor to the e-government agenda within local councils. Public libraries have a long tradition of providing reliable and accurate citizenship information and so facilitating online access to council services and other local resources might be expected to come naturally to them. Although they may not control the corporate e-government agenda, this role more likely to be invested in the information systems department of the

council, they can be key players with a responsibility to provide quality content which meets the needs of the community.

Libraries have long provided access to a range of local citizenship information. Traditionally in printed format, especially pamphlets, this type of information is increasingly available online and library services are often responsible for organising and hosting it. Cambridgeshire library service, for example, hosts Infocam – a searchable community information database[9] and a glance through the list of public library websites on the UK Public Libraries Page shows that many other library services provide a similar facility. Moreover, the SEAMLESS UK project is linking together electronic community information databases from different parts of the UK[10]. Librarians' understanding of how people ask questions and their information handling and management skills means that they should take a leading role in both designing the customer interface of council websites and ensuring the logical organization of the information and resources provided. This kind of activity is helping some library services position themselves at the heart of implementing e-government within their local authorities.

Public Libraries as Intermediaries

As highlighted earlier in this paper, the use of EGIs to help and encourage people to use e-government services is part of UK government policy. Take-up of e-government services is likely to come not simply from people accessing services directly from their own PC, then, but also from facilitated access through intermediaries. To be successful, though, these EGIs should demonstrate a variety of key attributes which enable them to deliver e-government services in a customer-centric way. Evidence to date suggests that they should:

(i)   Be accessible (in all senses of the word);
(ii)   Possess or have access to appropriate facilities;
(iii)   Have a trusted relationship with clients;
(iv)   Employ staff with appropriate skills in ICT, customer relations and information handling. (Citizen Advice Bureau, no date)

Public libraries display many of these characteristics and as public libraries are prime sites for the use of the Internet outside the home, it is likely that they will be required to fulfil the role of intermediary. As indicated above, they have a good reputation for providing citizenship and community information and research evidence suggests that the information provided via the websites of more established organisations such as museums, libraries and archives is more likely to be trusted (MORI, 2005). Public libraries are also perceived as open, friendly neutral spaces - open to all members of the community and in which people are treated as citizens rather than consumers; they are trusted institutions within the civic landscape. They are also accessible – located in communities and open for longer hours than many other services and agencies. Through the People's Network project, all public libraries within the UK now provide public access to the Internet, which, in the vast majority of cases, is free. Furthermore, Public libraries are staffed by a skilled, customer-focused workforce trained in

information handling and with skills in helping users access and use ICT. Public library users are accustomed to asking librarians questions on a range of issues and this has been reinforced by experience with the People's Network, research showing that users are comfortable asking library staff for help with ICT (Sommerlad et al., 2004). All these attributes suggest that public libraries could be effective intermediaries and we will now explore the extent to which they fulfil this promise by discussing activity in two of the key areas listed above in more depth: firstly, through the provision of access to appropriate facilities and, secondly, staff-assisted user support and training.

Facilities Provision

The Government wants the People's Network to provide a user-friendly entry point to government services. In Tameside, for example, the local authority's *Customer First* e-government project through which members of the public can request services and pay bills via the Internet has been extended into public libraries. Access to readily available e-government services like these is considered particularly important for those disadvantaged by the digital divide. For those living in socially excluded communities, access to ICT and skills in its exploitation can help them overcome many of the obstacles hindering their full participation in the economy and society. It can, for example, enable them to access benefits-related services, improve the range of information resources available to them and make it easier to access services and mobilise action for the benefit of themselves and their neighbourhood. Access to ICT and e-government services can thus empower socially excluded individuals and communities. Both Brophy (2002) and Sommerlad et al. (2004) report that the ICT access available in public libraries in the UK has attracted people from socially excluded groups into libraries and that the People's Network has been successful in bridging the digital divide with some public library services finding imaginative ways to reach out to these groups which do not readily have access to the Internet and who may have special needs which prevent them using ICT in other venues.

The needs of housebound people and those in residential or nursing homes are being addressed in some areas through the lending out of laptops with Internet connections, for example. Similarly, wireless links on mobile libraries are being used to provide supported access to isolated and disadvantaged rural communities. The MLA (the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives[11]), in cooperation with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Countryside Agency, have trialed WiFi hotspots in 10 public libraries across England to extend broadband connectivity to rural communities. In Derbyshire, the provision of ICT facilities in rural public libraries and on mobile services is seen by the council as an important way of providing access to a range of e-government information and services, especially to those in socially excluded communities. The advantages of public access Internet facilities and e-government services in these communities are particularly strong. Users unable to reach medical services readily can access NHSDirect Online to obtain health information, for example. Those with limited transport options can interact with local government and other agencies through central and local government Internet sites.

Provision is one thing, of course, use is quite another and it seems that worries about the security of online transactions may deter some from using e-government services. At

the moment, it appears that other delivery channels such as the telephone, kiosks and face-to-face discussions are considered more trustworthy and to have clear benefits over the Internet. In fact, kiosks allowing users to a menu-driven set of information pages are becoming increasingly popular in public libraries once again (Froud and Mackenzie, 2002). Once hosting PRESTEL services allowing users to access menu-driven community information pages, kiosks are now linked to the Internet to provide easily updated information on a range of council services. In Sutton, kiosks called *i+points* providing council and public service information were introduced in 2001. The nine kiosks also provide free email. In 2003, the kiosks were accessed 117,000 times, excluding email, compared with 95,000 visits in 2002. Other authorities including Islington, Southwark, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster, Lambeth, Bromley, Knowsley and Bristol have also introduced similar systems.

Many public library services in the UK are, therefore, trying to find ways of making it easier to the public to access e-government services. Often, though, users may need help to navigate sites and support from library staff will be important to encourage use and engagement.

User Support and Training

Public libraries are helping overcome the digital divide by providing public access to the ICT facilities through which people can access e-government services but they are also playing a role in helping to ensure that people have the skills to take advantage of the facilities provided. Users have to be comfortable with Internet technology before they can search for leisure, consumer or job-related information, for example, or before they can access central and local government websites to find information about welfare rights and other public services. Public libraries offer an accessible and informal environment in which people can gain basic ICT skills, enhancing their engagement with government and society more generally. The final evaluation report on the People's Network project confirmed that ICT training and support was the most prominent People's Network activity in library services, suggesting that libraries have helped many thousands of users to become confident and competent in handling ICT and exploiting its uses (Sommerlad et al., 2004). Just about all public library services have provided training to increase the confidence and competence of users in using ICT. 'Web Taster' sessions and 'Internet for the Terrified' courses are now commonplace in public libraries and often focus on groups which have had less opportunity than others to use technology. The installation of the People's Network was accompanied by another National Lottery funded programme which trained all public library staff in the use of ICT, generally through the ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) qualification. Trained staff are now acting as intermediaries between the technology, and the services it supports, and those users who are not confident with ICT. Increasingly, it seems, library staff are taking on the role of enabler of ICT within the community and, as more and more government services are available online, they are showing people how to connect with e-government services.

Public Libraries and Digital Citizenship

Information has long been recognised as a key right and an important facilitator of citizenship, and public libraries have a long and reliable tradition of providing free and open access to it. As more and more information is available online, it seems natural that public libraries should continue to fulfil their mission by providing 24/7 access to resources through ICT. The MLA is funding *Enquire*, for example, a live question and answer service available 24 hours a day connecting users to trained library staff[12]. This kind of professional guidance is considered essential to assist people connect with the e-government and digital citizenship agendas. In fact, it could be argued that public libraries have a responsibility to provide the equipment and facilities through which users can access digital information and help overcome the digital divide. Providing access and support may not be enough to close that gap, however, because although there is a wealth of information available on the web, accessing quality, relevant resources can often be frustrating. There is a role here again for public librarians as content managers - identifying and signposting websites considered to provide quality assured, reliable, accurate information relevant to the needs of users.

Additionally, public libraries have been taking a prominent role in the NOF-digitise programme and other initiatives which have financed the digitisation of local and national collections of documents, maps, photographs, and sound and image archives[13]. This kind of activity has a role to play in other important aspects of government policy, including those of social inclusion and neighbourhood regeneration. The digitisation of local collections which previously have not been easily and universally accessible can lead to deeper knowledge of an area, engender a strong sense of place and even a sense of pride in the area's history and traditions. In turn, this can promote civic identity and encourage community involvement. The evaluation of the People's Network project reported that the exploration of community history and identity was an activity that many public libraries were involved in, often in partnership with other local cultural organizations, through the building of digital collections (Sommerlad et al., 2004). However, a recent government report stated that 'a significant number of UK citizens remain digitally unengaged' (Cabinet Office, 2004). Opportunities to create local ownership and build community identity are therefore being missed, although in 2005, the MLA sought to address this – and achieve its *Framework for the Future* objectives - through a series of digital citizenship workshops[14].

Conclusion

The evaluation of the People's Network project found that the People's Network grade of service provided clear benefits to those seeking e-government information (Sommerlad et al., 2004). The People's Network has the ability to deliver services which meet many of the Government's social objectives and the more advanced public library services are moving beyond merely providing public access to ICT to develop services which exploit its opportunities to deliver key local and central government policies including those relating to e-government. One of the challenges public libraries face in this policy area, though, is how to encourage users to progress from accessing the Internet and using it to find information to encouraging them to engage with e-government services and facilities.

Public libraries need to consider how they can deliver their own services electronically and also how they can assist their local authorities develop its e-government capacity while encouraging people to develop the skills and confidence to use e-services and perhaps assist them to undertake online activities which link communities and build local networks. In this respect, the UK government has provided a clear information policy lead. The DCMS *Framework for the Future* has given UK public libraries some key objectives and a focus for their future work. The Cabinet Office, through their promotion of EGIs, has provided public libraries with an opportunity to progress from a dependent to a partnership relationship with government. By exploiting the information management expertise of their staff to broaden further the services they provide to their already diverse clientele, public libraries can position themselves at the centre of the networked society.

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Notes

[1] The twenty public services comprise twelve for citizens and eight for businesses. The two indicators for eGovernment benchmarking are:
- Percentage of basic public services available online;
- Use of online public services by the public.

[2] OECD e-government project:
http://webdomino1.oecd.org/COMNET/PUM/egovproweb.nsf/viewHtml/index/$FILE/e_gov_project.htm [25.11.05]

[3] However, the previous Conservative administration had produced an overarching vision for the use of ICT by the public sector in its 1996 Green Paper *Government.Direct*:
- Central IT Unit (CITU) (1996). *Government direct: a prospectus for the electronic delivery of government services*, London: CITU/Office of Public Service.

[4] Launched in 2000, the *UK Online Strategy* was originally overseen by the Office of the e-Envoy. In June 2004, the Office of the e-Envoy was re-established as the 'e-Government Unit':
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government / [27.11.05]

[5] The UK Online Annual Report 2002 claimed that the UK was the second best environment in the world for e-commerce, behind the United States: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/docs/annualreports/2002/annualreport02.pdf [30.11.05]

According to UK National Statistics, 55% of British households had Internet access in July 2005: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=8 [27.11.05]

[6] For further information on the People's Network project see:
http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/pn/00pn.asp [01.12.05]

[7] The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is the government department with responsibility for the public library service in England. For further information see:
http://www.culture.gov.uk/ [01.12.05]

[8] The UK Public Libraries Page is at: http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/square/ac940/weblibs.html [01.12.05]

[9] The Infocam website is at: http://www2.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/cambscc/infocam/cid.nsf/index.htm [01.12.05]

[10] The seamlessUK website is at: http://www.seamlessuk.info/ [01.12.05]

[11] MLA is the development agency for museums, libraries and archives in England, advising government on policy and priorities for the sector. For further information see: http://www.mla.gov.uk/ [01.12.05]

[12] Enquire is at: http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/enquire/index.html [01.12.05]

[13] The NOF-digitise programme provided funding to make learning materials available free of charge online. The programme ran for four years from April 2000 to March 2004:
http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/nof/support/ [30.11.05]

[14] MLA digital citizenship workshop series: http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/pn/events.asp#report [30.11.05].