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EVALUATING THE VALUE: COMPARING LOCAL GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES IN E-GOV IN THE UK AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

While Australia's role as a leader in moves to e-government is widely accepted, there appear to be a number of discrepancies emerging as we move down from federal to local levels of government. Thus, while earlier papers (see 1 & 2) revealed federal and state level moves to E-Government are relatively advanced, a recent review of local government websites was less optimistic (3).

The potential for e-government at the local level is particularly important, given it that it is here that the "size and geographical diversity... [which] has presented the country with particular problems of communication and travel" are generally most keenly felt (4). Also, deficiencies in the lack of functionality at the grass-roots level of local government will be a significant impediment to the larger context of aims such as the potential for 'joined-up-government' (5).

This paper thus continues the research from the user perspective of these services to present results of a comparative content analysis of Australian and UK local government websites. The aim is to further investigate what the implementation of E-Government actually means in terms of the public interface and access initiatives at the regional level. The results of the analysis provide further evidence of Australia being a long way from the clear value of e-government suggested in the notion of 'joined-up-government'.

EVALUATING THE VALUE:
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BACKGROUND

This paper presents a small part of a larger investigation into the use of ICT and public sector reform in Australia. While initially intended to form a minor part within this wider study, the results to date have produced interesting and unexpected complexities which require further investigation in their own right. One such result are indications that much of the e-government moves at the level of local government appear to be at a much lower stage than anticipated - often concentrated on the simplistic conversion of current documentation to electronic formats.

The key issue behind this current diversion in our research is the suggestion there may be another dimension to the term 'digital divide' commonly discussed in e-government literature. Rather than referring to the 'haves' and 'have nots' in terms of access to technology (6), here we may be looking at a digital divide in terms of the ability of local government to be a provider of high quality e-government services - specifically, in their apparent inability to be able to match the sophistication and functionality of the federal and state initiatives.

However, before rushing headfirst into such claims, there is another perspective which can be easily investigated and this is the suggestion that this lower level of e-government is a feature of local government per se rather than of Australian local government in particular. This paper thus develops the analysis of local government websites as an application of technology to their service delivery, programs and administration to extend it to a comparison between the UK and Australia. While this provides a view of how many and what components of government have made the migration to the online environment, it also encompasses qualitative features of this move (7). The comparison becomes how and for what purposes technology is being utilized in local governments in both countries through the key questions of:

(i)   what information is being provided on Australian and UK local government websites?
(ii)   in which formats for?
(iii)   what purposes of?
(iv)   which users?

The potential of e-government at this grass roots level clearly extends to a value (albeit a very useful one) beyond simply paying rates, settling planning disputes, borrowing books from the library or arranging home care online to one where technology can be used to enhance social interaction and community participation and provide linkages across, between and within local communities (5 & 7). The wider question thus continues to be: what is e-government at the local council level achieving – is it the supply of electronic services directly to connected users, a cost reduction program aimed at service design and delivery, a mechanism for providing fast and direct channels for user feedback or, an enabling tool which allows public participation in policy and program development?

THE STUDY

The results presented in this paper originate from two sources. The UK data is from a larger project 'Progress in implementing E-Government in Britain' carried out by Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, Callagahn and Yared (8) from LSE – itself, part of a larger project for the National Audit Office. The UK study contained a coding framework for the content analysis of websites of 82 items and was carried out across both central and local government agencies. The British framework provided the basis for the Australian study with the amendment that screening for relevance and overly complex detail reduced the Australian study framework down to 52 items. The British study was carried out in late 2001 and surveyed 388 local government websites – of which 375 had websites (see Table 1a).

Table 1a: UK Type of local authorities surveyed with a Web site

	Frequency	Percent
District Councils	227	60.5
Unitary Authorities	45	12.0
Metropolitan Councils	36	9.6
County Councils	34	9.1
London Boroughs (and the City)	33	8.8
Total	**375**	**100.0**

The Australian study was conducted in early 2003 and is comprised of a representative sample of 22 councils across the council types and within each state except the Northern Territory (See Tables1b & c)

Table 1b: Australian Local Government Levels Surveyed

	Frequency	Percent
Capital City/Urban Metro Developed	5	22.7
Urban Fringe	5	22.7
Urban regional Town or City	5	22.7
Rural	7	31.8
Total	**22**	**100.0**

Table 1c: Australian Local Governments Surveyed by state

State	Local Government	
	Frequency	Percent
NSW	7	31.8
Vic	7	31.8
QLD	4	18.2
WA	1	4.5
SA	2	9.1
Tas	1	4.5
NT	0	0.0
Total	**22**	**100.0**

RESULTS – THE WEBSITES

Examining how local authorities perform on specific aspects of their Web provision is a complex task because they typically spread themselves over a widely diverse range of areas. The results presented in this section thus attempt to deal with this complexity through reducing website content into two major dimensions. The first aspect reviewed are the general features presented in the councils' sites, as well as the links they contain to other bodies. The second dimension will then

examine in more detail the range of 'human services' provided - such as education, leisure and environmental services.

Before these two tasks however, is the primary issue of the ease in finding the website in the first place. Most of the websites in both the UK and Australian surveys were easy to find using the Google search engine and restricting the search to the appropriate country. Although dealing with small numbers, Table 2 reveals a difference between the two studies already in the fact that two Australian websites not listed in the top ten - both sites were small rural councils.

Table 2: Finding the Websites

		AUSTRALIA		UNITED KINGDOM	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
First place		19	86.5	367	98
Top ten		1	4.5	8	2
Not in top 10		2	9.0	0	0
	Total	**22**	**100.0**	**375**	**100**

Once a site is located, the next issue is the ease of site navigation in locating the desired information. Search facilities are essential to this process yet, as Table 3 reveals, a number of sites in both countries lacked this key tool. Overall, the percentage of Australian sites exceeds the UK and, of the 7 Australian council websites which did not have a general search facility, 4 were rural and 3 urban fringe. Of these, two of the urban fringe sites did provide a link to global web search engines such as Google, Yahoo and AltaVista - but this does not compensate for the absence of a site-specific search and the result is that finding information is more difficult.

Table 3: Site Navigation – Presence of a General Search Facility

		AUSTRALIA		UNITED KINGDOM	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes		15	68	285	76
No		7	32	90	24
	Total	**22**	**100**	**375**	**100**

In terms now of general site features, Figure 1 reveals some important national differences in that half (50%) of Australian local government sites did not have a site map (compared to just over 30% in the UK), while only 27% of Australian local government sites provided an A-Z list of services (compared to over 80% in the UK). This result reflects a paucity in basic information provision within Australian sites which is further compounded when we examine the feature of updating - where nearly 60 percent offering no indication as to when they had last been updated (compared to 20 in the UK).

Figure 1: Basic information and site facilities across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
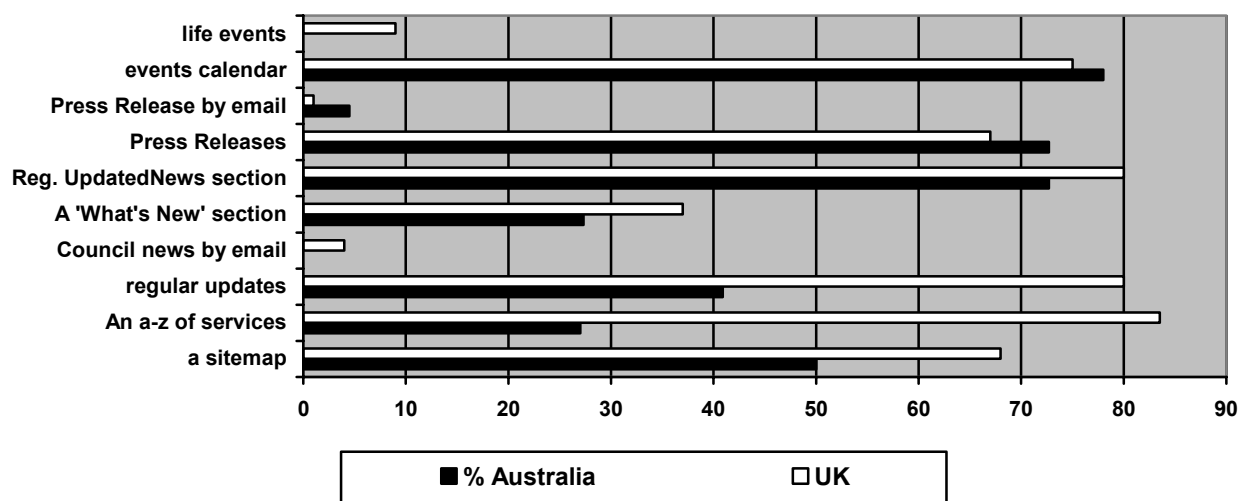

Table 4 below provides more detail on the updating of information to reveal even greater contrast between the two countries in that over half of the Australian councils failed to provide any updating service at all. Given the topical nature most users have when using the web to access information, this failure raises serious questions as to how useful any of the services then provided can be – as users are completely unable to judge the currency, and thus accuracy, of the information. Returning to the information councils do present about themselves to the public, Figure 1 clearly reveals regular updating is a feature of the services provided by the UK councils.

Table 4: Indication of when last updated

		AUSTRALIA		UNITED KINGDOM	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
last week		4	18.2	242	65
last month		3	13.6	52	14
3 months & more		2	9.1	16	4
Not updated		13	59.1	65	17
	Total	22	100.0	**375**	**100**

While judgements can be inferred from the presence (or, in Australia's case, the absence), of small but integral aspects such as dating, there is also the public relations factor of the information the organisation presents about itself. This is important in terms of the 'public face' and as Figure 2 shows, reveals a number of interesting factors. The first priority for most Australian councils appears to be publicising their Mission Statement and, for the majority, this was contained within a PDF version of their annual report. The eagerness of Australian councils to provide easily accessible their 'vision for the future' available – with 17 of the 22 councils posting this information. Perhaps rather cynically, it is noted that such information is quite easy to transfer into websites but highly unlikely to be of huge interest to the general public.

In contrast, UK sites focus on publicly useful information such as assistance in contacting the organisation. Both countries sites generally provided contact details such as address, telephone number, fax number and an email address for general enquiries/comments. However, the quality was often quite different with few Australian councils providing more than a phone number for their senior officials (though nearly 64 percent provided role specifications for their senior officials). All Australian and most UK websites provided an email address for general enquiries, complaints and notification of problems to the webmaster, but few provide email addresses for named employees or for citizen consultation. Only five of the Australian sites gave an indication of when a reply to an email could be expected. Of these 5, one was within 7 days, one within a fortnight, one within a month, and two gave the vague response of 'shortly'. More sophisticated details such as travel directions or clickable maps to locate the agency office were found in the UK sites. Nonne of the Australian sites had the facility to enter a postcode in order to find the location of an office location, compared to 24 (6%) of the UK sites.

Figure 2: Structure & Responsibilites across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
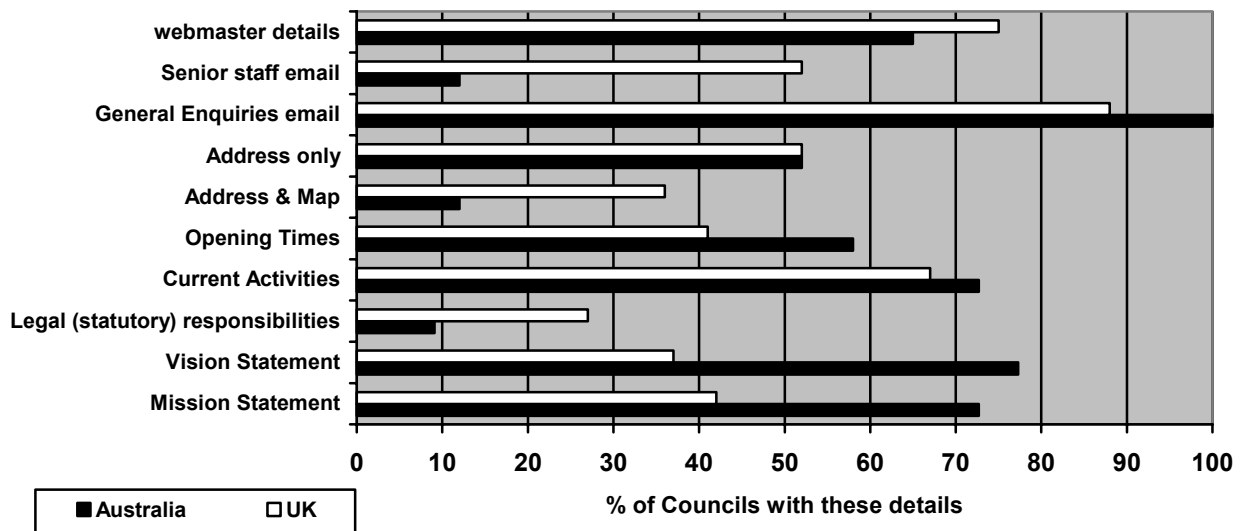

At the functional level, less than 10% of the Australian councils surveyed supplied details of legal or statutory responsibilities, compared to over 25% of UK councils - yet but both have over 65% advertising Current Activities. Again though, the usefulness of this current information within the Australian sites may be slightly negated by the lack of the updating feature. Overall, Figures 1 and 2 combine to reveal differences in terms of what councils provide in a number of basic information features. In Australia, it is easier to find out the mission and vision of a local council than it is to physically locate the building or obtain really useful information on the council's statutory (legal) responsibility. The UK sites provide more contact information and have less emphasis on missions and visions (which are probably of lesser interest to constituents than councils would like to think). It should be noted though, that if the UK specific imitative of Best Value Performance Plans were included, over 80% of UK councils do provide this – again, a service hardly likely to be of major interest to normal citizens.

The second aspect in this analysis of site content is what it reveals about how local councils see themselves as meeting more general, local community concerns and needs. These can clearly be gauged by the provision of links which facilitate a wider view of the community and to the local private sector. Some indicators likely to be important to this wider community perspective (and

indicative of more sophisticated initiatives such as 'joined up government) can be expected in areas such as education and leisure as well as access to information and services available on issues such as waste management, housing and community services. This next section thus investigates what amongst these sorts of services are provided and then, offers a comparative view of these features. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of details provided on local schools and adult educational institutions. At the basic level, the information supplied includes institutions address, a map of the location, catchment area, links to school Web sites and e-mail addresses, together with details of school term dates. Again, the UK appears to be far more advanced in the provision of these services – evidenced in more sophisticated features such as a search facility for people to determine which school's catchment area they are in.

Figure 3: Educational Details - Schools across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
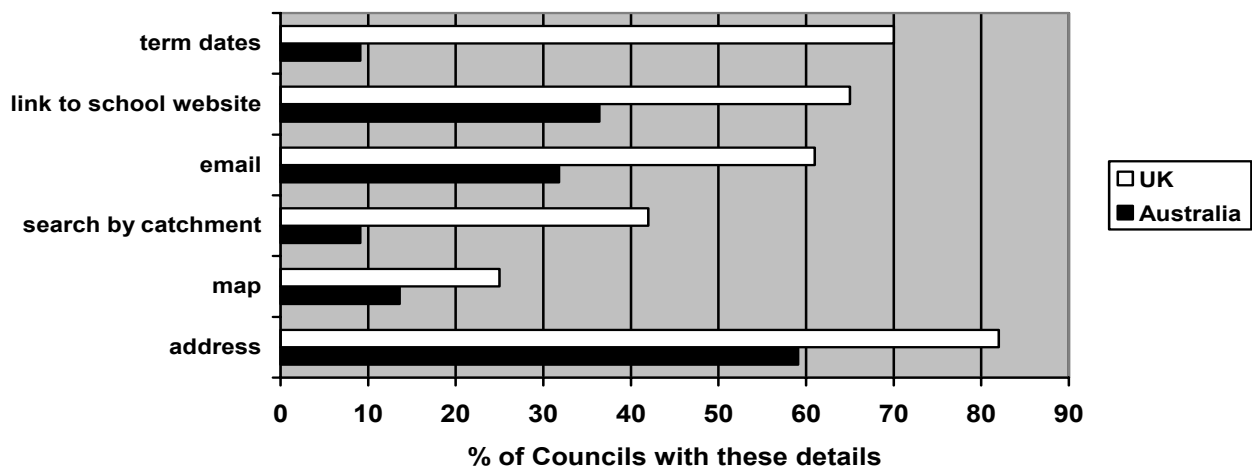

Adult education features and links were less well-developed for both countries but, as Figure 4 reveals, the UK continues to provide a better range and depth of services. This is verified clearly in the library services offered.

Figure 4: Educational Details – Adult Education across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
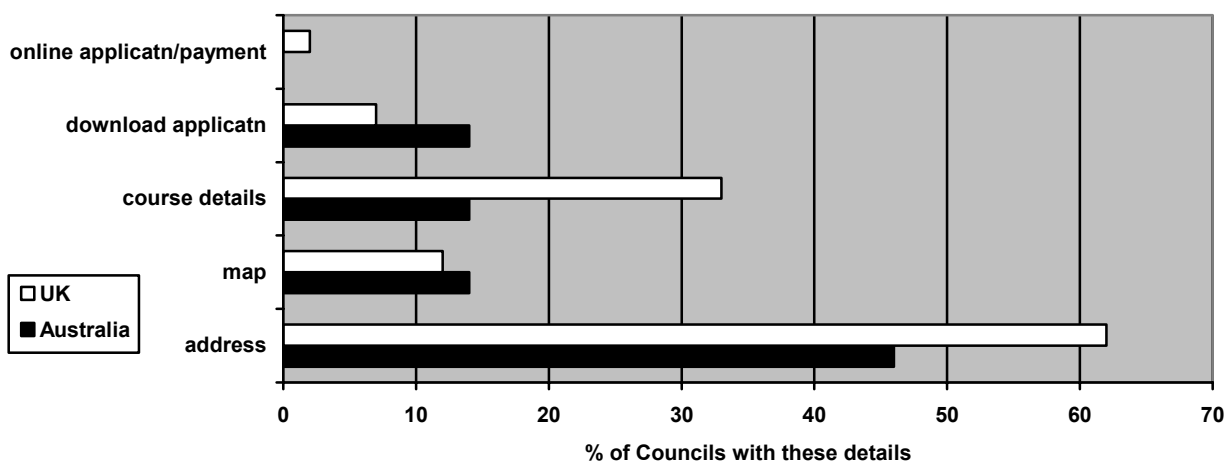
Library services have been a rich area of IT application since the 1980s. Today, most library catalogues can be more easily browsed, books ordered or reserved over the Web than via the phone and, as Figure 5 reveals, the majority of Australian and UK local councils provide a full range of details to library facilities in their area.

Figure 5: Library information and services available across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
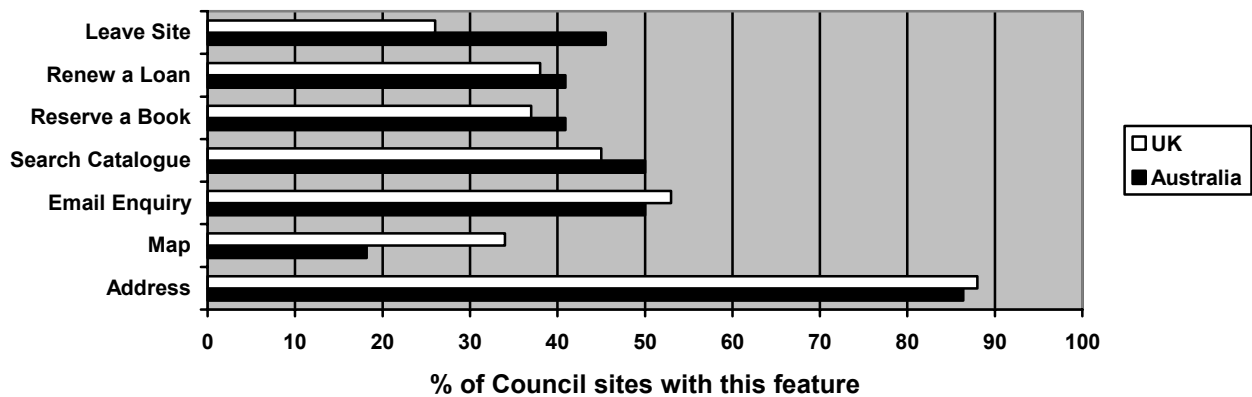
Of the 3 Australian councils not providing this information, two were remote rural councils and surprisingly, the third, a large regional town council. Overall, Figure 5 shows very similar results for most features of library information except in terms of how the links were made. Within Australian sites, it is mainly through a link to the library's own web site, while in the UK, it is more common for the library site to be provided by the council. This element supports a view of greater linkage and long-term planning in the UK.

While library services were well resourced on council websites, very few types of council in either country provided such services for Building and Planning. The major feature of the UK sites is the facility for reviewing building or planning applications online yet, there are few links to sites relevant to building and planning, as shown in Figure 6. Overall, in contrast to the library, planning uses of the Web in both countries are much less developed, with major functionality restricted to allowing users to download the forms needed to make a planning application. Although planning could be seen as an easy area to fully 'digitize' within local authority administration, there appears to be of rather modest progress towards this goal.

Figure 6: Building and Planning Features across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
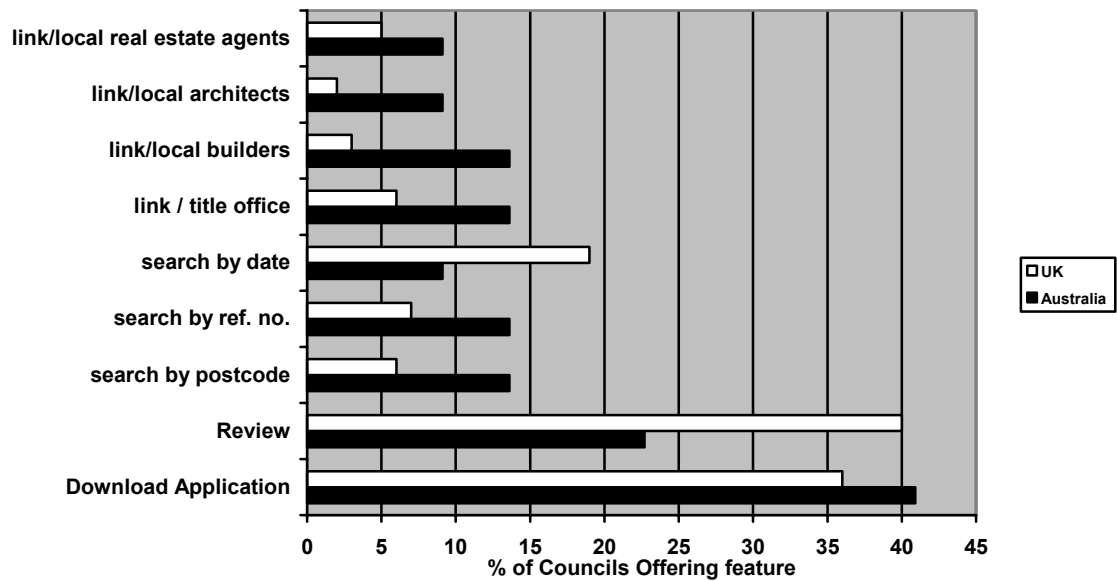
This rather constrained range of web-based services on offer to citizens continues when we examine transport. Here, e-government theoretically has the potential to help overcome some of the difficulties in finding information about public transport and assisting in identifying connected journeys across different forms of local transport. However, as Figure 7 shows, less than half the Australian and just over 40 percent of the UK councils surveyed provide information about transport in their locality. In all cases, these services were provided via links to transport companies.

Figure 7: Links to transport companies across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
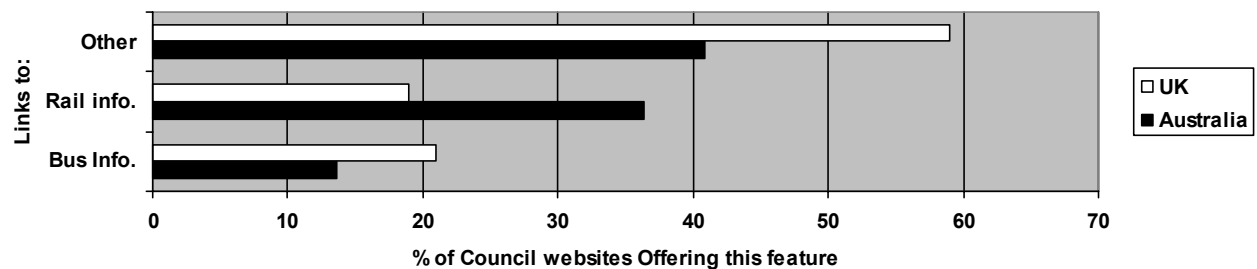

In Australia, only the links to a bus company shown in Figure 7 allowed the purchase of a ticket while 4 percent of the UK sites allowed ticket purchase. While not included in the data presented here, there are some developments emerging with over 20% of councils in both nations allowing users to access searchable journey planners. Again, this limited service seems at odds with the potential of the web as demonstrated by the sophisticated services available from most airlines today.

Similarly, the development of features about roads and highways on local government sites also appears to be just beginning and, at this stage, is clearly further progressed in the UK. As Figure 8 shows, only a few Australian councils provide information on local road repairs, allows users to

search for repairs or provides links to the National Department of Roads – though over 25% allow street faults to be reported online.

Figure 8: Road and highway information across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia
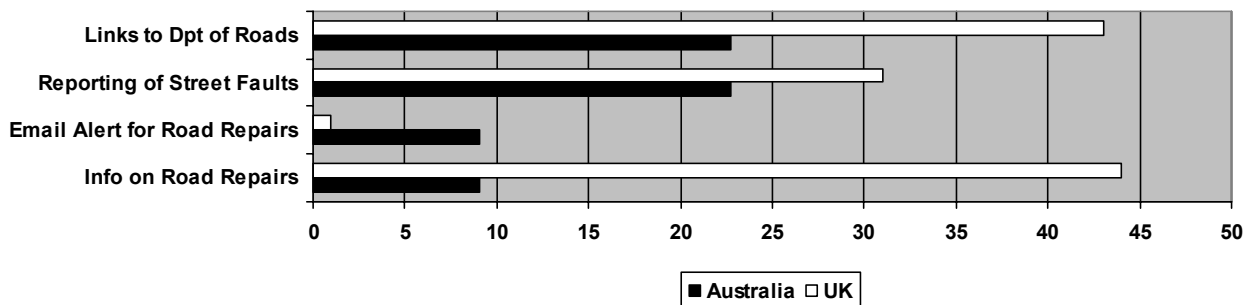
Social services information on council Web sites is shown in Figure 9. In this area, the results are very similar and for both nations.

Figure 9: Community Service Information across local authority websites in the UK & Australia
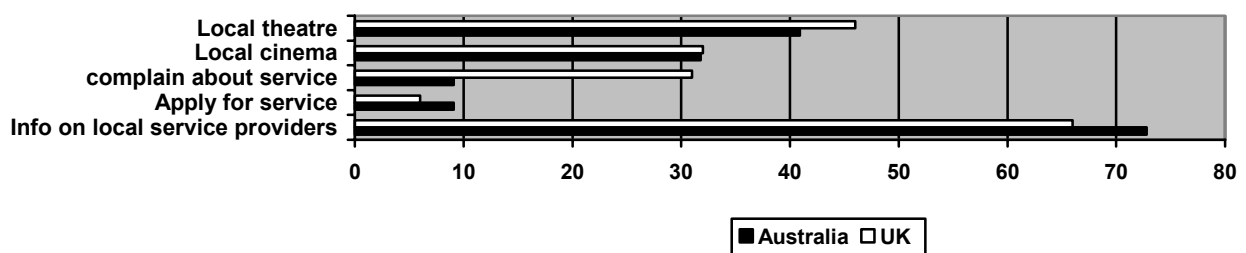
While over half of all the council Web sites provided a listing of local social services providers, few had direct links to them or allowed citizens to apply on-line for social services - or even download a form to fill and send back in the post. While this seems a major lack of functionality, the one feature of substantial difference was in the facilities to complain about the various service providers. Overall, while particularly marked in Australia, the low level of service in the areas above is even more surprising given the large scale moves to privatisation in both countries. The lack of information in areas where local government has traditionally played a very active role is further seen in the provision of information on Leisure - where local authorities have traditionally played an important role through providing and administering their own facilities as well as encouraging tourism. Again though, web links to local theatres and cinemas were provided by less than half.

Figure 10 provides an overview of another local government staple service, links to environmental health issues, waste management and the payment of council rates. This area is one where Australian councils appear to be providing substantially better value in services than their UK counterparts on all measures. However, these are generally provided by less than half of the 22 councils. It seems rate collection is a particularly high priority.

**Figure 10: Environmental information & Services across local authority Web sites in UK & Australia**
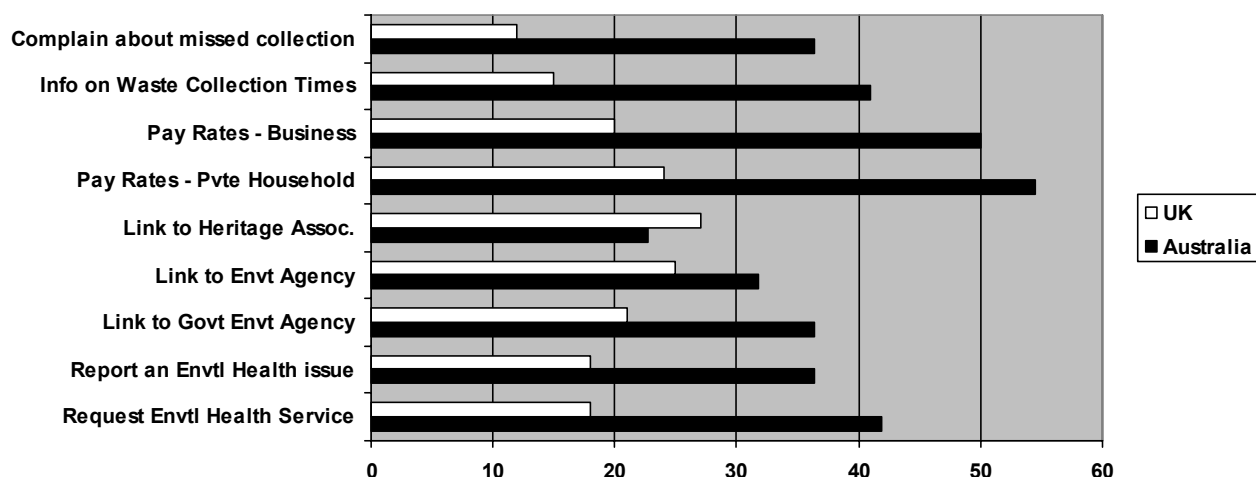
Finally, Figure 11 reveals that the most dramatic difference between the two countries lies in the technologies made (or not made) available through the websites. There were a number of areas in the UK survey which did not even feature in Australian council websites, primarily concerned with access and equity issues, particularly compliance with accessibility standards. Thus, none of the Australian sites surveyed provided:

- special technologies for users with special needs (such as voice output and Braille browsers);
- a chat room;
- video files; or
- audio files, although one local council provides an audio version of their 'Aged and Disability Services' brochure while another provides audio for a short preview of the tracks on a music CD which it is selling to raise money for local CFA brigades.

Only one Australian site, a metropolitan city council, offered a text-only version of their site, although many sites were clearly limited to a text-only design for other reasons, with the only graphics appearing in the banner.

The lack of technology options appears to reflect poorly on Australian local government as a concern common with moves to governments at all levels providing web-based services has been issues of access equity. We have seen the development of standards designed to cater for the needs of people with a range of disabilities and Australian governments have based their standards on the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). There is also a popular and comprehensive web accessibility software tool called Bobby, which evaluates websites for compliance with accessibility guidelines. While this has been taken up enthusiastically by the private sector in Australia and effectively promoted as evidence of corporate social responsibility, only two Australian metropolitan local councils noted that they complied with either Bobby or W3C standards for accessibility. This deficiency is further reflected in the general absence of sites being available in Languages other than English. Only one Australian local council provided multilingual support and this was limited to information about which phone number to call for support in one of 11 languages, and a three pages introduction (in PDF format) to the services provided by council*.*

Figure 11: Technologies available on local authority web sites in UK & Australia
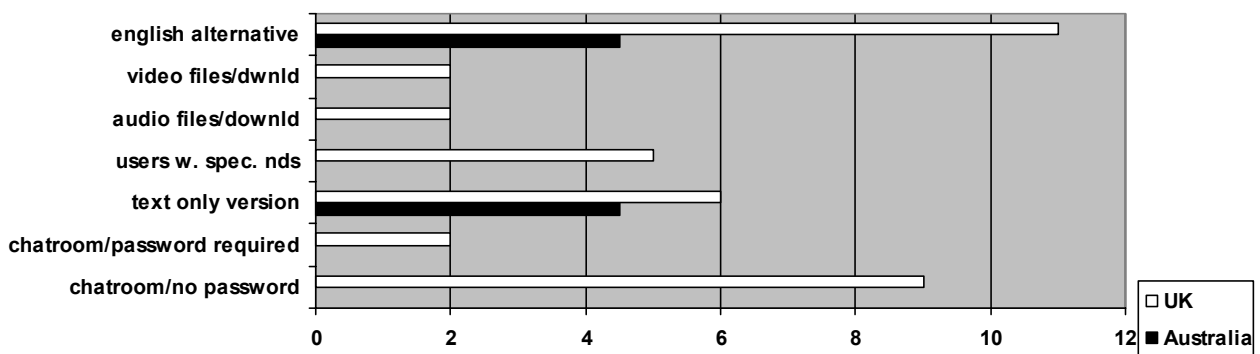
CONCLUSION

Overall, the results support the suggestion from our earlier paper that E-government implementation in Australian local government is in its infancy. Comparison with the UK revealed that most of our council sites are still relatively basic in nature, tending to focus more on promoting the local authority or area using the transfer of traditionally paperbound documentation into e-formats. Generally, the services available in Australian local government sites lag behind those on offer to UK citizens and this is most apparent in the technologies made available for users. However, there are indications of some Australian councils matching or even occasionally bettering the services of the UK – though these are largely confined to matters of revenue and traditional services of waste/environment issues and rate collection. The focus on providing documentation such as visions of the future and mission statements are rather unlikely to be the sort of materials that the average local constituent is going to actively go online and seek. Further, given the lack of basic information such as how to contact the council, where they are or any regular updating, it appears Australian local councils would be wise to invest some time in talking to their local population about the services they would like to have available on the website.

Overall, it appears Australian local government lags behind in terms of showing signs of preparedness to move into the next stage of service provision. At present the very low level of interactivity within Australian sites compares poorly to the more fully developed and interactively arranged UK sites that generally provide a more accessible Web presence. It should be noted in conclusion though that the notion of fully 'transactional' sites (where local authorities are Web enabled) appear to be some way off in both nations.

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