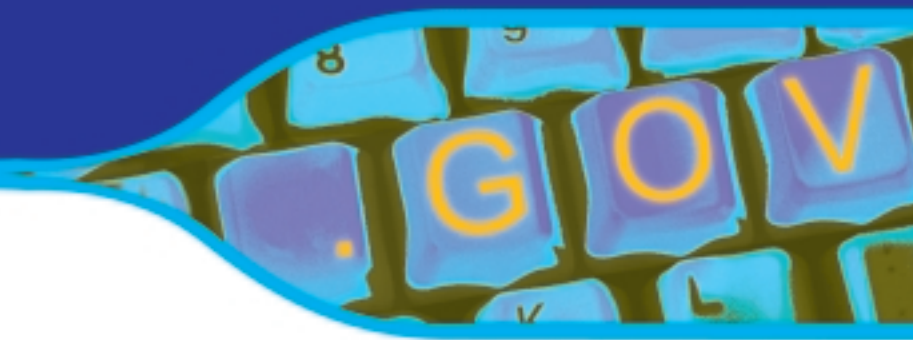


# Towards the Tipping Point:

Boosting Take-Up of

Local Government Online Services

July 2006



# About the Authority Forum

The Authority Forum is a quarterly focus group event for senior public sector executives involved in improving service delivery and efficiency at the local level. Selected delegates are drawn from progressive local authorities as well as central government and industry analysts, to discuss and debate a current public sector issue in depth and to develop recommendations for progress.

Taking part in the Authority Forum provides the opportunity to discuss opinions and ideas on key issues with peers. Delegates can position their organisation as a thought leader on priority areas at the local level and similarly can raise the profile of the programmes that they and their colleagues have been working hard to achieve.

The discussion and recommendations of the group are documented in the Authority Forum report, written by Dan Jellinek, editor of e-Government Bulletin. In addition, selected journalists were invited to listen and document any findings for their respective publications.

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# Executive summary

A recent report\* demonstrates that use of local authority online services is slowly growing, with visits to council websites up 40% on figures from the same period in 2005, and sites receiving 11.4 million visitors, representing 15% of the UK population.

Conversely, levels of e-government usage in the UK are deemed poor compared with many other countries, and councils are struggling to persuade large sections of the public to use online services.

According to a recent global survey of government customer service†, the UK still has the highest percentage of citizens who use the post to contact government among 21 countries surveyed. Only 38% of UK citizens used an e-government service last year compared to 68% for top-ranking Canada.

Figures from the European Commission published last year showed the UK lagging behind when it examined the percentage of citizens that had accessed a council service online in the previous three months. In fact the UK trailed behind not just those countries one might expect to have highly wired-up citizens, but small nations such as Latvia and Luxembourg.

Large sums of money have been spent in helping councils meet the 2005 target for having all appropriate services online, and this has been a key factor in shifting the focus onto take-up.

**Awareness is not the only challenge for authorities to tackle in boosting take-up**

Against this background, the national eServices Take-Up Campaign, 'Connect to your Council', was launched to publicise the breadth of online services available from UK local authorities and increase the percentage of citizens using them.

This will undoubtedly help, but awareness is not the only challenge for councils to tackle in boosting take-up.

When people are encouraged to use services, for example, their experience must be good or they will not return. This means that online services must be fully integrated with all the council's other service channels, working smoothly alongside them. It also means that the back office processes that sit behind the electronic interface must be efficient, and automated where possible.

Ultimately these challenges are about people. As is so often the case with the development of e-government services, the hard part is often cultural, adopting a customer service ethos throughout the authority as well as ensuring that all parts of the council integrate online services with other channels.

These issues formed the heart of the discussion at the July 2006 Authority Forum, which drew together key points for local authorities to bear in mind as they plan to boost service take-up in their areas. These key points are set out below, followed by a full account of the Forum's debate.

\* "Better Connected 2006", Society of IT Management (SOCITM), March 2006

† "Leadership in Customer Service: Building the Trust", Accenture, May 2006

## Key Points



- Take-up is expected to rise steadily over the coming months and years, through ongoing efforts and through the increasing use of technology in society. What local authorities must ensure is that they are well-placed to deliver real customer service benefits along with efficiency gains.
- Following take-up of online services by early adopters, authorities need to make sure they 'cross the chasm' into mainstream adoption, which is where many good ideas fail.
- One of the keys for take-up is trust. Organisations must ensure people are confident that their personal details will be secure, that money will be paid, and that requests will be acted upon.
- Online services must feel personal and friendly: many citizens like the human interaction to be gained from visiting a service centre or talking to an officer over the phone.
- Care must be taken to ensure all online services are of consistently good quality. If they suffer from inconsistency and weak spots, all services are likely to be tarred with the same brush.
- Online services should be as lively, interesting and fun to use as possible. Local content should extend beyond dry service information to engage the audience and make the site an enjoyable place to visit, with online discussion forums and tourist information cited as successful examples. Particularly powerful in this will be the ability to deliver personalised content.
- To serve customers well, it is essential to know who they are. Councils should continually research who is using their services, what their preferences may be, and where the high volume of transactions is likely to come from. Different strategies should then be created to target different groups and to match services to them.



- Online services must be fully integrated with back office systems, with processes being automated. Being able to track online the progress of a service or request will be an important factor in boosting take-up.
- A close working relationship between local authorities and their suppliers is imperative, as is the ability for both to take forward an integrated systems approach across the organisation.
- Councils and other local partners should consider pooling resources to share online services. This will help make the most of their investment in e-government and improve the services available, for which there are already good examples.
- The customer must be placed at the heart of all activities across a council, informing all activities of departments and workers. The definition of customer should be broadened well beyond that of resident to include business, tourism and other groups.
- There are many success stories, and they need to be celebrated and disseminated. Success stories are most powerful when related by customers, telling others what good online services mean to them and their lives.

# Discussion report

Post 2005, the focus on customer service rather than e-government moves beyond an approach of deploying technology and the mere act of placing services online. It looks instead at the provision of services that meet the needs of customers; how well these are integrated with other services; how well they help the council work across departments internally, and with other organisations externally, to present a united front to the customer; and the way services are becoming more interactive.

These are hard challenges, but two developments are driving a new age of focus on customer service in local government. First, customer focus has become an integral part of the revised Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. Second, the imminent Varney Review commissioned by the Treasury into transformational government will be based on improving the customer experience.

So improving customer service is no longer optional, and if local authorities get it right, it should go hand in hand with the take-up of e-services, as satisfied customers return online for more.

There are other challenges to meet though, in ensuring individual experiences of online services are good. Perhaps chief among these is making sure council websites are lively, engaging places to visit. This might sound simple enough, but there has been a tendency to be quite matter-of-fact, dry and bureaucratic in the style of communication. Moreover, local authorities must recognise that they are up against the best of the private sector in producing websites that are seen as worthwhile places to visit.

But if local authorities get it right, they will lead the way in creating a new generation of transactional sites that play a central part in people's lives in the years to come, forming a significant part of the 'place shaping' activity articulated by Sir Michael Lyons.

## Reaching the tipping point

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Eric Woods, Director of Ovum's Government Practice in the UK, opened the debate by suggesting that until the end of last year, the focus of government policy on local e-government has been on ensuring that local authorities place their services online. But the time has come to deliver on this investment by increasing the take-up of online services.

Peter Blair, Senior Responsible Officer for the National Take-up Campaign at the Department for Communities and Local Government, said: "It is natural timing for the take-up campaign to come now. In 2001, just 26% of local authority services were e-enabled, but thanks to the setting of a target for moving all services online by the end of 2005, by March 2006 it had reached 98%.

"The approach was always to say, let's get the infrastructure in place and then look at driving people onto it. For a long time we looked at take-up as the natural end of the local e-government programme: there was no point in advertising e-government earlier, if the services were not there."



**"The time has come for councils to deliver on their investment in online services by increasing the take-up."**

Eric Woods



**“At the moment services are seen as an add-on, of interest to some but not all, but we want to make it a major channel so we reap the return on investment.”**

Peter Blair

But that is only part of the story, Blair continued. “The government was taken aback by figures from the European Commission’s statistics office in 2005 which showed that, while the UK came top in terms of average degree of sophistication of online public services, it was way behind many other EU countries in take-up. We did not just come behind developing countries with a strong e-government track record like the Scandinavian countries, but also behind some of the smallest countries, such as Latvia and Luxembourg.”

It was clear that something needed be done, Blair said, building on investment in e-government up to that point. “Strategically, with the national take-up project, the objectives were to say to local authorities that now is the time to get serious, to view e-government not just as an add-on but as a strong channel, giving customers choice. Since we embarked on the local e-government programme, the internet has become embedded in people’s everyday lives.

“A feasibility study we ran before we started the project found we could increase take-up, but not as a one-off activity. To be effective over time we would have to sustain the momentum and make sure local authorities were on board and ‘open for business’.

“I do believe there is a tipping point for take-up of e-services,” Blair concluded. “At the moment services are seen as an add-on, of interest to some but not all, but we want to make it a major channel so we reap the return on investment”.

Siobhan Coughlan, Principal Consultant at the Improvement and Development Agency, pointed to return on investment as a major reason for the take-up work. “With the amount of money that has already been invested in developing services, there is a lot more benefit that needs to be seen to come out of it,” she said.

Allan Drew, Divisional Director of Customer Services at the London Borough of Lambeth, questioned whether take-up of online services was a problem that would solve itself in the fullness of time. “Will usage rise gradually as the world moves on? Is there any resistance to change that we need to overcome and tackle, or is it just something that will disappear over time?”

Paul Tonks, Local Government Director at Civica, agreed. “Adoption of online services is no different to any new development, following a lifecycle which starts with take-up by innovators and early adopters and ends with the laggards. However, as made famous by Geoffrey Moore, there is a chasm to cross before take-up by the majority is certain, a chasm that has seen off many good ideas.”

Justin Hunt, Director of ItsOpen, said: “A gradual, natural increase in take-up may indeed be inevitable, but the most important issue is how well local authorities are able to capitalise on rising take-up, saving money and improving the quality of services they provide.”

## Trust

Concern over universal access is ever present with online projects. And when it comes to boosting adoption, it takes centre stage.

Louise Gray, Head of Customer Access, Liverpool City Council, highlighted the need to reduce the social divide for people without PCs, for example by providing kiosks. “It is more likely that people without PCs

will be those that have more need to contact their councils, and who may not know what services are available or where to go. Perhaps the reason take-up is not what it could be is that those who can easily access online services have little reason to engage, and those that really need services are often not part of the online community.

“For many people, their first point of access is the phone, because it is easier,” Gray said. “Older people like to come in, partly for the interaction and partly because they may feel it is easier to discuss problems face to face.”

“People are sceptical about what local authorities can deliver. Will it work? How private are their personal details? It is a bit like cash machines: when they first came out no-one wanted to use them, but now everyone does.”

Mike Chambers, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Change, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, said: “When I told my mother that she could look at planning applications on the web now, she didn’t believe me. She didn’t believe a local authority would do anything that modern!”

Allan Drew said: “People need to trust alternative service channels before they will use them. For instance we have people queuing up to pay money at face-to-face centres because they know they will get a receipt.”



**“Older people like to come in, partly for the interaction and partly because they may feel it is easier to discuss problems face to face.”**

Louise Gray

Louise Gray pointed out that Liverpool City has installed kiosks on the streets, and these give a printed receipt for services as a means to enhance trust. “We found that a high proportion of people from minority groups and people with disabilities were using them, to obtain basic information before they came in to see us. It was easier than phoning up if you don’t have English as a first language, or can’t get to an office easily. However, there is a limit to the amount of information you can display on each page.

“On the other hand, many people were walking past them because they didn’t know what they were. So we have also placed them inside our offices, where staff can provide assistance in using them.”

“People would rather use the phone,” Allan Drew said. “For example, our own call centre provides a great call answering service – the average response time is 13 seconds, and you can’t expect that from your bank or from big companies. But if you provide a good telephone service people ask where the advantage is in going online. In a previous role at BT, we offered automated online account handling, but people wouldn’t use it as long as they could speak to someone in person. With the phone there is trust and ease of use.”

Peter Blair said: “Our research has shown that the phrase ‘I’m going to phone the council’ is ingrained in the public consciousness. We need to get the phrase ‘I’m going to email the council’ fixed in people’s minds in the same way. It is less about social exclusion and more about delivering customer service improvement across multiple channels.”

Louise Gray added: “Choice can be a problem. People will go for the easiest option. Everyone has a mobile phone these days so this is a channel that definitely should be considered.”



Paul Smith, Development Director at Comino, noted that the phone is part of an overall online service solution, and that the key is to join up processes so that the same service level is available online or via the telephone, building confidence.

The conclusion may be an incentive to use online services, added Allan Drew. “One idea is to offer discounts, which could be paid for from the savings to be made from the switch to e-services, as is done for example in the insurance industry. This could be an adjustment to existing incentives. For instance instead of getting a 50% discount for prompt payment of a parking ticket, a motorist might get only 40% with an extra 10% for paying online.”

## Once bitten, twice shy

If online users have a bad experience, they are unlikely to try again, rather falling back on tried and tested channels such as picking up the telephone or writing a letter. To address this, local authorities must be sure their online services work effectively.

Lack of consistency is an issue, said Siobhan Coughlan. “People tend to have differing experiences, for example an established online service such as the Planning Portal works quite well, whereas if you email your council the response may be poor. Inconsistencies lead to mistrust. Everybody is grappling with these issues to some extent.”

Paul Tonks said: “Recently I did try to put in a planning application online, and it wasn’t easy. The application had to be fully completed, you couldn’t fill it in partially and return later. I persisted: I paid money to the Land Registry as required, and attached the file. Then the local authority wrote

to me asking for photocopies of the application with the boundaries red-lined, and for them to be posted. This is not the way to build trust.”

Mark Say, Editor, Government Computing, said: “It is not just quality of services that puts people off. Some private sector online services are not so good, and this leads to a situation where people don’t want to do anything online. So how does the public sector distinguish itself from these services?”

Siobhan Coughlan said: “There is also a general fear of identity theft. But then look at private sector organisations that do an excellent job, like Amazon. There are useful lessons to be learned there.”



**“It is not just quality of services that puts people off. Some private sector online services are not so good, and this leads to a situation where people don’t want to do anything online.”**

Mark Say

## Giving people what they want

Everyone has a few favourite websites. They are often private sector sites that are simple to use, such as Google, which provide valued services and offer information in lively, accessible and innovative ways. The challenge for public sector organisations is that they have to compete with these private sector sites for attention and ‘share of voice’.

Eric Bohl, Executive Director of Corporate Services, London Borough of Lambeth, argued that council websites are “just so dreary and boring”. By contrast, many local or regional authority websites in other countries are much better. “Barcelona’s website is a fantastic tourist site,” Bohl said. “So many of ours do not give people information that is useful in their lives. Why don’t they give suggestions about things you can do, or general information that you might like to have, such as air quality, and not just transactions?”

“My daughter used to check the Lewisham weather every day on the council’s website – that tells you something about what people really want. Another example is the Tower Hamlets website, whose ‘quirky shopping’ guide was among the most popular pages.

“So boosting take-up is not just about transactions and trust: our website is in the Socitm ‘top 20’, but we still don’t think it is good enough because it doesn’t speak to people’s lives enough. It is interest and entertainment above all that drive use.”

Justin Hunt said: “Local information is a key factor. The BBC provides it, as well as useful information for my life, such as advice for parents, which is a good example of information that people really want.”

Siobhan Coughlan said: “That is true for many users, but for many others they just want to get in and out of the site quickly, for example to pay a parking ticket or get some rubbish collected, and we need to cater for these people efficiently as well. So ultimately it is about delivering services, although all the other aspects are important too.”

Paul Smith said: “Another key aspect of attracting people comes when we begin to move on personalisation of online services, for example letting people know what is happening in their street or community.

“If my bin has not been emptied, I want to know why. Ideally I would like to be able to find out what’s happening. There are other services too that are driven by user need, that would be impossible to deliver over the phone, for example to access all planning applications in your immediate area. They are services that can only be provided online, and through personalisation.”

No matter how sophisticated the process or the systems, ultimately it is about people and communication, so we have to make it easy, Smith continued, for example registering for online services. “There are some at the moment where the authentication process is so rigorous it puts people off. For example, to pay income tax online you have to wait a week for clearance, so I’m not going to use it, I’m going to pick up the telephone.

“People need to be able to find services more easily. For example, how easy is it to find where to report an abandoned vehicle? People don’t know whether it’s the responsibility of environmental health, the police, parking services or even the social landlord. That’s the case if they ring up their local authority: if we can solve it by immediately making it obvious online, without having to know the organisation of the council, then we’re providing a better service online rather than simply transferring existing difficulties.”

Justin Hunt added: “I don’t think local authorities have done enough research into what their customers want, but this take-up work is a good opportunity to put that right.”

Paul Tonks stated that in understanding what customers want, authorities first need to understand who their customers are.

## Understanding the customer

Understanding the customer is the first step in any activity. And this must be an ongoing task, so changes in use can be tracked.

Paul Tonks said: “Who is the customer? There is often an assumption that it is the local resident, but for some the main customer group could be visitors to an area. There may be many people who are not residents looking at online services. These people will not be looking for transactional services, so the route into the site for different groups could be split at a high level.”

Mike Chambers said: “It’s true that a real weakness is in understanding our customers, and we have a long way to go in getting that knowledge. Do people really want a council newspaper, for example? But there is a real difference between the public sector and businesses that are sales-driven, in that our services are defined for us. We can’t say we don’t want to do planning.”

Peter Blair said: “Typically authorities serve local populations with different demographics. If you understand who is visiting, and structure your services accordingly, it will help people find what they’re looking for.”

Paul Tonks added: “Segmentation is fundamental, and in this the public sector is no different to the private sector. What successful companies do is segment their customers by needs and wants, and then deliver products and services that meet the needs of those different groups, with communications varied accordingly.”



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Mike Chambers



Siobhan Coughlan said: “The Improvement and Development Agency has co-sponsored a programme with the Local Government Association using demographic information and mapping population against service take-up. The lesson is to provide access to specific services in certain areas based on propensity for take-up. This kind of project can help to work out how to locate services, for example putting a different mix of services in different one-stop locations. It is an effective way of managing your services.”

Allan Drew said: “It is not just a question of knowing who the users are, but in particular tracking where the volume of interactions come from and responding to that.”

Justin Hunt said: “It is clear that young people are important in this. Already they expect to get more from technology, and as they become users of local services they will be far more used to it. Are local authorities looking at initiatives to engage teenagers?”

Siobhan Coughlan answered: “Yes, councils are most certainly targeting young people. All pupils have access to online learning. It is almost taken for granted in schools now. Many authorities are innovating in this area, for example creating youth parliaments and online forums: Newham, for example, has elected a youth mayor.”

Peter Blair said: “Our research has found that part of the problem of low take-up of online services is that people simply don’t know what services in general councils provide. So an important part of the take-up campaign will be to help explain that.”



**“It is clear that young people are important in this ... Are local authorities looking at initiatives to engage teenagers?”**

Justin Hunt

## Automation and integration: Improving back-office services



**“Until we get better integration between systems across a council we can't guarantee a quick response.”**

Eric Bohl

Online services that are not fully automated behind the scenes can be worse than useless: a facade that appears to offer much but delivers little in service quality and efficiency. So transformation of business processes must finally be effected if we are to generate and hold a large user base for online services.

Eric Bohl said: “At Lambeth, we made it a rule that no-one can put anything online that isn't fully automated and controlled behind the scenes, or people stop coming.”

Mike Chambers said: “What has impressed me are those services where you do something once and it's there when you come back. The systems that remember you. The priority is to link enquiries across services. The difficulty is that what we can do is advancing and there is no benchmark of 'reasonable progress', so how far ahead should we look when we start a new initiative?”

Eric Bohl said: “When it comes to automation of the back office processes that sit behind an online service, we haven't completed the job by any means. If you look at the degree of real integration between customer relationship management (CRM) systems and back office

systems, for example, you can see a failure on the part of councils to be good collective clients of software suppliers, and to aggregate demand.

“Furthermore, many suppliers have been slow to get on board with the integration agenda, to add adaptors to their software for example, and to integrate their solutions with software from other vendors. But until we get better integration between systems across a council, we can't guarantee the customer a quick response, and we can't guarantee that service users will be able to finish online something they have started with us online. Lots of local authorities did want to engage with the 'Adaptor's Club' as part of the former CRM national project, but much work is needed to finish the job.”

Paul Smith said: “It is sometimes very difficult for suppliers at arms length to see what authorities actually want. That is compounded by the plethora of organisations and associations which have an involvement. There is sometimes mistrust of suppliers on the part of councils. For example we can't get access to the government's system for sharing best practice in local e-government linked to information about services at individual councils (the 'esd-toolkit'). So the request has been: free up information services to help suppliers help authorities.”

Paul Tonks pointed to Civica's experience in Australia, where the majority of the company's local government customers have implemented integrated council-wide solutions. “This issue regularly comes up at the Authority Forum. Many Australian authorities have moved from fragmented systems with myriad databases to an integrated 'enterprise wide' system. Perhaps most importantly for this debate however, a



**“It is sometimes very difficult for suppliers at arms length to see what authorities actually want.”**

Paul Smith

fundamental aspect of achieving this was a very close working relationship where local authorities took an active and driving role within the ongoing product development process.”

Allan Drew said: “At our call centre, at least 15% of calls received are repeat contacts, with people asking us: why didn’t you do what we asked you to do? Some calls are from people doing things online and then having to call in, and if that happens then they won’t bother trying to do it online again.

“So we’re implementing assurance systems, to help people see if what they have been promised is actually getting done, similar to the order tracking systems you see in online shops. The problem is that so many services are not fully transactional yet, they just take an order. We need to do more.”

Mark Say said: “You need to keep it simple, and make it clear what you’ve done at every stage of an online process, so that service users can see exactly what has been done and what comes next.”

Peter Blair said: “A good test is to see how well a call centre handles an enquiry about doing something online. If you can handle that call well, then you have a good balance between channels. I tried it recently with one authority and was put on hold while someone re-keyed details – that didn’t give a good impression of joined-up government. All parts of a council need to take responsibility for their online service.”

Siobhan Coughlan cited an experience in one of the pilots of the new customer service peer reviews developed at the IDeA. “We called one council after hours and asked for information, and were told to call back when the planning office was open. But as they spoke, we were looking at just the information we needed on the web, right then. There is a huge opportunity here to bring services together, so the contact centre and website could be used as a resource to answer queries.”

Louise Gray said: “It is essential that whatever access channel a customer uses they receive the same quality of service. I know that’s hard, but councils need to improve.”



**“We’re implementing assurance systems, to help people see if what they have been promised is actually getting done, similar to the order tracking systems you see in online shops.”**

Allan Drew

## A problem shared is a problem solved?

As with the improvement of customer service, the idea of shared services is moving forward as a central policy for the next wave of efficient and effective services. It is not always a simple matter to create the trust and organisational structures needed to work collaboratively with other local authorities and other agencies, but councils are expected to make clear progress in this area.

Peter Blair said: “To link up services with other councils you need a vision; you need to know where you’re going to be in five years’ time. In Liverpool they don’t use the ‘e’ word, they use the term customer services. In Dorset, they couldn’t agree at first about how to use government money to fund shared local e-government services. The real sticking point was that smaller authorities couldn’t approve revenue expenditure to bring to a collaborative web portal project, so some of them dropped out.

“But the project went ahead with most of the councils and now the ‘Dorset4You’ portal is regularly in the top 10 UK council sites for traffic. Online services in the area wouldn’t have been as successful as this if the rural councils had done it independently.”

Mike Chambers said: “Many local and regional relationships could be likened to the Balkans! When I joined Hyndburn, the only place where there was no historical barrier to co-operation between councils was e-government.”

Paul Tonks suggested that sharing services, not between different councils in this case, but between local partners such as the council, the police constabulary, the LEA and NHS Trusts where possible, could be an enormous lever to encourage take-up. Whilst there are obstacles in this area, the potential to provide a service with a common entry point for all local services would provide a much more powerful reason for citizens to adopt an online channel.



**“Sharing services, not between different councils in this case, but between ... the police constabulary, the LEA and NHS Trusts ... could be an enormous lever to encourage take-up.”**

Paul Tonks

## The customer at the centre

All agreed that the customer must now be placed at the centre of all council activity. But councils have often taken too narrow a view by focusing on the local resident as their main customer.

Siobhan Coughlan said: “It is easier to engage people across authorities now because everyone has responsibility for good customer services, not just in front line services or at the call centre. There has to be a balance between use of sticks and carrots though. The Gershon efficiency targets provided a stick, and now Varney is another potential stick. But on the other side there is the carrot of better customer satisfaction levels, which means thinking about the customer and taking a whole-council approach.”

Coughlan said she had detected a change in attitudes in this area over the past 15-18 months. “If you go back to the early days of e-government, what got us excited was the prospect of putting the customer at the centre. But our definition of the customer became too narrow; it was merely ‘the resident’, and it needs to be extended to other customer groups, such as small businesses and visitors.

“Every customer should have the same experience when they contact a council, the same ability to get what they want,” Coughlan continued. “It doesn’t matter how sophisticated our IT systems are, sometimes it’s the ability of people to be helped above and beyond what they expect that’s important. It should not just be a cold transaction. There is a need to put the customer at the centre, for example by dealing especially sensitively with someone phoning a call centre about adopting a child.”

Mike Chambers said: “It’s no surprise we are only just now at this point. As well as advances in new technology, there has also been a maturing in business planning.

“We can learn a lot from a robust business planning mentality, both in creating and delivering convenient services that our customers want to use and in developing a business case approach to spending public money. We have a clear focus for investing in any online service: how will it enhance our reputation; how will it improve the quality of service provision; and what efficiency gain will it deliver?”

## Trumpeting the success stories

All too often public sector bodies play the blame game whenever anything goes wrong, creating an atmosphere of risk aversion that can stifle innovation. But there is plenty of good practice out there too, and a good antidote to fear of failure is to trumpet these successes wherever and whenever possible.

Eric Woods said: “It’s not that long ago that someone with an enquiry would visit their local authority and be required to go from office to office. At each, there was the chance that the office was not open that day and you’d have to come back. So the transformation that has already taken place is huge.”

Siobhan Coughlan said: “If you look at what has already been done in encouraging use of the phone, the system is already more efficient. When it comes to getting people online there has been good progress in some areas, for example with the 24/7 contact centres running in Liverpool and Islington, but there is still a lot of inconsistency.

“It’s very important not to forget another audience for online services - the staff in local authorities, who can use them to find information and help customers over the phone.”

Eric Bohl said: “We’ve started to try to become less boring. I don’t know if it’s actually possible for local government to not be boring, but we’ve developed a beautiful venue guide, really useful and different. We’ve got to encourage more of that kind of facility.

“We also need to engage local groups in conversation, for example through ‘blogs’. People use the web to talk, to find and share information, and councils need to facilitate that.”

Siobhan Coughlan said: “Attitudes change. Look at council tax: five years ago, the majority of people were not paying by direct debit. I myself was moving around between properties, and paying by cheque. But now I wouldn’t dream of it. What happened there? We need to think about that process, and build on it. There are lots of successes to build on and we need to get people to tell us when it really worked, and what it meant to them.”

Peter Blair said: “There is always a danger of focusing on one specific way to deliver a service rather than providing a mixture, but one of the successes of the Local e-Government Programme has been its bottom-up approach. The method has been to consult and engage all councils.

“Ultimately, all the evidence is that getting e-government right is a reputation-building exercise. The challenge for councils is making sure services don’t disappoint. Then people will be impressed, and take-up is sure to improve.”



**“There are lots of successes to build on and we need to get people to tell us when it really worked, and what it meant to them.”**

Siobhan Coughlan

# Conclusion

The government, in the guise of the new Department for Communities and Local Government, has decided that now is the time to make a serious effort to drive take-up of online services.

The belief is that we are nearing a 'tipping point' for take-up beyond which it will continue to grow well of its own accord, as people recommend online services to friends, family and colleagues and themselves return to do more and more online. The result will be increased opportunities for major efficiency savings, as the numbers using services online make reduction of other more expensive channels a real option. But local authorities need to ensure that online services 'cross the chasm' to high volume mainstream use.

The key will be to combine a whole-council approach to customer services, automation of back office processes and integration of all service channels including telephone, mobile working, face-to-face services and the web.

The potential prizes are great, but the dangers of getting it wrong are also large. If the work being carried out nationally or the quality of the customer experience fails to boost take-up beyond the tipping point, it will have been a poor investment. The signs are that success is possible, and has already been achieved in some areas: now the call to action is to better understand the customer and to deliver integrated information and services that customer groups want to access.

**The call to action is to better understand the customer and to deliver integrated information and services that customer groups want to access.**



# Attendees

## Chairperson:



**Dr Eric Woods,**  
Government Practice Director, Ovum

## Participants:



**Peter Blair,**  
Senior Responsible Officer,  
National Take-up Campaign,  
Department for Communities  
and Local Government



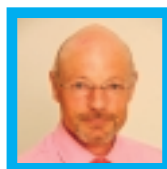
**Mark Say,**  
Editor, Government Computing



**Eric Bohl,**  
Executive Director of Corporate  
Services, London Borough of  
Lambeth



**Paul Smith,**  
Development Director, Comino



**Mike Chambers,**  
Deputy Chief Executive and  
Director of Change, Oldham  
Metropolitan Borough Council



**Paul Tonks,**  
Local Government Director,  
Civica



**Siobhan Coughlan,**  
Principal Consultant,  
Improvement & Development  
Agency



**Justin Hunt,**  
Director, ItsOpen



**Allan Drew,**  
Divisional Director of Customer  
Services, London Borough of  
Lambeth



**Dan  
Jellinek**  
Editor of  
e-Government Bulletin



**Louise Gray,**  
Head of Customer Access,  
Liverpool City Council

## About Civica

The Civica group, which includes Comino, is a leader in consulting, software and managed services for the public sector. Supplying many organisations in the UK, Australia and the USA, including 83% of the UK's local authorities, the company has a 20- year history of providing software and services to local government, criminal justice, healthcare and education organisations.

From creating and delivering performance plans to implementing effective IT systems that streamline complex tasks and work processes, Civica blends outcome-based advice, planning and service delivery with a range of systems and services to ease the process of change and to help achieve modern and efficient services.

Efficiency is a priority area for Civica, in activities ranging from a consortium project to establish a performance management framework for ten Scottish councils to helping Australian Local Government Innovation Award winner the City of Whittlesea to achieve transaction savings as high as 79% through e-services.

### Consulting

Civica combines practitioner and systems consulting. Led by experienced local government practitioners, its "Authority Solutions" range from corporate support to infrastructure deployment, and focus on:

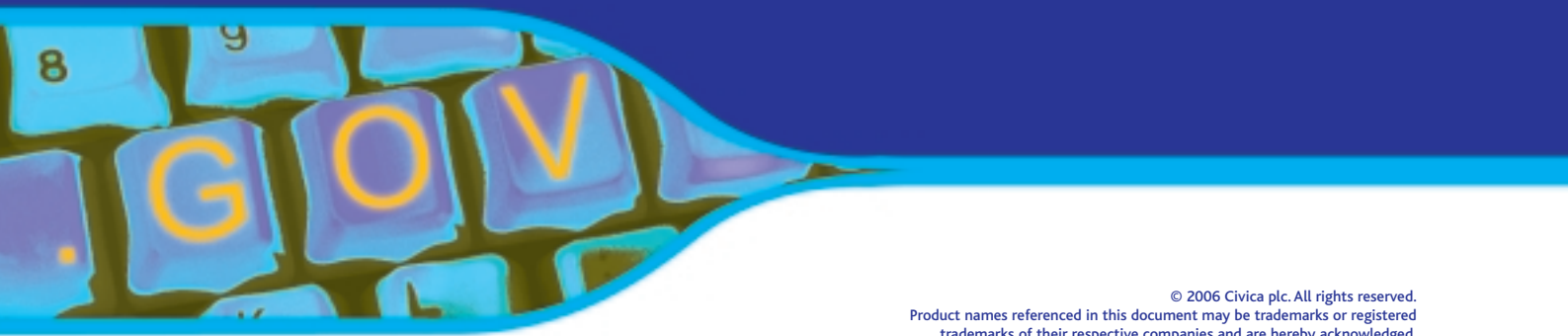
- Performance management
- Funding and procurement support
- Resource support and optimisation
- Process automation and financial efficiency
- IT strategy and efficiency, including e-government and mobile working

### Software

Civica provides a comprehensive suite of local government software. Business areas include finance and income management, revenues and benefits, public protection, parking and traffic management, housing, community safety and legal services, together with practical e-services such as e-billing and e-procurement. The company has developed an integrated enterprise model, providing a platform for the future with an enhanced ability to integrate front office and mobile systems with core systems and back end databases.

### Managed Services

Civica offers a proven suite of managed services that can be provided as standalone components or under a full and seamless service. The company takes responsibility for systems and infrastructure on behalf of customers, managing software systems along with equipment such as handheld units for optimum performance and convenience. In addition, and combined where appropriate with Civica's consulting services, the company manages and operates supporting processes ranging from bulk printing and correspondence to business service management.



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