Evaluating Citizen Attitudes towards Local E-Government and a Comparison of Engagement Methods in the UK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMERY

This case considers the issues facing local authorities in the UK regarding engaging their citizen’s with online service delivery channels. While these issues are shared with all local authorities in the UK, the focus of the work is around the far South West of England, in a region where, given high levels of social and economic exclusion, low incomes, and low population density, local e-government services have great potential to benefit populations. Several datasets highlight the problem that the local authorities face in the region; a disengaged population and a lack of trust in both local and central government. However, we can also demonstrate that once engaged, citizens can appreciate the value of online services and will make use of them. Building upon this data, two approaches to engagement are examined; one a national mass media led campaign whose impact upon the study region is assessed, and another at the grass roots level of local communities, where trusted community volunteers are used as facilitators for engagement. We demonstrate failure with the mass media effort, and some significant success with the grass roots engagement. However, we must conclude that the key challenge facing local authorities is not in the generation of engagement efforts in the short term, but sustaining their impact in the long term.

Keywords: citizen engagement; diffusion of innovations; e-government; technology adoption

ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

This study considers the issue of local e-government engagement within the UK. While the focus of the primary data presented here is drawn from the southwest of the country, the issues discussed affect local authorities across the country. In 1999, the UK government declared, ‘The information age should increase the choice of how citizens
and businesses receive services, not restrict it … We will develop targeted strategies to ensure that all groups have proper access to information age government’ (Cabinet Office, 1999).

The UK strategy fits within a European Union (EU) framework, most recently the ‘Information Strategy i2010’ which builds on its predecessor, the ‘eEurope 2005 Action Plan’ that was launched in 2002. The EU strategies and action plans ensure a common framework of e-government services across Europe. In March 2001, the council of the EU identified 12 key services for its citizens; each of the e-government services are intended to be ‘standard’ to all EU states.

Given that UK strategy works within an EU framework, in 2002, the National Audit Office produced a report, ‘Better Public Services Through eGovernment’ (NAO, 2002), which included identifying five key benefits of e-government:

- **Greater choice:** To provide users with a greater range of services and delivery channels
- **Better accessibility:** Giving citizens greater access to the range of services
- **More convenience:** Providing services in a way which suits citizens and businesses, for example 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- **Faster delivery:** Providing faster more accurate service
- **Improved efficiency:** Replacing manual processing of routine high volume work with IT system

However, the NAO report also identified six key risks regarding the ‘take-up’ of e-government services:

- **Familiarity:** The Internet which has yet to become a normal established part of everyday life
- **Expectation:** Low expectations about IT and what it can deliver
- **Ease of use:** Unless new services are easy to use there is a risk take up will be low
- **Benefits:** The benefits for the public must be clear or take up will be low
- **Social exclusion:** Citizens will not take up services if they do not have access to a computer
- **Cost:** If the cost of accessing services on-line is expensive people will not want to use it

In order to achieve the goal of e-enablement, considerable investment has been made in central and local government e-government projects. Between 2001 and 2006, £7.4bn has been spent (£3bn—local government, £4.4bn—central government) (Rogers, 2003).

To prioritise and standardise the development of local government services, implementing electronic government (IEG) statements were developed, for example, corporate plans for the goal of 100% ‘e-enablement’ of particular local government services/in-
Does National Culture Affect E-Procurement Implementations?: Analysis of Differences through a Unified Model
www.igi-global.com/article/does-national-culture-affect-procurement/62647?camid=4v1a