



engaging the community in e-government

a briefing paper from
the Strategic Support Unit

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purpose of this briefing paper

The paper explores key questions related to the benefits of community engagement and its role in supporting the implementation of local e-government, and promoting effective ways of:

- communicating with citizens
- improving the quality, relevance and delivery of services
- involving local people in local government
- using technology to expand and improve community consultation.

what do we mean by community engagement?

Community engagement involves working collaboratively with groups of local people to identify and address issues affecting community cohesion, community safety and sustainable communities:

Community cohesion incorporates the concept of race equality and social inclusion

Community safety involves the community in identifying priorities and developing responses to crime and prevention

Sustainable communities plan effective use of natural and human resources to improve the quality of life within communities and neighbourhoods

Community engagement puts people at the centre of councils' communication and consultation activities. In order to plan and deliver responsive services, local authorities need to listen to and engage with their communities. Activities are closely linked to an authority's community strategy, customer service and access policies, communication plan, and social inclusion strategies.

why is e-government important for community engagement?

'E-government is not an end in itself. It is at the heart of the drive to modernise government. Modernising local government is about enhancing the quality of local services and the effectiveness of local democracy.'

The National Strategy for Local e-Government , November 2002, p5

All local authorities are expected to achieve 100% capability in electronic delivery of **priority services** by the end of 2005, **in ways that customers will use.**

E-government needs to reach people to be effective. Increasing the involvement of local people in the design and evaluation of e-enabled public services helps councils to determine:

- which priority services people want, and will use
- how to promote and deliver their services
- whether people who need council services most can access them, and are using them.

what are the benefits of community engagement?

Local authorities are under constant pressure to prioritise spending, justify investment and provide evidence of efficiency and return on investment. A solid **business case** can be made for community engagement and consultation, providing benefits in many areas:

Financial: Understanding customers' needs and preferences to allow investment to be prioritised and money to be spent wisely.

Business processes: Refocusing and streamlining processes to provide more flexible service delivery models, responsive to different community needs, and levels of service required.

Learning and growth: Ensuring that change is managed effectively and improvement is sustained.

Customer satisfaction: Making sure that you deliver services that customers want, and will use. Understanding customer needs is core to effective marketing and take-up of e-government.

Community engagement in e-government promotes **civic and democratic outcomes**, including:

legitimacy and understanding

- Ensures that policy makers and service providers have a better understanding of local needs and issues
- Provides a mechanism for the resolution of conflict

citizen satisfaction and service

- Results in more appropriate and responsive services being delivered
- Builds citizen demand for services

participation through input and consultation

- Allows individuals and groups to have a level of control over what happens in their community
- The Internet and ICTs can be used in structured ways to obtain input from citizens

engagement and deliberation

- Ensures that decisions about local developments reflect the needs and concerns of the local community
- Encourages a better communication flow between the council and its customers and partners

inclusion and equitable access

- Provides an opportunity for the voices of groups in society who are hard to reach to be heard

effective representation and decision making

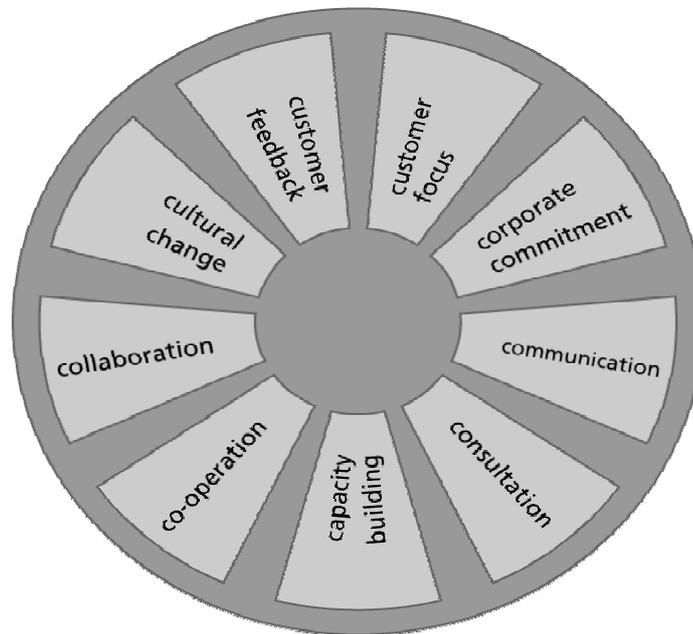
- Crosses all political boundaries

trust and accountability

- Builds trust in the authority of local government
- Improves the public perception of council services.

principles of community engagement

To design and deliver services that people can and will use you need to consider:



customer focus

Understanding diverse citizen and demographic needs
Knowing your customers and their individual needs and patterns of interaction

corporate commitment:

Clear, corporate objectives supported by staff, officers and members
Acknowledging the community as a source of knowledge and learning

communication

Information sharing using appropriate media and language
Connecting with hard-to-reach groups by making information accessible

consultation

Seeking responses and input from citizens and communities of interest
Encouraging local debate, drawing people into political and democratic processes

capacity building

Ensuring adequate resources and skills in authorities, community and partnerships
Supporting community capacity and cohesion, particularly among excluded groups

co-operation

Encouraging citizens' participation in policy, strategy and decision-making
Working with intermediaries and community advocates and champions

collaboration

Facilitating different ways of working and partnership
Strengthening community partnerships, particularly local strategic partnerships

cultural change

Organisational processes responsive to change
Listening, understanding, and being influenced by diverse cultures and interests

customer research and feedback

Designing customer feedback mechanisms to measure customer satisfaction
Using customer analysis, area profiles and market segmentation

How can technology help?

Councils can use a range of different technologies to support their community engagement activities. Interactive and innovative technologies complement, rather than replace, traditional methods. Conscious of a need to avoid a 'digital divide' in communities, many councils are adapting media which are widely used by all sectors of the community, for example mobile phones.

Technologies include:

traditional techniques	new technology applications
Telephone	sms text messaging
Distributing leaflets and booklets	Web publishing, email notification
Mobile exhibitions and road shows	Wireless and mobile computing
Public meetings and open forums	Internet discussion forums
Citizen and customer panels	Electronic consultation
Focus groups	Online communities
Role playing, interactive workshops	Virtual reality

examples from local authorities

IDeA Knowledge showcases good practice in local authorities. Here are some examples of local authorities' community engagement activities:

1. Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames 'Access Kingston'

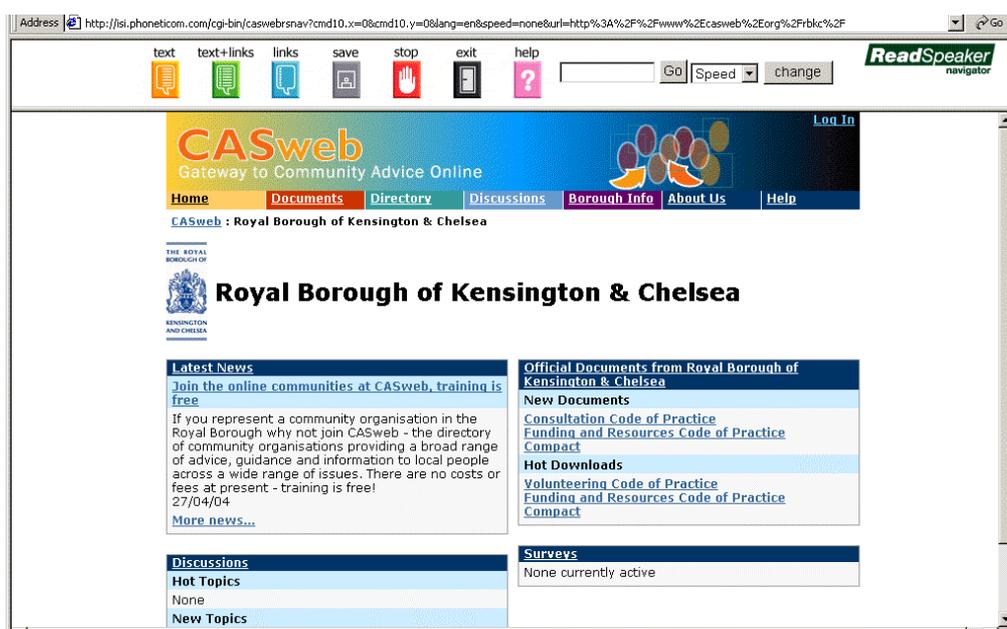


The screenshot shows the Kingston Council website with a navigation menu on the left and several content blocks. The navigation menu includes categories like 'Community, People & Living', 'Advice, Benefits & Emergencies', 'Business', and 'Social Care'. The main content area features 'Council News' with a link to 'Lavinia's Law for Safer Fireworks', a 'younglavin' logo, and a 'Council backs housing transfer 'offer'' news item. There are also links for '10 June 2004. You decide.' and 'Rotary Dragon Boat Challenge'. A 'Local Information' sidebar on the right offers a postcode search and links to 'Housing Choice', 'Text Your Council', 'Report a fault', 'ISIS Maps', 'Traffic Bulletin', and 'Online planning applications'.

Kingston upon Thames' website www.kingston.gov.uk demonstrates the council's commitment to integrating their information, services, communication and e-government activities. The website has many interactive features, including:

- 'Council news' provides a link to 'London Elects' website, offering a step-by-step guide to voting.
- 'YoungLivin' is an award-winning youth website designed and moderated by young people.
- 'Text your council' encourages people to send an SMS message to the council. Replies can be sent by text, telephone or email.
- 'Report a fault' provides email contacts for registering complaints with various services.
- 'Online planning applications' allows users to view planning applications and drawings.
- 'Translation service' translates the council web pages into eight languages.
- 'DisabledGo' links to a national website providing information on accessible goods and services.

2. CASweb – speech-enabling community information www.casweb.org



CASweb is a pilot project, funded by the ODPM, in partnership with:

- the London Central Partnership (members are London Boroughs of Camden, Islington, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster and the Corporation of London)
- the GLA (Greater London Authority)
- LVSC (London Voluntary Services Council).

The website enables advice services to become effective partners in delivering e-government to citizens. The site is speech-enabled, using ReadSpeaker, increasing the accessibility of the service for those who would like to listen to, as well as read, the content. CASweb (www.casweb.org) supports three-way communication between advice organisations, citizens and local authorities.

3. Derwentside community information points - improving accessibility



Community information points (CIPs) are designed to ensure everyone has access to the local authority, and any community information they need. Each point has a large keyboard, screen-reading software and induction loop facilities. The screen-reading software is proving to be very popular with Information Points users. This software is very simple to use and enables text and pictures to be enlarged up to 32 times the original size; it also has the facility to reverse colours making webpages and other electronic information accessible

to people with a variety of visual impairments. Additional equipment is also being installed to enable residents of Derwentside to speak to some service providers by video link avoiding the need to travel to central offices to speak to advisors. CIP project worker and community volunteers are also available to assist users new to ICT and the Internet.

4. Citizens online 'everybodyonline' project www.citizensonline.org.uk



everybodyonline
Experience the Internet



Citizens' access to ICT skills and confidence are prerequisites for community engagement with e-enabled services.



Citizens Online launched 'everybodyonline', in August 2002. The aim of the initiative is to increase access to ICT and the Internet in disadvantaged communities across the country where levels of Internet connectivity and access to information communication technology (ICT) are amongst the lowest in the UK. Eight projects are now up and running.

Each project is co-ordinated by a locally-based project officer. The role of the project officer is to foster a network of local facilities, programmes, partners and volunteers. Using various forms of communication, the project officer works in partnership with the local community to understand their needs and to create a co-ordinated local

action plan. Case studies of the projects, and their impact on citizens are published on the Citizens Online website.

focusing on the delivery of priority services

For the Government to measure progress towards the ODPM's SR2002 Public Service Agreement (PSA) target, a set of e-government priority outcomes for each local authority in England has been published¹. Each local authority is expected to deliver e-enabled services in the following priority areas by December 2005.

- schools
- community information
- democratic renewal
- local environment
- e-procurement
- payment
- library, sports and leisure
- transport
- benefits
- support for vulnerable people
- supporting new ways of working
- accessibility of services
- high take-up of web-based transactional services
- making it easy for citizens to do business with the council.

For each of the priority areas, ODPM has determined a set of specific outcomes for local e-government. These outcomes include:

- 1) **'Required' outcomes** – these refer to specific online facilities that must be in place in every area of the country for citizens, organisations, councillors and local authority staff to use by the end of December 2005.
- 2) **'Good' outcomes** – the precise approach to achieving these outcomes may be locally determined, but all local authorities are expected to commit to these objectives in order to qualify for further IEG4 funding in 2005/06.
- 3) **'Excellent' outcomes** – high-performing local authorities that have already achieved, or largely achieved, the defined 'required' and 'good' e-government outcomes, will be asked to agree a baseline and targets for promoting awareness and take-up of e-services, in return for greater discretion in applying IEG grant to meet locally-defined priorities.

linking community engagement with priority service outcomes

Getting citizens to use e-government services is a challenge. Community engagement is crucial to ensuring that priority areas are clearly defined and understood; required outcomes are delivered; and that excellent outcomes can be planned, based on citizens' communication and service needs.

There are clear links between community engagement and all of the priority areas listed above. Two examples are presented below: community information and democratic renewal - outlining the 'required', 'good', and 'excellent' outcomes.

¹ [Defining e-government outcomes for 2005 www.localegov.gov.uk](http://www.localegov.gov.uk)

1. community information

priority area	required outcomes	good outcomes	excellent outcomes
<p>community information</p> <p>To deliver integrated information about services for the community, delivered by local & regional partnerships where appropriate, and connected to a national infrastructure.</p>	<p>Online facilities to be available to allow:</p> <p>One-stop direct access and deep linking to joined up A-Z information on all local authority services via website or shared telephone contact centre using the recognised taxonomy of the Local Government Category List (see www.laws-project.org.uk)</p> <p>Local authority and youth justice agencies to co-ordinate the secure sending, sharing of and access to information in support of crime reduction initiatives in partnership with the local community</p>	<p>Empowering and supporting local organisations, community groups and clubs to create and maintain their own information online, including the promotion of job vacancies and events</p>	<p>Agreed baseline and targets for customer satisfaction and efficiency savings between the supplying organisations on shared community information initiatives</p>

meeting required outcomes

Socitm Insight's 'Better connected 2004²' provides a snapshot of all local authority websites. The report's detailed analysis, which builds on their 'Better connected: building for the future' (Jan 2003), stresses that what matters for users of local authority websites is whether they can find the information or service they are looking for with the minimum of effort:

'Getting the content right and making the website easy-to-use are vital for building the long-term relationship with website visitors that will sustain their participation and involvement.'

Socitm's report highlights local authorities that excel at the 'required outcomes' listed above. Examples include:

London Borough of Kensington & Chelsea

'It has an excellent A-Z list, the best I have ever seen, which includes all sorts of community as well as council information.'

Surrey County Council

'...a whole site dedicated to the community safety unit and partnership across the county, with its own news and a professional, clean design.'

² www.socitm.gov.uk

2. democratic renewal

<p>democratic renewal</p> <p>To promote greater public involvement in local decision-making and to enhance the representative role of councillors in the community through the use of technology.</p>	<p>Online facilities to be available to allow:</p> <p>Public access to reports, minutes and agendas from past council meetings, including future meetings diary updated daily</p> <p>Providing every councillor with the option to have an easy-to-manage set of public web pages (for community leadership purposes) that is either maintained for them, or that they can maintain themselves</p>	<p>Citizen participation and response to forthcoming consultations and decisions on matters of public interest (e-consultation), including facility for citizens to sign up for email and/or SMS text alerts on nominated topics</p> <p>Establishment of multimedia resources on local policy priorities accessible via public website (eg video & audio files)</p>	<p>Agreed baseline and targets for e-participation activities, including targets for citizen satisfaction (E3).</p>
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Meeting required outcomes

In order to promote greater public involvement in decision making, it is important to find ways of improving the engagement between citizens and their councils, and elected members. Websites and other technologies have the potential to improve communication with citizens and to encourage more active participation. Only 43 councils (9%) were judged by Socitm³ to promote excellent online consultation facilities and activities. These include:

London Borough of Merton

'This London borough website features an interesting development. The leader of the Council, Councillor Andrew Judge, holds an 'Online Surgery'. Questions can be sent to him via a form, which are then published on the site. An answer is provided within five working days and older questions are then stored on the site by subject area. This seems an excellent initiative that really seems to have engaged with the community; recent questions on the site covered topics such as schools, the phone book, licensing and football.'

Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

'We came across online databases and advice for organisations about to carry out consultation. For example, this council has developed a consultation database for all organisations involved in, or undertaking, consultation. The database contains information from completed consultation exercises and also lists those exercises planned for the future...Oldham MBC has also produced a 'Consultation Toolkit' and a consultation newsletter to offer online advice and guidance for people carrying out such exercises.'

³ Better connected 2004. Socitm Insight www.socitm.gov.uk

moving forward – planning for improvement

There are many sources of guidance on community access, engagement and consultation.

The National Strategy for Local e-Government www.localgov.gov.uk outlines how e-government can underpin local democratic renewal and help make councils more open, more accountable, more inclusive and better able to lead their communities

SSU briefing papers

The e-government strategic support unit has published several briefing papers on topics which link with community engagement.

developing an access strategy explores the access channels likely to be taken up by different communities.

integrating technology infrastructure outlines relevant technologies, integration and usability by different communities.

writing a business case outlines how to align customer needs with e-programme objectives.

moving forward with customer relationship management stresses the importance of managing customer data to ensure services become more citizen-focused.

marketing and take up of e-services explores how to target different user groups, stimulate demand for services; and improve the reach and quality of services.

case studies of community engagement

The e-government resource on IDeA Knowledge has a wide range of local authority case studies, focused on the building blocks of e-government www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk

'Connecting with communities' is an online toolkit on IDeA Knowledge containing professional advice, good practice, case studies and documents that can be downloaded for free.

Recent publications explore the impact of e-government from the citizen's perspective:

'Local e-government now 2004' (IDeA/Socitm)

'Local e-government now 2003' (IDeA/Socitm)

'Local e-democracy 2003 – Casting the net wider' (IDeA/LGA/Socitm)

The Audit Commission has also published case studies on community engagement:

'Connecting with users and citizens' (2002) www.audit-commission.gov.uk

'Casting the net wider: local e-democracy 2003', an LGA, Socitm and IDeA publication, gives an overview of councils' e-enabled democratic processes, and offers guidance for local authority policy makers www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk

digital inclusion and accessibility resources

Council activities include:

Beacon councils (social inclusion and ICT) – Forthcoming ODPM research

www.odpm.gov.uk

E-innovations (bridging the digital divide) www.localgov.gov.uk

Recommended reading:

UK Digital Equality Review www.citizenonline.org.uk

Disability Rights Commission report on Web Accessibility <http://www.drc-gb.org/publicationsandreports/report.asp>

Overview of the global digital divide: www.digitaldividenetwork.org

the leading and definitive guidelines - National Projects

RYOGENS www.ryogens.org.uk - enabling multi-agency information sharing

LAWS www.laws-project.org.uk - community engagement work stream

Local e-Democracy project www.e-dem.info

e-Citizen www.e-citizen.gov.uk - researching good practice in take up and marketing

Digital TV www.digitv.org.uk - interactive e-government services via digital TV

CRM www.crmnp.org - roadmaps for introducing and integrating CRM systems

Knowledge management www.knowledgemanagement.org.uk - customer-facing work stream; community engagement work stream

further information and your feedback

If you would like further information on community engagement, would like to discuss your authority's experience, or would like to give feedback on this paper, please contact Helen Mc Quillan, e-government strategic advisor on 020 7296 6281; email

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