




Cutting the Wires

Mobile IT and the transformation
of local services and governance

Michael Cross and **James MacGregor**



New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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Contents

About the authors	4
Acknowledgements	5
Foreword	6
Introduction	8
1 e-Government – the story so far	10
2 ‘Mary Mobile’ or ‘Fred Fixedline’ – a tale of two futures	13
3 Why mobile is more than ‘e’	17
4 Connecting the council	21
5 Connecting the citizen	29
6 Obstacles to cutting the wires	38
7 Conclusion – policy recommendations	46
Appendix – glossary of terms	49

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Michael Cross

James MacGregor

February 2006

Foreword

Local government has made striking progress in the last eight years: local services have improved markedly, local institutions are more representative of modern communities, and local democratic relationships are being strengthened.

The ODPM's Local e-Government programme has been vital in helping achieve these improvements.

The programme was conceived as a response to the unifying challenge facing government: how can public services and democratic institutions remain relevant to citizens when faced with ever-rising expectations in a rapidly changing world? To do so, we must adapt the way institutions are structured, how people work, and how citizens interact with representatives and service deliverers.

Last year, local government reached a watershed in modernisation. By December 2005, Local Authorities across the UK had e-enabled over 97% of services. Citizens now have greater control, increasingly deciding which services they access and when.

However, the tasks of modernisation and improvement continue. In his recent interim report, Sir Michael Lyons has identified the nascent challenges facing local authorities. Demographic changes, new legal responsibilities, cost base pressures, and renewed expectations from local people will all need to be addressed. Local government must continue to embrace transformational change so it can deliver positive answers to these tricky questions.

Mobile communication technologies are a key catalyst for such transformational change. One of the benefits that this report highlights is how using mobile communication technologies can deliver better jobs and reinforce the public sector ethos. Being mobile can enable local public servants to deliver better outcomes and better fulfil local needs, increasing job satisfaction. And, by linking with the devices in citizens' pockets, it can ensure that public services will be relevant to people's lives in the future.

The time is ripe to build on the successes of local e-Government and develop a new strategy that can truly provoke a step change in local government performance.

Local government and local citizens can benefit greatly from the effective application of mobile communications technology. What is also clear is that local government is ideally placed to move on from piloting to actually implementing solutions based on experience and local circumstances. The potential of mobile communication technologies to help transform local government is hard to ignore.

Jim Fitzpatrick MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Introduction

This report contributes to the debate about the potential of mobile IT reshaping local governance. Such technologies – which include phones, wirelessly connected computers and personal digital assistants – have the potential to change working lives, a potential that is being exploited by numerous private sector companies, as well as some public bodies.

We conclude that the time is right for local government to embrace these changes. Local government is in its best position for decades to acquire a strong leadership role and absorb positive change. The adoption of the new localist agenda, aided in part by the work of NLGN, has reasserted the legitimacy of local government. Services are now being run more effectively, local governance institutions being modernised, and the level of engagement between citizens and local representatives is improving. For the first time in decades, the trajectory of local government can be said to be upwards.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain. In his interim report into local government finance, Sir Michael Lyons lists a formidable set of pressures, including increasing demand for services caused by demographic changes, new legal and policy responsibilities, centrally-set targets, pressure from citizens for better services, and cost increases, including wages. For some local authorities, the danger is that these pressures will cause services to deteriorate, leading to a spiral of popular cynicism and disengagement.

To remain relevant and viable, local authorities need to look at changes far beyond those normally considered part of local government's responsibilities. One of these is the revolution in everyday lives brought about by information technologies, in particular mobile IT. We argue that the move from fixed-line to mobile represents a qualitative shift in the power of IT. When no longer connected by wires, phones and technologies become personal rather than institutional tools, extending the reach of information services to wherever they are needed and, at the same time, collecting a new order of information about the places in which they are used. The unique features of mobile IT can be exploited to aid the development of more meaningful engagement between local

authorities and citizens, more modern and pertinent governing institutions, and the more effective running of public services.

This report considers two categories of transformations that may be made possible through the imaginative use of mobile IT. One is within authorities themselves, the other in connecting with citizens and other stakeholders as they become more mobile. The work is based largely on interviews with opinion leaders and project managers in local authorities, as well as representatives from private companies, national government agencies and international colleagues. Case studies highlight examples of mobile IT in these organisations.

Mobile IT is already stimulating changes in the ways that people work, entertain themselves, conduct personal relationships, carry out commercial transactions and seek information. Local authorities must decide whether to embrace this potential and lead the development of mobile lifestyles for their communities, or whether they shore-up existing models of services and democratic participation which will be seen as increasingly anachronistic in a mobile world.

Our research suggests that a considerable number of authorities are already inclining towards the second course, at least to the extent of testing mobile IT in pilot projects. We believe that it is now time to bring this enthusiasm and experience into the mainstream. By making wide use of mobile IT, it may be possible to demonstrate a new model of local authority that can run services to the highest standards of efficiency while forging a new relationship with its citizens. It is now time to put this vision to the test on a scale where it can no longer be ignored. It is time to cut the wires.

1 *e-Government – the story so far*

“Local government is not just about the provision of services. It has a major and unique role to play in helping to develop and deliver vision for its communities, making decisions and trade-offs on their behalf, and shaping a strategic view of the area and its future – a role we might refer to as ‘placeshaping’.”¹

Sir Michael Lyons, December 2005

Local government has reached a critical stage in transforming working practices with information technology. Over the past five years, central and local government has spent several billion pounds ‘e-enabling’ public services.² The aim was to modernise access to public services, making them available on the internet and through other electronic media 24/7, while cutting the costs of individual transactions such as requests for services.

The e-government programme concluded at the end of 2005 (for some administrative purposes, 31st March, 2006) with nearly all services that public bodies carry out for citizens, businesses and other arms of the state ‘e-enabled’. This means that they are available via the worldwide web, other new electronic media or by phone, so long as the contact centre operator is equipped with IT to deal with the matter directly.

Local authorities, which are responsible for the majority of regular transactions between citizens and government, have been in the vanguard of e-government. Some of this work was inspired by genuine local enthusiasm – pioneering authorities such as Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council were years ahead of Whitehall in making services available electronically – but most was driven by central government targets. In all, local authorities in England spent some £2bn putting services online, despite receiving only £700m of central government subsidy.³

¹ Lyons Inquiry into local government, *Consultation Paper and Interim Report*, (December 2005), p1

² e-enablement is the requirement for local authorities to have 100% of services available electronically by 31st March 2006

³ Socitm, *IT Trends in Local Government*, (December 2005)

Although much good work has been done, e-government is far from fulfilling its promise. Opening new channels to public services does not in itself improve either effectiveness or efficiency. One problem is low take-up. Unless a large percentage of citizens use the e-channel, previous facilities for handling letters or face-to-face inquiries must be kept open, cutting costs. People who rely on local government's most complex services tend to be the poor, aged or infirm, with the least access to IT. At the other end of the scale, high take-up can cause its own problems, if the council does not have the resources to fulfil a flood of demands for, say, bulk rubbish collections. Several councils have found that e-enablement can increase their overall costs by removing the rationing effect of the difficulty of requesting a service through conventional channels.

Whitehall now recognises that the national e-government programme must change gear. A new strategy, *Transformational Government*, published by the Cabinet Office E-Government Unit in late 2005, proposes a series of reforms to create 'citizen centred' public services run by a seamlessly integrated mesh of agencies.⁴ The strategy recognises that 'transformational' e-government will involve more than just encouraging a greater number of people to use the internet and making efficiency gains. Among other things, it will require public services to make more use of a new blend of technologies, a blend that is having a profound effect on private business and social lives – mobile telephony and computing (mobile IT).⁵

Local government is already embracing the possibilities presented by mobile IT. More than half of English local authorities already carry out some form of mobile working using mobile technology (Ref: Project Nomad 2005, www.projectnomad.org.uk).⁶ NLGN's research has found that most of these projects are small-scale pilots, involving issuing mobile technology with limited

⁴ Cabinet Office, *Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology*, (November 2005) Section 22, p7

⁵ In this report the term mobile IT covers a set of developments in mobile telephony and computing, the radio systems that enable them to communicate and navigation systems to identify their location. Their convergence has enabled the development of pocket and laptop computing devices which, so long as their batteries last, can be used almost anywhere. The most familiar manifestation is the multi-function 'personal digital assistant' promoted by mobile phone companies, capable of being used as phones, cameras and email communicators. Laptop and 'tablet' computers are increasingly equipped as 'standard' with hardware connecting them to the internet, or corporate networks via 'always on' wireless networks such as the GPRS system, or WiFi networks. A parallel development is RFID – small and cheap electronic devices which reveal their locations with short range radio signals

⁶ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *Government Technology: The Project Nomad Supplement*, (2005) "The Snapshot Status" section

functions to small teams of staff or finding ways to use mobile telephony to build better and more inclusive links with their communities.

Mobile IT has three unique qualities. First, it collects and disseminates location-specific information, recording where data is captured. Secondly, mobile devices are inherently personal, wedded to individuals rather than locations. Thirdly, in one guise at least (the mobile phone) the technology reaches more people of all groups than any other type of IT. All of these qualities are of great interest to local authorities. They are finding that mobile IT can fill many of the missing links left by first generation e-government, creating more effective, engaging and efficient services.

Today, a weak link in local government work is between its front line staff and its citizens. This is where paperwork piles up, messages go astray or unanswered and errors and inconsistencies are generated. Mobile IT can bridge this gap. So long as there is an evidence base showing that the technology works and the benefits exceed the costs, the case for adoption seems overwhelming.

To date, however, many pilots of mobile IT in local authorities have been limited in scope and funded with what we might call 'soft money'.⁷ Most have bolted-on mobile IT to existing ways of working rather than truly transforming local authorities' work. Despite the efforts of the ODPM-funded Project Nomad, not enough information is being shared about the costs and benefits of the technology, or indeed its shortcomings. Too many pilots duplicate other authorities' work and run out of impetus when the time comes to scale them up. As a result, their ability to transform the workings of local authorities (let alone their relationships with citizens) has so far been limited. As the next chapter suggests however, the picture could be very different in the near future.

⁷ By this we mean one-off grants or other non-revenue sources of income

Also available from NLGN

Invisible Villages: Techno-localism and the enabling council

James Crabtree, William Davies and Anna Randle

ISBN 1 903447 40 2 · £10 (1-19 copies) or £7 (20+ copies) p&p

New Localism has come to dominate political debate. While the forms this might take might differ, policy makers and politicians of all persuasions agree that the devolution of power and decision making to more local levels with help achieve improvements in services and more engaged communities. Local government is being required to develop a new community leadership role and also to work at more local levels.

To date, there has been no consideration of the role technology has to play in supporting the development of local government's new role. Indeed, technology and the internet can often seem to support moves towards non-local communication and interest-based, rather than locality-based, community. However, as we learn more about the internet and the way people use it, we find that technology offers new ways for the real shared interests based around locality – 'invisible villages' – to become more visible. Such connections can help form a new conception of local community and also new ways for local councils to respond. Technology offers an opportunity for local government to play its new community leadership role more effectively.

Invisible Villages: techno-localism and the enabling council reveals not a model of 'heroic' civic leadership, but a new way of working informed by diverse and multi-layered communities. This 'techno-localism' looks ahead to the next stage of e-government, beyond transaction-based interactions and into real local debate and discussion. Technology and the internet should not be seen as a threat to local government and traditional institutions, but as offering new opportunities in a newly devolved world.

Rewiring local decision making for political judgement

Dr Perri 6

ISBN 1 903447 33 X · £10 (1-19 copies) or £7 (20+ copies) p&p

In recent years, the main changes in how elected council members make decisions have been structural – most notably the creation of council executives and attempts to develop the overview and scrutiny function. Contrary to this, there has been little progress in the way that local policy decisions are made.

Rewiring local decision making for political judgement illustrates the clear opportunities offered by the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Using case study material from the USA, Dr Perri 6 shows that the technology and data exists to radically change the decision making process.

As well as presenting a positive message about what the future holds for local decision making, the author is realistic about the nature of political life. It does not present ICT as a panacea for making easier, better decisions, but as a tool that can co-exist with the expressions of leadership, co-operation, conflict and political judgement that make political life what it is.

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We could be forgiven for thinking that eGovernment does not transform councils. Despite huge investment, impact has been limited. But mGovernment can be different.

Services are developing in ways that reflect people's lifestyles, liberate the workforce, and extend the council's frontline. *Cutting the Wires* draws on a wide evidence-base to discuss possibilities and challenges for local government.

As lifestyles change, nearly all of us are carrying mobile devices, and these allow us to interact in different ways. Why shouldn't this apply to local public services as much as it does to commercial ones? Following the lead taken by early public adopters, we are seeing the mobilisation of the workforce. This opens the door to new ways of working, where staff are freed to be judged on outcomes, not input.

After a decade of being told that "it's not about the technology", *Cutting the Wires* suggests that, now, it just might be. Mobile IT is changing how we live and local government can either embrace and lead this change, or stick its head in the sand and accept the consequences. By then, it might be too late.