

# Public Sector

**Dave Jennings**

## Better Connected

Local authorities are failing to focus Web services sufficiently on making the most frequently-requested user tasks quick and easy to perform, according to the latest annual review of all UK council sites published by the Society of IT Management (Socitm).

Overall, council websites have shown a "modest improvement" since last year in a live assessment of tasks, according to "Better Connected 2012". However performance has fallen in several key areas, which could lead to extra costs as people phone call centres instead of using cheaper online self-service routes, the report finds.

This year the survey was focused around assessing the ease of accomplishment of "top tasks" on each council website such as paying council tax, renewing a library book or objecting to a planning application online.

Most councils achieved a basic benchmark standard for more than half the top tasks assessed, though two gave particular problems: 'Renew library book' and 'Object to planning application'. The difficulties in these areas were caused by the use of specialist third-party

software such as searchable databases for planning applications and online library catalogues that are often poorly integrated into the design of the council's main website and which as a result become confusing to use, the report finds.

This year, 23 UK councils achieved "four star" ranking, the top level possible, compared with nine last year. The number of three-star sites is 160 (37% of the total 433, up from 30% last year). The remainder followed by 138 two-star sites (32%, down from 43%), and 111 one-star sites (26%, up from 24%).

Separate data from Socitm's "Website take-up service", which collates data from online user questionnaires, found a fall in ratings in several key areas, including ease of getting around the site; and ease of finding specific information. Other falls in performance this year include the number of websites rated by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) as "very good" for accessibility to disabled users, which "dropped sharply" from 59 last year to just two this year.

## Potholes solution is online

A report by the Department for Transport (DfT) has shown local councils "continue to rely on manual input of inspections" to identify potholes, and that and this could be improved with better use of technology.

Some authorities are using technology that helps identify potholes quickly and accurately and so improves the time taken to repair them.

The Cyclists' Touring Club has developed a smartphone app, using a photograph of a pothole with GPS technology, to pinpoint the exact location of the hazard and report it 'all in less than two minutes.'

The DfT's report 'Prevention and A Better Cure (<http://assets.dft.gov.uk/publications/pothole-review/pothole-review.pdf>), has urged all highway authorities to:

- Use the Internet, allowing the public to report highway defects, including potholes, at any time on its maintenance management system, also presenting the information to the public on a website.
- Use mobile hand-held devices to enable highway inspectors to record defects immediately, linked via wireless to the maintenance management system. Such devices often include mapping facilities and cameras, so that defects can be plotted and recorded quickly and accurately.

The report concludes: "Many local highway authorities use various technologies as part of their approach to pothole operations.

"However, this review has found that some authorities continue to rely on manual input of inspections to their highway management systems."

On technology in general, the report added: "Automated responses to members of the public who have reported potholes can be generated, ensuring customers remain informed at various stages".

"Technology has also been used to assist in defence of claims against local highway authorities."

## Overcoming the barriers of Channel Shift

Exceptional budgetary pressure has forced government organizations worldwide to rethink how they manage many public services. With fewer funds—and fewer employees—more has to be achieved with less.

With widespread usage of the Internet and mobile technologies, customers have come to rely on the convenience of self-service channels to handle tasks in many different areas of their lives—from making appointments on smartphones to making purchases on their PCs. Increasingly sophisticated citizens—across all demographics—have come to expect this efficiency from government services too.

The cost-saving potential of shifting to self-service channels is enormous but there are issues to address. This paper outlines the trends behind

channel shift and takes a look at the key barriers to a smooth implementation, most notably the difficulties of integration and security.

<http://www.wired-gov.net/wg/wg-directory-1.nsf/slh?Open&dc=DNWA-8S6NXT&usr=XYF0134P8>

## Linking Parliamentary Records through Metadata (LIPARM)

LIPARM is a collaboration between King's College London, the History of Parliament Trust, the Institute for Historical Research (IHR), the Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis, Queen's University Belfast, the UK Parliament Web and Intranet Service and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The aim is, for the first time, to link the parliamentary records together by creating a unified metadata scheme for all of its key elements. People, bills, acts, items of business, debates, divisions and sessions will all be described by the scheme and will be linked together across resources which are currently spread out. It will be possible to trace an MP's entire voting record or to find every speech they made and follow the passage of every bill or act, and every contribution to the debates that accompany it.

There are three main strands to the project:

- devise the metadata schema itself, which will allow the contents of the parliamentary record to be described in a controlled and systematic way.
- creation of authority lists for key components of the record, including lists for

people, sessions, items of legislation and division: each component will receive a unique identifier, allowing it to be linked to from any digitised resource.

- develop a pilot union catalogue, which will offer metadata records for two important collections, demonstrating how they can be linked together using the unified scheme.

[http://liparm.cerch.kcl.ac.uk/?page\\_id=27](http://liparm.cerch.kcl.ac.uk/?page_id=27)

## Digital by Default Panel

The government's advisory board for online public services was announced 25<sup>th</sup> April. Among the panel are a bank, a retailer and an academic expert but no representatives from local government or health.

Francis Maude, Cabinet Office Minister, said the Digital Advisory Board "will support the government to deliver its commitment to provide high-quality public services online by default". It is hoped the independent experts will think outside the organisational boundaries to ensure the new generation of online services are easy to find and use.

Martha Lane Fox, Chair, said the board "will challenge government to deliver better services for users and is the next step on the journey to achieving digital by default services and information provision across government".

The Digital Advisory Board will meet twice a year and members will be able to share their expertise

and take part in additional ad-hoc meetings and events.

Members of the board, which met for the first time on 24<sup>th</sup> April, are:

- Martha Lane Fox, UK digital champion
- Richard Allan, a former MP now with Facebook
- Alex Balfour, of Olympics organisers LOCOG
- James Bilefield, Condé Nast International
- Tim Brooks, former Guardian managing director now with UTalk
- Brent Hoberman, PROfounders Capital
- Ashley Machin, Lloyds Banking Group
- Professor Helen Margetts, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford University
- Brian McBride, MX Data Kip Meek, Everything Everywhere
- Will Perrin, a former Cabinet Office official now with Talk About Local
- Laura Wade-Gery, Marks & Spencer

## Data sharing and handling

Jobcentres and councils are to share data as part of the government's plans to turn around the lives of 'troubled families'.

Under the agreement councils will be able to obtain the names and addresses of those that are considered troublemakers and on benefits.

The initiative will pay councils up to £4,000 for each child they keep in school and out of a police station, or each long-term unemployed adult they get into work. Councils will only receive the full payment once they have delivered results and reduced the £75,000-a-year these families cost the taxpayer.

Transparency and access to public data are key priorities for this Government, which has pledged to be the most transparent and accountable government in the world. The belief, as put forward by the Government's open data and transparency tsar Tim Kelsey, is that freeing up big data could improve public services and lead to better government. But deriving such benefits from big data is not straightforward and, although its importance is broadly recognised, the route to take is not.

The [Data Dividend](#) identifies the major opportunities presented by big data and the obstacles that must be overcome to realise them. Big data can play a crucial role in holding public servants to account, but public servants themselves must also be part of the story, incorporating big data into the way they work. While it has been widely assumed that the rise of big data would lead to an increase in public participation in government through 'armchair auditing', a further stumbling block is that much of the public presently lacks the requisite skills to do this.

The report recommends a radical change to the way government collects and collates data. The benefits of 'big data' cannot be attained merely by improving existing methods: the approach must be transformative rather than evolutionary.

The ICO say that the penalties are there to act as a deterrent and the best way for the local authorities not to be fined is to be more secure in how they handle their data.

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## Information Security

The Information Commissioner has reported that another five councils have breached the Data Protection Act. These breaches were appropriate steps were not undertaken to ensure that personal information was kept secure.

In 2010 the ICO were given powers to fine up to £500,000 for Data Protection Act breaches and last year seven councils were fined a total of £640,000.

According to the Taxpayers' Alliance, council taxpayers are paying twice for data protection breaches as the fines go back into central government.

Dominique Lazanski, head of digital policy, the Taxpayers' Alliance said "Of course people in these situations should be held personally liable as if the council is fined, then that fine is paid for out of the local council taxes. In essence it is a double tax - once for collecting/storing the data and again for losing it.

"It has been my opinion that while I think the best kind of government is limited government, we have an Information Commissioner who isn't even doing his job in many cases and this seems like yet another example."