soc**itm**
insight

ICT for elected members

Not for kissing babies

A briefing for councillors

The internet has had an impact on voting and persuasion, the two activities most people associate with conventional politics.

Because the internet supports mass communication, interpersonal communication and interactive communication, there is scarcely an aspect of campaigning that cannot be conducted through it.

Kissing babies does come to mind as an exception.

**Michael Cornfield, *Politics moves online*
Century Foundation Report, 2004**
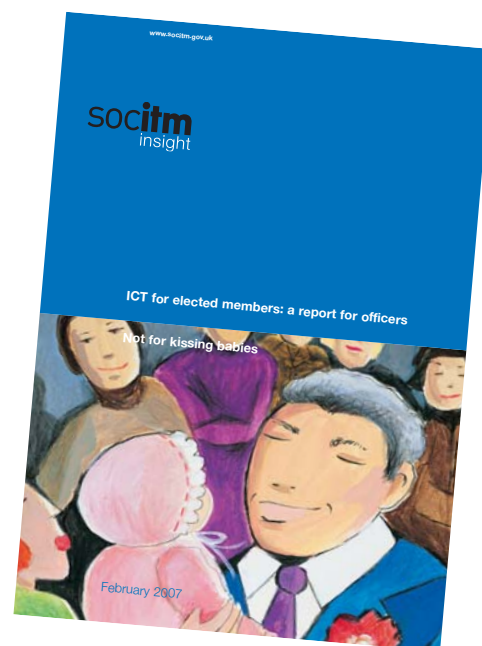
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1 Introduction

Changes across the public sector

Modernisation of public services has the greatest impact on the public when it improves the locally provided services they use every day. Information and communications technology (ICT) can make services and service providers more accessible, more responsive and more flexible. At its best, ICT can help to make people's lives better.

Changes are happening right across the public sector. ICT is transforming service delivery and ensuring that the people in greatest need get the right services. Elected members are in the front line of service provision and should have access to the best available resources — including information and the technology to use it.

So, in this new world where information is available whenever and wherever it is wanted, where images of localities are available through CCTV, webcams and other video-streaming technologies, where questions can be asked and answered immediately using internet-based technologies, how have elected members adjusted?

This briefing is for elected members. It offers examples of ways in which ICT can help you be more effective and more efficient in the various roles you take on. It complements a more detailed report for officers produced by the Socitm *Insight* service for promoting best practice in managing ICT.

Modern public services

The transformation of public services will have an impact right across the public sector. Every part of every organisation will feel the impact of change. Public expectations are driving change and the pervasive availability of technology in the home, the workplace and through public access channels now affects everyone.

In the last six years, councils across the UK have undergone a period of significant investment in ICT under the 'e-government' banner. ICT is now fundamental to the operation of the full range of council services. It facilitates partnership working and enables effective aggregation of services. It makes councils more accessible to their citizens and offers the opportunity for members of the public to become more involved in decisions about their neighbourhoods and localities.

Councillors are in the front line of local public service provision. They deal with constituents, local business, community and voluntary organisations and partners across the public sector every day. If the aim is to improve the capability of the front line by moving resources and support to it, elected members should be the target of some of this investment, whether it is made in terms of finance, time or the development of skills.

The transformation of public services cannot succeed without the involvement of informed and enthusiastic elected members. Using the technology on a day-to-day basis is the best way to find out what it is, and is not, capable of doing. Elected members who use technology have found it a benefit to them in many different ways. This briefing highlights some of these experiences.

**Councillor
Paul Bettison**

I have long been convinced of the positive impact the use of information technology has on service delivery when used by elected members in support of their work as councillors and local advocates. Too often dismissed simply as 'the website' or a 'members' portal', the use of home computers, mobile computers and hand held devices, web broadcasting and member-managed weblets are just a few of the ways in which elected councillors are now at the forefront of delivering an increasingly more efficient, transformed service to the people they represent.

This report highlights many examples of best practice from across the UK and I commend it to members, IT equipment suppliers and senior officers alike. I would urge you to share this learning with colleagues across the public sector. Indeed, our parliamentary colleagues in central government and in Europe could learn much from these examples. They exemplify ways in which we all might improve the service we provide to the people we represent by offering a choice of contact medium, a speedier and more detailed response to enquiries and issues and through the adoption of IT-supported real knowledge-based decision-making processes.

Benefits	
Saving you time	X
Keeping you in touch	X
Balancing your life	X
Raising your profile	X

The impact on elected members

In the next four sections of the briefing we look at some issues that affect most elected members.

The first is the **amount of time it takes to be a councillor**. The greatest challenge for many is how to fit it all in. There are meetings to attend and there is paperwork to read. There are, for most councillors, also family, caring and work commitments to satisfy. There are people in every direction demanding your attention. **How can information and technology help to save you time?**

Good communication can be the key to reducing stress, so staying in touch with a wide range of people and issues is the second area we look at. How do you keep up with all the issues affecting your neighbourhood, and ensure that your constituents are also informed? Can the internet really be a useful tool and not a time-wasting diversion? **How can you get answers quickly and easily?**

In the third section, we look at the **issues of work-life balance**. Councillors are 'on call' throughout the day and throughout the week. How can you use technology to fit your commitments as an elected member into your life without them taking over completely? If your best time to deal with council business is in the evening, how can you have effective communication with officers who work during the day? **If your constituents want answers at weekend surgeries or at evening meetings out in the community, how can you give well-informed answers immediately?**

Finally, we look at the ways in which information and communications technology can help to **raise your profile**. How can you get communities and individuals to take more interest in local affairs? How do you gain greater engagement in local issues? **How do you get your voice heard, your position understood and your achievements recognised?**

Training and support

Getting the technology right for each elected member can be a challenge. Officers in the ICT and members' support units may see efficiency in standardisation, but for elected members the technology must fit individual lifestyles and operating preferences. Some councils recognise that most councillors, along with most households in the UK, need home technology anyway, elected member or not. They now encourage investment in training and skills development rather than in equipment.

Some of the uses of ICT highlighted in the next four sections of this briefing change the nature of the members' support team role. These officers are no longer administrators chasing officers and elected members for reports, decisions and responses. They have become advisers and researchers, offering greater support to the executive and to the scrutiny function, and providing access to broader policy-related information.

In Scotland, in 2007, elected members will be paid to serve on their local councils for the first time in the UK. They will expect to have the best available equipment, information, and access channels. They will expect their time as an elected member to support the development of transferable skills and to enhance their CVs. Elected members in the rest of the UK should expect this same level of skills development and support.

Bailie Alan Stewart

Bailie Alan Stewart (Glasgow City Council), ICT spokesperson for the council, uses his ICT facilities for effective communication, for viewing papers and for note-taking when he is in meetings. He believes that the BlackBerry is the key gadget that has brought elected members round to everyday use of ICT. There are four key reasons:
- it fits in your pocket
- it is convenient to use
- it has a full keyboard
- it has a calendar that can be kept up to date by the support team from the office.

Bailie Stewart currently is in employment as well as carrying out his council duties and finds it so convenient to be able to use his BlackBerry on trains and away from home. He can receive an e-mail from a constituent at 8.15 am, respond to it by 8.20 am and have the entire question researched and answered by lunchtime.

He knows some people will always want to talk on the telephone or in person; however, the ability to deal speedily and easily with some queries just means that there is more time left for those who need it.

2 Saving you time

Responding to enquiries

The most useful facility identified by every councillor involved in this study is e-mail. It provides access to officers and colleagues, and a new access channel for the public. Increasing pressure on all services makes it harder to contact busy people during office hours, but e-mail allows those busy people, elected members included, to manage their own time better and provide a recorded, written response speedily.

The benefits of instant access, knowing that a message has arrived and been looked at, and then being able to control when you deal with the response, gives e-mail advantages over the telephone and all previous forms of messaging.

Apart from the value of e-mail in communication with officers and partner organisation, there is increasing pressure from the public, businesses and community organisations wanting to use this channel of communication. More than 62% of people in the UK are now users of the internet (source: www.internetworldstats.com, January 2007) and they expect to be able to e-mail large organisations, including their council and their elected representatives.

E-mail offers the chance to receive a query, ask for more information, refer the request to others and respond in a matter of minutes. A full record remains in the system, and the problem or issue is resolved. No paper-based system can match this for speed and efficiency.

Holding more effective surgeries

Every situation where members of the public can speak to their elected representative to enlist their assistance with a problem can benefit from some use of ICT. Surgery times and locations can vary and appointments can be made more easily. Queries can be dealt with in a whole range of community situations, not just at pre-arranged surgeries, if the facilities to deal with queries are flexible.

Provision of portable ICT facilities and wireless access to the internet in key locations allows you to access information and answer many queries immediately, in the surgery. Having immediate access to information contained in the council's back-office systems speeds up the response. It also reduces the workload for officers who no longer have to respond at second hand to the queries raised with councillors in surgeries.

Direct connection also allows immediate checking, for example, if a member of the public claims that they have been waiting a long time for something, perhaps a property repair. You can check the constituent's level of outstanding debt, or their period of residence in the area. Given the correct levels of security on the connection, you can then respond from a basis of much more information than would otherwise be available.

The constituent goes away from such an encounter with the impression of a councillor who is in touch, decisive and will take action. Your time in the surgery is better spent and follow-up administration reduced. You can deal with simple queries about the progress of an issue immediately. Any queries passed on to officers are based on significantly better information, and you are less likely to have to go back to a constituent with a different answer as the whole picture becomes clear.

Councillor Les Jones

For Councillor Les Jones (Dudley MBC), the primary benefit of ICT comes from use of e-mail, which he says has improved communication immeasurably. He does much of his council work in the evenings, when officers are not available, and e-mail makes contact easy, fast and reliable. He finds that up to 70% of contacts from constituents now come via e-mail. Even those who contact him initially by telephone are usually happy to follow that up with an e-mail.

Dudley MBC councillors also benefit from the availability of wireless connections in the council house, all the libraries and in the Dudley Council Plus one-stop shop in Dudley town centre. Councillor Jones is able to hold his surgery in a wireless environment, allowing him to check all the public information and other information available through the councillors' portal. This includes planning applications, now they are online. Councillor Jones finds accessing that information is as good as being in the planning office, but more convenient.

Dealing with information overload

One problem that can be worsened by technology is having too much information. It seems that the more you look for information about a particular subject, the more you find. Not only that, people seem to want to share everything they find with you, whether you need it or not.

One of the most arduous tasks for elected members is simply getting through the quantities of paperwork. Every meeting has its agenda; most agendas include reports; most reports have appendices; many have additional background papers that can run into hundreds of pages. There is so much information that could be relevant to, say, a large planning application that you will always be offered more documents than you could read.

Some councils now give elected members the minimum on paper and offer the rest online. You only get a printed agenda if you are actually going to attend the meeting. Otherwise, you get an e-mail with the top-level agenda attached. If there are items you wish to pursue further, all reports and background information are available online.

Online access can offer even more information than used to drop through a councillor's letterbox. Search facilities and hyperlink references can help manage the quantities of information available and make it easier to locate the right level of detail for each elected member and each situation.

The internet has opened up the world of information, but searching the internet can use up even more time and still not show you anything that is actually helpful. So-called 'search engines', like Google, can be useful, but what you really need is a 'find engine'. Those councils that use technology to manage their information for elected members are using the members' support team as researchers and training them to act as 'information finders'.

Support teams in this position are able to offer more support to policy-making, decision-making and to the scrutiny and overview process. Councils that use ICT systems to manage their decision support, linking all reports, minutes and background information on a particular subject find it far easier and more efficient to bring together the information required by their scrutiny and overview functions.

Making more informed decisions

Elected members with executive responsibility must become and remain aware of as much information as possible on the issues that are included in the council's policy framework and the community plan or strategy. Maintaining contact with a range of local strategic partners is a part of this. E-mail is, in many cases, the only way to establish effective regular contact, and records the conversations and outcomes.

Use of e-mail as a mass communications channel has emerged at the right time. Access to reports and minutes online whilst in preparation as well as when they are agreed also offers non-executive members the chance to see how decisions are emerging. Input from consultations, whether formal or informal, time-limited or open, is available throughout the decision-making process, and can be used to influence the decisions that are taken.

The internet also offers the chance to stay abreast of local, regional, national and international current affairs and research. Individual elected members can act as portfolio holders for a particular council, and also as advisers across a sub-region or region. The internet provides both the research medium and the communication channel for dissemination.

Councillor 'Slim' Wilkinson (King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council) has been using the laptop as an information centre for his council work for over four years. He has scanned many paper records and indexed them, and uses the laptop as a mobile office, diary and communications centre.

Councillor Wilkinson lives eight miles from his nearest constituent, in a rural part of West Norfolk, and is used to taking his laptop with him into rural areas when he attends meetings. He has seen a noticeable increase in the number of constituents who contact him by e-mail. He finds that the greatest number come from people of between 40 and 60 years old.

Councillor 'Slim' Wilkinson

3 Keeping you in touch

New contact channels

E-mail may be the most popular use of technology now, but newer contact channels are also becoming important for elected members challenged with staying in touch. Councils can direct information to mobile telephones using a whole range of new mobile technologies that just keep on coming.

Text messaging is one channel for communication to and from the public that is of increasing importance. Questions come from the public, and responses can go back in the same way. For younger people, 'texting' is a regular contact channel that is also used to good effect by some councils for quick and concise consultation.

Other new ways of communicating include web-casting (broadcasting across the internet), pod-casting and vod-casting (audio and video downloads to a portable device). These channels can be used to send out council and partnership information, plans and strategies.

As these new channels come into use, there will also be greater use of multi-media, graphics, video and audio information. The public will expect more than just words in information coming from their council, and this is likely to extend to officer-produced reports and other communications with elected members and partners.

Managing contacts and partnerships

Staying in touch with partners now takes place across wide geographic areas. Every council operates in a local, regional, national and even international context, and elected members are working with a whole network of contacts and partners. Examples from other countries and even other continents can influence decisions in a single neighbourhood, and those decisions can affect local and regional policy.

Recording details of background comments and thoughts involved in a decision, and then being able to re-use that information is a challenge. The technology offers this level of records management automatically.

Overview and scrutiny committees should influence policy and local leadership and develop strong and flexible relationships within the council, with officers and the executive, and with outside partners and other agencies. Innovative use of a wide range of information-gathering activities and technologies can help strengthen these relationships.

Informal discussions and meetings now take place away from formal council buildings. Neighbourhood discussions happen in village halls and meetings about schools reorganisation take place in the schools affected. Information is collected and opinions sought in local and neighbourhood meetings and using internet-based channels, such as councillors' websites and weblogs.

Councillor Richard Sharp

Councillor Richard Sharp (Woking Borough Council) was elected in 2005 and has had access to council equipment, systems and information since then. The major use that he makes of the facilities is for e-mail, but it also provides him with the pathway to all council documents he needs for reference.

He finds that many constituents use e-mail to contact him and feels that the option to publish 'councillor pages' and weblogs on the local community website (www.windowonwoking.org.uk)

opens up accessibility to the public and communities. The council has checks in place that ensure political content is not published there, and Councillor Sharp uses his party website for that purpose with links between the two, where appropriate.

In the future, he can see greater use of web-based diaries to log people's movements and arrange meetings. He can also see a place for casework support, although this is not yet a scheduled development at Woking.

Carrying out consultations

Elected members are already using ICT facilities in consultations with the public. Consultations may ask for public input to matters of policy, or they may be specific to a ward or a neighbourhood and be set up by or on behalf of the elected members concerned. As online facilities become more widely used by the public, it becomes more appropriate to use web-based facilities to ask for opinions.

Electronic consultation methods are not yet available to enough people to be used alone and traditional consultation channels will continue to be necessary. However, online discussion forums, websites and weblogs can help you to engage with constituents and offer innovative ways of encouraging people to express their opinions about proposals for change and investment in the locality.

Portable ICT facilities can take information out into the community to meetings with the public and specific stakeholder groups. Presentation software used on a laptop with a small data projector can help to bring issues to life in community halls and other local meeting venues. The same software can include voting facilities to record opinions and display results immediately, in a similar way to the audience voting in the TV programme *Who wants to be a millionaire?*

Researching issues

Whether acting as local ward representative or as portfolio holder, you will need to keep up to date with the development of a whole range of issues. You may choose to research some yourself, making and maintaining contacts with local people or with experts in particular areas. Of course, the internet provides a channel for this, but it can be a time-consuming process.

Part of the representation role involves knowing what is going on in your ward. Ward-centric information can be obtained using geographical information systems (GIS), offering an opportunity to see at a glance what is happening and what is planned, and to spot potential conflicts or emerging trends by thinking about information presented in a holistic way through the perspective of a particular location.

In many areas, region-wide networks of elected members keep each other informed of developments using e-mail and internet contacts. There are also ways of staying aware of emerging national issues, using information dissemination and alert websites such as www.info4local.gov.uk. When registering with this central government service, you identify your areas of interest and receive an alert every time new information becomes available.

For Councillor Andy Tyler (King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council) e-mail is the main reason for having ICT. It enables him to be in touch with colleague councillors and officers, county and regional contacts and other local organisations in between his paid employment and voluntary work.

Although initially wary of using the new technology, he always supported the principle of introducing it, realising that it was necessary and would ultimately be cost-effective. Checking e-mail is a now a part of his daily routine.

**Councillor
Andy Tyler**

4 Balancing your life

Home and mobile working

E-mail and the internet actually allow some people to become, or remain, a councillor. Keeping a balance between work, home and council commitments has never been easy, and home working has been a necessity rather than a choice for councillors. It is all about flexibility, being able to work whenever and wherever it suits you, and not having to fit in with office hours to be effective.

Many councillors are finding that mobile working is even more helpful than having equipment in an office at home. More and more councillors are taking advantage of the facilities of personal digital assistants (PDAs) and experience shows that they are reluctant to part with them even for a couple of hours for maintenance or updating.

If your council offers to provide home computing equipment, you must have a proper survey of the office facilities that you plan to use to ensure that the workstation conforms with office-based health and safety requirements. The council could be open to challenge if it provides office-based equipment without meeting all relevant health and safety requirements.

You will also need to find out about security and privacy, access passwords and authentication methods. These may be restrictive, but are essential. Use of the internet brings its own security issues. Whether you are inside the council's security firewall or outside, there will be regulations about use of the world-wide web on council business or using council-owned equipment. It may be acceptable for your children to use the equipment, but the personal and restricted information that may be stored must be protected from inadvertent (or conscious) access, amendment or deletion.

There is also legislation to consider, especially about data protection and freedom of information, but not exclusively about those areas. You may need to introduce an 'acceptable use' policy across the council and sign a personal undertaking to abide by the policy before accepting any council-provided equipment.

Out-of-hours access

Many situations arise where you need access to information from inside the council. Whether it is a constituent asking about the progress of an issue, a policy idea that needs verification, or your own interest in the progress of a decision, you can be sure that the officer you need to speak to will not be available if it arises in the evening or at the weekend.

Just having e-mail access means that you can log the queries and know that someone will respond. For many councillors, logging questions one evening and finding responses waiting for them the next is now their normal way of operating. However, that slows down the process and takes up officer time. Access directly into those of the council's back-office systems that can be made accessible to elected members provides the means to get straight to the information you need when you need it.

Communication with other councillors, with partner organisations and with the public using e-mail can then take place at whatever time suits you, with all the information you need to make that communication effective. In every way, out-of-hours access can put in control of your time and your work.

Councillor Anne-Marie Barker

For Councillor Anne-Marie Barker (Woking Borough Council) who is a working councillor and a parent, the great advantage of using ICT is the ability it gives her to arrange her council work at a time that suits her. She is able to check information online and send e-mails late at night and she usually gets a response from officers the next day.

There is a high penetration of home connection in her ward and so she is able to use e-mail from and to members of the public. E-mail is also invaluable for contact with fellow councillors and party members, officers and community organisations.

Information on the move

You may find it helpful to be able to work on the move, on trains and in hotel rooms, if you are trying to fit council work into a busy working life that takes you away from your home location. Even if you are not in that position, being a councillor takes you out into local communities and neighbourhoods and to local partner organisations.

Having information available to you wherever you are can make every contact with the public more effective. Going into community settings with information at your fingertips allows you to deal with issues there and then and shows that you are well-informed and able to get things done.

Security and privacy issues, passwords and authentication methods are essential in community situations. If you use portable equipment in community situations, you must be vigilant as to the dangers of displaying it openly. Heed the warnings given by community safety officers about using equipment in certain situations.

Travelling

For many councillors, representation involves significant amounts of travel. In many areas, simply getting to and from council offices can be a challenge, and when your ward is at the opposite end of the council area, face-to-face meetings with either constituents or officers can involve lengthy and time-consuming journeys.

ICT facilities can mean that the members of a committee or working group no longer have to meet in the same location. The internet provides the means by which people across the world talk face to face. Grandparents see and talk to their children and grandchildren on other continents using webcams and cheap, or free, internet-based telephone connections. Use the same facilities for council meetings and you can help address environmental concerns about the numbers of journeys across the council area.

Disruption to travel plans due to bad weather, road works or rail delays have resulted in abandoned journeys or late arrival at important meetings for many councillors. Use of video- or audio-conferencing based on the internet can provide the answer to these concerns, and help reduce the council's 'carbon footprint'.

Councillor Judith Brown

Councillor Judith Brown (King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council and Norfolk County Council) is a district and county councillor, and works full time. Under a reciprocal agreement, the county provides equipment she uses in both roles. In the main, she needs to carry out her council work in the evenings and at weekends and so she uses e-mail to contact officers, knowing that a query sent one evening will elicit a response she can see the following evening.

She also uses the equipment to stay in touch with other members of her political group, and uses an online 'chat line' that links all councillors of her party across Norfolk. She is a member of the children's service review panel, and finds the internet invaluable for keeping herself and her colleagues informed about national and regional issues and initiatives.

5   Raising your profile

Providing community information

Councillors use the internet to receive information from the public, but communication needs to be two-way. Many councillors also provide information directly to their constituents and partners using websites and e-mail. Information for the community can be organised for local people in ways that are more personal and highlight real local issues as they arise. Information provided should be about and for the community, but not necessarily only about the council's involvement in the locality.

Village, town and parish websites focused on local events and issues do not need to be staid and stuffy. Sharing information about the availability of free-range eggs from a local adventure playground that has acquired a flock of hens may not appear to be core to a councillor's responsibilities, but it is actually more likely to engage people and encourage them to return to the website than reproduction of any long council document.

E-mail allows councillors to send out mail shots targeted at those people who may be affected by a particular issue, or to invite people from a particular locality to comment or to attend a meeting. Getting local people to register their e-mail address with a councillor also ensures that responses can be sent with the minimum of delay.

Being accessible

As a contribution to increased access to and from the public, e-mail is becoming a contact channel of choice for many councillors and their constituents. Every council is now required to publish an e-mail contact address for each councillor on the main council website. This increased accessibility should result in faster responses to people contacting their local elected representative.

Facilities such as 'who is your councillor' on council websites, accessible by name, ward or postcode, and including the e-mail address, make it easy to find who to contact, and national initiatives such as the MySociety website (www.writetothem.com) offer the chance to locate the right person to contact.

Accessibility also requires a response, and the public now expects an e-mail response to be fast. Councillors who are not comfortable with accessing e-mail themselves might use facilities in their members' support team, or get their family members to help them, but they can no longer pretend that this access channel is not necessary. However, checking e-mail weekly, or getting members' services to do it and send on a printed copy is increasingly unacceptable. Councillors who do not check their e-mail frequently will soon find themselves completely out of touch.

Councillor David Hopkins

Councillor David Hopkins (Milton Keynes Council) maintains a website with four separate sections, each directed at one of the villages in his ward. He would be really disappointed if anyone in his ward said that they were not aware of what is going on. He uses ICT extensively in his work for his constituents, not only offering daily updates to his website but also using it to provide information for regular mail shots to the communities he serves.

All reports, plans and consultations are available through the council's website, and recent large-scale development proposals have been accompanied by CDs showing three-dimensional virtual walk-throughs of the proposed structures.

The elected members at Milton Keynes are, on average, younger than in the rest of the UK, and are all aware of the possibilities of ICT. They all use technology to communicate with each other, officers and the public. Elected members come up as often as officers with innovative ideas as to the possible use of technology.

Resolving constituents' problems

Earlier sections of this briefing have looked at surgeries and e-mail contacts with the public and community groups. Technology helps with arranging and facilitating meetings of all types. However, the councillor who actually resolves problems, who gives out answers and who deals with issues there and then is the one who will be remembered by individual constituents.

The technology, and the access it gives you to real, useful information, enables you to know more about the individuals you are dealing with. You can then provide a personalised and informed response that really makes good 'customer service' and a memorable interaction with a successful outcome.

Even though many interactions between a member of the public and their local council result in a decision that a service cannot be delivered, the quality of the interaction matters almost as much as the outcome in many cases. It has been said that service is about experience, and a constituent who is dealt with as a person by a well-informed representative who has all the necessary information at their fingertips will remember the experience.

Being re-elected

There is no doubt that good communication with the community will raise an elected member's profile. Re-engagement of the community with the democratic process can be assisted by effective and regular communication between councillors and their constituents throughout their period of office.

During election campaigns, the restrictions on use of council-provided facilities for party-political purposes mean that even those councillors making extensive use of websites may find these suspended during election campaigns.

Communication with the public is crucial during this period, but must be carried out using equipment and facilities that are not provided directly for use in council business. However, elected members who use ICT and the communication possibilities it offers can find that increased accessibility and a higher profile increase public support in the ballot box. The reputation of a councillor who is able to resolve issues and is always well-informed about local issues, policies and plans will stand out.

Councillor Steve Preston

When people in Ryedale were asked to name all the councillors they could think of, the majority were able to name the mayor and Councillor Steve Preston (Ryedale District Council). Part of Councillor Preston's high profile is due to his website (www.councillorpreston.org), which is anything but conventional.

He loads on to his website as much information as he can, including details of local events and many photographs. Wherever he goes, his camera goes with him, and the results are added to the website on a daily basis. He concentrates on matters that affect his ward, but offers links to information from further afield. He believes that anyone who is not yet using the internet for communication is losing out.

The evidence is that when election time comes, people in his ward will know Steve Preston's name, and that is one major step towards getting people to vote, and to vote for him. For Steve Preston, providing people with interesting and informative content on the web is part of his job as a councillor. If it contributes to getting re-elected, well, that is no bad thing.

6   Conclusions

Councillors in the front line

Efficient and effective public services depend on all the people in the front line of service delivery, including elected members.

ICT can help you to be efficient and effective by:

- dealing with enquiries immediately and quickly without passing them on to others

- maintaining your diary and access channels

- providing access to partners and colleagues whenever you need it

- offering channels for disseminating information to colleagues.

The transformation of public services depends upon input from, and participation by, elected members.

ICT can help you to transform the way you work by:

- reducing the amount of paperwork you need to deal with

- providing the right level of information when and where you need it

- tracking the progress of issues and decisions.

Improving the image of the council and each councillor makes a major contribution to democratic renewal.

ICT can help improve your image by:

- keeping you informed about recent developments and policy issues

- ensuring you have access to the most up-to-date position on local issues

- enabling you to provide a personalised response to individual queries.

Communities and partnerships

Recent changes mean that there is a greater focus on neighbourhoods and smaller geographic areas in all council strategies and plans.

ICT can help you focus on local issues by:

- providing you with information about your ward, neighbourhood and locality

- introducing new consultation opportunities online and in community locations

- using community and locality websites to focus information.

Dealing with a network of local community partners brings you in touch with many more contacts.

ICT can help you manage your contacts by:

- maintaining contact lists and recording interactions across wider geographical areas

- providing the chance for meetings to take place at a distance, with a wider group of participants

- offering e-mail contact with busy people who are otherwise difficult to contact.

Information is the most important resource for people to feel part of the communities you represent.

ICT can help you bring information to more people by:

- enabling you to take information into the community

- providing the chance to focus information for particular communities

- offering a communication channel that is fast, always there, and can easily be kept up to date.

Democratic renewal

Local people care about what happens in their locality.

ICT can help you get people involved and inspired by:

- using new access methods, like text messaging, that engage young people

- providing better quality information in community settings

- enabling people to offer opinions and ideas in less challenging, more supportive environments.

People across your neighbourhood, council area and region should be engaged in the democratic process.

ICT can help you engage people in debate about local issues by:

- providing information in new formats, like web-casting, pod-casting and vod-casting

- taking information into communities with innovative and exciting new presentation methods

- using internet-based channels such as websites and weblogs.

Being or becoming a local politician is a challenge as elected members are busy people with many calls on their time.

ICT can help you maintain a balance between council duties and the rest of your life by:

- fitting in with your individual lifestyle and operating methods

- allowing you to contact people at any time and receive answers when convenient to you

- reducing the need to travel to meetings by offering video- and audio-conferencing.

An eye on the future

The expectations of the public regarding council and councillor use of technology will keep rising.

ICT can help you respond to public expectations by:

- demonstrating that you are open to new ideas and will use new communication channels

- offering the public new ways to contact you

- showing that you are using all possible methods of keeping in touch with local opinions

- providing a personalised response to enquiries and contacts.

Without the new ways of keeping in touch, you will find yourself left behind by colleague elected members and partners.

ICT can help you stay in touch by:

- making sure you are accessible through a number of access channels

- keeping you abreast of recent decisions and developments

- ensuring you are aware of partner and community issues.

Information presented in innovative ways will make more impact and engage more people.

ICT can help you present information better by:

- offering easy ways of using pictures, sounds and video

- allowing innovative ways of consulting and gathering opinions

- facilitating contacts across localities and further afield.

Case studies

London Borough of Bexley
The elected members at Bexley come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. There are some retired and some in full-time employment; one has special needs.

The emphasis of all decisions is on economy and efficiency. Recycled equipment is offered for home use and, by 2008, the council will not provide or support home PCs or pay for elected members' internet access. The presumption is that they will have the need for home computing facilities in other aspects of their lives. Any elected members with special needs will still be provided with the facilities that they need.

All ten cabinet members use BlackBerrys, which are very popular. They use the diary facilities as well as contacts, e-mail and the telephone. Since much time is currently spent dealing with the meetings calendar, the expectation is that this new facility will reduce this overhead for all concerned.

Coventry City Council
Councillors in Coventry have had ICT equipment for many years but take-up and usage have increased since the introduction of specially personalised support. A dedicated support officer acts as a single point of contact for all 54 elected members, deals with systems, access, and on-the-spot training, and advises on improvements to facilities. She ensures that support issues are addressed efficiently, with minimal impact on elected members' diaries.

The members' support team has monthly ICT meetings to discuss problem areas. The elected members' development process includes ICT training, and the annual elected members' satisfaction survey now includes ICT as a standard part of the process.

A new system, designed to help elected members manage their ward casework, ties in to the corporate customer relationship management system. It provides an easy-to-use interface for managing cases and delivers individual weekly reports on casework entered into the system.

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Most Dudley MBC councillors use council-supplied ICT as a regular and essential part of their work. The elected members' ICT working group meets every couple of months and through this group councillors apply pressure to extend the breadth and depth of their use of ICT.

A system for managing committee papers is part of a drive to improve access and to reduce the quantity of paper produced. However, reducing the amount of paper used required a culture change that has taken time to achieve.

An elected members' portal offers easy access to an increasing amount of relevant information. This includes e-mail and office systems, committee agendas, background papers, minutes and other information such as who attended which meetings. A caseload management system records all contacts, actions and responses received. It also helps to track and manage performance in dealing with enquiries and complaints from members of the public.

Glasgow City Council
Online consultations are a regular feature of public involvement for Glasgow City Council. In 2005 the leader of the council and the chief executive participated in an online question-and-answer session on the budget as part of the overall consultation process

Libraries were open during this evening consultation, allowing people without home internet connections to use public access terminals. In total 63 people logged on asking 174 questions. This is significantly more interaction than at any previous public meeting on the subject.

Interactive voting software, similar to that used for the audience votes on the TV programme *Who wants to be a millionaire?*, has been used with the citizens' panel. It has proved popular with the public attending meetings as they can easily have their say without actually having to stand up and speak. The software can be used wherever it is possible to use a Microsoft PowerPoint slide show linked to a laptop computer with a receiver.

King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council
In the council-wide election of May 2003, nearly half of the elected members either stood down or were not re-elected. The current members have significantly more ICT experience than their predecessors.

Virtually all councillors now use ICT equipment supplied by either the district or the county council. Rollout benefited from being scheduled in groups of five every two weeks, rather than a 'big bang' approach. The laptops were replaced by terminals in councillors' homes, with no local software and a consequent reduction in security issues.

Agendas are now provided electronically to councillors, the public and parish councils on the intranet and the web. All councillors have noticed a reduction in the quantity of paper that comes to them from the council, although there is still a way to go before the council achieves the targets that it set for efficiencies in this area.

London Borough of Lambeth

In Lambeth, wireless networking started with elected members. The aim was to provide flexibility of working within the town hall and deal with the limitations of operating in a listed building.

The project coincided with the provision of laptops and BlackBerrys, offering full access to the Lambeth network from home, on the move and in any office space in the town hall. Now 80% of councillors use laptops and BlackBerrys and managing without would be unthinkable.

Elected members also use a web portal, accessible from any computer, to manage their casework and to access reports, minutes and other information from both the council and external partners.

North Warwickshire Borough Council

All the elected members in North Warwickshire BC use some form of ICT equipment. Some use equipment supplied by the county council, and one uses a BlackBerry, but most use laptops supplied by the district council. Access is provided to e-mail, internet, intranet and the council's GIS system.

More than half of elected members now use wireless at home and from the wireless 'hot spot' in the civic suite, and they are piloting the use of webcams with the aim of reducing travel to a central point for meetings.

One problem was the need to remember multiple passwords to gain access to the various systems. This was worst for those councillors who sit on both the district and county councils. The solution was to provide laptops with biometric finger scanners. Most councillors find this much easier than remembering all those passwords.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

Elected members of Stockton-on-Tees BC choose from a range of equipment that includes laptop, PC and PDA. They have a telephone line and broadband at home for council use only. This gives them access to a range of office systems, e-mail, internet, intranet and e-agenda systems and to the council's website for online planning and other public information.

Group training sessions are offered and elected members are invited to join any scheduled employee training. One-to-one sessions are also available. Written instructions are provided, but in small units rather than in large instruction manuals.

The members' support officer manages councillor websites for elected members who wish to have their own web presence. Everything is checked by legal services, and their advice is quite restrictive. However, councillors are currently experimenting with this method of communication, and the restrictions have not proved to be a problem to date.

Surrey County Council

The elected members of Surrey CC are sensitive about the costs and benefits of providing ICT equipment for elected members. The current policy offers elected members a laptop and broadband connection; members of the executive and key committee members have BlackBerrys.

Councillors can use any Surrey CC desktop PC and receive their own personal desktop. The council's SCCAnywhere facility that enables connectivity to council systems from any internet-connected PC is also available to them. Beyond that, elected members are on their own.

There is a web presence for individual councillors on the main Surrey CC website, and an elected members' diary is maintained. Councillors use e-mail extensively and can use their ICT equipment to check points on the council's public website during surgeries, but the council supports no other systems for them.

Woking Borough Council

The council uses a decision-tracking system that is now 'the way things are done' at Woking. Reports are all created within the system, using templates maintained by members' services. Everything is public and accessible, including reports in preparation.

The system records meeting dates and issues reminders to ensure that reports are produced on time. The same applies to actions arising from decisions taken at meetings. All items are linked to community strategy priorities and show the responsible person. They can also be linked to specific wards. Elected members use the system to find out about past, current and future items.

The system has changed the role of the members' services team. The emphasis is no longer on chasing people, responding to last-minute additions to already jammed agendas. They now provide a more proactive service and greater support to executive, scrutiny and regulatory functions.

Founded in 1986, Socitm is the professional organisation which represents those managers in local government who are responsible for ICT policy. The objectives of Socitm are to provide a focal point for ICT management, share experiences, promote the recognition of ICT and influence legislation. It has now up to 2000 members and continues to grow. One example of its role is the Socitm *Insight* research programme.

Socitm *Insight* is a subscription service to which over 500 local authorities and other public and private sector organisations now belong. It identifies and encourages good ICT management practice.
Socitm *Insight* has produced a series of comprehensive and detailed guides on all the major ICT themes linked to the critical issues of the day, which provide valuable advice and support for ICT practitioners.
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