Message beyond the medium

Improving local government services through e-government in England
1 E-government can help to improve services in the ways that people want and expect. The success of this vision is based on a partnership between central and local government and so it is critical that councillors play their part. But successful local e-government is not easy. There is no blueprint for success and e-government is relevant to everything that a council does. While this offers local choices, it also makes it difficult to know where to start. Councils know that to get local e-government right, their priorities need to reflect people’s expectations of, and needs for, services. In other words, benefits to local people should drive e-government activities. Your role as a local authority councillor in leading, challenging and supporting your council’s direction is vital to this success.

2 In our report ‘Message beyond the medium: Improving local government services through e-government’ we identified that for some councils e-government is working well. These ‘early succeeder’ councils have set out a practical vision of how technology can help to deliver, and improve, local priorities. A vision that is as much about improving the quality of services as it is about improving access to them. And you, as councillors, have played a key role in developing and delivering these visions, often working with others to share experience and learning and to boost capacity.

   Our main driving force is to raise the standards and the aspirations of our people, to extend people’s horizons…we can do that through ICT (information and communications technology). A lot of what (the council) has done is as a result of members finding out from others [councils] about what they’re doing.

   Leader, metropolitan borough council

3 But not all councils have made as much progress. We found that councils have different levels of confidence in their approach to e-government and their ability to deliver. Some councils are confident and share with the ‘early succeeders’ the key features of ambition, vision and clarity of purpose. These councils seem well equipped for success. But many others are more hesitant and for them e-government still feels marginal to the delivery of core services. Members of these ‘hesitant’ councils are less engaged, and central government targets rather than local needs are shaping their agendas.

4 The full potential of e-government depends upon hesitant councils becoming confident and confident councils delivering success (Exhibit 1). On page 4 we set out a number of questions to help you to honestly assess the progress that your council has made.

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The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, health and criminal justice services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

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The policy framework for e-government in Wales is different to that in England. While our report highlights issues that are relevant to Wales, its evidence was drawn only from English councils, and its recommendations are addressed to English stakeholders.

Exhibit 1
Councillors have different levels of confidence

Within a climate of overall optimism, some councils are more confident than others.

**Hesitant councils are...**

- More likely to agree that there are more important priorities for their council.
- More likely to believe that the e-government agenda is too broad for their authority to tackle effectively.
- More likely to cite a lack of member interest as a barrier.
- Government initiatives, Government targets, ICT suppliers and the best value agenda have driven activity, despite these councils not considering these as important as other drivers such as benefits to local people.
- More likely to believe that e-government is too expensive.

**Confident councils are...**

- Chief executives are more likely to agree that e-government contributes to the overall objectives of the council.
- E-champions are more likely to say that they are taking steps to improve the ICT skills of local people.
- Chief executives are more likely to say they are using the private sector for funding purposes.
- The need to modernise services, benefits to local people and potential costs savings are considered more important and have driven agendas to a greater degree.
- More likely to report working with private sector partners.
- E-champions and service managers feel more supported by central agencies.
- More likely to learn from external sources.
- More likely to agree that e-government projects can fail if staff do not understand the need for change.

*Source:* Audit Commission analysis of an e-government survey commissioned from MORI
Key questions for councillors

Understanding what success looks like

**Focus on what matters locally**

**Q1** Do you know how your council’s e-government activities will improve core services and meet local needs?

Of the chief executives we surveyed 94 per cent agreed that e-government makes a significant contribution to delivering their council’s overall objectives. But 58 per cent believed that there are more important priorities. Those councils that are furthest ahead have not seen e-government as a discrete, competing objective but as an activity that underpins existing core objectives.

**Understand the potential of technology**

**Q2** Does your council have the skills and knowledge to tell you what technology can do to help to deliver your key priorities? If not, can you access those skills from others?

While many local people are able to identify the improvements that they want from services, few, as yet, are able to articulate how technology can help to deliver these improvements. Instead it is for you to decide how you can exploit technology to deliver improvements, taking into account local people’s views. To do this means marrying up specialist information and communications technology (ICT) skills with a strategic understanding of your council’s business. But many of you find simply accessing the technical skills difficult. Those councils who are furthest ahead have identified their skill gaps and sought to fill them. They have recruited one or more senior people who, between them, understand both the council’s business and the role for technology within it.

**Delivering successful e-government**

**Ensure leadership and local ownership**

**Q3** Has your council developed a business case for e-government that sets out a clear rationale for investment decisions?

As many as 44 per cent of your e-champions and service managers thought that e-government would deliver cost savings. But few could tell us how much, and by when. And cost-efficiencies need not be the only driver of your e-government agenda. You might want to re-direct freed-up resources to improving and extending services for your communities. These choices are all valid if the rationale is clear. This rationale should, as a minimum, identify the cost of the investment, how the initial investment
(as well as any ongoing costs) will be funded, whether savings are anticipated, how they will be used, and the productivity improvements you expect to see.

**Q4**

*Do all your council’s staff, from the ‘top team’ through to those on the front line, understand, and engage with, your e-government plans?*

While most councils agreed that e-government projects are likely to fail unless staff understand the need for change, fewer than one in ten had explicit plans to involve staff. Those councils that are furthest ahead have put in place a ‘matrix’ of leadership to drive changes forward and to create the sense of local ownership from staff that encourages them to engage in delivery. This matrix includes an influential member, a senior officer with influence at the ‘top table’, and manager(s) who have influence at a senior level and an understanding of both technology and business issues.

**Q5**

*Are you or your colleagues sufficiently involved in the development and scrutiny of your council’s e-government strategy and plans?*

As councillors you play a key role in ensuring that your council’s e-government activity is driven by, and continues to be driven by, local needs. However, councils told us that lack of member interest was a significant barrier to e-government success and a recent survey reported that 86 per cent of you had a poor or patchy understanding of your e-government agenda.

**Build capacity to deliver**

**Q6**

*Has your council prioritised its plan for the delivery of its e-government strategy, ensuring that it is practical and realistic?*

Those councils having more success are making e-government manageable by prioritising their plans for delivery. They have understood the skills, resources and infrastructure that they need at each stage of implementation and have been able to identify the gaps in their capacity and have sought to fill them.

**Q7**

*Does your council’s e-government strategy consider all of the available resourcing options, for example, from internal funds, working collaboratively to combine resources, and working with the private sector?*

Funding the implementation of e-government is a critical issue for councils, with a lack of funding identified as being the most significant risk to success. But common to all of the councils that are furthest ahead is a commitment to releasing internal funds through redirecting resources and/or making efficiency gains. These councils recognise that to make certain improvements to services in the future, they will need to invest money in ICT now. Many of these councils are also combining resources by working in partnership with other councils and/or private sector suppliers.

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Sustaining delivery

Set challenging local targets

How will you know if your council’s e-government activities have been successful?

Not losing sight of what matters most to local people when delivering e-government requires a strong performance management framework. Without this framework, you risk implementing projects that deliver nothing but better access to poor services. Yet, when we asked about important e-government performance targets, fewer than 2 per cent of councils cited locally set targets. Setting a few relevant local measures and targets will help you and council staff to think through what the e-government agenda means for you and so drive activity towards meeting local priorities.

Ensure that activity is relevant

Does your council regularly check that what is being delivered continues to meet the evolving needs and expectations of local people?

Setting targets is only the first step. Councils need to monitor progress against these targets and challenge and review whether their objectives are being met. Given that it is still early days for delivery and that success for many is unclear, councils must check that what they are delivering still relates to what people want. We found that some councils are struggling to monitor and evaluate progress. And some are not making the most of available management information to set stretching targets in the first place. We found one council identifying new priorities for improvement by monitoring where services are ‘failing’ local people. Using this information to set improvement targets would be a useful next step.