

COMMUNITY INFORMATION LINE – AN EVALUATION OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL EGOVERNMENT

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Abstract

The Community Information Line – an eInnovations project (ODPM 2004), also known as eChampions, examines the potential for engagement with local eGovernment at a grassroots level in North Cornwall, through the use of community volunteers who act as local interfaces to electronic service delivery methods.

The project acknowledges both the potential for online delivery of local government services and also the problems of engagement that currently exist. The Community Information Line adopts a different approach to engagement compared to traditional mass media approaches. This model was evaluated over the first year of the project, and can demonstrate a number of key issues related to technical infrastructure, community awareness and “eParticipation” that could have potentially far reaching implications for the wider engagement of eGovernment services.

Keywords: Local Government, eDemocracy, engagement, diffusion of innovations

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an evaluation of the *Community Information Line* – an eInnovations project (ODPM 2004), also known as “*Rural eChampions*”. The project provides an interesting model to addressing the issues of citizen engagement for local eGovernment by approaching the problem from a human, rather than technological, perspective. The project was funded for from July 2004 – September 2005, and is currently entering into a new, volunteer driven phase. The evaluation focussed upon the work in the first year of the project, but also considers the implications for the future.

The evaluation of the project considers the approach adopted from a largely qualitative perspective and draws results from the project that contribute toward models of engagement for local eGovernment. Conclusions are drawn that consider the successes from the project and its future, and the potential for a greater impact when considered from a national perspective.

2 DELIVERING LOCAL EGOVERNMENT

The UK Government’s national strategy for local eGovernment (ODPM, 2002), together with its associated website (ODPM, 2004b) aims to greatly enhance local government and empower communities to have greater involvement with the democratic process. eGovernment is seen as central to reforming and modernising all public services and local eGovernment into an integral part of

the overall UK Online programme to realise the benefits of the Internet for all citizens. With currently 62% of the population regularly using the Internet (CitizensOnline 2005) the UK is viewed as a country that could greatly exploit electronic service delivery – in aiming to make all its services available electronically by 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2000) the Government is attempting to exploit this potential

The key benefits which are expected to be achieved as a result of the electronic delivery of services are:

- wider participation(also known as eDemocracy)/reduced social exclusion improvements in information sharing between services and agencies;
- greater variety, choice and convenience of access for customers;
- improved speed and efficiency of the processes which underpin services.

However, while the potential for usage is great, the biggest concern for the Government is the low number of citizens using online government services. An Accenture report (2003) provides statistics as approximately 1 in 10 citizens using online government services. This is a very small percentage compared to countries such as Canada, where half of the population engage with Government online. More recent reports by Guardian (2005) have show small increases in engagement, but, again, other countries are far ahead of the UK.

Certainly, the recent publication of the e-citizenship research programme (eCitizen National Project 2004) has highlighted the potential for eGovernment services, presenting a very positive picture of UK citizen's view on eGovernment. Statistics such as 42% of respondent stating they would be likely to use their local authority website, and 63% of respondents with internet access stating they would be happy to use email to communicate with their local authority, do demonstrate interest in the potential of "eChannels" (i.e. the web or email) to engage with local authorities.

However, one of the most telling statistics from the report is the only 12% of adults in England have ever used an eChannel to communicate with their local authority. Comparing crude statistics with the Accenture (2003) study gives something indicative, if not concrete - we can see little growth in citizen engagement during a period when local eGovernment was very much at the forefront of local authority development. Given the level of expenditure that has occurred in that time, such growth is surely cause for concern.

It has been suggested (for example, Olphert and Damodaran 2004) that the major issue with eGovernment adoption lies in the technical nature of the drive up to this point. If engagement is going to happen, there has to be more involved at the grassroots level, talking with and promoting such services with the service consumers (as also, ultimately, the people who paid for the systems through their taxes!).

In considering the needs of engagement within local eGovernment, it is worth considering how technology adoption happens from the theoretical perspective. If one can understand the theory behind adoption, then one can address the issues specific to local eGovernment. One of the most widely accepted theories of technology transfer is Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2004).

2.1 Diffusion of Innovations Applied to Local eGovernment

There have been some efforts (for example, Fichman and Kemerer (1997), Fichman (2000), Zelkowitz (1996)) to understand ICT related innovations and their adoption, drawing from DoI theory. An interesting piece of work from a number of years ago (Fichman & Kemerer, 1993) identified a wider issue in DoI, the role of the community within which the innovation sits (i.e. a technology will not be adopted by an organisation if others are not also adopting).

In developing these ideas, the concept of a *critical mass* is introduced. This critical mass is needed so that the technology can achieve mainstream acceptance. If this critical mass is not achieved, the wider community will not adopt the technology. This concept is achieving far more widespread acceptance

in more recent times, and can be seen anecdotally with technologies such as email and mobile phones. A popular text that discusses this concept in more detail is Gladwell's Tipping Point (2000).

The DoI theory provides a sound starting point for considering an appropriate approach to engagement with local eGovernment. We can view "Local eGovernment" as the object for diffusion – while it is, in essence, a collection of services delivered through a common interface (the web), service delivery online is the central concept. This method of service delivery is the "innovation" we wish to consider within the diffusion scenario.

The application of DoI theory generally relates to the business domain, where communication structures, change agents and social interactions are well established – meaning that, with careful planning, diffusion theory can be applied with controlled boundaries. The first problem when considering engagement with the users of local eGovernment lies with the dispersed system in which it exists – the local district. Such a "system" is actually comprised of a huge variety of different systems (local communities, social networks, organisations, etc.), existing within a geographical constraint. As such it is less clear when one tries to identify:

- Communication channels: While mass media communication channels can be easily define, interpersonal structures are less clear. How can interpersonal channels be used to communicate the benefits of local eGovernment?
- Nature of fit: If we are to accept that a district is not a single group of adopters, but a group of complex inter-related systems, all with different types of adopter, then we must conclude the nature of fit is heterophilious.
- Social structure and norms: Similarly, within a local district, there could be a great variety of social structures and norms, and therefore communication within these structures can become very complex.
- Change agents: While business communities have established change agents (consultants, salesmen, management), how can one identify change agents within a local district? Such agents undoubtedly do exist within communities, but identification of such individuals is far more complex than within the business domain.
- Anti-change agents: In addition to change agents (white knights) we have to recognise the possibility of anti-change personnel (black knights) – who for whatever reason oppose change. There may be a power struggle between white and black knights and one or the other may dominate.

If we consider the "marketing" of local eGovernment, there has been little attempt to engage with the community through any channels aside from mass media. While there has been considerable publicity about eGovernment in general, the eCitizenship project demonstrates potential, rather than awareness and engagement. This model of engagement can be analogised to a "town hall" approach to local government. The authority has implemented services, and they are there if citizens wish to use them. If DoI theory can be used to aid in the engagement of local eGovernment, it is very apparent from the theory than something more needs to be done.

2.2 Community Information Line – An Overview

The Community Information Line project within the district of North Cornwall was an attempt to move beyond the town hall model of eGovernment toward engagement within communities. The problem of engagement within North Cornwall is compounded due to the rural nature of the region. The North Cornwall district is approximately 1200 square kilometres with a population of 82,000. As one might expect from a region with such low population density, there are many isolated communities without easy access to face-to-face interaction with their local authority.

The concept of the project was simple – if volunteers within local communities can be made aware of the potential of local eGovernment, and then can engage with their area, the benefits of eGovernment

can be communicated within a trusted, social network. With this intention, the project was, in essence, identifying change agents within local communities and empowering them, rather than try to engage with all social networks and communities within a district from a single point (the local authority). It bypassed the overarching problem of engagement from a local authority perspective – trying to interact with many complex social systems at one time.

The benefits of the project were perceived as equally beneficial for all involved parties:

- The Local Authority would benefit by making online services accessible to a much wider section of the community, resulting in cost-savings through reduced office time. The authority will also benefit from ongoing user feedback that will help to refine the online services offered.
- The citizen would benefit from a locally accessible one stop shop type information point, delivered by local people who are already actively involved in their communities. They will not need to distinguish between service providers and will receive a good quality, personal service which is considered particularly important for the elderly and vulnerable.
- Communities will benefit from having an open dialogue with the local authority.

Volunteers were recruited from the region through advertising in the local press. From an initial advert, potential recruits were invited to submit a brief CV, detailing location, community involvement, and their thoughts on the potential of the project. Drawing from an initial group of around 30 people, an initial cohort of 8 volunteers was selected. Selection was based upon what they had put in their application, in particular ensuring recruits were involved within the local community, had established communication networks, and their location within the district. Figure 1 shows approximate locations of the volunteers within the district. It was intended to select locations in remote locales in general, away from the major towns in the region (who have easy access to face to face interaction with their local authority). The concentration of volunteers around the North Hill/South Petherwin area was deliberate – this is one of the most remote regions of the district with little easy access to local government services. Volunteers from this region were selected to ensure as little cross over of interest and social groups as possible. The group was comprised of a mix semi- or fully retired people and people that worked within the community. Most had some involvement within the local community through parish council, community groups, etc.. Table 1 defines the volunteer's roles and location. The numbers in the location column related to the locations defined on the map in figure 1:

Location	Occupation	Community Activity
Boscastle (1)	Self employed - marketing	Involved in parish council and local newspaper
Coads Green (2)	Horticulturalist	Active in the community with youth groups, local school, etc.
Launcells (3)	House husband	Previous experience in community regeneration in a different region
North Hill (4)	Basketmaker	Voluntary worker in the community, involved in village hall and development group for region.
North Hill (5)	Retired	Very involved in local amateur dramatic groups, significant experience in enterprise/SME generation
South Petherwin (6)	Retired	Involved on parish council, local groups and many charities
St Merryn (7)	Retired	Involved in parish council activities, village correspondent for local paper.
St. Breward (8)	Postmaster	"Community hub" – St. Breward is a small rural village with 2 shops, the post office, which includes an Internet Café, provides a centre for community.

Table 1. Community Information Line Volunteer Locations and Profiles

Once recruited, the volunteers had relevant ICT equipment provided from the project budget. Generally this was either a laptop, new monitor, a printer and some type of connectivity – broadband

where available, but other options were also necessary. For example, volunteers with laptops were given mobile data cards so they could connect from areas without wired Internet access.

The volunteers were encouraged to engage with their communities as they saw fit – it was not a prescriptive model beyond providing an access point for people within their communities wishing to access public services online. Volunteers were also encouraged to move beyond the local authority website to provide access to any area of interest for their “customers”, such as community and voluntary sector groups.

The remainder of this paper evaluates the project using a number of different methods, and measures the success of the project as both a means of engaging citizens with local eGovernment, and as a wider community resource.



Figure 1. Volunteer locations in North Cornwall

3 AN IN-DEPTH EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY INFORMATION LINE

The evaluation of the Community Information Line project was broken into a number of different phases:

1. An attitudinal measurement toward ICT and local eGovernment within the region.
2. A survey of expectations from the volunteers.
3. Year long data collection from volunteers.

The first phase of the evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper, and is presented in (Phippen & Lacohee 2006). This research examined attitudes toward eDemocracy from both the service provision and consumer. In general service providers had a positive attitude toward the concept of local eGovernment service delivery, but had concerns whether the consumers either wanted or were capable of exploiting its potential. Consumers demonstrated an animosity to the concept, with most feeling that it was more to do with cost savings than improving the interface with citizens. A number of the issues identified in this work serve as a basis for focus with a project such as the Community Information Line could address

3.1 A Review of the First Year

A variety of methods we used for the evaluation of the first year of the project. Initially volunteers were surveyed to determine their expectations for the service. Volunteer “mini-CVs”, used during the application process, also provided a source of information to for this measurement. During the running of the project, enquiry logs were set up so volunteers could record interactions they had with members of the public. Email was used for ad hoc communication about volunteer experiences, a number of group meetings through the year allowed volunteers to share their experiences. Finally, toward the end of the project, a set of in depth interviews were used to discuss the experiences of the individual volunteers and the experiences of their “customers”.

3.1.1 *Volunteer Expectations*

Volunteers were posed three questions at the start of the project:

1. Why did the concept of eChampions/Community Information Line appeal to you?
2. How do you intend to facilitate the service in your own community?
3. Has your community already expressed an interest in a service such as Community Information Line?

The first question had a number of themes emerging from their responses. In general, all commented upon the potential for such a project, and their enthusiasm for trying to make it work. The use of ICT in rural locations was also a common theme through their responses – all saw technology as a means to help those in remote and isolated situations, and saw the project as an opportunity to do more for their community. The majority of volunteers felt it helped complement their existing voluntary and community work. Another interesting observation from the responses is the majority also stated they wanted to do more for their community – this will be something we return to later in this paper.

The means of facilitation was more diverse – while some volunteers had very clear ideas about how they would use the service (sessions in village halls, home based services, visits to “customers” at their homes), others were more pragmatic and had a “wait and see” view. A number of volunteers also considered aspects of awareness within their responses. Most viewed local press as a means to promote awareness, along with promotion through contact with local groups, “local oracles”, etc. Their responses show an awareness of how their communities worked – more a case of engaging with people and groups that act as “community hubs”, rather than a simple dissemination of information. Again, methods of promotion and awareness will be concepts we return to later in the paper.

Finally, the question of existing interest in the project elicited interesting responses. There was general agreement that members of the community with whom the project had been discussed had very little awareness of local eGovernment services. There was, however, a lot of community expectation about

the potential of ICT, in particular the Internet. The majority of volunteers mentioned community groups, etc. that had expressed an interest in investigating how they could use the Internet to improve information resource, connectivity, etc. within their own community.

3.1.2 *Experiences in the First Year of the Project*

In terms of engagement with the wider community the project had a slow start beset by technical problems. The majority of volunteers required some additional connectivity or hardware in order to get underway with the public facing aspect of the project. It was difficult to demonstrate the potential for local eGovernment without a reliable, fast Internet connection, and establishing this seemingly straightforward technology in remote areas of North Cornwall proved difficult. While upgrades to local exchanges were making inroads into getting broadband to areas within the region with a high population density, the remote locations within the region (the areas of focus for services intended to address issues of isolation within public service engagement) were beyond the capable range of ADSL. Therefore alternative technologies had to be investigated. ISDN lines were provided to a couple of locations. These proved costly, time consuming to install, and not significantly better than a dial-up connection once installed. Mobile data connectivity (GPRS) was also a proposed solution to get the technology and services to location beyond the reach of broadband. However, the remoteness of some of the project locations, which caused problems with broadband connectivity, also proved problematic for mobile technology, where coverage was patchy.

The technical problems were, on the whole, addressed within the first six months of the project. During that time there was some activity among volunteers who had working technology, and initial observations were that there was a lack of interest in the service with few enquiries. Up to this point the awareness raising was, on the whole, carried out through local press and advertising – passive forms of engagement that require some effort on behalf of the “customer” to realise the potential of the service for their own needs. A passive medium means that the customer cannot ask further questions, they are simply presented with information and have to form their own opinions. Indeed, many recipients of passive information treat it in a similar manner to junk mail.

At a six month review of the project, the majority of volunteers, and project coordinators, were beginning to doubt the value of the project. Technical problems had dampened the volunteer's enthusiasm and lack of interest had caused further negativity. However, there was one volunteer who was starting to generate a lot of interest, and it was interesting to consider his circumstances.

The volunteer was one of the more remotely located members of the project (location 5 on the figure 1), but was involved across a wide geographical area as a result of activity within local amateur dramatics. Rather than rely on mass communication of the service, he engaged with members of his own social group and discussed the potential benefits of the service. Once engaged, and if they had a need, people tended to visit him to further investigate the potential for that service. General interest came from people without their own ICT equipment and had little experience in the use of the Internet. The availability of a local volunteer who could provide access to the equipment, and also guide them through the process of locating information online, proved to be hugely beneficial to them.

The final six months of the project were certainly more successful for the volunteers, with the majority starting to generate their own methods of engagement and, as a result, generated more interest in the project and the potential for local eGovernment. Engagement tended to occur with individuals at first then, as word got around about the service; more people approached the volunteers regarding online services. An interesting observation from this phase of the project was the nature of enquiries in some cases.

It was envisaged that the majority of help provided by the volunteers would be “hands on” – the volunteer would sit with the customer and help them through the process of locating the information they required. However, volunteers who were receiving enquiries started to notice that people would only enquire as to the availability and location of the information they required. If they had their own

PC and internet connection, once they were informed of this, they would find the information themselves. Several volunteers had this experience, and this method of engagement was the primary type of engagement experienced by two volunteers (Coads Green and St. Breward).

The types of information sought from enquirers have been wide ranging. Local authority information from planning, funding, boundary disputes and education have all been popular information searches within local authority resources. However, as people became more comfortable with using the volunteers as “information resources”, requests became more wide ranging, with requests for things as diverse as renewable energy and train timetables. Farming has been also been well represented, with lots of interest in uses online resources to communication with national farming bodies. However, one thing that was common to all but a single recorded enquiry was that all enquirers had a specific need – they were not simply curious about what was there.

One interesting observation from St Breward came from the availability of planning resources. A number of architects live in the village, and, obviously, interact with the planning department using “traditional” methods on a regular basis. However, following discussion with the volunteer in the local post office, all have begun using online facilities for information and interaction with the planning department. This results in a two way benefit – the professionals have a more convenient way of engaging with the local authority, and the local authority reduces the number of enquiries it has to deal with over the phone/in person. It also shows the value of a community member in disseminating the resources available from the local authority website. Undoubtedly the architects were aware of a local authority website, but did not consider that it was useful for their professional activities. This also demonstrates the lack of effective communication through mass media. Even with a high degree of eGovernment promotion in national and local press, none of these people considered using it until they had spoken with someone from their community.

The volunteer in St. Breward, possibly helped a result of his already central location in the village post office, has become know as the local knowledge resource for all things related to the local authority. If he can not come up with an immediate source for information or an answer to an enquiry, certain members of the community got quite disappointed!

A couple of other cases also demonstrate the value of the project as a community resource, rather than simply an outreach to local government services.

One of the volunteers from North Hill was asked if he could use the internet to find a cheaper source for a medical product an enquirer used regularly and for which she was paying too much. The enquirer was paying around £3.70 for a pack of 5 and used 1 a week. A search discovered she could buy 10 packs with 8 in a pack for around £24.00 including delivery. While this is a trivial result for someone familiar with the Internet and eCommerce, it demonstrates the value of a local contact for Internet resources within a community, especially for those members of the community who do not have internet access or are not knowledgeable about its use. Prior to the availability of the volunteer in the region, the enquirer did not have to confidence or knowledge to use the Internet themselves. However, when they had someone they were comfortable talking to, someone who they could engage with without being embarrassed to ask questions, the achieved a real and personal benefit from the use of the service.

Another very interesting, case occurred in the Coads Green area. A running joke in the area is that the only thing you can buy in Coads Green is a tractor, the only shop being a tractor shop. However, recently a couple of residents decided to set up a more traditional shop for the village. The Coads Green volunteer has been active with the residents in using both local authority and other online resources to source information, grants, assistance etc and as a result they have created a business plan for the shop. This case is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the potential for both the service and also local eGovernment in general. It provides a means for people to do things for their communities without having to travel considerable distances to find out information, resources, etc. in order to be able to encourage local regeneration.

3.1.3 *Reflecting Upon the Experiences in the First Year*

By the end of the year, when the majority of technical problems had been resolved, five of the eight volunteers were engaged within their communities and delivering the Community Information Line “vision” in some way. When examining these results the project must be considered a success. What is more difficult though, is to quantify this success:

- **Typical enquirer:** There was no typical enquirer, they were wide ranging, from young people who are fully conversant with Internet technologies but like idea of engaging with their local authority but needed information about *what* is available, to the elderly, with no Internet experience who need to be shown *how* to engage, and *learn* about the potential of such services.
- **Typical enquiry:** Again impossible to specify a typical enquiry, they were wide ranging and went far beyond the boundaries of the local authority web site. The only thing that was “typical” was that there was always a specific need to be addressed, rather than to satisfy curiosity.
- **Number of enquiries:** While the logging of some face to face enquiries enabled a small measurement to be taken (one of the volunteers in North Hill had 50 face to face enquiries between March and July 2005), the majority of communication has existed as a means to promote awareness and encourage individuals to find information themselves. As such, a single enquiry to a volunteer could result in many uses of the local authority online services.

While quantitative data is difficult to draw from the project, qualitative results have clearly demonstrated that as a means of engaging the community with both local eGovernment, and more generally with the potential for the Internet and its use within communities, the project is undeniably successful and provides a number of outcomes that deserve further dissemination.

3.1.3.1 *Why did it not work in certain instances?*

There were three locations across the region where the Community Information Line project did not have much impact. These were in Boscastle (1), Lancells (3) and St. Merryn (7). In considering why the project didn't engage with the community in these locations, there are two issues which need to be taken into account.

In the case of Boscastle, the flood in August 2004 (BBC 2004) resulted in a high council presence in the region for a long time afterward. People within the community were able to interact with their local authority face to face and had no need to interact online.

In the other two locations, the method of engagement was somewhat passive from the volunteers – while adverts were placed in local newspapers and newsletters, there was little attempt to actively promote the project further. The issue of the use of mass media or passive interactions to engage people with the concept of eGovernment has already been discussed. In essence, the volunteers in this region were simply taking the “traditional” model of engagement with regard to local eGovernment (which could be described as “here it is, use it if you like”) and had similar outcomes as a result.

3.1.3.2 *Models of Engagement*

If we conclude from this study that passive and mass communicative methods of dissemination failed to work, we must also examine the successful models. We can identify three successful approaches to engagement:

- **Direct assistance:** The volunteer either visits the customer in their home, or invited them to a mutually agreed location, and uses their own ICT equipment to carry out the request for them. The customer can see the benefits of the technology without personally having the required knowledge to carry out the service request.

- **Promotion of awareness:** the volunteer deals with the enquiry as a human to human interaction, informing the customer about how they can locate the service or information they require. The customer then uses their own knowledge/ICT equipment to locate and use it.
- **Engagement through other information sources:** We have discussed, in section 4.2.2, that in order to realise the benefits of local eGovernment, a customer has to have a specific need. Very few people will see the potential from simply browsing the services. The promotion of awareness model only works if people have the requisite knowledge and equipment to locate online resources themselves, and the direct assistance model only works if the customer has an information requirement. Therefore, for people who are not aren't aware of, or have the knowledge of and equipment to exploit, the potential of the Internet as an information resource, it is unlikely they would ever engage with local eGovernment. One volunteer used their equipment and connectivity to not only provide an information resource for the community, but as a demonstrator for Internet usage. Involvement with the North Hill village hall provided a location to hold local history events that engaged members of the community with the potential of the Internet. Once people gained enthusiasm for the use of online resources, there started to become interested in its use for local government. It would seem, anecdotally, that local history is a particularly useful subject for engagement. This is reflected in the findings of another eInnovations project, the Community Heritage Store in Norfolk (Community Heritage Store 2005).

However, in all of these models, it is not simply a case of recruiting someone within a community and if they are active in their attempts to engage, they will be successful. Engagement generally happens on a human to human level, whether that is as an introduction to technical assistance, or simply as an information resource to direct a customer. The five successes in the project happened due to the volunteers all having social networks that existed prior to the project, that could be used to informally disseminate information about the service prior to fully engaging on specific issues. This is a very important thing to consider if the approach used for Community Information Line is replicated in any other locations.

3.1.3.3 *Technical Issues*

It was very apparent from early on in the project that a solid technical foundation is crucial in successfully engaging citizens with local eGovernment. Technical problems at the start of the project almost caused the project to come to a premature end; the lessons learned from this project are far reaching.

Firstly, at a human level, negative technical experiences are one of the largest problems in failing to engage citizens with the concept of eGovernment. In order to become part of the mainstream or, put another way, an accepted channel for service delivery, Government has to engage with more than the technologically aware. Those who do not already have the technical skills to be able to locate services themselves are already disadvantaged compared to those that do. This digital divide means that they perceive themselves to be in a vulnerable position, which results in anxiety when met with the technologies. Poor technical experiences provide such people with an excuse not to try the service again. This theory was observed from a number of volunteers – people who tried the service and met technical problems felt it was a waste of time, and did not return to try the service again.

3.1.3.4 *The Future of Community Information Line*

A wider ranging, and potential more serious issue, comes from appropriate connectivity in tin rural locations. The project was viewed as a way to bring the potential of the Internet to remote, isolated locations and allow them to engage with local government without having to travel to do it. However, the connectivity problems that hampered the rural locations show that a satisfactory the technical infrastructure is still not available in some of these places.

While broadband coverage is comprehensive, rural and remote locations still have problems achieving ADSL connectivity, and mobile coverage does not provide a useful alternative. If ICT is going to be successful at addressing the needs of the isolated, the removal of these technical issues is essential. Without appropriate connectivity that can be reached by the whole of the country, the eGovernment vision of the Internet for all cannot be realised and issues of engagement with local government services are pointless.

3.1.4 *Consideration of the Project and DoI Theory*

The start of this paper considered the theory of Diffusion of Innovations and its application to local eGovernment. In particular, we identified four aspects of diffusion that were difficult to identify with the context of local eGovernment:

- Communication channels
- Nature of fit
- Social structure and norms
- Change agents

Prior to concluding the evaluation of the project, we can consider how the Community Information Line addresses these aspects. One of the initial problems identified with regard to eGovernment was the complexity of the “system” boundary. If the authority was trying to connect with users across the region, they were actually trying to engage with a large number of independent systems, bound only by geographical location. The project broke this large system into small sub-systems, and provided a local interface within each sub-system. More specifically, we can consider each of the aspects identified above in terms of the project:

- **Communication channels:** We have strong evidence to conclude that mass media, and other passive forms of communication; do not work well when trying to disseminate the potential of eGovernment. The volunteers provided an interpersonal communication channel within the system to provide an information source about its potential, which, once in place, was a strong channel for dissemination.
- **Nature of fit:** By decomposing the region, placing a volunteer within the sub systems and ensuring the volunteer is aware of the nature of the sub-system (or community) in which they exist. Therefore, there was greater potential to working within the system and demonstrate nature of fit for local eGovernment within the community.
- **Social structure and norms:** Similarly, through the use of a member of the community who is already aware of social structures and norms, the potential for dissemination is increased.
- **Change agents:** Most importantly, the volunteers act as change agents within their community. They can communicate the benefits of the new technology to their community using channels that are acceptable to the community.

4 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

While the evidence presented in this paper represents the analysis of a successful pilot study examining the issues of face to face engagement with regard to eGovernment, it is acknowledged that there are limitations to the generalisation of the work, namely:

- **Study locale:** The study took place in a single local authority area, a particularly rural area with a sparse population. It would be very interesting to see whether such an approach would have an impact in different regions, in particular an urban setting.
- **Technical issues within the project:** The first half of the project was beset with technical problems that hampered efforts to engage with communities. When we return to the second year of the project, it will be interesting to measure the level of engagement that has occurred in a full 12 month cycle.

In addition to limitation, the study raises a number of questions that merit further study:

- **Measuring Local eGovernment success:** When can a Local eGovernment initiative be considered a success? While it might be easy to simply try to quantify this with take-up measurements, it is more complex to truly measure an effective engagement – anecdotally, Local Government officers have stated that *any* engagement is valuable, as it reduced the load placed on other communication channels for service provision. However, from the citizen perspective, the measurement of success is more complex. Longitudinal study is required to understand eGovernment engagement as it moves from a novel approach to service delivery toward an accepted and expected communication channel.
- **Gender issues:** One aspect of facilitation not explored within this study is the different approaches adopted by male and female champions. This is something that will be returned to in further study.
- **Anti-change agents:** An issue mentioned in the literature review, but not examined in depth through the study was the role of change-opposed individuals, and also those with apathy toward the innovation. There was certainly evidence of both within this project, and the concept is also one that will be returned to with further study.
- **Mass communication of Local eGovernment:** While this project presents a very people focussed approach it is acknowledged that this approach is constrained to communities where “champions” are placed. Engagement outside of these communities relies on other forms of communication. This study hypothesises that traditional mass media (in this case radio and newspapers) is not an effective method of communication. Therefore, more study is needed to identify effective channels.

5 CONCLUSIONS

At face value we can consider the Community Information Line to be a success for both the local authority and citizens within North Cornwall. For the local authority, they have identified a number of individuals who act as engagers in a way that would be impossible from a central position. For citizens in the region they have demonstrated technologies in a user friendly way so as to show the unquestionable benefits of ICT and eGovernment in improving the citizen/local authority interface.

From a more theoretical perspective, the project can be show to address concepts within Diffusion of Innovations theory and address problems that could not be addressed from a central location.

In addition to findings directly addressing the aims of the project, there are a couple of interesting issues that emerge from this evaluation:

- The concept of engagement goes beyond engaging with eGovernment. If eGovernment strategies are to be successful, there level of engagement should not simply target service provision, but address the digital divide and engaging with core ICT skills for those who would consider themselves to be disadvantaged in today’s society.
- There is massive value in social capital within communities – if local authorities can engage with, and use, such resources, there is great potential in addressing the continuing “them and us” that can be pervasive within local authorities and their “customers”

Finally, most importantly, engagement of local eGovernment will not happen at a solely technical level, it has to happen at a sociotechnical and human level. The technology is simply a means of service provision.

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