An Exploratory Evaluation of UK Local e-Government From an Accountability Perspective

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Abstract: This paper provides an initial exploration of the relationship between electronic service delivery and public accountability. Specifically, it investigates public accountability for the implementation of electronic local government. Based on empirical research with council officers and elected members, it proposes a initial evaluation framework for local e-Government accountability. It examines the practice of e-Government accountability using this framework.

1. Introduction

The opening years of the new millennium have been a period of rapid change in the UK public sector. Long-standing democratic structures have been re-engineered. The internal departments (often criticised as information 'silos') and service delivery processes have been consolidated and re-organised. Previous under-investment in information and communication technology (ICT) is being addressed (Beynon-Davies and Williams, 2003).

The agenda for this change was set out in the Modernising Government White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999). Two of the key objectives of this modernisation were to:

- make public administration more citizen-centred;
- improve the transparency of government, making it more accountable to its stakeholders.

Electronic service delivery occupies a significant role in the modernisation programme. Public sector organisations are currently investing heavily in new ICT to meet the government target of 100% of services being available on-line via the Internet by December 2005.

In this article, we explore the relationship between these three aspects of the modernisation of government: electronic service delivery, public accountability and a citizen-centred view of public service. Specifically, we set out to investigate the issue of public accountability for the implementation of digital local government service delivery.

The paper is organised as follows. Firstly, we review the literature covering public accountability, citizen-centred service delivery and e-Government evaluation. This discussion straddles several disciplines: public administration, politics and information systems. We then outline the methods used to gather the empirical evidence for this research. Finally, we present the initial findings from interviews with a sample of local authorities, and draw some conclusions about accountability for the implementation of e-Government.

2. The notion of public accountability

The government modernisation programme aims to make local public services more transparent and accountable. But what is meant by 'public accountability'? At its most basic, it can be said to be a relationship between two parties, in which one party, the steward, is held to account for their performance by a second party, the principal (Kelly, 2003; Boyne et al, 2002). The steward may be obliged to give an account to certain parties which have power over it. This power is exhibited by the setting of performance objectives and measures and by applying sanctions when performance targets are not met. Sanctions take several forms, for example withdrawal of funding or, in the more extreme case, replacing the steward by another service provider. The steward may additionally feel accountable to other stakeholders who have an interest in its activities, but lack formal power over it (Boyne et al, 2002). These stakeholders may include the customers of the service (Lawton,

McKevitt and Millar, 2000), local businesses and voluntary organisations (Boyne et al, 2002). However, the customers of the service, in this case, members of the public, may not be equipped to scrutinise the activities of their local council (Kelly, 2003). Boyne et al (2002) query the quality of the information made available to external stakeholders. More fundamentally, do these parties have similar values and are they in agreement over the objectives to be achieved and the measures of service delivery to employed (Fowles, 1993)? Service delivery may be measured against the overall outcomes expected from the policy implementation, such as democratic renewal, or the more precise output targets, such as 100% electronic service delivery by Christmas 2005 (Mather, 2003).

Meijer (2003) distinguishes between internal and external accountability. Internal accountability exists within the bureaucracy of the organisation. The Service Head in a local authority, for example, is answerable to the Executive of the council. Furthermore, public sector officers are regulated by the code of conduct of their professional bodies. External accountability is ensured through political and legal structures. There are numerous external stakeholders to whom the council is responsible (Wisniewski and Stewart, 2004).

Nevertheless, public sector accountability continues to be a problematic issue. There remains the underlying debate over the applicability of private sector practices to public administration as typified by the New Public Management agenda (Griffin, Foster and Halpin, 2004). The separation of service definition from service delivery has replaced professional discretion and accountability within the local authority by external management by objectives set and monitored by central government agencies (Fowles, 1993). The monitoring mechanisms that accompany this division of responsibilities, according to Mather (2003), have developed into a costly and resource-consuming 'snoopocracy', tilting the emphasis of service activity towards target achievement rather than service improvement (Gray and Jenkins, 2004). A further complication is introduced by joined-up public service delivery. This often includes a network of public and private organisations (Horrocks and Bellamy, 1997). According to Ling (2002), this joined-up working is typified by public-private partnerships, the blurring of boundaries between functional areas and less hierarchical relationships between organisations. As a result, structures may be merged, budgets shared and joint teams formed from the partner organisations (Cabinet Office, 2000). These issues all make it more complex to identify those aspects of service delivery for which each individual partner is responsible (Fowles, 1993).

Whilst accountability has long been considered an important aspect of democratic society (Bowerman et al, 2002), the Local Government Act 2000 made changes to the democratic structure of councils in order to improve their public accountability. Under this Act, all councils in England and Wales were required to replace the committee system of decision-making by one of three new arrangements: a cabinet with a leader, a directly elected mayor with a cabinet or a directly elected mayor with a council manager. This new executive is responsible for policy implementation and service delivery. All other elected members of the council are members of scrutiny committees, with the responsibility to publicly scrutinise the decisions made by the executive. One aim of this legislation is to encourage improved public consultation and participation in council decision making (ODPM, 2004a)

3. Citizen-centred service delivery

New Public Management (NPM) brings some of the philosophy of the private sector into public administration. This is illustrated by changing organisational structures. Councils are establishing Customer Services Departments to amalgamate the front office operations from disparate functional services. One council has gone further and replaced the Chief Executive post by a Managing Director (DMBC, 2004). There is a continuing debate as to whether private sector values should be reflected in public sector dealings with citizens. It has been argued that NPM regards members of the public solely as service customers (Finger and Pecaud, 2003). Others criticise this restricted viewpoint. They argue that the citizen fulfils a complex set of roles in its

relationship with government (Beynon-Davies and Williams, 2003). Indeed, it might be considered that one role occupied by the citizen is as owner of the government service (Stahl and Butler, 2003).

Individual citizens are members of a wider community. Barnes et al (2003) identify three community groups to which members of the public may belong: locality-based; community of interest; community of identity (e.g. members of an ethnic group).

4. Evaluation of the e-Government programme

The e-Government initiative in the UK is now entering year four of a five-year programme, with attention now turning to evaluation of the programme. Most studies to date have concentrated on measuring maturity in electronic service provision, either by proposing stages of growth models or by examining web-based service delivery. Latterly, there has also been some interest in evaluating the involvement of key stakeholders and initial consideration of the costs and benefits of ICT-based change in public administration. Table 1 provides summarises this evaluation activity.

Table 1: The focus of evaluation on e-Government

Focus of evaluation	Levels of government	References
Evaluation of e-Government stages of growth: Four stages of e-Government maturity	Federal, state and local agencies	Layne and Lee (2002)
Fifth stage added representing participative democracy	All levels	Moon (2002)
Evaluation of the barriers at each stage of growth	All levels	Moon (2002)
Evaluation of electronic service delivery via the Internet: The website as an intermediary in service provision	Local authority	Griffin and Halpin (2002)
Website content, management and website style design	Local authority	Criado and Ramilo (2003)
Evaluation of the integration of IT strategy and use of Internet technologies	District council	Phythian and Taylor (2001)
Evaluation of implementation strategies	Unitary authority	Beynon-Davies and Williams (2003)
Evaluation of stakeholder involvement: The e-champion leading the e-Government programme	Local authority	Foster and Griffin (2003)
The need for e-Government hybrids	All levels	Heeks (2002)
Evaluation of the costs and benefits of e-Government IS value in public administration	All levels	Bannister (2002)
Benefits/disbenefits arising from the Information Society	All levels	Bannister and Remenyi (2003)

In this paper, we take a different stance, based on the concept of accountability, and explore ways in which the success of the e-Government programme may be externally scrutinised.

5. Methodology of the study

This exploratory study aims to determine the factors involved in holding councils to account for their progress on the introduction of e-Government. To achieve

this, interviews were held with council elected members and officers responsible for both e-Government management and the transparency and public accountability of policy implementation.

Seventy-seven English councils were selected from the index of local authority web sites compiled by Tagish Consulting (www.tagish.co.uk), following the practice of previous studies that have used this as the sampling frame (Griffin and Halpin, 2002; Horrocks, 1998). The web sites of these councils were searched to find contact details for the Scrutiny Manager or other officer with a similar title. It was possible to locate an email address for sixty-one of these councils. A short questionnaire was developed and trialled by an elected member serving on the scrutiny commission at one of the sample councils. Following minor amendments this was sent to the nominated councils, achieving an overall response rate of sixteen percent. This response is similar to that achieved in other, similar email-based surveys (Griffin, Foster and Halpin, 2004). Table 2 shows the composition of the survey and the responses achieved for each type of council. The content of the questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

Table 2: Composition of the survey

Type of council	Sample size	Number of respondents (response rate)
Metropolitan borough	24	8 (33%)
London borough	16	1 (6%)
District council	10	1 (10%)
County council	8	0
Unitary council	3	0
TOTAL	61	10 (16%)

Semi-structured interviews were held at six local authorities. These were all metropolitan borough councils. This tier of English authorities has unitary responsibility for all local government functions in a metropolitan area. There are thrity-six metropolitan borough councils in total in England. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and a half. (Appendix B provides a list of the issues discussed in the interviews). Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees comprised of personnel with strategic, tactical and operational responsibilities in their council. They included key stakeholders in the topic being studied: the Chief Executive

and the e-Government Manager (as representatives of the Executive arm of the Council); the Elected Member and Scrutiny Manager (as representatives of the Scrutiny arm of the Council). The roles of the participants are shown in Table 3. In addition, a public meeting of a council scrutiny commission was attended at which e-Government was discussed.

Table 3: Participants in the interview sessions

	Role	Number interviewed
Elected member	Chair of Scrutiny Commission	1
Officer	Chief Executive Head of Scrutiny Principal Scrutiny Officer e-Government Manager Accountant and e-Government project manager	1 2 2 2 1

The interviews were supplemented by document analysis to provide an insight into the scrutiny of e-Government. A number of reports were collected in preparation for, and during, the interview sessions. These included:

- The Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statements for each Council

- The report of an Inquiry into Implementing Electronic Government

- Notes of Scrutiny Board investigation meetings

- ICT Manager's report to the Scrutiny Board investigation team

- Chief Customer Services Officer's report to the Scrutiny Board investigation team

- Scrutiny Board report on developing customer-focused council services, in which aspects of e-Government were considered

- Minutes of scrutiny board meetings, open to the public, at which e-Government was discussed

6. A framework for evaluating e-Government accountability

A review of the literature on public accountability has identified a number of significant issues. These issues are listed in Table 4 and we have grouped them into

five components which form the basis of the evaluation framework employed in this study (Figure 1).

These components are:
- The principal stakeholders involved with examining e-Government performance
- The processes of scrutinising the e-government agenda
- Sanctions that are applied for unsatisfactory performance
- The impact of partnership funding and working and joint service delivery
- The impact of politics and power relationships on e-Government and scrutiny

Table 4: Public accountability issues

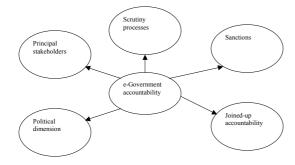| Component	Issues examined in the literature	References
Principal stakeholders	Accountability to the general public is an essential element of a democracy	Bowerman et al (2002)
	Need to focus on results that are important to the public	Page (2004)
	Performance information needs of key stakeholders	Wisnieski and Stewardt (2004)
Scrutiny processes	Pressures to adopt benchmarking for accountability purposes	Bowerman et al (2002)
	Professional independence and external scrutiny	Allmendinger , Tewdwr-Jones and Morphet (2003)
	Questions the current balance between resources allocated for checking performance and resources allocated to provide the service	Gray and Jenkins (2004)
	The effect of ICT on accountability processes	Meijer (2001)
Sanctions	Difficulties associated with measuring public sector performance and results	Noordegraaf and Abma (2003)
	Inadequacy of the local election as the mechanism for public accountability	Kelly (2003)
Joined-up accountability	Accountability challenges resulting from new forms of inter-agency collaboration	Ryan and Walsh (2004); Page (2004)
Political dimension	Dimensions of power exhibited in joint public consultation forums	Barnes et al (2003)

Figure 1: e-Government accountability evaluation framework

7. Findings of the pilot study

7.1 Principal stakeholders

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked their opinion as to which external parties should play a part in holding their council to account for e-Government progress. The results are presented in Table 5. Local residents emerged as the stakeholder that they felt should have the most significant involvement in scrutinising the implementation of electronic service delivery by their councils.

The public meetings at which e-Government has been scrutinised have not attracted public attendance. However, there has been little public interest in scrutiny activity generally. As noted by one scrutiny adviser: "I have to be honest. We are disappointed with the amount of contact that we get from members of the public. It is very rare that we get responses in any way."

The interviewees stressed the other mechanisms for disseminating scrutiny information and ways in which the public are influencing investigations. Local newspapers are sending reporters to some open meetings, perhaps with an interest in observing a conflict between the executive, comprising of the majority party, and a scrutiny committee, staffed by the opposition parties. Some councils also reported that some members of the public are corresponding with scrutiny committees over particular issues.

Table 5: Survey ranking of key stakeholders

Stakeholder	Ranking
Local residents	1
Local businesses	2
District Audit	3
e-Government partners	3
Central government	5

7.2 Scrutiny processes

The scrutiny committees in two-thirds of the survey councils have already examined e-Government progress. Furthermore, this is not seen as a one-off activity. All of these authorities have plans to review e-Government again in the future, with sixty-six percent of them intending to review the programme biannually. The main reasons given by those who had not yet investigated e-Government were higher priority matters to investigate and waiting for further e-Government progress to be achieved.

In one of the councils, the inquiry had been initiated following elected members' complaints over their own email facilities and computer hardware. This had been widened to review the entire e-Government programme. In another

council, electronic service delivery had been considered as part of an overall investigation into customer services. In a third council, it was the IEG statement itself that had sparked scrutiny interest. This council had submitted an IEG statement that failed to meet the target set by the government. The scrutiny committee were eager to explore the reasons for not achieving the targets and the likely impact in terms of government sanctions.

Two councils mentioned the importance of benchmarking to internal scrutiny processes. During their investigations visits had been made to other local authorities to observe their use of ICTs in service delivery. Elected members also took the opportunity to inspect the websites of other councils to experience, at first hand, their rollout of the e-Government programme. As one scrutiny official complained:

> *"There is a strong element of comparing. [Elected members] get on the computer and say 'look at X's site, look at what Y is doing on their site. Because it is accessible, you can actually see on your screen what other authorities can do. Officers don't get so excited. What X has done is window-dressing. You know the back-office stuff isn't necessarily as good as the front-office stuff".*

The Chief Executive of one council broadened the discussion of benchmarking to consider the availability of information to enable members of the public to make comparisons. He explained:

> *"It would be very hard for people to make comparisons between one authority and another.. ..For a comparison to be made, they would also need to take into account how much you'd spent… It would be very difficult for the public to have full knowledge."*

The e-Government Manager in this council emphasised the need for consistency in measuring e-Government progress across authorities. She felt that benchmarking was problematic for any stakeholder to

undertake, given the lack of standardisation and definition in some areas. The e-Government Manager in another Council, which had already achieved the 100% electronic service delivery target, provided evidence to support this proposition:

> *"We like to think we are reasonably well advanced. Exactly how far is hard to say, really. Part of the way we hit the target was someone splattering electronic forms all over the place and some of them weren't particularly sophisticated. "*

7.3 Sanctions

Central government uses the annual IEG statement to measure councils' progress towards the target of 100% electronic service delivery. The Government has assembled a set of sanctions, of increasing severity, for poor performance. All councils making satisfactory progress on e-Government are awarded a capital grant for the next financial year. For instance, a grant of £350,000 is payable in 2004/05 (ODPM, 2004b). Councils submitting an unsatisfactory IEG statement are required to make changes and resubmit it. In the event that this version of the statement still does not comply with government expectations, the final sanction is to withhold the following year's allocation of funds. As mentioned above, one of the councils visited in this study was required to reconsider their plans, make changes and resubmit the IEG statement. These changes included new e-Government staffing appointments and the reallocation of priorities in the ICT services future work plan.

The ultimate sanction available to the public is the ballot box. If sufficient residents are concerned about council performance, they have the power to remove the controlling party. However, according to one interviewee, "that is such an obscure link to democracy because e-Government is essentially a managerial process. It is not a political process; failure to achieve is not a political failure."

The activity of the scrutiny process, per se, however is unlikely to rally significant public interest in most issues. The interviewees all felt that e-Government was not a burning issue for the public. They would not be interested in the outputs of the e-Government programme, shrouded, as one interviewee commented, in the "dryness of the IEG priorities and all the techie stuff". The public are more likely to be concerned about the physical outcomes resulting from electronic service delivery, such as emptied bins, that do impact on residents' lives.

7.4 Joined-up accountability

Better collaboration between tiers of government, and more integrated working arrangements with other agencies, has been championed by governments throughout the last century as practices to achieve the goals of public policy (Flinders, 2002). In the e-Government programme, the use of ICT-enabled processes provides new opportunities for joined-up working: sharing information between distinct organisations, combining in joint teams to share information, building a joint website, etc. Of course, this change in approach to public administration represents 'a paradigm change in public policy' (Richards, 2002, p 61) and will take considerable political will to achieve (Griffin, Foster and Halpin, 2004). The sample councils in this study, as evidenced by their IEG statements, have initiated, and are developing, areas of joined-up working with a range of partners: other councils, other local public agencies, the voluntary sector and private sector companies.
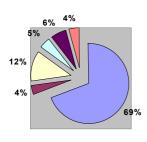
The resources summary in the IEG statement identifies the sources of funds for developing and implementing electronic government throughout the five-year programme. In Figure 2 the sources of funds for the sample councils have been summarised. As this shows, sixty-nine percent of the e-Government cost is being met by councils' own budgets. The remaining thirty-one percent is being financed by money provided by the government (IEG allocation, e-Government national projects, etc), partnerships with other public agencies and private companies.

Are the councils accountable for the entirety of resource being used to deliver electronic service? The chief executive in one council, when asked this question in a public scrutiny committee meeting, gave the impression that he merely felt

accountable for internal council funding. The scrutiny adviser for another council shared this viewpoint: "I don't know about the executive, but I think the scrutiny board would only feel strongly about the money provided by the Council itself."

The Chief Executive in another council disagreed with this narrow view of accountability, stating: "Clearly, anything that we are a party to, we are all jointly and severely liable for." However, in practice, he recognised that there were significant practical obstacles to achieving accountability for partnership initiatives, for example:

- The growing number of partnerships to monitor. His council was a member of thirty-three formal partnerships and more than one hundred informal partnerships.

- The cost of being responsible and accountable for partnerships. It was his opinion that this fragmentation of service delivery was particularly expensive to audit.

- The resource capacity needed for setting up governance and accountability arrangements for all partnership ventures.
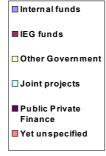

Figure 2: Sample councils' sources of e-Government funding

7.5 Political dimensions

Politics and power relationships were apparent in several of the interviews.

7.5.1 Dependence on the executive for continuity of e-Government scrutiny:

The interviews were held towards the end of the municipal year and scrutiny planning was on hold until after the June local elections. The principal scrutiny officer at one authority emphasised the significance of this:

"We will be in a state of flux after this month. The scrutiny boards aren't necessarily permanent fixtures. This has an impact on how we take forward the IEG scrutiny agenda. The Chair is very keen, but he is not entirely convinced the Board will remain the same. He is very keen that IEG scrutiny doesn't drop off."

7.5.2 Balance of power between the executive and the scrutiny committee:

Are the two parties perceived as equals? The executive, as the decision-making body, appears to wield more power. In one of the councils, the respondent felt they were striving to achieve parity between the two. In another council, the head of scrutiny highlighted the role of key executive personnel in scrutiny decision-making:

"We've been satisfied with the IEG group that the council has put in place, with the deputy leader being personally involved. When he got concerned things weren't happening in certain areas, he got the chief executive involved, along with the director of resources and other strategic directors. So we've generally been satisfied that there has been a sufficient handle to secure this."

One of the respondents highlighted the political manoeuvring that can take place between the completion of an investigation and the publication of the scrutiny committee's findings. Although the committee had identified shortcomings in the exploitation of ICT in support of a particular service, several recommendations in this area were omitted from the final report. These actions had been sacrificed to ensure the retention of critical actions in other areas covered in the investigation.

8. Discussion

The modernisation programme, of which e-Government and the new democratic structures are constituent parts, aims to

achieve democratic renewal and improved public accountability. But there is still much progress to make in this respect. All participants in this study reported difficulties in engaging members of the public in the scrutiny of their e-Government progress. They all felt that e-Government is not the sort of issue that will capture the attention of the general public. However, it might be of interest to certain 'communities of interest' (Barnes et al, 2003). Some of the councils are introducing facilities on their websites for members of such communities to register and be pro-actively informed when the issue is due to be investigated in the future. Although a home address is taken during registration, it is usually possible for non-residents to engage in the scrutiny of e-Government in the locality.

It has been argued that public sector performance is difficult to measure (Noordegraaf and Abma, 2003). The e-Government programme typifies this. Several issues have been observed in this study that tend to complicate the measurement process. These include: monitoring the activity of numerous individual project teams with the potential for different measurement practices, summarising their performance in a manner that fulfils the needs of all significant stakeholders, likely divergent definitions between councils as to the scope and boundary of their e-Government programme. The perceived interest of the public in the outcomes from e-Government, rather than its more measurable outputs, is another contributory factor to this problem.

The scrutiny processes investigated in this study took some account of benchmarking and comparison with similar councils. This practise has been adopted for a number of years by other public services, particularly in the health and education services. These have tended to be compulsory benchmarking initiatives initiated by government agencies as distinguished from voluntary benchmarking that might be set up by councils themselves (Bowerman et al, 2002). None of the participant councils provided benchmarking data to assist members of the public to scrutinise their e-government progress. However some comparative information is collected and was observed in the private working papers of one scrutiny committee.

The range of sanctions open to members of the public if they are unhappy with e-Government progress is limited. We distinguish between the formative and summative sanctions which were identified during this study. A formative sanction might be to make a complaint to an elected member. One interviewee used the term 'embarrassment sanctions' in this context. Other formative sanctions that might embarrass the council service provider include writing to the newspaper or protesting on the town hall steps. A summative sanction might be to vote the majority party out of office. Formative action can be taken immediately. The feedback of summative action is delayed, as it is usually only available at four yearly intervals. Boyne et al (2002) make the distinction between obligatory and discretionary principals. The public clearly fall into the latter category.

Stakeholder theory suggests that the key stakeholders to consider during the implementation of strategy are those with high interest and high power over its outcomes (Johnson and Scholes, 2002). The sample councils considered members of the public to be the main party that should hold them to account for electronic service implementation. It is surprising that central government, which demonstrates its interest in e-Government, by obliging councils to make an annual progress report, and its power, through IEG grant allocation and funding for projects of national interest, does not rate more highly. Is it realistic to consider a discretionary principal to have more significance that the obligatory principal, the government, which has the power to name and shame and to withhold future e-Government funds? The current mantra of 'citizen-centricity' may have influenced the respondents somewhat. Do members of the public exhibit the desire to scrutinise e-government activity? One participant chief executive felt that residents would lack interest in what he perceived to be 'back-office stuff, predominantly.' The evidence gathered in this study suggests that the public are more likely to be interested in customer-facing services rather than the outputs from e-Government. However, in one authority, the lack of visibility and presence of this "back-office" function was overcome by deploying kiosks around the borough, as a symbol of the e-

Government programme. Nevertheless, the councils surveyed consider local residents to be the principal stakeholder to whom they are accountable. If this is the case, it makes the role of the Scrutiny Committee, representing the public, more significant and necessary to ensure that councils are held to account for their e-Government progress. It is encouraging that two-thirds of the councils in this survey are subjecting this programme to scrutiny at least once a year by the relevant scrutiny committee.

The Local e-Government Strategy (ODPM, 2002) recommended that councils should consider how they could work with the full range of public and private organisations in the development of electronic services. This study has indicated the extent to which this joint working is contributing to the resourcing of e-Government. It has also highlighted the potential for the partner organisations to take a narrower view of public accountability for the use of these funds. Respondents pointed out that internal accountability was achieved by project teams engaged in joined-up service development reporting to a joint board comprising of representatives from the partner organisations. They were less clear as to how their own scrutiny committees contributed to the external accountability for all joined-up working. Page (2004) identifies several reasons why difficulties occur in holding partner organisations to account, for instance, there may be disagreement between the partners over which outcomes to measure; underperforming partners might be less willing to be measured by others; partnership governance needs to be clarified to determine who is accountable to whom in the joined-up service delivery.

Finally, it is interesting to examine the response rates of the different types of authority. Why should there be a significantly higher return of completed questionnaires from metropolitan councils than the other types of council? It is suggested that, in district councils, with a small e-Government programme and limited staff resources dedicated to a single area of policy, the low response is understandable. This is not the case for county councils. The reason could be geographical. The majority of the respondent councils were based in the same region as the team conducting this

study. However, it was observed during investigation of the scrutiny committee pages of council websites, that many of the county councils appeared to have given less priority to the development of this aspect of democratic service. This is worthy of further investigation in the next phase of this study.

9. Conclusions

This paper presents the findings of the initial phase of the study of the relationship between public accountability and electronic service delivery by UK local authorities.

The councils consulted in this research consider local residents to be the principal stakeholder to whom they are accountable for e-government progress. Following Kelly (2003), we suggest that members of the public may not be equipped to scrutinise these activities. It is questionable as to whether they have the desire to scrutinise e-Government implementation specifically. It is unlikely that local residents will be interested in the same set of performance data as the Government (Wisnieski and Stewart, 2004) and, as we have found in this study, there are complications associated with measuring e-Government progress (Noordegraaf and Abma, 2003).

In accountability theory, the principal partially legitimises their power over the steward of the service by applying sanctions (Boyne et al, 2002). The present study clearly illustrates the lack of sanctions available to discretionary principals such as the public. This principal is limited, in the main, to utilising what one interviewee described as 'embarrassment sanctions'.

One of the participants in this study questioned whether delivering accountability on a wider scale would undermine the role of those who are elected. This issue has not been specifically addressed in this research, but it does indicate the political dimension of accountability. The relationship between the Council Executive (the steward) and the Scrutiny Committee (representing the local Principal) is a complex arrangement. For example, the principal both has power over the steward but, at the same time, as this study has shown, is dependent upon

the steward for continued participation in the process.

Joined-up e-government presents new challenges for public accountability (Page, 2004). It would appear that partner accountability silos are being erected, preventing members of joint arrangements from being fully held to account for all the e-government activity in which they participate. Some councils have the aspiration of being jointly and severally accountable for joined-up working. Few are actively scrutinising all joined-up service delivery.

Finally, we should point out some of the limitations of this study. This is an exploratory study, based upon a small sample of local authorities with interviews conducted with a single tier of local government. The framework needs testing against a larger empirical base over a longer timescale. Other researchers might also wish to specifically examine, in greater detail, individual components of the evaluation framework, with the intent of finding 'deviant cases' that refute the findings presented here (Silverman, 2005).

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Appendix A: The content of the questionnaire

- Has your scrutiny committee examined your council's e-Government programme?
- What is your opinion of the following statements?
    - "I feel that beneficial changes have been made to the e-Government programme as a result of our scrutiny of it."
    - "We need more information than is currently received by the scrutiny committee to enable us to investigate the e-Government programme"
    - "The online services, introduced as part of our e-Government programme, have improved the information available for external parties to scrutinise the activities of the council".
    - "The online services we shall be introducing, as part of our e-Government programme, have improved the information available for external parties to scrutinise the activities of the council".
- In your opinion, what are the reasons for e-Government not being examined by your scrutiny committee (higher priority matters to investigate, perceived lack of interest by key stakeholders, lack of information to investigate, adequate scrutiny is already undertaken by the executive, waiting for further e-Government progress, other)
- How frequently does your scrutiny committee expect to review e-Government progress (no plans, occasionally, annually, more frequently)
- In which ways are your council's cabinet held to account for e-Government progress?
- Which external parties do you feel should play a part in holding your council to account for e-Government progress – in order of significance? (central government, audit commission, local residents, local businesses, e-Government partners, others).

Appendix B: Issues discussed in the interviews

- Brief outline of the interviewee's current role and career history
- What does the term 'public accountability' mean to you?
- What sort of information was made available to the Council scrutiny committee when it last investigated the e-Government programme?
- You have identified local residents, businesses and e-Government partners as having a role in holding your council to account for e-Government.
    - How is this undertaken?
    - What sort of information is currently made available to these parties concerning progress/delivery?
    - In what ways might these parties apply sanctions if relevant outputs/outcomes aren't achieved?
    - Do you feel that these parties have a common understanding of the objectives of this programme and would they be readily able to access information about the objectives?
- Councils' e-Government programmes often involves joint working with other public and private organisations.
    - Do you feel accountable for the complete programme detailed in the resource statement in the Implementing Electronic Government 3 return?
    - Does your scrutiny committee consider all elements of the programme, including these joint arrangements?
    - Is someone within the council accountable for the spending of all the money listed in the resource section of the IEG return?
- Are the minutes of the scrutiny committee investigation into e-Government available on your website?
- In Education league tables and inspection reports are published to

help the public to evaluate local provision. Would this type of information help in making your council accountable for e-Government to the local population?

- It is often said that the ultimate (and maybe only) sanction available to the public is the ballot box.
    - o Do you feel that e-Government is the sort of issue that could influence the local election here?
    - o In what other ways can local residents feedback their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with e-Government progress?
- How do you feel that ICT systems are contributing to public accountability in your council?

- o How is your scrutiny committee supported by ICT?
- o How is ICT/e-Government assisting external parties to hold you to account?
- o How would external parties find out about progress/performance against earlier council decisions?
- o How would they discover the underlying policy objectives for centrally-initiated policy implementation?
- o Does your ICT support a member of the public in attempting to influence/change policy implementation?

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