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Social housing, social care and electronic service delivery

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

This report describes the results of research conducted with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into the introduction of electronic service delivery (ESD) in the social housing, social care and housing-related support sectors. It is concerned with the new ways in which the commissioners and providers of these services are planning to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to administer and deliver services.

At the time the research was conducted, electronic service delivery (ESD) and egovernment (shorthand for 'electronic government') had only reached an early stage of development. The research was therefore focused on testing attitudes within organisations and among people using services towards the practicality and potential of a series of *ideas* rather than on an evaluation of a series of services that were up and running.

The research was designed to examine three main questions. These were:

- To what extent has electronic service delivery been developed in social housing and social care services?

- What are the attitudes of service users and service providers to electronic service delivery?

- What are the potential benefits and costs of electronic service delivery in the fields of social care and social housing?

The first chapter explains the concepts of ESD and egovernment. As this chapter shows, ESD is largely concerned with the *administration* of services and how that can be handled electronically. The chapter describes how the concepts of ESD and egovernment arose, discusses how ESD might work in practice and then outlines the context of its introduction.

The second chapter examines the results of a postal survey conducted in England during 2000. This survey asked local authorities, a sample of registered social landlords (RSLs, formerly known as housing associations) and a sample of voluntary sector organisations about the introduction of ESD, focusing particularly on Internet-based services. The results of the survey also informed the selection of case study organisations.

The third chapter contains the results of staff interviews in the case study organisations. These agencies included a range of local authorities, RSLs and voluntary sector organisations. The agencies ranged in size from major urban local authorities and national-level RSLs through to individual projects, such as foyers and sheltered housing schemes. These organisations worked in a wide variety of situations, including suburban, rural and inner-city areas in the North East, the North West, the Midlands, the South East and London.

Chapter 4 reports on the results of a series of focus groups held with people using social care, social housing and housing-related support services. Ten focus groups were conducted with older people, vulnerable young people and people with mental health problems. In total, 58 people using a range of services were interviewed about their views on ESD.

The final chapter draws together the various findings and comes to some conclusions about ESD and how it might work. The research raises a number of questions that should be the concern of organisations seeking to introduce ESD, particularly in relation to the views of service users on this new form of service delivery.

1 Electronic service delivery and electronic government

Introduction

This chapter is intended as a brief introduction to the concept of electronic service delivery (ESD). It also examines some of the possible obstacles to the development of ESD and attempts to set the 'model' of ESD in a wider policy context.

What is electronic service delivery?

Electronic service delivery is something of a misnomer. Clearly, it is not possible to produce 'electronic' versions of services that are physically delivered by care staff, housing-related support workers, housing managers or other professionals. Thus, while the term suggests the physical delivery of services, what is actually being talked about is the *computerisation of the administration of services*.

There is no intention that this computerisation will be wholesale. It is evident that some processes – a good example would be community care assessments, which require careful judgement in response to often dissimilar sets of needs – are too complex to be automated. Nevertheless, there is the intention to wholly automate simpler exchanges, such as applying for a parking sticker to use disabled parking spaces. It is intended that the more complex procedures, like a community care assessment, can also be enhanced and streamlined by ESD techniques.

By the mid-1990s, whole tiers of administration in large private sector companies had been replaced by computer networks. Computerised systems, such as call centres, computerised telephone call handling systems

and websites, gave 24-hour access for customers and greatly reduced overheads. Computer networks were used across every aspect of business, replacing large numbers of administrative staff, reducing costs and putting significant numbers of people out of work (Castells, 1996, 2000).

In the US, Federal Government looked at what was happening and saw a way to reduce the cost of public administration (Gore, 1993; Dawes *et al.*, 1999). The idea of egovernment, which was also being heavily promoted by gigantic North American hardware and software companies, soon took hold across the rest of the economically developed world. Besides England, national strategies are in place in Scotland and Wales (*Digital Scotland* and the *Wales Information Society Initiative*) and in Australia (Johnson, 1999), Singapore, Canada, Germany, France and throughout the EU (Chatrie and Wraight, 2000).

Real interest in ESD began under the last Conservative Government, culminating with the 1996 Green Paper *government.direct* (HM Government 1996). This paper centred on reducing administrative costs, but it was eclipsed by the 1997 election defeat. It soon became clear, however, that New Labour was, if anything, more interested in egovernment than the preceding administration and that ESD would be central to its policies. At the beginning of 2000, the Office of the E-Envoy, which reports directly to the Prime Minister, was established to oversee and drive forward egovernment (http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/).

In the *Modernising Government* White Paper (HM Government, 1999) the Government set a

target that all services, with exceptions for operational and policy reasons, should be 'available electronically' by 2008. The Prime Minister then announced in March 2000 that this date should be advanced to 2005. The targets applied both to central and local government (LGA and DETR, 2001). Policy statements talked about changes in *administration*, rather than changes in the *nature* of services provided:

> *By 2005, when the 100% target has been achieved, all government services will be accessible electronically. Of course public services will still be delivered by teachers, social workers, doctors and nurses, fire fighters, police and other frontline staff, but much of the organisation of services and initial public contact can be handled electronically. So processes which currently depend largely on the exchange of physical documents or attendance at a specific place will be very widely augmented and in many cases replaced by the application of new technology. The core processes that typify government interactions with citizens and businesses – giving and receiving money, giving and receiving information, regulation and procurement – will be able to be done electronically.* (Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 11)

While previous large-scale projects had often met with only partial success (Hudson, 1999, 2000), ESD was portrayed as a new departure. Electronic service delivery was not one big project that could go wrong, it was a statement of strategic intent:

> *… a strategic direction for the way in which the public sector will transform itself by implementing business models which exploit the possibilities of new technology.* (Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 5)

A central idea in US work on the development of ESD had been the concept of the single point of access or *portal* for government services (DiCaterino and Pardo, 1996; Dawes *et al.*, 1999). In the model, the services are listed in one place, a website or similar environment, which is easy to access and easy to use. Services were to be presented according to which part of, or event in, a person's life they applied to. So, for example, all the services related to moving house, the birth of a child, or experiencing crime were all found together, regardless of which agency provided them. This idea has been copied and there is already a 'portal' for central government in England at http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/

> *People should not need to understand how government is organised, or to know which department or agency does what, or whether a function is exercised by central or local government. We need a strategy that will provide this – by helping departments and agencies, central and local government, cooperate in partnerships that will offer their services in ways that make sense to the customer.*
> (Cabinet Office, 2000, p. 1)

Broad targets for English local authorities appeared early in 2001. These outlined the level of ESD that authorities would be expected to have reached by 2005 and announced £25 million in additional funding for 'pathfinder' authorities that had 'a track record and capacity for further innovation in this area'. An additional, £350 million had been identified in the 2000 Spending Review for Local Government Online (LGA and DETR, 2001).

One final aspect of ESD is important to note and this is the relationship between the

statutory, voluntary and private sectors that Government envisages. Electronic service delivery was not only intended to involve borrowing concepts and buying technology from the private sector, but was also meant to involve close working relationships. Further, ESD was seen as linked to the wider policy objective of increasing public–private partnerships and voluntary sector and private sector involvement in the delivery of public services. Electronic service delivery of government services could eventually happen via private or voluntary sector portals, in cooperation and competition with one another. As one policy report noted:

> *Electronic delivery of government services offers enormous new opportunities for the private and voluntary sectors. There should be a new, mixed economy in the electronic delivery of government services in which the public, private and voluntary sectors can all play a role on the basis that what matters is what works rather than who does it.* (Cabinet Office/PIU, 2000)

What will electronic service delivery look like?

Broadly speaking, models of computerised business administration and direct selling through ecommerce and telephone call centres underpin the concept of ESD. Electronic service delivery starts with a network. Communication then has to be established between 'customers',[1] and this network. Communication between the customer and network happens in two ways (Figure 1).

The first of the two ways in which customers interact with the network is referred to as 'assisted contact'. Here, the network is made available to counter staff, project staff, community workers and staff in call centres.

Figure 1 A basic ESD model
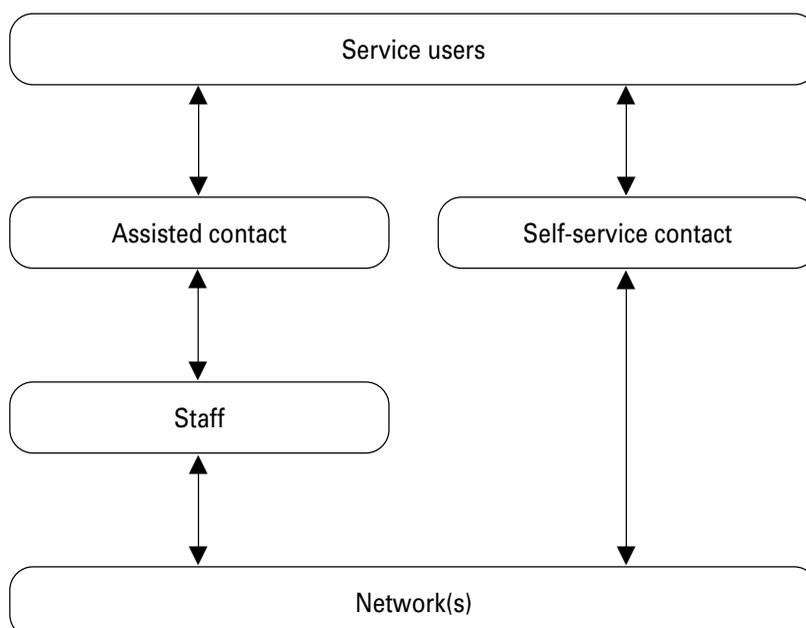
These staff, whether they are mobile staff working in the community, behind a counter or answering a telephone, will use the network in order to provide the services that the customers need. Since these staff interact with the network on the customers' behalf, or help them to use the network, they can be described as providing 'assisted contact' with the network.

Second, the service user can be given the choice to interact *directly* with the network for themselves, through the medium of a website or similar interactive system. Loader has described this as a 'welfare direct' or as a *'self-service'* welfare system (Loader, 1998).

In a basic ESD model (Figure 1), all the needs of service users are met through the same network. Some people are helped by staff who use the network with them or on their behalf (assisted contact) and other people use the network directly for themselves, through a website or other interactive service (self-service).

Self-service is anticipated to be best for *relatively simple* exchanges. Self-service systems would not be able to handle assessments or determinations that required complex interpretation or professional judgement (Johnson, 1999). Equally, just as people now sometimes need help in completing a form, some would need help in filling in a network's version of a form and so could not necessarily always use even relatively simple self-service facilities.

Assisted contact would be employed whenever more complex procedures were required, or whenever someone needed assistance in arranging services because they were not able to do it for themselves. Someone would be able to get 'assisted contact' through a range of different routes, including:

- telephone call centres

- area offices

- one-stop shops

- mobile staff working in the community

- written queries (letter, fax or email).

It is anticipated that outside agencies, for example Citizens' Advice Bureaux, would also be able to access the network to provide support for people who were not able or willing to engage directly with it.

Where possible, the intention would be to maximise the number of self-service contacts. This is necessary to produce the significant savings that are anticipated to result from ESD. This focus means that Internet-based and other interactive services (such as computerised interactive telephone-based systems) are at the *core* of ESD strategy.

The European Union has produced a typology of the roles of egovernment. The three roles that have been identified are:

- information services

- communication services

- transaction services.

The first of these refers to the provision of information to service users and to the exchange of information between agencies. The second refers to the use of ESD as a means of communication between customers and providers and between organisations. The third role is that of transactions, which basically means the administration of services – processes, like applying for a service or arranging a service – that could, in whole or in part, be handled electronically (European Union, 1999).

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Electronic service delivery in context

The digital revolution offers huge opportunities to improve public services by better tailoring them to the needs of individual citizens, who increasingly want to be able to choose when, where and how they interact with government. Many public services will be delivered far more efficiently and effectively than through traditional channels. However, groups that use government services most heavily are often those that currently have the lowest levels of access to electronic service delivery channels.
(Cabinet Office/PIU, 2000, p. 6)

At the time of writing, three doubts about the practicalities of ESD have been raised. In summary, these are that:

- there is a 'digital divide' that will prohibit access for many poorer households and individuals

- political and administrative barriers will be raised within central and local government that will undermine the extent to which ESD can be introduced, just as they undermined previous large-scale ICT projects

- ICTs cannot deliver what is envisaged.

There is also a fourth doubt about egovernment and ESD that is concerned not with the implementation but with the overall rationale of the policy. This doubt centres on the view that ESD is much more concerned with a reduction in expenditure than with improved quality of services. This concern is coupled with another that ESD might be used to increase the control that is exercised over the lives of people on low incomes who are using government services.

At the time of writing, most people with low incomes cannot access the Internet from home. In early 2001, 9.2 million UK households (37 per cent of all households) had Internet access, but among the poorest tenth of households this figure fell to 7 per cent (ONS, June 2001). Regional disparities also reflected average incomes. While 38 per cent of households in the South East had access, this compared with only 25 per cent in the North East (ONS, June, 2001). Across the world, the biggest determinant of Internet access was income (Castells, 1996; Holderness, 1998).

Government has made ESD part of its wider UK Online Strategy that is designed to promote universal Internet access, education in ICTs and ebusiness. However, while the strategy includes initiatives like low-cost computers for low-income families, the 'universal access' promised is only equivalent to the access that people have to Post Offices (via public access terminals or kiosks), not an Internet connection in every home (Hudson, 1999, 2000; Office of the E-Envoy, 2000).

The problem of access was not simply about income, however. People whose first language was not English, people with visual impairments, some disabled people and anyone with poor literacy would also find it difficult to use what is essentially an English language text-based medium that almost always requires the use of a keyboard and mouse.

There was also evidence that a popular willingness to use ESD, even if access improved, could not simply be assumed. In April 2001, 45 per cent of people who had not used the Internet reported that they had not done so

because of a 'lack of interest'. Nineteen per cent reported that they had 'no need' to use it. Twenty per cent reported that they had not used it because they had not got access to it and 19 per cent reported that they did not have the confidence or skills to use it (ONS, June 2001). Only 16 per cent of people over 65 had used the Internet, compared to 69 per cent of 25–44 year olds and 82 per cent of 16–24 year olds. Women (46 per cent) were also still less likely than men (57 per cent) to have used the Internet, although the gender gap appeared to be closing (ONS, June 2001).

Administrative and political barriers within central and local government were seen as major obstacles by some commentators. Administrative resistance – departments seeking to protect their sphere of influence and power by retaining existing structures – had undermined major IT projects in the past and, it was argued, could do so again (Hudson, 1999, 2000; Corrigan and Joyce, 2000; Silcock, 2001). However, these potential obstacles were to a considerable extent anticipated by Government. Decisions on egovernment are being taken at the highest levels, with the E-Envoy reporting directly to the Prime Minister (Holliday, 2001). Although this does not, of course, mean coordination and control will be easy, this is different from past situations in which the departments designed and controlled their own IT projects. As ESD is a universal strategy, the momentum may also prove difficult to resist.

Technical obstacles tended to be seen by Government as temporary issues that would be overcome. Nevertheless, at the time the research was conducted, ESD remained quite undeveloped and for the most part was a series of plans and theories rather than working

systems. Alternatives to still relatively expensive PC-based access to the Internet had not been widely adopted and even PC-based access from home often remained very slow, as 'broadband'[2] connections were expensive. Work had, however, started on developing new broadband networks.

The final set of doubts about ESD centre not on its viability, but on the motivations behind it. Government is clear that ESD is about improving the accessibility and quality of services. Many advantages are emphasised, like 24-hour access and a hugely simplified way of finding services, for example through services arranged around 'life events' rather than having to find which department or agency provides which service.

The arguments criticising the motivations behind ESD are highly complex, drawing heavily on sociological and economic theory (Fitzpatrick, 2000, 2001), but, while it is an oversimplification and perhaps something of an injustice to do so, they can be reduced to two main points. First, that the main motivation behind ESD is to reduce public expenditure. This is in the context of another major change to the welfare state, which is also aimed at reducing expenditure, the ever increasing emphasis on ensuring anyone who can be in paid work is in paid work (Stepney *et al.*, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 2001).

Second, these commentators have worries that computerisation could be used to 'control' people claiming benefits or using government services. For example, computers could theoretically be used to exercise detailed control over individuals, compelling them to work in a certain job or behave in certain ways (Fitzpatrick, 2000). This raises questions about

what is sometimes called the 'regulation' of socially and economically marginalised people such as social housing tenants and many users of community care services. This is a charge that Government would not accept and it would argue that, if ESD were used in a regulatory or controlling way at all, it would only be to detect and prevent fraud.

The remainder of this report examines the early implementation of ESD and the questions about both its viability and the intentions behind it are revisited in the concluding chapter.

2 Electronic service delivery and the Internet: a survey

Introduction

The first stage of the research was a survey of commissioners and providers of social housing, housing-related support and social care. The survey was conducted in the late summer and early autumn of 2000 and focused on the use of the Internet for ESD.

While ESD will not be simply Internet based, a decision was made that the survey should concentrate on this aspect of ESD. This decision was made for three reasons:

- A comprehensive survey covering all aspects of potential ESD development would have been unwieldy and was anticipated to have reduced the response rate.

- As Internet-based ESD was at the heart of central government policy towards egovernment, it was seen as logical to focus mainly on that.

- The central role of Internet-based ESD was felt to be the best single indicator of progress towards ESD. An agency that was not making progress was unlikely to be making significant general progress.

The survey was sent to samples of registered social landlords (RSLs)[1] and voluntary sector and charitable agencies. Organisations working with older people, people with a mental health problem or vulnerable young people were approached. This was because the later interviews with service users were undertaken with people in these groups (Chapter 4). These groups were selected because they would give the research team access to people with widely ranging needs, characteristics and experiences, while at the same time allowing the research to be undertaken on a realistic scale. The survey was also sent to every local authority in England, most of which were major commissioners and providers of services.

The chapter first describes the organisations that responded to the survey and their Internet use. The remainder of the chapter examines the use of websites to provide information about services, facilitate communication and undertake transactions. The chapter concludes with a separate discussion on the accessibility of the services that the organisations were providing.

The organisations that responded to the survey

Local authorities
All 388 English local authorities were included in the survey and a 45 per cent response rate was achieved. As shown in Table 1, there was a good response from the smaller district councils, which tended to be rural, and some of the largest urban authorities (London and the metropolitan districts). The survey was less representative of the large rural county councils and English shires (which tend to be suburban conurbations or smaller cities).

Registered social landlords
The researchers asked 167 RSLs working with older people, people with mental health problems and vulnerable young people[2] to participate in the survey and 87 responded (52 per cent). The responding RSLs ranged in size

from those with 33 homes to those with over 26,000, and collectively managed over 409,000 homes (Table 2). Almost all the RSLs also provided housing-related support services (85 per cent) and most were also general needs landlords[3] (87 per cent).

Charities

Many charities and voluntary sector organisations are very small. At the time the research was conducted, most would have had difficulty in finding the resources to fund a website. A decision was therefore taken to focus

Table 1 Responding local authorities

Type	Responses	As percentage of all authorities in England	Functions
District council	120	50	Housing* (non-unitary)
County council	9	26	Community care** (non-unitary)
English shire[a]	16	34	Housing* and community care (unitary)
Metropolitan district	20	56	Housing* and community care (unitary)
London boroughs	11	33	Housing* and community care (unitary)
All	176	45	–

*Some authorities are no longer social landlords having transferred their stock to RSLs.
** i.e. social services.
[a]English shires are sometimes called 'new unitary' authorities.

Source: postal survey.

Table 2 Responding RSLs

Stock size	Number	Percentage of responding RSLs	Areas of operation
Support only*	13	15	London and urban
Less than 2,500 units	28	33	Mainly urban
2,501–5,000 units	16	19	Urban and national[a]
More than 5,000 units	28	33	London and national
Total	85 **	100	–

*RSLs providing hostels and floating support only, rather than actual housing.
**Stock information was not available for two RSLs.
[a]i.e. England.

Source: postal survey.

on fairly large organisations working with older people, people with mental health problems and vulnerable young people. Fifty-three of 157 charities approached replied (34 per cent). Collectively, the charities provided a wider range of services than the RSLs, ranging from advice and information through to care homes (Table 3).

Using ICTs

The bulk of local authorities (91 per cent) and charities (85 per cent) had websites, but the RSLs were less likely to have a website (52 per cent). Practically every organisation without a website was in the process of developing one. The local authorities tended to have been running websites longer than the other organisations.

Many organisations had worked closely with the private sector in the development of their websites (Table 4). Overall, local authorities

Table 3 Responding charities

Types of support provided	Percentage of responding charities
Education	36
Information	60
Training	64
Rehabilitation	38
Daycare	47
Resettlement	34
Advice	49
Advocacy	36
Financial support	28
Personal care	28
Care (i.e. registered care)	51
Counselling	26

Source: postal survey.

were the most likely to have developed websites for themselves (in house), although half (49 per cent) had contracted out the process in whole or in part. Overall, half the local authorities, nearly two-thirds of the RSLs and two-thirds of the charities had used private companies in the development of their websites.

Progress in developing electronic service delivery

The survey took place several months after the appearance of the 1999 White Paper *Modernising Government* (HM Government, 1999) and four months after the appearance of *egovernment: A strategic framework for public services in the Information Age* in April 2000 (Cabinet Office, 2000).

Chapter 1 described the basic model of ESD, which can be described as having three interlacing roles:

- information

- communication

- transactions.

The first of these refers to the provision of information to customers[4] and to the exchange of information between agencies. The second refers to the use of ESD as a means of communication between customers and service providers and commissioners (and communication between organisations). The third role is that of transactions, the exchange of information between customers and the service provider, which would include applying for services or arranging access to services using ESD.

Providing information on services

While 92 per cent of local authorities provided some information on services on their websites it was often not very detailed. Tourist information was more widely available on local authority websites than information on eligibility for services, how to apply for services or how to complain about services (Figure 2).

Seventy-two per cent of local authorities provided links to other organisations on their websites (Figure 2). Districts were less likely (66 per cent) than the other authorities to do this, with metropolitan districts (95 per cent) and counties (90 per cent) being the most likely to provide links to related websites.

The local authorities who were social landlords[5] were *unlikely* to have detailed information about their housing services on their

Table 4 How websites had been developed

Agencies	In house	Jointly with private company	Wholly by private company	Base
LAs	73 (47%)	51 (33%)	27 (17%)	157 (100%)*
RSLs	18 (40%)	14 (31%)	12 (27%)	45 (100%)*
Charities	15 (34%)	20 (46%)	9 (20%)	44 (100%)

*Six LAs and one RSL reported that they did not know how their site had been developed.

Source: postal survey.

Figure 2 Types of information provided by local authorities on their websites(percentage of all authorities with a website)
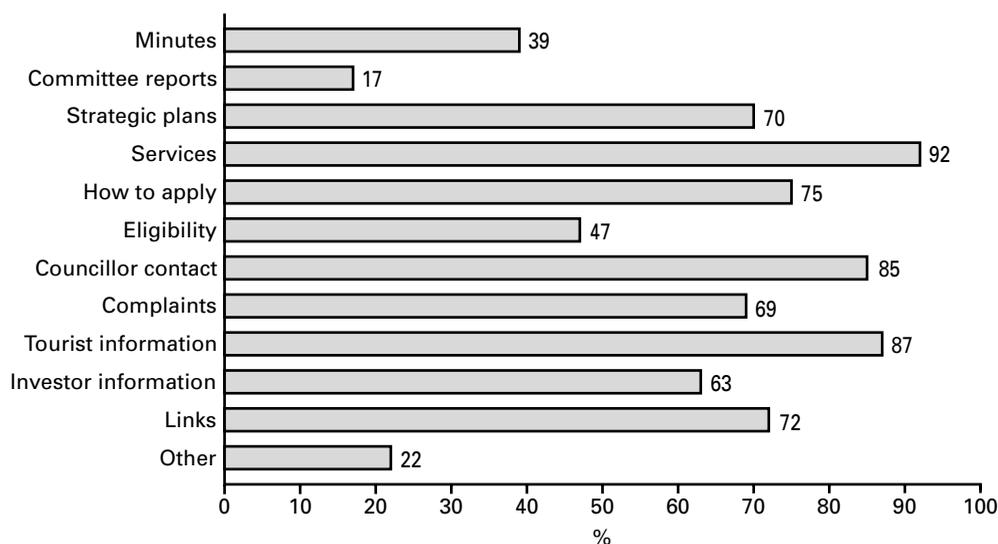
Base: 157.
Source: postal survey.

websites. Only four local authorities reported they had 'detailed' information on their housing services. While another fifth (19 per cent) reported 'quite detailed' information on their social housing services, the majority described the information they provided as 'basic' (60 per cent). Almost a fifth of local housing authorities had no information about their housing services on their website (17 per cent).

Among the 53 social services authorities commissioning and providing community care services, quite a low proportion had detailed information on their websites. Fifteen per cent of authorities described their website information on social services as 'detailed' and a further 23 per cent as 'quite detailed'. Again, the majority (58 per cent) described the information about community care on their websites as 'basic' and two authorities had no information about community care services on their websites.

While the majority of local authority websites predated the Modernising Government programme and the survey itself took place only months after the main policies had been launched, these findings were quite surprising in some ways. These were highly computerised organisations that had often been running websites for several years, but they had generally not been using those websites as a means by which they disseminated anything beyond often very basic information about their services.

As Figure 3 shows, while RSLs provided information about their services (80 per cent), they also tended not to include very much detail on their websites. For example, information on eligibility or how to complain about services was often absent. The RSLs were also less likely than local authorities to be providing links to other organisations (42 per cent, Figure 3). Only just under one-fifth of RSLs were providing information about other service providers on their websites (17 per cent), compared to 58 per cent of local authorities. Information on how the RSL worked and what its plans were, such as

Figure 3 Types of information provided by RSLs on their websites (percentage of all RSLs with websites)

Category	%
Management board papers	
Annual reports	51
Strategic plans	27
Services	80
How to apply	67
Eligibility	33
Complaints	31
Links	42
Other	36
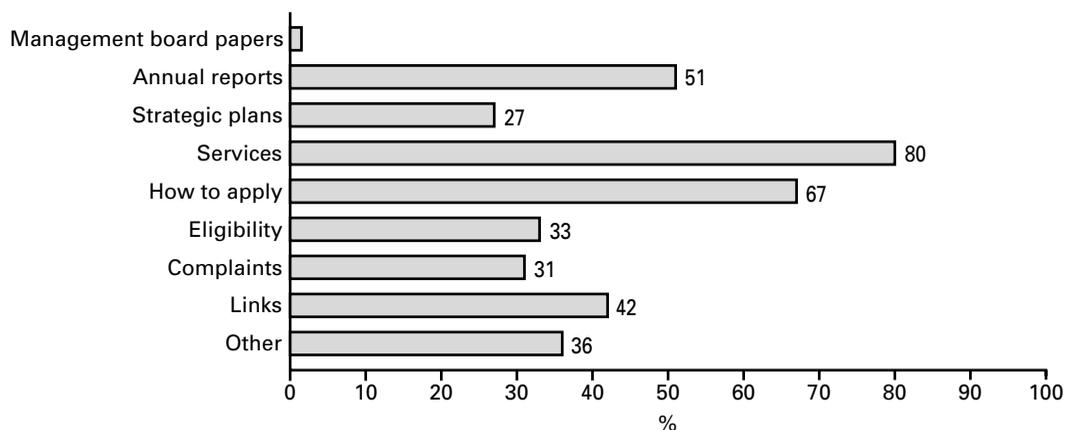
Base: 44.
Source: postal survey.

management board papers, strategic plans and annual reports, was quite often not available on RSL websites.

Like the local housing authorities, the RSLs were not likely to be providing detailed information about their housing services on their websites. None of the RSLs provided 'detailed information' on their services, although 28 per cent reported that they provided 'quite detailed' information. Half the RSLs reported providing only basic information and almost a quarter (23 per cent) were providing no information about their social housing services.

These findings were largely as anticipated, given that, when the survey was conducted, the RSL sector was not under the same pressure to develop ESD as local authorities. There was also limited evidence suggesting some uncertainty about the accessibility and viability of the technology. Among some of the RSLs that did not have websites at the time of the survey,

there were several who reported that this technology was inaccessible to many of their tenants and service users (nevertheless almost all were developing websites):

> *... young single homeless would not generally have access. Currently use more appropriate methods eg Youth clubs, Youth Advocacy, Social Services etc. to distribute association literature.*

> *Only 3% of our tenants have access to the Internet. We are running IT training for tenants. While we expect this percentage to increase at present it doesn't make a web site for tenants cost effective.*

(Written comments from RSLs on the survey forms)

Charities tended to have service information on their websites, but were quite unlikely to provide details on how their services were assessed, eligibility for services or on complaints (Figure 4). Just under one-third of charities

Figure 4 Types of information provided by charities on their websites (percentage of all charities with a website)
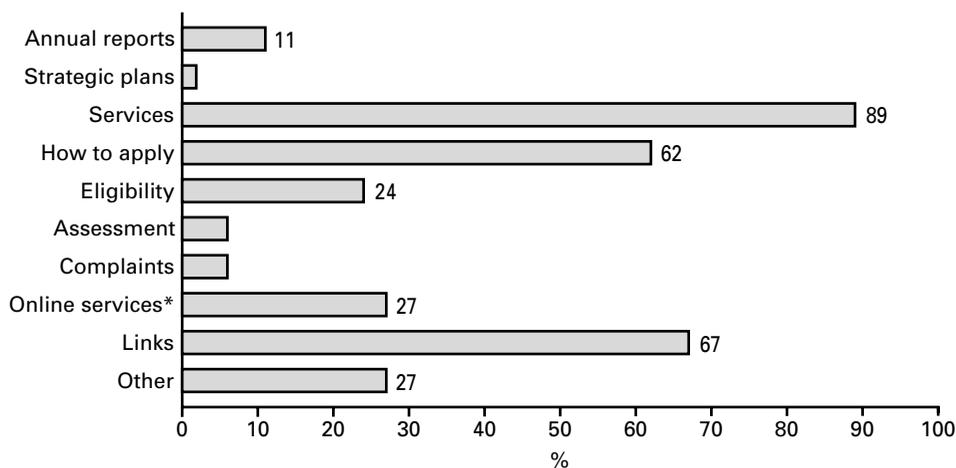
*Online services like advice and information via email

Base: 45.
Source: postal survey.

reported that they provided Internet-based services, such as email-based advice services and information services based on websites. This was not, at that time, an area of activity with which the responding local authorities and RSLs were engaged.

The charities were more likely than local authorities or RSLs to provide detailed information on services on their websites. However, only 14 per cent provided detailed information, while 51 per cent provided quite detailed information and 35 per cent provided basic information.

Communication

Contact details and the facility to email questions were widely available on local authority, RSL and charity sites. Later fieldwork (see Chapter 3) suggested that sometimes these facilities may have been quite basic, for example a single email address for the whole organisation or department. The survey did not ask whether specific members of staff could be contacted. Most of the agencies also provided other contact information on their websites (Table 5).

Transactions

The capacity of websites to handle transactions was expected to be low and this proved to be the case. While ecommerce was a reality in 2000, ESD was still in the developmental stage (Chapter 1). A few very simple transactions were taking place, for example application forms that could be downloaded and either printed off and posted back or attached to an email and returned.

None of the social services departments had the facility to request a community care assessment online, but 44 per cent were thinking of developing one. Some had a facility for people to report problems with social services (44 per cent) and 25 per cent were contemplating developing a facility. A handful of the housing authorities already had their housing application forms online and 43 per cent were considering making them available. While just under one-third had a facility for reporting problems with housing (29 per cent), another 35 per cent were considering developing a facility.

Just one authority claimed to be delivering a housing management service, the facility to

Table 5 Using websites to communicate with service users and potential service users

Agency	Facility to email questions on services	Other contact details*	Base
Local authorities (social services departments)	36 (68%)	48 (91%)	53 (100%)
Local authorities (housing departments)	74 (71%)	86 (83%)	104 (100%)
RSLs	31 (75%)	31 (75%)	41 (100%)
Charities	39 (87%)	45 (100%)	45 (100%)

Percentages are rounded.
*Address, telephone numbers, etc.

Source: postal survey.

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report repairs via an email address, on its website. However, another 42 per cent of housing authorities reported that they were considering developing such services. Larger housing authorities were more likely to be contemplating developing online services.

Almost one-quarter of RSLs with websites (23 per cent) were already providing online housing application forms and/or transfer forms and a further 41 per cent were contemplating doing so. One-third of the RSLs with websites had a facility for people to complain, with another 30 per cent developing one. Five of the RSLs with websites reported that they were delivering actual housing management services online (12 per cent); in all instances, this was the facility to report repairs. Again, larger RSLs (in terms of stock size) were more likely to be using or contemplating using ESD.

Just over half of the charities had online application forms for at least some of their services on their websites (53 per cent). Another 18 per cent were contemplating developing online applications. The charities were less likely to have facilities for reporting problems with services on their website (33 per cent had facilities for reporting problems and 16 per cent were considering developing one).

However, while 29 per cent of charities were providing online services (for example, email-based counselling or information services), there was not great enthusiasm among the other responding charities for ESD. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of charities were neither providing online services nor contemplating developing them.

Future plans for electronic service delivery

Overall, local authorities were the most likely to report that it was 'very important' to expand their use of the Internet (Table 6), with larger authorities tending to be the keenest to do so. Registered social landlords with between 2,500 and 5,000 units of housing were less likely to report that expanding their use of the Internet was very important (38 per cent) than those with more than 5,000 units (57 per cent).

Most of the local authorities saw some potential use for the Internet in increasing ESD (Figure 5). Almost all saw the potential for online applications for services (93 per cent), a role for the Internet as a major source of information (97 per cent) and potential to enhance democracy and the service users' voices. Sixty-three per cent also reported that there was potential to develop online services. While the local authorities were more cautious
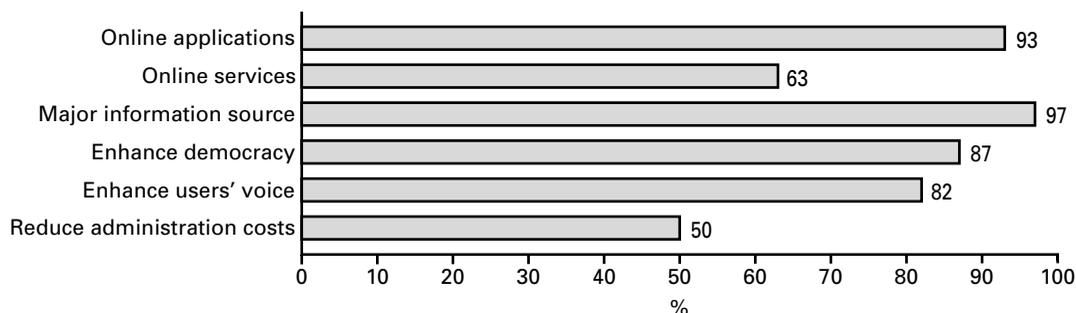
Table 6 Importance of expanding use of the Internet

Type	Very important (%)	Quite important (%)	Unimportant or not important (%)
LAs	74	24	2
RSLs	48	41	11
Charities	50	40	10

Percentages are rounded.

Source: postal survey.

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Figure 5 Potential for future use of the Internet in the view of responding local authorities

Base: 176.
Source: postal survey.

about the capacity of the Internet to reduce administrative costs, half took the view that it would.

Larger unitary authorities, concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas, were the most positive about the potential of ESD to reduce administrative costs. Almost all the English shires (93 per cent) and the majority of metropolitan districts and London boroughs (70 per cent and 73 per cent respectively) saw potential administrative savings resulting from ESD.

Overall, the RSLs were enthusiastic about the potential of the Internet as a major means of providing information (88 per cent), although they were less likely (66 per cent) than local authorities to see a role in enhancing service users' voices. Like the local authorities, they were more hesitant about the potential to deliver services online (56 per cent) or to reduce administrative costs (45 per cent). Nevertheless, 63 per cent of RSLs saw potential in the Internet to 'computerise many of their dealings with the public'. Larger RSLs were more likely to see potential in these areas than smaller RSLs. There was no significant difference between RSLs that

had websites and those without websites on these questions.

The charities also saw potential for the Internet to become a major source of information on their services (94 per cent). They also saw a role in enhancing the voice of service users (66 per cent). However, they were much less likely overall to see a potential role for the Internet in service delivery, with 67 per cent reporting that they did not see *any* potential in this respect. These organisations were also less likely to see potential administrative savings in use of the Internet (42 per cent). The generally more hesitant attitude of the charities was summarised in the finding that 73 per cent of charities did not see any potential in the Internet to 'computerise many of this organisation's dealings with the public'.

The accessibility of websites

Local authorities could have a role in addressing the 'digital divide' in their areas and 40 per cent of the responding authorities provided public access terminals. Urban authorities were more likely than the others to provide terminals (66

per cent of the London boroughs and 70 per cent of metropolitan districts). Among district councils the figure fell to 22 per cent.

The survey results suggested some uncertainty about the accessibility of ESD among those RSLs that had not yet developed websites. However, only a small number of RSLs without websites reported that there was no point in having a website because their tenants would not be able to access it or have the skills to use it. RSLs without websites were most likely to report that their other services had had to take priority over the development of a website (27 per cent).

The charities appeared less convinced about the use of ESD than the other organisations. They were generally not in a position in which they could work towards improving Internet access for their users.

There are also questions around how easy it is for many people to use a largely text-based medium. There is a very large literature on human–computer interaction that falls outside the direct focus of this research, largely because it was undertaken when ESD was for the most part an idea, rather than a set of working systems that could be evaluated.

Nevertheless, some basic questions could be asked about the existing accessibility of websites. The results indicated that there was considerable work to be done in making these websites more accessible (see Table 7).

Less than one-fifth of local authorities had designed their websites following Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines to make sites more accessible to disabled people. A smaller number had made the whole of their website available as text as well as web pages. Given the quite high number of urban authorities responding, which are often areas with relatively large black and minority ethnic populations, it was perhaps surprising that only seven local authorities were providing their website in languages other than English. Charities did not tend to perform any better than the local authorities did on accessibility, while the RSLs were unlikely to have taken any steps to make their websites more accessible.

Table 7 The accessibility of websites

Agency	WAI* compliant	Text only**	Other languages	Base
Local authorities	29 (19%)	20 (13%)	7 (5%)	152 (100%)
RSLs	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	1 (2%)	44 (100%)
Charities	8 (19%)	6 (11%)	2 (5%)	45 (100%)

*The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines that are designed to make websites accessible to disabled people were introduced by the WWW Consortium (www.w3c.org/), which promotes standardisation and accessibility across the Internet.
**Text-only pages make a site more accessible to software like talking browsers used by blind and visually impaired people.

Source: postal survey.

3 Organisations' views of electronic service delivery

Introduction

This chapter examines the views of providers and commissioners of social housing, housing-related support and social care services. A series of face-to-face and group interviews were conducted with representatives of local authorities, registered social landlords (RSLs) and voluntary sector organisations.

There was a particular focus on people and organisations working with older people, people with a mental health problem and vulnerable young people. These groups were selected because they would give the research team access to people with widely ranging needs, characteristics and experiences, while at the same time allowing the research to be undertaken on a realistic scale.

The chapter begins with an overview of the interviews. The second section describes the different roles of the organisations that took part in the fieldwork and how their roles influenced their perceptions of ESD and egovernment. The next section of the chapter examines views on the potential of ESD. The chapter concludes with a discussion of views on obstacles to ESD and its accessibility.

The case study organisations and the interviewees

Thirty people working for 17 organisations were interviewed. Their roles varied from being a manager or worker in an individual project through to being a chief executive of a large organisation. The interviewees included:

- representatives of two *district councils* (one of which provided social housing in a small city, the other being a stock transfer authority[1] in a rural area)

- representatives of a *county council* (responsible for commissioning and providing community care in a largely rural area)

- representatives of two *metropolitan districts* (large urban local authorities with responsibility for commissioning and providing social housing and community care)

- representatives of a *London borough* (with the same responsibilities as the metropolitan districts)

- representatives of a *voluntary sector* organisation providing housing-related support services

- representatives of three *RSLs*, two of which were large organisations (one London based and one national) and one of which was a medium-sized RSL working largely in one conurbation

- representatives of three voluntary sector *umbrella organisations* representing a range of projects working with young people, people with a severe mental illness and disabled people at a national and regional level

- two managers of *sheltered housing schemes* for older people (one in a major city, one in a smaller town)

- the staff of three *foyers*, hostels providing housing, support and help with training and employment to vulnerable young people (two rural and one urban)

- representatives of a *private sector software company* developing ESD websites for a number of local authorities.

The case study organisations were selected by using the postal survey returns. There was a concern to represent as wide a range of organisations as possible at different points in their development of ESD. Organisations of differing sizes, working in urban and rural contexts and within areas of varied economic prosperity were selected. One metropolitan district contacted the researchers independently through the project website and volunteered to participate, and the software company offered to participate when it heard about the research through one of the local authorities it was working with.

The intention of the research team had been to recruit a sample of organisations within four distinct case study areas. This did not prove possible. Initially, considerable difficulties were encountered in getting organisations to participate in the research. These difficulties appeared to have been linked to a perception among some organisations that ESD was unimportant, while others viewed it as an issue they would be considering in 2005 rather than 2001. Following the renewed emphasis on egovernment and ESD from central government after the 2001 election (see Chapter 1), it became much easier to recruit organisations, but by this stage the research was drawing to a close.

The roles of interviewees and their views of electronic service delivery

Front-line staff working in individual projects
Front-line staff and managers emphasised that face-to-face interaction was central to their role. Although the foyers were working with vulnerable young people to help them into employment and the sheltered schemes were aiming to maximise the independence and quality of life of older people, staff in both saw personal contact as at the core of the services they provided.

This emphasis on face-to-face interaction led to an assumption among front-line staff that computers could not be used for service delivery in foyers or sheltered housing. Within sheltered housing, computers were viewed as an administrative tool and perhaps as an alternative means of providing basic information on the scheme. There was also an interest in giving residents access to computers and the Internet to enhance their quality of life. Within two of the foyers, computers were again seen as largely being an administrative tool, while access to them and the Internet was seen as a means by which to enhance the personal development and employment prospects of young people. In one foyer, access to computers and the Internet was viewed with more caution, as there were fears about the content of the Internet and how young people would use it.

Mid-sized organisations
The mid-sized voluntary sector organisation and RSL were both concerned with questions of cost, efficiency and equity in the administration of service delivery, but at the same time did still see service delivery itself as a face-to-face

process. Computers were again seen as an office tool and perhaps as a means of providing information, but not as something that was set to revolutionise the administration of services.

However, the staff from the district councils were more likely to see a major role for computers in service delivery. Although their operations were substantially smaller than those of the larger councils, they were highly computerised and had a good awareness of the ESD agenda. The staff also tended to see service delivery as a process to be administered, rather than as a personal exchange between service providers and service users. In many respects their views were similar to those found in larger organisations.

The three voluntary sector umbrella organisations were quite small in themselves but two represented a large membership made up of individual projects and provider organisations. These organisations tended to view the Internet as a means by which information and guidance could be disseminated to their membership. Two organisations also wanted their website to act as an information resource for service users.

Larger organisations
Staff in larger local authorities and RSLs had similar attitudes and views. Those dealing with ESD tended to be heads of department, chief executives or heads of a major element of administration. These staff often used the language and concepts of business management and it was not uncommon for them to refer to different elements of service provision as 'businesses' and to service users as 'customers'.

The larger organisations working in urban areas also had another thing in common, which was to see their role not simply in terms of

service commissioning and delivery, but also in terms of regeneration and community development. As the chief executive of a large RSL working in London put it:

> *Increasingly we are seeing our role as making sure that people don't just get an affordable, good quality roof over their head, but are actually part of an environment, a neighbourhood, an economic and social structure which helps them have a better life chance.*

This was something that particularly influenced the attitude towards egovernment and ESD in the metropolitan districts and within the London borough. The two metropolitan districts were in the process of launching pilots that would involve providing Internet access to marginalised social housing estates. These pilots aimed to use ESD as part of a wider ICT-based attempt to regenerate areas and stimulate community development through enhanced participation. These pilots were partnerships with the private sector, based around subsidised PCs and interactive digital television (DTV) services.

ICTs were ubiquitous in the larger local authorities (LAs) and RSLs. Most had their own networks (intranets) and also tended to have had websites for several years. For most, there had been a marked tendency towards ever increasing computerisation over the last decade.

Senior management in large organisations also talked openly about the cost of services and the restricted budgets with which they often had to work. Electronic service delivery was always discussed in this context. Attempts to increase cost-effectiveness and improve efficiency were seen as important drivers of ESD and as having been the drivers behind past computerisation.

ESD and egovernment: service providers' and commissioners' views

As described in Chapter 1, the basic concept of ESD focuses on using ICTs in three different ways:

- providing information on services

- allowing communication between service users and providers

- making transactions via ESD (e.g. interactive application forms).

Providing information on services

Staff working in individual foyers and sheltered housing schemes tended to feel that websites with information on their services would be a good idea. However, they tended to see this simply in terms of replicating the printed information that they already provided to inform potential residents about their service. One of the foyers, which had previously lacked access, also saw the Internet as a management tool:

> … *little things like the Foyer Fed are now doing their newsletter online, we're not online, I get the paperwork through the bulletin a week after everyone else and it says 'the first 50 people to email us back get free blah, blah, blah' and I think 'Not again, no please get us into the twenty-first century quick'.* (Manager, foyer A)

Within the mid-sized organisations, the Internet was seen as a tool for attracting investment and as a cost-effective means of recruiting staff. It was not seen as a major means by which information would be provided to service users, because it was presumed they would not have access.

The larger organisations saw a major role for their websites in information provision to service users. However, interviewees often drew attention to what they saw as the inadequacy of their current website in this regard:

> *… it's got some very strange titles across the top, it says things like 'living', the way in which you get to housing is via 'living' and I think if you type in the word 'repairs', I think you get virtually nothing back, or nothing relevant.*
> (Senior officer, London borough)

> *It's very typical, to be fair, of a local government site, in that it's very much about what we do. Certainly, the housing site is targeted at, I suppose, housing anoraks, if you want to know about our good practice this is how we do it. Very little of it is customer facing, very little of it is about accessing the service.*
> (Housing director, metropolitan district A)

There was a feeling across the larger organisations that mistakes had initially been made. Some talked of a 'me too' pattern of behaviour that had led organisations to develop websites because other similar organisations had one. They often reported that little thought had been given to the content of early websites, beyond giving their organisation an Internet presence:

> *You can find out about some ridiculous things … you can't find out how to pay your rent, you can't find out how to order a repair, they're not there, you can find out how many conferences we're running and how great we are at training people and that we've got Beacon status but the word repair isn't even on there.* (Website development manager, housing department, metropolitan district A)

This finding reflected the results of the postal survey, which also suggested that websites often contained little or no information about services (Chapter 2). However, most of the interviewees also reported that they were busy replacing their websites with sites that would have a great deal more ESD-related information (again reflecting the results of the postal survey). Several commented on the information that their new sites should contain and how it should be presented:

> It's got to be simple, it's got to be quick to download, it's got to be up to date ... and we became much more focused on who it's for, instead of having a website for having a website's sake, we thought 'well, who do we actually want to contact on this website and who's likely to be in a position to contact us?'. (Senior manager, medium-sized RSL)

> My approach is very much to think of it as a series of signposts, so that you introduce people to the generality and then, if they want to dig deeper and get more information, then you lead them gently on. People find it easy to get into the system, but once they're in they can find their way round to get the information they want, however detailed or however general.
> (Social services manager, county council)

For one of the larger local authorities, there was a clear strategy in place to start using the website as the main medium for information provision, initially internally and eventually externally:

> It's an information site that is accessible globally and that was important to us ... It is more and more beginning to represent our information

base. Yes, what we now do, some of the things on the website we provide in printed form, for those people who don't have access to digital channels. (Director of housing, metropolitan district B)

Others were more cautious about the capacity of the Web to become the main means of information provision about services. All saw a central role for the Internet and sometimes DTV services in information provision, but usually as one of a range of different means by which information was provided:

> Some people don't like it, some people can't do it, some people haven't got access to it, you need to have alternative possibilities as well. (Social services information officer, county council)

The interviewees from the local authorities and the two larger RSLs also saw information provision as only one of several roles that their website or DTV services would undertake. The Internet and DTV were seen as being as much about communication and transactions with service users, about providing an online *service*, as they were about information provision.

The voluntary sector umbrella organisations were concerned mainly with providing information and guidance to their membership via their websites. However, one of the three also had a role in acting as an information resource for people with a severe mental illness and their carers and another was looking towards developing a similar resource for disabled people. These umbrella organisations' main role was the dissemination of information and the Internet was seen very much as a means to extend the accessibility of the information they produced:

I think our strength is probably our website because the information is up to date and it can be changed so easily if anything does become out of date. And it's obviously cheaper than funding publications. (Officer, umbrella organisation B)

Communication

For the front-line staff, it was difficult to see any particular utility in computer-based communication between themselves and their service users. Communication was seen as part of the personal interaction on which all service delivery was based in sheltered housing and foyers. There was some uncertainty about whether this sort of communication would be a good idea, linked to these views:

> *… our type of service achieves more from face to face, like if you're face to face with clients, rather than, you know, having a sort of helpline or going over to email … often service users can be quite frightened of technology.* (IT manager, voluntary sector organisation)

Among larger organisations, communication was seen as something that was currently underdeveloped. Some criticised their existing websites, which, in one example had just one email address for the whole organisation and, in another, provided email addresses without clear guidance as to which individual should be contacted about which problem or service.

Again, the larger organisations were working on new websites and sometimes DTV services with enhanced communication facilities as part of developing ESD. As part of ESD, communication had three roles:

1   to allow customers to ask questions

2   to allow customers to make requests and order services

3   to allow and facilitate complaints, comments and service user participation.

While the first and third role were seen in terms of simply improving facilities, the second role of communication was seen as embedded in the process of conducting *transactions* rather than as discrete 'communication'. Requests and orders from customers were to be processed through the mechanisms being envisaged to deal with transactions (see following section).

The role of ESD in relation to complaints was seen in quite simple terms, really just as an extension of existing channels.

For some of the local authorities and larger RSLs, online communication was seen as a way in which ESD could enhance service user participation. This was generally linked to regeneration projects involving ICTs, within which ESD was seen both as a means for better service user participation and as a means by which marginalised communities might develop new forms of group interaction that would make them more socially cohesive:

> *Many of our residents are on the Internet themselves and do communicate with us directly as well, we are very pleased that happens … I see it as a future vehicle for greater tenant participation.* (Senior executive, national RSL)

> *In terms of resident empowerment and neighbourhoods, for us it is the next big step … if we want to find ways of linking people locally then the web is one way of actually being able to do that.* (Senior housing manager, London RSL)

The voluntary sector umbrella organisations used their websites mainly for dissemination of information, but one of the three also provided online discussion groups for people with a severe mental illness to share their experiences with one another:

> … it gets some service users who, you know, explain their experiences and ask [for advice from] anybody else who's had similar experiences. (Senior officer, umbrella organisation B)

Transactions

Some front-line staff had an instinctive reaction against what they interpreted as using computers to 'deliver services'. Again, this was because service delivery was seen as being possible only through human interaction:

> I think Internet transactions are OK for buying something, but, when it's a service, when it's a support relationship orientated service, you need some personal contact in there somewhere; I think if you're buying CDs or buying books then that's fine, you get your book, but when it's a service, it has a relationship attached to it, and you can't form that over the Internet. (Worker in foyer B)

Even when ESD was discussed in terms of administration, there was still great hesitancy about its viability among front-line staff. Applications for the three foyers, for example, were not seen as something that could be handled via an online application form; the young people had to be seen and assessed and there were also other considerations. This view was shared by one of the voluntary sector umbrella bodies representing services working with homeless people at a national level:

> I'm a people worker … I need to weigh them up … you could do your application form, but I would even prefer to see them before that, because if it's possible you'd rather they went back home … sometimes you can do good work before they have even filled in their application form. (Worker in foyer B)

> I think that's perhaps a little more sci-fi than this sector is ready for … it's alright when you're buying a product or you're logging onto a training session because the information's there, but to remove the human advice element from housing … I think the idea of suddenly putting even 20 tick boxes; are you (a) miserable,(b) homeless … I'd much rather there were human error rather than computer error in that kind of thing. (Senior officer, umbrella organisation A)

Attitudes in the local authorities and larger organisations were quite different. For most, ESD was firmly part of their agenda and, for it to make sense, it had to extend beyond information and communication and into transactions. Within three larger local authorities, there was a clear intention to develop ESD call centres and websites to handle the bulk of transactions (see Chapter 1).

> We built a system that was based on local access through local offices. That's actually something that's become a bit of a millstone around our necks really and we've moved on now and recognised that something like 80 per cent of our tenants would prefer to do business over the telephone and only see someone face to face when they need to or want to … a few years ago telephone ownership was much lower than it is now, our local work on telephone ownership comes back with a figure of 95 per cent plus … more and more we are seeing poorer people are

having mobiles … I think we will start to move in that direction in other electronic access to services, even in the more disadvantaged communities. (Director of housing, metropolitan district A)

These combinations of call centres and websites were envisaged as integrated systems. As described in Chapter 1, 'assisted contact' would be arranged largely through the call centre, while 'self-service' contact would be handled through the website (or DTV service):

… a call centre wraps up most of what goes through it then and there … The call centre we have for housing has 100 odd scripts [procedures] *for housing advisers to follow with enquiries and deal with them.* (Director of housing, metropolitan district A)

The website will be both an alternative to [the call centre] *and a significant tool for those operating* [the call centre]. *So it will be the key source of information, so, if you are at the front desk and somebody rings in wanting information, then you would go to the Internet site or possibly the intranet site, normally the Internet site … But equally we want to ensure that people don't even have to call in, they can just go to the Internet site … information will be widely and easily available.* (Senior staff member, social services, county council)

All the larger social landlords also envisaged a situation in which housing managers would use mobile devices to communicate with the network and be based in the community rather than an office. Further, several of the larger social landlords were also planning to handle the bulk of transactions around letting housing and organising repairs via ESD:

At the moment we're working on what we think is a quite radical approach to rehousing … they will have to proactively apply for homes that they are interested in … the website will be very interactive, in that they'll just give us a bit of detail about what they want, the areas they want and there will be a database going on in the background of available properties and they will see what's available in the areas that they want, that they are eligible for. So we know they are proactively applying for something they want, like they were trying to buy a car or a washing machine, we're not offering them something which we think they should have. (IT officer, metropolitan district A)

You are going to be able to, he said with all fingers crossed, order a repair. Now there is a big difference between reporting a repair and ordering a repair … with reporting a repair, someone has to phone the tenant back and say 'so you've reported this repair, when can we come and see you?', so we're not really gaining anything … what we want to do is ask them a series of questions about what they want, in simple cases it's only one or two questions, if it's something more complicated it could be five or six, and that everything is OK, in that the computer will check that they've not ordered this five times in the last week or something. They will then be offered an appointment, and pick the appointment they want. (Website development manager, housing department, metropolitan district A)

Some of the local authorities were also starting to think about the potential of ESD to facilitate greater joint working, to provide the 'portals' through which access to a range of services from a range of agencies could be

greatly simplified for the customer/service user (see Chapter 1).

> … it's fragmented, you know, different things are being provided by different people and they are not talking to each another, so, from the customer or citizen's point of view, you're faced with quite a task if your mum is developing Alzheimer's and you're not sure she can stay at home much longer or your marriage is breaking down and you don't know what you're going to do with the kids … you've got to be tenacious, you've got to be resourceful, you've got to go around the whole circuit of providers to get the package of care you need … so it's the packages of care we think we can provide better … this one-stop shop thing is the Holy Grail of all ESD, it's the idea that if we can design the system right and integrate the system properly, people will be able to access all the providers from that one point and build up their own package of care. (Social services manager, metropolitan district B)

This view of ESD as potentially allowing a new level of joint working, despite being at the core of Government's plans for ESD and egovernment, was not widespread. Most of the larger organisations were preoccupied with getting their own services online by 2005 and were yet to focus on issues around further enhancing the joint working already encouraged under community care and more generally. Some also saw barriers to this degree of integration and were dubious about the extent to which it could be achieved (see next section).

Some local authorities were looking towards full implementation of ESD, with what that meant in terms of the number of transactions that would be handled electronically, as a major

route towards reducing administrative costs. As area offices closed and were replaced by a combination of call centre and website (and/or website-like) services, jobs would start to go:

> You can definitely see staff reductions coming. Not in the short term, but five to seven years yes, definitely, big time. (Director of housing, metropolitan district B)

> Generally we are trying to drive costs down. (Senior manager, district council B)

While some of the larger urban and particularly London-based organisations saw ESD as a way of reducing costs, they were at least equally concerned with the role that ICTs could play in regeneration and community development. Electronic service delivery was part of this wider social agenda. There might well be job cuts, but ESD was not simply seen as a cost-cutting exercise.

> I would like to see a situation where we had more or less all our housing services online, probably much wider opening hours than we have at the minute, service delivery that's more joined up, more one-stop shops perhaps. I'd like to see some of our big offices shut down probably, there's major administrative savings there … more people able to work from home. I'd like to see a situation where most borough residents have free access to the Internet if they want it and there's some sort of training provision for people somehow, individual learning accounts I'd like to see that … I'd like to see in the borough a much wider group of people involved in the democratic process … I think IT can help with some of those areas. (ICT manager, London borough)

The limits of electronic service delivery

For the larger organisations, ESD was a reality that was about to start happening. Plans were in place and systems for delivery were either being piloted or were shortly to be piloted. Yet, at the same time, the interviewees working for these organisations saw inherent limitations in ESD and formidable obstacles to its development.

Like Government itself, the interviewees saw ESD as about streamlining administration, reducing costs and improving access to services, not as a substitute for the physical delivery of services (see Chapter 1):

> *The other thing to say is that in health and social care we will never replace in-person intervention, you can never get rid of in-person intervention … that's a myth, people get scared about computers taking over, no, they are not going to, not in this arena anyway.* (Social services IT manager, metropolitan district B)

> *You can improve service delivery by electronic communications, in a sense, you can improve that element, but, if the person who is delivering the service does not care, is surly, does not do the extra bit, you know, does the minimum … you're not going to improve service delivery, so I'd go along with it to a point, but it's not the answer for good service delivery, people are.* (Senior officer, district council A)

It was also clear that no one envisaged the Internet or similar networks being the sole means of communication between their organisation and its customers/service users:

> *We don't foresee the Internet totally doing away with all other means of communication with our tenants, by far, I mean, it sounds obvious at the moment but ten years down the line I don't think it's going to be replacing all our staff … our general strategy with our tenants, with everything like tenant participation, is to have loads of different ways of engaging and communicating with tenants.* (Senior manager, RSL)

While larger organisations were perhaps the most concerned to handle as many transactions as possible through their ESD call centres and websites, they also saw inherent limits in ESD. These centred around two issues. The first was the accessibility of ESD to someone who might find it difficult to use a call centre or a self-service facility. Many accepted that face-to-face help in arranging and accessing services was still going to be necessary for vulnerable or marginalised people. The second revolved around the impracticality of automating often highly complex transactions, like housing applications or community care assessments, that required both expert judgement and intuition (Johnson, 1999):

> *In our homeless hostels we'll have someone charged with sitting down with people and checking what's available and saying 'do you fancy this, do you fancy that?' … That's the bit that really is on trial, how well that will work, we are in the process of setting that up. I think that's the real tricky one … because clearly homeless duties and duties to some other vulnerable groups don't fit comfortably with electronic access to services … And the beauty is, if you can get efficiencies by most people accessing services in a new way, that cuts the middle person out to some extent, then you will have the resources available to be able to apply to the people who need help.* (Housing director, metropolitan district A)

[The application form for housing] *… it's on there now available, they can do it, but we know that it creates probably more problems if you do that and send it off than if we sat with you, because we then have to get you in and say, you know, 'what did you really mean by this and how could you really do this?'* (Senior manager, district council B)

Obstacles to the implementation of ESD

Chapter 1 outlined the potential obstacles to the implementation of ESD that have been identified in work on the subject at the time of writing. In summary, these doubts are as follows:

- There is a 'digital divide' that will prohibit access for many poorer households and individuals.

- Political and administrative barriers will be raised within central and local government that will undermine the extent to which ESD can be introduced, just as they undermined previous large-scale ICT projects.

- ICTs cannot deliver what is envisaged.

The interviewees in the case study organisations often had concerns centred on these potential obstacles. They also saw a number of related issues as potential barriers.

Accessibility and the digital divide

Many interviewees saw website and website-like ESD services becoming increasingly important over the next five to ten years. They foresaw a future in which low-cost access to websites and other interactive services would be

possible through a host of cheap devices. While it was not viable now to talk about ESD functioning as a major means of service delivery, improved access to cheap ICTs was expected to greatly enhance its role:

… we've got at least five more years of being very telephone led, in terms of most of the business that we do. But I think that the percentages will start to shift around. (Director of housing, metropolitan borough A)

… five years' time is probably a good time frame to look at … I am sure we can convert a lot of our service enquiry and request processes into a format that's digital and can be requested anywhere. (Director of housing, metropolitan borough B)

… we don't want to invest time and money into something that is not going to be used or is not accessible or useful … first of all it's subject to change … it looks like we are going to get more and more gadgets and the information superhighway will be ubiquitous, that's the first point. The second point that the Internet through PCs is not the one thing that we are looking at here, in fact we are trying to look past that, towards digital television, mobile data devices, kiosks, community access points, so on and so forth. (Senior member of staff, social services, metropolitan borough B)

Several interviewees were more hesitant about the accessibility of the technology to service users and shared some of the concerns raised by service users themselves (see Chapter 4). Some, including those working for the private software company that took part in the research, were not convinced that the revolution in access was coming that soon, or that, when it

did come, everyone would want to engage with the new technology:

> If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have said it was going to explode. I don't think it is now, because there is no sign of it happening in the year or 18 months since we started thinking 'our website is not very good and we need to do something about it'. (Senior manager, medium-sized RSL)

> There was an assumption there that every household in the country would be flooded with technology. I think we're starting to sit back and say 'will it?' I mean the research that was recently done that says digital television is not wanted by half the population, bang goes half your original means of access. (Senior staff member, software company)

A few interviewees also felt that affordable access ESD for very marginalised people was unlikely to arrive. The front-line staff working in foyers and sheltered housing shared these concerns, particularly about the client group they worked with:

> … a lot of our customers, in terms of housing, homeless people, they are sort of disenfranchised, if that's the right word, in terms of access to egovernment and things, so there's an issue there for a lot of our customers. You can quite well justify it in terms of tourism and other aspects of the council's business, but some of the most needy people perhaps couldn't have much access to it. (Senior officer, district council A)

> If it were actually all online, actually at the moment, I mean looking here, I mean, there would be a lot of people who wouldn't be able to afford it and, if they could afford it, they wouldn't

know how to use it and wouldn't want to know how to use it, it's as simple as that. (Sheltered housing scheme manager)

> … I think it's going to be straight back to the haves and have nots again, which it is in some ways already, we can get things more cheaply over the Internet, we can get them quicker, but you've got to have access to the Internet and you've got to be able to understand it … a lot of people … can't access it because they don't have the education and they don't have access to a computer. (Worker in foyer, rural area B)

However, the larger organisations tended to take the view that ESD was one of a number of roles that ICTs were going to play. These organisations were interested in providing greater access to the Internet and other networks as part of encouraging the use of ESD. In this context, the particular issues around poor access for socially and economically marginalised people did not arise in the same way, because the development of ESD was intertwined with improving access to ICTs for people in these groups:

> There is an issue of social exclusion going on to technological exclusion, we all know about social exclusion and the Internet seemed to be making that worse because of the advantages that it gives people … 'go online and you get this much off', which obviously if you're not online is unfair … and just the sort of attitude, which I had, admittedly, a year or two ago, you know 'How many of our tenants have got the Internet? What do we want to bother with that for, it's a waste of time' to swinging round to saying 'let's use this project to increase technological inclusion for people'. (Website development manager, metropolitan district A)

Political and administrative barriers

Some interviewees reported that different departments and administrative groups in their organisation could be reluctant to become incorporated into a network because it was felt to mean some loss of control. Culture clashes could also be a problem. There was also sometimes reluctance to give up existing systems to become part of a wider network:

> *We have developed, over the years, our systems individually. The finance department has developed its. Housing benefit have got what they think is the best. We've got what we think is the best. Planning has got what it thinks is the best and not one of them will talk to the other without a lot of difficulty.* (Senior manager, district council B)

These sorts of problems were not widespread, or at least the interviewees did not report them as issues within their own organisations. Rather, most of the interviewees described the different elements of their own organisation as moving in the same direction to develop ESD, perhaps reflecting the global effect of central government's policies on egovernment and ESD.

However, interorganisational differences were seen as more of an obstacle. One of the RSLs had some worries about being part of any service (or portal) through which all the services provided by all the social landlords working in a given area or field could be easily accessed:

> *I have issues around the ability of other organisations to be able to understand how we deliver the service … they may be able to identify that there is a need, but because of the range of provision it may well be that the assessment*

made may be inappropriate … I feel very strongly that older people have the right to choose themselves what they want, rather than having to go through a central resource to say that you can only go to [our RSL] *or you can only go to one of our competitors, I think that it could limit choice as opposed to giving greater choice, but I would need to know exactly what the working protocols were in terms of how information was given to the person.* (Senior executive, national RSL)

In short, there were worries about how information would be presented, how links to specific service providers would work and concern about whether participation in a 'social housing portal' would ultimately be advantageous. This RSL was not alone in wondering whether its services would be as well represented as those of other organisations within a website or website-like service through which a range of services and service providers could be accessed.

Within the statutory sector, there were sometimes concerns that some agencies still found it difficult to work with one another, even after years of joint working under community care. These issues have often been reported in research examining joint working between the NHS, social services and social landlords and do not need to be examined again here:

> *… the drivers are coming from central government and into the chief executives and from the chief execs to the organisations, whether they are NHS … or local authorities … I am sure that they are very important people and I think they like to feel important as well and I am not sure how good they are at sharing … and so what seems to be happening in this region is that various initiatives are passed down, they go*

through the chief execs, the executives call meetings, the meetings produce further meetings and some stuff gets done, but it doesn't always really filter down. (Senior manager, social services, metropolitan district B)

One of the possible implications of ESD in the medium term was that there would be redundancies made as organisations shifted to a call centre / website model of service delivery. This was expected by the interviewees working for some of the larger organisations and was not seen as an obstacle to further development. However, senior staff working for the software company that took part in the research had detected something of a reluctance among some local authorities to face up to what the potential human costs of ESD were:

People are starting to wonder … people have started to say to me, 'if people can pay their council tax over the Web, then we've lost our print department', 'we've lost our bill producing facilities', that's where the big savings are going to come on this and that's what I detect … there's a reluctance amongst authorities, I deal with a few, to actually start facing these facts, that this has got to be financed and the potential for savings is huge, but it's painful.
(Senior member of staff, software company)

Data protection

Data protection was seen as a potential obstacle when ESD involved information sharing between different departments or agencies. When and if ESD systems, for example social housing and social services, became linked, the movement of data within that network would be constrained both by moral questions and the Data Protection Act. These potential problems became particularly prominent when ESD involved moving information between separate organisations. These issues were not often seen as insurmountable, but they were regarded as a significant hurdle by some interviewees:

I do sometimes think that some people should talk about it more than they do at the moment, because it's not going to go away … what we are going to have to do is, through the delivery points, we are going to have to have a consent system in place, where a little box flags up and says '… between the organisations that are party to this, to make this service work, we share information between ourselves, do you consent?, tick yes or no'. (Senior manager, social services, metropolitan district B)

Some of the interviewees felt data protection was sometimes used as a smokescreen to conceal other administrative and political barriers. Individuals who were reluctant to lose control of their data and their autonomy by becoming more closely integrated with one another via ESD could use data protection as an excuse not to make progress:

Personally I don't think it's as much of an obstacle as people would think really, apart from going through the data and, you know, deciding which bits can be shared and which can't. I mean for social services it's more of a key issue. I think people's concern about sharing data is, I think people put it up as a barrier when it does not have to be … I think the main issue is to do with professional specialisms as well, people like to feel they are the only ones who can understand the data or do anything with them. (IT manager, London borough)

Technical obstacles

Electronic service delivery was generally seen as technically viable. Some doubts arose, however, when ESD was going to have to be undertaken using 'legacy systems'. A legacy system is the industry term for older computers or networks that are still in use and that are not going to be replaced but will instead be expected to function as part of a newer system. For some of the local authorities, it was simply not possible to fund a new network and, consequently, ESD would have to be bolted onto their existing systems. While networking software is available that enables different generations and types of computer to work together, this sort of installation can be highly complex, particularly if any of the systems are unusual:

> *… our core housing systems are in quite a bad way. About five years ago we started the implementation of an integrated system. It was at a time when the markets were a little bit less mature than they are now. It wasn't clear who was going to be the market leaders and we feel that we picked quite a poor supplier and it's non-standard in terms of the underlying database … and most of the initiatives that we've tried to get up and running, things like customer relationship management tools sitting on top of the database or web enabling the database, have run into a lot of difficulties … so we are quite hampered in that our back-office systems … are holding us back in terms of what we can do in integrating front and back office.[2] (IT manager, London borough)*

At the time when the research was undertaken, many ESD systems were still being designed, which may have given some of the

interviewees unrealistic expectations of how complex the installation of these systems might be. It was notable that those who were most enthusiastic about the capacity of ESD were senior managers who did not have a technical background. Those interviewees who were ICT professionals were more cautious about how easy it would be to get ESD operational.

Resource limitations

For some of the smaller organisations, there were issues even around the cost of developing any sort of website, let alone the cost of implementing ESD itself:

> *Like all councils we are fairly strapped for cash, and with setting up a website there is a cost attached, and as a front-line service provider you think 'well, what could I do with that ten or 20 thousand pounds, could I use it better?', so I have to be perfectly honest and say … I was one of the less enthusiastic ones. (Senior manager, district council A)*

Several interviewees reported a lack of staff skills within their organisations and problems in recruiting, or being able to afford, trained software engineers. This had led a number of them to contract out all or part of their website and ESD development (see Chapter 2). This was not seen as unusual in a context in which a number of other developments in public–private partnerships were taking place. Other agencies had tried to develop skills in house, usually because they saw that as the only way to keep costs down:

> *I think that, for example, IT is outsourced here, I can see other services, big services, disappearing shortly to the private sector, but I hope with*

similar kind of partnership arrangements that we have with IT … the boundaries of the organisation will become very blurred. (Senior manager, district council B)

… the recruitment of IT staff in local government, especially in London, is difficult really, you're likely to get people who train up and go. My philosophy really is to grow our own staff, try and find people in housing or elsewhere in the council who have skills or an interest in that area and try to develop it … some people will stay, because there are the work–life balance issues and they don't want to do 70 hours a week in the private sector. (IT manager, London borough)

Within the local authority sector, two sets of resource constraints were at work. One was a lack of skills and the other was a lack of finance. Both these resource constraints acted as catalysts for the development of close relationships between the private sector and local authorities in relation to ESD. All the local authorities had some form of relationship with the private sector. The two metropolitan districts were working with private sector

companies to provide DTV services, Internet access and ESD in pilot schemes for some of their more marginalised social housing estates. These arrangements were sometimes simply contractual and sometimes an opportunity (as in the networking of marginalised estates) for the local authority to share costs and for the private sector to develop products it could then sell elsewhere. In one district council, ESD had been wholly contracted out and any savings made were to be split between the council and the contractor. There are important questions about what these relationships that fall outside the immediate concerns of this research might mean but that will warrant further investigation when ESD has become operational.

Security

The security of ESD was never raised as an issue by the staff interviewees, although it was a major concern of the people who might be expected to use this form of service delivery (see Chapter 4). There was a widespread assumption that these systems would not be accessible either to malicious hackers or to viruses that might disrupt the network or destroy data.

4 The views of service users on electronic service delivery

Introduction

This chapter presents the views of service users on ESD. Ten focus groups were conducted with users of services for older people, vulnerable young people and people with mental health problems. These groups were selected because they gave the research team access to people with widely ranging needs, characteristics and experiences, while at the same time allowing the research to be undertaken on a realistic scale.

Below, the focus groups are outlined in more detail. The chapter then explores the relationship of the interviewees with technology, providing a contextual frame of reference from which their potential relationship with ESD could be examined. From this basis, people's views on ESD are then explored in detail. The final section of the chapter examines the limitations of ESD and the barriers to its development from the perspective of the service users who are expected to become its future 'customers'.

The focus groups

Fifty-eight people currently using a health, housing or social care service participated in the ten focus groups. The groups comprised the following:

- *Four focus groups with older people*: 26 older people between the ages of 65 and 93 (average age of 76) participated in four focus groups. The interviews were held in three sheltered housing schemes run by a leading registered social landlord in Newcastle (two groups), Cambridge and

London. All the focus group participants were living in sheltered housing, self-contained one- or two-bedroom flats, with a resident warden and communal facilities available.

- *Three focus groups with young people*: 17 young people between the ages of 16 and 26 (average age of 19) participated in three groups held in Greater Manchester, North Yorkshire and Cambridgeshire. All groups took place in 'foyers': a hostel-type facility providing housing and access to job-search, training and education for resident vulnerable young people. One foyer had a training suite with computers on site; one was developing a UK Online Centre.[1]

- *Three focus groups with people with mental health problems*: 15 people with mental health problems took part in three groups. These groups included people of mixed adult ages, between 22 and 62, with an average age of 33. The groups were held in Nuneaton (two groups) and Manchester, in two specialist day settings for people recovering from mental illness, both run by voluntary sector organisations. One facility operated as a social business providing employment and training opportunities in IT; the other operated as a drop-in facility and was in the process of setting up a cybercafé. People using these services were living in a variety of different settings (including with their family, in their own tenancy and supported accommodation).

A topic guide was used in all groups to prompt people to talk about their use of new technology. The central idea of ESD was explained to participants and they were asked for their experiences and views on the potential value of such services. People were also encouraged to talk about how they felt about technology generally.

People's views on, and relationship with, technology

The interviews with service users were designed to explore the context within which people were presently using technology in their everyday lives, and to understand their relationships with technology, with ICTs and therefore, potentially, with ESD. Such relationships are likely to be key in explaining how accessible and successful ESD might be.

Existing research suggests that technology can in the right circumstances become so ingrained in day-to-day life that it ceases to be recognised as 'technology'. One example would be telephones, still an inaccessible technology to the bulk of the world's population as most people on earth will never make a telephone call (Holderness, 1998), but, in the UK, simply 'part of the furniture' for decades. Another example would be television.

Technology that builds on and adds to widely used technology, such as video recorders and DVD players for televisions and innovations in telephony, can benefit from being associated with the already familiar. If everyone knows what a telephone is then there is no real leap to be made to understand what an answering machine or a mobile telephone is and why it might be useful. Computers and the

Internet, for some people, may be rather more of a leap, having arrived, respectively, as a mass-produced consumer item and a means of consumption only in the late 1990s (Haddon, 2000). Of course, over time, this picture will change; everyone who went to school in the last 15 years knows what a computer is, everyone leaving school now – hopefully – knows what the Internet is.

The discussion below shows that many forms of everyday, familiar technology were a valued and accepted part of people's lives, in particular telephones and televisions. Such technology played a key role in people's lives, particularly in keeping them connected to friends, family and the wider world. Differences were found between client groups regarding the relative importance, and acceptance, of some forms of technology, with younger people generally being most enthusiastic and older people least so (and people with mental health problems somewhere in the middle). However, the overall similarities between people in the different groups were greater than the differences and there was shared scepticism of some forms of ICTs.

The importance of the telephone

Most people reported that the telephone was important to them. Older people in particular said that access to a landline telephone was an essential part of life, often more so than access to any other form of technology, even the TV for some, and definitely more important than a computer. It was crucial in enabling them to stay in touch with family and friends, and was also important for arranging services such as the doctor's:

You can't live without a telephone nowadays, it's a necessity. (Older man, 68)

I think the telephone is a godsend, it's a godsend to me, and a lot like me. I would hate to be without it … Because, if you live on your own, the television is a handy thing, but the telephone is more so. Even here, [friend's name] *phones me and she is just upstairs … no, the telephone is more of a boon to my generation than the computer.* (Older woman, 88)

Business, everything, for instance I wanted to know if there was a chemist open yesterday, I rang up to find out … if you want an appointment for anything, whether it's the doctor or whatever, you can contact them right away.
(Older woman, 76)

Older people did not perceive that there were many problems with the telephone. It was seen as affordable and easy to use, although a couple of people found it annoying when it rang at inconvenient times (for example, if they were watching a good TV programme). However, many people found the increased use of automated call answering systems by businesses and other agencies frustrating and annoying.

Young people were the least likely to have access to a landline phone. Partly because of this, and also because of personal preferences, young people were much more likely to have mobile phones. Whereas only one older person had a mobile, and no one showed much interest in mobile technology, all except one young person had a mobile phone (and here the mobile had been stolen with the young man explaining, 'I feel like I've lost a limb'.) While some young people still preferred to use a landline when

possible (mainly because of cost), many were very attached to their mobiles, using them both for phoning and also text-messaging friends and family.

While young people explained that mobiles were still relatively expensive (part of the reason for 'texting' was because it was cheaper), and one person admitted to getting into considerable financial trouble over billing, many young people felt they relied on their mobile and would be lost without it. One young woman explained it was her 'lifeline' and, when asked how they would feel if the researchers took away their mobiles, one young person exclaimed that:

We'd hunt you down and kill you!
(Young man, 17)

People with mental health problems also explained that access to a telephone was important to them to enable them to stay in touch with family and friends, and sometimes support workers:

It's important to be reachable by phone, that's important. (Male mental health service user, 32)

However, while access was seen as essential, the degree of reliance on the telephone did vary from individual to individual. For example, although there were mixed views of the merits of landlines over mobiles, one young woman explained that her health and independence literally depended on her (two) mobiles:

… well I got mine, my first mobile, because I suffer from anxiety, and basically that's all I suffer from, well it is quite a big thing, but you know, and if I'm out and I start to really get panicky, I feel a lot safer with a mobile, and it can stop me

panicking at all, just having a mobile … I'm very very attached to my mobile for the fact that it keeps me independent … if my phone disappeared I'd have to move back in with my mum, if I felt that my line of communication went then I'd probably have to live with somebody. (Female mental health service user, 23)

Television and allied technology

Everyone interviewed had a television. It was important to all the older people although the extent to which they used it varied. A few older disabled men were particularly reliant on the television, as their deafness made socialising more difficult for them.

I use mine at night-time. I don't have it on during the day, I cannae stand it through the day, I like it through the night. (Older woman, 78)

I don't know how people in our situation managed years ago when there was no telly, what did they do through the day? … I mean people who are disabled, who can't go out. (Older woman, 75)

Television seemed to serve a number of functions. While some commented on some good programmes they watched in the evenings, many also explained that it helped pass the time, kept them in touch with the wider world and particularly provided many with company (for some a radio served a very similar purpose):

F1:	*I turn mine on in the morning, just for company, you know, I don't watch it, I'm doing something, but I just turn it on, just for the company.* (Older woman, 71)

F2:	*I think a lot of people use it for background don't they? If they are away from their family or live alone.* (Older woman, 77)

Overall, television appeared less important to young people than older people. Although there were still some young people who evidently watched TV for many hours a day, many explained how music and going out was more important to them.

F1:	*… somebody take my stereo away from me I'd punch 'em, take my TV away and I wouldn't care.* (Young woman, 16)

F2:	*You would because all you ever do is watch TV.* (Young woman, 18)

I ain't really fond on TVs, but to most people, to most people in England, TV's their life, but to me, TV ain't nothing to me, but 95 per cent of people that lives in England, the TV's their life. They come home they watch that. Get up, go to work, come home, watch it again, go to bed. (Young man, 19)

Mental health service users again had a range of responses to television. Some relied on it a lot, others (especially younger people) again mentioned their preference for going out or listening to music. One person explained that television could be counterproductive to their sense of well-being:

As soon as I get up the telly's on until I go to bed and like if I'm in the house like I'll watch it constantly. (Male mental health service user, 24)

I don't watch mine much as it starts my mind wandering off because of what's actually happening around. (Male mental health service user, 38)

Quite a few people, across all the focus groups, had access to teletext on their TV, and many appeared to use this for a variety of purposes; nobody appeared to feel particularly strongly for or against teletext. Many also had videos which they valued, although some older people found problems with using the timer. No one in the focus groups had a DVD player:

> *Oh yeah, like we can afford one of them* [DVD], *what do you think we are, rich?*
> (Young woman, 18)

Only two people interviewed presently had access to digital TV or satellite TV. A couple of younger people had got OnDigital (now ITVDigital) boxes but only temporarily as they could not/did not keep up the subscriptions. While some people wanted access to more channels, the majority of interviewees were not overly impressed or keen on digital or satellite technology. Some simply could not see the advantage of paying for more channels:

> *I'm quite happy with my television at the moment touch wood, but they keep flogging me, these different people, on and on … the whole lot, trying to flog me these so called digital televisions with about 240 different wavelengths, so you get the films, you get anything, but I'm quite content with my BBC, ITV, Channel Four and Five.*
> (Older man, 93)

Use of other technology
People living in sheltered housing all had access to an intercom-linked alarm system, which went through to the warden or a central control (when the warden was not on duty). A few older people also had mobile pendant alarms. Older people felt very comfortable and familiar with this type of technology and valued the system enormously:

> *It's a marvellous system that, pulling the cord like that.* (Older woman, 78)

Many young people and a few mental health service users also mentioned other technology such as games consoles, walkmans and discmans. These were all used for leisure purposes and were part of everyday life.

People's use of computers and the Internet

This section examines focus group participants' present use of computers and the Internet. Unsurprisingly, younger people, and some mental health users, had more experience of computers than most older people, however variations did exist both between and within groups.

Only three (of the 26) older people had computers of their own, with two of these having an Internet connection. For these three people, their computer was a major part of their life:

> *My wife said, if she cited anything for a divorce it would be the computer.* (Older man, 67)

> *I use it for my home accounts, writing letters, email, lots of email. The reason we got it in the first place was that my daughter is in Australia and so emailing her was a very cheap and easy way to keep in touch with her. We don't use it so much now … there's a company which we can phone Australia for 5p a minute and it's so much more convenient, well not convenient, but it's easier to talk, but we use both.* (Older man, 65)

Some older people had had 'a go' on a computer, often on visits to their relations, and

five people had been on a short introductory course, arranged through one sheltered scheme. Some people commented on the good things about a computer from their limited experience. This was usually linked to Internet access, like being able to email grandchildren who were abroad, or find out information on favourite musical artists.

A majority of the older people interviewed, however, had little or no experience of computers or the Internet. Within this group, some were quite keen to have a try, whilst others tended to have little interest in, or enthusiasm for, the technology:

> *I would love to learn.* (Older woman, 75)

> *I don't want to hear anything about it … I'm not good at change, I like to go on my own steady way, but the Internet you have to start all over again.* (Older man, 80)

> *I'm not interested. We are too old to start learning new.* (Older woman, 78)

Five (of the 17) young people had personal computers (although, in two cases, the computers were broken). Most younger people had used a computer (with the exception of one or two), and many presently had access through a variety of means, sometimes at the parental home, via friends, college, community access centres or through their foyer's facilities. A couple of young people appeared to almost live their life around a computer and the Internet, either in chat-rooms or 'gaming' with other people from all over the world:

> *Chat-rooms, five hours straight, nearly every day. That's at my parent's place, they pay for it.*
> (Young man, 20)

Other young people who used it less compulsively predominately used it for interactive purposes (emailing, meeting people through games or chat-rooms), for downloading music, for studying. Only one person used it to look for jobs. The couple of young people who had not used a computer were reasonably interested in using one at some stage.

Seven of the 15 mental health service users interviewed had home computers; four of these people were attending an IT training project where the focus groups took place. A couple of people who were not interviewed at the IT training project appeared to use their computers a lot and derived real benefits from them. Two people explained how using the Internet served a positive purpose in helping them to cope with isolation or their illness:

> *I use it in a big way, it's one of my coping strategies to get over difficult times I have during the day or during the night, I have other strategies, but using the Internet and going to places where more than likely I'll never go again, it helps me come to terms with what and who I am … it's like a time-lapse for me, I use it as that so I get like four to five hours in the future from where I am now.* (Male mental health service user, 38)

> *It makes you feel less isolated; since I got my computer, I mean at Christmas, when I broke up from my boyfriend, it was a really really difficult time, but, when I got my computer, it's a distraction, I mean it's not the biggest thing in my life any more but it's … mind you, I got a cat at the same time so it might be the cat that's making me feel better, I'm not sure.*
> (Female mental health service user, 23)

Although most mental health service users had used computers and/or had access to them, mainly through the IT project, many people had quite balanced and utilitarian views on them. Computers were around to stay so it was as well to get used to them. They may even be quite interesting in parts, but they did not dominate people's lives.

> I: How important is the computer in your life?
>
> M1: Not very important at all.
>
> F1: I'm just a beginner … I want to learn and educate myself. That's what I want to do.
>
> M1: I'm fascinated by it but I could live without it …
>
> F2: They're just the way forward these days, aren't they?
>
> M2: They're everywhere aren't they? … Everywhere you go there's a computer.
>
> (Mental health service users, 62, 57, 32 and 28 years old respectively)

It was also important to note that many of those on computer skills courses had not used the Internet, and this was sometimes perceived as quite different:

> I'm familiar with that aspect of it [databases] but the Internet and email are a different language to me. (Male mental health service user, 62)

Only people using mental health services appeared to use the Internet for finding out about services, and here only one or two service users:

> Basically, to access things on my mental illness that's one of the things. Just basically just

browsing just looking at a lot of different things to see … I use those for information for myself. And just if I want to check something up and stuff like that it's really useful on that thing. There's a lot of useful sites. (Male mental health service user, 38)

ESD and egovernment: service users' views of the idea

The basic idea of electronic service delivery and egovernment was explained to focus group participants and a couple of examples were given (for example, being able to arrange a doctor's appointment using the Internet). Participants were asked to consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet in the three main areas of ESD:

- finding *information* on services on the Internet

- using the Internet to *communicate* with service providers (e.g. through email)

- conducting *transactions* on the Internet (e.g. application forms for housing, benefits, etc.).

Problems with the lack of accessibility of technology were raised immediately in most focus groups; because of their importance, this detailed issue and other obstacles to ESD raised by the interviewees are discussed separately in the next section. Here, discussion is confined to comments on the idea of ESD, presuming access.

Information
There was a general consensus that, in terms of ESD, the Internet would be most useful in giving people the opportunity to access information. A number of people described how

impressed they were generally with the information available on the Internet:

> *They invited me to go for a computer trial on the Internet and I did and they said 'who's your favourite singer?' and I said 'Michael Ball' and up all this information came about Michael Ball and what songs he'd done and everything and that was wonderful … and that was just a trivial thing, so if you are in dire straits about something and you are on the Internet I think it's excellent.*
> (Older woman, 76)

> *Well, you can find all sorts of information in it, can't you? From like football to whatever. That's what I like – football, so I look the football teams up and that. Yeah, it's really interesting, things that you're interested in you can find out and that.*
> (Male mental health service user, 28)

A number of advantages of using the Internet, including the immediacy of the information and the perceived likelihood of it being up to date, were also noted:

> *It's always up to date isn't it? I mean you get leaflets which might well be a year old, the dates are wrong, the photographs aren't up to date, with web content you get up to date information and a vast amount of information. The downside is that there is so much information there you get bogged down trying to find the bit that you want.*
> (Older man, 65)

However, as the above quote demonstrated, people also identified some potential problems such as information overload and not being able to find the information they needed. They were also worried about stumbling across inaccurate or unhelpful information. This had happened to one person with unfortunate consequences:

> *M1: … it's stuff that I really did not want to know …*

> *F1: Yeah it can do that, look at the side-effects of your medication when you don't really want to know … You can stumble across stuff that you don't want to know about.*

> *M1: Yeah, yes, which I did, I was looking for an artist … and I came up with all this about suicide and all this, which I have tried and I didn't want to know … it's brought it all back, what the hell am I doing here basically, so now I'm seeing a psychologist again, through just accidentally doing that, twice a week again now … it can be too much information at the wrong time … so it can be detrimental to someone's health.*

> (Mental health service users, 38 and 23 years old respectively)

> *I was reading an article the other day about this thing called 'Cyberchondria', like hypochondria, you know people turning to the Internet for advice on their health, you know, and how much inaccurate information is on the Net as well.*
> (Young man, 26)

Some people, though, felt that the Internet could be genuinely helpful in finding out general information on services. Young people thought that it would be a good idea for housing projects, for example, to have a presence on the Internet in the future so that people could find out about their options, which they could then follow up by visiting foyers. Older people, however, thought that most people, when looking for sheltered accommodation, would rather visit local schemes initially than use the Internet to investigate their options.

It was generally agreed that the Internet could be used as a useful starting point to gain information on services, but that it was restricted by the fact that you could not ask it questions, which meant that it was ultimately limited:

> *I'd find that useful for information. I'd still want to have, as somebody else said, face-to-face contact, but I think initially it gives you the opportunity to get information and to look at it as long as you want and to perhaps follow up …*
> *Even on the Net, even with your, you know, with your FAQs, frequently asked questions, and what not, you often can't find the answer that you want so you do need that voice-to-voice or face-to-face contact, don't you? To get at the particular issue.* (Older man, 67)

For some, there needed to be a facility to ask questions before the Internet could compete with other sources of information:

> *I think it's good to access, you could access say a doctor if you've got a query say if you didn't know whether to use a surgery or not. And if you could use it that way. And the doctor online maybe will tell you to go down to the surgery or not. I think there's something like that on at the minute but I'm not quite sure.* (Male mental health user, 38)

> *It would be good if they had a helpline for some of your benefits. Because, if you go down, usually there's a queue, it's not that helpful. So, if you could actually email and you could get an answer that way I think that would be good.*
> (Male mental health service user, 25)

These findings suggested that there was limited appeal in self-service information services, but that assisted contact services using network technology, like call centres and enhanced counter-based or community services, would not be seen as using 'technology' in the way that using a website was.

Communication

Focus group participants were asked to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of two possible examples of communication between users and service providers; first, where users could email support staff such as wardens, housing workers and mental health professionals; and, second, being able to communicate by email with other service providers like doctors and the Benefits Agency.

Generally, people seemed to think that, in certain circumstances, being able to email staff may be handy but that it must not replace other forms of communication. One group of young people were in favour of being able to email staff from their bedrooms to the office as it would mean they could avoid speaking to them, though this said perhaps more about staff-to-resident relationships than it did about ESD:

> *Yes, it would involve not going down and speaking to them and that would be a good thing.*
> (Young man, 20)

However, another group of people who appeared to have excellent relationships with staff in the foyer pointed out the danger of communicating from a distance:

> *I: How about email contact from the office to your rooms? …*
>
> *M1: It's alright, but if you've got problems it's not good is it really; say if you had financial difficulties with your banking, you're better off speaking to somebody there and then.*

M2: It's always handy, but there are still some things that you always should do in person.

M3: That's the other thing, if you've done something wrong, you're better off coming down here and telling her.

F1: She [the Director] wouldn't want to find out through an email.

M3: Cos that's impersonal again, that's not you telling her, kind of like a coward's way out.

(Young people, aged 21, 22, 19 and 17 years old respectively)

Mental health service users felt that the telephone would generally be a better way of communicating with staff than email. The telephone was likely to be quicker and you could be sure that a message had got through to someone (users also commented that in some cases managers either did not know how to work the email or hardly ever picked up their email).

A distinction was made that email might be useful if you were arranging something in the future, but not for more urgent needs, where one wanted an immediate response:

For something really urgent like you need a doctor's appointment tomorrow morning … I don't think you're going to be typing out, 'I wish to have an appointment', it will be the phone job, 'have you got an appointment? I want it. Thank you', that's it … if there's an appointment going in five minutes, you can get down there, and it's going to take those five minutes for you to write out the letter and send it and for him to get back in touch with ya. (Male mental health service user, 38)

There was some differing of views as to whether email would actually be quicker or not for booking appointments:

And on the website you wouldn't have to wait for them on the phone and you wouldn't have to be in a queue or anything. Everything's done faster isn't it? Because you can have an email sent by the time you've dialled in the number to ring someone on the phone, haven't you? Well, near enough. It just speeds everything up and less hassle. (Male mental health service user, 24)

I find it easier to telephone because like I said my own computer isn't online … so it's just easier to phone up and it's easier to punch in the numbers … You have to put the computer online if it's not on already. It's just more handy really. (Male mental health service user, 38)

There was also a concern about the efficiency of email communication:

… how efficient is it going to be, cos I feel when I ring up and speak to someone and say, 'this is what I want', I know that they are listening to me. If I send an email, I don't know if they've read that email … I know people who don't check their emails, they only like check them once a month … it would have to be everyone who starts checking them every day to make it efficient. (Female mental health service user, 22)

One mental health user did, however, seem to prefer the email option every time, but here he explained that it was because he did not like communicating with service providers (unless he knew them very well):

I suppose it wouldn't make much difference with the doctors because I never go down there. I just don't like the place. I [phone up] talk to the doctor, job done, prescription's ready like, you know what I mean … I get my mother to talk to them. The email would suit me. (Male mental health service user, 24)

Generally, however, there was a very strong feeling among all groups that a fundamental disadvantage of ESD was that it was impersonal; people preferred direct human interaction (both face-to-face and by telephone) and that, for ESD to be successful, there was a risk of losing that valuable personal contact:

> M1: I don't think that's a very good idea anyway … you become a social hermit, you're sat behind a computer … while you're talking through a computer you're not talking face to face … it's going into a new age with technology where you're going to be sat in your house, as you said you can get your doctor's appointment, probably won't even need to go and see your doctor, your doctor will email you back and tell you what's wrong with you.

> M1: … looking for work from your home, you can email a company and they'll email you back to see if they want you, for an interview, have an interview over the internet with a web-cam; that's how bad it's going to get; so I don't think it's that good.

> M2: And then work from home.

> M1: Yeah and then work from home! A very bad idea.

(Young people, 19 and 17 years old)

> I am a visual person, I like to speak to people … But there is the danger of isolation. We isolate ourselves more and more from other people. We need people, we need to communicate, we need to see people. (Older woman, 70 years old)

Again, the interviews conveyed a strong sense that 'self-help' was going to be less popular than the 'assisted contact' envisaged under ESD. There was a need to feel that interaction was with another person, even if that person was in turn interacting with a network. Interviewees also tended to focus on what might arguably be called the most negative outcome of ESD, self-service websites, when talking about ESD.

Transactions

Most people were quite sceptical about the value and utility of self-service ESD transactions. Generally, the majority of people did not feel comfortable with making commercial transactions over the Internet, such as purchasing shopping, holidays, etc. This was mainly due to a distrust of the technology in so far as not wanting to give personal financial details online, and also because they could not see the goods being bought (or return them easily). Most people were equally concerned about the idea of using the Internet to engage in transactions for the purposes of accessing social housing, personal care and housing-related support services.

All client groups described three main potential problems with ESD transactions. First, many were immediately concerned that they would not have the skills required to fill in complicated forms on the computer. Many people described how, at present, they relied on assistance from staff to enable them to complete benefit forms, job applications, housing applications and the like. For example, older people in sheltered housing explained how the warden was always there to assist with any paperwork and, in one scheme, an officer from

the Benefits Agency visited the scheme from time to time to assist with claiming benefits. People with mental health problems and younger people also often asked support workers for help in filling in forms:

> *I certainly* [would] *not want to substitute the scheme manager for it, no.* (Older woman, 70)

> I: *What about some of the other services that you might want to use like housing services or claiming benefits sometimes, things like that? … Do you think you would use something like that if it was available?*

> F1: *Possibly, especially if somebody was there to help me …*

> M1: *There's so many forms, it's so confusing, even those who are sort of computer literate, they still have a job understanding what the questions are for a start, let alone providing a suitable answer to them.*

(Mental health service users, 32 and 62 years old respectively)

> I: *How would you feel about filling in a form on the Internet?*

> F: *I'd rather have somebody to tell me how to fill it in.*

(Female mental health service user, 57)

Those people comfortable with filling in forms over the Internet were the exceptions, for example one man said he would prefer to use a computer to fill in a form as he was not very confident with writing and the computer could spellcheck the form for him. In another focus group, a young woman suggested that somebody could still assist those who needed help with filling in forms, and how she would prefer the computer as it would be quicker and easier:

> F1: *When you're applying* [for benefits] *you don't see anybody anyway, it's just a form; I think forms are fantastic on the Internet, you don't have to get a stamp, and you don't have to wander around …*

> M1: *But every time I've had a form somebody has always come out and helped me with it …*

> F1: *Well, then somebody could come and help you do it on the Internet!*

(Mental health service users, 23 and 38 years old respectively)

The second main problem that people explained when discussing self-service transactions was the feeling that many transactions required personal face-to-face contact to make them meaningful. This was thought to be particularly the case when someone was applying for a scheme, for example visiting a potential sheltered housing scheme or foyer. One group of young people explained that the form was really irrelevant when it came to the staff's decision as to whether to offer them a place on the scheme:

> M1: *That would have been a bad thing* [applying over the Internet], *for somebody to take you on, they've got to see you and get a first impression.*

> M2: *I think they know within the first ten minutes whether they're going to take you on or not.*

> M1: *Take one look at you.*

F1: They do.

M2: If you've got potential, or even if you don't, if you're down and you need somebody, they'll take you.

(Young people, 20, 19 and 17 years old respectively)

Many people still felt that personal contact was important for more routine transactions and in fact changed the experience of applying for something into a more acceptable process:

> *Bearing in mind the people that come to [name of service], they've got mental health problems. So, the chances are that they need somebody with them sometimes, even face to face. So, I mean, I don't think they'd cope very well at all over the Internet. Because there isn't even a face to relate to.* (Male mental health service user, 62)

> *You go to, whether it be DSS or anywhere, you can go for an interview, a one to one and you're actually talking with someone, there's body language and the rest of it, you know, to help with communication, but when, you know, when you're on the Internet the whole dynamics of it are changed, it's just what you get on the programme and that's it.* (Young man, 26)

Third, a number of people questioned how secure confidential information was over the Internet. A majority of people felt uneasy about the idea of having quite personal information (for example, their medical history) being sent to someone electronically, although one or two people felt that all information was already electronic:

> *F1: None of this is private is it? … You want to know something and you put your details up,*
> *but anybody can log onto that can't they? I thought anybody can sort of pick up on your details …*

> *F2: But really all your details, your bank details, are all on computers now aren't they? Everybody knows they can get at them now.*

(Older women, 77 and 66 years old respectively)

> *I've used computers and I just don't like going on the Internet, don't like the idea of putting all my information out there for someone to look at. Leave it alone. There is no security on it, it's just open isn't it? Anyone can look at it if they know what they are doing.* (Young man, 19)

> *M1: I don't think I'd like it on the computer at the moment. I don't think they're quite secure enough although they reckon they are. But, I think I wouldn't be happy …*

> *M2: … if they had everything about you all your medical history everything I don't think many people would like that.*

(Mental health service users, 38 and 24 years old respectively)

In addition, some people explained how the process of applying for services was, for the individuals concerned if not for the agencies, essentially a private business, and not always an easy one; as such, it deserved more attention than just an electronic form being sent to an unknown desk in an agency:

> *Where benefits are concerned, I'm sorry, that is private business, I mean why should I have to talk to a screen instead of seeing the person?* (Young woman, 19)

What gets me is the transferring of really vital information about me to say somebody who I will never ever see or even talk to, the only way I'd talk to is through [phoning] *– at least I've got a voice and a name at the end – but that person doesn't even have to respond* [via the Internet]; *they've got the information and they don't even have to respond back.* (Male mental health service user, 38)

Finally, a couple of people questioned the reliability of applying for services over the Internet, quoting examples where they had applied for forms and received no reply:

M1: It's easy enough to fill in the form but it's more the other end to process it. So, I filled in a few forms on the Internet. I filled in a form for [name] *college to get some course information and they never got back to me. And I filled in a form to get a new battery for my laptop and they never got back to me on that either.*

M2: I've had that problem as well. With the email, I've actually sent off and nothing comes back.

(Mental health service users, 25 and 38 years old respectively)

Despite these problems, some people explained that the Internet, as with the way it provided information, might be used as a starting point, for example in being able to access an application form, or perhaps complete simple transactions, such as order a repeat prescription from the doctor:

I think it would be good with me, I have to have a repeat prescription every so often. It'd be good, I may have to go down to the surgery to actually *put my repeat prescription in and have to wait a couple of days. So, if you could email, that would be a good situation. If you could email your repeat to the doctor's it would be good because you'd only have one journey to actually go to the chemist's.* (Male mental health service user, 38)

However, it was clear that complex service transactions – for example, when applying for housing, benefits and social services – and processes that involved the sharing of detailed personal information both required person-to-person interaction in the view of service users. Again, these findings raised the most questions about 'self-service' ESD, which would be central to reducing administrative costs for various agencies were egovernment to be successfully implemented.

Barriers to electronic service delivery

In many respects, service users saw self-service ESD as limited in capacity. The provision of information was fine, but there needed to be the facility to ask questions and to have things explained, which ultimately required a human presence. The possibilities around communication were acknowledged, but there often needed to be a connection with another person for people to feel comfortable that their concerns were being listened to and that they were understood. Finally, transactions might be possible, but some people would still want assistance with forms and might require someone to help them through the process of applying for or requesting services. There was also a widespread concern that confidential information given to a computer was inherently insecure – a considerable disincentive in itself.

Chapter 1 outlined the potential obstacles to ESD that academic commentators have so far identified. In summary, these doubts are that:

- there is a 'digital divide'

- there are political and administrative barriers

- ICTs cannot deliver what is envisaged.

The service users did not envisage a situation in which ESD would fail to be implemented. None raised the possibility of administrative and political barriers and no one suggested that the technology might not be up to providing the portals and other services envisaged. What did concern the service users, beyond their rather lukewarm response to the concept of self-service ESD, was that many people would not be able to access these new services, for reasons of cost and because they felt that the technology was inherently inaccessible.

The affordability of computers

If you haven't got a computer, then you've got to go out to a computer so it would be pointless … you'd have to get the people to own the computers for it to work. Everybody would have to own a computer for it to even think of working. (Young man, 20)

Only a minority of focus group participants had their own computer. Others had varying amounts of access via scheme-based initiatives. The problem of the general lack of access to home computers for many people was something many saw as a fundamental barrier to ESD:

It's a damn good idea [ESD], *but whether it works or not is a completely different thing – first off, there's the expense of people having to have computers in their homes … basically, for people living in poverty, the necessities are paying your bills, buying your food, clothing your kids. I know parents who are not eating properly so they can send their kids on school trips, so it's going to be difficult to get a computer unless the price is completely dropped.* (Female mental health service user, 22)

… most people who come to foyers as residents, first they might not have a PC, you know, what use is a website about the foyer to people like the residents? It may be to funders who want to put some money into the foyer, but for residents or people who want to stay here … I doubt that any resident of the foyer found out about the foyer through the Internet. (Young man, 26)

Not everyone has got a computer yet … it could happen in perhaps ten or 20 years when the next generation comes up and they grow up with computers. (Male mental health service user, 32)

The few people with computers had obviously overcome the high cost. However, some people were buying on credit arrangements and were slightly worried at having to find the lump sum at the end of the contract. Others had managed to buy a second-hand computer; this sometimes worked very well, but, in a couple of cases, the computers had subsequently broken and they were unable to afford to repair or replace them. For most, the price of computers was seen as prohibitive. Some would be tempted to get a computer if the price was right; in one sheltered scheme, older people were being encouraged to make use of

the UK Online initiative whereby they could purchase a reconditioned computer for £60:

> *See, the reason we are interested in computers is that we can get one for as cheap as 60 quid. Now, if we had to pay the 800 and the 1,000 pounds for the computer, we wouldn't be interested in it would we? So, price controls things like this.* (Older man, 68)

Most people supported giving people greater access to computers in public places and also within the supported or shared housing in which some of the focus group participants lived. Many of those who did not presently have access to computers felt that they would try using them if they were provided free.

The accessibility of computers

The research showed that the fact of whether someone had physical access to a computer was far from being the only problem of access. Electronic service delivery would also rely on people being able to use the technology on a number of different levels: accessibility for disabled people; general ease of use of ICTs; and, underlying psychological attitude to, or interest in, computers.

Accessible for all?

The research did not include any focus groups with disabled people aged under 65; however, a number of the older people who took part in the research were disabled. For example, one older woman who was partially sighted explained that, for her, using a conventional computer was simply impractical. Others pointed out how difficult the technology was to use for someone with limited dexterity:

> *M1: … and controlling it, I mean, now I understand, I've learned, that you don't need that mouse all the time anyway, you can do it on the keyboard, which would have helped these people a lot more than the mouse, cos our, not mine particularly, but there's people their hands shaking and they can't get the pointer on.*

> *F1: They're so small them pointers aren't they? Small and awkward.*

(Older people, 68 and 77 years old respectively)

Of course, modified computer systems are available that can make the technology accessible to people with limited dexterity or visual impairment. Such ICTs are widely used in special education, for example. However, these non-standard systems are often more expensive and it was perhaps telling of general attitudes on courses and in other public access facilities that no attempt had apparently been made to provide more accessible systems.

General ease of use

A number of people who did use the Internet also explained that they sometimes ran into problems using it; for example, searching for information was not always straightforward:

> *… sometimes you can word it not quite right and it doesn't bring up the stuff that you, you know, you have to word it the way that the computer sees it to bring up. Or it brings up stuff that's not quite what you want. And, although you've put it in OK it just brings up other stuff that's not really in the category.* (Male mental health service user, 25)

> *M1: I hate it, it's always too hard to find something which you're looking for, if you*

don't know the name of it, and you're like browsing around, it's a lot harder.

M2: *It's a bit hard trying to find stuff if you don't know what the site name is.*

M3: *It's really easy, you just go 'I want to search for this', search and it gives you a list.*

F1: *Only if you are in a search engine, if you don't know anything about the Internet, you wouldn't know what a search engine is, you wouldn't know where to go, you'd just have a thing in mind that you'd want to find and you wouldn't know what to do.*

(Young people, 17, 20, 20 and 18 years old respectively)

Even some people with experience of computing occasionally felt overwhelmed by the technology:

I've had the computer two years now, two-and-a-half years I think, and I'm still at the stage where, if something new comes along, I'm afraid to start it because of the problems that will arise with me learning to deal with it and so, you know, I put off, starting a new programme or getting something new set up, which I suppose one of the problems everyone has with new things, but it seems to be worse on a computer. (Older man, 65)

Generally, there was an appreciation by many that, although the technology itself was not as easy to use as it might be, a general lack of knowledge about computers and the Internet meant that some people felt scared of the technology and out of their depth. Quite a number of older people recognised that they did have problems with confidence, but some were optimistic about overcoming these with greater familiarity with the technology:

F1: *Once you know how to use it, you'd use it, it's getting used to it.*

F2: *It's getting the confidence to do this isn't it?*

(Older people, 79 and 66 years old respectively)

… once we got confidence, it would be like using the phone wouldn't it? (Older man, 68)

Overall attitude to computers

I think it depends on the person themselves, whether they are real interested in it or not, because you're going to get some people who are going to want to know about computers and then there's the opposite who just don't want nothing to do with them. (Young man, 19)

A few people, particularly among the older people, felt that computers and the Internet were so strange and difficult that they simply would not know where to start with the technology:

I wouldn't try I wouldn't, I just can't understand it. (Older woman, 78)

Every time I visit the family they try to educate me into using it, but I can't make sense of it yet … it is interesting, I would like to know what they are talking about. (Older woman, 85)

Most young people, in contrast, felt reasonably confident with computers, even if they had limited experience in using one. Within this context, it was difficult for the few younger people who did not feel confident to admit this to their peers.

Levels of confidence among people using mental health services varied considerably; some younger people with some experience of computing at home or school felt very familiar with it, others less so:

I wouldn't know what to do. And another thing, I'm not educated enough to learn it.
(Male mental health service user, 32)

It was clear that, over and above concerns about accessibility, some people were simply more interested in new technology than others. In every focus group, there appeared to be a minority of people who embraced new technology in and of itself, a minority of people who hated new technology with a vengeance, or saw it as a complete irrelevance to their life. There were also those occupying the middle ground who might be encouraged one way or the other depending on their experiences:

F1: I do think, really, you're interviewing the wrong people, I think you should be with the young people. I'm 88, so what do you want? It's no good to me. But I do think you should get around the young people.

F2: It's the young people you want. I mean we are nearly out of this world now.

(Older women, 88 and 78 years old respectively)

I don't use it in my day-to-day life, so I am not going to waste money on something I am not going to get anything out of using ... it's been there for years [the one in the foyer] *and I've not used it.* (Young man, 19)

It's not natural, because you could be one of those people what are terrified of computers and don't like the thought of it and to be messing around on some computer, remembering your password and going all through that, probably not, to me I don't think it's natural. It only becomes natural when you gets used to it or when you feel comfortable with it and you feel comfortable on
your own using it, without the aid of someone watching over you. (Young woman, 19)

I just want to use it whatever, anything, emails. I just want to know about it, like. Everyone's getting involved with the Internet. Everything's the Internet now, www. Every programme, every advert, everyone's got a website. (Male mental health service user, 24)

Alternative technologies

The advocates of ESD draw attention to an anticipated explosion in low-cost Internet access through a host of devices other than PCs. These include a range of handheld devices, such as third-generation mobile phones and handheld computers and various devices in the home, such as digital television, games consoles and perhaps eventually a very wide range of products indeed. There is also an expectation that, in addition to being much more economic to buy and use, these new technologies will be much more accessible. At the time of writing, this explosion of low-cost, 'easy-to-use' access is starting to look a little overdue. However, this situation could be subject to very rapid change. It is easy to forget that a decade ago the Internet was a tool for academics and scientists, not a public network.

Any research involving ICTs can never be more than a snapshot. To try to allow for the impact of technological change, the research team asked about digital television and WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) telephones.

Many commentators have argued that the advent of digital TV will mean that access to the Internet is greatly increased. There certainly was not overwhelming enthusiasm for Internet TV access. Some, particularly older people, were

quite keen to combine television with Internet access, but others were not very keen at all. Those without computers tended to be keener than those who already had access. However, many saw significant disadvantages in terms of combining the two technologies:

> F1: If I want to see the television I watch the television, if I want to go on the computer I go on the computer …
>
> M1: I don't think my wife would take very kindly when she wants to watch Morse if I said 'I just want to send a few emails'.

(Older people, 67 and 77 years old respectively)

> M1: I'd rather have a TV that's for television and a computer for whatever you want. I'd rather have them separate than into one, because that's when you start getting complications … there's more chance of it breaking down if there are two things into one.
>
> F1: And, if you've got your telly that you use every day, maybe, most people use it every day … it tempts you to put on the Internet if you've got it through your telly; then the Internet does become a daily part of your routine.

(Young people, aged 20 and 17 years old respectively)

> I think it would be good to have a television and the computer because then, if somebody wants to watch the television and somebody wants to use the computer, you've got both. But, if you've got it on the one, then it could cause problems. And I think it's nice to have a computer as a computer and a telly as a telly personally.
> (Male mental health service user, 38)

There are also a number of technical issues in relation to DTV, which has problems in displaying a website intended for a PC screen in an accessible way. Fairly obvious points, such as the distance people sit from a television as opposed to a TV screen, can be made. These issues can reach a point at which separate content is required for DTV.

Only one or two people had WAP mobile phones, which provide limited Internet access. A few people had tried them but had switched back to a normal mobile phone. There was very little enthusiasm for this type of technology; those who had tried it complained of the expense, the slowness of the connection and the limited access.

> … but it's ridiculous, my last phone that I got I could get on the Internet with, but access would take about three minutes, which would cost about three bloody pounds just to link up, it was ridiculous. (Young man, 26)
>
> I was at first [interested], cos of the name, it was a WAP phone and something new, so I went out and bought it and a couple of days later regretted it. (Young man, 19)

This technology, which requires separately programmed content, is an intermediate stage that is currently expected to be rapidly eclipsed by third-generation mobile telephones. These were not yet available at the time of writing.

Overall messages

The focus group interviews revealed that technology such as telephones and TVs occupied a central part of people's everyday lives, helping them feel connected to the world.

However, when technology was less familiar, and also both complex and costly, as with computers, people's relationships with it became more problematic and inconsistent. Relationships were not necessarily predictable across client groups – while older people tended to be more cautious, there were people who were more and less enthusiastic about technology in most groups.

Interestingly, however, service users' views on the idea of ESD tended to be more consistent: most people saw some scope for using the Internet in providing more information, but people pointed out a number of potential limits to this technology, particularly in terms of communicating with service providers and online transactions. The vast majority of people expressed a preference for more personal forms of interaction with service providers; they did not want to relate to a screen rather than a person who could listen and respond to their requests and needs. This, combined with access difficulties, led most participants to the conclusion that any expansion of online services would clearly need to be as an addition to present points of service contacts, not as a replacement – providing an option for those who wanted and could use these forms of technology, but ensuring that people still had a choice of the present, often preferred, methods of contact with services.

5 Conclusions

Any research examining a rapidly changing policy area can never be more than a snapshot. Information and communications technology, in particular, presents researchers with a constantly moving target. In 1991, the Internet was a network for academics and scientists; by 2001, around 40 per cent of Britons could access it from their homes.

While this report is concerned more with the underlying ideas and concept of ESD and egovernment than with the technologies involved, it would be foolish to pretend that these technologies are not to some extent shaping the plans and expectations for ESD and the responses to it. There are concerns and limitations reported on here that are clearly linked to the limitations of current ICTs – ICTs that may rapidly be made redundant by new technologies. Even now, software companies are working on Natural Language Processing that may produce computers that can understand commands in day-to-day language. There is also work on 'agent' applications that will guide people through using their computer. In the longer term, networked computers may become both ubiquitous and invisible, merged with other technologies to a point at which the idea of a separate computer may start to seem odd.

This final chapter presents the conclusions from the research into the introduction of ESD in the social housing, social care and housing-related support sectors. The present target for the electronic delivery of all government services by 2005 was set during 2000. At the time of writing, while some policy guidance had been produced, ESD is still at an early stage of development. The research was *an exploration of the idea of ESD*, conducted when ESD was largely in the planning stage. The study aimed to understand how people using services, providing them and commissioning them were thinking about what may be an important and far-reaching change in the way services are administered.

The central idea of the egovernment/ESD model is to automate administration, and, in so doing, increase citizen choice, make services more accessible, use information more effectively and promote social inclusion (DETR, 2000). However, questions remain about the efficacy with which ESD can operate and about its accessibility to service users. Perhaps fundamentally, there are also some questions around the extent to which service users wish to engage with this technology.

This final chapter examines the findings of the research under the three main original research questions:

- To what extent has electronic service delivery been developed in social housing and social care services?

- What are the attitudes of service providers and users to electronic service delivery?

- What are the potential benefits and costs of electronic service delivery in the fields of social housing and social care?

The development of electronic service delivery in the housing and social care sectors

While the survey was conducted a year on from the 1999 White Paper, *Modernising Government* (HM Government, 1999), it was apparent that ESD was not being widely used. The survey

suggested that websites had often been developed on an ad-hoc basis, without a clear service delivery role (something the later fieldwork confirmed). Information provision was often poor with tourist information being more widespread than detailed information about services on local authority websites and the websites of RSLs quite often not containing any information on their housing services.

The survey results showed not only that ESD was not developed during 2000 but also that the vast majority of organisational websites were inaccessible to disabled people or those whose first language was not English. However, there were strong indications that many local authorities and RSLs were actively examining increasing their use of ESD.

Service providers' and users' attitudes to electronic service delivery

Attitudes about ESD could vary within organisations and between service users. This was especially true among users, as it was not possible to simply predict attitudes by preconceived ideas. Older people, for example, were far from being uniformly hostile to ICTs and young people were not always keen to use them. At the same time, however, one of the clearest findings was the difference in attitudes, particularly towards self-service ESD, between senior managers in large organisations and the other staff who were interviewed.

In short, those working at policy level in large organisations tended to see more potential in ESD, while those who worked directly with service users who would have to use the technology were not as convinced. Similarly, hesitant attitudes towards self-service ESD were also sometimes found among management staff in smaller organisations, as they also tended to be closer to both the process of service delivery and service users. This finding might be interpreted in part as reflecting a lack of understanding of ESD on the part of front-line staff and some managers in smaller organisations, but it was not clear this was the case. As ESD was expressed in the language of systems and business management they were accustomed to, senior managers in larger organisations may have felt more at home with the concept of ESD and more in control of it as a process than other staff.

Interviews with older people, people with mental health problems and young people revealed some differences in general attitudes towards the value and role of technology; however, this pattern disguised people who were more and less enthusiastic about technology in all the groups. Moreover, in discussions of ESD, service user views tended to be more consistent across groups: most people saw some scope for using self-service ESD, but often in very limited and prescribed ways. Any possible acceptance of ESD was often on the condition that any extension of self-service systems should be as a further option for those who wanted to use them and not as a replacement of more traditional forms of service delivery. The service users shared the doubts of front-line staff and had a few concerns of their own focused on the accessibility, and particularly the security, of ESD.

Senior management in larger organisations were clearly moving towards full ESD, with various combinations of call centres, community workers with mobile access and networked offices being used to provide assisted contact,

while great emphasis was also being placed on web and web-like (i.e. DTV) self-service ESD. There was a clear agenda to reduce costs and the survey results showed this agenda was already widespread within the local authority and RSL sectors (see Chapter 2).

Both front-line staff and service users could see potential in the use of self-service ESD for information provision, but mainly in terms of ESD providing online equivalents of existing brochures and pamphlets. These groups often could not see a clear role for self-service ESD *beyond* basic information provision.

The service users and front-line staff were less convinced of the potential effectiveness of self-service systems when it came to communication between service users (or 'customers') and service providers. The vast majority of service users expressed a preference for more personal forms of interaction with service providers; they generally wanted to communicate with a person directly, rather than 'talk to a machine'. Service users also quite often emphasized the importance of having access to someone who could support them when they communicated with a service provider and who could if necessary communicate with a service provider on their behalf. Both workers in foyers and scheme managers on sheltered housing took on this role. The service users described how interacting with another person was more personal, meaningful and also flexible in terms of service providers being able to respond immediately to requests and needs.

Most of the interviewees drew attention to the limitations of self-service ESD when it came to handling anything but very simple exchanges or transactions. Though senior management accepted that more complex processes could not

be automated, they nevertheless saw a role for ESD in streamlining at least some aspects of even the most complicated assessments and systems for service delivery. Front-line staff and service users were more of the opinion that the inability of self-service systems to answer questions, explain, provide help and generally give the quality of service that a face-to-face exchange allowed significantly undermined the 'self-service' part of the ESD concept.

Service providers' and users' views on the obstacles to electronic service delivery

Even the keenest senior managers outlined some obstacles to the progress of ESD. Staff sometimes mentioned potential technical difficulties, although those who foresaw significant problems in this respect were firmly in the minority. There was also sometimes mention of internal political difficulties (between different departments) and concerns about potentially much larger problems of interorganisational working. A few staff identified data protection issues as problematic, although this was not seen as a problem by others.

The continuing lack of accessibility of ESD for many service users was also raised by some staff. There was a recognition that more work needed to be done by larger organisations in helping people to overcome technological exclusion. More senior staff working for larger organisations tended to see access to the Internet as an issue that would be solved by ever cheaper and easier to use ICTs. Those working for smaller organisations and front-line staff were considerably more hesitant.

For service users and front-line staff,

accessibility was a major issue. The problem of accessibility operated on a number of levels, including continuing affordability problems, as well as the accessibility of technology for disabled people, the difficulties associated with using the Internet and the level of knowledge required. There were also concerns over issues like the literacy of some of the vulnerable young people who might be expected to use ESD. There were also differing levels of interest in using ICTs – for example, while some people might be keen to purchase an affordable computer, others explained that they were simply not interested in such technology. There seemed to be little enthusiasm for digital TV-based services.

The potential benefits and costs of electronic service delivery

Government is advocating ESD because it can potentially offer much easier access to services on a 24-hour basis. Additional advantages are also anticipated in terms of reducing costs, improving efficiency and improving the quality of services through the advanced administration ESD is expected to offer (Chapter 1).

Electronic service delivery is often described as bringing benefits to 'the customer' or as 'customer-led' (Cabinet Office/PIU, 2000). Yet, it is arguably quite difficult to see where the 'customer' has fitted into the policy development of ESD. Policy development has been highly centralised, with egovernment and ESD policy initially being handled by Number 10 and the Cabinet Office and now by the Office of the E-Envoy, which reports directly to the Prime Minister (Holliday, 2001). It is, of course, arguable that previous attempts at wide-scale

computerisation failed because they were individual projects controlled by departments and sometimes these same departments contained interests who did not necessarily want the planned computerisation to succeed fully (Hudson, 2000). In this context, the degree of centralisation and the extent to which decisions are being taken at the highest level is understandable. Nevertheless, considering ESD is so focused on 'the customer', it is perhaps still pertinent to wonder why 'the customer' has not been better represented in the development of the policy.

There was evidence from the research that this pattern was to some extent being repeated at the level of individual organisations. There was clearly a gap between what senior management thought about ESD and what front-line staff and most service users thought about it. This difference was explainable in part by the greater exposure of senior management to the concepts behind ESD and perhaps by a tendency to view service delivery increasingly in terms of processes or 'businesses' to be effectively managed. Yet, the difference also perhaps suggested that service users and front-line staff had not always been as well consulted as they could have been.

With any top-down initiative, it is important to ask the question as to whether the policy might benefit the policy-makers more than it does service users. In writing a report about ESD, this question is perhaps more difficult to ask than it is in relation to some other policies. Doubts about ESD could be dismissed as Luddite, while endorsement might be seen as the uncritical enthusiasm of technophiles.

In considering what the benefits and costs of ESD might be, the starting point should be a

recognition that technology is a tool that can be used in many different ways. Electronic service delivery is about changing the administration of public services according to a specific set of ideas and a specific plan. It is about adapting models of business administration and ebusiness to a public sector setting. It is about, whenever possible, organising the administration and delivery of welfare services like social housing, housing-related support and personal care via a *self-service model*.

The policy of egovernment anticipates a high degree of cooperation between the public, private and voluntary sector. There will also be an attempt to create market-like competition between public, private and voluntary sector 'portals' (websites). If a private sector website giving access to public and voluntary sector services were to be better designed and organised than the voluntary sector and public sector sites, it is expected that service users or 'customers' would make the choice to use that site in preference to others.

The central issue for ESD is the same one that permeates all aspects of social policy – the need to balance the pursuit of quality and accessibility against the need to keep expenditure under control. There is clearly an intention to improve services and the accessibility of services within Government, yet at the same time there is also an intention to reduce expenditure. This research, which is an exploratory study undertaken at a time before ESD became properly operational, suggests that the move towards a greater degree of 'self-service' (Loader, 1998) may be more difficult than has been envisaged. That this problem has not been noted to the same extent before perhaps reflects the 'top-down' nature of the

implementation of ESD and egovernment.

In order to fully deliver the envisaged savings and efficiency gains, ESD has got to start taking traffic away from 'assisted contact' channels of access like area offices, community workers and call centres, and start handling it through 'self-service' channels like websites. The evidence from this research is that the intended 'customers' did not like the idea of self-service housing, housing-related support and personal care services. Further, front-line staff delivering the services affected saw the same limitations around the lack of person-to-person contact as service users themselves identified.

Senior managers in local authorities, RSLs and the voluntary sector also viewed the self-service component of ESD as inherently limited, incapable of handing complex procedures that require judgement or interpretation. Something as apparently simple as an application for social housing could not, in the view of most of them, be handled wholly electronically. That said, many took the view that ESD could at least support and streamline complex procedures.

Questions about the accessibility of services will arise if service users are increasingly expected, rather than merely encouraged, to use self-service ESD. Some commentators have raised the possibility that the imperatives behind ESD and egovernment, particularly in relation to reducing public expenditure, will mean that 'self-service' access will be promoted over and above other channels and the current emphasis on multiple channels may be reduced (Loader, 1998; Fitzpatrick, 2000). Area offices are more expensive than call centres, which are in turn more expensive than self-service websites. How far this is a potential problem depends on

how far one accepts the thesis that the central priority of ESD is to reduce expenditure on welfare services.

The evidence from this study, again acknowledging its exploratory nature and that ESD was not really up and running while the research was conducted, was that self-service delivery was being actively pursued by larger organisations that were anticipating service users would engage with it. These organisations did want to retain other channels of access to services, but their policies were designed to move more and more of their dealings with the public to self-service systems. The move towards ESD was seen as benefiting the 'consumer' and improving efficiency, while at the same time delivering the desired reductions in administrative costs.

Yet, the 'consumer' is not really a consumer at all, unless they can choose *not* to use self-service ESD but to seek services through going to an area office, a telephone call centre or some other means of assisted contact. Providing

different routes to self-service ESD by allowing voluntary sector, private sector and local authorities to provide competitive portals or websites is not the same as a real customer choice, if the end product is always self-service ESD.

The social and economic marginalisation of people living in social housing, using housing-related support or social services is often referred to and widely reported, yet there is another dimension to their marginalisation – the political. The relative powerlessness of many people who will be expected to make use of ESD in relation to the forces promoting its use should always be remembered. There may be nothing wrong in employing self-service ESD for some services, but accessibility, equity and service users' needs and preferences must be considered alongside cost-effectiveness. It is important to remember that the people who will be using ESD for social housing and social care are citizens, not merely consumers of a service provided by an ebusiness.

Notes

Chapter 1

1 The business origins of the ESD concept have led Government and others to use the term 'customer' rather than 'service user' or 'citizen'.

2 'Broadband' technology allows a much faster Internet connection. It allows video and graphics to be used in ways that are not possible on systems based on telephone lines.

Chapter 2

1 Formerly known as housing associations.

2 Many of the RSLs also worked with disabled people.

3 *General needs housing* refers to ordinary flats and houses. *Housing-related support services* include tenancy support services, supported housing and sheltered housing for vulnerable people.

4 As noted in Chapter 1, the origins of ESD in private sector models have led to the use of the term 'customer' rather than 'citizen' or 'service user'.

5 There were 101 housing authorities among the responding local authorities that still had housing stock. The figures quoted here exclude local authorities who had transferred their stock.

Chapter 3

1 That is, an authority that has transferred ownership and management of its housing stock to a registered social landlord.

2 'Front office' and 'back office' are terms used to describe the systems supporting 'assisted delivery' or 'self service' (the 'front') and the underlying administrative systems ('back').

Chapter 4

1 A UK Online Centre is a community-based service providing access to ICTs. It is part of the Government's wider strategy aimed at promoting Internet access for socio-economically marginalised groups (see Chapter 1).

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