

Social care, social housing and electronic service delivery

Major changes will shortly take place in the management and administration of social landlords and social care providers. Processes such as applying for a service, making a complaint or ordering a service like a housing repair will increasingly be handled with the aid of computerisation and will in some cases be wholly computerised. Electronic service delivery (ESD) is being actively encouraged and supported by government through the Office of the E-Envoy. Research by Nicholas Pleace and Deborah Quilgars of the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, indicates mixed progress in development and uncertainty about ESD among service users and frontline staff:

-  **Few social services departments, social landlords or charities offered detailed service information on their websites. Fewer still had any facility for potential users to apply for services or make an enquiry or complaint.**
-  **Websites generally made no specific provision for disabled people or those whose first language was not English.**
-  **There was a high degree of enthusiasm for the further development of web-based service delivery among local authorities and larger Registered Social Landlords. Smaller Registered Social Landlords and charities had more mixed views on the extent to which electronic service delivery could be successfully used.**
-  **Most managers saw the advantages of electronic service delivery as centring on improved access to services, greater efficiency, and a significant reduction in administrative costs. Some organisations had replaced area offices and counter services with call centres and websites. Others were developing interactive digital television services with private sector partners.**
-  **Frontline staff thought that electronic service delivery would be a useful complement to existing means of providing information on services, but were hesitant about its value for processes like applying for services, making complaints, or handling enquiries. They felt that electronic systems could not undertake the complex judgements and assessments required, nor provide the necessary level of interactivity and support.**
-  **Service users shared this perspective and were also concerned about the barriers electronic service delivery may pose to people on low incomes. In addition, security of personal information was a major concern.**

Background

During the 1980s and 1990s, whole sections of business administration were replaced by computerised systems. These handled much of the day-to-day organisation formerly undertaken by large numbers of staff, and also took over some of the exchanges between companies and their customers. Unstaffed computerised systems began to handle significant proportions of telephone enquiries and direct selling became possible through the development of e-commerce.

In the early 1990s, the US government began to look at using these same processes for government services. Strategies along very similar lines had been developed by the turn of the century across all of the EU and most other economically developed countries. In England, the 1999 White Paper *Modernising government* introduced a strategy designed to permeate all aspects of central and local government. An initial target to have all government services available electronically by 2008 was quickly revised down to 2005 and the Office of the E-Envoy, reporting directly to the Prime Minister, was established to pursue the objective of getting Britain online.

Electronic service delivery is focused on the ways in which service users interact with the computer systems that administer services. For the purposes of this research, this meant the interaction between the tenants of social landlords, users of housing related support services and users of community care services and the organisations commissioning and providing those services. This interaction can happen in one of two ways:

- Assisted contact - staff, working in the community or in a call centre, use the computerised systems for handling enquiries, applications, assessments and complaints on behalf of a service user.
- Self-service contact - individuals use the computerised systems for themselves, via a website or similar interactive service: this might mean filling in an application online, arranging the time and date a service will call (such as a housing repair service) or using a computerised complaints system.

Achieving all the anticipated benefits of electronic service delivery - such as 24-hour access and

reductions in staff costs - will require maximum use of 'self-service' contact.

This research was concerned with understanding what the impact of electronic service delivery might be on the people using social housing, housing related support and personal care services. It also examined the views of organisations that commissioned and provided these services. At the time the research was conducted, electronic service delivery was still in its infancy, so the study examined its introduction and potential, rather than looking at a working system. The research considered:

- the extent to which social housing, housing related support and social care commissioners and providers have developed electronic service delivery;
- the attitudes of service users and service providers;
- the potential benefits and costs.

Progress in developing electronic service delivery

While most local authorities had websites, the survey conducted showed that they were not using them as a major means to disseminate information on services. Only 15 per cent of social services departments reported that they were providing 'detailed' information on community care. Those local authorities providing housing tended to provide only basic information (a pattern repeated amongst Registered Social Landlords - RSLs). Indeed, 17 per cent of local authorities (23 per cent of RSLs) provided no information about their housing services at all. Online information on eligibility for services or how to complain about services was rare. By contrast, tourist information on local authority websites was far more common.

As expected, electronic service delivery was effectively undeveloped although most local authorities and RSLs responding to the survey had plans to introduce it, particularly the larger organisations. Among the surveyed sample of charities, one-third were providing online services, such as email-based counselling or web-based information services, but the majority had no plans to develop either online services or electronic service delivery. Overall, 74 per cent of local authorities, 48

per cent of RSLs and 50 per cent of charities were seeking to increase their use of the Internet. Local authorities were particularly keen to develop online applications for services (93 per cent), use the web as a major source of information for service users (97 per cent) and employ the Internet as a means of enhancing the voices of service users (82 per cent). Half the authorities saw a potential to reduce administrative costs and 63 per cent saw potential to develop online services.

Almost none of the websites run by charities, local authorities or RSLs had given specific attention to how they could be accessed by disabled people or those whose first language was not English.

The views of service users and staff

Senior managers tended to have largely positive views of electronic service delivery. Some case study organisations had already replaced counter and area office based services with call centres and websites and others were developing interactive digital television service delivery with private sector partners. Respondents accepted that electronic service delivery could not handle complex procedures like community care assessments on its own, although they thought it could support these processes and wholly automate more straightforward ones. There was an expectation that convenience and efficiency would lead to service users taking-up electronic service delivery, especially in its 'self-service' form.

"... 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)

Frontline staff were generally more hesitant. They felt that providing information via new media like the web was likely to be useful, but that processes like assessment, processing applications and even dealing with enquiries needed face-to-face interaction between frontline staff and service users.

"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 ..." (Manager, Charity)

The service users interviewed had varied relationships with technology. Some older people were avid users of the Internet, others were not too sure about even switching a computer on. The same mixture of attitudes, although in the general context of greater exposure to computers, was found among the vulnerable young people and people with mental health problems interviewed.

Generally, service users shared the views of frontline staff. Something like electronic service delivery could be successfully used for information provision, but when they wanted questions answered, were making an enquiry or a complaint or applying for a service, they wanted the interaction to be with another person. There was no particular resistance to the use of technology but the concept of 'self-service' electronic service delivery, which underpins many of the anticipated gains in efficiency and reductions in cost, was not popular.

"Even on the Net, even with your, you know, with your FAQs, frequently asked questions, and whatnot, 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 people's group)

"I'm sorry, that is private business, I mean why should I have to talk to a screen instead of seeing the person?" (Young people's group)

Service users were also concerned that some electronic service delivery systems, particularly the Internet, would simply not be affordable. At the time the research was conducted, around 37 per cent of households had Internet access (ONS, June 2001) with the proportion being markedly lower among poorer households. However, a combination of the various policies under the Government's UK Online initiative and the falling costs of technology meant that the managers in the case study organisations did

not see this as a long-term problem.

There were also concerns that computers were inherently insecure. Many service users, including most of the young people, were reluctant to use e-commerce for this reason, let alone place their personal details in relation to seeking a housing or personal care service on a computer. Senior managers simply did not see this as an issue, although some raised the issue of data protection and the need to find ways of successfully integrating it with electronic service delivery.

Conclusion

The research was a 'snapshot' examination of a rapidly changing area of public policy at an early point in its development and its findings should be viewed in that light. Bearing this in mind, the research did suggest a quite marked contrast between managers' views of electronic service delivery as providing cost benefits and efficiency gains, and the generally more hesitant view of service users and frontline staff. All took the view that electronic service delivery could extend and improve the range of information on services, but for the most part only managers took the view that it could successfully automate much of the contact between organisations and their service users.

Service users wanted to deal with other people when making enquiries, applying for services or making a complaint, a perspective that was also put forward by front-line staff. The research strongly suggests that extensive consultation is needed to ensure that the views of service users are represented and that electronic service delivery is introduced carefully and sensitively.

Above all, the potential cost-benefits of self-service delivery to agencies need to be properly balanced against the needs and preferences of service users. Self-service delivery should be introduced not simply because it reduces cost, but also because it will clearly improve the accessibility and responsiveness of services.

About the project

The research employed a postal survey, conducted during mid-2000, and covering English local authorities, a sample of Registered Social Landlords and a sample of charities. Interviews were also conducted with 30 representatives of 17 organisations falling within these categories, and focus groups held with 58 service users (separated into older people, vulnerable young people, and people with a mental health problem). These groups were selected because of their widely ranging needs, characteristics and experiences.

How to get further information

A report of the research, housing.support.org.uk: **Social housing, social care and electronic service delivery** by Nicholas Pleace and Deborah Quilgars, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 069 5, price £13.95).

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