

Websites Facilitating Community Engagement? The Case of Birmingham City Council

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Abstract

Local government in Britain is currently experiencing a rapid and profound period of change. As part of a broad program of New Labour led modernisation, the role of local government is currently being reconfigured away from the practice of local *government*, and towards the practice of local *governance*. The essence of this shift is bound up in a reconceived role for councils as 'community leaders', facilitating the development of 'strategic partnerships' across their localities. The upshot is that councils are now legislated to directly engage private, voluntary, and community groups and organisations in service delivery and decision-making.

The Internet is seen as key to this programme of reform. By providing a platform for diverse local voices to be heard, the Internet is primarily regarded as a means for developing greater community engagement in the governing process. Accordingly, under legislative pressure, all local councils in the UK have now developed websites, and their 'electronic interactions' with citizens are routinely monitored by central government.

Birmingham City Council (BCC) has not been slow in reacting to these changes. Its website, first established in 1994, has recently been assessed as one of the top 10 local government sites in the UK (being awarded the key accolade — 'transactional'). Drawing on an extended period of field research within the organisation, this paper evaluates the extent to which the website facilitates greater community engagement. This involves accessing not only the website's evolving functionality, but also its relationship to BCC's organisational structure, managerial hierarchy, and organisational culture.

Keywords

Local government, governance, community engagement, Internet, websites

Introduction

As has been widely noted in the literature (see for example Byrne 2000; Goss 2001; Heeks 1999; Orr 1998; Snape 2000; Stoker 1999a, 2000; Wilson and Game 2002), local government in the UK is currently experiencing a particularly rapid period of change, change which can be traced in the main to successive reform programmes mounted by central government. Although the roots of this state of "apparent perpetual motion" (Wilson and Game 2002, p.14) can be traced back as far as the rise of Thatcherism in the late 1970s, the pace and magnitude of change in the sector has accelerated under New Labour. Whilst such dynamism

means few commentators speak with certainty about the future of local government, the notion that councils should become far more effective in engaging their communities is a key characteristic of this current period of reform (Cabinet Office 1999). Equally, it is clear that New Labour has identified the broad implementation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and in particular the Internet, as a crucial part of this process. Internet use has been heralded as key to local councils effectively engaging the broader community in decision-making and service delivery, and, under legislative pressure, each UK council has been forced to develop a website as part of a shift to 'e-government' (CITU 2000; Cabinet Office 2000; PIU 2000).

In drawing upon a case study of Internet use in Birmingham City Council (BCC), this paper investigates the extent to which the implementation of Internet technology facilitates greater community engagement in local government. Whilst it is recognised that broader issues clearly matter to such an analysis (as Kuk (2002) has shown in relation to UK councils' electronic service delivery and local 'digital divides'), the focus of this article has been specifically placed upon the *organisational* context of Internet use in local government. In concentrating on organisational issues, the research reported here recognises that "the democratic effects of telecommunications technologies can be enriched by greater attention to institutional detail" (Musso et al. 2000, p. 3). That is, it is argued that — if the Internet as a tool for community engagement in local government is to be fully understood — full account must be taken of how the use of Internet technology interacts with the established organisational dynamics of local government.

This paper first briefly outlines the methodology used to investigate BCC, and then moves on to present the results of the research. This initially involves tracing BCC's responses to New Labour's modernising agenda — which have seen the organisation adapt to a fundamentally new role as a 'community leader' (a shift which has seen more attention than ever before placed upon effective forms of consultation and engagement with the public). Next, in light of these changes to 'modern' local government, BCC's use of Internet technology is discussed. Focus will be placed in particular upon the redevelopment of BCC's website (www.birmingham.gov.uk) to bring it more in line with the modernising agenda. This analysis will highlight that BCC has sought to utilise the Internet to facilitate community engagement in two main ways. Firstly, by using the technology to open up new 'electronic channels' with citizens. Secondly, by using the Internet to enable the better sharing of information within the organisation — a move referred to as 'joined up'/networked e-government. On the face of it, these Internet facilitated changes will point towards BCC experiencing a considerable shift towards a new networked organisational form — a 'learning organisation' capable of engaging with the community it serves in new ways. However, in the remainder of the paper I concentrate on exploring how shifts to 'electronic channels' and 'joined up government' need to be problematised in relation to three important contextual factors — BCC's pre-existing

organisational structure, its organisational culture, and established managerial decision-making procedures. Ultimately, it is argued that these factors significantly limit the extent to which Internet use within BCC results in greater community engagement.

Methodology

The research design incorporated a triangulation of three distinct research methodologies. Firstly, a period of participant-observation within BCC was conducted over a seven-month period from May to November 2000. A total of 44 days were spent working in the organisation — primarily in the Equalities Division of the Personnel and Organisation Department. The emphasis here was weighted more to observation than participation. However, as part of the conditions of gaining access to the organisation, I was tasked with producing a research report that aimed to investigate the potential for utilising ICTs to engage ‘socially excluded’ communities in the Birmingham area. This report, *Closer to Citizens? Social Inequality and ICTs*, was published by BCC in 2001. Secondly, a total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with BCC employees, and two with members of the Council, over the period August 1999 to August 2001. The job role and function of these individuals varied widely, but each was, in one way or another, involved in implementing or running ICT projects. Thirdly, an extensive amount of documentary analysis was conducted, which was primarily aimed at tracking policy developments in the ‘modernising agenda’. This particular combination of methodologies was chosen in order to enable a ‘grounded’ study of Internet use in the organisation to be completed. A primary aim here, in line with an interpretative epistemology, was to gain an understanding of how the research participants made sense of their use of Internet technology, particularly in relation to constructions of community and community engagement. The timeframe of the research coincided with the planning stages of a significant revamp of the organisations website (discussed in detail in the analysis sections which follow).

New Labour led ‘modernisation’, community engagement and BCC

New Labour came to power in 1997 with a desire to build upon, and modify, the programme of local government reform instigated in the 1980s and 1990s by successive conservative governments. This was primarily articulated in their concern to ‘modernise’ the public service (Cabinet Office 1999; DETR 1998), and enacted into law in the Local Government Acts of 1999 and 2000. Seeing local authorities as distanced from their electorates and less than open/accountable in their operation, in ‘modernising’ local government New Labour has instigated a series of important changes to the way in which local government operates. Perhaps most prominently, the traditional committee system has been replaced with a division between executive and scrutiny structures. As Cole (2003, p. 182) summarises, each authority must now adopt a structure based upon “one of 3 models: a directly elected mayor and a cabinet; a directly elected mayor and a council manager; and a leader and cabinet”. BCC, which has been Labour-led for the past 25 years, moved extremely quickly to adopt the

leader and cabinet model in January 2000 — ahead of the actual law change later that year. Accordingly, the executive function of BCC is now shared between an executive committee (which decides on major strategic and financial issues), 11 ‘advisory teams’ (effectively sub-committees of the executive committee, that are open to the public and control key services such as social services), and a cabinet comprised of the chairs of the advisory teams and the executive committee (which coordinates the work of the advisory teams). The working of the executive is now also overseen by 12 scrutiny committees, which also meet in public, whose work is coordinated by a scrutiny management board. These changes aim to make BCC more ‘efficient’ in its operation, as well as providing for the ‘proper’ monitoring of the council’s policy development and performance by Birmingham’s citizens (BCC 2000a).

Alongside these changes, New Labour has implemented a ‘Best Value’ performance framework for local government — which replaces the older system of Compulsory Competitive Tendering. As such, the 1999 Act now places a legal duty on local government to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness” (HMSO 1999, Clause 3.1). This new regime is based around a requirement for local authorities to consult with service users and then set, and publish in a ‘performance plan’, clear performance targets. An excellent overview of the complexities of this new regime has been provided by Geddes and Martin (2000). However, for the purposes of the current paper it is principally necessary to note that BCC’s political leadership has fully endorsed the adoption of the new regime, and quickly published its first performance plan in 2000. The plan itself was organised around 6 key themes, with the creation of an “informed and involved (local) people” (BCC 2000b, p. 4) being one of them.

Whilst these changes have extremely important ramifications for local government, of perhaps greater longer term significance has been the new emphasis placed upon the revitalisation of community in relation to ‘modernising’ local government. New Labour has not only stated clearly that it wants to “see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils” (DETR 1998, p. 39), it has also placed a legislative duty upon them to promote the overall ‘well being’ of the communities they serve (HMSO 1999). As part of this duty each council is now required to produce and publish a community plan for their locality (BCC published its first ‘Community Strategy’ in 2002). Moreover, councils have been given increased powers to enter into partnerships with private, voluntary, and community groups. That is, rather than operate as a unitary decision maker and provider of services, the idea is that councils should operate at the apex of a network of institutions, as ‘community leaders’. This shift to community leadership has received a great deal of academic attention (for example see Chandler 2001; Clarke and Stewart 2000; Leach and Percy-Smith 2001), and it has been convincingly argued that the very purpose of local government has been transformed by such developments — away from the practice of local government (via unitary

councils operating in relative isolation) and towards the practice of local governance (see Stewart 2000; Stoker 1999a, 2000). Thus governing 'outcomes' now depend upon complex interactions between networks of institutions, with the council performing a role of 'facilitation' as opposed to public administration (Goss 2001).

In line with this new network paradigm, BCC is actively seeking to engage with New Labour's agenda by developing "a new partnership approach to the governance of the city" (BCC 2001, p. 8):

"The Council cannot plan and deliver every public service and development within the city. A successful city relies on strong community networks, built on the skills and commitment of local people, on a thriving network of voluntary and private organisations which can contribute to the city's success and on large public agencies and private companies that can bring significant resources to the city" (BCC 2001, p. 8).

This new emphasis on 'partnership' is evident in BCC's desire to more effectively engage citizens and established community/voluntary groups in decision-making. Indeed, many employees see the move to a partnership approach as truly reflecting a new relationship between the council and the communities it serves, one where BCC becomes a part of developing the 'infrastructure' of community life:

"A substantial part of our work now is around creating the infrastructures which are ... effectively community based or based in the voluntary sector, whereby those ... community views may be articulated and brought forward. We are beginning to achieve this. For example we have a Race Action Partnership which brings together the City Council and other key institutions — the Health Service, Learning and Skills Council, CRE [Commission on Racial Equality], and others on the race agenda, to engage with the views of the black minority ethnic communities" (Interview, September 2001).

BCC has therefore responded in comprehensive ways to each of the three major elements of modernisation: new executive structures, the new 'Best Value' performance framework, and the redefinition of councils as 'community leaders'. With this background in mind, I now turn to an examination of the central position of the Internet in terms of this agenda for change.

Modernisation, the Internet, and community engagement at BCC

At the same time as New Labour outlined its agenda for modernising the public service, it made it clear that ICTs had a central role to play in the process (Cabinet Office 1998). Indeed, the progression of the modernising agenda has been accompanied by a "feverish outpouring of policy papers and guidance" (Hudson 2003, p. 271) related to the role of ICTs in governmental reform. The Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Office Central IT Unit (CITU) and the

Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), the latter two newly formed as part of the modernising programme, have led the way here — publishing the following key policy statements: *E-Government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age* (Cabinet Office 2000a), *Implementing E-Government: Guidelines for Local Government* (CITU 2000), and *E-Gov: Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century* (PIU 2000).. In broad terms, the vision being outlined emphasises utilising the networking potential of ICTs in two inter-related ways: first to create new electronic access ‘channels’ for citizens, with websites being featured most prominently; second, to utilise ICTs in the better sharing of information within and between governmental departments and agencies as part of ‘joined up’ government. Via these developments, ICTs are to aid the modernising process by creating a ‘citizen-facing’ government. That is, ICTs are to aid in shifting government towards a strong *external* focus on the needs of “people — people as consumers, people as citizens” (Cabinet Office 1999, p. 5). For example, citizen-facing government aims to treat people in a more ‘holistic fashion’ (CITU 2000; PIU 2000) by reorganising the provision of governmental information around ‘life-themes’ (such as finding work or starting a family). Consultation with the public, beyond issues solely regarding the delivery of specific services to include broader policy development processes, is also prioritised in shifts to citizen-facing government. This vision of an ICT-enabled, modernised public service has been applied as strictly to local government as it has been to central agencies and departments, and is therefore intimately tied to the key concern to foster greater local community engagement with councils through the modernising programme.

The creation of electronic access channels is aimed at enabling citizens to choose “when and where they interact with government”, and will mean *all* services will become available “24 hours a day, 7 days a week” (PIU 2000, p. 17). Indeed, New Labour has committed itself to ensuring that all services are made available electronically by the end of 2005, and as part of this goal developed a Best Value Performance Indicator — BVPI157 — which measures the “percentage of interactions with the public, by type, which are capable of electronic services delivery and which are being delivered using Internet protocols or other paperless methods” (DETR 2000). This foregrounding of the Internet is typical in terms of the broader e-government agenda. As Kearns et al. (2002, p. 12) report, in terms of ‘citizen centric’ services and e-enabled democratic processes “the principle ICT of relevance ... is considered to be the Internet, accessible by a variety of devices such as PCs, mobile phones and interactive digital TVs”. In practical terms, the use of the Internet in developing electronic channels has centred specifically on the need to develop websites, with e-government policy therefore putting websites at the heart of public sector strategy (SOCITM 2001).

In terms of its experience in utilising Internet technology, BCC was relatively well placed to respond to this call for developing electronic channels. The Economic Development Department first developed a website in 1994, well ahead of most local councils (and ahead

of the development of the modernising agenda itself). Then named 'Birmingham Assist',¹ the website was originally part of an innovative strategy for delivering work training schemes to people in their homes. However, it quickly outgrew this limited remit as it began to be utilised by the development team to publicise additional information about BCC and its services. In 1996 a decision was made to adopt Birmingham Assist as the Council's 'official' site, and in 1997 the management of Assist was transferred to the Libraries and Learning Division. As the modernising agenda progressed throughout the late 1990s, however, concern grew within the senior management of BCC that the existing website had "...now fallen behind other councils in the scope, style, clarity and interactivity of what it offer[ed]" (WDSG 2001, p. 1). The redevelopment and re-launch of the website was therefore planned throughout 2001 and executed in 2002 (by UK IT consultancy Morse Hughes Ray). In line with New Labour's modernising agenda, the purpose of the website was redefined by the Website Development Steering Group (WDSG):

"The purpose of Birmingham City Council's website is to: be a source of information; provide an interactive and transactional channel for access to services; give a platform for local voices, reflecting citizens views and concerns; help fulfil the city council's community leadership role" (WDSG 2001, pp. 2-3).

In line with these goals, the redevelopment of the website has resulted in a number of substantive changes. In terms of providing information, BCC's website already presented a great deal of content online before the revamp even began — 7000 pages by June 2001 (WDSG 2001). However, significant progress has been made in terms of usability. Since the completion of the revamp in 2002 each webpage now conforms to a standardised template that incorporates new navigational features. That is, each webpage is now framed by menus along the top and left hand side which provide hyperlinks to particular topics, and an additional series of 'quick links' has been provided to those specific pages that generate most demand — for example links to the home page, a 'what's on page', job listings (for BCC positions), a 'what's new' page listing recent updates and additions to the website, and an 'A-Z webpage' listing specific topics of information (as well as services provided by the council) in alphabetical order. The presentation of information has also been fundamentally reorganised. As opposed to the core of the site revolving around a series of departmental web pages, issues are now grouped into 7 'life themes' which represent distinct sections of the website, including 'business and the economy', 'community', 'environment', 'health', 'learning', 'leisure and tourism', and 'your council'. In line with the modernising agenda's goal of producing 'citizen-facing' government, this reorganisation of information means citizens no longer have to understand the complexities of BCC's organisational structure in order to quickly locate the information that they are after. Notably, the 'your council' themed section includes a series of easily navigable links to key policy documents and reports, which are all now provided online in a PDF format — including BCC's annual opinion survey, cabinet

reports, and community plans/strategy documentation (and, in addition, each webpage itself is also available in a printer friendly version).

The goal of providing a 'platform for local voices' has been addressed by bolstering the interactive features of the website. A 'contact us' page gives details for contacting BCC by post, telephone, email and fax, provides links to email contact details for all major services, and also provides an online form for providing feedback directly to the web administrator. The website also hosts a discussion forum for Birmingham's citizens, where issues of regarding the council, its policies, and the locality in general are discussed (participants must register online and all topics for discussion must be approved beforehand by the council). Besides listing contact details for services, a number of council services have been made directly available via the website — for example citizens can pay their council tax and businesses can pay their rates, leisure centres can be booked, and the libraries joined/books renewed. There are also a number of electronic forms available (for example for street fault reporting), and users are also encouraged to contribute to the website itself (for example by suggesting links to alternative sites or by adding an event to the 'what's on' page).

The last significant feature of the revamp revolved around shifting the technological platform used from a Lotus Notes to an Oracle database, which means that the website is now, in principle, accessible across a variety of access devices — from mobile phones, to the web, to iDTV and kiosk systems (although no substantive moves to make the most of this functionality have yet been made: initial attempts to develop an iDTV service with local cable provider Telewest were begun in 2001 but abandoned in 2002 due to technical problems). However, the inter-operability provided by the shift to an Oracle database has meant that, within BCC as an organisation, the website can be used as a central source of information for the new Customer Contact Centre (which represents the other major step towards BCC's creation of 'electronic channels'). This phone centre, established in 2001, now deals with approximately 80 per cent of incoming calls to BCC (BCC 2003), and its operators use the information contained in the Oracle database to deal with enquires. Together, these two initiatives have meant that, as of 2003, BCC has been able to claim that 100 per cent of its interactions with the public are deliverable electronically (under the definition of the term provided by BVPI157) — well ahead of the 2005 deadline. Moreover, in their 2003 survey of all 468 local authority websites the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM) reported that BCC had achieved 'transactional' website status — the highest category of achievement. Only nine other local authorities achieved this status, and therefore SOCITM had rated the revamped BCC site as one of the ten best in the UK (that is, in the top two per cent of all sites).

Alongside their drive to establish electronic channels, BCC has also sought to address the second major theme of modernisation — the better sharing of information via 'joined up government'. The key project in this regard is the development of BCC's Wide Area Network

(WAN) in 1996. The establishment of the WAN prompted the organisation as a whole to adopt a common, open set of communications protocols (TCP/IP; XML). Departments have utilised these protocols to develop a series of departmental intranets. However, whilst these facilitate greater information sharing within departments, they do not currently facilitate information sharing between departments (a problematic point I will discuss later in relation to managerial decision-making procedures). However, perhaps more significantly, the WAN has also allowed for the development, for the first time, of corporate — council wide — IT applications that utilise client-server technologies. The most prominent of these are GLAMIS (a city-wide general ledger system) and the Human Resource application HRIS. By superseding individual departmental applications, these have provided easier, timelier access to some management information on a city wide basis. Moreover, in conjunction with the growing use of email within BCC, the WAN has provided a means for experimentation with a range of other applications of networking technologies. Only a very few of these networking initiatives currently operate across the organisation as a whole; for example the Better Governance Forum — an email discussion list intended to be utilised by employees to discuss the modernisation of BCC — provides access to a council wide online forum. However, the most important point to note in terms of the development of the WAN is it has provided the technical *potential*, in utilising TCP/IP as a common ‘internal’ communication protocol, for the integration of attempts to develop joined up government with the creation of electronic channels. This allows, in principle at least, for new forms of interaction between BCC and the public which dissolve sharp distinctions between internal information exchanges and communications with external users of the electronic channels.

In summary, in adopting its new ‘community leadership’ role, BCC has made significant moves to adapt to the model of e-government outlined in the modernising agenda. That is, a model of government as a citizen-facing, flexible, networked, ‘learning organisation’ utilising the Internet to develop electronic channels and joined up government (and thereby becoming capable of developing new forms of community engagement in decision-making and service delivery). In the remainder of this paper I will set the changes outlined thus far against an analysis of the broader organisational context of BCC by discussing three inter-related themes: the organisational structure of BCC, the organisational culture of BCC, and the managerial and decision-making processes of BCC. Ultimately I will argue that, despite the significant changes that have been made, these factors limit the extent to which shifts towards electronic channels and joined up government within BCC have resulted in more effective forms of community engagement.

The organisational structure of BCC — “You can’t turn a super tanker around on a six-pence”

Like all other UK local authorities, BCC operates as, in the words of one senior manager, a “dual organisation” (Interview, August 2001). Alongside the political structure of BCC (which

has been altered in line with 'modernisation') sits the bureaucratic/organisational component of local government. In the case of BCC this structure is both massive in size and complex in operation. BCC provides over 200 different services, spends approximately £2.3 billion annually, and employs over 50,000 people. This bureaucratic structure is set up with the overriding goal of supporting council members in the implementation of policy. The work of 43 neighbourhood offices, the network of local libraries, the work of local education authorities, and, indeed, the operation of many other organisational 'units' are coordinated by a single central office. This central office was the location of the fieldwork reported here, and provided the main focus for the analysis. Its structure is built around the functional breakdown of activities into 12 separate departments (most oriented around specific services such as Social Welfare or Housing, but some with a more 'corporate' orientation, like Personnel and Organisation), each of which in turn has a number of divisions under its control (which in turn may be further divided into the work of various divisional teams). Traditionally, each department has acted as a largely independent entity, seeing its functional remit as requiring little in the way of cooperation with other sectors of the Council. This structural divide is supported by many facets of the Council's operation, but the key factor seemed to be that budgets/spending levels are administered at a departmental level. Thus spending priorities, though guided by policy, remain largely within departmental control.

This departmental structure has impacted on the way information systems have developed within BCC. Although a corporately oriented Central IT Division exists within the Personnel and Organisation Department, it is responsible for administering, but not controlling, the procurement of hardware and software. Each department, being largely autonomous, retains the power to devise, create and/or commission its own ICT systems. Often these systems have been specifically tailored to meet the needs of each department, and therefore the result has been the creation of a set of 'information silos': a plethora of systems that are largely incompatible with each other. Indeed, according to a senior IT manager, the 10 major service departments alone operated, by 1999, over 380 different ICT applications (Interview, 1999). The call to joined up government is therefore a political agenda that runs up against entrenched organisational uses of ICTs that are often fundamentally opposed to the sharing of information. Moreover, whilst political changes (such as BCC's changes to committee structures) may happen with relative rapidity, organisational change at the departmental level takes considerably more time and effort. Indeed, variations on the view that 'you can't turn a super tanker around on a six-pence' were recited several times in interview, as well as in day-to-day conversations, for example:

"Trying to produce change in Birmingham City Council is like trying to turn a super-tanker around on a six-pence. There's a lot of momentum behind the old structures" (Interview, October 1999).

This 'momentum behind the old structures' results in networked, inter-departmental uses of ICTs like the website, which utilise common protocols and data standards, co-existing with departmental stand-alone systems, based upon functional divisions between departments, and utilising incompatible data standards.

In terms of redeveloping BCC as an organisation capable of new forms of community engagement, much depends upon shifts towards joined up government. However, the degree to which 'joined up' government is realised will fundamentally depend upon the extent to which departmental information silos can be phased out in favour of networked ICT applications. Whether or not this will occur is currently a matter for debate. As Chadwick (2003) notes, the "Weberian exigencies" (p. 446) that drive the creation of information silos within government will come under increasing pressure in the shift to e-government, but this does not mean that they will disappear. Departments will still need to process large amounts of relatively discrete data — processes involving comparatively simple forms of data entry, archiving and automation that will remain amenable to customised ICT solutions. This may help explain why departmental IT managers interviewed within BCC varied in their reaction to developing a coordinated approach. Some felt comfortable with the notion that ICT development should be standardised and controlled inter-departmentally but some did not. Given that departmental coordination cannot be easily enforced where resistance to a corporate approach is encountered, BCC itself has identified structural issues as a major 'internal' risk factor in implementing joined up e-government:

"IEG [Implementing E-government] activities will need to be prioritised and coordinated corporately. Initiatives or projects which conflict with IEG objectives will need to be halted or constrained ... Traditionally, the City Council has little experience of these methods of working or of the project management disciplines which are needed to support them" (BCC 2001, p. 17)

Structural issues do not only impact upon BCC's drive to develop joined up government, they also impact upon its drive to establish unified, comprehensive electronic channels. Whilst the Assist website was adopted as BCC's 'official' site back as far back as 1996, many departments have resisted this move, preferring to develop their own websites that they deem better suited to facilitating their interactions with the community. Indeed, by the time the redevelopment of the official site was being planned in 2001, 17 separate websites existed promoting BCC services. These websites, containing significant amounts of information and offering their own interactive services, include major sites such as the 'Birmingham Grid for Learning' <<http://www.bgfl.org/bgfl/>>, run by the Education Department, and the 'Locate Birmingham' site <<http://www.locatebirmingham.org.uk/>> run by Economic Development. The growth of these sites raises serious issues for the notion that Internet technology is providing a user friendly, citizen-oriented (as opposed to departmentally-oriented) electronic channel for interacting with Birmingham's citizens. As the Website Development Steering Group itself

commented: “the corporate value of promoting a city council service and the move to a cross-cutting approach to our work is being lost by the stand alone nature of these sites” (WDSG 2001, p. 3). The redevelopment of the website in 2001/2002 therefore sought to address this issue by providing extensive numbers of hyper-links to these other sites — making it easier to navigate through them and return to the official site without ‘leaving’ BCC. Nevertheless, this does nothing to address the underlying dynamics of the situation. The overall web presence of BCC manifests the same tensions, between a corporate and a departmental approach, evident in the development of ‘information silos’. The redesigning of the official site to present BCC online as a singular organisation, oriented outwards towards community engagement, is in fact incongruous with the more fragmented reality that emerges when these alternative departmental websites are considered.

The organisational culture of BCC — ‘warring Balkan states’?

Given the size of BCC, and its functionally divided nature, assessing its corporate culture is a complex task. In fact, it is more accurate to talk of BCC’s corporate cultures — there are varying systems of values and beliefs which inform organisational behaviour. However, I wish to focus on only two aspects of this level of differentiation and complexity, which were raised by employees as common themes in relation to how cultural issues impact upon utilising the Internet to develop electronic channels and joined up government. First, differing departments have *unique* cultures which often lead to very different understandings of the role that electronic channels should play in community engagement. Second, employees continually referred to a broader background of inter-departmental hostility, or a general culture of conflict *between* departments, that acted as an important background to the changes being wrought by moves to partnership and joined up government. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Whilst the modernising agenda has raised the profile of Internet use, prioritising the creation of electronic channels with the community across the organisation as a whole, the ways in which this is interpreted varies within BCC. This is not an issue related to the technology per se, nor merely to structural/functional divides, but to different, strongly held beliefs about how the Internet is best used to improve relationships with the community. The proliferation of websites beyond the official site is, therefore, not merely due to structural factors. Cultural differences mean different departments often view citizens/‘the community’ in fundamentally different ways, and therefore set about developing different sets of electronic channels:

“Behind structural divides lie differences in outlook, differences in the way in which people perceive the citizen, which then lead to differences in the ways of collecting data about them” (Interview, July 2000).

Indeed, in this context the imposition of a single, ‘official’ website for BCC has been viewed with suspicion by some departments — being seen as an issue of internal politics, i.e. a

politically led effort to impose central control over their affairs, rather than being a *citizen*-focused attempt at developing electronic channels:

“There is tension between the proposition that BCC is a single organisation, and I’m willing to accept that it is, and the fact that there is ... a divergence between its [departmental] functional units. Each of these functions is increasingly creating a different relationship with the community and establishing a different set of links in terms of private partnerships. They all have different values on promotion. The problem is that, despite the growing awareness of the need for integration, the business unit approach is still strong ... Assist [the ‘official’ website] is caught in the middle of these moves. There is a debate over whether Assist represents an outdated attempt at control or a move towards integration” (Interview, June 2001).

These debates and tensions over the official website, driven by ‘different values on promotion’ as well as functional divides, are not only played out in terms of the proliferation of websites. Some departments see the Internet as an entirely inappropriate device for dealing with the community/communities they serve — which may be perceived as socially disadvantaged and lacking Internet access. Rather than produce alternative websites, these departments have tended to resist utilising the Internet altogether. Thus, whilst the success of the official site depends on its varied content being continually updated by all departments, some departments have conducted what one employee referred to as “guerrilla warfare” (Interview, September 2001) in this regard. That is, officially departmental managers agree to update the website’s content, and then proceed to make this task an extremely low priority or fail to allocate personnel to web development altogether. This has meant that, historically, some of the web content of the official site has quickly become “embarrassingly out of date” (Interview, August 2001).

However, the revamp of the website has sought to address this issue through relocating the web development team to the Corporate Communications (or public relations) Department (a more ‘corporately’ focused section of BCC than Library Services), and strengthening its line management through the creation of a new e-government managerial post with “responsibility for the final approval of web pages, troubleshooting and developing the website to meet future needs” (WDSG 2001, p. 6). Whilst such organisational moves effectively cede much of the editorial control away from departments, and may therefore improve the timeliness of the online content they provide, they do not necessarily result in all departments becoming committed to the ongoing development of the Internet as a full electronic channel, in the manner proposed by modernisation. Forms of ‘guerrilla warfare’, such as departments committing to post only limited amounts of information, may well continue into the future (this is, however, a matter for further research).

These types of issues lead into the second area of concern raised by BCC employees regarding the inter-relationship between Internet use and organisational culture — that is, the widely held view that “BCC has evolved a culture of non-cooperation between departments” (Interview, October 1999). Indeed, one employee rather expressively pointed out the extent to which conflict was considered a key cultural concern: “I’ve worked in local authorities where conflict has been an issue, but it’s like warring Balkan states in here” (Interview, October 2000). Although this comment was intended by the interviewee to be interpreted flippantly, the metaphor of ‘warring states’ does succinctly sum up this very real facet of conflict within the organisation’s overall culture. The different departments within BCC have not only tended to operate in a functionally divided way that is opposed to viewing the citizen holistically, they have often viewed any ‘interference’ from other departments in their relations with citizens extremely negatively — as “an intrusion on their turf” (Interview, October 1999).

During the period of participant observation at BCC such conflict was rarely overtly expressed in day-to-day working life; nor does it characterise all relations between departments. Rather, the key point is that debate over the development of ICT systems is one major area where often latent forms of inter-departmental conflict are brought to the fore. Ultimately this is because, as Peled (2001, p. 690) argues, “the information contained inside computers often determines which organisational factions will gain or lose power relative to others”. Indeed, many involved in implementing and developing the newer *inter*-departmental ICT systems, including Assist and its revamp, viewed cultural conflict as being far more important than technical problems and strictly ‘functional’ divides:

“[When implementing inter-departmental systems] people will meet with you and tell you that your ideas were good and that they were behind you. Then various [technical] issues would come up, and you would have to solve them ... Then once you’d solved them more issues would spring up and you would try to tackle them, and so it would go on and on until finally you would realise that the real issue is cultural” (Interview, July 2000).

This issue therefore helps further explain the proliferation of standalone websites and the continued existence of information silos within BCC. The production of incompatible departmental ICT systems is not only related to functional necessity, it is also derived from a broader culture of conflict which means managers often *actively* seek to bolster divisions between departments by creating stand alone systems and resisting inter-departmental developments. In fact this culture of conflict suggests that, even should the technical barriers to fully joined up e-government eventually be overcome as the modernising agenda progresses, this is in itself no guarantee that information sharing will actually occur — a problem that has been documented elsewhere, for example in Landsbergen and Wolken’s (2001) analysis of federal and state officials in the USA.

The managerial hierarchy of BCC — ‘Who makes what decisions and on what basis’?

Whilst the decision-making processes of BCC’s political structure have quickly been altered in line with modernisation, to a cabinet style of ‘governance’ described previously, the decision-making processes of the bureaucratic/organisational component of the organisation have remained relatively unchanged. Each department of BCC is dominated by comparatively rigid, hierarchical, vertical management structures that have traditionally been geared at supporting the functional separation of BCC’s activities (predominantly in terms of the core business of the Council — service delivery). The vast majority of the £2.3 billion spent annually by BCC is controlled from within these departmental management structures. As many employees continually noted, this situation raises a number of issues for BCC in terms of analysing shifts to joined up government and the creation of electronic channels.

In the first instance, BCC’s development of unified, ‘citizen-centric’ electronic channels sits, in some respects, uncomfortably with the division of managerial decision-making powers along functionally divided lines. For relatively simple forms of online interaction (such as the payment of council tax, renewing library books, reporting street faults etc.) the development of electronic channels is relatively unproblematic. This is because these generic forms of engagement with the community do not, essentially, disrupt departmental dynamics as they largely come clearly under the remit of existing departments. They reflect, rather, an extension of existing ways of delivering services into an online environment (with the important caveat that reorganising the website around ‘life themes’ does mark a substantive break from the past — making it far easier for users to locate the services on the website that they wish to access regardless of their knowledge of intricate departmental structures).

For more complex forms of community engagement, such as utilising the online forum to provide a ‘platform for citizens voices’, the ‘offline’ reality of diffused managerial powers becomes much more challenging. If such interaction is to be utilised meaningfully by BCC, it will often need to be debated throughout the Council as a whole — at both political *and* organisational levels (where managerial decisions over implementing policy get made). Yet there are currently no information systems at the ‘back end’ capable of capturing such debate and distributing it to politicians or to departments for discussion, and there are no binding inter-departmental decision-making procedures in place capable of producing a coordinated response to online debates. Innovative cross-cutting internal online forums, such as the Better Governance email discussion list, are not currently linked in any systematic way to feedback generated by the website. These types of complexities are overlooked by performance measures such as BVPI157. The redevelopment of the website to include substantial interactive features has enabled BCC to validly claim — under the definitions provided by the Best Value regime — that its consultation with the public has become ‘100% e-enabled’ (BCC 2003, p. 13). This, however, hides the more complex reality pointed to here. The complexities of how electronic channels can provide effective feedback into policy debate, or into the

corresponding departmental managerial decisions over service delivery and the allocation of resources, have not yet been addressed by BCC.

Whether or not such issues will be resolved is presently unclear. New electronic channels which invite citizens into online debates over the Council's overall performance, or which invite them to contact the Council in order to 'have their say', operate in ways that shift communication beyond departmental control. In the same vein, shifts to joined up government imply a similar loss of departmental autonomy. This loss of departmental control fits the new political agenda well as these changes — in line with notions of facilitating community engagement — are associated with 'including' the citizen, and with giving them an increased degree of power over the decisions which affect them. However, it also means they meet forms of departmental *resistance* as they effectively disrupt established departmental decision-making powers. For example, one senior manager in a major service department raised concerns, which were also expressed by others interviewed, over the entire project of joined up government, commenting:

"I want to know what 'joined up government' means. Who makes the decisions and on what basis?" (Interview, September 2000).

Ultimately then, debates over information exchanges within BCC become bound up in wider internal conflicts over 'who makes what decisions and on what basis'. At stake is the power to control the use of organisational resources. In this sense, control over the flow of information, both between departments themselves and between departments and citizens, acts as one of the organisation's "most important material resources" (Interview, October 2000). That is, it helps determine which elements within the Council eventually gain or lose decision-making power relative to others. For these reasons, despite the new political imperative to 'modernise', many departments are likely to continue to raise questions over the nature of the reforms underway. Shifting BCC towards the form of flexible, learning organisation envisaged in the modernising agenda is likely to continue to encounter ongoing forms of internal resistance.

Conclusions — Websites, joined-up government and community engagement at BCC

In drawing upon a case study of Internet use in Birmingham City Council (BCC), this paper has investigated the extent to which the implementation of Internet technology facilitates greater community engagement in local government. Whilst it was recognised that such a project ultimately requires a broad variety of factors to be taken into account, such as local access rates to ICTs, the focus of this article has been placed upon the *organisational* context of Internet use in local government. Initially, as part of a broader discussion of BCC's response to the modernising agenda, the significant steps the organisation has taken towards the development of 'electronic channels' and 'joined-up government' were discussed. In particular, the redevelopment of BCC's website into an interactive electronic channel for

citizens was discussed in detail. In light of these changes, it was suggested that BCC has made progress in terms of utilising the Internet for facilitating community engagement. However, although these changes are noteworthy, it was demonstrated that when they are set within a wider organisational context issues surrounding structure, culture, and managerial decision-making impact upon the extent to which electronic channels and joined up government have been developed. Rather than straightforwardly shifting towards a new form of citizen-facing 'learning organisation', BCC is actually an organisation in a complex, conflict ridden transition. A conflicting combination of old and new forms of governmental operation currently characterises BCC, a finding that suggests Fountain's (2001) account of the 'virtual state' in the USA, which reaches a similar conclusion in relation to what Fountain terms 'Weber Redux', can be applied to a UK context (and to local, as opposed to central, government).

Ultimately these factors limit the extent to which Internet use within BCC has resulted in new forms of community engagement. Despite the proliferation of websites, it does seem clear that BCC has become relatively adept at presenting a diversity of online information to the public (about the Council and its services as well as the locality). Moreover, the management changes associated with the revamp of the official site, and the shift to organising the site around 'life themes', have acted to improve the maintenance and presentation of much of the information provided by BCC. Such improvements in information provision may eventually act as a catalyst for greater community involvement in local government. The concept of developing new forms of active engagement with citizens/ community groups has, however, been much more problematic for BCC. The interactivity required cuts to the heart of issues of power and control (over resources and decision-making) within the organisation. Real spaces for interaction have been opened up on the official website. For example, the development of an online forum where citizens can have their say is significant. However, it is not clear what linkages will be made between the forum and the rest of the organisation. The extent to which online discussion will feed back into the decision-making process is unclear, and the forum may not impact to any great extent upon the power of politicians and departments to make decisions regarding the locality. Indeed, given the fragmented nature of power within the organisation, it is difficult to see how it could do so. Nor is it clear how much organisational support it will receive on an ongoing basis. Indeed, given these types of issues, Orr's (1998) concerns regarding the nature of face-to-face public meetings in the new form of modernised 'local governance' may equally apply to online interactions with the public:

"There is... a question about the purpose of such exercises — are they designed truly to include people in the decision-making process or merely to legitimate council decisions which will be made elsewhere, and thus socialise the discontented into the council's view of the world? Are we talking about a capacity for 'deliberation' or 'incorporation'?" (p. 232).

Such concerns raise questions over the extent of community participation actually being facilitated by the development of electronic channels. Indeed, currently the forms of 'interaction' that are being successfully facilitated by Internet use within BCC tend to simply revolve around the provision of online forms of service, or primarily relate to dealing with queries about service provision, as these developments tend not to disrupt established organisational structures, cultures, and power relations to any great degree. If Birmingham's citizens are to receive new forms of more convenient online services from BCC's use of the Internet, then this is surely a material benefit not to be lightly dismissed. In fact Orr (1998) also reminds us that the present emphasis on vague notions of governance "marginalises the importance of service delivery and the way in which this is closely bound up in the representative role of local government" (p. 235). That is, in the local government context, services matter to citizens. Community governance would undoubtedly suffer in a neighbourhood where, for example, no rubbish bins were emptied and no streets were cleaned. Nevertheless, improvements to services ultimately represent a very limited version of 'partnership'/community engagement.

Finally, given the current state of dynamism in the local government sector, it should be noted this analysis is not intended to be read as the final word on BCC's utilisation of the Internet in developing forms of community engagement. Indeed, since the completion of the fieldwork described here, two significant changes have already been made to the organisation of BCC that will impact upon the extent to which the organisation's Internet use facilitates community engagement. First, a decision has been made to devolve decision-making powers over some services, such as the rubbish collection, to a local level (although this change is so new that the Audit Commission's (2004) performance assessment of BCC has noted that its impact upon services has not yet been felt). Second, departments have recently been reorganised into five new 'strategic directives' — Resources, Development, Local Services, Learning and Culture, and Social and Health Care. Together these changes will eventually impact considerably upon the themes analysed in this paper. However, this does not mean that they will automatically change or disrupt the organisational dynamics described. For example, despite these changes, the Audit Commission (2004, p. 4) notes that "Cross-cutting [inter-departmental] service working ... is not yet common" — suggesting that departmental boundaries and cultural differences still matter. Nevertheless, such dynamism suggests an urgent need for ongoing research.

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¹The name 'Birmingham Assist' was dropped by BCC as part of the revamp described. The banner over the websites homepage now simply gives the URL: birmingham.gov.uk (a move that is aimed to reflect the status of the site as representing the organisation as a whole).