

## **Scrutiny Topic Assessment - The Expansion of Local Democracy using Digital Means**

### **Purpose of Report**

1. This report presents a scrutiny topic proposed by James Alexander on the expansion of local democracy using digital means – see Annex A, together with background information on e-government transformation. Members are asked to decide if they wish to proceed to scrutiny review.

### **Background to E-Government Transformation**

2. Since the mid-1990s the explosion of the Internet has prompted intense speculation about its ultimate impact upon the economy, society and politics. Many hoped that the Internet would be a powerful new force capable of transforming existing patterns of social inequality, strengthening linkages between citizens and representatives, facilitating new forms of public engagement and communication, and widening opportunities for the development of a global civic society.
3. If politicians were willing to respond to the challenges of digital disruption, the internet could revolutionise the whole political process, massively boosting voter engagement for all ages and move the UK to a system of genuine direct democracy.
4. A recent national [YouGov poll](#) confirmed the majority of people would welcome this change. It found 57% of all UK adults want the opportunity to regularly vote via digital and social media channels on key issues and legislation debated in parliament and this increased to 72% of 18- to 24-year-olds. A significant majority (60%) of this younger age group also said they wanted to be able to vote online in the general election.
5. The delivery of government information and services online through the Internet or other digital means is referred to as 'E-Government'. Unlike traditional structures, which are hierarchical, linear, and one-way, internet delivery systems are non-hierarchical, nonlinear, two-way, and

available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The non-hierarchical character of internet delivery frees citizens to seek information at their own convenience, not just when a government office is open. The interactive aspects of e-government allow both citizens and bureaucrats to send and receive information. By facilitating two-way interaction, electronic governance has been hailed as a way to improve service delivery and responsiveness to citizens, in the long run generating greater public confidence in government.

6. There are four general stages of e-government development that distinguish where different government agencies are on the road to transformation:

Stage 1 - The billboard stage;

In the first stage, officials treat government Web sites much the same as highway billboards, that is, static mechanisms to display information. They post reports and publications and offer data bases for viewing by visitors. There is little opportunity for citizen interaction or two-way communication between citizens and officials. Citizens can read government reports, see the text of proposed legislation, and find out who works in specific offices but they cannot manipulate information or interact with it in any way other than viewing. The public generally is limited to seeing information in the form put together by officials.

Stage 2 - The partial-service-delivery stage;

In this stage citizens can order and execute a handful of services online and start to manipulate informational databases. They can search Web sites for material they want to see, as opposed to the information officials want to present to them. This helps them access materials in the form they prefer. However, online service possibilities are sporadic and limited to a very few areas. Posting of privacy and security statements are not very abundant, and there isn't much accessibility for non-English speakers and the disabled.

Stage 3 - The portal stage, with fully executable & integrated service delivery;

This stage is a one-stop government portal with fully executable and integrated online services. This phase offers considerable convenience to visitors. The entire city or county has one place where all other agencies can be accessed, which improves citizen ability to find information. Agency sites are integrated with one another, and a range of fully executable services are available to citizens and businesses. Officials show they pay attention to the public's privacy and security

concerns by posting policies online. Translation options are available for those who do not speak English or those who are visually or hearing impaired.

Stage 4 - Interactive democracy with public outreach and accountability enhancing features:

Here, government Web sites move beyond a service-delivery model to system wide political transformation. In addition to having integrated and fully executable online services, government sites offer options for Web site personalisation (such as customising for someone's own particular interests) and push technology (such as providing e-mails or electronic subscriptions that provide automatic updates on issues or areas people care about). Through these and other kinds of advanced features, visitors can personalise Web sites, provide feedback, make comments, and avail themselves of a host of sophisticated features designed to boost democratic responsiveness and leadership accountability.

7. The categorisation above does not mean that all government websites go through these steps or that they undertake them in this particular order. Research clearly shows there is a wide variety of ways that e-government has evolved in different cities, counties and countries. However, based on that research, this sequence appears to be a prevalent course of development in many agencies. The commonality of this model therefore, allows researchers to determine an agency's progress based on how far along they are at incorporating various website features.
8. New technologies enhance communication by overcoming geographical distance, promoting ideological variety, opening citizens to more diverse viewpoints, and encouraging deliberation.
9. Furthermore, information technology (IT) alters the capacity and control features of traditional bureaucracies, and has the potential to substantially redistribute power, functional responsibilities, and control within and across government agencies and between the public and private sectors. However, it cannot be ignored that at a time of shrinking budgets, financial considerations restrict the ability of government offices to place services online and to use technology for democratic outreach.
10. Here in York, the aid and use of technology to improve and broaden access to local decision making and scrutiny has been welcomed and the Council has already demonstrated a commitment to making better use of available technology.

11. For example, some years ago the Council implemented its online Committee Management System, which enables the electronic publication of reports, agenda and minutes for meetings. It provides electronic access to officer decisions. It enables the submission of ePetitions and online access to sign those ePetitions. Members of the public can also subscribe to their own specific areas of interest and it provides access to a wealth of information, about elected Members and the democratically accountable bodies to which the Council appoints them.
12. In 2012, the Council introduced an electronic voting system within its Council Chamber to make it easier for the public to see how their elected Councillors voted in major decisions in Council meetings.
13. More recently, the Council introduced web casting of its public meetings so that residents could watch their Councillors scrutinising or making decisions in their own time or without having to come to the meetings themselves.
14. In 2013/14 this Committee undertook a review into democratic engagement which consulted interested groups and individuals on what steps would be helpful to widen local participation in decision making. The findings from that review did not indicate a growing public desire in York for an increase in the Council's delivery of information and services online. Instead it focussed on improving the quality and timeliness of the information currently being provided.

### **Consultation**

15. The Head of Democratic Services & the Head of ICT were both asked for their views on this scrutiny topic proposal. Feedback from the Head of Democratic Services is shown below:

*'There are technological improvements which could be made. For instance, the introduction of on-line registration to speak at meetings would provide a more flexible arrangement for residents. There are also improvements which could be made which do not require technological solutions. For example, Members have already agreed new rules by which Council should operate to provide a free flow of questions to Executive Members from the floor during Council meetings, without the prescription of advance notification.'*

16. James Alexander has been invited to attend this meeting to present his topic registration.

### **Options**

17. In light of officer comments and the improvements and work in recent years detailed in paragraphs 11-14 above , it is for Members to consider whether there would be any added value in commencing a review of this kind at this time.
18. Alternatively, Members may choose to defer their decision on the topic until further information is made available e.g. Members may wish to consider receiving a progress report on parliamentary digital improvements in 6 - 12 months, to see whether there would be merit in looking into whether any of those improvements, not already introduced at a local level, would be beneficial in terms of engagement and resource implications for York.

### **Associated Implications & Risk Management**

19. There are no implications or risks associated with the recommendation in this report. If a decision is taken to proceed with the review, all implications and risks associated with the findings from the review will be identified within the review final report.

### **Recommendations**

20. Having considered the information provided within this report, Members are recommended to agree whether or not they wish to proceed with the review.
21. If a decision is taken to proceed, Members are recommended to agree:
  - i. A review remit, including a suggested aim and a number of key objectives
  - ii. A timeframe for review completion
  - iii. A Task Group to carry out the review on the Committee's behalf

Reason: To ensure compliance with scrutiny procedures, protocols and workplans.

## Contact Details

**Author:**

Melanie Carr  
Scrutiny Officer  
Scrutiny Services  
Tel No. 01904 552054

**Chief Officer Responsible for the report:**

Andrew Docherty  
Head of Civic, Democratic & Legal Services

**Scoping Report Approved**

**Date** 2 July 2015

**Specialist Implications Officer(s)**

**Wards Affected:**

All



**For further information please contact the author of the report**

**Background Papers:** None

**Annexes:**

**Annex A** – Topic Registration Form on ‘The Expansion of Local Democracy Using Digital Means’