

## **How Technology Can Help Shape Local Government Service Delivery: the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Square'**

By Sasha Lennon, Marcus Spiller and Peter Cumming

Local Government has a dual role. Firstly, it is a delivery agency for property, business and human services as prescribed by statute. Equally, it is also a sphere of governance with a mandate to develop the community it serves.

Both roles are vital. Efficient service delivery is important for giving ratepayers the services they need at reasonable cost while the community development role is important for helping shape community identity and confidence.

The use of current and emerging technology is potentially fundamental for enabling more effective and efficient delivery of local government services, while also enhancing local government's role as an effective 'enabler' of community development.

Given the sheer size of many local government jurisdictions throughout Australia today - in Queensland for example, following the 2008 local government amalgamations, that state's south-east corner comprises five of the nation's ten largest local government areas – each LGA can perhaps best be thought of as a 'commonwealth of communities' as distinct from a unitary, cohesive, singular community.

In many cases, the principal bond between a Council's constituent communities is cost efficiency in service delivery and growth management, rather than any shared affiliation in demographic, economic or spatial terms.

Because the size of these new 'super councils' weighs against them having a central symbolic heart, each constituent sub-community (of which there may be many based on population levels and on shared demographic, locational and economic characteristics) should have its own local government focal point, akin to the traditional town hall function.

Several local government services, including councillor constituent access, could be co-located in these community hubs, which might be anchored by libraries, meeting rooms and small business development centres. In effect, each of these service hubs would deliver to each local community a '21<sup>st</sup> Century town square' function, providing a logical gathering space for social, cultural and economic interaction and exchange, locally and with the wider (global) community.

How these dispersed sub-regional communities effectively link up with the Council's central civic function, its corporate 'core' and with each other as desired or necessary, will be facilitated by both 'hard' and 'soft' information technology infrastructure. This might include wireless broadband, the Internet and software applications which will, in effect, facilitate or accommodate the development of distributed centres of high connectivity.

As recent and current experience from Councils in South East Queensland and around the world shows, while the impact of technology on customer service and relationships between Councils and their residents has been revolutionary over the last 15 years, in the foreseeable future, particularly with the cost of technological change and its returns increasingly being scrutinised, we might

expect to see these recent developments built upon with customer service technology impacts likely to be more 'evolutionary' over the next few years.

In recent years, the impact of technology on council customer service delivery has enabled fast contact through call centres and the performance management of responses; interactive e-contact through Council websites for information, development application lodgement and business transactions, and linked, highly organised face-to-face contact at decentralised locations.

Some of the emerging local and UK trends worth mentioning include:

- The 'transformation' agenda in UK Councils which is strongly supported and driven by the national government. This agenda is about performance improvement, cost savings and improved service delivery to customers. IT programs such as Birmingham's CHAMPS have been developed to guide and manage customer and business transformation.
- Enhanced e-communication and on-line interaction with residents including major investments in Council websites and on-line lodgement, payment and communication with linked community, government and business sites.
- "Customer Experience Transformation" (CET) is being actively pursued by both the Brisbane and Gold Coast City Councils. This approach treats the customer as the focal point for service rather than the 'complaint' or the 'request'. A CET system might involve an individual logging on to the Council website, registering his/her details and bringing up 'their' file – history of payments to Council, when rates or other payments are due, what happened to a request to fix a pothole in the street, whether a requested book has been delivered to the local library, etc.
- The development of shared service providers and provider arrangements to reduce individual council costs in the development and operation of IT systems. Examples include the Queensland Partnership Group (a public/private group comprising LGAQ, UCMS, Ipswich City Council) and CAPITA, a major private customer technology provider in the UK.
- Pushing customer service management into the 'second tier' – public communication and performance management of more detailed public requests which require actions by para-professional or professional staff including the use of video conferencing, decentralisation of staff and the electronic management of files.

Each hub could feature, for example:

- A library;
- A customer service centre for general enquiries, rates transactions and, potentially, agency functions on behalf of other government authorities;
- Appropriate service teams for development applications (DAs) and other semi-routine enquiries around building, flooding, pest control and the like (for example, on a nominated day of the week);
- Meeting rooms and auditoria, suitable for occasional meetings with Councillors and / or staff as well as a range of local community functions;
- Ad hoc meeting rooms which may be booked by Council staff for community consultations and by councillors from time to time for constituent engagement; and

- A business development portal linked to the council's economic development / business development unit, providing a range of advisory, training and network building services or referral service for home-based businesses, micro businesses and SMEs.

Over time, the hubs could develop into genuine community focal points, around customer service centres co-located with a major activity centre and adding to the economic vibrancy of that centre. Quality urban design will be critical to the success of these hubs.

With the help of continually advancing information technology, decentralised local hubs could truly develop into something akin to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Square, offering not just cost efficiencies, but also active, vibrant and engaging community focal points. In this sense, the use of new and emerging technology will be central to the notion of place-making in the years ahead.

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