



Delivering e-government via SMS

West Devon Borough Council exploits Web-enabled GIS software to deliver planning services to citizens... via SMS texting

In May 2004, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published a paper detailing its 'priority outcomes for 2005' as part of the Local e-Government Programme. The expectation set out in the paper was that, by the end of 2005, local authorities would achieve 100 per cent capability in delivering the electronic delivery of priority services in ways that citizens would use. It set precise targets and objectives to this end, and helpfully, categorised them as 'required', 'excellent' and 'good'.

With the programme's aim of giving every citizen better access to government services, local authorities must be able to deliver those services via telephone, Web sites, e-mail and, of course, face-to-face meetings ... the objective being to respond to queries at the first point of contact.

Within the programme, the ODPM is keen to support the work of individual councils and partnerships, not least by supporting cutting edge projects. It also challenges the thinking behind local e-government development by seeking new and innovative approaches to joined-up working, effective service delivery and community engagement.

Exploring new channels

With funding made available under the e-innovation programme, West Devon Borough Council welcomed the opportunity to explore the feasibility of a project that would engage citizens by opening up and exploiting a new but widely-available access channel.

As a rural council, the authority faces particular challenges in delivering services. For example, the distances involved often make it difficult to arrange face-to-face meetings to suit everyone concerned. Further, while land line telephone services are available to everyone, only a minority of the Borough's citizens have access to the Internet via their own PC, so e-mail and access to services via the Council's Web site are unavailable to many.

However, cellular communications is another matter. As elsewhere in the UK, mobile phones are pervasive. And while the use of SMS (Short Message Service) does not feature in the ODPM's 'required' targets, it does get a mention in several of the 'good' targets.

West Devon Borough Council therefore decided to investigate if SMS 'texting', alongside the use of other access channels, would prove a practical tool for service delivery.



Photo: Peter FitzGibbon

The thinking was that SMS is a widely-available communications medium, even in remote rural areas, and can be used where Internet connection is poor or non-existent. Of course, the technology also has its limitations. For this reason, the Council's 'SMS Access Channel in Rural Areas' project set out to explore if and how SMS could contribute to its e-government objectives.

Setting priorities

Those objectives were derived from the national and local priorities for e-government. In particular, it was hoped the project would increase the level of public engagement with local government processes. If this could be sustained, it would improve customer service levels and create greater social and geographic inclusion - cross-cutting objectives that cover the seven priorities for local government.

The primary goal of the project in terms of deliverables was to deliver, by June 2005, the following three 'products':

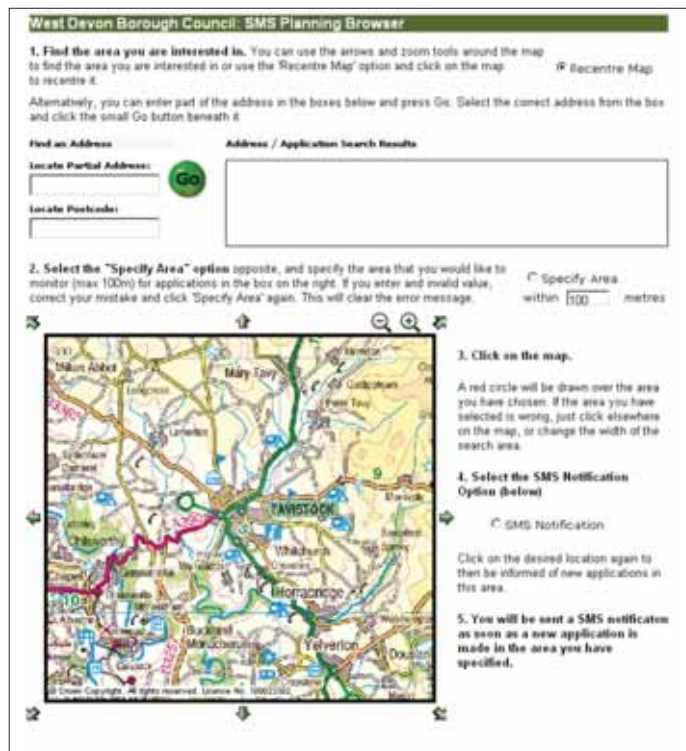
- Research products: research consultation and findings
- Pilot products: code and documentation of the pilot (route-map)
- In terms of service delivery, the objectives included engaging the public. It was also felt that the lessons learned and the outcomes of the project should be available to other local authorities, who would benefit from knowing the critical success factors of the project and the pitfalls to be avoided.

SMS in action

Of course, SMS is by its very nature a text-based communications medium. To make it user-friendly and suitable for spatial data-based applications, a GIS software component was needed. This was procured in the shape of Cadcorp's GeognoSIS.NET and used to extend the dynamic functionality of the company's SIS (Spatial Information System) suite for Internet/corporate intranet use.

The main logon for SMS, developed by the West Devon project team, asks the user to enter a telephone number and e-mail address. This is verified back to the user by SMS before the account is activated. It is also possible for these details to be updated/deleted.

One service provides notification of newly-received planning applications in user-specified areas. Here, GeognoSIS.NET allows a given area to be located on a map. Once the user has pin-pointed the area of interest, a grid reference is returned from a Web interface. This is the 'feeder' to the main system. Other, more simpler feeders give users the ability to register for specific items of interest such as a sporting event.



While citizens requiring SMS notification of planning applications need a PC to register and specify areas of interest (above), those with smartphones such as the Palm Treo 650 (right), can perform all functions from one device

It is the ability to locate an area spatially, rather than by a list of text addresses, that is the really innovative aspect of the system.

In the planning example mentioned above, the system will periodically match the grid reference registrations and the main registration to a listing of new planning applications. If a match is found, this will be sent as an SMS via 2SMS Ltd.

Benefits

Although fully functional, the system is still in its early days in terms of take-up. Nevertheless, several major benefits are already apparent.

As registering an area of interest for planning applications is done spatially, it eliminates the need for those at either end of the communications link to know about a given address. It also allows anyone to register whether or not they have local knowledge. Moreover, the SMS notification can reach a large section of the population including those lacking regular Web access.

The SMS-based channel complements but does not replace West Devon's delivery of planning services via the Internet. While citizens can visit the council offices to consult the planning files, they can also obtain information concerning an application over the Internet. In the near future they will also be able to examine the full planning application file online.

While it is still to be formally determined or quantified via research, the new system allows West Devon Borough Council to reach the right people, at the right time and in a manner with which they are likely to be familiar. This improves the planning consultation process qualitatively - through potentially earlier contact than via post - as well as quantitatively - with more people being reached. The system can also be applied internally for other consultation processes.

Pierre Morel is the e-government programme manager for West Devon Borough Council (www.ruralsms.org.uk and www.westdevon.gov.uk) while Richard Rollins is the marketing manager for Cadcorp (www.cadcorp.com)