



Citizens as customers: Exploring the future of CRM in UK local government

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Abstract

Customer relationship management (CRM) is seen as a key element in delivering citizen-centric public services in the UK. However, CRM originated in the private sector as a technology to support customer acquisition, retention and extension (cross-selling). The appropriateness of this technology to organizations striving to meet complex goals such as improving the quality of life for vulnerable people is open to question. This paper uses the results of recent UK electronic government CRM programs to show that the focus for many local authorities has so far been systems integration, CRM-enabling call centers and the provision of routine transactions online. More advanced authorities are planning to use CRM to help them understand their citizens better. But more can be done. To this end, the paper proposes an alternative model of CRM progress which moves beyond transactions and customer insight and encourages citizens to co-produce the public services they consume.

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1. Introduction

‘Choice’—this small word currently underlies a very large volume of UK government rhetoric. Citizens must be able to choose their schools, hospitals, doctors, social housing and potentially any other service provided from the public purse. The future is of citizens as empowered consumers, able to take their custom away from poor quality providers and move it to the best. Consumers become customers in this world and private sector management approaches are increasingly being seen as appropriate solutions to the problems of bureaucratic providers unable to offer a modern service. One approach that has become popular in the private sector, when confronted by customers able to switch to alternative suppliers with ease, is to provide a consistent service through all customer interactions and to develop deep customer ‘insight’ in order to predict future customer needs and to steer them towards appropriate products and services. This is called Customer relationship management (CRM) and, when it works well, can encourage customer loyalty and the development of long-lasting profitable relationships for the provider. CRM has recently become popular in the UK public sector, especially in local government. Many local authorities are implementing CRM, and the government, seeing CRM as a key e-government ‘enabler’, has funded a number of pilot projects and a National CRM Programme to explore its benefits and to identify and disseminate best practice across authorities. This paper goes in search of Citizen Relationship Management by assessing the outcomes of the recent government-sponsored CRM programs in terms of both the classic private sector model of CRM, and in terms of the potential of CRM to genuinely deliver improved, citizen-centric public services which have a real impact on citizen quality of life.

2. Electronic government and CRM

Over the past two decades, the transformation and reform of local authorities have been central to the political programs of the UK government. The Labor Government’s ‘Modernization and Improvement’ agenda aims to develop local authorities that are more dynamic, entrepreneurial, efficient, effective and in touch with their citizens.¹ People usually think of government as hierarchical bureaucracy.^{2,3} This model is referred to as the Weberian model, which is often criticized for its rigidity, proceduralism, inefficiency and inability to serve “human clients”.⁴ E-government is seen to offer a ‘paradigm shift’⁴ and has been defined as ‘...the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees. It has the power to create a new mode of public services where all public organizations deliver a modernized, integrated and seamless service for their citizens.’⁵ According to Margetts,⁴ just as Max Weber’s followers viewed bureaucracy as the basis of modernism in the first half of the 20th century, advocates of e-government have seen information and communications technology (ICT) as the basis of modernism in the second half and beyond. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) is the central government body responsible for local government in the UK. The three main

outcomes of successful implementation of local e-government are reported by the ODPM⁶ to be:

- Customer Service: citizen-oriented services delivering ‘right first time’ outcomes with maximum cost effectiveness.
- Social Inclusion: avoiding a ‘digital divide’ and harnessing the power of e-government to tackle exclusion from services and communities.
- Democracy and Accountability: encouraging openness and active democratic participation.

The ODPM⁷ reported that most local authorities believe that e-government has had some positive effects in the way local information and services are delivered, and the ability of staff to work more flexibly. While e-government holds a great potential to improve government performance and possibly help restore public confidence in public institutions, Holden and Fletcher⁸ argue that there are virtually no systematic research results justifying this rapid transition. Moon⁹ concluded that e-government has been adopted by many local authorities, but it is still at an early stage and has not yet achieved many of the expected outcomes. Beynon-Davies and Martin¹⁰ echo this view and suggest that local authorities are unlikely to achieve the radical and rapid transformation of services envisaged by central government. Collinge¹¹ believes that local authorities are in awkward position. From above, central government is demanding to see a return on investment. From below, citizens are demanding to see improvements. Meeting government targets is one of the main challenges faced by local authorities. According to the ODPM, the government expects local authorities ‘...to achieve 100% capability in electronic delivery of priority services by 2005, in ways that customers will use.’¹² Local authorities have identified four major challenges in achieving these targets⁶:

- change management capability;
- funding: despite total spend on UK e-government of £12.2 billion in 2003/4, rising to a forecast £17.9 billion in 2007/8—of which £2.9 billion of the 2003/4 spend was by local authorities¹³;
- channel uptake by citizens; and
- co-ordination of government activities.

What then of CRM? CRM has developed as an approach based on maintaining positive relationships with customers, increasing customer loyalty, and expanding customer lifetime value.^{14–16} Understanding the needs of customers and offering added value services are recognized as factors that determine the success or failure of companies. Kotler¹⁷ pointed out that CRM principally revolves around marketing and begins with a deep analysis of consumer behavior. Chaffey¹⁸ presents a three-stage model of CRM which shows how customer relationships can be managed. The model proposes that customers are first acquired via clear communication of a powerful value proposition. They are retained via good service; and the relationship extended via the delivery of tailored products/services to clearly defined customer segments. This means that CRM uses information and

communications technology (ICT) to gather data, which can then be analyzed to provide the information required to create a more personal interaction with the customer.^{19–21} Fig. 1 shows the typical components of a CRM architecture. From the operations perspective, Bose²² pointed out that CRM is an integration of technologies and business processes that are adopted to satisfy the needs of a customer during any given interaction.

While the potential benefits are attractive, CRM implementation must be managed carefully to deliver results, with system users involved and expectations carefully managed.²³ Business processes need to be changed as well as technology,^{24–26} with two interconnected processes, knowledge management and interaction management, seen as key by Zablah et al.²⁷—see Fig. 2. These two processes emphasize the generation and use of

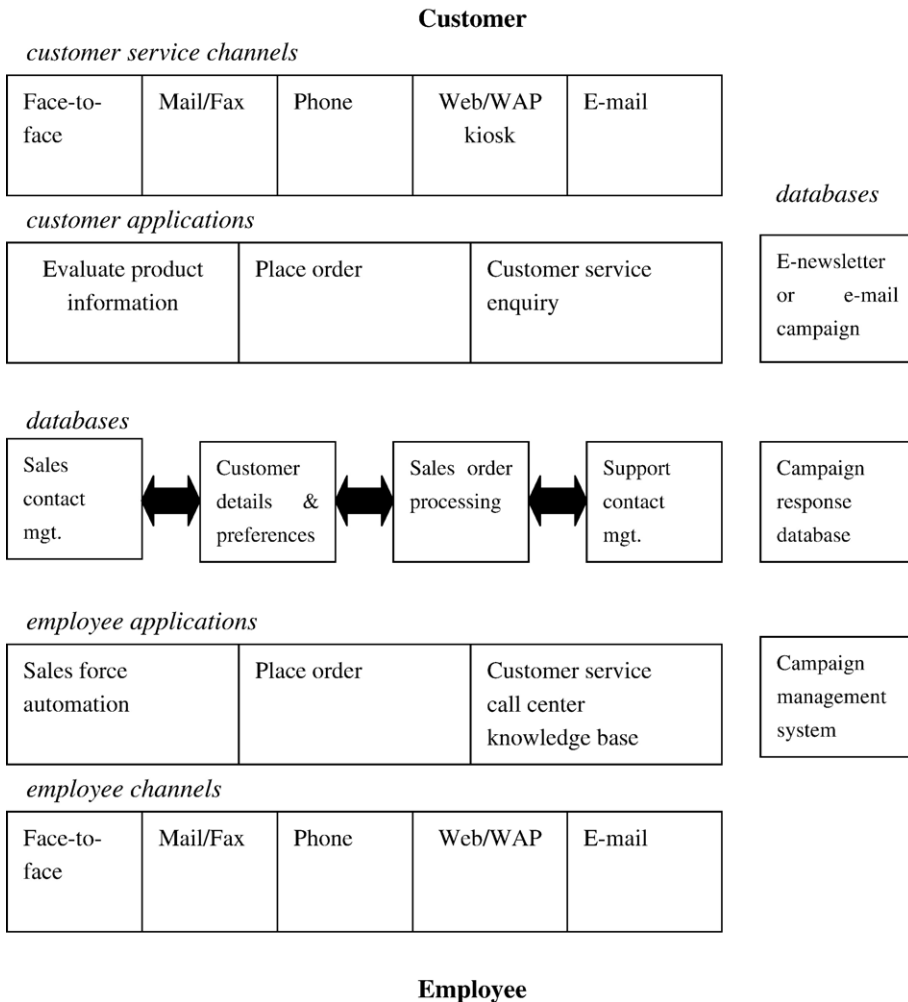


Fig. 1. A typical CRM architecture (after ¹⁸, p. 411).

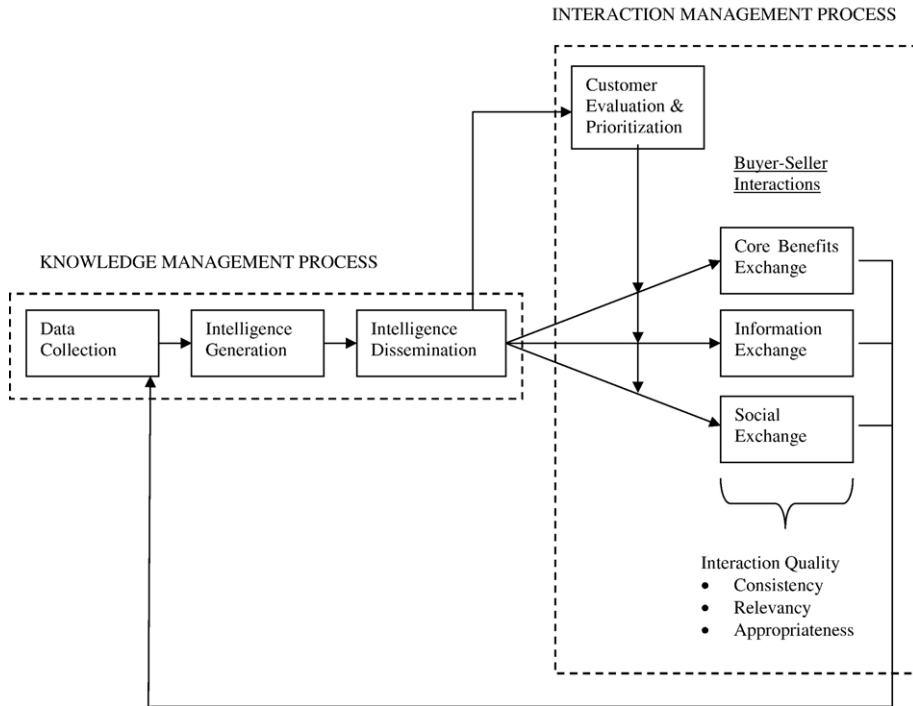


Fig. 2. The customer relationship management process (after ²⁷, p. 482).

customer insight in order to target products and services at the most profitable customer segments.

3. Local authority CRM experiences

While the genesis of CRM has been in the private sector, with the aim of maximizing profits via long-term relationships with preferred customers, CRM concepts are also of relevance to the public sector^{28–30} with CRM cited as one of the ‘enablers’ of the local e-organization by the ODPM.⁶ The ODPM has funded two programs in the UK to explore the potential of CRM and to disseminate good practice: the CRM Pathfinder program from June 2001 to June 2002,³¹ followed by the CRM National Programme from January 2003 to April 2004.³²

Eight Pathfinder projects focused on CRM, led by the following English councils: Brent, Bromley, Camden, Salford, Sedgemoor, Sunderland, Three Rivers and the West Sussex Consortium. Each project explored a different aspect of CRM. Two models were developed by the ODPM to guide CRM developments: a CRM strategy framework (Fig. 3) and a generic CRM architecture.

Fig. 3 proposes that CRM projects should fit into a progressive strategic framework, which consists of three major levels: improving accessibility, organizational transformation and

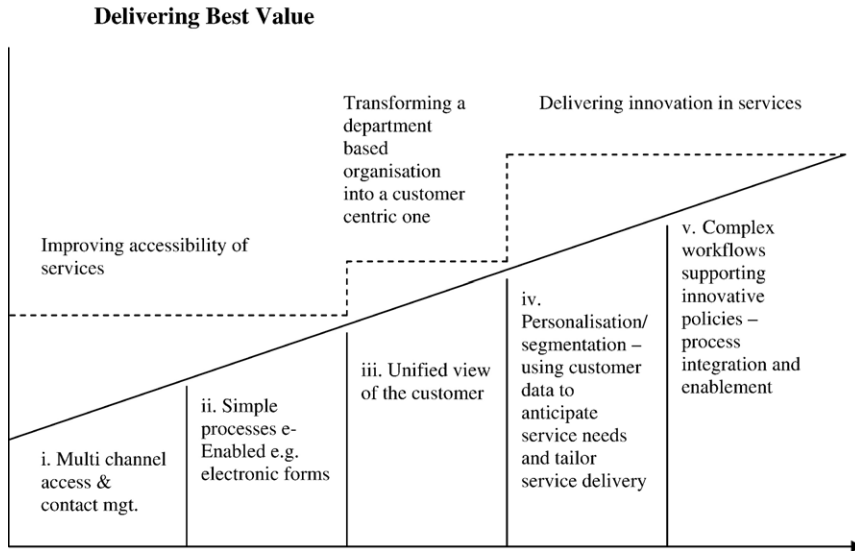


Fig. 3. CRM strategy framework (after ³¹).

service delivery innovation, each level building on the previous one. The end of project reports were published on the Pathfinder Web site.³¹ These, together with the subsequent Implementing Electronic Government statements for each council (November 2003), were analyzed to understand what had been achieved and what problems were encountered. Table 1 summarizes the achievements of the projects to the end of 2003 and the problems encountered.

Of the eight projects, Three Rivers provides one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the range of customer interactions they hope to support once the system is fully implemented, including ‘book a pest control appointment’, ‘check refuse collection dates’ and ‘request voter registration’ (see Table 2). But these transactions essentially provide electronic access to a subset of existing council services; this suggests that the traditional departmental silos² remain intact. Furthermore, none of the Pathfinder final reports discusses the use of CRM systems to generate ‘customer insight’ in order to better understand the customer and to provide better services. Returning to Fig. 3, the analysis shows that few of the Pathfinders delivered full multi-channel access (level 1), and none attempted segmentation/personalization (level 3) apart from Camden’s pilot personalized Web site. And yet Bromley, Camden, Sedgemoor, Three Rivers and West Sussex can claim to be exploring service innovation and process integration (level 3). But these innovations bypass the ‘transformation’ stage (level 2) of creating a ‘customer-centric’ organization and little is said of organizational change issues in the reports. Only Salford explicitly addresses this challenge. From this, it can be seen that the three major levels do not necessarily build upon each other, and that it is possible to be at level 2 with mediated (call-center) CRM without offering multi-channel access (level 1)—see Brent; or to be at level 3 without becoming a customer-centric organization (level 2)—see Bromley, Camden et al.

The Pathfinders were followed by the CRM National Programme. The program identified the following potential benefits of CRM³²:

- To transform services to citizen-led services, by tailoring or personalization of services to citizens.
- To make joining-up of services within councils, between councils and with other partners easier.
- To provide a holistic view of customers and a single citizen account through the integration of systems across departments.
- To change the public service experience by making services more responsive, accessible, convenient and cost effective.

The program commissioned case studies of twelve local authorities that were seen as leaders in CRM³³ and a Web-based survey of all English local authorities.³⁴ The case studies revealed authorities at different stages of CRM maturity, some focusing on ‘deep integration’ of a few services, others on ‘shallow integration’ of many services (see Fig. 4). None had achieved deep integration of many services at the time of the report (early 2004). Furthermore, there was no evidence of the use of CRM to generate insight into citizens’ use of services or future service needs (a suggested ‘stage 5,’ Advanced Business Intelligence, in the model).

The case study report showed that CRM was being used primarily in telephone contact centers and one stop shops and was helping improve call resolution rates (‘right first time’) and customer satisfaction. This was improving the efficiency of customer services and contributing to the achievement of good Government review scores in some cases. The national survey, conducted in early 2004, echoed this theme by reporting that by far the most important aspects of CRM were consistent customer service and joining-up service delivery. The most frequently targeted service was environmental and waste management, followed by general inquiries and then benefits. Interestingly, the three typically highest cost and arguably most complex services, education, social services and housing, were lower down the list of CRM priorities. Fig. 5 shows the predicted and realized impacts of CRM reported by the councils. Again, improved customer service and customer satisfaction lead the way with improved management information third. However, since only twenty-seven responding councils had gone live with CRM at the time of the survey, it is fair to assume that the majority of the seventy-seven councils responding were reporting predicted impacts rather than realized ones.

The survey also asked councils to list barriers to implementation. Out of 109 responses, the leading barriers were:

1. cost or budgetary constraints (sixty-eight responses);
2. problems with information sharing and management (sixty);
3. joining-up services (fifty-two);
- 3= legacy system integration (fifty-two);
5. lack of skills and resources (fifty);
- 5= change management (fifty);

Table 1
CRM pathfinder analysis

Local authority and CRM project	Aims and description (taken from ³¹)	Results
Brent: E-Shop	Developing a CRM system suited to the particular needs of local government and capable of rapid and low-cost implementation.	Customized commercial CRM system (Onyx) No access to back-end systems In use in Brent, evaluating elsewhere Problems with suppliers and lack of resources
Bromley: ExSEL Event Broker	Linking front and back office processes across multiple agencies to enable higher performance and improve quality of customer service.	Triggered by an event e.g. discharge from hospital Acts as “glue” e.g. notify housing department, exchequer services and housing associations Pilot only so far Formalized multi-agency working Problems around inadequate involvement of partners and “selling” of project internally
Camden: APLAWS	A Web content management architecture for local authority Web sites that will enable citizens to create a personal portal to allow information from more than one authority to be displayed, in an accessible manner, on an individual’s homepage.	Content management system for citizen portals Open source Prototype running in Camden Problems co-ordinating several workstreams
Salford: CITIZEN and SPRINT	ICT solutions including integrated CRM. Portal, electronic forms and an online agenda and decision-making toolkit, which will be available through shareware facilities where appropriate.	Very ambitious program of strategic change Aided by Salford University and Manchester Business School Delivered CRM system and BPR methodology CRM running in contact center initially (mediated access) Problems in recruiting expertise and with demands of dissemination/mentoring

Sedgemoor: Virtual Service Provider (VSP)	XML message broker middleware integrating all back-end systems + workflow + Electronic Record Management System (ERM).	A Somerset district council XML message broker middleware Connecting Web site/community portal to back-end systems Pilot for council planning applications and planning documentation Problems with staffing and supplier management
Sunderland: Integrated Service Center	Put in place an integrated public access service center, which will deliver the choice to the citizen of “anytime, anyplace.” The service center will support traditional phone and post in addition to a range of electronic service delivery options.	Documentation says little about CRM Focus on contact center and “single number” Extensive research into citizens’ preferences undertaken Siebel CRM already in place but not discussed
Three Rivers: Interactive Internet Services	Web-enabling all of its services and integrating its Web site with its corporate CRM system and all of its back-office systems.	A Hertfordshire district council Integrating Web site with commercial CRM, content management system and middleware and council back-end systems Pilot in waste management and recycling Net-enthusiastic citizens Ambitious range of e-services planned Problems with suppliers and overstretched staff
West Sussex Consortium: CNET+	Series of common components delivering electronic forms, an information repository, shared workflow, customer related management and contact management.	An ambitious architecture of “components” To share between the County Council and seven district councils Designed but not yet implemented

Table 2

Proposed electronic customer interactions at Three Rivers district council (after⁴²)

Environmental health	Book a pest control appointment Make a complaint about noise and bonfires Report a lost or found dog View details of lost or found dogs
Waste and recycling	Check refuse collection dates Make a complaint about refuse collection service e.g. missed bin, no sack left etc. Make a complaint about the curbside recycling service e.g. missed box, request new box, etc. Register for the curbside recycling scheme Request and pay for a special collection of bulky waste
Council tax	View banding details of a property Check the balance of Council tax account Make an online payment of Council tax View direct debit details Report a change of address Claim a discount or exemption Report a deceased tax payer
NNDR	View valuation details of a commercial property Check the balance of a NNDR account Make online payment of NNDR
Electoral registration	View the Electoral Register—temporarily withheld pending outcome of new legislation Request Voter Registration form Request Postal/Proxy Vote form
Common functions	Register to use the site for viewing personal information View previous inquiries (registered users only) Address validation—to confirm residency within the district Forms Library—to download various forms for completion

7. difficulties developing business processes (forty-six);
8. no ownership at an appropriate management level (forty-three);
9. inadequate business case for CRM (forty-one); and
- 9= inadequate customer service strategy (forty-one).

4. Transactions and insight

Despite its position at the center of the CRM strategy model (Fig. 3), seven out of the eight Pathfinders make no mention of organizational transformation. The focus is almost exclusively on providing a wider range of more efficient access channels to the existing departmental silos. While there is evidence of ‘joining-up’ at the technology level, via message brokers and XML, there is little evidence of joining-up at the organizational level. And there is no evidence whatsoever of ‘insight.’ The CRM National Programme tells a similar story. The focus is on rapid resolution of inquiries and on satisfied customers. This

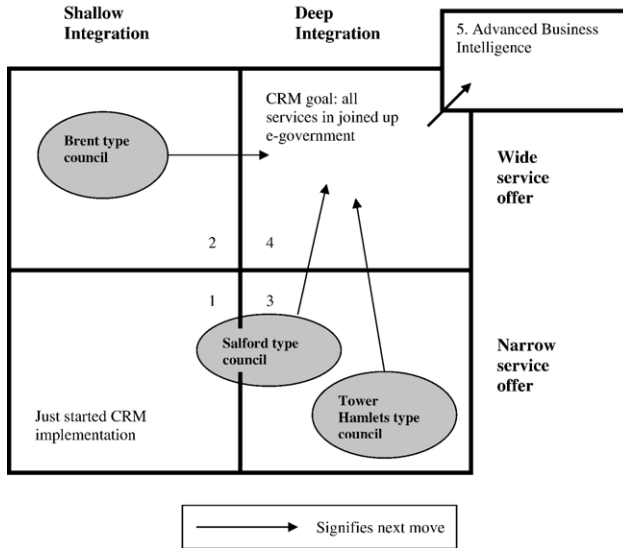


Fig. 4. CRM maturity model (adapted from ³³, p. 32).

is a positive achievement no doubt, but is essentially reactive. Problems with the cost of CRM, with information sharing and joined-up services, and with change management are reported and may well stand in the way of councils achieving stages 4 and 5 in the maturity model shown in Fig. 4. A further indication of limited progress regarding moving to a truly citizen-centric culture is given in the letter sent from the ODPM to council chief executives at the start of the 2004 Implementing Electronic Government funding round (IEG4): ‘We have not done much work to date on the ‘people’ element of the e-government strategy ... [we aim to] produce a workforce development plan by March 2005.’

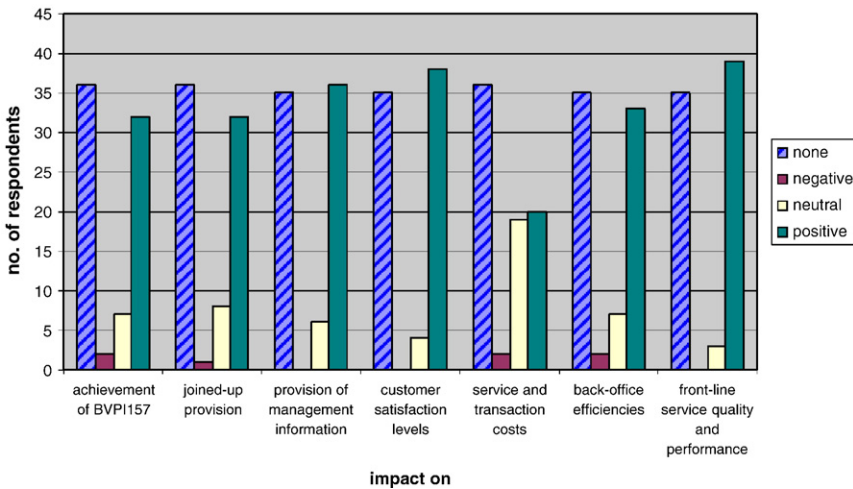


Fig. 5. Predicted and realized CRM impacts (after ³⁴, p. 44): 77 respondents.

The preceding analysis would imply that local government CRM practice is a long way behind the claims of leading-edge private sector suppliers where, for example, one of the largest suppliers of CRM systems, Siebel, states that their Analytics module can ‘...empower every member of an organization with relevant up-to-the-moment customer and business insight. Insight into historical and emerging trends. Deep insight about customer behaviors. Predictions about most likely future outcomes.’³⁵ It would seem that councils’ CRM focus is on ‘fast telephone response’ not on ‘insight,’ with little evidence to date of the knowledge management and customer evaluation processes recommended by Zablah et al.²⁷ and shown in Fig. 2.

5. Co-production and empowerment

Clearly there are some significant tensions here: between the private sector model of CRM (acquire, retain, extend) and the complexity of local authority services; between the cost-cutting climate in many councils and the high cost of packaged CRM solutions; between traditional, bureaucratic cultures and the need to tolerate experimentation and innovation; and between the provider-centric CRM technology and the growing awareness that the citizen has a right to be heard in service design and delivery. Take the case of Social Services, a major area of local government. Social services deal with complex situations and vulnerable people. For example, the design and implementation of a care plan for a disabled child will involve several stakeholders: the child herself, her parents/guardians, her social worker and possibly health and education professionals too. It is increasingly being recognized, particularly in the area of health, that the patient/client/customer should be a ‘co-producer’ of her own care. For her care to be effective, she needs to be involved in the design and to feel ownership for the plan and the outcomes. But the private sector model of CRM assumes that the organization which runs the system owns the customer data and does something ‘to’ the customer rather than ‘with’ them (as exemplified by Fig. 2). The market leading Siebel Analytics CRM system enables firms to run marketing campaigns which identify prospective customers and to help sales staff sell pre-existing (profitable) products to them. The customer is on the receiving end, not the producing end here. Many local authorities have not got this far yet, most are still struggling to CRM-enable their call centers and one stop shops so that they record customer interactions consistently. But these private sector ‘best practices’ are endorsed as the pinnacle of local authority CRM achievement by the UK government and are what local authorities are being encouraged to aim for (Fig. 3).

6. The wall

But what if the signpost is pointing in the wrong direction? What if the heavy investment in CRM-enabling call centers, one stop shops and Web sites and eventually generating customer insight simply re-enforces inappropriate practice? What if it puts more power in the hands of the local authorities and continues to leave the citizen out of the debate? Are there better ways of

using ICT to improve public services and citizen quality of life? Recent research presented by the multi-agency working research project AMASE³⁶ suggests some alternatives. The suggestions start from the belief that citizens should be co-producers of public services, in conjunction with the professionals. Putting all of the expensive and sophisticated private sector CRM systems to one side for a moment, the question then becomes—what kind of ICT can best support the co-production process? Not surprisingly, simple technology such as mobile access to databases, the Internet and e-mail comes out high on the list. Technology that enables a group of stakeholders to get together at the most appropriate location (e.g. in the citizen's home) and to work together in a way that is understandable to all, is seen as more promising than the storing of vast amounts of data in a centralized system accessible only to a few professionals. And 'customer insight' takes on a new meaning—it means that the customer, via ICT and the professionals, is given insight into her own situation and needs and possible solutions. This line of argument suggests an alternative to the ODPM's CRM strategic framework presented in Fig. 3. The ODPM's five stages are simplified into three: information, transactions and insight. The new model, shown in Fig. 6, proposes a fourth stage which goes far beyond the ODPM's vision: co-production. But, unlike many 'maturity' models, the new model acknowledges that the move from stage to stage is far from easy. To emphasize this point, a Wall has been placed between stages three and four, representing the significant barrier standing between traditional, bureaucratic, political (power-holding) government organizations and the dis-empowered, and often dis-engaged, citizen.

7. New ways of relating to citizens

Fig. 6 indicates three possible relationships between local authorities and their citizens:

- *An informational/transactional relationship.* This is where the English CRM pioneers are today. The aim is to provide efficient response to citizen inquiries supported by transactional systems to enable appointments to be made, payments received, benefits paid, etc. Reddick³⁷

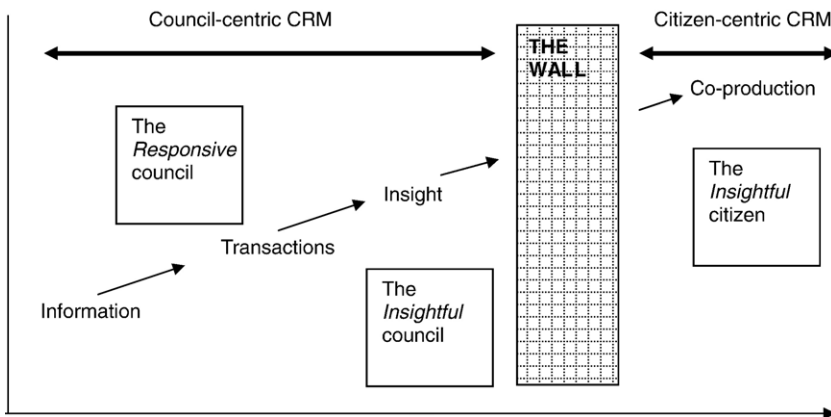


Fig. 6. CRM and the wall.

reports a similar stage of development in the USA. For this relationship to work fully, services and systems must be integrated—stage 4 in Fig. 4.

- *An insightful relationship: council-driven.* This is the aspiration of many local authorities and is presented as a final stage 5, Advanced Business Intelligence, in Fig. 4. This also corresponds to private sector CRM ‘best practice’ and to the later stages of the ODPM maturity model (Fig. 3). In the private sector, many techniques are used to segment customers and to target products and services at the different segments. The most popular segmentation technique is RFM (Recency, Frequency, Monetary value).^{38–40} This recommends firms target the most recent purchasers first, then within that group the most frequent purchasers, and within that group those spending the most. Applying this logic to council customers, one approach to citizen segmentation would be to replace ‘amount spent’ with ‘cost incurred’ to the council by the citizen’s use of services. Cost could either be direct financial cost in providing services to the citizen, or indirect, quality of life costs to either the citizen or those affected by the citizen’s actions. This leads to an ‘RFC’ approach to segmentation (Recency, Frequency, Cost). Councils could then ‘target’ the highest scoring citizens (e.g. drug users, vandals, noisy neighbors) in order to improve/reduce their use of services. This is similar to Kotler and Roberto’s⁴¹ ‘demarketing’ concept. Recent research reveals that no English councils are engaged in this kind of relationship with their citizens yet.³³
- *An insightful relationship: citizen-driven.* This is radically different to the traditional CRM concept. It represents a discontinuity in CRM thinking in the public sector (and quite possibly in the private sector too). The relationship is predicated on extensive citizen access to information and systems. This could, for example, be via Web-based community portals which are linked to Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and enable individual citizens or citizen groups to find out more about the services available in their area (and their performance) and to challenge service providers to improve performance, particularly via increased citizen participation in service design and delivery. Early examples of community portals are appearing in some local authorities, such as Wandsworth in London, while North Lincolnshire council is leading a project to explore what it means for a local authority to be held ‘accountable’ to its citizens (e.g. for reducing anti-social behavior, poor school performance, health care problems and high crime rates). Participative design approaches can be used to involve citizens in system design based on flexible component-based ICT infrastructures^{2,36}—a far cry from the pre-defined CRM packages in use in many councils today.

8. Conclusion

This paper began with a discussion about the concept of ‘choice’ in public services. This is a big issue in British politics at the moment with the major parties placing choice center stage in their strategies. In terms of e-government, choice has mainly focused on choice of access channel (call center, face-to-face, Web, etc.). But the services behind the access channels appear to remain entrenched in their departmental silos. Private sector CRM best

practice suggests that once sufficient customer data have accrued, the CRM system can be used to analyze the data in order to generate insights into customer behaviors and to predict their future needs. This is the territory of the cross-sell and up-sell in commercial language. More enlightened English local authorities are planning to use this technology to help them understand their citizens better: who is entitled to more benefits, who is due a visit from a social worker, who is due to be discharged from hospital and requires re-housing? This degree of insight would undoubtedly represent a considerable advance on the current use of information within local government. But more can be done. Instead of simply following the private sector CRM model, and retaining power and control of the relationship in the hands of the local authority, citizen relationship management could be re-balanced, with power being shared between the service provider and the service consumer. This requires a lot more letting go on behalf of the former and a lot more engagement on behalf of the latter. Whether the transaction-based centralized CRM systems being adopted from the private sector are capable of supporting such a radical change in practice and culture is open to question.

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