

# Insight

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## Mapping out the maze

A maze of regulations surround data sharing among local authorities.  
Graeme Spurr maps the way through

Faculty Review // Tackling the digital divide // Enhancing service through websites

# An interactive future

Recent research shows that websites have an invaluable role to play in paving the way for improved public service, says **Simon Bailey**

I will put on my anorak yet again and promote websites and the important role they play in providing service to the public. As with anything technological, change happens at a pace, and website development/usage is no exception.

So how are we doing with regards to websites? Well, the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM) has recently published its 10th anniversary edition of *Better Connected*, a snapshot of local authority (LA) websites. If you can get hold of a copy it makes for interesting reading. I will provide a snapshot here and highlight how some of the findings may impact on revenues and benefits.

Another recent report commissioned by the London Borough of Brent, that researched online use amongst residents of Brent, provides some excellent statistics on internet use and



## Internet activities of adults in the UK who accessed the internet in the last three months of 2007

	Men	Women	Both
	Percent		
Finding information about goods or services	88	84	86
Sending/receiving emails	85	85	85
Using services related to travel and accommodation	65	61	63
Obtaining information from public authorities' websites	47	43	46

interaction with the Brent website. The first Web 2.0 LA website has been launched, Redbridge i, a groundbreaking site which is setting the standard for next generation web activity.

I was staggered by the findings in a recent publication by the Office for National Statistics: *Internet Access 2007*. The publication identifies that internet usage is growing, with 67% of the adult population accessing the internet in 2007. This is a 14% increase over 2006. The unexpected fact is the purpose of access to the internet, as can be seen from the table. Obtaining information from public authorities came fourth, just behind travel and accommodation.

Obviously, this level of activity around public authority websites proves there is a demand for information that must be provided by authorities. The importance of an information rich and transactional website cannot be ignored.

The SOCITM report provides an excellent insight into how LAs are making progress in ensuring that their websites are useful, usable and used.

The report shares some secrets for success from authorities that regularly appear in the "top sites" rankings. Some of these secrets, which I have detailed below, are particularly important

when developing the revenues and benefits area:

- ensure buy-in from senior management – in my opinion the importance of website delivery must have support to ensure it's used and maintained;
- quality of content is everything – I believe this is the key to a good site. Poor content or lack of information will only frustrate visitors and send them straight to the telephone to get answers to simple questions; and
- make sure each page has an information owner – for example, the recovery manager owns a page on council tax (CT) recovery. This will ensure the information is kept up-to-date and the owners can ensure the information provided is useful to visitors.

The SOCITM survey sets scenarios to test the functionality of the websites. One of these scenarios related to obtaining information on the financing of the LA.

The survey asked these three questions regarding finance:

1. Can I find out what my council received and spent in 2005/6 or 2006/7 in a simple format?
2. Can I find a link to the valuation office with adequate explanation (or Scottish/N Ireland equivalents)?
3. Can I find my CT or business rate balance?



Surprisingly, the results were as follows:

- only 50% of websites provided information on receipts and expenditure in a simple format;
- only 79% of councils gave a link to the valuation office with an adequate explanation; and
- only 29% of websites offered online checking of CT and business rates.

I am amazed that it is eight years since e-government started and 71% of authorities still don't allow online viewing of balances. I am even more astounded that 21% do not provide satisfactory links to the valuation office. These are probably some of the most popular customer requests for information. Failure to provide such basic information for self-service can only lead to increased demand on already busy revenues and benefits sections.

Interestingly this year, one site seems to be trail blazing for LAs. Many web users will be used to customisable web pages such as igoogle, the new BBC home page or even Facebook. Such sites are becoming the norm. Redbridge i is following the pattern, and it looks very impressive.

As the home page states, Redbridge i is the "first of its kind", with searches on the home page from "find the nearest..." (a list of useful addresses) by entering your post code, or displaying recent jobs which can be refined by type or age of vacancy.

One area of the website that I think others should follow is the online forums. These forums can be signed up to, and are a major step forward from traditional websites where providing information was the main objective.

The i map facility is also a great idea. While we are used to Google maps, the ability to overlay information relevant to the authority is excellent. The overlay of information on the i map, such as libraries, schools and recycling, is easy to use, and I wish my LA could provide such an interactive website. Redbridge i is certainly the future.

**“LAs are making progress in ensuring that their websites are useful, usable and used”**

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While the information on CT is traditional, Redbridge i is a site that will rank highly for "stickiness" – a website is sticky if a visitor tends to stay for a long time and keeps returning. Take a visit to Redbridge i and see for yourself.

So do the general public want to use LA websites? Well, if you read the report at: [www.brent.gov.uk/egovsurvey2007](http://www.brent.gov.uk/egovsurvey2007) you will find the answer is a resounding yes. The report found that 56% of Brent residents had visited the website, compared to only 43% in 2005. The report also found that the internet is now the most popular method of contacting the council for information on certain services.

Brent has always been a leader in website leagues, and its feedback further demonstrates this: 84% of those surveyed said the website was easy to use and navigate. Poor navigation is a key area where visitors can be turned off from using a site and then resort to more traditional methods of contact, such as the telephone.

Why are people visiting the Brent website? The survey found that the most commonly accessed area is jobs, at 20%. A close second is CT at 16% (an increase of 3%). If ever you needed a reason to keep the CT area of a website fresh, then these statistics provide the answer.

Visitors are even demanding more transactions from the Brent website. The highest level of transactions related to either completing a form online or printing off a form. For example, within housing benefit, printing forms has increased from 30% in 2005 to 39% in 2007, with online completion of forms increasing from 22% to 27%.

In conclusion, websites continue to improve with SOCITM reporting general improvements, and five sites being classed as "excellent" compared to only one last year. The number of sites classed as transactional also increased from 121 to 165 in just one year. Redbridge i is groundbreaking, taking LA websites to a new level. The need and use of the internet in delivering services is increasing and websites should now form an integral part of customer service. ■

