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# MC-eGov Study on Multi-channel Delivery Strategies and Sustainable Business Models for Public Services addressing Socially Disadvantaged Groups

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**Think Paper 5: How do socially disadvantaged citizens prefer to access public services?**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *What is this paper investigating?*

This paper aims to provide background information for those involved in the design and delivery of services targeted at socially excluded people. Rather than to take an agency approach, which looks at the responsibilities and actions of organisations and government officers, it takes a customer approach, looking at service needs from the viewpoint of socially excluded people, drawing mainly on academic analyses and existing research with socially excluded groups. The paper also looks at the channels through which citizens can receive services and their preferences around those services, in particular traditional services such as call centres alongside other newer technologies.

In addition, there are very different landscapes of social exclusion across Europe, combined with the very different policy frameworks. For example some countries acknowledge certain conditions to be specific social exclusions, and others not.

### 1.2 *Who should read this paper?*

This paper may be beneficial for public servants who are involved in designing and delivering public services at EU or national level as it will help to draw together current understandings of how disadvantaged citizens prefer to consume services.

### 1.3 *What are the key messages for policy makers?*

Disadvantaged groups face multiple and complex needs with their needs often falling between the remit of several public authorities. At the European level, relative and absolute disadvantage varies enormously. Internet access is growing but still patchy at European level. New divides are created as technology develops.

Disadvantaged citizens (those most in need and with the most complex and demanding needs) are the biggest users of public services. Disadvantaged groups often experience poorer service and poorer outcomes from their service interactions - even to the extent of increasing their exclusion.

Age, gender, income, educational background and level of disadvantage all affect citizens' attitudes towards channel choice – public services must therefore understand the customer segments they serve in order to make informed decisions about channel choice. Disadvantaged groups maintain a strong preference for face to face channels.

Diversity of channel choice should be maintained – lower cost channels can be utilised where appropriate and where they do not heighten disadvantage to save costs.

Involving the third sector in service delivery is vital. The third sector offers intermediating access to services through technologies to disadvantaged groups and better understand those citizens needs and can more readily access those citizens whom governments find hard to reach.

#### **1.4 *What are the main actions that can deliver better services to socially excluded people?***

This paper looks at multi-channel public service delivery from the citizen's perspective. It explores socially disadvantaged citizens' expectations and preferences around how they would like to access public services.

Within that context it is clear that some citizens, and particularly socially disadvantaged citizens, may prefer not to access public services at all. Accessing the benefits of electronic public service delivery direct to citizens through e-Government channels may not necessarily be relevant to socially disadvantaged citizens (or indeed to citizens as a whole). Therefore the role of intermediaries in facilitating access to multi-channel public services is explored as a viable alternative to more 'standard' public service delivery models.

This paper therefore explores the basic question: "How do socially disadvantaged citizens prefer to access public services?"

#### **1.5 *Basic premises of this paper: social and digital disadvantage***

This paper takes as a given that social disadvantage exists right across Europe, as evidenced by more than a decade of research. At the European level it is known that level levels and types of disadvantage vary; and relative and absolute disadvantage varies significantly between member states. There are well accepted definitions of social disadvantage which consider lack of education, worklessness, lack of housing, ill health & disability and age related disadvantage. By way of an example, recent evidence indicates that life expectancy is improving across the EU, yet longevity is up to three years shorter in some EU15 countries (Ireland and Portugal compared with Italy and Sweden) and central European countries fare even worse, with longevity in Hungary being five years less than the EU average<sup>1</sup>.

The existence of a digital divide across Europe is also well documented. The existence of such a divide and the particular impact of that divide on disadvantaged groups, as described briefly below is clear evidence of the need for governments to design and implement truly multi-channel services which use a mixture of service channels to meet the needs of disadvantaged citizens.

To explain, it is known that internet access continues to rise, and more than half of Europeans are now regular Internet users<sup>2</sup>. In 2007 the Internet attracted nearly 40 million new regular users, taking the EU total to 250 million in total. However despite progress in this area, there remains a well documented 'digital divide' between those who do and those who do not have Internet

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<sup>1</sup> Europa (2007c) "Health Status and Living Conditions in an enlarged Europe - 2007" London School of Economics for DG Employment Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity. Pp 22-25.

<sup>2</sup> Europa (2008a) "More than 250 million Europeans regularly use Internet, says Commission's ICT Progress Report" press release available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/605>

access. Nearly 40% of Europeans do not use the Internet at all, and this ranges from 69% (Romania), 65% (Bulgaria) and 62% (Greece), to 13% (Denmark, The Netherlands).<sup>3</sup> This digital divide is complex and cannot easily be defined by age or gender. Broadly speaking, those from higher income groups are more likely to access the Internet than those in lower income groups. Recent evidence suggests that those who lack access to the Internet still tend to be the most socially excluded and hardest to reach groups and not just in terms of income. Looking purely at Internet access, in the UK for example Internet penetration has stabilised at the level it reached in 2004 and research has established that three quarters of people counted as socially excluded are also digitally excluded<sup>4</sup>. This means that digital exclusion is yet another disadvantages a group or individual may face in addition to their complex social exclusions.

Lack of internet access can also impinge life chances or quality of life. For example, a lack of home Internet access can 'seriously disadvantage' many children living in low income households. In the UK OFCOM (2007) research established that children living without Internet access are socially disadvantaged because they have lower technical skills levels and cannot benefit from electronic social communication, leading to isolation from their peers with access<sup>5</sup>. The same is likely to be true of adults who are not able to benefit from digital literacy skills learned in a natural or unsupported environment at home.

The above issues merely relate to physical access to ICT infrastructures. However, motivation and desire to use the Internet, as well as having the necessary skills and the confidence to use it are further critical factors in accessing services on the Web. Research has suggested that access alone is not enough<sup>6</sup>. A proportion of the public simply do not want to use electronic channels. This may also be preventing socially excluded groups from accessing the benefits of ICT and electronic public services in particular. For many non-users a lack of interest or desire to use new technologies ('it offers no benefit for me'), or a fear of not knowing how to use technology (fear it might 'break'), or lacking the required skills and know-how, create barriers for their effective access to services.

All of the above evidence adds up to suggest that electronic communication direct to / from citizens will not work as the main channel of communication for all citizens, particularly disadvantaged citizens. Instead we need to concentrate on utilising and revitalising traditional channels (face to face, phone) as well as enabling traditional channels to be supported by electronic support. In this situation, the use of new technologies by front office services and intermediaries is vital in supporting a truly multi channel approach which caters adequately for the needs of disadvantaged groups.

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<sup>3</sup> To encourage use of ICT/new online technologies, the Commission plans to publish a Guide to EU Users' Digital Rights and Obligations later in 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Citizens Online (2007) "*Digital divide is not old news!*" available at <http://www.citizenonline.org.uk/online/news/display?contentId=4686> and Freshminds and UK Online (2007) "*Understanding digital inclusion*" available at: [http://www.ukonlinecentres.com/corporate/images/stories/downloads/uk\\_online\\_digitalinclusion.pdf](http://www.ukonlinecentres.com/corporate/images/stories/downloads/uk_online_digitalinclusion.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ofcom (2007) "*No home Internet access for children can lead to social disadvantage says report from Ofcom*" press release accessed via eGov Monitor at [www.egovmonitor.com/node/12448/print](http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/12448/print)

<sup>6</sup> In the UK of the four in ten who do not access the Internet regularly, a quarter live in households with Internet access. Citizens Online (2007) "*Digital divide is not old news!*" available at <http://www.citizenonline.org.uk/online/news/display?contentId=4686> and Freshminds and UK Online (2007) "*Understanding digital inclusion*" available at: [http://www.ukonlinecentres.com/corporate/images/stories/downloads/uk\\_online\\_digitalinclusion.pdf](http://www.ukonlinecentres.com/corporate/images/stories/downloads/uk_online_digitalinclusion.pdf)

## **1.6      *Structure of this paper***

The first part of the paper explores how disadvantaged citizens' consumption experiences can be very different from those 'better-off' citizens. The paper then explores how disadvantaged citizens would prefer to access public services in terms of their experiences of service and the channel choice. Finally, the paper explores the role of intermediaries (particularly the Third Sector) in mediating the public service experience.

## 2.0 WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED CONSUMERS OF PUBLIC SERVICES?

When it comes to the consumption of public services, it is disadvantaged citizens (those most in need and with the most complex and entrenched needs) who are the biggest users (and most in need) of public services. And current evidence suggests that some public services may be creating exclusions by offering their services in a manner which is inaccessible to their target groups. When disadvantaged groups access public and commercial services, they often suffer a worse experience and get worse outcomes than other ('better off') consumers. Research into consumer disadvantage by the National Consumer Council<sup>7</sup> highlights experiences such as:

- Disadvantaged groups are recognised as being 'cash poor' but they are also 'time poor' due to family caring responsibilities and balancing this with long working hours or shift work – this makes it harder and more expensive to tackle problems or access services. It is often assumed that 'time poor' people are working in highly paid demanding jobs, but those in well-paid jobs can usually engage with eCommerce and related services to overcome time pressures.
- Because of where disadvantaged groups live, closure – or lack of – local services (for example in rural areas or deprived neighbourhoods) means more ill-afforded expense and time travelling to town or city centre offices. The poor therefore pay more to access services<sup>8</sup>. For example in many rural areas of Hungary, as illustrated by our case study, before the introduction of eHungary centres, people had to travel many miles to the nearest town or even to the capital city to access some public services<sup>9</sup>.
- Disadvantaged consumer-citizens are less likely to seek corrective action when something goes wrong, often because they cannot afford the time or lack the resources to follow complaints up.<sup>10</sup>
- Disadvantaged consumer-citizens find the terms and conditions on bills, letters and forms difficult to understand, and may lack literacy skills to deal with these effectively.
- Disadvantaged people can lack confidence to deal with gatekeepers to public services such as call centre operatives, housing officers or doctor surgery receptionists and find it difficult to access appointments due to inflexible booking systems or due to caring responsibilities which meant they could not call or attend at the allotted time. This can often mean they are less able to get the outcome needed. In the MC-eGov scenarios<sup>11</sup> it was established that homeless people with challenging lifestyles and multiple social and health problems, can find it hard to access doctor's surgeries. This may be caused by a

<sup>7</sup> National Consumer Council (2008) "*Time poor, cash poor*" Published as part of National Consumer Council (2008) "*Consumer futures; understanding disadvantage*" available at [http://www.ncc.org.uk/research\\_policy/consfutures/index.php](http://www.ncc.org.uk/research_policy/consfutures/index.php). The UK's parliament is creating a powerful new statutory National Consumer Council, the NCC's Consumer Futures project will build the intellectual framework, consumer insight and high level relationships that will enable it to succeed. Consumer Futures is the projects' programme of research and engagement that will involve dialogue with business and consumer leaders, as well as extensive consumer research.

<sup>8</sup> National Consumer Council (2008) "*Ignored, isolated, invisible*" Published as part of National Consumer Council (2008) "*Consumer futures; understanding disadvantage*" available at [http://www.ncc.org.uk/research\\_policy/consfutures/index.php](http://www.ncc.org.uk/research_policy/consfutures/index.php).

<sup>9</sup> Hall, N (2008) "*eHungary Project: Roma pilot project case study*" available at

[http://www.mcegov.eu/media/513/ehungary%20roma%20case%20study\\_final+photos.pdf](http://www.mcegov.eu/media/513/ehungary%20roma%20case%20study_final+photos.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> National Consumer Council (2008) "*Consumer Futures: The Research*"

<sup>11</sup> MC-eGov (2008) "*Deliverable D1.3b: A life-event scenarios approach*" available at [www.mcegov.eu](http://www.mcegov.eu)

lack of time or resources on the part of the surgeries, the attitudes and beliefs of surgery staff or homeless people's inability to cope with the rigid working practices of GP surgeries. Many surgeries mistakenly believed that without an address, a patient cannot register, but reality is that homeless people can be registered using the surgery's own address or that of a friend. This means homeless people disproportionately access emergency health services, which are of higher cost.

- Disadvantaged consumers can also be less aware of or less able to access alternatives (such as Web based information and advice) and may access services inappropriately or try to solve the problem for themselves for by self-medicating instead of seeing a doctor. This can ultimately lead to higher costs for public services as people come for emergency, rather than routine treatment.
- Finally, disadvantaged consumer-citizens can also end up paying more for the same services – for example by not being able to take up discounts offered through using direct debit facilities, or because they do not have bank accounts or a credit reference history that allows them to take out loans at low rates of interest. Many disadvantaged groups avoid direct debits because of weekly salary payments which mean monthly direct debit payments can be missed and charges made and not having a steady income flow to be able to ensure money is in the account at the right time.

All of the above means that it is more challenging and difficult for disadvantaged citizens to extract public value out of the services being provided. On top of all of this, effective service access for disadvantaged groups can be arguable more important. Being disadvantaged often means that effective service access and usage is more critical (it may even mean 'life and death') whereas for other citizens getting access may not be so critical, and may just be an irritation or annoyance to be dealt with.

## 3.0 HOW WOULD DISADVANTAGED CITIZENS PREFER TO ACCESS PUBLIC SERVICES?

The transformative potential of the Internet to change the way citizens access and use public services is a high priority for Inclusive eGovernment. There are a multitude of models, pilots and case examples of the variety of ways in which citizens can consume private and public services in the Knowledge Society. A key policy challenge is to use the Internet to develop a more collaborative and informed model of service usage. Amongst all this a key question remains pertinent; how do disadvantaged citizens prefer to consume public services? This section now looks at patterns around consumption of services and asks how do citizens want to consume public services? It examines first how disadvantaged groups wish to access public services, and then look at channel preferences.

### 3.1 *Exercising choice*

Literature notes that the manner in which customers or citizens consume services (whether public or private) is changing as new delivery models evolve.<sup>12</sup> It can appear that consumers have shifted towards being more engaged and more informed about the decisions they take, partly through greater use of information search via the Internet (e.g. insurance comparison or holiday rating Websites) which 'empowers' them to make 'better' decisions. This is also reflected in the public sector, for example through citizens using Web searches to identify symptoms, diagnose and seek a second medical opinion. In the public sector however, it is often noted that the citizen cannot go elsewhere for services (there is no competition in your choice of police force for example).

However the agenda around increased choice in public services (for example which hospital you are treated in) may increase the level of empowerment for citizens, as it has done in the private sector where customers can decide where they want to go because they are paying more directly. Recent research<sup>13</sup> has challenged the view that citizens have real choice in the delivery of public services, and they identify four models of the service encounter which suggest a more 'fragmented' picture of service interaction:

- Compliance – where the professional's opinion dictates
- Collaboration – where consumers expect engagement on more of less equal status
- Confirmation – checking professional opinion against other information sources
- Consumerism – seeing and using professional services purely as a resource.<sup>14</sup>

The point here being that when it comes to public services (and even perhaps some private services, for example financial advice) not everyone wants to be an informed consumer, or wants to invest the time and energy in researching their options, and becoming an expert. On many occasions citizens want to rely on and take a professional's advice. For some consumers choice is not always preferential. Indeed in some cases, citizens may not possess the skills or educational level to be able to gather and interpret the information they need and may be

<sup>12</sup> Laing and Hogg (2005) Consuming services in the knowledge society: the Internet & consumer culture" Cultures of consumption programme, ESRC. Available at <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/research/laing.html>

<sup>13</sup> Laing and Hogg (2005) Consuming services in the knowledge society: the Internet & consumer culture" Cultures of consumption programme, ESRC. Available at <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/research/laing.html>

<sup>14</sup> Laing and Hogg (2005) *Ibid*

disadvantaged because of that. Citizens who are dealing with multiple personal issues, such as low income, being a single parent, or physical or mental disabilities may also be unlikely to have the time or resources to invest. Finally, consumers may want to take more responsibility for choosing services but that does not diminish the level of service and expertise they expect to receive from professionals or public services.

### **3.2 Channel preferences**

Evidence is also mixed about which channels disadvantaged consumers/citizens prefer to use to access services. Research from the Netherlands<sup>15</sup> suggests six groups of determinants are taken into account by citizens in selecting channel choice:

- Habit – what people are used to and prefer doing
- Channel characteristics – for example opening hours and accessibility
- Task characteristics – the personal nature and complexity of the task in hand
- Situational constraints – personal situation including web access
- Experiences – past experiences of accessing services via different channels
- Personal characteristics – such as age, skills levels etc.

Of these, Pieterse and Dijk conclude that habit has the greatest bearing on channel choice. However when the task in hand becomes more complex or more unclear (ambiguous), the characteristics of the task itself and the channel characteristics move to the forefront of decision making on channel choice<sup>16</sup>. From this we might conclude that for more complex and emotional services (such as health issues or dealing with a death) people may select different channels than those for simpler tasks like renewing vehicle tax. Disadvantaged citizens facing more complex, emotional issues may therefore make their selection vary differently. Age, gender, income, educational backgrounds also all affect attitudes towards channel choice.

Regarding channel choice, there is a significant amount of research suggesting that citizens still prefer more traditional face to face (in person) and telephone communications with public services, as in the case of research into consumer services in the United States<sup>17</sup>. This research suggested the preference was strong even though more traditional face to face services can often be more inconvenient (shorter opening hours, further distance to travel) than electronic services. National Consumer Council research confirmed this indicating that disadvantaged consumers in particular preferred face-to-face interactions because they are less confident (for example they are less able to articulate their problems, may be fearful of the 'authority' of the person talking to them, and may be not used to communicating frequently via telephone) using the telephone or the Web.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pieterse and van Dijk (2008) "*Channel choice determinants: an exploration of the factors that determine the choice of a service channel in citizen initiated contacts*" ACM International Conference Proceeding Series; Vol 228 Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> annual international conference on digital government research: bridging disciplines and domains, pp 173-182 accessed at <http://portal.acm.org>

<sup>16</sup> Pieterse and van Dijk (2008) *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Streib, G and Navarro, I (2006) "*Citizen demand for Interactive e-Government*" The American Review of Public Administration, Vol 36, No 3, 288-300

<sup>18</sup> National Consumer Council (2008) "*Consumer Futures: the research*"

The preference for face to face channels is still strong, but given these are costly, many services are instead delivered via a call centres. There is a well researched and documented dislike<sup>19</sup> and distrust of call centres.<sup>20</sup> General complaints of call centres are well rehearsed<sup>21</sup> and this indicates the strength of public opinion against call centres and the particular aversion among younger customers. Yet while this channel aversion to call centres extends to many groups of citizens/ consumers, research has identified further specific problems that disadvantaged consumers experience when using call centres which caused aversion to this channel as a choice<sup>22</sup>. These include financial and emotional barriers such as:

- less confidence in using the telephone for processing transactions, coupled with,
- little choice of alternative contact mechanisms (despite preferences)
- higher charges for using call centres numbers from mobiles because of lack of access to a landline and added expense if on pay-as-you-go tariff (even calls to freephone numbers can be charged from a mobile)
- for pay-as-you-go users time spent calling call centres reduced credit available for normal everyday use
- for users of phone boxes being out on hold and being asked to call back are problematic
- many public services will not offer to return calls to mobiles
- can be more time-consuming for the 'time poor' (for example single parents who balance work and care responsibilities)
- issues that could easily be resolved locally or face to face often escalate when on the telephone (for example and managers being called on the line)

There remains however a strong foundation for support and advice through contact centres that is being provided by third sector helplines; for example in the UK alone over 1,000 helplines provide assistance on topics diverse as health, education, domestic abuse, drugs and alcohol and deal with in excess of 22 million calls per year.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that while general opinions of call centres can be negative, there remains a clear role for them in providing support to those socially disadvantaged consumers at the heart of this study.

Other newer channel choices are available but less well researched in terms of citizens' preferences towards them. In the UK digital television (iDTV) is being explored as an alternative to Internet service delivery, based on the rationale that after digital switchover more homes will have digital TV access than those who access the Internet (which has peaked and levelled off in the UK). This is particularly seen as having potential to target lower income households which are

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<sup>19</sup> For example Clark, M (2005) "Call centre hang up: Four out of five Brits are fed up, frustrated and stressed with the service their receive from call centres" This is Money, available at [http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/news/article.html?in\\_article\\_id=404659&in\\_page\\_id=2](http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=404659&in_page_id=2)

<sup>20</sup> Recent research suggests that nearly seven in ten (69%) of UK consumers would be less likely to purchase after a negative call centre experience, rising to 75% amongst 16-44 year olds GfK NOP (2008) research available at [http://www.webitpr.com/release\\_detail.asp?ReleaseID=9337](http://www.webitpr.com/release_detail.asp?ReleaseID=9337)

<sup>21</sup> For a full summary see National Consumer Council (2008) "*Consumer futures; understanding disadvantage*" is available at [http://www.ncc.org.uk/research\\_policy/consfutures/index.php](http://www.ncc.org.uk/research_policy/consfutures/index.php).

<sup>22</sup> National Consumer Council (2008) "*Consumer futures; understanding disadvantage*" is available at [http://www.ncc.org.uk/research\\_policy/consfutures/index.php](http://www.ncc.org.uk/research_policy/consfutures/index.php). The UK's parliament is creating a powerful new statutory National Consumer Council, the NCC's Consumer Futures project will build the intellectual framework, consumer insight and high level relationships that will enable it to succeed. Consumer Futures is the projects' programme of research and engagement that will involve dialogue with business and consumer leaders, as well as extensive consumer research.

<sup>23</sup> Source: Telephone Helplines Association, for details see [http://www.helplines.org.uk/tha\\_home\\_page.htm](http://www.helplines.org.uk/tha_home_page.htm)

less likely to have Internet access. A recent review of public service delivery via digital television concludes that while offering some potential, the technology is still in its infancy, although "it has the potential to become an increasingly important complementary service platform." (Smith and Webster, 2008)<sup>24</sup> and further research is required regarding citizens' preferences towards this channel.

Similarly, mobile phones are also being explored as an alternative channel for public service delivery, particularly as Web enabled mobile phones become more widely used. Examples of SMS services abound in the education sector, with schools texting parents about reports, grades and to support school attendance strategies and truancy<sup>25</sup> - in itself a service partnership between school and parents to pre-empt possible social exclusion at school. However recent research similarly concludes that this area of delivery is still in its infancy, lacking the maturity of Web based models<sup>26</sup>; again customer preferences around these channels are as yet un-tested and un-proven.

So, while multi-channel public services are a desirable policy-goal, ICTs do not in themselves provide the answer to the delivery of services to socially excluded people. In particular, in relation to socially excluded groups who may not have Internet access, traditional – and preferred – channels (i.e. face to face) must be kept open to allow continued access.<sup>27</sup> Encouraging and supporting citizens to develop new habits (moving towards using new channels) may also help migrate people into more cost effective channels and away from costly face to face. This could be done through the use of intermediaries who can support people, to gain the skills and confidence needed to access new channels. Incentivising new channels may also influence channel preferences.

Furthermore, the services that are available online may not be relevant or appropriate for disadvantaged customers (e.g. online tax completion, online school result reporting) and may not get to the real needs of the people, instead offering 'quick wins' in terms of getting services online.

### **3.3 Role for the Third Sector**

A further dimension around accessing public services is the long history of service delivery by NGOs and the third sector. In the UK for example a significant proportion of service delivery is provided by the third sector and charities, funded through fundraising and donations. This was exemplified in the UK homelessness case study presented as part of this study where the NGOs provide the immediate shelter and support for homeless people. People with particular exclusions may be dispersed both spatially and socially, and special interest groups (whether they are

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<sup>24</sup> Smith and Webster (2008) "Is Interactive Digital Television the Future of E-Government Services? A Critical Assessment of UK Initiatives" International Journal of Public Administration, Volume 31, Issue 7 June 2008, pages 771 – 796 available at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a794208940~db=all>

<sup>25</sup> See work by Becta in the UK at

[http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=oe&catcode=ss\\_es\\_fam\\_att\\_03&rid=14769](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=oe&catcode=ss_es_fam_att_03&rid=14769)

<sup>26</sup> Vincent and Harris (2008) "EFFECTIVE USE OF MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS IN E-GOVERNMENT: How do we reach the tipping point?" Information, Communication & Society, Volume 11, Issue 3 April 2008, pages 395 – 413 available at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a792105100~db=all>

<sup>27</sup> Pieterse and Ebberts (2008) "The use of service channels by citizens in the Netherlands: implications for multi-channel management" International review of administrative sciences, Vol 74, No 1, 95-110 accessed at <http://ras.sagepub.com>

charities, associations, or social intermediary organisations) can help to articulate their needs, and to mediate with government in ensuring effective service delivery. Additionally the involvement of the third sector is beneficial that many disadvantaged groups do not want to engage with government and even choose to opt out of accessing public services. But very often the delivery of services is not as a result of preference, it is simply that the third sector steps in to deliver where the statutory sector does not provide.

There is a thus clear role for intermediaries such as third sector organisations<sup>28</sup> to provide services to disadvantaged groups on behalf of, or in partnership with, government provision. In some cases disadvantaged groups are more likely to trust third sector intermediaries than 'the government' as providers of impartial information, advice and support.<sup>29</sup>

*"The network economy also offers nonprofits special opportunities, including a role as trusted intermediaries to help people cope with a deluge of complex information" (Dov Te'eni, 2003)*

This type of service model is evident in numerous cases. For example the Parent Know How programme being funded by the UK's Department for Children, Schools and Families, provides information advice and support to parents through a range of services including telephone helplines, text messaging, instant messaging, social networking and a virtual magazine.<sup>30</sup> All of these services are being independently delivered by third sector organisations and targeted to parents, particularly parents in need of support (such as parents of disabled children and minority ethnic parents)<sup>31</sup> without the explicit support of the Department being visible, so as not to disengage or alienate target parents. One of the cases explored as part of this study, the Roma eHungary project in Hungary also exemplifies this approach of using intermediaries to deliver services to target disadvantaged groups. The eHungary project funds a series of local eHungary public Internet access points which are targeted at the socially disadvantaged Roma community in Hungary. The Roma eHungary points are designed, developed and run by local intermediaries from the local Roma community in an effort to encourage the Roma community to access the Internet, learn new skills and also access web-based public services through the centres, and with the support of trained Roma intermediaries<sup>32</sup>.

### **3.4 Personalised services**

A final area for consideration is the move towards personalised services that is occurring across public services. This involves the use of personalised budgets and direct payments giving users more control over the services they access. In the UK this has been trialled by local councils in their re-design of delivery of social care services<sup>33</sup> i.e. focussing on disadvantaged groups. Technology plays a key part in this agenda by providing more flexible, accessible services. Web-

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<sup>28</sup> Also referred to as 'organised civil society' or 'économie sociale'.

<sup>29</sup> Dov Te'eni - Tel-Aviv University, Dennis R. Young - Case Western Reserve University (2003) "The Changing Role of Nonprofits in the Network Economy," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 397-414 (2003) DOI: 10.1177/0899764003254900

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/parents/parentknowhow/>

<sup>31</sup> Directory of services [http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/\\_files/PKHDDirectoryJuly08.pdf](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/PKHDDirectoryJuly08.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Hall, N (2008) "eHungary Project: Roma pilot project case study" available at [www.mcegov.eu](http://www.mcegov.eu)

<sup>33</sup> Gaines, S (5 March 2008) "Personalised services to be extended" *The Guardian* available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/05/conferences>

based services lend themselves to personalisation by storing information about visitors through cookies and user preferences, pushing appropriate content forwards.

However some research by the Work Foundation<sup>34</sup> found that while all of the citizens in higher income groups had used personalised websites, only a third of lower income groups had done so<sup>35</sup>. And while 'better off' and more technology skilled citizens are getting more used to personalised services (through their experiences with the private sector), disadvantaged citizens approach these types of services with caution and scepticism. Concerns centre around personal information security and data sharing, concerns the technology would 'fail' and above all, over-riding preferences to transact via other channels.

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<sup>34</sup> Jones and Williams (2005) *"What ICT? Providing more customer-focussed services"* The Work Foundation.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

## 4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Disadvantage is difficult to define. Citizens can be disadvantaged by nature of their educational or work status, their health, age, gender, sexuality or geography. Disadvantaged groups face multiple and complex needs with their needs often falling between the remit of several public authorities.

At the European level, relative and absolute disadvantage varies enormously. Disadvantaged groups living even in the "poorest situation" within the "richest" countries face a lower absolute level of deprivation than the "richest" people living in the most "poor" EU countries.

While Internet access grows at European level, strong differentials in levels of access exist between member states and progress with regard to Internet access to government services is patchy. The digital divide is complex and not easily defined by age, income or gender and as technology advances new divides are created between those who do and do not have access to the latest or fastest technology. Furthermore many citizens do not even want to access the Internet.

The desire, as well as the skills and confidence to use technology, are essential for disadvantaged citizens to access services effectively. Trust in multi-channel public services is also an essential building block before citizens will access online public services.

When it comes to the consumption of public services; it is those disadvantaged citizens (those most in need and with the most complex and demanding needs) who are the biggest users of public services. And being socially disadvantaged affects the way citizens consume; with disadvantaged groups often experiencing poorer service and poorer outcomes from their service interactions. Being time poor, lacking literacy skills or not having the confidence to deal with service gatekeepers all negatively affect disadvantaged citizens' service experiences even to the extent of increasing their exclusion. This all affects channel preference.

Age, gender, income, educational background and level of disadvantage all affect citizens' attitudes towards channel choice. And habit has the greatest bearing on channel choice. Thus a strong preference for face to face channels continues to exist among disadvantaged groups. Telephone based services are a more cost effective alternative (and are well used for example in the case of third sector led telephone helplines) but are also disliked and create further exclusions for already disadvantaged people; disadvantaged groups again often end up worse off than their better off counterparts when accessing services via those routes.

Diversity of channel choice should therefore be maintained – lower cost channels can be utilised where appropriate and where they do not heighten disadvantage to save costs. The potential of iDTV and mobile could be further explored as part of a multi-channel offer. More cost effective (online) channels could be directed to services for better off citizens to enable continued investment in multiple channel and more traditionally delivered services for disadvantaged communities. Encouraging and supporting citizens to develop new habits (moving towards using new channels) may also help migrate people into more cost effective channels and away from costly face to face. This could be done through the use of intermediaries who can support people,

to gain the skills and confidence needed to access new channels. Incentivising new channels may also influence channel preferences.

The third sector has historically been playing, and will continue to play a vital role in intermediating access to services through technologies to disadvantaged groups. They deliver where public services fail to do so. This role builds on public trust (and mistrust of public authorities) and their ability to build capacity and skills levels. Since 2001 the EU has been capitalising on this opportunity by working with the third sector<sup>36</sup> as a means of better connecting with and reaching out to citizens. The EU's working relations with NGOs are also firmly established in action through structural funds and Community action programmes.

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<sup>36</sup> Or 'organised civil society' or 'économie sociale' as it is often referred.