# Using email in municipal service delivery
# - lessons for cities

## 1. Introduction

Citizens and businesses have many different ways of contacting municipalities for services, and many municipalities allow customers to use email as a contact channel. However many municipalities often find that they have difficulties in managing the email channel, with customers contacting a range of official and unofficial email addresses, and have difficulties in measuring how successful/efficient/appropriate email is for service delivery and as a point of customer contact.

This report illustrates how the municipality of Groningen has transformed its email handling methods and processes in the context of a wider multi-channel strategy to deliver better and more effective services to its citizens.

This report provides an overview of best practices in the use and handling of email by municipalities, shares lessons from Groningen's experience in transforming email handling through a case study, and gives an insight into the complexities and uses of the email channel. A glossary and links to further reading and resources are also included.

## 2 When is email the appropriate channel?

Email has become ubiquitous amongst municipalities as a channel for both internal and external communication. It has evolved through popular use into a channel that some customers also expect to use in their communications with municipalities, alongside using municipal websites. Email is quick and convenient to send, and as a result some customers are choosing this channel as a way of engaging with their local municipality.

It is important to note that not all customers choose to use email all of the time for a number of reasons, including:

- inability to access email (which can be technology or skill-related),

- concerns over safety of email as a communication channel,

- a lack of confidence in the municipality's ability to respond to emails,

- preferring to talk to someone,

- more formal methods of communication may be appropriate. e.g. physical letter,

- the complexity of an issue/multiple different issues,

- disability or impairment meaning that email is not a suitable channel,

- requirement for customer's signature as part of process/interaction, and

- the need to provide original physical documentation/supporting evidence.

It is vital that **the use of the email channel is considered in the context of a multi-channel customer access strategy**, which reflects the target audience's access to technology, the type and complexity of the contact with the municipality, their personal preferences, and the social/technological skill sets that affect their channel choices.

In 2010 the UK Cabinet Office's Local Government Contact Council produced a Channel Strategy Template to support municipalities in this task. The template provides a clear, structured framework for a municipal channel strategy, and included suggested content and standard text (that can be edited to suit the local context). It covers the basic principles and scope of the strategy, with key considerations and suggested governance arrangements, as well as specific strategies for the various channels (including email).

### What do customers expect from email?

Customers' expectations are often based on their experiences of email and online contact with other organisations/businesses, as well as any previous experience of engaging with municipalities. These experiences can colour their expectations in a positive or negative way. Different customers may have differing expectations, and may even prefer to use another method of contact.

Customers sending an email to a municipality expect a timely response; one which is polite and acknowledges the query/issue raised; which requests clarification or additional information (if necessary); which provides an answer or redirects the customer accordingly to someone who can provide an answer; and acknowledges if there is a delay that the full response will follow in a reasonable timescale.

If email responses do not meet this basic service level, customers may be inclined to escalate the issue; to change channels to get a better/different/ quicker response; or may even complain about the level of service received. Such reactions could be described as 'failure demand' and create more work for the municipality, so it is worth investing in the customer engagement process to ensure you get it right first time.

## Service delivery standards

There is a perception by some customers that municipalities are 'open all hours' via email and their websites. Whatever service delivery standards are agreed, municipalities should be transparent and publicise them clearly to help manage customer expectations. Staff should also be informed of these standards and arrangements made to manage departmental email addresses.

In a customer consultation exercise undertaken in 2010 by St Albans City & District Council (as a pilot for a customer service toolkit '*Getting it right and righting the wrongs*'), customers from their Community Panel suggested appropriate response times for emails which varied considerably – from 24 hours to one week. When asked "do you understand our service standards?" 49% of customers responded "No". Customers had differing perceptions of what was an acceptable response time, and were unaware of the municipality's actual service standards.

The municipality of Groningen has a target response time of 24 hours for email enquiries, which includes sending an interim response if the procedure is likely to take longer for a complete answer. Groningen has also developed **Ten Golden Tips** for writing and responding to emails has and ensured that all staff are trained to use them.

A 'mystery shopping exercise' of how well municipalities in the UK respond to customer emails is done as part of the annual socitm *Better Connected* survey of municipality websites in the UK. Every UK municipal website is checked in order to complete an online contact form or to find an e-mail address to send a request for help/information about a particular topic.

The sample e-mail test is always based on a different question to the previous year's survey. For the 2011 survey the email test requested help applying for a blue badge (a disabled car parking exemption badge). Not all municipalities in England are responsible for directly providing this service, although it was expected that this request would still be handled by every municipality.

The acceptable standard (for the survey) was a reply that was rated at least 'satisfactory' and which was received within two working days. In total, 56% of all UK municipalities achieved the standard, although 77% provided a reply in two working days (clearly some replies were received in time but did not provide satisfactory answers).

socitm has made a number of recommendations to municipalities to help them improve their email handling, including:

- setup a system to check that e-mail correspondence is handled properly and monitor the quality and speed of responses,

- carry out mystery shopping exercises to highlight strengths and weaknesses of your e-mail handling (some municipalities arrange this on a reciprocal basis with each other and include other channels, such as telephone enquiries),

- ensure that staff responsible for responding to emails have access to the right information to provide a quality reply,

- check that website links included within an e-mail response actually work, and

- emails may be more informal than a printed letter but should include a minimum amount of standard information:

- the name and title of the person responding, and

- the organisation's name, a telephone number and the website address.

### When is email appropriate?

To some extent, customers themselves dictate the use of email by choosing it as a method of contact. Customer enquiries that require a standard answer should be dealt with via email. These frequently asked questions and answers, along with relevant application forms, should also be published on the municipality's website to encourage self-service.

Invariably municipalities initially respond to customers using the same channel the customer used. Depending on the nature and complexity of the enquiry, municipalities may then need to decide if it is appropriate to conclude the matter via email. This is another reason why choosing the appropriate use of email should be considered as part of a multi-channel strategy.

St Albans City & District Council's Community Panel consultation included questions from the municipality about customer attitudes towards channel shift. Customers were asked if they would be comfortable if the municipality responded to customer letters or emails via telephone (where they were more complex and/or related to a complaint). The overwhelming response was positive, provided a letter was sent to confirm the outcome of the conversation. Customers could see the benefit in direct engagement, followed by the reassurance of a follow-up formal letter.

Using email to engage with customers was also part of the strategy adopted by St Albans City & District Council in surveying their Community Panel. 51% of their panel members provided valid contact email addresses, which were used to invite panel members to take an online survey. 65% of the panel who were emailed the link to the survey completed it online, compared to a 39% response rate from the panel members who received a paper copy of the same survey (which was posted to the 49% of panel members who did not provide an email address, along with a stamped return envelope). These customers were comfortable with email contact *from* their municipality and indeed, greater levels of participation was achieved from those who were contacted via this channel.

The model in Figure 1 (from the Local Government Contact Council's Channel Strategy Template), shows the customer contact channels that require a greater level of human contact and which provide more reassurance to customers. Conversely, delivery typically becomes cheaper for the organisation as a customer chooses different channels of engagement where less human contact is needed (shifting channel up the triangle).
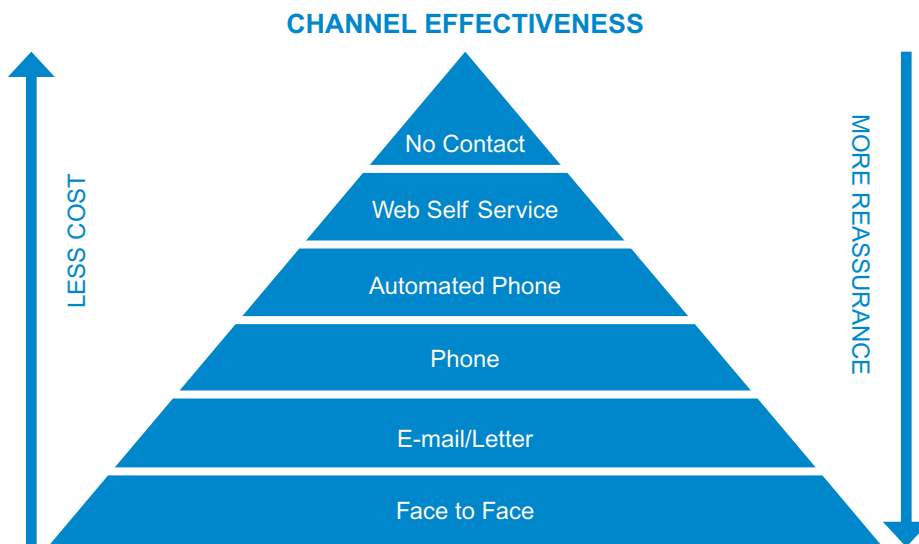
**CHANNEL EFFECTIVENESS**



*Figure 1 - The cost and effectiveness of different customer contact channels*

It may not be appropriate to encourage complex customer enquiries to be handled by email, or in situations where it is necessary to provide original physical documentation or other forms of supporting evidence. The municipality of Groningen has actively discouraged customers from using emails for services – they have developed service-specific online web forms which capture citizen enquiries in a structured way, and which means the municipality receives better quality information from citizens.

In the socitm 2011 email mystery shopping exercise, 21% of municipalities had functioning online forms that were completed, while 79% of UK municipalities published generic email addresses that were contacted instead. In this exercise, socitm found that the use of the online form did not guarantee a response, or guarantee a response within the two-day timeframe. It is unclear if customers are more or less confident about using online forms as a channel to engage with their municipality: from the model in Figure 1, it is assumed that customers have less reassurance/confidence about such interactions.

**Emerging technologies/channels**
Some customers are adopting the emerging social media technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter and consequently, municipalities are also establishing a presence on these sites as an engagement tool. In January 2010, the severe weather in the UK disrupted critical local services and encouraged many municipalities to use these new forms of social media to communicate service messages and updates to customers. Since then, more municipalities have embraced social media as an effective customer engagement tool for both in-bound and out-bound contacts, as well as redirecting customers to their websites for more information.

Municipal websites are also inviting customers to register to receive regular news bulletins or notifications of changes in services via email. Online consultation exercises are another way of engaging with customers, with the option of customers receiving an alert when new consultations begin.

Text messaging is another channel that municipalities are using to engage with customers for both in-bound and out-bound contacts. Some municipal library services provide customers with the option of registering to receive an email or text message to remind them to return their books before the due date. Others are encouraging customers to send them text messages to inform them of a whole host of issues/problems, such as vandalism, abandoned vehicles, fly-tipping, graffiti and stray dogs. Some issues are particularly time-sensitive, so inviting customers to text the municipality directly could avoid issues escalating.

# 3 The email workflow

Handling emails can be assisted or hampered by how you allocate, manage and monitor email addresses and traffic.

**Email addresses**
In England, municipalities operate in a mixed environment, with the majority of areas operating a two-tier structure of local government of County and Shire District Councils. Few municipalities distinguish this in their email addresses, such as:

- Dorset County Council @dorsetcc.gov.uk.

- Wyre Borough Council @wyrebc.gov.uk.

- Ashfield District Council @ashfield-dc.gov.uk.

Across the UK, even fewer use abbreviations of their names, which is perhaps it is understandable given the length of their official names and the propensity of misspelling, for example:

- Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council @tmbc.gov.uk.

- The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea @rbkc.gov.uk.

- Perth & Kinross Council @pkc.gov.uk.

Most municipalities regardless of type use their main official name as their email address, for instance:

- Watford Borough Council @watford.gov.uk.

- Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council @stockport.gov.uk.

- Darlington Borough Council @darlington.gov.uk.

Likewise, most conform to the standard format of firstname.lastname@council.gov.uk for staff email addresses and department@council.gov.uk for departmental/generic email addresses. Standardising in this way enables customers and other organisations to predict unknown email addresses for new contacts.

The Groningen case study highlights how it overcame the problem of email address formats.

**Personal versus Departmental addresses**

Personal email addresses tend to be used by municipalities for internal staff email addresses. Departmental addresses are often used on websites and publicity material (leaflets, posters etc.).

In the socitm mystery shopping exercise, 100% of email addresses advertised on each municipality's website that were contacted for help (where online forms were not available) were generic or departmental addresses. These ranged from the generic info@, customerservices@, and enquiries@ through to the more specific parking@, parkingservices@ and transportation@.

Using generic or departmental email addresses online and/or on printed material has its advantages: multiple users can view and respond to incoming emails; it is less-likely that out-of-office rule replies will be necessary (as shared management enables cover); changes to addresses are infrequent, lowering maintenance/republishing costs; emails can be logged and monitored; emails can be integrated into back-office systems.

There are potential disadvantages to generic or departmental email addresses: shared ownership/responsibility by staff could result in delayed responses as everyone assumes someone else is dealing with the email; different staff have differing levels of knowledge, so the responses may vary; and the continuity of responses may be affected if customers engage in an email dialogue over a period of time when different staff may be handling emails.

## 4 The email model

As indicated in the channel effectiveness model earlier, email is not necessarily the most cost-effective channel of customer engagement for municipalities. In Groningen, the effect of 'loose' emails within the municipality has made it difficult to monitor the quality and speed of responses to customers' emails. Consequently Groningen does not know all of their current costs for email handling.

From the customer's perspective, emails are free to send (saving on postage stamps, paper and envelopes), and are quick and convenient, so they are often a popular channel. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that customer emails can disappear into a 'black hole' within municipalities, resulting in customers changing channel and pursuing more costly modes of contact such as the telephone or face-to-face.

Establishing a municipality's costs for handling the email channel has proved difficult. This could be due to the variable nature of customer emails, and a lack of management/monitoring arrangements of emails within municipalities.

Socitim published 'cost to serve' data for the three main service channels in August 2010:

• Face-to-face £7.40

• Telephone    £2.90

• Web          £0.32

Given the unstructured nature of emails and the variability of the complexity of customer contacts via this channel, the cost to serve of emails should be somewhere between the costs of telephone transactions and face-to-face transactions. Reducing the number of customer emails by providing self-serve information on the municipality's website, by reducing the number of published email addresses, or by developing online web forms to capture customer enquiries might therefore be desirable. The transfer of emails into other channels would potentially result in a more cost-efficient process.

An annual survey of 253 UK municipalities by NDL into integration and CRM reported that in 2010, 89% of the municipalities surveyed used a CRM to manage customer contacts. However, 17% were still re-keying all data that was being collected into the CRM, with 38% re-keying more than 60% of data. It could be argued that in attempting to build a customer contact picture, this is adding costs to the process of handling customer enquiries from all channels without adding value to the customer. Online web forms also were not integrated into CRM systems, with 35% of municipalities surveyed re-keying all data and 77% re-keying more than 51% of data from web forms. This lack of integration requires additional resources and the reprocessing of data that municipalities can ill-afford.

## 5 Legal issues

Municipalities should establish a clear email policy as a guide to staff on usage, to help prevent time wasting, to protect the security of your data and system, and to minimise the risk of legal issues. All staff should be made aware of the email policy and it is recommended that staff be required to sign an acknowledgement of understanding and an agreement to abide by the policy. It is also recommended that the municipality's employment terms and conditions make reference to staff adherence to the email policy.

An email policy should include guidelines and rules around:

- permitted use – internal and external, business and personal, confidential and contractual,

- prohibited use and monitoring arrangements,

- content – style, tone, standard header/footer content, disclaimer,

- handling – response times, use of 'out of office' rules, read-receipts, access to email accounts, and

- Ttchnical - speed of transmission, storage, file size of attachments, security (including encryption of emails if provided), spam and viruses.

Spam emails are a problem for municipalities, both for staff who receive them and when municipal emails are identified as spam, resulting in emails from the municipality being blocked/filtered by the recipient. There is also a potential for viruses to be transmitted via email, and spam emails should be dealt with via the municipality's ICT Security Policy, as well as being highlighted in the email policy.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) **personal information online code of practice** recommends that it is bad practice to collect personal details like names and email addresses just to let someone look at your website. Likewise the code notes that it is bad practice to make people contact you by letter or telephone if you provide services to them online. This guidance should be borne in mind by municipalities when developing their channel strategy.

There is further guidance from the **ICO** in the **email marketing data protection good practice note**, which explains the regulations that apply to direct marketing via electronic mail, which activities they cover, and includes some good practice recommendations. This could also affect how municipalities gather and distribute information to customers via email.

**Read-receipts** do not appear to be commonly used by municipalities for outbound customer emails. Guidance on the use of such receipts should be covered in the email policy.

**Disclaimers** are commonly appended to the end of outgoing municipality emails by mail servers. There appears to be no clear guidance in the UK on the use or inclusion of email disclaimers. They provide a sense of security and/or offer damage limitation - as most, if not all, municipalities use them they have become standard by default.

Customers perceive an email from a municipality as being 'official' correspondence/response and so rely on the contents. It is suggested that contractual business is not conducted via email, and municipalities should use the traditional letter instead.

The National Ombudsman of the Netherlands recommends that the use of disclaimers in emails is not a legal obligation, because the content of the emails from municipalities should contain trustworthy information. As a result, the municipality of Groningen will be reviewing its use of disclaimers in emails.

The **European Union Data Retention Directive** (2006/24/EC) covers telecommunications data retention (which includes emails). According to the directive, member states will have to store citizens' telecommunications data for six to 24 months stipulating a maximum time period. However, the UK is among those countries that have not adopted the retention directive, relying on the Data Protection Act 1998 to ensure it is compliant with EU requirements. EU municipalities should check if this directive is adopted and enforced in their country.

# 6 Case Study: Optimising the email channel in the City of Groningen, Netherlands

## Overview

The Municipal Ombudsman of Groningen stated in the 2010 Annual Report that citizens did not get proper answers when they contact the municipality of Groningen by email. This confirmed what had already been recognised by the Customer Services Programme that was already underway in the municipality of Groningen. Management information was lacking: emails were not registered, the content and quality of the responses was not monitored, the speed of responses was unknown, and the information/responses provided by different service channels was inconsistent.

Groningen tackled these issues by reducing the number of published email addresses on its website and on promotional material; by introducing service-specific online electronic forms in order to capture citizen enquiries in a structured way; by drastically reducing the number of public email addresses following an audit; by standardising their email address format (including internal addresses); and training all staff on the Ten Golden Tips for writing and responding to citizens' emails.

Groningen has achieved improved results in mystery shopping exercises to test their effectiveness at handling emails, and staff are more professional and courteous in responding to emails after appropriate training.

## Background

Groningen is a municipality and the capital city of the province of Groningen in the Netherlands. With a population of around 190,000, it is by far the largest city in the north of the Netherlands, covering an area of almost 84 km2, with a population density of 2,324/km2. Groningen is a university city, inhabited on average by about 50,000 students and has the youngest average population in the Netherlands, with the majority of the population under 35 years old.

The municipality of Groningen recognised that their citizens will choose their own preferred channel/method of contact, and engaging with the municipality via email and the Internet are popular. While Groningen has over 3000 employees, it had at least 5000 internal email addresses, and more than 70 different mail-addresses were published on its website. It was clear that there was a problem in managing and maintaining citizen contacts via email and the website, and that these inconsistencies needed to be addressed.

Groningen aimed to handle citizen emails in the same way as any other form of contact and to provide the same, consistent response independent of the channel that was used. They recognised that service standards would vary depending on channel but the essential response/answer should be consistent.

**What did they do?**

The municipality of Groningen established a project as part of the Smart Cities initiative. A Project Initiation Document (PID) was completed and a Project Leader appointed and an outline project plan agreed. The email handling project was managed by an existing Stad & Stadhuis Steering Committee (Stad & Stadhuis is the programme to improve customer services in Groningen).

**An inventory of existing problems** relating to email handling and addresses formed the baseline for the project, which started in March 2008 and is due to be completed by December 2011. However, work will continue as part of the Customer Services Programme to standardise citizen contacts across all channels.

A **communication plan** was produced which was key to ensure that all stakeholders were aware of the project and its objectives.

An **email protocol** was developed, which included determining which central email addresses were required within the Groningen municipality, as well as the policy for issuing new email addresses and how such addresses are formatted. There were originally almost 80 public email addresses and this number is to be reduced by 90% to eight departmental email addresses, with the ultimate aim of having only one public email address. This will reduce the number of emails publicised on the website and on promotional material. It is acknowledged that this means that citizens will still be able to email these departmental email addresses and that these 'loose' emails will need managing. The email protocol is now included in the Staff Introduction Process.

In addition, these eight departmental email addresses will each have an **auto-reply**, so that when citizens email them they get an immediate response acknowledging receipt.

Unnecessary email addresses were removed from the website and replaced by **web forms**. By introducing service-specific online electronic forms to capture citizen enquiries in a structured way, better quality information was received. Most web form content is usually sent to the relevant departmental email address for a response (although web forms can be setup to send the content to an individual within the municipality). In some instances, the web forms pre-populate the back-office application system (saving re-keying and reducing errors). Groningen is still developing and fine-tuning the process behind web forms and admits that they are not perfect yet! The aim is to receive less unstructured emails, and to encourage more contact through the website forms.

Groningen has over 3000 employees, yet it had at least 5000 internal email addresses. An **audit and rationalisation of the redundant email addresses** resulted in removing 40%, leaving around 3000 email addresses (i.e. one per employee). On-going housekeeping continues to ensure that this level is maintained. Employees are also required to enable an 'out-of-office' reply to all external emails when they are unavailable for any extended period (due to holiday or illness etc.).

As well as reducing the number, the format of the email address was reviewed in order to standardise the suffix of addresses. Previously, departments added a suffix to all their email addresses such as parkeren@roez.groningen.nl. The standard format agreed generated much discussion and is now in use: name.surname@groningen.nl for a person and a clear name for departmental email addresses (such as parkeren@groningen.nl). The standard was implemented department by department and whilst it was purely an administrative task, this aspect of the project was time-consuming and resource-intensive.

This attention to emails served to raise awareness amongst staff about email handling issues and led to a review of the content and quality of emails. In order to measure the quality of email responses, a **mystery-shopping exercise** was setup with an external third party. 120 emails were sent to the eight departmental email addresses. The results of this confirmed that 58% of citizens' received a response to their email within 24 hours, the emails had a positive tone and were readable. On the negative side, auto-replies were not consistently setup, emails were not addressed personally, they included mistakes and spelling errors, included unnecessary web links, and showed little understanding of the citizen's circumstances.

As a result, Groningen developed **Ten Golden Tips** for writing and responding to citizen emails and all staff were trained to further improve their emails. A simple but effective set of presentation slides were used to get the message across to staff in a friendly way, and included a summary of the mystery shopping exercise. This training and dissemination for all staff was done over a three-month period using a cascade approach: a central meeting was held with each department and then nominated officers used the presentation slides to further disseminate the message within each department. The Ten Golden Tips were also publicised on the staff intranet.

**Ten Golden Tips for email use**

1. Set up an automatic reply.

2. Make the opening personal (refer to the citizen by their name).

3. Correct the subject line (if necessary).

4. Use a proper structure/format, for example: heading-answer-ending.

5. Show empathy.

6. Show that you understand the question (and refer to it).

7. Copy and paste information into the reply (use web links as little as possible).

8. End the reply personally, conforming to the e-mail protocol/style guide (use an electronic signature).

9. Be accurate and check your spelling (use the spell-check feature).

10. Answer e-mails from the general public mail address.

A **second mystery-shopping exercise** has been undertaken and the results are being analysed - initial findings show a marked improvement in email responses following the staff training.

## Who was involved?

The key personnel involved in the project included the existing Stad & Stadhuis Programme (which is the programme to improve customer services in Groningen), the Project Leader (who worked on the email project part-time) and members of the municipality's General Management Team. IT staff were involved in removing the old email addresses and reformatting the existing ones. The Service Desk (help desk) was responsible for applying the new email protocol rules and getting the databases in order. All staff were trained in the Ten Golden Rules of email handling by an enthusiastic member of staff, followed by a cascade approach to the training within each department.

## Outcomes and impact

The municipality of Groningen set the following objectives for the project which they achieved:

- **Enhanced customer satisfaction** – evidenced by the second mystery shopping exercise with work continually on-going to improve satisfaction levels.

- **Better e-mail handling within the organisation** – enabled by the rationalisation of redundant internal email addresses by 40% and the standardisation of email addresses.

- **Better quality answers for citizens** – supported by the Ten Golden Tips training.

- **More structured e-mail entrances and communication policy** on (the use of) e-mail – will be enabled by the reduction by 90% of departmental email addresses.

- **Use of web forms on the website channel only** (no 'loose' web-addresses any more) – the use of web forms is underway with further forms in development.

- **Establish an e-mail protocol** – delivered and included in the Staff Introduction Process.

**Key lessons for others**

The municipality of Groningen identified the following key lessons for municipalities doing similar projects:

- **Email process** – is difficult to monitor with too many 'loose' email addresses in terms of quality and speed of response (too many people involved). Place emphasis on customer contact and look at the use of email from the customers' perspective.

- **Communications** – create very easy rules, such as promoting the Ten Golden Tips to staff to gain buy-in and understanding.

- **Technical issues** – these were experienced by some staff that were unaware of how to use email – help them by providing training in the use of email functionality.

- **Web forms** – look at the volume of specific citizen requests before developing an online web form to ensure the effort is worth it (use the 80-20 rule).

**What could have gone better?**

Having realised the benefits and success of the Ten Golden Tips, rolling these out sooner might have had an even greater impact.

**Next steps**

The municipality of Groningen aims to keep the quality of email responses high and also to continue removing old internal email addresses as a routine housekeeping exercise. Further web forms will be developed on a case-by-case basis. Work continues to integrate the eight departmental website emails and to install an auto-reply on these remaining public email addresses, with the ultimate aim of having only one public email address.

Groningen is still analysing the results of the second mystery shopping exercise on email responses to fully understand the outcomes. The Customer Services Programme will continue, focusing on optimising citizen contact across all channels using a central knowledge base. Further work will include the status tracking of emails using workflows, so that citizens can be informed of the status of their email at any given time.

The recent "Digital traffic between government and citizens" (August 2011) report by the Dutch National Ombudsman recognised the improvements Groningen had made in handling emails. This report also recommends that there is no legal obligation to use disclaimers in emails in the Netherlands, because the content of the emails from municipalities should contain trustworthy information. As a result, the municipality of Groningen will be reviewing its use of disclaimers in emails.

## 7 Summary

Email is ubiquitous, and has both advantages and disadvantages for both customers and municipalities.

Having/using email could be seen as an advantage from the customer's perspective as it is quick and convenient to send, albeit customer emails can disappear into a 'black hole' within municipalities. Consequently, new social media channels could replace some customer interactions with municipalities.

In-bound customer emails could be seen as a problem for municipalities: the unstructured nature of emails and the variability of the complexity of customer contacts combines to make handling emails a challenge. Out-bound municipality emails that are sent to customers could help to improve the take-up and awareness of services. Efforts to encourage channel shift should be considered in the context of a multi-channel customer access strategy.

Email needs managing and monitoring, along with customers' expectations, to foster a harmonious ongoing relationship between citizens and municipalities..

**www.smartcities.info**

## 8 Glossary

**Channel** – A means of communication/interaction to access or deliver a service. Examples of direct channels provided by municipalities include face-to-face, letter (post), email, telephone, mobile telephone, website, digital television and kiosks.

**Channel strategy** – A municipality's plan to manage the channels it will use to deliver services to its customers. A channel strategy explains how an organisation will meet the demands of its customers using the resources it has available.

**Community Panel** – Community or Citizen Panels are routinely used by municipalities in the UK to consult with customers about new initiatives/ potential changes to services etc. Panel make-up is usually representative of the population served by the municipality, ensuring a mix of ages, genders, ethnicities etc.

**CRM** – Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system/software is used to manage, monitor and record an organisation's interactions and communications with its customers. It is used in both the private and public sector, as well as by many municipalities.

**Encryption**
Encryption of emails is done in order to protect the content from being read by unintended recipients, by converting it from readable plaintext into scrambled ciphertext.

**Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)** – The Information Commissioner's Office is the UK's independent authority set up to uphold information rights in the public interest, promoting openness by public bodies and data privacy for individuals. http://www.ico.gov.uk/

**Mystery shopping** – Mystery shopping is a tool used externally or internally by organisations to measure the quality of service they provide, or their compliance with regulations, or to gather specific information about products and services. The mystery shopper's identity is generally not known by the organisation that is being evaluated. Mystery shoppers perform specific tasks such as purchasing a product, asking questions or registering a complaint, and then provide detailed reports or feedback about their experiences.

**Socitm** – The Society of IT Managers (socitm) is the association for ICT and related professionals in the public and third sectors in the UK. Socitm offers networking and peer support, professional development, and access to research and consultancy on a wide range of policy and technology issues.

**Spam** – Spam emails are emails that are sent to you without your consent. The ICO provides guidance on how to avoid receiving spam. http://www.ico.gov.uk/ for_the_public/topic_specific_guides/spam_emails.aspx

**Virus** – A virus is an unwanted computer program that can copy itself (reproduce) and infect a computer, causing damage and disruption. Anti-virus software is used to combat virus infections.

# 9 Resources and further reading

The UK Cabinet Office's Local Government Contact Council produced a **Channel Strategy Template** for municipalities in 2010, which includes an example completed strategy from Surrey County Council.

http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/London%20
CouncilsCHANNELSTRATEGY2010completetemplatefinal.doc

**socitm's Better Connected 2011 Annual Report** identifies good practice in the development of municipality websites in the UK based on extensive evidence-based research. It is free for socitm Insight subscribers, and available for sale to others.

http://www.socitm.net/betterconnected

**Getting it Right and Righting the Wrongs is a Practitioners' Toolkit** was produced by the UK Department for Communities & Local Government (CLG), following an independent review and report in June 2009. It challenges municipalities through self-assessment questions: are you getting your customer service right, and are you righting the wrongs? It is aimed at improving customer service across all channels and includes sections on service and remedy pledges, the importance of the frontline, and customer-focused partnerships.

http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1258307.pdf

**Nationale Ombudsman 2011 Digitaal verkeer tussen overheid en burger** (Dutch National Ombudsman – Digital communication between government and citizens)

http://www.nationaleombudsman.nl/sites/default/files/rapport_2011-204_
digitaal_verkeer_tussen_burger_en_overheid.pdf

**NDL Integration and CRM report 2011** highlights the lack of integration of CRM systems within UK municipalities.

http://www.pscsf.org.uk/2011/03/driving-out-hidden-waste-and-inefficiencies-
local-authorities-look-to-integration-2/

**UK ICO Personal information online - code of practice (July 2010)** includes guidance and best practice on the use of personal data.

http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/guidance_index/~/media/documents/
library/Data_Protection/Detailed_specialist_guides/personal_information_online_
cop.ashx

**UK ICO Data Protection Good Practice Note - Electronic mail marketing (Dec 2006)**. This guidance explains how the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 apply to direct marketing via electronic mail, which activities they cover and include some good practice recommendations.

http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/guidance_index/~/media/documents/
library/Data_Protection/Practical_application/ELECTRONIC_MAIL_
MARKETING_12_06.ashx

**www.smartcities.info**

**is4profit** is an independent, internet-based business offering information and business advice for UK SME/small businesses and provides free online guidance on establishing and implementing an email Policy for employees.

http://www.is4profit.com/business-advice/employment/an-email-policy-for-your-employees.html

**JISC Legal** is funded and is hosted by the University of Strathclyde and offers legal guidance for ICT use in education, research and external engagement. JISC has published a commentary on the use of email disclaimers.

http://www.jisclegal.ac.uk/ManageContent/ManageContent/tabid/243/ID/1649/What-is-the-current-legal-position-concerning-email-disclaimers-and-how-are-they-used.aspx

**European Union Data Retention Directive (2006/24/EC)** sets out the criteria for telecommunications data retention. According to the directive, member states will have to store citizens' telecommunications data for six to 24 months stipulating a maximum time period.

http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:105:0054:0063:EN:PDF

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