

# **Liverpool's Experience in TeleCities**

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This paper is one of a series of works in progress sponsored by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (BCSIA), its Governance Initiative in the Middle East, and the Dubai School of Government. All papers in the series are available on the BCSIA web site, [www.belfercenter.org](http://www.belfercenter.org), and the Dubai School of Government's web site, [www.dsg.ae](http://www.dsg.ae).

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In this paper, I intend to outline case studies of examples of success, failure, and as yet unproven learning between member cities of TeleCities. Initially, I will describe Liverpool's "Customer Focus" project which is an example of TeleCities learning from Liverpool and will later detail what Liverpool been able to learn from TeleCities, an example of a failure, and some learning in its infancy.

It is essential that public organizations focus upon front-line service delivery at all times. Liverpool uses the term "putting the customer at the heart of everything we do" to describe this function. It is also important that public bodies engage in what Liverpool calls "reach and richness", which means that procedures are put into place which reach everyone in society regardless of race, disability, faith, gender, class, sexual preference, or age, and that the provided services are high in quality, efficient, and cost-effective.

Political administrations have paid dearly for ignoring the needs and aspirations of the public. Liverpool is a particularly pertinent example of the price politicians pay for forgetting that they serve the citizens' needs and not their own. Liverpool has a history of voting administrations out of office for ignoring this basic tenet. When the present Liberal Democrat administration assumed power in 1998, they recognized the fact that Liverpool needed to change from a highly introspective and self-serving council to one which looks outward and caters to the public's needs. One of the decisions that this new administration made was to put the technology agenda high on the list of priorities and, to that end, Liverpool became highly active in the European Union (EU) networking and policy formulating TeleCities organization.

TeleCities is a network of over 140 cities from most of the 25 European Union countries. After four years of intensive involvement in the organization, Liverpool assumed the Presidency of TeleCities in November 2004. The term of office lasts for two years, and it effectively places Liverpool in the top league of technology policy formulation for the European Union through the European Commission, and ultimately the Council of Ministers.

In 1998, Liverpool City Council decided, as part of the aforementioned drive to concentrate upon effective service delivery to its citizens by decentralizing its operations from the center to the districts of Liverpool. The central purpose of the project was to ensure that citizens could easily access the council by whichever means that they chose. This would include telephone communications, face-to-face meetings, by letter, or by electronic means. Liverpool embarked upon a project to establish the largest call center of any UK local government and to set up a network of fourteen "One Stop Shops" strategically located around the city.

In addition, Liverpool began research on how to install a network of interactive, transactional on-street kiosks providing electronic access to council services along with access to a number of partner organizations such as health, police, and the arts sector.

In terms of the One Stop Shops and call center, Liverpool has become a beacon for other municipal councils around the United Kingdom and other EU countries for learning and benchmarking. The city has had so many visitors from other cities in the EU that it became necessary to limit them to two per month and to recoup expenses (staff and organizational) from client cities.

The city has set high but achievable targets for its staff. For instance, it is Liverpool's aim to service customers within five minutes on entry to One Stop Shops and to resolve their issues on their first visit in 95 percent of the cases.

Liverpool's call center aims to answer calls within six rings of the telephone and again to deal with queries 95 percent of the time upon first contact with the council.

The on-street kiosks exist for two primary reasons: first, to fill in the geographical gaps between the locations of the One Stop Shops and second, to provide as near to 100 percent electronic access to city council services as is realistically feasible.

Liverpool had no example to follow in the United Kingdom because, although other cities had on-street kiosks, they were neither transactional nor interactive, being simply informational. The city therefore turned to the TeleCities organization for help and discovered that Vienna (a very active member city which had previously assumed the presidency) had successfully installed a significant network of exactly the type of kiosk that Liverpool was interested in establishing.

A team from Liverpool visited Vienna and was impressed with the way that they had implemented the project, and rather than re-inventing the wheel (so to speak) the city was able to copy almost verbatim the Vienna experience. Liverpool now has a network of ten kiosks, which, in addition to providing electronic access to services, also offer a free email service to its citizens. This latter service is particularly popular with young people, making the council more popular with the next generation of users (and voters). Eventually, the city aspires to increase the network to between 50 and 100 kiosks.

TeleCare is another example of successful cross-jurisdictional learning between member cities in TeleCities. Liverpool embarked upon the project three years ago, the aim of which is to enable those elders who wish to remain longer in their own homes, rather than being forced into the alternative — sheltered accommodation. The person in question's house is wired and connected to the latest technology, which enables the call center to monitor their movements throughout the day to establish if anything out of the ordinary is occurring. For instance, it is possible to discern if someone is not up and about at the usual time in the morning, we can monitor the temperature of their bath water and alert them if it is too hot, or we can tell if they have left a window or door open overnight. If a problem is suspected, the call center can then initiate an escalating series of actions, which alert their friends or relatives and/or the authorities to the situation. This has proved a very popular scheme which was presented in Venice at a TeleCities-related conference in 2003 and which has attracted a substantial amount of interest.

An issue which needs to be addressed during the course of Liverpool's presidency is that the TeleCities organization needs to be more outward looking. As organizations become older they tend to turn in upon themselves and cater to their own internal audience. TeleCities is no exception to this rule, and it is Liverpool's intention to proactively influence the operation of EU policy on technology to an even greater extent than has hitherto been the case. A great deal of good work has been completed in areas such as eHealth, eSecurity, Risk Management, Broadband, eDemocracy (including eVoting), and eCitizenship, but it has not always been possible to showcase these activities and results on the wider EU and world stages.

Very importantly, TeleCities is not only open to membership by cities. The organization is also very fortunate to have as members some of the major technology firms. For instance, we work closely with IBM, Deloitte Touche, Oracle and, recently, CISCO. One of our partners (Deloitte) has established a benchmarking website for members of TeleCities only. This is as yet an unproven, established system which needs time to embed, but has the potential to be extremely valuable to member cities and companies. It is interesting to note that large companies in the technology field, which would be natural competitors and would therefore wish to keep information very close to their respective chests, are willing to share such information. No doubt this is due to the unique nature of TeleCities' networking operations and clearly adds value to the companies concerned, engendering trust, and a relatively free flow of information.

One area of business which TeleCities has attempted to address is the question of Open Source or open code. It may be argued by some that the monopoly enjoyed by Microsoft in the computer software field has advantages. It also has many disadvantages, however, and many public organizations would probably benefit from a more open and competitive market. After much analysis and debate (and a number of field trials), TeleCities and public bodies within the EU have found it virtually impossible to come up with many realistic

solutions. A brave exception, however, is the case of Munich, Germany, which has embarked upon a project to become the first European City to operate an entirely open source or open code system using the company Debian Linux. This experiment is of such concern to Microsoft that it is rumoured the Mayor of Munich has received telephone calls from Bill Gates himself and a low profile visit from the Chief Executive of Microsoft, presumably designed to persuade the City to abandon the trial. The whole of the European Union is watching and eagerly awaits the results.

To conclude, it is important to emphasize that both TeleCities and Liverpool City Council are proud to have at the very top of their agendas the issue of social inclusion (or what I prefer to refer to as “combating social exclusion”). It is self-evident that the use of technology has many advantages. Increased efficiency, reductions in cost, and the means by which national and local public bodies may provide services, which were impossible to provide before the advent of the technology age. It is also true, however, that without careful thought and the willingness to take account of the social agenda, along with the relentless speed of the advance of technology comes the risk of alienation, thereby increasing the so called “digital divide”.

Public bodies must ensure that they provide free education and training to that section of society who simply cannot afford to pay. It must also be acknowledged that technology may simply not be anywhere near the top of economically disadvantaged people’s agendas. They simply may have neither the time nor inclination to deal with technology, even if it is offered at no charge, with appropriate free training.