The public services' customer as talk, text and technology: a constructionist study of customer relationship management in English local government

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Abstract

E-government began to take shape at a local level in the UK at the beginning of the last decade, promising a transformation in the delivery of public services. A core element of this transformation effort entails the implementation of new organisational technologies; of particular note is those designed to support customer relationship management (CRM). The main protagonist (rhetorically at least) in the unfolding of local e-government – the public services' customer – is of chief concern in this thesis. While there is a well-established academic critique of customer-focus in public sector contexts, little is known about how the notion is being played out in the practice of e-government – it is here that this thesis is located. The single case study research design is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology and employs a discourse analysis approach. The methods used are open-ended interviews, observation, and document analysis. In addition to the significant role played by CRM-supporting technologies, the research findings identify a multi-faceted customer-focus framework – in the shape of a new institutional home, the restructuring of roles and responsibilities, the reorganization of workflow, and a cultural reorientation – which is serving to scaffold and 'perform' the public services' customer. Thus, in the face of organizational 'resistance' and the academic critique, it is argued that the linguistic and material instantiation of a customer-focus narrative is a significant discursive achievement, one that relies on the remarkable appeal and versatility of the 'customer'. It is claimed that the thesis' findings and its explanatory framework constitute both empirical and theoretical contributions to a number of disciplines. In conclusion, implications are drawn for the relationship between state agencies and the individual and it is argued that a more ambitious relationship requires more innovation and, crucially, more imagination.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of my family for their support and understanding during this process, especially my wife Rebecca.

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Introduction

The e-government agenda began to take shape in the UK at the beginning of the last decade under the stewardship of the New Labour government. It promised to herald a transformation in the delivery of public services and, according to early estimates, attracted costs amounting to over 1% of GDP in many industrialised nations (Margetts, 2006). At the same time, its arrival has been the subject of critical attention, to the extent that Heeks has declared that "most e-government projects fail" (2006: 3).

E-government represents a burgeoning site of study and wider activity. As Heeks and Bailur point out, "there are now MSc programs on e-government; several annual conferences devoted to e-government; journals devoted solely to e-government; and books on e-government" (2007: 244). Scholars of e-government (in the UK, USA, and Australia predominantly) have focused on a range of issues, mainly from a supply-side, but also from the perspective of the various user-groups.

Many have been concerned to evaluate progress towards, and barriers to, the achievement of e-government goals (Andersen and Henriksen, 2006; Ferguson and Baron, 2002; Garcia and Pardo, 2005; Heeks, 1999, 2006; Layne and Lee, 2001; Lee et al., 2011; Moon, 2002). Shaw et al. (2004) has examined the deployment of CRM systems in particular (technologies that are of specific importance in this thesis, as will be demonstrated below). Another popular are of study centres on the issue of user adoption and satisfaction rates in relation to trust in online government services (Belanger and Carter, 2008; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2008; Morgeson et al., 2011; Parent et al., 2005; Shareef et al., 2011; Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006; Warkentin et al., 2002; Welch et al. 2005; and West, 2004). Some have focussed on e-government's potential to stimulate e-democracy (Chadwick and May, 2003; Griffiths, 2002; Levine, 2002; Navarra and Cornford, 2012; Silcock, 2001; Toregas, 2001; West, 2004) Tat-Kei Ho (2002), meanwhile, has explored e-government in a historical context, arguing that it represents a paradigmatic change in the organisation of public services. Heeks' and Bailur's assessment of the literature in this field of study found that, by the middle of the last decade, much of the work is characterised by a "weak or confused positivism" and is dominated by "…over-optimistic, a-theoretical work that has done little to accumulate either knowledge or practical guidance for e-government." (2007: 243).

A parallel set of debates, of key significance for the research being conducted in this thesis, adds up to a wide-ranging critique of the, largely unexamined, character at the heart of the e-government agenda – the 'customer'. Scholars from a number of disciplines over recent decades have critically analysed the customer-ization of increasing realms of practice, including that of public services. Contributors to this debate hail from: Public Policy (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006; Clarke and Newman, 2005; Clarke et al., 2007; Needham, 2003, 2006, 2009); Public Administration (Alford, 2002; Gray and Jenkins, 2002; O'Toole, 2006); Political Theory (Aberbach and Christensen, 2005; Haque, 2001; Keat et al., 1994); Organizational Studies (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Gabriel and Lang, 2006); Sociology (Abercormbie, 1994; Goode and Greatbatch, 2005); Historical Studies (McKendrick, 1982; McKibbin, 2006); and Linguistics (Fairclough, 1994).

The relative absence of dialogue between these parallel literatures represents the gap that this thesis seeks to play a part in filling. In doing so, I acknowledge that several writers have contributed to a very useful critique of customer-centrism in the context of new technology deployment in government settings, incorporating an exploration of what these efforts imply for the relationship between the state and the individual. Studies from a number of disciplines are of note here: Public Administration (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; Michel, 2005; Snellen, 2002); Political Science (Fountain, 2001; Margetts, 2006); and Information Systems (King, 2007). What is lacking, however, is an in-depth, empirical examination of customer-focus in the practice of e-government – it is here that this thesis is located and it from this context that the research question driving this study emerges: How is customer-focused local e-government being realised? I now turn to the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 1 documents a review of the relevant literatures. In addition to many of the studies cited above, I draw on contributions from a range of disciplines to prepare the ground for answering the research question. This involves tracing the political philosophical roots of the customer/consumer character (Gray, 1995; Miller, 2003). From there, I identify the customer as the dominant strategic focus of contemporary organizations (Karmarkar, 2004; Peters, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003; Zuboff and Maxmin, 2004) and as a figure of significant power (as well as weakness) in service settings (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Boyd, 2002; Fuller and Smith, 1991; Korczynski, 2002, 2009, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2001; Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Thompson and van den Broek, 2010). This discussion sets the scene for locating the customer within the realm of public service delivery (where I draw on the multi-disciplinary contributions of scholars cited earlier).

Having done so, I clarify the public administration terrain within which the customer arguably emerged – the rise of New Public Management (NPM). This discussion involves outlining the chief characteristics of the NPM shift (Braibant, 2002; Dunleavy et al, 2005; Hood, 1991; Hughes, 2003) and reviewing the thoughts of those who have critiqued the NPM agenda in terms of its implications for traditional conceptions of the state (Barberis, 2012; du Gay, 2000, 2004; Fox, 1996; Grey, 2005; Moe, 1994). This leads to an exploration of e-government (key references cited earlier), an agenda which I argue represents the potential for instantiation of the public services' customer). Of particular interest in this regard is the role played by a set of technologies relating to customer relationship management (CRM), about which very little has been written from a critical perspective (apart from King, 2007; Zwick and Dholakia, 2004). The chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of the literature (again cited earlier) that forms a thoroughgoing critique of customer-centrism in a public services context.

The next chapter sets out the design of the research study. This involves an exploration of the philosophical assumptions that underpin that research design, which, in turn, entails an examination of the ontological and epistemological scaffolding that supports the theoretical and methodological choices I have made. There, I clarify my reasons for employing a constructionist epistemology combined with an interpretivist approach to research. The discourse analysis methodology is, in turn, justified, as are the discursive approaches to understanding organization and technology that characterise my perspective on analysing e-government. This latter task entails a detailed discussion of the properties and effects I attribute to discourse in relation to organization (including change processes), and in relation to the constitution of individual actors' subjectivities. It also involves clarifying my perspective on the role and effects of technologies in organizational settings. I go on to justify the choice of an institutionalist perspective on organizational change combined with ANT-inspired perspectives for providing a conceptual lens to explain the material mechanisms by which dominant narratives achieve a degree of stability.

Chapter 3 then details the study's research methods. This entails an examination of the overarching approach chosen to collect data – a single case study – in addition to a description and appraisal of the specific methods used and the sampling and access strategies employed. I also discuss how I approach the task of analysing the data and what the concepts of validity,

reliability, and generalizability imply for the kind of study being undertaken here. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the ethical dimensions of the research.

The thesis then moves to the research findings in Chapter 4. There, I explain how the overarching research question was operationalised in terms of a set of orienting questions developed in relation to extant debates and my own research concerns. The chapter exhibits the initial levels of data analysis – the outcome of coding, clustering and ordering the linguistic and material data. After introducing the relevant features of the case study site, the narrative of the chapter is organised around four major themes that emerged from the data analysis process – the rehearsing, refining, resourcing, and resisting of the public services' customer. These concepts provide a framework for understanding how, in the local government setting being researched, customer-focussed local e-government is being realised.

Chapter 5 addresses the task of developing a theoretical explanation of the empirical findings. It is argued that the relative success of customer-focus at the research site, in the light of organizational resistance and the wide-ranging academic critique, that demands explanation. This is achieved by marshalling key elements of the theoretical framework set out in Chapter 2 to argue that customer-focus is being naturalised, institutionalised, and heterogeneously performed in the local e-government setting. Further, through reflecting on literature concerned with the customer's unique and multiple features, it is argued that the polyvalence of the customer represents an important aspect of this organizational accomplishment. At the same time, this latter discussion facilitates an exploration of what the, at once seductive and dissatisfying, public services' customer implies for those charged with delivering customer-focus and for the relationship between the individual and the state.

The final chapter provides a space to reflect on the implications of the analytical framework employed in the thesis to consider emerging trends in e-Government in relation to the potential they present for constituting a post-customer paradigm in public services. It is argued that the emergence of any alternative, more ambitious, citizen subjectivity requires (further) innovation and imagination on linguistic, policy, and material levels to achieve stability. In that chapter, I also argue that the thesis' findings and its explanatory framework constitute both empirical and theoretical contributions to debates in e-government, the Sociology of Technology, Public Policy, Public Administration, and the Sociology of Work.

Chapter 1. Review of literature

1.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter serves to set the scene from which the research question has emerged. It does so by drawing on literatures from a number of academic disciplines that help in scoping out the breadth of debates informing the research design.

My first task in this chapter is to trace the lineage of the customer/consumer that has come to dominate the vocabulary of organizational landscapes, entailing a review of literature from the Political Philosophy, Business Strategy, and Organizational Studies domains. I then turn to work within Public Policy, Sociology, and Historical studies to gain a perspective on the customer-ization of public sector settings. This leads into a discussion of the Public Administration literature focussing on the advent, rise, and, some would argue fall, of NPM.

Next, I outline the provenance and main features of the e-government agenda (drawing on the Political Science and Public Administration literatures as well as government policy and strategy publications). This discussion includes drawing on the Marketing literature to provide a description of CRM technologies which are of key interest in this thesis. The chapter culminates in the drawing together of various strands of a critique of customer-centric public services, which involves discussing the thoughts of scholars interested in NPM from several disciplinary perspectives (including Public Administration, Political Theory, Management Studies, and Organizational Theory) as well as those focussing on the rise of digital government (from an Information Systems and Political Science perspective).

1.2 The consumer/customer: from liberalism to public service delivery

Two words (and the meanings they conjure up) that are of central concern to this study are ‘consumer’ and ‘customer’. This being the case, it is informative to turn briefly to the etymology of each. In the case of ‘consumer’, it appears that the word had rather unfavourable beginnings; from the early sixteenth century – “He who or that which consumes, wastes, squanders, or destroys”; from eighteenth century Politics and Economics – “One who uses up an article produced, thereby exhausting its exchangeable value”. More recently (the twentieth century), ‘consumer’ has acquired a more benign flavour; “One who purchases goods or pays for services; a customer, purchaser” (all definitions from OED, 2009). As Gabriel and Lang

(2006: 24) have observed, however, by the early twenty-first century, the consumer had regained its "older, destructive connotations" owing to the environmental critique. The case of the 'customer' appears to be similarly colourful. In the nineteenth century, the word's derogatory associations were apparent; "A person to have to do with; usually with some qualifying adjective, as *ugly*, *awkward*, *queer*, *rum*, etc." Today's more recognisable 'customer' dates back to the late fifteenth century; "One who customarily purchases from a particular tradesman; a buyer, purchaser" (OED, 2009).

Accepting the polysemic history of both 'customer' and 'consumer', current usage of both words, in most walks of life, tends to imply a self-regarding, rational actor, typically engaged in economic activity within some form of market context – in short, *homo economicus*. It is this commonality of meaning which has led to both words being employed, to a large extent, synonymously in a range of contexts, including the academic discourses that this study engages with. Consequently, when either word is used in this study, unless it is stated to the contrary, it will be used with the aforementioned explanation in mind. At the same time, it is important to point out that neither the customer nor consumer possess an 'essential' meaning; rather, their meaning is discursively constituted. This position corresponds with the wider theoretical approach adopted in this thesis (and detailed in the next chapter), one that understands "the study of social reality as discursively constructed and maintained" (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1126).

The stress being placed on the customer/consumer in this thesis relates to their preponderance in an increasing number of spheres of activity; a subject for later discussion. At this point, I will contextualize this issue by outlining what I see as a crucial variable in the ascendancy of this actor on the social scene; that is, "the dominant political ideology of our age" (Miller 2003: 55) – liberalism. It is liberalism's emphasis on the sovereign nature of the individual twinned with the value of market mechanisms which, arguably, affords the customer/consumer a sense of on-going legitimacy.

Now whereas Gray (1995) makes the point that, over time, various forms of liberalism are distinguishable, what they share is a modern conception of 'man' and society of relevance to this discussion. The liberal tradition is:

> "…*individualist*, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity; *egalitarian*, inasmuch as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth

> among human beings; *universalist*, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms; and *meliorist* in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements." (emphasis in original, Gray, 1995: xii)

From when can we identify a shift towards a liberal outlook? One way to answer this is to note that the classical question which liberalism directly engages with concerns the appropriate size and domain of ruling bodies in relation to the private realm of the individual. And according to Miller (2003), this debate can be traced back to the demands for religious freedom that followed the European Reformation of the sixteenth century. Gray (1995) points to the seventeenth century for the first systematic expositions of the modern individualist outlook through the writings of, inter alia, Thomas Hobbes. Also significant according to Miller is the bequest to all subsequent generations from the Romantic movement (during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) of "…the idea that each person is a unique individual who can find true fulfilment only if she is allowed to choose for herself how she should live…" (2003: 56). Similarly, for John Stuart Mill, an individual's own mode of "…laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode." (2002: 56)

During the decades that followed Mill's seminal work *On Liberty* (1859), the collective demands of the First, followed by the Second, World War brought about what Gray (1995) argued were the greatest challenge to the liberal tradition. The wartime period had a considerable constraining influence on individual liberties, for the first time activating citizens and requiring them to put the demands of the state above their own affairs. It is widely held that liberalist traditions were reinvigorated during the mid-twentieth century by the writings of Friedrich Hayek, characterized as they were by stern warnings about the adoption of socialist policies. Famously, Hayek's thinking is seen to have influenced Thatcherism and Reaganism in the 1980s.

What is clear from an early twenty-first century vantage point is that the (neo)-liberal commitment to self-regulating markets is very much to the fore, following a brief interruption during the middle of the last century when we witnessed an allegiance to state-controlled economic mechanisms in the UK in a social democratic mould. And it is a market-oriented approach which locates the interests and behaviour of the individual agent (rather than the collective) centre-stage. In their work on the contemporary culture of 'enterprise', du Gay and

Salaman (1992) have drawn a conceptual line from key neo-liberal thinkers – notably Friedman and Hayek – to Thatcherite policies in the UK, united by an emphasis on the efficacy of the market, a line which can be extended through the Major-Blair-Brown years (Clarke et al., 2007; Vincent, 2011) up to the present day. In opposition to the passive beneficiary associated with the welfarist political rationality of much of the last century, an enterprise culture demands, as its central character, the active, choice-making individual who strives to optimise her/his quality of life and that of her/his family.

Aside from the obvious moral appeal of an approach which champions individual freedom, the liberal perspective is, of course, underpinned by what its followers would claim to be a sound economic rationality. It is a claim that is often grounded in the legacy of Adam Smith, and in particular Smith's notion that the pursuit of individual self-interest represents the most efficient means of satisfying the interests of all – the public good. From this perspective, the collective good is in principle "incalculable" (Burchell, 1991), making it utterly futile to seek to totalize economic processes – "…*only* the isolated subject of interest is rational, only the individual is in a position to know his or her own interest and be able to calculate how best to pursue it" (emphasis in original, Burchell, 1991: 134). The discursive legacy associated with the construction of the knowing, empowered agent located at the heart of the Smithian view underpins and legitimises contemporary notions of the customer/consumer. The next section will explore this character's rise to prominence.

1.2.1 The inexorable rise of the consumer/customer

The most useful literatures in helping with the task of charting the ascendancy of the consumer/customer are those concerned with the socio-economic phenomenon of consumerism, what, for Bocock (1993), is the legitimator of the global capitalist system. Gabriel and Lang (2006) identified five variants of the term consumerism; two are of particular relevance to this study. First, the idea of consumerism as a moral doctrine, whereby, "…with the demise of the Puritan ethic of self-denial, consumption has emerged virtually unchallenged as the essence of the good life,…the vehicle for freedom, power and happiness" (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 8). And second, consumerism as a political ideology, increasingly accepted (if not championed) across the political spectrum, where the modern state acts as a guarantor of consumer rights.

Consumerism's subject – the neo-liberal consumer – is cast in a variety of powerful roles across political and economic discourses. Gabriel and Lang (2006) have usefully rehearsed the "god-like" figure's versatile repertoire, which includes an ability to dictate production, to fuel innovation, to create new service sectors, to drive modern politics, and to have it in their power to protect the future of the planet in the face of environmental crisis. However, as these authors also remind us, such is the rhetorical potency attributed to the consumer that s/he is simultaneously the subject of widespread critique: "…the consumer is…seen as a weak and malleable creature, easily manipulated, dependent, passive and foolish, immersed in illusions, addicted to joyless pursuits of ever-increasing living standards;…far from being god, [the consumer] is a pawn, in games played in invisible boardrooms." (2006: 1). What the widespread invocation of this character implies for the neo-liberal individual's sense of identity is the displacement of traditional roles – workers, citizens, parents and so on. This issue will be pursued later.

It is important to note at this point that, in view of its versatility, the word 'consumer' is now so overused that it is "…in danger of collapsing into meaningless cliché…", it can mean "all things to all people." (Gabriel and Lang 2006: 2). These authors remark on "the theoretical softness of the concept…", such that they have become "…impatient with one-dimensional views, whether they demonize or romanticize the consumer." (2006: 2). They are referring to its employment by conservative economists, consumer activists, cultural theorists, ecologists and others. I am sympathetic to this view. I am in neither the romanticizers nor demonizers camp. Rather, I am intrigued by the resilience and prevalence of what Trentmann has called "a master category of collective and individual identity" (2006: 2), especially in terms of the ground the consumer/customer has come to occupy in policy connected with public services delivery.

Taking a momentary step back, this discussion raises the question of the point at which we 'became' consumers – When was the 'consumer' born? Keat et al. (1994) suggest that there is "rough agreement" between academics in this field that the appearance of the 'consumer society' can be attributed to the period following the Second World War. Others (including Campbell, 1987; McKendrick, 1982) have it that consumption on a mass scale can be identified far earlier, certainly in England. Quite logically, McKendrick (1982) argues that the 'consumer revolution' was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution.

Apart from disagreement over the timing of its appearance, critics highlight concerns over the consumer's character. Certainly, at the dawn of mass consumerism, many observers expressed moral outrage towards those who celebrated the national, social and economic benefits that would stem from "…luxury, avarice, prodigality, pride, envy and vanity." (McKendrick, 1982: 16). Whereas today's critics might employ less colourful language to characterize consumption practices, the foregrounding of the consumer identity remains a cause for concern inasmuch as the emphasis on pleasure-seeking which it implies is seen to weaken traditional roles and duties. For Abercrombie, the modern consumer organises his/her life around fantasises and daydreams, s/he is a hedonist, an individualist, driven to pursue his/her own ends and uncaring towards others (1994: 44). While the self-interested nature of Abercrombie's consumer is not disputed, much of today's consumption practice, notwithstanding the representations crafted by the marketer, is in fact rather mundane. du Gay and Salaman (1992) characterise the reality (as opposed to the anticipation) of consumption as bringing anti-climax; for Campbell (1987: 1), it is dull and prosaic.

1.2.2 The customer: Focus of the modern organization

A key element of the trend towards perceiving individuals as consumers/customers is the way that, over recent decades, businesses and, more recently, non-commercial organizations, have endeavoured to orientate themselves towards satisfying the needs of those customers – that is the concern of this section.

Business discourse tends to justify the contemporary preoccupation with customer-focus in the context of various environmental developments. These include increased competition within an international marketplace, a consumer population that is more quality-conscious, rapidly changing product markets, deregulation, and the ubiquity of new information and communication technologies. In order to confront these widely accepted challenges and opportunities, it has become commonplace to identify the need for radical new ways of working, ways which stress the value of innovation, flexibility and customer responsiveness. Among the most widely-implemented strategies of recent decades in this vein are Just in time (JIT), 'Lean', and Total Quality Management (TQM).

More recently, the sense that the customer demands more of an active role in decisions related to the design, manufacture, and delivery of products and services has intensified, prompting the reconceptualization of old processes and relationships. For Zuboff and Maxmin (2004),

the enterprise logic associated with managerial capitalism has outlived its usefulness, heralding a shift to 'distributed' capitalism. The former is suited to the production and distribution of things, not services; as such, there is a chasm between the needs of today's more demanding consumers and those assumed by organisations operating within a managerial capitalism paradigm. In an excess economy, service providers are encouraged to appeal to the 'emotional', rather than the rational customer (Ridderstrale and Nordstrom, 2000; Peters, 2003). More fundamentally, Zuboff and Maxmin argue that the last fifty years have witnessed the rise of a "new breed of individuals" (2004: 3). Ownership and control of value is now dispersed. Whereas value was once created inside organizations, it is now lodged in individual space and realized in relationships of 'deep support'. In a similar vein, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003) talk of how the act of consumption is being reconceptualised whereby organizations seek to enable individual consumers to 'co-create' unique experiences via a network of companies and consumer communities. Within this networked environment, Karmarkar (2004) points to the need for strategic realignment around the demands of customers such that service providers are required to think beyond 'front' and 'back' offices to encompass a third organization with responsibility for managing partnerships, suppliers, co-producers and so on.

An important dimension of these and earlier quality-focused strategies is a commitment to the idea that both internal organizational, and more conventional external, relationships are conceived of in terms of a customer-supplier dynamic. What this implies for du Gay and Salaman (1992) is a fundamental attempt to restructure work: departments behave as if actors in a market, workers relate to each other as customers, and customers are treated as if they were managers. These behaviours form part of what the authors argue is the 'reimagination' of the organization in accordance with an 'enterprise' logic. In union with the autonomous, self-regulating, and self-actualizing individual customer, an enterprise discourse conceives of the members of 'enterprising' businesses in a similar fashion. du Gay and Salaman (1992) employ the notion of the 'enterprising self' to argue that customer-focused organizations attempt to embed an enterprising culture among the individual members of its workforce, thereby 'empowering', 'responsibilizing' and 'enabling' all members to 'add value' – both to the organization for which they work and to themselves (1992: 85). The empirical element of this thesis will explore these issues in the context of a local authority organization.

Significantly, the contemporary obsession with customer-centric strategic change involves the replacement of bureaucratic principles with market relations. This is something which du Gay

and Salaman have described as a "…curious inversion of what was for many years the received wisdom, that the inadequacies of the market should be ameliorated by the bureaucratic method of controlling transactions…" (1992: 80) The vehemence of popular anti-bureaucratic rhetoric is neatly encapsulated by Tom Peters' plea: "I beg each and every one of you to develop a passionate and public hatred of bureaucracy." (cited du Gay, 2000: 61). The loss of trust attached to the bureaucratic form in many organizational contexts will be discussed in greater detail later.

In the meantime, it is useful to recall some of the characteristics of the service delivery setting and the roles that structure the service encounter which, according to Fountain (2001) in her work on the digital state, are responsible for the contemporary strategic focus on service recipients. These characteristics include the intangibility of services (in contrast to the tangibility of products) which renders customers' subjective perceptions of quality of vital importance. Hence, the exhibition of, for example, courtesy and friendliness by service providers, in part, shapes the customer's subjective perceptions of the actual quality of a service. Another feature described by Fountain is the simultaneous occurrence of service production, delivery and consumption – this means that the service agent is seen to perform an agglomeration of organizational roles: "buffers, stockpiles, quality control, and other control processes are structurally absent from the service production process." In their place, service staff "…function as producers, quality control personnel, delivery agents, and marketing representatives as part of their boundary-spanning role." (2001: 58).

A further structural element of contemporary service transactions is the idea that customers enter into them as 'co-producers' (Fountain uses this term in an analytical rather than a normative sense). This implies that customers provide essential inputs in real time via verbal and written communication in addition to their demeanour and visual cues. As such, service agents' propensity to elicit, comprehend, and respond appropriately is rendered highly desirable. It is in this context that we observe high levels of investment in customer service training initiatives (at *all* levels of organization) and in technologies that support organizations in generating customer 'insight'. It is also in this context that the interaction between customer and service provider represents a particularly rich site of study.

In parallel with contributions from the management and marketing literatures, such has been the rise of service work in the latter decades of the twentieth century that sociologists (of work) have turned their attention to the service encounter and the customer. Korczynski

(2009) calculated that 28 per cent of the UK workforce can be categorized as occupying service jobs which are below the level of senior professional and in which the central job requirement involves interacting with a service-recipient, a statistic that justifies his call for more research in this area. For Korczynski (2013), research in this area clusters around those scholars interested in the 'dark side' of worker-customer relations (Boyd, 2002; Gabriel and Lang, 2006) and those concerned to extend the analysis of control beyond the management–worker dyad, to consider the role of the customer (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Korczynski et al., 2000; Rosenthal et al., 2001; Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Thompson and van den Broek, 2010). By researching the service encounter with a specific focus on the public services' user, this thesis seeks to make an empirical and theoretical contribution of relevance to this body of work and more specifically to extant studies conducted in other public service settings (see Goode and Greatbatch, 2005; Needham, 2006; Clarke et al., 2007).

1.2.3 The 'customer' of public services

The landscape outlined in previous sections – the popularization of the customer/consumer, set against a political ideological backdrop championing the liberal idea of the sovereign individual, and reflected in current organizational restructuring practices – sets the scene for the introduction of this study's central character, the 'customer' of *public services*.

Many observers have remarked on, and some expressed deep concern over, the ubiquitous nature of the customer-consumer label and how it determinedly marches on into new territories far beyond its homeland (the marketplace, characterised by the exchange of products/services for money). Keat et al. (1994: 1) recall some of the contexts that the encroaching customer/consumer has occupied over recent years – museum visitors, theatre audiences, sports spectators and TV viewers; university students, hospital patients, social workers' clients, and even taxpayers and the public served by the police. Of particular concern is the customer's increasing presence in public sector organizations. In these contexts, it is a trend that has been viewed as a core element of an Enterprise discourse which is dominating more and more realms of human action (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Law, 2002).

The emergence of 'Enterprise' as an organising principle in public services is often associated in the UK with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration (1979-90). It was during that

period that we began to witness the redefinition of the citizen as customer as part of a sharp ideological turn to the right – a neo-liberalist championing of the expanded market, the minimal state, and the self-governing individual. Notwithstanding the authenticity or otherwise of Thatcher's now infamous proclamation – 'There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women, and there are families' (Keay, 1987) – Heward (1994) finds that it is a sentiment that has echoes in many of the public service reforms Thatcher's government implemented, wherein the individual is seen as paramount, and the collective or the communal a distraction, fiction or danger.

Whereas the UK governments (of all colours) that have held power since the Thatcher era may have articulated their commitment to the neo-liberal individual in somewhat less emphatic terms, that commitment is nevertheless readily observable and made manifest in, among other ways, the ongoing devotion to the language of the citizen as 'customer'. This point is clearly reflected in the *Charter* initiatives implemented by Thatcher's Conservative successor, John Major, in the early 1990s. According to Bellamy and Greenaway (1995), The Citizen's Charter, characterized by four interlocking themes – quality, choice, standards and value – aimed to instil a culture of customer service into government and the public utilities. That the subsequent New Labour administration saw fit to continue in this vein is widely recognized, both outside and within parliamentary circles (although Needham, 2006 suggests New Labour tempered the muscular customer-oriented rhetoric of their Conservative predecessors). According to The Select Committee on Public Administration, "…it was after the election of the Labour Government in 1997 that the idea of citizens also being consumers of public services (and that those services should therefore become increasingly customer focused) gained greater currency" (The UK Parliament, 2004). I have space only for an abbreviated version of the part played by New Labour in this narrative. Clarke et al. (2007) provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of the policies and practices flowing from New Labour's tenure. What we share, however, is a concern to develop the conversation about that administration's role in "creating" (Clarke et al., 2007) citizen-consumers.

Notwithstanding any differences in emphasis among administrations, reflecting what du Gay calls the "pervasiveness" and "obduracy" of an Enterprise discourse, the approach to public services championed by Thatcher's government appears to have established itself as the dominant position across the political spectrum. What was once seen exclusively as the ideological property of the New Right has, over time, transmuted into a set of "…seemingly neutral organisational techniques applicable to a range of circumstances." (du Gay, 2004: 40).

New Labour is associated with agendas to ‘modernize’, and later ‘transform’, government service delivery. A key theme of these agendas has been a shift from organizing public services in accordance with the priorities of the service provider to delivering those services in customer-responsive ways. Under the latter approach, citizen-customers are perceived to be autonomous, self-regarding and increasingly conscious of service quality: “People are exercising choice and demanding higher quality. In the private sector, service standards and service delivery have improved as a result. People are now rightly demanding a better service not just from the private sector, but from the public sector too” (Cabinet Office, 1999: 10). What this representation also does is conflate the experience of the private sector customer and the public sector citizen; each actor is deemed to approach service interactions with similar expectations of the process and outcome and with a similar view of the concomitant roles and responsibilities. As will be discussed below, this idea is troubling for many commentators.

Because the fieldwork for this study was carried out at the time of the New Labour administration, this analysis largely omits discussion of the current coalition government’s record in this regard. Suffice to say, however, that it has said or done very little to diverge from a customer-focus approach to service delivery; indeed, quite the opposite.

It is, however, worth noting that in recent years, public policy debates have begun to feature concepts that imply a revised relationship between state and service user – chief among these is the idea of service ‘coproduction’ (Bartlett, 2009; Boyle and Harris, 2009; Halpern et al., 2004; Leadbeater, 2004; Needham, 2003, 2007, 2008; Needham et al., 2014). The origins of the term have been traced to the late 1970s and urban US public administration settings marked by fiscal constraint (Brundey and England, 1983; Parks et al., 1981). There, coproduction emerged as a re-conception of the service delivery process as one “…which envisions direct citizen involvement in the design and delivery of city services with professional service agents” (Brundey and England, 1983: 59). According to these authors, coproductive activities can take place on an individual, group, and collective level, and definitions of the term differ in the literature. Of key importance to this discussion, however, is that coproduction implies a more engaged, responsibilised service user role than that commonly associated with the customer paradigm.

In the UK, government attention to ideas associated with service coproduction has been relatively recent; it is an approach that only began to gain traction during the middle of the last decade. The notion of coproduction was largely absent from the interview data generated during this project's fieldwork at around the same time. Nevertheless, the idea that service user involvement is required in the achievement of major policy outcomes – that "governments can't do it alone" (Halpern et al., 2004) – is reflected in a range of contemporary service delivery environments. These include "…user-led mental health services, nurse family partnerships, prisoner councils, patient care plans, and apps that facilitate neighbourhood planning" (Needham, et al, 2014: 4).

Often, the introduction of coproductive approaches reflects efforts to respond to budgetary constraints. Needham (2008: 222-223), however, has usefully reviewed the literature to summarise a whole set of potential advantages associated with coproduction. These include the idea that: regular interaction with service users affords frontline staff with a distinctive and expert voice; service quality can be improved through the transformation of service user attitudes; and allocative efficiency can be enhanced through the development of a heightened sensitivity to user needs. For Needham, such benefits are only likely to flow from certain forms of coproduction, "…those that are collective, dialogical, positive-sum and focused at the point of delivery, rather than individualised, zero-sum and abstracted from service experiences" (2008: 225). The danger, according to Needham, is that, in practice, coproductive activities will in fact be individualised, transactional and substitutive. Wider concerns cited by Needham (2008) include "…the blurring of boundaries between public and private interests and the shifting of costs and risks on to users" (2008: 222). Of chief concern in this thesis, meanwhile, is the kind of relationship – coproductive or otherwise – that the organizational systems being championed in certain service delivery settings can best facilitate.

Finally, given the specific emphasis afforded language in this thesis, and in particular the language used to refer to individuals in their relations with state agencies, it is important to briefly clarify my choice of language in this regard. My main task, both in writing this thesis and in conducting the fieldwork, has been to employ a signifier other than 'customer', given that the 'customer' is the main object of enquiry. While the position taken in this thesis is that no language is value-free, the term 'service user' arguably brings with it less cultural 'baggage' than alternatives such as 'customer', 'client', 'citizen' and so on (even if it may well be argued that 'service user' suggests a passive role, someone whose primary role is

benefiting from a service provided by a given organization), Further, in popular discourse, 'service user' tends to be associated with public services' contexts rather than non-public settings. For these reasons, 'service user' is the favoured term for referring to individuals who interact with agents of the state engaged in public service delivery settings. There is an extensive discussion of competing descriptors in Chapter 4 based on the various data sources analysed in the course of this study.

1.2.4 New Public Management: setting the foundations for the public services' customer

This section aims to locate the citizen-customer within the wider set of debates around how the public sector should be organised. First, we need to note the trend across public sectors in many countries away from the idea that what state agencies do is 'administer' towards the idea that what they do is 'manage'. Barberis notes how the emergence of Managerialism in (British) public administration was gradual; it was "the product neither of design nor of any "big bang"; it rose almost without trace" (2012: 332). Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that by the beginning of the 1990s, a new model of public sector management had emerged in most advanced, and many developing, countries (Hughes, 2003), even though this new model has been referred to differently by key commentators. Among these definitions are; 'managerialism' (Pollitt 1993); 'new public management' (Hood 1991); 'market-based public administration' (Lan and Rosenbloom 1992); the 'post-bureaucratic paradigm' (Barzelay 1992) and 'entrepreneurial government' (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). The literature, however, has more or less settled on new public management (NPM) Hughes argues. Mindful that "NPM…is a highly contested concept" (Maesschalck 2004: 465), or a "slippery label" (Dunleavy et al, 2005: 469), it arguably represents a definite shift in approach. What we have witnessed within the public sector is not "…simply a matter of reform or a minor change in management style, but a change in the role of government in society and the relationship between government and citizenry." (Hughes 2003: 1).

What is New Public Management? Hood, credited with coining the label NPM, links the rise of this model to a set of 'administrative megatrends'. These include: efforts to slow down or reverse government growth in relation to overt public spending and staffing; the shift away from core government institutions and towards privatization and quasi-privatization; IT-based automation in the production and distribution of public services; and the development of a more international agenda, focusing on general issues of public management, policy design, and inter-governmental cooperation (Hood, 1991: 3). Within this set of broad trends, Hood

articulates a coherent set of ‘doctrines’ which characterize more specifically the distinct nature of the NPM model. These are: hands-on professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance; greater emphasis on output controls; a shift to disaggregation of units; a shift to greater competition; stress on private-sector styles of management practice; and stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use (Hood, 1991: 4-5).

An exploration of NPM philosophies and practices draws our attention to the profoundly anti-bureaucratic (and simultaneously, *pro*-entrepreneurial) flavour of this shift in thinking. A number of commentators have remarked upon the zeal with which proponents of an entrepreneurial approach to organization (in both the commercial sector and more recently the public sector) have attacked bureaucracy. du Gay has depicted critics’ anti-bureaucratic discourse as “…a religious and romantic narrative of collective and individual salvation and emancipation.” (2000: 62). Through an exploration of current managerial popularisms such as *vision* and *mission*, du Gay proposed that “one of the most remarkable features of contemporary organizational discourse is the prevalence of religious language and metaphors, especially those derived from apocalyptic, millenarian Christianity.” (2000: 67). In a similar vein, Moe, in a US context, submits that “change, almost literally for change’s sake, has acquired a theological aura discouraging discussion within the public administration community.” (1994: 113). Echoing this trend, such is the enthusiasm for ‘enterprising’ ICT-centric solutions such as business process reengineering (BPR) displayed by leading advocates (most famously *Michael* Hammer) that commentators have talked about the “gospel according to St. Michael” (Jones, 1994) and, not business process reengineering, but “business paradise regained” (Grint and Willcocks, 1995, both cited Bellamy and Taylor, 1998: 52).

Whereas Hood (1991) points out that NPM-style thinking has been on the bureaucratic reform agenda since the late 1970s, arguably it was not until around a decade later that a broad consensus among public administrations emerged and aspirations began to be translated into action. A significant milestone on the road to a consensus was the publication of the ‘National Performance Review’ (1993) in the US, at the time the latest of many calls to ‘run government like a business’. Many commentators have made an explicit link between this initiative and Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government* (1992) text. Calling for an American ‘perestroika’ and couched in the language of the American pioneering spirit, where government officials who had embarked on the journey of reinvention were depicted as

‘heroes’, Osborne and Gaebler employ ten adjectives to characterize the type of government they endorse – catalytic, community-owned, competitive, mission-driven, results-oriented, customer-driven, enterprising, anticipatory, decentralized and market-oriented.

At around the same time, the OECD and other international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF began to show an interest in improving the management of their member and client nations. In the late nineties, the OECD argued that increased efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector would involve a major cultural shift as the ‘old management paradigm’, largely process-and rules-driven, is replaced by a ‘new paradigm’, combining modern management practices with the logic of economics while still retaining core public service values (Hughes, 2003).

As mentioned above, an aversion to the idea of the bureaucratic is a key feature of NPM. Criticisms tend to relate to the purported inefficiency of bureaucracies and the unaccountability of their inhabitants. Such criticisms tend to stem from the belief that the lack of a competitive market environment in the delivery of public services provides little incentive for local government to strive for efficiencies “…or to take pains to ensure that it provides the services that people want and in the manner they want.” (Lyons, 2007: 54). In turn, a key policy response, in the UK and elsewhere, has been the expansion of the range of bodies involved in delivering public services to include commercial, voluntary, and other non-public sector organisations (Cabinet Office, 2000b). From this view, public sector organisations should focus on ‘steering’ rather than ‘rowing’, an idea first advanced by Osborne and Gaebler (1992: 35). Early UK e-government policy pronouncements (which will be discussed at length later in this chapter) urged government organizations to “…avoid exclusive contracts for the ‘front end’ delivery of…services”. Rather, there should be a working assumption that, “…unless there are strong public policy reasons to the contrary, [private and voluntary sector] providers should be allowed to deliver government services.” (Cabinet Office, 2000b: 9-10). The resulting mixed economy market would promote competition, which, in turn, would improve service quality, bring down costs, stimulate innovation, and herald new, joined-up and customer-focused services to the citizen (Cabinet Office, 2000b: 59). What this equates to in general terms is an ambition to leave behind bureaucratic ways of organizing in favour of more entrepreneurial alternatives. Braibant (2002) neatly sums up the role-shift implied by this trend as one from the ‘État gérant’ to the ‘État garant’ (from the ‘manager state’ to the ‘guarantor state’).

In the light of this study's geographical focus, it is important to note that this re-conceptualization of public sector organization has been reflected nowhere more than in the reform agenda of successive UK administrations over the last three decades. The New Labour government's key policy document, *Modernising Government*, articulates the desired change of culture twinned with the desired image of the public service worker required to deliver a paradigmatic shift in administration. According to this text, public servants have been "wrongly denigrated and demoralised for too long." They are, in fact, "hard-working" and "dedicated", and many are "…as innovative and entrepreneurial as anyone outside government." (Cabinet Office, 1999: 11) It calls for a move away from the "risk-averse culture" inherent in government and towards "…greater creativity, radical thinking and collaborative working". In part, this involves removing "unnecessary bureaucracy", something which prevents public servants from "…experimenting, innovating and delivering a better product." (1999: 55)

The aspect of NPM thinking which warrants particular emphasis in this study is its commitment to satisfying the needs and demands of individual members of the public, however those actors might be defined. The approach advocated by the OECD emphasizes "…a focus on clients, outputs and outcomes…", while one of the four key principles of change articulated in the US National Performance Review, alongside "cutting red tape", "empowering employees" and "cutting back to basics", is "putting customers first" (Hughes, 2003: 5). In a specifically UK context, Bellamy and Taylor offer a vivid account of the consumerist flavour of government policy during the latter decades of the twentieth century. They talk of "…the application to the public sector of prescriptions promulgated by the highly influential 'culture management' school, which exhorted managers to build value-driven organizations that 'smell of the customer'." (1998: 67-68). New Labour's allegiance to a customer-centric course during the first years of the twenty-first century is illustrated by its' funding of a wide scale study aiming to gain an overall picture of the "factors which make customers satisfied or not" (Cabinet Office, 2005a), or by its' endorsement of *Charter Mark* as a "…powerful, easy to use tool to help everyone in the organization focus on and improve customer service." (Cabinet Office, 2005b).

Although many contributors to these debates continue to talk in terms of NPM as shorthand for the dominant set of trends in the organisation of public services, it is worth noting what Dunleavy et al (2005) have said about the demise of NPM in certain nations (including the UK). The paper in question is an attempt to capture the direction of travel, post-NPM, given

the pervasiveness of new technologies in organizing service delivery and what the authors view as the failure of certain elements of a NPM agenda. Dunleavy et al have dubbed the post-NPM era, 'Digital Era Governance' (DEG).

The way in which Dunleavy et al (2005) highlight a distinction between NPM and DEG is in terms of the overarching themes of each era. Hence, NPM concentrated on *disaggregation* (of public sector hierarchies), *competition* (among public service providers), and *incentivization* (of those delivering services via pecuniary-based, specific performance incentives rather than reward in terms of a diffuse public service or professional ethos). DEG, on the other hand, is more concerned with *reintegration* (through exploiting the opportunities of digital technologies), *needs-based holism* (based on the simplification of the relationship between agencies and their clients via the 'end to end' reengineering of processes), and *digitization processes* (aimed at realizing productivity gains from IT and related organizational changes).

What leads Dunleavy et al to conclude that NPM is "dead" is that its record in terms of its direct effect on achieving improvements in the level of social problem-solving is a highly questionable one. More specifically, the authors claim that "NPM changes themselves had powerful adverse impacts on citizens' autonomous capacities…and on the level of institutional and policy complexity." (2005: 475) In the light of this critique, Dunleavy et al. state that NPM has "essentially died in the water" as far as certain countries (including the UK) are concerned. At the same time, however, they argue that NPM's "cognitive and reform schema" is still at large. In other parts of the world, meanwhile, NPM ideas are said to be still gaining influence (for example, Japan and India).

To employ the metaphor of "death" to describe NPM's condition, is, arguably, somewhat overstating the case. And while I am not concerned to evaluate the validity of Dunleavy et al.'s analysis at a detailed level, I do share the authors' broad thesis that the potentialities associated with recent advances in digital technologies are playing a significant shaping role in the conception and functioning of modern governance structures. In particular, I agree with the authors' assertion that "what is different in the current period is the growth of the Internet, e-mail, and the Web and the generalization of IT systems from only affecting back-office processes to conditioning in important ways the whole terms of relations between government agencies and civil society." (2005: 478) It is these elements of public service organization that are of primary concern of this thesis.

1.3 e-Government: instantiating the public services' customer?

Since the early days of NPM thinking, the significance and perceived potential of new technologies has come to the fore (which, in part, prompted Dunleavy et al (2005) to advance the notion of Digital Era Governance). A common way of referring to this trend, popularised during the early 2000s, is *electronic government* (often shortened to 'e-Government'). This agenda is of specific importance to this thesis because, arguably, the rolling out of e-government could represent a significant period in terms of the more concrete establishment of the user of public services as 'customer'. This section of the chapter draws on extant literature and policy documents to outline the main features of e-government and local e-government and chart how the agenda has shifted in emphasis over the last decade. It also explores the notion of CRM in public service settings by way of introducing a key technological dimension of the empirical context for this research. Finally, it reviews the elements of e-government that are, in practice, being resourced and which are not.

1.3.1 The IT roots of UK e-government

E-government, in the sense of the use of IT inside organisations to improve or replace older administrative processes, has been part of public administration for many decades, with the first computers entering government in the 1950s (Margetts, 2006). Owing to structural issues within government, however, it was not until 1995 that "serious work" began on developing an information-age strategy for British government (Bellamy, 2002: 214) with the setting up of a Central IT Unit (CITU) in the Cabinet Office that sought to harness private sector IT expertise in this endeavour. The publication of the Green Paper, government.direct embodied the first attempt to flesh out a new IT strategy and the principles set out in that text were formally adopted by the then (Conservative) government in early 1997. Soon after coming to power in May 1997, the New Labour administration re-articulated its commitment to an ICT-led government change agenda under the 'modernising government' banner. The White Paper (1999) encapsulating the government's thinking in this area emphasised the role of new technologies in facilitating joined-up government and delivering joined-up services. More fundamentally, the White Paper's publication was, for Barberis, symbolic of an affirmation of managerialist government – "change was now built into the fabric" (2012: 334).

Importantly, in order to achieve the aspiration of joining-up in new ways, the government committed to "...using the best and most modern techniques, to match the best of the private

sector – including one-stop shops, single contacts which link in to a range of government departments and especially electronic information-age services." (Cabinet Office, 1999: 5). The government's keenness to embrace private sector techniques as part of an ICT revolution reflects a more fundamental and longstanding characteristic of IT strategy and practice in the UK government. Margetts (2006) argues that the UK computer services market has, since the 1980s and 1990s, been shaped by the "distinctive characteristics of public management reform" (NPM), in which contracting out and models of contract financing has played a central part. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, e-government became "big business", amounting to more than 1% of GDP in most industrialised nations and approximately £14 billion annually in the UK (Margetts, 2006: 250). These figures underline how the dawn of e-government has presented the communities of system developers and technology consultants traditionally operating in commercial environments with the immensely lucrative prospect of doing business with "their best customer yet" (Murray, 2001) – government. Significantly, one of the consequences of this trend is that government agencies have retained very little in the way of IT expertise internally (Margetts, 2006: 254). In later chapters of this thesis I will go on to argue that the intimate relationship between public and private sectors, beyond shaping government IT strategy, is playing an important role in shaping the relationship between the individual and the state.

1.3.2 e-government: an agenda for transformation

In terms of the meaning of 'e-government', unsurprisingly, it is by no means a straightforward concept (Aldrich et al., 2002; Jain, 2002). Definitions of e-government vary in terms of their emphasis on, for example, service delivery transformation, democratic renewal, efficiency-making, and so on. Common to most definitions, however, and of particular relevance to this thesis, is the centrality of the individual service user/citizen. According to an early Deloitte Research report (2000) on e-government, in the light of user demands for convenience, customisation, and empowerment, "…most governments cite customer demand as the top incentive to improve service." (2000: 5) Citizen-centricity is certainly reflected in the UK's approach to e-government, as illustrated by its four 'guiding principles' set out in a key policy paper, *e-Government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in The Information Age*:

• "building services around citizens' choices
• making government and its services more accessible
• social inclusion
• using information better" (Cabinet Office, 2000a: 1)

This is not to say that it is only the citizen who stands to benefit from e-government. According to another significant policy document, *Electronic government services for the 21st century*, "…it will radically improve services to the citizen as consumer, transform government operations, reducing costs to the benefit of taxpayers, and ultimately enhance UK economic performance through increased public sector productivity." (Cabinet Office, 2000b: 21) Beyond this considerable potential, the New Labour government viewed the exploitation of new technologies across *all* spheres to be of central importance to the UK as a whole, both socially and economically, on a global stage.

The cross-sector nature of the government's aspiration regarding ICT-exploitation is significant in that e-government policy documents tend to feature a common theme concerned with how citizens' expectations of service quality are continually rising in the light of faster and more convenient service experiences in the private sector. Hence, "the challenge to government is to match and even surpass these expectations: Government will be compared to the cream of the private sector." (Cabinet Office, 2000b: 21). It is from this standpoint that the watchwords of e-government are 'speed' (of carrying out transactions), 'convenience', 'access', 'flexibility' (in options and hours of service), and 'empowerment' (by bringing services closer to the public and allowing them to choose how/when to carry out transactions) (Cabinet Office, 1998).

In order that citizens might experience public services in such a seamless fashion, change of different kinds – technological, organisational, and cultural – is required at all levels of governance and within multiple constituencies, including those of practitioners, managers, system developers, and citizens. From this point of view, e-government encompasses a truly ambitious vision of the operation of government; what is often described as 'transformational'. While Dunleavy et al (2005) associate 'e-government' with just one of three thematic components of 'Digital Era Governance' – *digitization* (alongside *reintegration* and *needs-based holism*) – I argue that dominant conceptions of e-government also embrace many aspects of the latter two themes. I say this in the light of the ways in which ICTs have come to be integrated into all manner of governance innovations, including 'the reengineering of back office functions', 'one-stop provision', 'data-warehousing' and so on. As such, I assume a broad definition of the term in this thesis.

The idea of government undergoing a 'transformation' is a radical one. As such, it is naive to think that achieving such an ambition would be a straightforward or speedy process (Moon, 2002). Commentators (Layne and Lee, 2001) tend to suggest that organisations embarking on e-service delivery will need to pass through a number of dynamic stages before arriving at anything approaching transformation. A report published by Deloitte Research (2000) offers a useful description of the kinds of stages I am referring to (see figure 1 below).

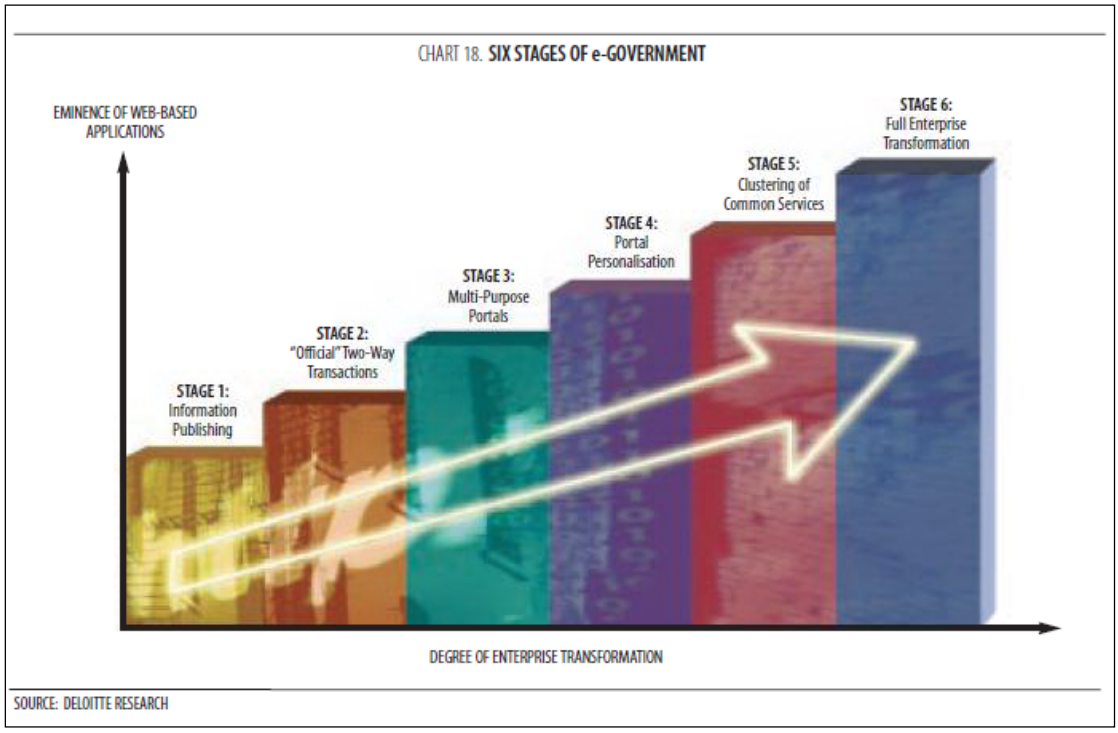

Figure 1: Six stages of e-Government (reproduced from Deloitte Research, 2000: 22)

According to this view, the e-government journey tends to begin with organizational websites pushing information out at customers, before a degree of interactivity is introduced facilitating basic transactions. At stage 3, portal technology allows a single point of entry to multiple departments; this experience being extended at stage 4, with users able to customise portals. Next, customers are able to discern groups of transactions rather than groups of agencies. And, ultimately, organisations are seen to arrive at a full-service centre, personalised to each customer's needs and preferences.

1.3.3 e2government: re-focusing on efficiency

While the achievement of efficiencies had always been a stated aspiration of e-government, in the early years the agenda appeared to privilege the potential of ICTs to bring about improved public service delivery above anything else. However, the character of e-government rhetoric

soon shifted to reflect a growing concern to see cost-savings resulting from the investment in organizational technologies. The ‘e’ of ‘e’-government was increasingly about ‘efficient’ (and ‘effective’) *as well as* ‘electronic’ government. It was a shift that was reflected in the ODPM’s local e-government progress report at the time – *Two Years On* (2005a). There, it stated that, in the future, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) – the auditing framework within which local authorities’ performance was assessed – would have a much greater focus on local authorities’ delivery of value for money and their approach to cost-effectiveness and efficiency (2005). In some quarters, the concept of ‘e-government’ was dropped in favour of *e2government* to reflect this shift of emphasis (see Scarfe, 2005). At the time, the President of the SOCITM declared “e-Government is dead: long live e2Government” (eGov Monitor, 2005).

Perhaps the most influential publication in terms of re-focusing the e-government agenda at this time was the *Independent Review of Public Sector Efficiency* (2004) conducted by Sir Peter Gershon. The review identified £21.5 billion of efficiency savings to be released across the public sector by 2007–8, involving a gross reduction of 84,000 posts in the Civil Service and military personnel in administrative and support roles. The main areas Gershon (2004) identified for realising savings were the ‘back office’, procurement processes, and the delivery of transactional services.

In that the Gershon Review was explicitly concerned with re-organising the structures and processes supporting public service delivery, it was, in effect, inward looking. At the same time, however, its rhetorical underpinnings were very much externally focused in that internal re-organising efforts were fundamentally about reorienting service delivery around the customer of public services; as is communicated by the document’s subtitle – ‘releasing resources to the front line’. A similar argument can be made about another important publication around the same time which also sought to improve the government’s bottom line. At the end of 2004, Sir Michael Lyons was invited by the government to conduct a study into the management of public sector assets with a view to achieving its objective of securing £30 billion of asset sales and achieving further efficiency savings. The Lyons’ study encouraged a more strategic approach to the management and disposal of government assets, including recommending the practice of appropriate outsourcing and asset sharing at a local and regional level. Again, the customer was placed at the heart of the justificatory rhetoric; it was s/he who was demanding the kind of change being advocated. As Lyons argues: “In an ever changing, more customer focussed and efficient public sector,…it is no longer tenable for

those charged with managing our public services to separate asset management from their core business planning." (2004: 23).

Government modernisation rhetoric at this time, therefore, was marshalling the popular concepts of customer-focus, service improvement, *and* waste-cutting, even if these efforts entailed the rather less palatable idea (in certain quarters) of cutting public sector jobs and curtailing services. Public service reform appeared to be presenting a win-win deal to the British taxpayer. Indeed, the subtitle of another, more recent, strategy document (Sir David Varney's *Service Transformation*, 2006) – 'A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer' – delivers precisely this message. While the Gershon Review looked primarily to the reorganisation of the 'back office' to release resources to the frontline, Varney (2006) emphasised the opportunities to realise further savings through enhanced transactional efficiency at the frontline (including encouraging service users to make use of self-service channels) and a greater willingness among government bodies to share data and resources. These efficiency-oriented actions are still being played out a number of years on from Varney's contribution to the debate. And in the light of what has commonly come to be referred to as the gravest economic crisis of the post-war era, the gaze of successive governments has, unsurprisingly, remained fixed on getting more for less.

For the current coalition government, efficiency-making has been subsumed by the 'austerity' programme being driven by The Efficiency and Reform Group (ERG). Despite the vigour with which the government is pursuing this agenda, it maintains a rhetorical commitment to simultaneously 'transform' services and enhance customer-focus: "ERG aims to save money, transform the way public services are delivered, improve user experience and support UK growth." (Cabinet Office, nd)

Although the idea of driving through public sector efficiencies has not gone away (indeed, in recent times, it has come to eclipse almost every other strategic priority), *e2government* soon faded as a useful concept. Arguably, it was displaced by the idea of *T-government*. In the key strategic publication, *Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology* (2005), we find a less deterministic tone, where there is an explicit acceptance that new technologies represent but one (albeit crucial) element of a complex organisational and cultural change process: "Technology alone does not transform government, but government cannot transform to meet modern citizens' expectations without it." (Cabinet Office, 2005c: 3)

T-government represented an emphasis on greater levels of service personalization. Governments have been investing considerable resources in techniques and technologies designed to provide a better understanding of service users – 'customer insight' – via the deployment of "…tools and techniques to allow government to use what it knows and discovers about what really matters to citizens and businesses to shape the services that affect them", and the development of "…a model for the greater use of online channels to enable citizens to access services more effectively." (Cabinet Office, 2007).

The language of t-government, and before it e2government and e-government, has waned under the current coalition government. Many of those agendas' objectives, however, now form part of the government's 'Government Digital Strategy'. The priority under this strategy is to redesign government's digital services "…to make them so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them prefer to do so." (Cabinet Office, 2013a). The Digital Strategy is mainly concerned with services delivered by central government departments and associated agencies and arm's length bodies (in contrast to earlier e-government agendas that encompassed local service delivery). In keeping with recent policy statements in this area, the perceived gains are principally financial – "by going digital by default, the government could save between £1.7 and £1.8 billion each year" (Cabinet Office, 2013b) – but not exclusively so. There remains an ambition to deliver customer-focused services akin to those experienced in the private sector: "this isn't just about saving money – the public increasingly expects to access services quickly and conveniently, at times and in ways that suit them." (Cabinet Office, 2013b).

1.3.4 Local e-government: The site of digital government in practice

Given that the delivery point of many public services is local in nature, it is unsurprising that considerable resources have, over the years, been directed towards achieving the aims of the modernisation/transformation agendas at the level of *local* e-government – it is here that that the empirical dimension of this thesis is located.

This emphasis on the local has been reflected in governance structures from the dawning of e-government. A government Minister for Local e-Government, located in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, was appointed at the turn of the century to represent this agenda at the top table. Also, at the heart of government was the Office of the e-Envoy, a part of the Prime Minister's Delivery and Reform team based in the Cabinet Office that superseded the CITU

(Margetts, 2006). The e-Envoy was responsible for delivering on the incumbent government's flagship commitment to having all key government services available electronically by 2005. So as to keep individual local authorities on track in this regard, during the period leading up to 2005, each was required to submit annual Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) returns detailing their progress towards achieving electronic service delivery. An initial sum of 750 million pounds was made available to councils through *Local Government Online* to facilitate e-government change (IDeA, nd.).

At around the same time, a number of other organisations coalesced around the local e-government agenda to support the government in driving through change. Among these was the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government (IDeA), a body which was set up to support innovation at a local level. Then there were three bodies that represented key constituencies involved in making local e-government a reality. One was the Local Government Association (LGA), the voice of local government in the national arena representing its member authorities across England and Wales. Another was the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm), the membership association for ICT professionals working in local authorities and the public and third sectors which aims to promote ICT best practice. The other body was the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), the representative body for senior strategic managers working in the public sector.

One of the earliest attempts to articulate the UK's local e-government strategy came in a 2002 consultation paper. While ICTs were seen to have a critical role in achieving the modernization vision at a local level, this document emphasized that technologies were subordinate to an overarching customer-centric agenda:

> "e-Government is more than technology, more than the Internet, more than service delivery. It is about putting citizens and customers at the heart of everything we do and building service access, delivery and democratic accountability around them. Local e-government is the realisation of this vision at the point where the vast majority of public services are delivered." (DTLR, 2002: 2).

The results of this consultation were formalized in a National Strategy document later in 2002. Here, the ODPM clarified the three overarching aims of local e-government – transforming services; renewing local democracy; and promoting local economic vitality – thereby setting the government's ambitions for local level change firmly within the context of its broader aspiration to cultivate a public fit for the challenges of the information society.

By the time the *One Year On* (from the strategic framework) progress report had been published, we were beginning to see how the overarching local e-government aims were being translated into action. According to that document, for example, by the end of 2003 the average council had 60% of its services online and expected to achieve the 100% target by 2005; it had appointed a Council Member and senior manager in the role of e-Champion; it was working towards a single public access telephone contact centre; and it was in the process of developing its customer relationship management capability to handle transactions across multiple channels (ODPM, 2003: 6).

The local e-government agenda, as mentioned above, encompassed democratic, economic, and service delivery aims. In practice, however, much of the effort appears to have focussed primarily on developing and streamlining service delivery mechanisms. This idea is supported by the early research of Ferguson and Baron (2002), who characterized the UK local e-government strategy as 'e-services flavoured', reflecting an emphasis on "securing and providing government services by electronic means." (2002: 105) This 'flavour' differs from others – 'e-governance' or 'e-knowledge' – that the authors attached to certain other local e-government approaches elsewhere in the world.

1.3.5 Customer Relationship Management: Key to the e-government Enterprise

So far, the discussion of e-government and its subsequent iterations has focussed on the agendas' evolving strategic dimensions and the critical role of ICTs in delivering citizen-centric services. In this sub-section I take a closer look at a set of technologies and techniques that have come to form a crucial element of local e-government in practice. ICT investment by local authorities over recent years has been directed at supporting a variety of new ways of working. These include, inter alia, technologies to support the management and distribution of organisational knowledge and documentation, the processing of internal and external transactions, and the coordination of an organisation's supply chain. They also include a set of technologies designed to manage an organisation's external relationship with its service users and to provide a coherent and consolidated internal view of those users to support delivery processes – these are commonly referred to as Customer Relationship Management (CRM). It is these which are of particular interest in this thesis, for it is CRM-related technologies that directly support (and arguably shape) the relationship between service users and the state.

While CRM activities are now a common feature of local authority operations, they first emerged in for-profit organisations some years earlier. CRM is a concept that grew out of the marketing function and marked the shift from 'transactional' marketing, concerned with one-off interactions, to 'relationship' marketing concerned with establishing a long-lasting association with individual customers. Over recent decades, CRM has come to take centre-stage in organisations' corporate strategy (Greenberg, 2002; Swift, 2001). At its most basic level, CRM can be defined as a combination of business processes and technology (Sigala, 2005). Offering a more holistic description, Stone and Woodcock see CRM as the "…methodologies, technologies and e-commerce capabilities used by companies to manage customer relationships." (2001: 3). Getting rather closer to the heart of the matter, Zwick and Dholakia point out that CRM "…aims at creating, developing, and enhancing personal and valuable relationships with customers by providing personalized and customized products and services." (2004: 215).

Despite the divergent organizational objectives, the core CRM aims set out above apply to public service delivery contexts as much as commercial settings. By the middle of the last decade, the New Labour government had enthusiastically embraced the notion of CRM as an important vehicle in realising technology-led 'customer-focus' on the ground. In the words of the, then, Minister for Local Government and eGovernment, "…to be fully e-enabled by 2005, councils must embrace the CRM concept to put customers first." (eGov monitor, 2004).

It is striking that, while there are fundamental differences between the kinds of 'service-provider-customer' relationship operating within each setting, much of the rhetoric surrounding CRM in public services differs very little from that found in for-profit contexts. Having said this, there have been attempts to draw a distinction in terms of the underpinning motivations for achieving a similar set of aims. For example, the actors involved with developing the *National CRM Programme* – a key element of the strategic infrastructure introduced by the government to drive through CRM-related change – articulated the divergence in this way:

"Private sector CRM:

- aims to identify most valued customers
- provides services to keep customer returning
- identifies new service offerings
- increases revenue

Public sector CRM:

- aims to provide improved services to citizens/customers – e.g. one-stop
- aims to minimise the number of times a citizen/customer interacts with a council
- provides the customer/citizen with a single view of the council
- increases efficiency
- reduces cost
- improves customer service" (The National CRM Programme, 2004).

Hence, CRM embodies the chief aims of the broader e-government agenda – to transform the service delivery experience while delivering increased organisational efficiency.

The figure below shows the basic levels of the kind of CRM infrastructure envisaged at the local government level, focusing on how the main players are connected with one another.

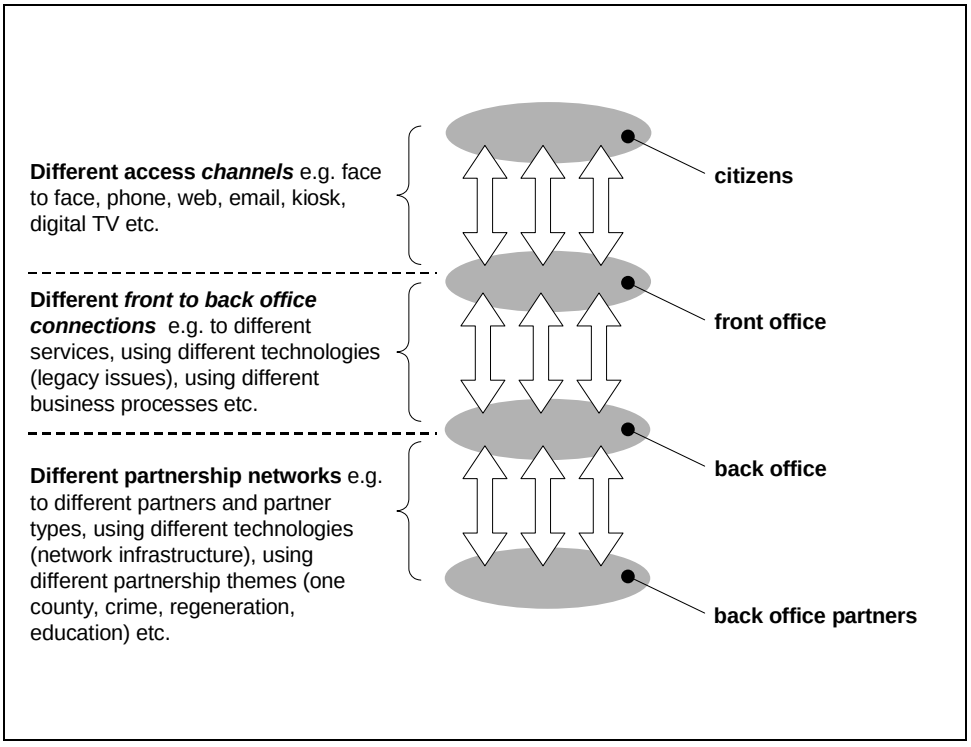

Figure 2: How the main players are connected up in local government CRM. (Reproduced from Shaw et al., 2003: 8)

In practice, local authorities have approached the deployment of CRM systems in different ways. A baseline report by Shaw et al. (2004) demonstrates the variety of approaches being pursued at the time. First – and reflecting the significance of the CRM initiative in public services – the 'owner' of CRM in the local authorities surveyed was identified, in the main, as the chief executive or someone at Director level. The survey found significant variation in the choice of CRM system vendor local authorities had made; some had in fact proceeded with an

in-house development option. A range of service areas had been targeted for CRM system support in the early stages of implementation; the most common of these were environmental services and waste management, general enquiries, benefits, and council tax. In terms of the CRM functionality being exploited, local authorities tended to focus on: supporting call centre and face to face queries, contacts database, enquiry recorder, and customer record management. Less common in this regard, although planned by some local authorities, was the support of legacy integration and internet transactions. Finally, the report found variation in the definition of CRM favoured by local authorities. Some interpreted CRM as 'technology', others as 'culture change', but the majority viewed the concept in terms of 'organisational transformation'.

The degree of engagement with CRM among local authorities, certainly at the level of a commitment to invest in supporting technologies, implied by Shaw et al.'s (2004) report is significant – a quarter of local authorities surveyed had already 'gone live', while the majority of those who had not were either in the process of implementing CRM systems or were planning the development process. The level of support from central government undoubtedly played a key role in promoting widespread adoption of CRM at a local level. Much of this support has been channelled through the *National CRM Programme*. The guidance and support offered by the Programme was extensive: it included a series of diagnostic tools to assist local authorities choose an appropriate CRM trajectory; a 'Roadmap' outlining the scale, scope and sequence of tasks, processes and developments required to deliver a successful implementation; a generic Business Case that could be tailored for each trajectory; CRM Standards for Information Architectures, Customer Care and Procurement/Supplier Selection; and a Centre of Excellence for CRM in local government – The CRM Academy. (Dailey, 2003).

Despite the substantial support provided to local government, research suggests that embedding CRM systems within organisational settings has been anything but straightforward. The list of 'barriers to implementation of CRM systems' reported by councils ranges from budgetary constraints, to information sharing and system integration, to inadequate senior management ownership (Shaw et al., 2004: 26). Other research has identified similar obstacles, in particular that of inadequate system integration, which "still seems to be an afterthought" (ndl-metascybe, 2006: 2) for many councils. The result has been the achievement of only shallow CRM integration in many cases.

Once implemented, further obstacles to full exploitation have been identified. A study funded by the *CRM National Programme* found that while these technologies were helping UK local authorities improve call resolution rates and customer satisfaction "there was no evidence of the use of CRM to generate insight into citizens' use of services or future service needs." (King, 2007: 53). This is not unique to the UK public sector. Even in the case of many US-based commercial operators – where CRM has been a feature of business strategy considerably longer than it has in the UK public sector – a survey found that "sixty-four percent of [US] corporations admitted that they lacked a formal strategy for using the customer data they had spent millions to collect." (Wailgum, 2006: 3). These findings may, in part, explain the claim that 60 per cent of CRM projects in the private sector "fail to deliver". (Jones and Williams, 2005: 9).

This is not to say that all local authorities necessarily consider their investment in CRM to have been fruitless. According to research carried out in 2006 – at which time 66% of councils claimed to have live CRM systems – the overwhelming majority (77%) considered that they had achieved efficiency savings as a result of implementing CRM. Less encouraging was that most of these councils were unable to put a figure on those savings; "of the 199 interviewed that were aware that savings had been made, only 19…could make even the remotest stab at their value." (ndl-metascybe, 2006: 14). Again, this is a cross-sector trend. According to Bollen and Emes, during the 1990s CRM was "…touted as the panacea for a whole host of marketing dilemmas" (2008: 10); disappointment inevitably followed. In 2000, industry studies showed that 60% of CRM software installations fail (Bollen and Emes, 2008). A key criticism of organisations that invest in CRM technologies (including public sector bodies more recently) is that all too often, they fail to turn valuable customer data into even more valuable customer insight (Davenport et al., 2001).

In a still wider context – that which encompasses the relationship between IT and government organisations more generally – the relative success of CRM in local authorities is better understood. According to Heeks (1999), "some computerised information systems do succeed in the public sector, but the vast majority – quite possibly at least 80% – fail in some way." Or in the even more uncompromising words of one Westminster politician – "government plus IT = disaster" (Richard Allen MP cited Margetts, 2006: 256). Of course, while concepts such as 'failure' and 'disaster' are satisfyingly dramatic, they are hardly elucidatory. Margetts' (2006) evaluation of UK e-government efforts in broad terms offers a more useful context against which the 'failure' (or success) of government-led IT programmes might be judged.

She reported that, on the supply side, UK e-government has performed well, inasmuch as the UK is regularly among the top achievers of UN countries in the 'readiness for e-government' and 'e-participation' indices. More recent data (United Nations, 2010) shows the UK having slipped a little in the global rankings (to fifth in terms of e-participation and fourth in terms of e-readiness) but still very much on a par with countries such as the US and Canada. On the demand side, however, Margetts claims that "the rhetoric is still running ahead of the results" (2006: 262), with the UK lagging behind many other OECD countries in terms of the percentage of the population reporting any sort of interaction with government online between 2001 and 2003. Some of the reasons for this finding are discussed in the next sub-section in the context of e-government in practice.

Looking beyond the 'usual suspects' of inadequate system integration or poorly executed culture change programmes, Heeks (2006, 1999) has attempted to explain why governments have an inauspicious record of deploying IT projects. He has identified what he calls 'archetypes' of IT failure in government. One of these relates to 'rationality-reality gaps': failures arising from the formal rational way in which information systems are conceived in contrast to the informal, subjective, self-interested realities of many public sector organisations. Another relates to 'private-public sector gaps'; these are failures that arise from the application of information systems developed for the private sector in public sector contexts (Heeks, 2006).

More concerning, perhaps, than the above inadequacies are those cited in a report commissioned by the Office of Public Management (OPM) to identify the current and future capacity-building needs of local government. The report pinpointed a number of skills gaps, including a lack of knowledge about how ICT can be applied, a lack of people who understand how to respond strategically and corporately to the e-government agenda, and a lack of skills in procuring ICT (IDeA, 2004: 4). The following year, a Work Foundation report concluded that "there is a high degree of uncertainty across public services about what ICT is for and how it might improve and enable public services". (Jones and Williams, 2005: 9-10). In the course of this research, I will seek to ascertain whether any of the cited challenges apply to the local e-government setting being studied.

1.3.6 UK e-government in practice: service quality over democracy?

Much of the discussion of e-government up until now has centred on the agenda's ambitions to transform the delivery of public services and drive through organisational efficiencies through the introduction of new technologies to support new ways of working. It is easy to forget that, rhetorically at least, the pursuit of e-government is also about re-engaging with citizens by making the internal workings of government more transparent and exploiting new technologies to support more and easier interaction between the citizen and the state (in the form of e-voting or on-line consultation for example) – activities commonly bundled under the term 'e-democracy'. Indeed, one of the three overarching aims of local e-government is to "renew local democracy – making councils more open, more accountable, more inclusive and better able to lead their communities." (ODPM, 2002: 5).

The corollary of e-democracy might reasonably be the 'e-citizen'. The e-citizen puts one in mind of a character rather different from the 'customer/consumer' figure that I have argued is at the heart of NPM thinking and much e-government rhetoric in the UK. Hence, in this section I will briefly turn to the notion of e-democracy in the context of the broader e-government debate.

Many early commentators were optimistic about the prospect of a flourishing e-democracy resulting from an increasingly networked society. Toregas (see also West, 2004), in a US context, envisaged a future populated by 'neticians' – politicians who "…represent an Internet-oriented aggregation of people rather than a geographically defined polis." (2001: 238). For Toregas, e-government "…can become a way for our federal, intergovernmental system to align itself around a citizen-centric model and redefine alliances for a democratic future in which every voice is heard and every resource is identified and wisely invested." (2001: 240). More exuberant still, Grossman (1996) predicted that tomorrow's telecommunications technology will "…make it possible for our political system to return to the roots of Western democracy as it was practiced in the city-states of ancient Greece." (Grossman, 1996: 33, cited Levine, 2002).

Voices in the UK tended to be somewhat more circumspect about the dawn of e-democracy. Bend (2002), for example, argued that e-democracy offers those in government a mechanism

to resolve two crucial problems – democratic disengagement and the risk that a technologically underdeveloped public sector will be seen as out of touch by an ever more connected citizenry. Bend, however, was unconvinced that the UK government was sufficiently committed to tackling these issues. Silcock (2001) struck a similarly cautious tone when she claimed that one of the most important aspects of e-government is its potential to enhance democracy, before going on to qualify this statement: "the word 'potential' is used advisedly here – technology is democratically neutral. Used wrongly, it could stifle diversity or reinforce current patterns of power and debate, used well, it could create new ways for people to interact, particularly at the global and local level." (2001: 98).

Given the UK government's early progress in terms of rolling out e-government, perhaps the more optimistic voices on e-democracy are justifiable. As mentioned above, the UK tends to perform relatively well on the global e-readiness and e-participation indices, suggesting that considerable progress has been made in terms of the quality and utility of participatory tools, government web sites, telecoms infrastructures and so on. Apart from organisational preparedness, early survey research (Ipsos Mori, 2001) found a high degree of receptiveness among the UK public towards the idea of online interaction with government.

On the other hand, translating this potential for an engaged e-citizenry into practice may be more difficult. Studies looking at public engagement with e-government activities more broadly find relatively low participation. Results from the 2005 Oxford Internet Survey found that less than a quarter of respondents reported some kind of e-government interaction (Margetts, 2006). The findings of a 2008 study carried out by Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley – that "interest in e-government is generally low overall" (2008: 723) – suggest little is changing in terms of the appetite of UK service users to engage with government online. These results contrast strongly with those relating to e-commerce and e-travel at the time, where 87% of users used the Internet to look up product information, 66% to get local events information, and 61% to look for current news (Margetts, 2006: 259).

It follows from these findings that interest in engaging in e-democracy related activity would also be low. Indeed, this is borne out by research. Interested to understand any differences between online and offline civic activity, Dutton et al. (2009: 47) found that, during 2009, around one fifth of Internet users undertook "…at least one civic action on the Internet" (compared to 34% of users who had done this offline). The most frequently undertaken activity of this kind was signing an e-petition. An online civic activity that is arguably more

meaningful – contacting a politician – had been undertaken by 8% of Internet users (up from 2% in 2007). Overall, Dutton et al. found the Internet is occupying a more central role in our lives in many respects. They noted a "remarkable rise" in social networking, with nearly half of all Internet users having up-dated or created a social networking profile in the last year. They also found the increasing importance of the Internet as a first and often major source of information about a widening variety of matters (from local events to health and medical information) along with a marked increase in the creation and production of user-content (2009: 5-6). At the same time, the authors concluded that "in contrast to many other areas, the Internet did not seem to play an important role in civic activities, except for a minority of users". (2009: 6).

More recent research (focussing on the US and Germany) looking at whether online spaces better correspond to the demands of the participatory model than traditional print media communication offers little comfort to e-democrats. Gerhards and Schäfer (2010) focused their study on the debate surrounding human genome research and concluded that internet communication was even more one-sided and less inclusive than print media communication "…in terms of its actor structure and issue evaluations." Both spheres are dominated by scientific actors; "popular inclusion does not occur". (2010: 155)

Turning briefly to the question of why the UK public is not more engaged with government online, a whole range of possible reasons come to mind. Many of these may help explain the relative absence of a thriving e-democracy in the UK as well as the somewhat muted levels of e-government activity more generally (in comparison to levels of e-commerce and other non-civic endeavours).

First, access to the appropriate technologies (the so-called 'digital divide') remains a relevant issue. In 2010, 30% of UK households did not have Internet access and a fifth of adults had never accessed the Internet (Office for National Statistics, 2010). Beneath the broad division of the Internet 'haves' and 'have nots', there are a number of more subtle 'digital divides'. Among these are the well-documented urban-rural divide and the significant variation in available broadband speeds in different parts of the country, as well as behaviour differences based on the user's age, level of formal education, and employment status. The main point here is that just because a household has access to the Internet it does not necessarily follow that all members of that household are able or willing to engage in e-government and e-democracy activity.

Second, and related to the above issue, some commentators have questioned whether we are sufficiently ICT-literate and politically-literate to engage in e-democratic activities – in other words, whether we are e-citizens-in-waiting. Silcock had in mind the lack of public understanding about e-government more generally when she warned that "governments should not make the mistake of assuming that most citizens want and, more importantly, will use government services online." (2001: 92-93). For Penfold (2002), the main problem is that the proportion of the population who are technically aware is relatively small, a situation that has no doubt eased to some degree over the last few years. In an Australian context, Griffiths (2002) has called into question a familiar hypothesis: High ICT Uptake + Politics = e-Democracy. Levine (2002) frames the debate around the "four myths of the Internet as a tool of democracy"; these are that: "Convenience is the key to participation; We need more information; The Internet is a massive town meeting; and Democracy will flourish when the 'power brokers' are gone".

It may, of course, be that more conventional barriers to utilizing new technologies underpin the lack of online engagement with government. These barriers may include ongoing concerns about issues of privacy and data security (Pavlou, 2003; Siau and Shen, 2003; Warkentin et al., 2002) – concerns which would be understandable given a succession of high-profile fiascos (see Margetts, 2006: 256). It could be that people simply prefer more traditional access channels. When it comes to contacting the local authority or a central government service, for most people, telephone is the preferred method of contact for urgent enquiries, rather than e-mail (DFES, 2005: iii). Further, a majority of people (62%) reported not using the internet as a starting point for finding out information about their council or government." (DFES, 2005: iv).

Another set of arguments suggests that the UK's stuttering e-democracy is less to do with the citizen's capabilities or preferences and more to do with how e-government is being conceived and rolled out by state organizations. Chadwick and May (2003) have identified three possible models of interaction between the state and the citizen in the wake of the e-government drive in the UK, the US and the European Union. These are: a *managerial* model that emphasises more efficient and responsive service delivery while largely ignoring the issue of democratic participation; a *consultative* model that focuses upon citizens needs and opinions as a resource to be drawn on by government; and a *participatory* model that supports horizontal and multidirectional flows of interaction between the citizen and government

(Chadwick and May, 2003: 276-282). They conclude that governments are a long way from utilising new technologies to their full democratic potential and that the approach to e-government in the UK (as well as the US and the EU) is characterised by a *managerial* model of interaction. Navarra and Cornford offer a more damning appraisal of "…the mainstream models of e-government as managerial/service infrastructures". For these authors, such models, in failing to connect with the state's essential role of increasing social welfare, "…waste public monies, and leave the government in a deeper crisis of legitimacy." (2012: 42).

The results of the above-cited research may help explain why other contributors have found that public officials seem to be ill-prepared to facilitate 'citizen-centred governance'. For Barnes et al., this is a key factor, in addition to the confusion (for citizens, councillors, and public officials) arising from the "…patchwork of different agencies, partnerships, trusts, regeneration boards and other governance structures…" (2008: 71.) Public managers are expected to put into practice complex democratic principles (such as 'participation', 'representation' and 'accountability') even though this is seldom part of their professional training, while they have "…limited awareness of the issues involved in constitutional design and a reluctance or inability to negotiate the roles of all participants…" (Barnes et al, 2008: 71). In a French context, Michel has noted that "public decision makers try to involve citizens in decision-making processes without excessive costs and loss of efficiency, but do not know how to do it." (2005: 213). In the context of more recent enthusiasm for citizens being encouraged to be part of 'co-producing' services, Boyle and Harris argue that this can only happen if public servants change their attitudes, priorities and training – "they need to move from fixers to facilitators." (2009: 17).

In conclusion, it appears that the 'flavour' of e-government being pursued in the UK is such that while the rolling out of organizational technologies has continued apace, considerably less attention is being paid to structures and processes of e-governance. This issue is among those that make up a wide-ranging critique of current e-government efforts and the instantiation of a customer-service paradigm within government more broadly. This is the focus of the next section.

1.4 Critiquing 'customer'- centric public services

So far in this chapter I have charted the emergence and rise of the 'customer' of public services. I have argued that modern conceptions of public management embrace customer-centric organisation and that the widespread introduction of new technologies (particularly those designed to support the individual-state relationship) in the administration of government duties presents a policy and practice context within which the customer can thrive. I now rehearse some of the key elements of a critique of this trend. These should, of course, be understood in the context of what many advocates would argue to be the multiple benefits of a consumer focus, including the prospect of increased flexibility of access and choice of services, the mitigation of the stigma often associated with the uptake of public services, more appropriate decision-making by professionals on behalf of clients, and the potential empowerment of service users resulting from increased access to information (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998).

1.4.1 A change of language

Critics of current trends in public administration have expressed unease at the apparently wholesale adoption of the language (and with it the underpinning philosophy) of managerialism and entrepreneurialism. In making these criticisms, many are motivated, as I am in this thesis, by the idea that language is more than simply a powerful describer of phenomena, but an active constructor. As such, the way in which public administration is represented is of *real* consequence. McKibben argues that its vocabulary is market-managerialism's most "powerful weapon". He characterizes its lexicon as more potent than the kind of language satirised by Flaubert in the *Dictionnaire des idees recues* since "it determines the way our political (and economic) elites think of the world." (2006).

A number of contributors to this debate have exposed what they see as the imprecise and rather shallow nature of the language (much of which has its roots in commercial settings) that frames managerialist approaches to public administration. This could relate to its obfuscatory nature: "Management discourse thrives upon a certain language that critics would call jargon – what Lord Hennessy describes as 'bullshit bingo'." (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2011: Q. 25, cited Barberis, 2012: 341). Or, as in Moe's (1994) case, it is the emotive tone

that is a cause of concern. Having analysed the National Performance Review report (a core document that articulates the US 'reinventing government' programme), Moe is particularly struck by how public officials of the future are framed in it. The report "largely rejects" the traditional language of administrative discourse which Moe argues attempts, albeit with mixed success, to employ terms with precise meanings. In contrast, he points to "a new highly value-laden lexicon" being employed by entrepreneurial management enthusiasts. Here, 'customers' replace 'citizens' and "…there is a heavy reliance upon active verbs – reinventing, reengineering, empowering – to maximize the emotive content of what otherwise has been a largely nonemotive subject matter." (Moe, 1994: 113-114).

Sharing Moe's concerns about the flavour as well as the potentially deleterious consequences of today's 'transformational government' discourse, Fox (1996) is keen to expose what he judges to be its inconsistent and insubstantial quality. Far from representing substantive reform, Fox regards much of it as symbolic politics of a particularly 'postmodern' kind. Referring to Osborne and Gaebler's (1992), *Reinventing Government: What does it mean?* text (commonly viewed as forming the foundation of the NPR analysed by Moe above), Fox's primary concern is articulated by the question: "When what is essentially a self-help motivational book claims to chart a paradigm revolution…and when that claim is embraced by powerful legitimate officials, what *real* effects does it have?" (1996: 258). Drawing on the notion of hyperreality, which has it that "…words, symbols and signs are increasingly divorced from direct real-world experience" (1996: 257), Fox characterizes the text as postmodern in three senses – "the style of argumentation", "the tolerance for contradiction" and "the conflation of opposing theories". By way of illustration, Fox exposes a major inconsistency in how the text's authors "…blithely assert the need to embrace both markets and community, [when] market theory is based on atomistic individualism whereas community is based on group solidarity – deeply contradictory social philosophies." (1996: 258). The consequence of this reinvention discourse for Fox is that we are left drifting in an essentially hollow, contradictory political world, reliant for any sense of buoyancy on a melange of transitory, if appealing, cultural anchors.

Commenting on developments in the UK in the mid-1990s, Fairclough's work offers a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective on this issue. Fairclough (1994) interprets contemporary public administration reform efforts in terms of the related processes of *commodification* – "the reconstruction of…public services on the analogy of commodity markets" – and *consumerization* – "the reconstruction of their publics and or clients as

consumers." (1994: 253). These processes are part of a broader "…weakening of boundaries between orders of discourse" that sees the conflation of the discursive practices of the market and those of politics, public services, and government. To be clear, Fairclough sees this process in uni-directional terms; it is the "colonization" of public domains by market discourses. McKibbin (2006), commentating on more recent UK government education and health policy, puts the case in even starker terms. For him, the ideological model of market-managerialism "…has largely destroyed all alternatives, traditional and untraditional".

Needham's (2006) in-depth research into the language use of central and local UK government actors provides a set of more nuanced results against which to judge these claims. In support of the idea that attitudes 'on the ground' have indeed taken on key elements of the marketization critique referred to above, Needham formulated five conceptions of 'customer care' from the interview data. These reflected differing emphases on: service personalization, user choice, payment for services, treating users with courtesy and respect; and improving user access. Among the implications of such 'customer care' approaches, if fully adopted in practice, are the redesign and expansion of services and the stigmatization of those less able to pay for services.

In addition to expressing concern at the appetite for business-related language among public administration reformers, Mintzberg (1996) is highly sceptical of the suitability and effectiveness of the language and ideas that accompany the recent blurring of private and public sectors. Mintzberg is keen to point out that much managerialist thinking simply would not work in a public service setting. Contesting the view that "government must become more like business", he declares that "if we are to manage government properly, then we must learn to govern management." (1996: 76).

Mintzberg's case rests on a number of Management 'myths'; these are based on assumptions that collapse when held up against the ways in which most government agencies do, and have to, work. The first of these, which undermines the now mainstream practice of contracting out aspects of service delivery, is that "…particular activities can be isolated – both from one another and from direct authority". (1996: 78). Mintzberg argues that this assumption falls down on three counts: the interconnected nature of much government activity, politicians' reluctance to relinquish control of the implementation of their policies, and the difficulties associated with formulating policy in isolation of administration before it is enacted.

Second, Mintzberg examines the idea that "performance can be fully and properly evaluated by objective measures". In critiquing this myth, he poses the rhetorical question: "How many of the real benefits of government activities lend themselves to…measurement?" (1996: 79). Mintzberg's response is that certain simple and directly delivered activities, such as refuse collection, do, but the vast majority do not. Rather, they require what Mintzberg calls "soft judgement". Commenting on the same trends some years later, Barberis has argued that "…judgement, discretion and common sense have been among the victims of managerialism." (2012: 340).

The third myth Mintzberg sought to expose was that "activities can be entrusted to autonomous professional managers held responsible for performance". (1996: 79). He likened this notion to a cult of heroic leadership which blinds advocates to its contradictions. Among these contradictions is the idea that hierarchies are actually reinforced in the name of empowering workers, whereby empowerment becomes the "empty gift" of managers who remain in charge. Mintzberg further claimed that managers, in fear of not meeting the "holy numbers", engage in constant reorganisation, which serves to promote increasing confusion rather than clarification. On this latter point, Barberis lists an obsession with 'change' among managerialism's five key features: "it is predicated upon an almost Whiggish assumption that there is an unbroken path of progress, that what is proposed is better than that which exists." (2012: 329-30). This and the other concerns discussed in this sub-section will be reflected on later in this thesis in the light of the empirical findings.

1.4.2 A change of ethos

I now focus on what many critics view to be a particularly worrying implication of the blurring of the boundary between the private and public sectors – the devaluation of bureaucratic principles and a public service ethos. du Gay has expressed this idea in characteristically forceful terms: "if the new public management or 'entrepreneurial governance' has one overarching target – that which it most explicitly defines itself in opposition to – then it is the impersonal, procedural, hierarchical and technical organisation of the Weberian bureau." (2000: 6) As touched on earlier, proponents of NPM-style reform tend to exhibit an aversion to concepts associated with bureaucratic rationality, signalling a departure from the notion of standardized service provision, at one time championed for being "…indifferent and unresponsive to individual needs" (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998: 89) and more recently, attacked for the very same reason.

Before discussing specific concerns with the anti-bureaucratic nature of current public administration efforts, it is useful to crystallise the main features, or opposing principles, of the approaches under consideration. Tat-Kei Ho (2002) has usefully done this from an e-government perspective (see table 1 below), wherein he charts the shift from a *traditional bureaucratic* to an *e-government* paradigm. While his primary interest is local government in the US I argue that a broadly similar trend is in evidence in the UK.

Shifting Paradigms in Public Service Delivery		
	Bureaucratic paradigm	**e-Government paradigm**
Orientation	Production cost-efficiency	User satisfaction and control, flexibility
Process organization	Functional rationality, departmentalization, vertical hierarchy of control	Horizontal hierarchy, network organization, information sharing
Management principle	Management by rule and mandate	Flexible management, interdepartmental teamwork with central coordination
Leadership style	Command and control	Facilitation and coordination, innovative entrepreneurship
Internal communication	Top-down, hierarchical	Multidirectional network with central coordination, direct communication
External communication	Centralized, formal, limited channels	Formal and informal, direct and fast feedback, multiple channels
Mode of service delivery	Documentary mode, and interpersonal interaction	Electronic exchange, non face-to-face interaction (so far)
Principles of service delivery	Standardization, impartiality, equity	User customization, personalization

Table 1 (Tat-Kei Ho 2002: 437)

For the purposes of this discussion, the features of an e-government paradigm of most concern relate to the innovative entrepreneurship leadership style, the organization of services according to user customization/personalization principles, and a user satisfaction orientation. And it is the last of these that has aroused considerable suspicion among critics. du Gay has

articulated these concerns thus: “the focus on ‘customer satisfaction’ may be an important value for those keen to promote entrepreneurial forms of organisational governance but in the context of public sector management it seems constitutionally surprising, hierarchically anomalous and…potentially dangerous.” (2000: 109).

Exploring in more detail what du Gay has in mind, he claims that a customer satisfaction focus is constitutionally surprising because “the operative functions of government can be fairly distinguished from private manufacturing and service functions in that they are regulatory and based on legal powers over the citizen.” (2000: 109). As such, in Britain, these functions are subject to the political accountability of government ministers. Commentators writing in a US context have expressed allied concerns. For Aberbach and Christensen (2005), the result of an NPM-inspired customer service orientation is the significant undermining of political leaders’ control (also see Moe, 1994).

This act of political short-circuiting gives rise to another source of unease for critics; the undue empowerment of the public sector manager – which, for du Gay (2000), is ‘hierarchically anomalous’. He is concerned that a shift away from bureaucratic organization implies a departure from the hierarchical accountability that has traditionally put certain limits on the operational discretion available to individual managers. Freedom to expand investment and levels of service provision in response to customer demand (especially if there is an element of risk involved) in the manner that their private sector counterparts might, is something that public sector managers should not enjoy (du Gay, 2000: 109). Grey argues that organizational rules often represent a small price to pay for avoiding “calamities”: “current day attempts to reduce bureaucracy so as to foster innovation frequently run into appalling disasters when, freed from rule-following, organizations take risks which do not come off.” (2005:24).

Given that ‘enterprising’ organizations seek to empower, responsibilize and enable *all* organizational members to ‘add value’ (du Gay and Salaman, 1992), it follows that it is not just managers who are being encouraged to be more entrepreneurial in their approach to public service delivery. The potential consequences of this kind of thinking – namely the inequitable treatment of service users – concerns Fountain (2001). Characterising public service delivery contexts as featuring the mass processing of highly variable clients and inadequate resources, Fountain argues that the discretion needed by the street-level bureaucrat to administer service encounters often leads them to employ “heuristic devices such as

favouritism, stereotyping, and routinizing". (2001: 63). As well as poorer service quality, Fountain fears that it is a situation that could lead to "…de facto restriction of rights and services provided by law." (2001: 63). These concerns should be judged in relation to what Lipsky argued in his now classic next: "The decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out" (1980: xiii).

At the same time, from the client side, public service efforts may be biased towards clients of higher socioeconomic status because they are "…more likely to know and demand their rights, to exercise voice, and to use voice in ways that are persuasive and effective." (Fountain, 2001: 65). Aberbach and Christensen (2005) have argued that NPM's advocacy of the simple slogan "putting customers first" glosses over fundamental political issues with implications for the distribution of power and benefits and for related questions of social justice (see also Needham, 2003; Moffatt and Higgs, 2007; Wilberforce et al., 2011; Jilke, 2014).

A core element of translating the 'putting customers first' slogan into practice relates to the re-structuring of what are seen as inefficient bureaucratic processes that lead to organizational sclerosis. Gershon's efficiency review, for example, has as one of its two key aims: "to reduce the bureaucracy faced by frontline professionals and free them up to better meet the needs of their customers." (2004: 37). This issue raises another dimension of the debate that has come in for criticism. In recent years, it has become commonplace to frame bureaucratic organising as inherently inefficient and to pinpoint the 'back office' as the site of much of the wastefulness. According to this logic, 'waste' needs to be eliminated to release resources to the customer-facing, enterprising frontline. The distinction commonly made between the front-line service worker and the back office 'bureaucrat' implied by this kind of reasoning is viewed by some commentators as "spurious" or "fictitious" (Walker, 2005). According to Walker, in order to sustain this oppositional dynamic, front-line workers are represented as "veritable saints", while all other public service employees belong to "a species of parasite"; they are "drones", "paper pushers", "bureaucrats" (2005). At the time of writing, Microsoft Word's thesaurus tool offers the following as potential synonyms for 'bureaucratic': bossy, officious, self-important, overbearing, interfering, intrusive, and fussy.

While voices on both sides of the argument debate the *actual* efficiency of public service organisations, some critics would argue that a preoccupation with efficiency in a public

service setting rather misses the point. More than three decades ago, Johnson (1983) argued that the function of public officials "…cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of achieving results efficiently." He reminded us of their duty to observe the varied limits on action by public bodies and to satisfy the political imperatives of public service that make up a professional ethic – "…loyalty to those who are politically responsible, responsiveness to parliamentary and public opinion, sensitivity to the complexity of the public interest, honesty in the formulation of advice, and so on." (1983: 193-4).

Johnson's comments raise another area of specific concern in this debate, that relating to the attack on a bureaucratic ethos and the related diminution of a public service ethos. In a bid to defend a bureaucratic ethos, du Gay (2000) has challenged the widely held belief that adherence to the principle of impersonality in carrying out a bureaucratic function implies moral inadequacy when set alongside an entrepreneurial model of service. du Gay's defence relies on what he would argue is a more meaningful engagement with Weberian thought than bureaucracy's critics have achieved. According to du Gay, in his classic account of the bureaucrat's persona, Weber (1978) "…refuses to treat the impersonal, expert, procedural and hierarchical character of bureaucratic reason and action as morally bankrupt." Rather, Weber saw the bureau as comprising a particular ethos, one which should be assessed "…in its own right as a moral institution" (2000: 74-5). For Weber, bureaucratic rationality's emphasis on impersonality "…does not equate with a general denial of humanity; it refers to the bureaucratic capacity – hard-won and ultimately fragile – to treat individuals as cases, apart from status and ascription." (du Gay, 2000: 75). In short, what the champions of entrepreneurial government fail to appreciate, for du Gay, is that what is relevant in one domain of existence need not be so in another.

Many commentators have highlighted the elision of the public and the private implied by du Gay's critique. Braibant has argued that "…we can neither manage public services like enterprises or associations nor apply the same legal rules…" given that the rationale behind individual profit and that of the general interest are distinct and "…do not respond to the same exigencies." (2002: 339). Haque has expressed related concerns in terms of the diminishing of 'publicness' in public service. More emphatically, O'Toole (2006) has argued that the emergence of NPM has led to no less than the destruction of the ethos which underpinned the organisational characteristics of public service (see also Newland, 2012; de Vries and Pan Suk Kim, 2011). In the context of these kinds of concerns, alternative approaches to public administration are being proposed and explored, those that seek to reinvigorate public values

and virtues (de Vries and Pan Suk Kim, 2011). Among such alternative models are Stoker's (2006) Public Value Management or Tholen's (2011) Public Virtue Approach.

These arguments should be seen in the context of contemporary studies concerned to investigate the degree to which individuals choosing to work in public service settings have fundamentally different motivating values from those opting for alternative career paths (Buelens and Van den Broeck, 2007; de Graaf and van der Wal, 2008; Houston, 2000; Lyons et al., 2006; van der Wal and Huberts, 2007). Particularly interesting is the study carried out by Lyons et al., who sought to investigate any differences in general values, work values and organizational commitment among Canadian knowledge workers based in the private, public, and parapublic sectors. They concluded that, on the whole, there were limited differences between private sector and public sector employees with respect to the value and commitment constructs. Of most significance for my study, they also found that public servants were no more altruistic and no less self-interested than private sector employees and that employees in the parapublic sector were more inclined than public servants (and private sector employees) to "…value the contribution that their work makes to society and the personal fulfilment they derive from their work." (2006: 615).

However many points of opposition one might identify against the current 'entrepreneurial' vision of public service delivery, du Gay makes the salient point that it can appear illogical to hold any other point of view than a customer-centric one. As du Gay asks, "How could anyone be for bureaucracy if it is simply a dysfunctional, outdated and inefficient form of organization?" At the same time, "Who could not be supportive of a form of organization that shares none of these deficiencies and guarantees a better future?" (2004: 44) In posing these questions, du Gay describes as 'epochalist' the way in which the available terms of the debate for or against 'entrepreneurial' government have been established in advance. These ideas will become particularly useful during the discussion of the empirical findings.

1.4.3 A change of technologies

An important dimension of contemporary public service delivery approaches, and one which fuels concerns about the direction of travel for some critics, relates to the significant investment in new technologies witnessed over the last two decades. Many concerns relate to the fact that the intensive exploitation of new technologies allows governments to collect, share, and utilise customer information in the interests of providing better targeted services

and meeting individual customer needs. A key set of technologies in this regard is Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technologies which, as described earlier, lie at the heart of e-government strategies to transform UK local authorities into customer-focused e-organisations.

For Bellamy and Taylor, the enhanced capabilities for sifting and categorising consumers facilitated by CRM and related technologies, may well result in "overcrude categorization and stereotyping". Hence, far from being "…a gateway to expanded social rights, they will serve to pigeon-hole individuals and restrict or channel access to services." (1998: 89). The increased possibilities to differentiate between customer segments, and the concomitant retreat from universal service principles, also concerns Fountain. She characterises the adoption of such techniques by public agencies as placing them on a "slippery slope" which could easily lead to political inequality – "a wealth of empirical research demonstrates the propensity of elected officials, appointees, and agency actors to serve those clients who are easiest to serve." (2001: 62-3). More fundamentally, for Bellamy and Taylor the post-Fordist flexibility afforded by new technologies signal a retreat from the traditional values of public bureaucracy discussed above. For King (2007), it is the limitations of the relationship implicit in CRM systems that is of concern; significantly, it is a relationship that fails to accommodate the customer in a 'co-producer' role.

The thoughts of Snellen (2002) offer a paradoxical take on these issues. Looking at how e-government is taking shape in the Netherlands, Snellen is interested in the impact on different client-state relationships of ICTs supporting front-end verification and automatic decision-taking processes. Mindful of critics' concerns outlined above about the enhanced decision-making powers of enterprising front-line staff, Snellen has argued that, as a consequence of the intensive deployment of decision-making ICTs, the street level bureaucrat has been simultaneously empowered and downgraded. On the one hand, she finds that the availability of databases and other knowledge sources enables public servants to handle cases on their own; hence, the "empowerment" of the street-level bureaucrat. On the other hand, because officials are supported by case-handling systems that predetermine the premise upon which decisions are made, this can be characterised as "domination by the technostructure." (2002: 194). Although less critical of these kinds of developments, Bovens and Zouridis (2002) have also commented on the disempowerment of the customer-facing official: "Instead of noisy, disorganized decision-making factories populated by fickle officials, many of these executive agencies are fast becoming quiet information refineries, in which nearly all decisions are pre-

programmed by algorithms and digital decision trees" (2002: 175). The result for these authors is the appearance of 'system-level' (rather than street-level) bureaucracies.

Given that a key concern in this set of debates is the commercial sector provenance of the technologies being deployed, it is interesting to note that some commentators have argued that the proliferation of private-public partnering arrangements can have real cultural implications for public sector organizations. Dunleavy et al. talk about there being "…an influential additional pathway for organizational change…" in former NPM countries – "…the impact of large-scale contractor involvement in delivering IT-related administration processes on the organizational arrangements and cultures of the agencies they supply." (2005: 479). Further, and getting to the issue at the heart of this thesis, in their paper which sets out to understand the model(s) of state-citizen interaction implicated by e-government initiatives, Chadwick and May argued that "[ICT] contractors in normal circumstances work with a consumer model of interaction because that is their business, and they bring this perspective to their work for government." (2003: 294). The potential consequences of these arguments are addressed later in this thesis.

1.4.4 A change of relationship

So far I have set out a number of ways in which the boundary between public and private sectors is seen to have become blurred and the concerns that some commentators have expressed at these developments. This discussion has taken in a critique of the language of entrepreneurial government, of post-bureaucratic principles, and of some of the technologies governments are turning to. Each of these issues has implications for citizens. I will now directly address what the prevailing shift in public service thinking might mean for the relationship between the individual and the state. It is an issue of considerable concern to many commentators. One of these is Fountain, who argues that the idea that "…public managers should view their clients as customers and serve them using management concepts drawn from effective private sector service firms demands close scrutiny." (2001: 56) Here, I will examine this and related concerns.

In order to begin to understand what it is about the 'customer' of public services that underpins critics' concerns, we need to appreciate what distinguishes the role(s) of the public and private sector 'customer'. A good starting place is the work of Alford (2002), who argues for a reconceptualization of government-public relations from a 'social-exchange' perspective

in order to reinvigorate what many critics of NPM-style policies see as a devaluation of citizenship (this specific issue will be discussed later). Alford points out that, in the case of the private sector, the 'customer' can be seen to perform two key functions. Firstly, forming a preference and acting on that choice by paying the supplier for the good or service. Secondly, the customer consumes the good or service – "…that is, receiving it from the supplier and deriving value from using or enjoying it" (Alford, 2002: 338).

It is noteworthy to recall the conditions within which this transaction takes place. First of all, the process is reciprocal (money reflecting the purchase price is exchanged for the good/service), and secondly, both parties receive private value; the good or service can be consumed by the customer individually, while the money can be appropriated by the firm. Further, the customer usually has a choice among a number of competitors, and expresses a positive preference for the good/service. Finally, "as long as it earns a profit on each transaction, the firm seeks to maximise sales of goods or services." (emphasis in original Alford, 2002: 338). Alford points out that this type of transaction (known as 'restricted economic exchange') is seen by social-exchange theorists as one among many forms of exchange, whereas economists and management scholars tend to view it as the only type.

The key differences between public and private sector organization-customer relationships for Alford relate to *who* performs the earlier mentioned functions and the *nature* of the functions. So, whereas in private sector transactions, both functions (expressing preferences and receiving goods/services) are performed by the customer, in a public-sector context "…they are asymmetrically divided between two categories of actors – the citizenry and clients." (2002: 338). This essentially comes down to an appreciation of the notion of 'public' as well as 'private' value. Alford explains that, on the one hand, the value delivered by government is 'consumed' both by citizens (who receive public value) and by clients (who receive private value). On the other hand, "the function of expressing preferences about what value should be produced (including how it should be paid for) is primarily carried out by the citizenry through the democratic political process." (2002: 338).

On the basis of this first key distinction, critics have raised concerns about the use of traditionally commercial practices for understanding customer preferences in public service settings. According to Fountain, the "…aggregation of survey data from direct recipients of services provides only a distorted sketch of the highly variegated landscape that encapsulates the joint preferences of citizens." (2001: 67). On a related point, Alford points out that the

collective choice of the citizenry as to what value the state should produce is not synonymous with an aggregation of the preferences of individual citizens; rather, it is the outcome of political interaction and deliberation. In contrast, consumers "…act as atoms, unencumbered by social responsibilities and duties, free of the obligation to account for their preferences and choices". (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 175).

Another site of clear difference relates to the payment of goods/services. In the private sector, when customers pay for products, they are simultaneously signalling their preferences for them, and do so voluntarily (Alford, 2002). However, in a public sector context, government activity is paid for by taxpayers, a group which coincides largely but not exactly with the citizenry. Moreover, individual taxpayers do not necessarily endorse the value gained from what they are paying for, neither do they necessarily pay voluntarily.

This issue calls to mind classical marketing notions such as choice, voice, and exit, and more generally, the degree of autonomy that public service users are able to exercise. According to Gray and Jenkins, whereas the commercial customer is often described as sovereign in transactions ('the customer is always right'), in aspects of public service delivery such as the provision of personal welfare, "…the provider rather than the user is the expert, the relationship is founded on personal contact and a reciprocal desire for a particular outcome and an understanding of mutual participation in achieving that outcome." (2002: 251-52). As such, the scope for exercising voice, beyond lodging a complaint, is often limited. At the same time, the degree of choice that is available to public service users, although increasing in some respects (for example in certain areas of health and social care), remains restricted. Further, service users "…have no real exit option and prices do not reflect the matching of supply and demand" (Ciborra 2003: 9) for the service in question.

Turning to the issue of the consumption of goods/services (touched on earlier), we find an added dimension of complexity and difference. Alford argues that there are a number of forms of individualized consumption attributable to the public sector client, when she can be said to be consuming 'private value' – among the roles the client may adopt in this mode is that of 'paying customer'. Here, clients (for example, public transport users) elect to pay for a particular service from a range of services and the transit provider seeks to maximise its customer numbers. However, Alford points out that clients of public organizations are hardly ever, if at all, solely paying customers. So in the case of public transport systems, they tend to be subsidized by the public purse because they are seen to create public value in the shape of

mitigation of traffic congestion and air pollution. Hence, "to the extent they are subsidized, commuters receive part of the service without paying money directly." (Alford, 2002: 340). This is more clearly the case where there is no economic exchange, as in the case of pupils at government funded schools or social security recipients; such clients, Alford terms 'beneficiaries'. Importantly, in this scenario the government agency in question cannot be said to be seeking to maximise client numbers; rather, its concern is to ration its services. The final individual role identified by Alford is that of 'obligatee', applicable to circumstances where it would be difficult to argue that the client is expressing a positive preference; for example, 'clients' of the state prison system.

Alongside this set of individual consumption roles, members of the citizenry collectively consume 'public value'. While Fountain (2001) acknowledges that a consumer logic in the context of public bureaucracy may suggest improved responsiveness towards citizens, she fears that it may produce "pernicious externalities." Key among these is the weakening of "…the critical roles of representation and trusteeship intrinsic to both public officials and the public." (2001: 71). The contention here is that citizens do not simply express preferences via democratic processes which they wish to consume as individuals. Rather, citizens have desires or aspirations for the whole of society – that is, "…conceptions of how things should be ordered, of who should get what, or new values that should be realized" (Alford, 2002: 340) – rooted in social or normative commitments. In its sharpest form, Alford argues that some citizens may be in favour of a specific policy which they do not stand to directly benefit from (or which they may even lose out from) because they view it as "…inherently worthwhile or beneficial to the society as a whole" (Alford, 2002: 340). The examples he gives are a wealthy individual who supports progressive income tax, and a childless person advocating greater public expenditure on education. Clarke et al. (2007) neatly encapsulate the heart of the distinction being discussed here – the citizen is a "political construct" while the consumer is an "economic construct". However, these authors remind us that "…both figures are critical elements in the liberal social imaginary: they co-exist in more or less uncomfortable combinations with one another." (2007: 2). Arguably, contemporary trends make that co-existence decidedly uncomfortable, given that the consumer is doing a very good job of overshadowing its bedfellow.

The shift in relationship being analysed can be conceptualised as a movement towards a version of *neo-liberal* citizenship from a Marshallian concept of *social* citizenship that emerged in the post-War UK (in a US context, Aberbach and Christensen, 2005, talk in terms

of a ‘Republican’ versus a ‘collective’ tradition). The latter conceptualisation was linked to the idea of democratic-welfare-capitalism, and was viewed as a superior alternative to Marxian social revolution or unfettered free-market competition (Ahier et al, 2003). According to Ahier et al, one of the key features of the neo-liberal restructuring programme was “…a work of identity construction seeking to shape a new kind of ‘citizen’ identity” (2003: 16). This involved efforts to position and interpellate citizens as consumers “…whose main concern vis-à-vis the state is to individualistically obtain value-for-money and quality service delivery for themselves and their dependants, and to seek remedies and compensation if services are inadequate” (2003: 18). It also involved focusing on the idea of individual enterprise whereby citizens are viewed to be “an entrepreneur of him or herself” (Ahier et al, 2003: 18).

A study carried out by Callaghan and Wistow in a healthcare context provides evidence of this trend in practice. They are keen to differentiate between the customer’s legitimate interest in service provision on a “personal basis” in contrast to that of the citizen which is based “...on the legitimacy of legal, political and social membership of the community.” (2006: 585) Needham (2008), too, has argued that the language of public service consumerism signals a worrying diminution of the citizen. She has pointed out that a fundamental problem with the current approach to public service delivery is that “…both consumer and customer proceed from an individualistic ontology, which is a misrepresentation of the way that many public services are often collectively experienced (higher education students learn through group discussion, social care is provided through support groups etc.).” (Jones and Needham, 2008: 74). In the context of current e-government efforts, Navarra and Cornford have observed that the managerialist model being pursued may well contribute to the “…successful completion of government’s informatization and digitization processes…”, but, at the same time, could also “…lead to a model of governance that is decoupled from government’s important function of increasing and nurturing social welfare via democratic politics.” (2012: 42).

Aberbach and Christensen (2005: 234) have articulated more specifically some of the implications of this shift for civic life. One implication is that, within a climate that reinforces the freedom of individuals to choose, if the citizen’s self-interest is better served by non-participation, s/he may not feel “a deep obligation” to participate in the political process. Another is that it is perfectly legitimate for a citizen to “use existing law or exploit loopholes” in a manner that benefits the individual. In short, “what looks like a harmless way to ensure

more responsive government can be conceived …as a profoundly upsetting challenge to the way society, administration and politics ought to operate." (2005: 227).

Sennett (2006) has advanced complementary arguments within the context of what he terms the current 'culture of new capitalism', one that is fundamentally short-termist, attuned to singular events, one-off transactions or interventions. Sennett posits the consumer-citizen against the more desirable 'citizen-as-craftsman'. Democracy, Sennett argues, requires that citizens "…be willing to make some effort to find out how the world around them works" (2006: 171), to invest time and effort in understanding an issue of broader social relevance. However, while the citizen-as-craftsman would be inclined to make such an effort, "when democracy becomes modelled on consumption, becomes user-friendly, that will to know fades." (2006: 171). One of the things the research question driving this thesis intends to cast further light on is the degree to which e-government practice may be augmenting or diminishing the 'citizen-as-craftsman'.

1.5 Chapter conclusion

In the course of this chapter, I have marshalled ongoing debates within several related academic disciplines, the sum of which sets the scene for posing the central research question: How is customer-focussed local e-government being realised? This has involved charting the lineage and the rise of the customer/consumer, emphasising its enshrinement in NPM approaches to public sector organization, and its potential instantiation in the playing out of e-government, in particular via CRM technologies.
The importance of answering the research question is magnified by the multi-layered critique of customer-centric public services, a trend which, for many, presents significant challenges to the organization and ethos of public service as well as the core relationship between the citizen and the state.

As the preceding section illustrates, it is not difficult to find critics of customer-focused government. What is more difficult is to find evidence of what is happening on the ground against which to judge the critique. Hence, this study – by conducting an in-depth investigation of one major local authority which has implemented CRM-supporting technologies – seeks to respond to this research need. In conducting this research, the findings will augment those from existing empirical studies concerned with understanding customer-orientation in various public services settings (Callaghan and Wistow, 2006; Clarke et al.,

2007; Heward, 1994; Needham, 2006), none of which have explored the issue with a focus on the technologies of customer-focus. Also, it should be noted that my fieldwork took place prior to the publication of most of these studies. My research will also provide new evidence to inform ongoing discussions about the realisation (or not) of the varied concerns that make up the critique set out earlier in this chapter.

Chapter 2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

2.1 Chapter introduction

The primary objective of this (and the next) chapter is to set out and justify the design of the research study I am carrying out. This task necessitates an exploration of the philosophical assumptions that underpin that research design, which, in turn, entails an examination of the ontological and epistemological scaffolding that supports the theoretical and methodological choices I have made. It also entails maintaining one eye on the study's research question so as to ensure compatibility between this and the methodological approach I adopt.

While the structure of this chapter imposes linearity on the development of the research design, in practice the chronology of the process, in broad terms, began with a set of 'pragmatic' (Punch, 2006) research issues and questions that emerged from engagement with the academic literature. As the study's potential aims became clearer, the research design took shape via an ongoing internal conversation informed by engaging with literature concerned with the philosophy of social research and a greater awareness of the approaches taken in previous studies that asked similar questions in comparable organisational settings. More important than the 'true' chronology of the research design process, I aim to demonstrate a cohesive relationship between the multiple layers of the study's approach and the research question that I have sought to answer. What is set out in this chapter, therefore, is an analysis of the key concepts that demand examination in any comprehensive account of social science research design. I agree with Bocock that being aphilosophical is not an option for the social researcher: "any conception of how we can find and gain knowledge about the social, political, economic, cultural and psychological aspects of life is, logically, grounded in some philosophical conception or other." (1993: 8). Here, I will expose that which guides my research.

Turning to the key elements of the research design, Crotty posits that contemplating the design of social research triggers four central questions:

- What *methods* do we propose to use?
- What *methodology* governs our choice and use of methods?
- What *theoretical perspective* lies behind the methodology in question?
- What *epistemology* informs this theoretical structure? (emphasis in original Crotty, 1998: 2)

Turning this list on its head, Crotty argues that each of these elements should inform the next in order to arrive at a cohesive research design (see figure 3 below).

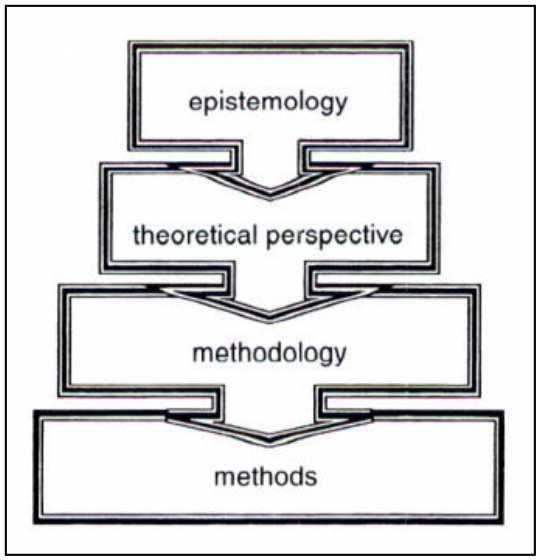

Figure 3: Crotty, 1998: 4

From this perspective, the researcher should take the time to clarify where s/he stands epistemologically, given that this dimension drives the overall research design. From there, one can more readily articulate a study's theoretical perspective, that is "…the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria" (Crotty, 1998: 3). Then, at a more practical level, one is equipped to make the appropriate methodological decisions in terms of the strategy lying behind the choice and use of particular methods. In this way, the researcher can demonstrate an internal logic to his/her research design that drives the entire research process.

2.2 Epistemological stance: Constructionism

"…the pursuit of epistemological and similar questions in the philosophy of social science is evil…Theory is a dangerous, greedy animal, and we need to be alert to keep it in its cage."
(Becker, 1993)

As I begin this reflection, I recognise the 'evil' referred to by Becker above as something I have glimpsed during the period of carrying out this doctoral study. Nevertheless, the 'greedy' theoretical 'animal' needs feeding.

An examination of one's epistemological stance elicits these kinds of questions: "Is there objective truth that we need to identify, and can identify, with precision and certitude? Or are there just humanly fashioned ways of seeing things whose processes we need to explore and which we can only come to understand through a similar process of meaning making? And is this making of meaning a subjective act essentially independent of the object, or do both subject and object contribute to the construction of meaning?" (Crotty,1998: 9). The most convincing response to these questions implies that a constructionist epistemology is that which I can most readily align myself with.

I will now address the task of explaining why I find a constructionist approach most persuasive. This task is made easier by describing an epistemological viewpoint that stands in stark contrast to constructionism. I am referring to objectivism, a position which holds that meaning exists as such separate from the operation of any consciousness. From an objectivist viewpoint, human being's "…understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people we are studying and, if we go about it in the right way, we can discover the objective truth." (Crotty, 1998: 8). For the constructionist on the other hand, there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Rather, meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with our realities – "There is no meaning without a mind." (Crotty, 1998: 8-9). From this perspective, different people may well construct different meanings in relation to the same phenomenon; subject and object emerge in the generation of meaning. Acknowledging this relationship between subject and object in the meaning-making process is distinct from a third epistemological perspective – 'subjectivism'. Here, "…meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject…; the object as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning." (Crotty, 1998: 9). Such a notion is eschewed by the constructionist, who would argue that we do not *create* meaning, we *construct* it.

Owing to the intimate relationship that constructionism ascribes to subject and object, the idea that there can be one, true interpretation of a given phenomenon is thoroughly problematic. This obviously throws up a set of challenges for the researcher engaged in interpreting interview and observation data or organisational documents, as I am in this study. One is compelled to justify one's claims in a way that the objectivist is not. This and related issues are dealt with below as part of a broader discussion of the notions of validity and reliability in relation to qualitative data collection.

Finally in this section, it is worth drawing the often blurred distinction between constructionism and constructivism as a way of further clarifying the epistemological stance that I am arguing for in this study, and in so doing draw attention to the socio-cultural dimension of meaning-making that some constructionists emphasise. The roots of constructivism have been linked with developmental psychology (Phillips et al., 2006). Epistemologically, it emphasizes "…the notion of people as active constructors, rather than passive receptors, of knowledge: 'reality' from a constructivist perspective is constructed in people's minds." (2006: 480). (Social) constructionism, on the other hand, builds on such ideas but emphasizes the *social* nature of reality – "…it is not constructed in people's minds but in their social interaction, and especially in their linguistic interaction because of the enduring traces that this form of interaction is particularly capable of producing." (Phillips et al, 2006: 480).

2.2.1 Ontological perspective

As part of this discussion of philosophical underpinnings, I should briefly mention ontology in the context of epistemology. Thinking about the research schema set out earlier, Crotty suggests that ontology ought to sit alongside epistemology in informing a study's theoretical perspective: "each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding *what is* (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding *what it means to know* (epistemology)." (emphasis in original, 1998: 10).

In order to begin articulating my own ontological position, it is useful to pose the question Mason (1996) suggests all social researchers take the time to ask themselves in the process of working out their research design – *What is the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social 'reality', which I wish to investigate?* (1996: 11). It is a question intimately related to that posed by Mason in order to encourage the researcher to engage with epistemological issues – *What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social 'reality' which I wish to investigate?* (1996: 13). First, in answer to this latter question, the kind of knowledge or evidence I aim to generate will result from a discursive analysis of, for example, formal documentation and interview-based accounts that I propose will aid understanding of certain organizational actors' perceptions of their own realities and which are likely to shape their behaviour. Hence, in answer to the first question (concerning ontology), the kinds of phenomena that I am interested in accessing and which make up social reality for me, are the socio-cultural and organizational discourses that underpin those organizational actors'

perceptions. Hence, social reality from my perspective include “representations”, “cultural or social constructions” and “discourses”, while I am less convinced by the idea that social reality is made up of things such as “essence”, “psyches”, “subconsciousness”, or “one objective reality” (Mason, 1996).

Turning to the thoughts of Crotty on this issue, he usefully describes different ontological positions which help me locate my own. In ontological terms, I am comfortable describing myself as a realist, where Realism is an ontological notion asserting realities exist outside the mind. It is a position that can be set in opposition to Idealism – “the philosophical view that what is real is somehow confined to what is in the mind, that is, it consists only of ‘ideas’.” (Crotty, 1998: 64) Mindful of the close relationship between ontology and epistemology, Crotty argues that some writers (including Guba and Lincoln, 1994) have it that a ‘realist’ ontology necessarily implies an ‘objectivist’ epistemology. Given the account of epistemology set out above, this is not an association I identify with. Neither is it a connection that Crotty supports; nor, in his opinion, would the likes of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who, “…frequently invoke a ‘world always already there’, but are far from being objectivists.” (1998: 10). I am with Crotty when he argues that, of course, the world is there regardless of whether human beings are conscious of and engage with it. But, crucially, what kind of a world? Not an intelligible world, not a world of meaning – “…it becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it.” (1998: 10). This reasoning allows me to argue that realism in ontology and constructionism in epistemology are quite compatible.

2.3 Theoretical perspective: Interpretivism

In this section, I will elaborate the theoretical perspective that underpins this study and which provides the most robust basis from which to answer the research question. The theoretical perspective needs to correspond with the epistemological standpoint articulated above and should also provide a compatible context for the methodological process that is set out later in this chapter. At an abstract level, this tends to mean making certain assumptions and adopting certain systems of meaning, and rejecting others (Punch, 2006). The nature of those assumptions is likely to influence the researcher to focus on certain issues and raise certain questions and problems for research. In more practical terms, one’s theoretical perspective will “…influence both the discourse and the methods of the research”, and ultimately, it will shape one’s judgement of the value of a study’s overall contribution – “different perspectives

often imply different sets of criteria for evaluating a piece of social research." (Punch, 2006: 31-32).

How then might I begin to characterise my theoretical perspective? In this section, I will discuss how the design of my research has been informed by a number of theoretical traditions associated with interpretivism. In justifying why I favour an interpretivist approach to investigating social phenomena, I will be helped by setting out how it is distinct from other research traditions. In the case of interpretivism, the most germane counterpoint is positivism, a perspective that is commonly traced back to the sixteenth century writing of Francis Bacon in the practice of natural science and, more recently, to the work of nineteenth century social scientists, Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, and after them, the twentieth century philosophers who made up the Vienna Circle.

What, then, are the principal elements of a more contemporary understanding of positivism? Among these is a strong association with empirical science which attributes unity to all the sciences, and an optimistic faith in progress, whereby scientific discovery, along with the technology it precipitates, are seen as instrumental in the achievement of such progress. What marks out scientific knowledge generated in this mode against opinions, beliefs and feelings, is its alleged objectivity. Subjective understandings (such as those which this study seeks to grasp) "…may be of very great importance in our lives…[but for the positivist] they constitute an essentially different kind of knowledge from scientifically established facts." (Crotty, 1998: 27). While a positivist approach looks to identify universal features of humanhood, society and history in search of explanation and hence control and predictability, an interpretivist approach, seeks out historically situated, culturally derived interpretations of the social life-world. This distinction is, in a certain sense, reflected in the Weberian notions of *Erklären* (explaining), associated with the natural sciences, and *Verstehen* (understanding), related with endeavours in the human and social sciences.

My main quarrel with positivism regards the status that its proponents ascribe to scientific findings; that is, the idea that scientific knowledge and the process by which it is discovered is wholly objective, and that *only* scientific knowledge is valid and certain. As such, I am a *non-positivist*. I align myself with those who adopt a more modest appraisal of the status of any knowledge contribution I stake claim to. Rather than aiming to generate objective, valid and generalizable conclusions, I have a closer affinity with those who maintain that the outcomes of our research tend to be suggestive rather than conclusive, offering plausible rather than

certain ways of seeing the world. Advocates of this more modest position can usefully marshal the thoughts of philosophers of science who have similarly taken issue with positivism's claims to objectivity and value-free neutrality. One of the most influential is Thomas Kuhn, who argued that traditional accounts of science – whether inductivist or falsificationist – do not bear comparison with historical evidence (Chalmers, 1999). Kuhn emphasised that scientific endeavour is a very human affair, in no way divorced from socio-cultural and historical factors. More radical even than a Kuhnian perspective is that associated with the writing of Paul Feyerabend, whose description of scientific progress as "anarchic" has earned him the label, "enemy of science". (Chalmers, 1999).

Turning to the *social* research setting specifically, it is hardly necessary to seek out the radical views of Feyerabend to find a critique of the objective social scientist. The arguably less controversial figure of Max Weber was, according to Silverman (2001), in no doubt about the influential role of the researcher in the research process, a defining feature of an interpretivist perspective. For Weber, all research is "contaminated" to some extent by the researcher's moral and political beliefs. Indeed, even the commitment to scientific method is itself a value (Silverman, 2001). While I am in agreement with the substantive point being made here, one is left with the notion that the inevitable and multiple influences of the researcher are unwelcome – they "contaminate". I am somewhat more sanguine about the involvement of the researcher. In my view, the subjectivity of all actors in a given research context is an issue that ought to be addressed and accounted for rather than wished away. This kind of thinking can also lead to a more agreeable view of the relationship between researcher and researched: "one of the opportunities – and challenges – posed by qualitative approaches is to regard our fellow humans as people instead of subjects, and to regard ourselves as humans who conduct our research *among* rather than *on* them." (emphasis in original, Wolcott, 1990: 19).

According to Crotty (1998), the interpretivist approach to human inquiry has appeared historically in a range of guises; the three he identifies are symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. The first of these traditions is of most relevance to my approach. There is an obvious fit between a symbolic interactionist perspective and the social constructionist epistemology set out earlier; both emphasise the idea that meaning-making is very much a socio-culturally embedded affair. This is revealed in the three basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism enunciated by Herbert Blumer: "that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them; that the meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows;

that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters." (Blumer, 1969: 2).

What this set of assumptions suggests to the social researcher, attempting to understand what shapes research subjects' behaviour (as I am in this study) is the significance of utilising appropriate methods to access those meanings. In short, this perspective encourages the researcher to put themselves in the place of the research subject. Crucial to interpetivist traditions such as symbolic interactionism is that the researcher adopt an empathetic stance: "the challenge here is to enter the social world of our research subjects and understand their world from their point of view." (Saunders et al., 2007: 107). In this study, I am endeavouring to understand the world from the research subjects' point of view, to access the language that they use to describe, make sense of, and operate in, their environment.

2.4 Methodology: Discourse Analysis

This section sets out my methodological position which governs the choice and use of methods detailed in the next chapter and dovetails with the philosophical perspective already described. Hence, I argue that my methodological position – a discourse analysis (DA) approach – is epistemologically and theoretically consistent with a social constructionist, interpretivist stance. As stated earlier, in epistemological terms, I aim to generate knowledge through an analysis of formal documentation, interview-based accounts, and observational data that will aid understanding of organizational actors' interpretations of their own realities and which play an important role in shaping the behaviour of those, and importantly, related sets of actors (public services' users in this case). That analysis will focus on the *discourses* framing and organizing those actors' interpretations and actions.

Before I expand on the substantive methodological issues, I want to clarify a labelling issue. The concept of (a) 'discourse' in social research is an ambiguous one and it is important for researchers employing the term to explain what meaning and force they attribute to it. As Alvesson and Karreman have argued, "discourse sometimes comes close to standing for everything, and thus nothing." (2000: 1128). At the same time, there are a number of other concepts in use across many social science disciplines that often appear to be used synonymously with 'discourse' or used to express something quite similar; I'm talking about concepts such as 'narrative' (e.g. Boje, 2001) or 'interpretive repertoires' (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984).

Thinking of how ‘discourse’ can be operationalised, the deliberations of Watson are helpful in thinking through this issue in the context of studying organisations. With a view to sharpening the conceptual tools he employs in his analysis, Watson settles on ‘discourse’ (rather than other related terms) and by way of clarifying how he is approaching this notion, he defines discourse as “…a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue.” (2001: 113). Watson, like many others, aligns his use of the term with the thinking of Foucault (1980) in that ‘discourse’ is seen to connect language to power inasmuch as the way words are used is intimately related to how people act as a consequence.

I share the above-cited definition of discourse as an appropriate term to do the work of expressing the significance of language in shaping human behaviour, even if my own conceptualisation is somewhat more ‘muscular’ (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) than Watson’s (see below). Further, I afford greater importance than Watson to the range of ‘material’ dimensions on which discourse can be seen to operate. In this, I align myself with the perspective of writers from the sociology of technology tradition (where there is an obvious motivation to explore how discourse relates to extra-linguistic phenomena) such as John Law (1994) and Bill Doolin (2003); the latter defines discourse in terms of “the language, ideas, and *practices* that condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena.” (my emphasis, Doolin, 2003: 757). In conjunction with the term ‘discourse’, these authors also talk in terms of ‘narratives’. More specifically, they employ the notion of ‘ordering narratives’ to express ‘modes of ordering’ that have a strategic, performative, and discursive dimension. In order to explain the findings of this study, I, too, find it useful to employ both concepts. Having attempted to clarify my interpretation of ‘discourse’ and ‘narrative’, I am prepared to concede that, at times during this thesis, it may appear to the reader that I apply them synonymously (see Bamburg et al., 2008). If that is the case, this is probably a reflection of the ambiguity I referred to in introducing this discussion.

What unites the aforementioned, and many other, organization thinkers who attribute special significance to discourse is a commitment to the idea that language has more than communicative, descriptive, or aesthetic properties. According to Alvesson and Karreman “language (and language use) is increasingly being understood as the most important phenomenon, accessible for empirical investigation, in social and organizational research.”

(2000: 1126). Recent developments in the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, social psychology and communications theory connect with a broad shift in the social sciences – including organization studies – often referred to as the *linguistic* turn. Crotty captures the implications of the linguistic turn thus: "As the medieval philosophers would have it, the way things are (*ordo essendi*) shapes the way we perceive things (*ordo cogitandi*) and this gets expressed in the way we speak (*ordo loquendi*)" (1998: 88). This view of the world arguably still dominates today, both within and beyond academic circles. For some, however, this conceptualisation is more useful turned on its head: "the *ordo loquendi* constitutes the *ordo cogitandi* and, as far as meaningful reality is concerned, even the *ordo essendi*." (1998: 88). In other words, "language is not merely contemplative or justificatory, it is performative" (Rose and Miller, 1991: 6) – this notion is central to the discursive perspective adopted in this study.

2.4.1 A discursive approach to organization

Such is the interest in discourse and so widespread its use that in the context of studying organization, "the question is what kind of discourse organizational analysts ought to pay attention to, and how much attention they ought to pay to discourse." (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1126). In order to begin to respond to this question, these authors offer a useful clarification of the analytical options available to discourse analysts and their consequences for studying organizational phenomena. Alvesson and Karreman identify two broad (and quite different) approaches to discourse in organization studies. First, "the study of the social text (talk and written text in its social action contexts)". And second, "the study of social reality as discursively constructed and maintained (the shaping of social reality through language)." (2000: 1126). In the former approach, discourses are seen as local achievements, distinct in analytical terms from other levels of social reality (such as the levels of meaning and practice). In the latter approach, on the other hand, discourses are viewed as "…general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time" (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1126-27). In short, the distinction is one of regarding discourse as a "linguistic or semiotic mechanism" versus "a mode of thinking" (Grant et al., 1998).

In order to clarify the differences between common approaches to DA, Alvesson and Karreman (2000) posit that there are two key dimensions in relation to which DA perspectives can be mapped (see figure 4 below).

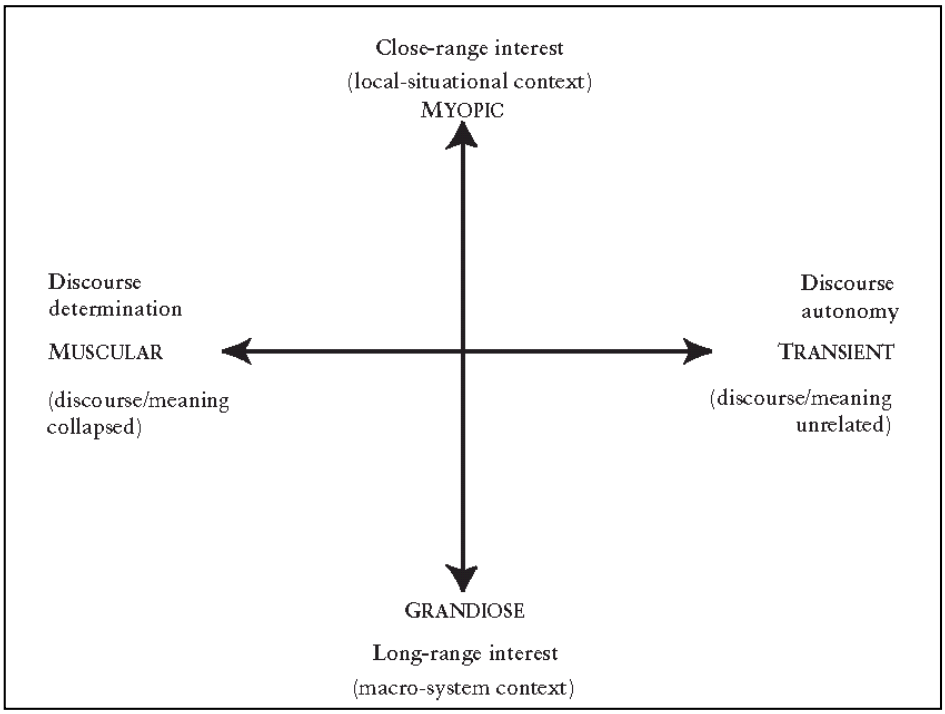

Figure 4: Two core dimensions in discourse studies (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1130)

The opposition represented in the above matrix between 'muscular' and 'transient' conceptions of discourse – which the authors relate to the tightness of coupling between discourse and meaning – brings to mind a historical tension that has been played out in organizational studies. I will briefly articulate where I stand in relation to this debate in order to clarify my position on discourse. Grant et al (1998) have argued that, whereas the relevance of discourse in organizational studies is increasingly accepted by management researchers, historically, the biggest challenge to the legitimacy of DA is the deeply rooted cultural bias in favour of action over mere talk. Among the "common mistaken assumptions" underpinning conventional thinking is that discourse is generally seen as a "passive activity", of "less value than action" while "doing" is seen as "active and purposive with a tangible outcome". Also, that "talking" and "doing" are assumed to be "…consecutive rather than concurrent or mutually implicated activities." (1998: 5). Setting this debate within a wider sociological context, Sturdy and Fleming (2003), recalling the ideas of Plato, Descartes and Marx, suggest that the talk/deeds distinction is often "…expressed in terms of other prevalent dualisms such as mind/body, theory/practice, base/superstructure or even surface/depth." (2003: 757).

This issue frequently provokes a seemingly obligatory discussion about the ontological limits of a textual perspective and a delineation of the discursive versus the non-discursive. Very often, as in the case of Sturdy and Fleming's contribution (2003), this results in the characterization of, for example, Derrida (1967, 1976) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) as

radicals, as discursive reductionists, who believe there to be nothing beyond discourse, while "softer" positions are said to recognize that "…there is more to social life than just words." (Sturdy and Fleming, 2003: 759). Drawing on the thoughts of Hardy et al (1998), these authors offer a defence to this proposition by stating that "…just talking about repairing a machine is different to actually repairing the machine. It may *facilitate* repairing it, but by itself is not enough." (emphasis in original, 2003: 759). In making such a statement, the authors, it seems to me, are misrepresenting the debate. I would suggest that few discursive perspectives would disagree with the authors' claim; the point is more that the *type* of action that is deemed appropriate in the repair of a machine is not simply given. Indeed, the notion that machines *can* and sometimes *need to be* repaired, or the idea that *certain* individuals (and not others) are perceived to have the expertise to carry out the repair, is discursively constituted.

I therefore support an ontological position on discourse that dispenses with historical separations of talk and action. I tend to agree with Boje et al., who reject the idea that the organization is a 'thing' that exists independent of language and that is only described and reported on in language. They start from the view that the organization is better understood as "…collaborative and contending discourses,…[as] material practices of text and talk set in currents of political economy and sociohistory – in time and space." (2004: 571). Organization, from this perspective, can be seen as a continuous process of social accomplishment (Grant et al, 1998). As Law (and others associated with actor-network approaches) have it, "organisation is a verb rather than a noun." (1994: 248-9).

To conclude this debate, I call to mind an analogous one that is often played out in the context of technology. It is a debate that Grint and Woolgar (1992) explicated and, to my mind, resolved convincingly through posing and responding to the question: What's social about being shot? The authors critique the position which holds that while the 'social' and the 'technical' are undoubtedly related, ultimately, there are events (such as being shot) which are fundamentally 'technical'. Grint and Woolgar favour an approach that sees these realms as mutually constitutive, such that, in the scenario they set out, "…we do not argue that the bullet (technology) is irrelevant but that the process by which it achieves relevance is irredeemably social." (1992: 377). This and related socio-technical debates are addressed more directly in later sections of this chapter.

Connected to questions surrounding the degree of separation between talk and action is the relationship between discourse and subjectivity, something that has occupied the thoughts of many organizational theorists. So as to consider the breadth of positions on this and related issues, we can refer to the two dimensions of Alvesson and Karreman's diagram above. First, on the horizontal axis, the opposing positions can be conceptualised thus: "Does discourse precede and incorporate cultural meaning and subjectivity or is it best understood as referring to the level of talk (and other forms of social texts) loosely coupled to the level of meaning?" (2000: 1129). As for the 'formative' range of discourse (represented by the vertical axis), the authors pose this orienting question: "Is discourse best understood as a highly local, context-dependent phenomenon to be studied in detail or does it mean an interest in understanding broader, more generalized vocabularies/ways of structuring the social world?" (2000: 1129). A 'myopic', 'transient' view of discourse, therefore, would focus on language use in particular social contexts rather than actors' meanings or subjectivity. It is a view Alvesson and Karreman associate with certain discourse and conversational analysts and ethnomethodologists. For them, addressing what may "go on in people's heads and hearts" (2000: 1132) is not of primary concern and may only be carried out speculatively – "people may produce politically correct opinions in interviews or conversations without any particular feelings or convictions being involved." (2000: 1132).

While it does not characterise my approach in this thesis, I have some sympathy for the view that an interviewee may be "…a politically conscious language user, telling the right kind of stories to the right audiences at the right moment." (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1132). More broadly, I agree with Potter that a conventional view of the research interview as a site of naturally occurring talk akin to a straightforward discovered object is a flawed one. Rather than "machinery for harvesting data from respondents", the research interview is better seen as "…an arena for interaction in its own right: that is, natural-interaction-in-interview." (2004: 205).

Hence, I am rejecting a *positivist* (Silverman, 2001) or a *realist* (Madill et al., 2000) approach to valuing (interview) data. At the same time, I do not align myself with a *radical constructionist* (Madill et al., 2000) approach which sees the interview text as being produced in the specific interview context and which makes "…no attempt…to make claims about the participant's personal experience." (King, 2004: 12). I do not see the interview as redundant as a means of gaining meaningful insight into an individual's attitude towards some aspect of organizational life (in my case, towards customer-oriented change in public service delivery).

That interview talk represents the absolute 'truth' is not of primary concern for me. I am more concerned to identify the linguistic resources the interviewee employs (and does not employ) in talking about a given set of issues. In this, my position is closer to that of Gilbert and Mulkay (cited by Silverman, 2001) in their analysis of scientists' accounts of scientific practice. There, they viewed interview data as gaining access to the 'vocabularies' that scientists use rather than direct insights into how they carry out their work. Further, as argued earlier, I *am* interested in the relationship between (interview) talk and action (beyond the interview setting). I do not therefore agree with the 'myopic', 'transient' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) view that separates interview talk from an actor's (organizational) subjectivity/ies. Moreover, I see an individual's subjectivity as, in part, constituted by organizational processes and structures beyond the interview setting and beyond the direct control of that individual.

My approach, therefore, can be most usefully aligned with what Silverman terms a *constructionist* approach, one that sees participants as actively creating meaning. From here, the subject behind the respondent "…not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details." (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 117 cited Silverman, 2001: 95). Importantly, constructionists preserve a concern for *what* interviewees are saying as well as with *how* they get to say it (Silverman, 2001: 97).

What this discussion suggests with regard to my broader position on 'discourse' is that I am sympathetic to what Alvesson and Karreman (2000) refer to as a Discourse (with a capital 'D') approach, macro-systemic and long-range. Here, discourse is seen as "…a rather universal, if historically situated, set of vocabularies, standing loosely coupled to, referring to or constituting a particular phenomenon." (2000: 1133). The authors offer illustrations such as a discourse on masculinity, or on management in the Western world.

Grandiose approaches to discourse often borrow ideas from the writings of Michel Foucault. In the context of the current discussion, a Foucauldian approach starts from the assumption that discourses constitute objects and subjects; they arrange and naturalize the social world in a specific way, thereby informing social practices that "…constitute particular forms of subjectivity in which human subjects are managed and given a certain form, viewed as self-evident and rational." (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1127-28). While I would not associate my position with those 'Foucauldian' approaches that adopt a totalizing view of discourse, I

do find certain core ideas useful for explaining the dominance of particular ways of organizing over alternatives.

One feature of Foucauldian thought that I find to be of particular methodological value concerns the relationship between discourse and *practice*. Referring to his work on prisons, Foucault explained that, "…the target of analysis wasn't 'institutions', 'theories' or 'ideology', but *practices* – with the aim of grasping the conditions which make these acceptable at a given moment; the hypothesis being that these types of practice…possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and 'reason'." (emphasis in original, Foucault, 1991: 75). In a similar vein, this study is interested in 'practices'; here, the practices associated with the delivery of UK local government services in the early twenty-first century. Clearly, the institutional, theoretical and ideological landscape must be explicated as part of this endeavour but it is at the level of practice where these elements are enacted, practices being understood as "…places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect." (Foucault, 1991: 75).

Applying a Foucauldian perspective to the study of organizations, thinkers including Deetz talk of how a dominant organizational logic can be reproduced through various material and symbolic formations which constitutes a discursive formation: "…a complex system for giving meaning to the world, organizing social institutions and processes, and naturalizing such structures and meanings." (1998: 159). Emphasising how discursive formations are rooted in everyday actions, Reed characterises them as sets of patterned or ordered practices which identify certain objects and specify their conditions of existence "…so that we can speak, read, write and reason about them in a coherent and relevant way." (1998: 194). Similarly, Rose and Miller (1991) advocate paying close attention to "the humble and mundane mechanisms" – or "technologies of government" – by which political rationalities articulated through programmes of government become deployable. In accordance with this kind of reasoning, this study sets out to question the self-evidence of regarding the most appropriate means by which to perform the function of government to be along NPM lines; of regarding public service users as customers; of considering the deployment of certain new technologies in the organization of local government to be inherently beneficial, and so on.

Many Foucauldian thinkers point out that discourses are not immutable; they are open to challenge by alternative discursive formations. Phillips et al. stress that, regardless of how

complete discursive formations may appear, they are always the subject of a certain degree of struggle – they are "never completely cohesive and never able to determine social reality totally." (2004: 637) Echoing the empirical setting of this thesis, Reed (1998) has argued that alternative discursive formations such as public service, professionalism, community or citizenship "struggle to displace and replace dominant discourses and the techniques of government which they require." (1998: 194).

Applying this kind of thinking to the main issue under discussion – the relationship between discursive formations and organizational subjectivities – while the magnitude of discourse is preserved, the relationship between a given discursive formation and an individual's organizational identity is seen as more fluid than some, more muscular, analyses might suggest. Knights and McCabe (2000) have articulated a useful conception of employee subjectivity as "a complex, contradictory, shifting and discursive outcome of a set of narratives that is generated by individuals in their working practices." (2000: 423) Rooting their ideas in a Foucauldian tradition, too, they are keen to express a non-deterministic notion of subjectivity in relation to managerial power, one which does not preclude resistance. For Knights and McCabe, "because processes of interpretation are inescapable features of work organization and the self-formation process of employee subjectivity, staff retain considerable discretionary autonomy." (2000: 421-422). Employee subjectivity then, from this point of view, is constituted *through*, rather than by, social relations. Rather than being something that is done *to* individuals, subjectivity is something that individuals participate in the constitution of "…as they reflect on, and reproduce the social world." (Knights and McCabe, 2000: 424) This standpoint is one that I broadly share, eschewing as it does more totalising conceptualisations of workplace strategies.

It is worth noting that my study is located among a number of others which have analysed current changes associated with public sector modernization and which have also done so from DA approaches of one kind or another. Prominent among these is the work of du Gay (2000; 2004), whose contributions are discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis. Reflecting a muscular stance towards discourse, du Gay charts a shift in contemporary approaches to public administration from a bureaucratic to entrepreneurial model, one which has far-reaching and 'real' implications.

Writing from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, some of Fairclough's work (1994) has also made a valuable contribution to this field by interpreting public administration

reform efforts as processes of commodification and consumerization, whereby the discursive practices of the market have become conflated with those of politics, public services, and government. Another important commentator on recent developments in this domain is Fountain. Arguably Fountain attributes a less deterministic role to discursive formations than some; nevertheless, she distances herself from those who view metaphoric devices (such as 'customer service' and 'market' in this context) as just "…one more example of management jargon, a contemporary signal used by political elites to signal sophistication". (2001: 56). Rather, she aligns herself with Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Giddens (1984), and March and Olsen (1989) in arguing that metaphors shape attitudes, cognition and behaviour. In this thesis, I draw on and seek to develop these and related arguments through a close-up examination of local authority public service delivery in action.

Turning to the question of how a DA approach can be more practically applied to the process of analysing data, certain 'institutionalist' perspectives on organization offer a complementary and systematic framework of ideas for making sense of the processes by which some organizational discursive formations come to achieve dominance at particular times. There is no space here to excavate the history of institutionalist perspectives. It is important to note, however, that from this view, "organizations, and the individuals who populate them, are suspended in a web of values, norms, rules, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions that are at least partially of their own making." (Barley and Tolbert, 1997: 93) And in an effort to develop the institutionalist literature, Barley and Tolbert (1997), and later, Phillips et al. (2004), have sought to respond to the question: How is it that *certain* "values", "norms", and "taken-for-granted assumptions come to dominate while others do not? It is the contribution of Phillips et al., by emphasising the role of discursive practices in response to this question, which is of particular relevance in this study. These authors have proposed a model (see figure 5 below) which informs my theoretical framework and guides the process of data analysis. Here, I will set out the key features of their approach.

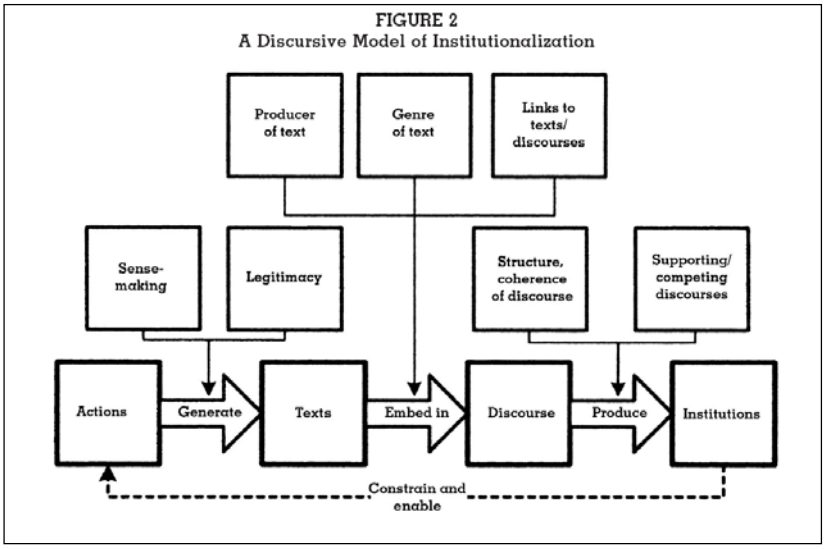

Figure 5: Phillips et al. 2004: 641

Phillips et al (2004) emphasize the centrality of linguistic processes to institutionalization and propose that a discourse analytic framework can help us better understand how institutions are produced and maintained. Drawing on the insights of Berger and Luckmann (1966), they argue that "institutionalization occurs as actors interact and come to accept shared definitions of reality and it is through linguistic processes that definitions of reality are constituted." (2004: 635) They point out that part of the reason why particular definitions become institutionalized is because deviations from the accepted institutional order are "costly" in some way; such costs may be: economic (it increases risk), cognitive (it requires more thought), or social (it reduces legitimacy and the access to resources that accompany legitimacy). (Phillips et al., 2004: 637-8) In this, their framework may imply more scope for action on the part of organizational actors than my own position. However, the fundamental processes that their model identifies – relating to actions, texts, discourses, and institutions – are still seen as useful for carrying out a detailed analysis of how certain values and norms come to dominate in certain settings.

What is important, methodologically, is that, for Phillips et al., at the heart of the relationship between discourse and social action are linguistic processes which take the form of the production and consumption of 'texts'. The authors, along with many discourse theorists, employ the notion of a text in a way which extends beyond written transcriptions; in this context, texts are seen to embody discourses and may take many forms, including written documents, verbal reports, spoken words, pictures, symbols, buildings, and other artefacts. Because discourses cannot be studied directly – only via the texts that constitute them –

discourse analysis, for Phillips et al, involves "…the systematic study of texts – including their production, dissemination, and consumption – in order to explore the relationship between discourse and social reality." (2004: 636) In this research, the textual objects of study include published documents, interview transcripts, observational data (including material workplace symbols) and, importantly, technological artefacts (of which more will be said below).

A series of theoretical propositions set out by Phillips et al. are of particular use in guiding the empirical investigation of institutional discourses. The propositions support the discourse analyst in identifying the types of organizational actions that are most likely to be associated with the production of texts which, in turn, are more likely to be 'taken up' (Cooren and Taylor 1997), that 'leave traces', or that become 'embedded'. That is, they help in identifying the extent to which texts are adopted and incorporated by other organizations and which become part of standardized, categorized, generalized meanings. The propositions also promote understanding of how such generalized meanings, in the form of discourses, affect action. Specifically, Phillips et al. argue that discourse affects action through the production of institutions – "…social constructions that embody sets of sanctions that make contradictory actions problematic." (2004: 644) Again, the authors suggest that the likelihood of a discourse producing an institution is dependent on a number of factors, including the internal construction (and degree of cohesion) of a particular discourse, and the relationship between a given discourse and other discourses. These theoretical propositions will be explored systematically in the Discussion chapter in the process of analysing the data.

2.4.2 A discursive approach to technology

New technologies are a key focus for this study; they are at the heart of government efforts to streamline the delivery of public services. As these technologies have come to occupy seemingly every realm of our public and private lives, much has been written about their design, development, use, and implications. None of the theoretical perspectives focussed on thus far emphasise, or adequately theorise, these dimensions of technologies in an organizational context. Hence, it is important that I articulate my perspective on these issues.

In general terms, I adopt what might be called a socio-technical perspective towards understanding technologies. What this implies is that I eschew perspectives that treat technology as an exogenous factor in an organizational context. As Spicer has pointed out, in

much of the early work in this area, “technology is treated as an independent variable that determines a range of organizational aspects including workflow (Woodward, 1958), size (Hickson et al., 1969), the variability and analysability of tasks (Perrow, 1970) and degree of task independence (Thompson, 1970).” (Spicer, 2005: 868). Writers associated with such analyses are commonly regarded as technological determinists, whereby the characteristics and uses of a technology are treated as pre-established and as having a determining effect on all other aspects of organizational life. At the same time, there are those who, conversely, privilege the causal effects of social factors. From this view, the use of any given technology is shaped by structural and organizational demands. The viewpoint I favour rejects both the notion of technological and social determinism.

Arguably, what ultimately matters, if we are concerned to understand a technology in use, is the meaning (or meanings) associated with that technology. As implied above, I am not persuaded that such meaning is an innate quality of any given technology. Rather, the meaning of any technology is the outcome of an ongoing set of socio-technical processes involving a range of actors at different points in time during the life of a technology – in the case of organizational ICTs these actors could include designers, developers, implementers, consultants, and management and user groups in the client organization – as they interact with that technology, or in some cases representations of that technology. Certain of those actor groups will be seen to carry more legitimacy than others, with the result that some meanings are likely to be more dominant.

A key stage in the biography of a technology – in terms of meaning-making – is its design and development. A body of ideas associated with a Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) approach to understanding technological development is helpful in this regard. From this perspective, one is encouraged to think about how meanings attributed to a given technology and mobilised through sense-giving discourses constitute the artefact, with the effect that such discourses shape how a technology tends to be spoken about and understood.

A number of writers have recruited the notion of ‘inscription’ to express the process by which those involved in designing and developing technologies give meaning to artefacts. Spicer usefully recalls a number of prominent studies that have empirically demonstrated the discursive ‘inscription’ of a range of technologies, including “the use of information technology in health care (Bloomfield and Best, 1992; Bloomfield and Coombs, 1992; Doolin, 2003), the introduction of the Lotus notes system (Hayes and Walsham, 2000), a

computerized trading system on the London insurance exchange (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001), the pesticide DDT (Maguire, 2004), and photo-imaging technology (Munir, 2005; Munir and Phillips, 2005)." (Spicer, 2005: 869).

A foundational text that served to usefully develop the concept of inscription was written by Madeleine Akrich (1992). Akrich claimed that "a large part of the work of innovators is that of "*inscribing*" [a] vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of [a] new object." (emphasis in original, 1992: 208) This process of visioning is, of course, unavoidable. Thus, "designers...define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways." (Akrich, 1992: 207-208). More recently, Oudshoorn et al have similarly argued that the inscription of representations of users and use in artefacts has the result of technologies containing a script: "they attribute and delegate specific competencies, actions, and responsibilities to users and technological artefacts." (2004: 31-2) At the same time, however, many of these commentators are quick to point out that when it comes to technologies *in use* it is not a case of the inscribed vision mapping on to the 'real' world in a straightforward way. As Akrich acknowledges, "...to be sure, it may be that no actors will come forward to play the roles envisaged by the designer." (1992: 208).

Woolgar's metaphor 'technology as text' captures the interpretative flexibility of technology by reinforcing the idea that technology is 'authored' (or inscribed) and 'read'. From this position, Woolgar argues that "…technology texts 'perform communities' by creating and making available a preferred moral order in which appropriate interpretations can be made." (1996: 93). As such, it is useful in striking a balance between an essentialist and a radical constructivist view of technology, and is epistemologically compatible with a social constructionist view that characterises my broader theoretical approach.

To complete this section, I now turn to a body of ideas that serves to tie together an emphasis on practice (from the earlier discussion of organization) with the notion of technology as being socially shaped, and as having textual qualities in both design and use. Maintaining a focus on the discursive, it allows for a more thoroughgoing analysis of the relationship between organization, materiality and subjectivity. In short, it provides a relational analysis of texts, technologies, practices, and people. I am referring to a body of work that is associated with proponents of actor network theory (ANT).

Up until this point, I have written about 'technologies' and about 'social' factors unproblematically, as if they were discrete phenomena. This is a product of existing common practice in the Management discipline (and many others) and a lack of an alternative nomenclature. In fact, I agree with those (including many thinkers allied to ANT approaches) who view it as "…mistaken to think of technology and society as separate spheres influencing each other: technology and society are mutually constitutive." (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1998: 23) The upshot of this position is that it is always inadequate to talk of a 'technology' (even though I do exactly this much of the time) as doing so tends to render invisible the socio-technical complex constituting it.

The writing of early ANT thinkers, John Law in particular (alongside other important ANT contributors Michel Callon and Bruno Latour), is a key influence in shaping my thoughts on technologies in use as well as organising more broadly. In his treatise on power, Law leaves one in no doubt that to conceive of the 'social' in isolation is thoroughly problematic: "To talk of the way in which we live by speaking of the social is misleading. As agents, as stores of power, as discretionary centres of calculation, we are only possible in the first place because we are constituted in and caught up by a heterogeneous sociotechnical network. Indeed, I cannot imagine what a purely social relationship would look like: arguably, there is no such thing." (1991: 186)

This philosophical standpoint, in fusing the production of materiality and sociality, underpins Law's analyses of new technologies, heavily influenced by the earlier writing of Callon and Latour (1981). Law and Mol's (1995) discussion of baboon society memorably captured the central point that, unlike baboons, humans deal in both social *and* technical relations. As such, humans are 'heterogeneous engineers' – we produce, for example, scientific knowledge, economies, and technologies. So whereas a baboon's corporeal reality shapes social order at least temporarily, human experience is ordered and made durable through a multiplicity of sociotechnical structures across space and time.

It is this emphasis on durability through materiality that delivers conceptual power in the context of my theoretical framework, affording as it does an important role to technologies (among other materials) in organizational settings. At the same time this set of ideas can appear challenging. They form the basis of an ontological perspective that collapses the conceptual boundaries we tend to employ in speaking of and making sense of the world around us, thereby exposing the significance of the *relations* which constitute materials.

In their 1995 paper, Law and Mol illustrate this position by recalling Callon's investigation of a French electric vehicle. They argue that the electric vehicle is a set of relations between electrons, accumulators, laboratories, industrial companies, consumers and so on. These 'bits and pieces' don't exist in and of themselves; they are 'semiotic', constituted in the networks of which they form a part. Key to this approach – semiotic relational materialism – is that it is non-humanist; humans are perceived alongside inanimate objects as points or actors in a network.

The other key contribution from this set of ideas which I find useful in this study relates to the notion of 'performativity', a notion that serves to animate arguments concerning materiality. According to Law, "semiotics tell[s] us that entities achieve their form as a consequence of the relations in which they are located; but this means that it also tells us that they are performed in, by, and through those relations." From this perspective, actor-network studies seek to explain how durability is achieved through posing questions such as: "How is [it] that things get performed (and perform themselves) into relations that are relatively stable and stay in place [?]" (Law, 1997) Performativity has, of course, been a feature of a number of the theoretical positions discussed in this chapter already. What the notion, as articulated by Law, adds to these is it puts the specific relevance of language into context by emphasising the range of 'materials' (of which 'talk' is one) through which discourses are 'performed'.

Tying these concepts together – the fusing of materiality and sociality, and performativity – and useful for thinking about the introduction of technologies to an organizational context is the notion of organizational 'narratives' or 'modes of ordering'. For Law, narratives are embodied in and constitute a series of materials including talk, agents, devices and organizational arrangements, and can be seen as "ordering syntaxes, recursive modes for telling and performing, and embodying the organisation." (1994: 250) Importantly, and in keeping with other favoured perspectives mentioned earlier, Law emphasises that narratives are always *incomplete* – "their attempts to tell, embody, and perform ordering arrangements tend, in the end, to fail." (1994: 260) The world, Law tells us, never completely conforms.

In summary, Law's ideas form a key element of the theoretical framework structuring the discussion of findings later in this thesis. There, I endeavour to make sense of the data generated during this study and in doing so I also reflect on research carried out by, among others, Bill Doolin (2003). Doolin's work represents an instructive employment of aspects of

Law's conceptual framework – indeed, the value of Doolin's case study to my own analysis is enhanced by the similarity of its setting; the transformation of public service delivery.

Before concluding this section, I wish to make an important point about the socio-technical setting being studied. Much of the earlier discussion of the designer-user dimension as set out so far (and the degree to which users' characteristics are shaped or constituted by design processes) has tended to imply *direct* users of technologies. In this study, as well as gaining an understanding of the relationship between designers of (CRM-supporting) technologies and organizational users, I am keen to understand this relationship in terms of what it might imply for the nature of 'customers' of government (those who interact with and are served by organizational technology users). Social shaping approaches tend not to be concerned with such a group, located as they are tangentially to direct users. However, in this case, where ICTs are being developed and implemented in support of a set of specific service provider-service user relationships, it is fitting and important to examine this dimension. This is the idea that, in the design and adaptation of new technologies such as these (particularly in a setting distinct from the commercial settings where CRM-supporting technologies have been traditionally located), a process of inscription is in play, one which constitutes the character, needs, motives, and competencies of service users, in conjunction with the process of inscribing the character of direct users of the technology. With its emphasis on how actors take a particular form and acquire particular attributes as a result of their relations with other actors, it is seen that an ANT-inspired perspective offers a valuable lens through which to conceive this key 'technology user-service user' relationship.

What this section has set out to do is outline and justify the methodological perspective. In broad terms I am calling this a discourse analysis approach. Given that DA can take many forms in the study of organization, I have attempted to clarify the properties and effects attributable to discourse from the perspective I am taking. This process of clarification gave rise to a discursive re-examination of what 'organization' means, of the constitution of individual actors' subjectivities, and of how to think about the role and effects of technologies in organizational settings – three areas of specific concern in this study. In order to do so, I have drawn on several key concepts and analytical frameworks. I have marshalled an institutionalist perspective on organization, one that emphasises the role of discourses in creating, altering and reproducing institutions, and one which facilitates a practical analysis of the research data. At the same time, ANT-inspired perspectives afford a conceptual lens for understanding the material mechanisms by which dominant narratives achieve a degree of

stability. Seen together, these theoretical contributions form a framework that facilitates an investigation of the implications of contemporary e-government efforts in public services delivery for the roles and subjectivities of those involved in the ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ of local e-government.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

3.1 Chapter introduction

To begin this chapter, it is useful to recall the main aspects of the research framework set out thus far. Epistemologically, I have allied myself to a social constructionist stance. Accordingly, I have described the theoretical perspective as interpretivist and discussed the methodological approach as one characterised by discourse analysis. In this chapter, I set out the study's research methods, the choice of which is governed by this framework. This discussion covers an examination of the overarching approach chosen to collect data – here, a single case study approach – in addition to a description and appraisal of the specific methods used and the sampling and access strategies employed. I also discuss how I approach the analysis of the data and what the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability imply for the kind of study being undertaken here. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the ethical dimensions of the research.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection process of this research has been conducted in accordance with a single case study approach. In this sub-section, I will appraise the merits and weaknesses of such an approach in conjunction with a discussion of the scope for theory development associated with it. I will then describe how I approached the issues of sampling in relation to the three main methods of data collection and consider the successes and limitations experienced in terms of accessing relevant data sources/occasions.

3.2.1 Single case study

Arguably, the leading contributor to methodological thinking relating to the case study approach – Robert Yin – openly confesses that "the case study has long been (and continues to be) stereotyped as a weak sibling among social science methods" (Yin, 2003: xiii). For many years now, Yin has sought to legitimize the case study approach – to gain acceptance that it is a rigorous method of social research. More recently, Hartley has argued that there is "growing confidence in the case study as a rigorous research strategy in its own right." (2004: 323) Given that Yin is writing about social science practice within the North American tradition (which tends to be somewhat less tolerant of non-quantitative approaches than the

European research community), it seems to me that the critique he is referring to has been levelled at all approaches which tend to favour the generation of qualitative data. Nevertheless, Yin asks that we derive comfort from the fact that the case study continues to be extensively used by researchers within a vast range of social science disciplines.

Whereas Yin's representation of case study research would appear to sit more comfortably within an objectivist (rather than a constructionist) view of the world, elements of the approach are seen to be valuable in informing this study's methodological frame. Other advocates of the approach adopt a more pluralistic position. Cavaye, for example, points out that case study research is by no means a 'monolithic' strategy: it can be "…a highly structured, positivist, deductive investigation of multiple cases; it can also be an unstructured, interpretative, inductive investigation of one case; lastly, it can be anything in between these two extremes in almost any combination." (1996: 227-228) She also notes that, in spite of the dominance of positivistic case study research (which is how Cavaye characterizes Yin's stance), there has recently been a noticeable increase in studies – particularly in Information Systems research – adopting an interpretative stance. Indeed, a number of recent case study-based research projects share many features in common with this study, both in terms of the general approach to understanding the organizational context of systems' deployment and in terms of the range of methods employed. These include research into allied areas of public service change – Boonstra and Govers (2009), Doolin (2003), and Lawrence and Doolin (1997) in health service settings; Michel (2005) in a local e-government context; Waring and Skoumpopoulou (2012), Pollock and Cornford (2004), and Wagner and Newell (2004) in higher education settings; and Alferoff and Knights (2008) in different commercial settings.

Yin (2003) compares case studies alongside a range of other social science approaches, including 'experiments', 'surveys', 'histories' and 'the analysis of archival information'. For him, case studies are the preferred strategy for investigating 'how' or 'why' questions, when the researcher has limited control over events, and when the focus is contemporary phenomena within some real-life context (2003: 1). Further, Hartley explains that it is a valuable approach for investigating a range of organizational questions, including, importantly for this project, "…to understand everyday practices and their meanings to those involved, which would not be revealed in brief contact." (2004: 325) Another of the case study's strengths is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations. (Yin, 2003: 8) For all of these reasons, the case study approach

lends itself to the organizational setting under examination and the research question being posed here.

An important aspect of any study relates to the place of theory. In the context of interpretive case studies in information systems research, Walsham (1995) provides a useful discussion of the various uses of theory. Drawing on Eisenhardt (1989), he suggests three distinct uses of theory in this kind of research: as an initial guide to design and data collection; as part of an iterative process of data collection and analysis; and as a final product of the research (Walsham, 1995: 76). These serve as a helpful prompt to briefly consider my own study.

In this study, the initial research design is informed, in broad terms, by the theoretical framework set out earlier. This shaped my approach to carrying out a study of an organisational setting, one that featured the development and use of new technologies. Further, the theoretical contributions of studies which have explored similar settings and that have theorised about contemporary trends in public management also inform the research design. Finally, and more practically, a review of the literature concerned with the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative data-gathering (expanded on below) has shaped my approach. Hence, I would distance the approach taken here from one that adheres to the notion that a researcher enters the field without any theoretical insights to guide his/her strategy. At the same time, while many of the case study's methodological strengths are seen as valuable, the research design constructed here does not share the emphasis on theory development (prior to any data collection activity) articulated by Yin (2003).

Turning to the second mode of theory use, this research has entailed an iterative process of collecting and analysing data which has involved developing and testing emerging lines of empirical enquiry and formative theorising, an approach to case study research advocated by Hartley (2004). As part of this process, I carried out a second round of interviews with certain participants with a view to clarifying and testing emerging avenues of interest. This theorising activity, in close contact with the data, is important to counter the "danger of the researcher only seeing what the [extant] theory suggests, and thus using the theory in a rigid way which stifles potential new issues and avenues of exploration." (Walsham, 1995: 76).

The third dimension of theory use relates to outputs from case study research, which may include concepts, a conceptual framework, propositions or mid-range theory; my aim is to make contributions of this nature. While, on the one hand, I am engaging in 'verifying'

existing theory – for example that which provides a framework for understanding discursive institutionalisation – I am also interested in making a theoretical (as well as empirical) contribution of my own. Thinking of Punch's distinction between descriptive and explanatory studies (and the potential for theory generation he associates with the latter), I seek to operate at both these levels.

First, the empirical findings (set out in the next chapter) serve to summarise details of events, characteristics, cases or processes (Punch, 2006: 34). In my case, the details relate to the realisation of customer-focus in local e-government and are framed by a series of novel conceptualizations. Subsequently, and in an effort to "…explain and account for the descriptive information" (Punch, 2006: 34), I marshal existing theoretical concepts to advance a novel contribution to the understanding of those phenomena. Further, I seek to develop existing theory concerned to explain the phenomenon of the 'customer' as an important and powerful organizational actor. As such, I am engaged in to "…find[ing] the reasons for things, showing why and how they are what they are" (Punch, 2006: 34) – characteristics of an explanatory study. The aim, then, is to work at the level of substantive and, potentially, middle-range theory development (Cresswell, 2002).

This discussion prompts the issue of whether I am adopting a deductive or an inductive approach to theory development. The obvious response to this question, given my methodological framework and given that my research design is more "unfolding" than "prestructured" (Punch, 2006), is that I am employing an inductive approach. As Hartley (2004) has pointed out, case study theory-building tends to be inductive as it offers the opportunity to explore issues in depth and in context, allowing the development of theory by means of systematically piecing together detailed evidence to generate (or replicate) theories of broader interest. While I would not disagree with Hartley's point, and while my approach to theory generation is more appropriately described as inductive than deductive, I am with Dey on this issue: "We cannot analyse the data without ideas, but our ideas must be shaped and tested by the data we are analysing. In my view this dialectic informs qualitative analysis from the outset, making debates about whether to base analysis primarily on ideas (through deduction) or on the data (through induction) rather sterile." (1993: 7)

Turning to the more practical issue of the empirical setting for this study, Big City Council was selected for a number of reasons, drawing on elements of various sampling approaches. In the first place, a local authority organisation was chosen as much of the direct contact

between a citizen and the state takes place at a local government level (see Michel, 2005 for comparable reasoning in the context of her investigation of e-democracy). Further, as Ferguson and Baron (2002) have noted, local e-government has been somewhat neglected within the e-government debate, despite "the overwhelming majority (up to 80 per cent) of citizen-government transactions [taking] place at the local level" (2002: 103). Beynon-Davies and Williams (2003) have similarly called for more research into local e-government.

In accordance with a 'purposive' sampling strategy – an approach which "…allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested" (Silverman, 2001: 250) – Big City Council was selected because it was an organization directly implicated by the local e-government agenda. At the time of the fieldwork, a widespread process of organizational 'transformation' was underway, including a departmental restructuring programme reflecting the council's customer-focus strategy. Part of this strategy comprised the establishment of a corporate customer services facility and the development of a technological infrastructure to support customer-focus operationally. Hence, it was an ideal time to study the discursive terrain that framed this period of change, capturing any differences in perspective among organizational actors, and ultimately helping me to answer the study's key research question. On this basis, my strategy can alternatively be characterised as a 'theoretical sampling' approach (which, for Mason 1996, is synonymous with a 'purposive' sampling approach), given that it implies selecting cases according to their relevance to the research questions, the theoretical position, and the explanation or account being developed. At the same time, given that the UK e-government agenda is being played out at a local level right across the country, often in very similar ways, in accordance with a considerable amount of input from central government, Big City can be seen as a 'typical' case (Yin, 2003).

Finally, this case was chosen because access to the organization was aided by an existing relationship established by research colleagues on earlier projects. Gaining access is, of course, a crucial aspect of carrying out empirical research. And given that, in this case, it was not clear at the outset exactly who in the organization I wished to gain access to, it was particularly important that an element of trust had already been established.

Once access to the council had been negotiated, the process of selecting interviewees (as well as those of observation occasions and documents) was also inspired by the notion of *theoretical* or *purposive sampling* (see Arber, 1993 and Mason, 1996). These approaches have

been defined as “constructing a non-representative sample with the aim of making key comparisons and testing and developing theoretical propositions.” (Mason, 1996: 93) In practice, this approach also took the form of what is often termed a ‘snowball’ technique to sampling. The identification of suitable participants was an evolving process that developed from emerging theoretical interests, suggestions from interviewees, and, crucially, ongoing discussions with the principal gatekeeper. This issue raises the wider question of access in the research study I have conducted. I turn to this next.

In the early summer of 2003, I made my first contact with Big City; this was with the Customer Services Manager. It was decided that Customer Services would be the most appropriate place to begin an investigation of how customer-focus was taking shape in the organisation. As Hartley points out, “deciding on who are the critical gatekeepers to organizational research is important.” (2004: 327) It quickly became apparent that this manager felt she was too senior to act as the primary gatekeeper, delegating this responsibility to a member of her team, a Customer Service Centre Supervisor. In access terms, while the latter may well have had less influence with senior council management than my initial contact, she proved to be a very valuable ally in helping me identify suitable participants, setting up research meetings, and arranging for suitable venues for those meetings.

I developed a strong, trusting relationship with the gatekeeper. She appeared to value the research I was undertaking and invested considerable effort in supporting me. At the same time, I was fully aware that the gatekeeper was essentially ‘doing me a favour’. This meant that I had to tread a fine line between proactively maintaining contact with her in an effort to access new participants, new observation opportunities, and documentation, and demonstrating understanding that the demands of her organizational role inevitably took priority over my research concerns. On occasions when I failed to receive an answer to repeated enquiries, I contacted prospective interviewees directly rather than risk pestering the gatekeeper (notifying her of my actions). By way of illustrating the gatekeeper’s level of commitment to supporting my efforts, when I interviewed *her* about her attitudes towards the organizational change programme the recording equipment failed to capture the meeting. On hearing about my mishap, the gatekeeper was sympathetic but (quite understandably) wanted to avoid repeating the interview. However, after I explained the importance of free-flowing dialogue to my methodology (rather than her responding to a series of questions by e-mail as she had suggested), she agreed to another meeting.

In an effort to maintain a positive relationship with research participants (for the sake of my ongoing fieldwork and any subsequent research activity that I, university colleagues, or other researchers may undertake), I would ensure that the interview did not over-run the agreed time (unless the participant consented to this). I also tended to send interviewees a follow-up email to thank them for their participation. More generally, in conducting the fieldwork – in terms of arranging meetings, requesting information and so on – I maintained a flexible approach in the knowledge that in an organizational setting the last-minute postponement of research meetings (in one case because of an employee strike) or unreplied e-mails are commonplace.

The main limitation of the gatekeeper relationship concerned gaining access to senior management in the organization and staff from the council's CRM system vendor. The supervisor was often reluctant to approach senior managers on my behalf, expressing doubts over whether they would be willing to meet me. Given this situation, I tended to approach senior management independently, emphasising that I had already carried out successful interviews with his/her colleagues, offering a realistic estimate of the time of the interview I was seeking to secure, and enclosing a suitably non-academic summary of my research study. As a consequence of these difficulties, I interviewed fewer senior managers than I had initially intended. As for accessing staff from the firm implementing the CRM system, I had to manage this process largely unaided. Staff from that firm visited the council site sporadically and at short notice; hence, arranging a meeting during one of those visits proved very difficult. Ultimately, I opportunistically visited the firm in person during a work trip overseas.

Another area of data-collection that posed certain challenges related to the observational activities I planned to carry out. Non-participant observation was carried out but not to the extent that I had initially hoped. The main gatekeeper was able to facilitate access to certain meetings related to Customer Service Centre activities. However, she was unable to assist me in gaining access to other, more strategy-oriented, meetings such as project board meetings (relating to the ongoing ICT development programme) or meetings of a council-based electronic services implementation group. I would request access to such events directly when writing to senior management. I would also mention to participants, as a standard addition to emails, that I would welcome the opportunity to attend meetings that they believed may be of interest to my research. Neither strategy proved particularly successful.

On reflection (and in the light of subsequent experience on research projects), I suspect that I may have been more successful if I had been clearer about what the organization stood to gain from my involvement. As Saunders et al. point out, access may be denied a researcher owing to "…a lack of perceived value in relation to the work of the organisation, group or the individual." (2009: 170) This is not to say that I failed to gain a strategic discursive insight into Big City's customer-focus efforts. A significant success in this regard was a comprehensive interview with the Head of Big City Service, a key figure in driving through the council's change programme. In that case, an initial e-mail approach from my doctoral supervisor (who had met this individual in the course of a previous research project) helped me to secure a meeting. It is useful to recall Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) here: "…whether or not people have knowledge of social research, they are often more concerned with what kind of person the researcher is than with the research itself." (1983: 78 cited Silverman, 2001: 57) In a similar vein, another research colleague played a part in helping me access another key participant – a Children and Families Team Manager. While the main gatekeeper provided excellent levels of access to staff attached with Customer Services, she was less well-connected with staff in other service areas. On the whole, then, fieldwork access was facilitated by a combination of gatekeeper introductions, support from research colleagues, and a good deal of 'door-knocking' on my part.

3.2.2 Multi-method research strategy

In order to collect the appropriate data to address the research question, multiple methods were deployed in this study. These included the open-ended (or semi-structured) interview. This technique was designed to gain access to the language employed by a range of organizational participants and therefore gain an understanding of the organizational world from their point of view. Interview-based data collection was supplemented by observational activity – this offered the opportunity to gain exposure to more 'naturalistic' data. The final data source was policy and e-government related documents, helping me to identify how the agenda is being discursively represented by a range of communities. The combination of methods facilitated a triangulation process that served to support emerging analytical themes. In short, the multi-method approach allowed me to observe local e-government customer-focus (and other competing narratives) in the making.

A key data-collection method was the open-ended interview. This can be seen alongside other types of interview approach – "depth", "exploratory", "semi-structured" and so on – as what

King (2004) labels the “qualitative research interview”. Each of these approaches, King proposes, share certain characteristics; in the words of Kvale, the qualitative research interview is “an interview whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena.” (1983: 174, cited King, 2004: 11) For the interactionist, then, the interview setting presents an ideal opportunity to enter the participants’ world, for as Crotty argues, it is “only through dialogue [that] one [can] become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent.” (Crotty, 1998: 75-76)

Turning to the issue of who I interviewed, I was conscious of wanting to listen to a broad range of voices relevant to (but not necessarily directly involved in) the council’s e-government programme. Details of interviewees and the timing of interviews are set out in Table 2 below.

Organizational role (number of interviewees)	Phase 1 (Spring/Summer 2003)	Phase 2 (Winter 2004/05)	Phase 3 (Summer/Autumn 2005)	Number of interviews
Big City Customer Services Manager	**29/4/03; 27/5/03**		**1/8/05**	**3**
Big City Customer Service Centre Supervisor (2)*	**29/4/03**	**6/4/04**	**20/7/05**	**3**
Big City Customer Service Centre Manager			**20/7/05**	**1**
Big City Customer Service Centre Generic Officer (4)	**28/5/03 (x 2); 18/6/03 (x 2)**	**12/10/04**	**20/7/05 (x 2)**	**7**
Big City Senior Training and Development Officer	**18/6/03**			**1**
Head of Big City Service			**24/8/05**	**1**
Big City Corporate Systems Manager	**7/5/03**			**1**
Big City ICT Team Manager		**14/10/04**		**1**
Big City Contact Centre Development Officer		**29/11/04**		**1**
Transformation Team member	**16/6/03**			**1**
Big City CRM Scriptor		**18/11/04**		**1**
Big City Revenues Officer (Revenues and Benefits)		**13/1/05; 24/3/05**		**2**
Big City Parking Officer (Parking)		**13/1/05**		**1**
Big City PA to the Head of Performance (Social Services)			**15/8/05**	**1**
Big City Business Officer (Social Services)			**15/8/05**	**1**
Big City Children and Families Team Manager (Social Services)			**4/10/05**	**1**
Big City Benefits Officer (Revenues and Benefits)			**5/10/05**	**1**
Big City Service UNISON convenor			**19/8/05**	**1**
Project Manager (CRM systems vendor)			**6/4/05**	**1**
Technical Consultant (CRM systems vendor)			**6/4/05**	**1**
Total				**31**

Table 2: Research Interviews

* (one of these Supervisors was promoted to Customer Service Centre Manager during the fieldwork period)

As the table shows, interview-based fieldwork was carried out in three main phases over a period of two years. According to Hartley, “the first strategy might well be to get a general overview of the structure and functioning of the organization [which] might consist of half a dozen ‘orientation’ interviews.” (2004: 328) This is very close to the fieldwork strategy I adopted. The first few interviews were with key members of the Customer Services unit (including the main gatekeeper) and the council’s IT department. These early interviews helped me to gain a broad sense of the recently reorganised formal structure of the council and the history of the CRM-supporting system development. They also gave me useful ideas as to who else I should gain access to.

Phase 2 interviewing included a wide range of staff based in the council’s principal Customer Service Centre and those adjacent to the ‘front line’ who were performing roles of particular relevance to the research (i.e. ICT Managers; a ‘Transformation’ team member; a Contact Centre Development Officer; a CRM Scriptor and so on). The final phase of interviewing focussed on staff based in ‘back office’ service areas. It also included a number of repeat interviews which represented opportunities to probe for data on emerging issues of interest (such as the use or not of CRM ‘scripts’ and the degree of sophistication with which the notion of CRM was articulated) and to observe whether interviewees’ language and outlook had altered in any way, particularly in the case of those Generic Officers who were new to their role when first interviewed. A small number of interviews fell outside these three phases; the timing of these was dictated by opportunities that arose at short notice.

A key focus of the interviewing fieldwork was the local authority’s so-called (new) frontline. The rationale here was quite straightforward; “frontline service personnel are situated at the organisation-customer interface and, thus, represent the organisation to customers.” (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 90) For my purposes, frontline workers are seen to enact customer-focus in a particularly tangible way. The group of frontline workers of especial interest comprised those populating the council’s Customer Service Centres – so-called ‘generic officers’. Interviews with these staff members presented the opportunity to discuss key areas of research interest (many of which dominated discussions with other interviewees). These included: the language used to refer to service users and the relationship between service users and the council; the concept of ‘customer service’ in a local authority context; understanding of customer relationship management and the council’s rationale for a CRM strategy; experiences of using the newly implemented CRM-supporting technologies; the benefits and challenges associated with handling generic enquiries (including more sensitive

enquiries); the relative significance of public service values; the nature of staff training and development policies; and staff employment histories (in terms of sector and role).

I was interested in interviewing generic officers with a range of experience of working in a council setting, and took steps to ensure the sample included those who had worked in Big City Council for a number of years as well as those who had been recruited as part of the ongoing 'transformation' programme. That way, I could ask the longer serving staff whether they had detected any changes in management style or in terms of management expectations of them during the period of e-government service reform and whether they felt their relationship had changed with 'back-office' colleagues. I was also concerned to understand how these officers gauged their degree of expertise in the different service areas they were now taking enquiries on. As for newer members of the team, I asked them additional questions relating to their motivations for joining the local authority (and the Customer Services unit in particular), what skills and aptitudes were demanded of them during the recruitment process, and for those who had previously worked in private sector settings, whether they discerned any differences in management style and working culture.

So as to understand more about the training programmes devised to support customer-focus culture change at Big City, I arranged to meet with a Senior Training and Development Officer. This interview offered me the opportunity to unpick the notion of 'customer service' in a wider local authority context. The interview included a discussion of what the customer service training programme entailed, whether there were perceived to be any differences between 'customer service' in public versus private sector settings, and what key skills the training programmes aimed to develop in frontline and other staff.

Another set of voices I was keen to hear in the interview setting was that of management connected with the Customer Services function. As mentioned above, I experienced some difficulty accessing certain layers of council management. I did, however, conduct very rich interviews with middle-tier managers who had direct oversight of customer services in the council. I was exposed to a strategic as well as an operational view of the issues to supplement and contrast with the data generated from other interviews and documentation. In addition to covering the topics discussed in other interviews, I sought management views on managing the transition of enquiry-handling from traditional service areas to Customer Service Centres, and handling any staff resistance to change efforts.

In addition, I gained a higher level strategic view of the council's e-government programme from the Head of Big City Service (the division within which Customer Services sits). Access to this individual offered me the opportunity to explore customer-focus within the context of the wider organisation's strategy and in relation to the efficiency agenda. I was also able to discuss in detail the council's relationship with its technology/organizational change partners. For another strategic view of, specifically, ICT developments at the council, I accessed middle and senior management from the in-house IT division. These interviews deepened my understanding of the history, rationale, and deployment of the systems supporting customer-focus (particularly the CRM system).

One of the important areas of interest in this thesis is the nature and degree of influence of 'external' actors on the realisation of e-government, particularly in connection with how CRM is discursively framed. As well as examining documents produced by the council's CRM system vendor, I was very keen to speak with staff who were involved in the Big City project. As explained earlier, gaining access to the firm proved particularly challenging, but, ultimately, I did manage to interview a Project Manager and a Technical Consultant who had experience of the Big City case. These discussions provided a very interesting counter-perspective on many of the issues I discussed with the council-based staff.

As well as gaining the perspective of those involved in developing and implementing the CRM technologies, I was keen to see for myself how the system supported enquiry-handling. Central to this process, and a key mediator of the council-service user interaction, is the 'script' that generic users are trained to follow when handling an enquiry. Hence, I sought the opportunity to speak to members of the team involved in the processes of mapping common enquiries connected with different service areas and building the scripts that support enquiry-handling. I was interested to learn from these participants the rationale behind the mapping and scripting processes; how service areas were responding to the transfer of enquiries to the new 'front office'; and how closely generic officers tended to follow scripts in practice. During one of the interviews with a member of staff tasked with inputting pre-mapped data into the new system (a CRM Scriptor), I asked him to demonstrate and talk me through what this process entailed. During another interview, with the person who had coordinated the initial mapping processes in the council, we discussed, among other things, the notion of standardising and systematising specialist knowledge, and the internal political dimension of transferring enquiry-handling from service areas to Customer Service Centres.

Investigating this latter issue in particular, it seemed to me, held the potential for exposing any underlying resistance among council staff towards the ongoing change programme. From early interviews with generic officers and their managers, I had heard about tensions that had arisen during negotiations between the new 'front' and 'back' offices over the transition of enquiry-handling. I was eager to get the perspective of some 'back' office staff and, at the same time, to note any differences in the discourses that framed their language and attitudes. Other issues I raised during these encounters included: the use of professional discretion in service user interactions; attitudes towards the idea of being labelled a 'bureaucrat'; processes for updating the information and advice embedded in system scripts; and the effects on specialist officers located in 'back' offices. I managed to interview staff based in service areas in which enquiry processes had already been (or were at the time being) mapped and scripted as well as staff based in areas yet to experience these activities. I reasoned that another route to understanding the nature of any internal resistance (and potentially any alternative views on the role of a local authority and its service users) would be to gain a trade union perspective. A number of earlier interviewees had mentioned that trade union figures represented something of an obstacle to elements of the modernisation programme. A trade union perspective was achieved through interviewing the UNISON convenor for Big City Service.

All of the interviewing took place in private spaces. In the case of management, this was often the interviewees' office. In the case of other interviewees, this tended to be a meeting room or unoccupied office. Conducting interviews in private is conducive to having an open and frank discussion. And while some interviewees appeared to be a little apprehensive about speaking with me initially (particularly the more junior members of council staff), on the whole, the interviews were free-flowing and wide-ranging. All interviews were recorded; this may have added to interviewees' apprehension in some cases but the importance of capturing the discussion verbatim was paramount. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

Although open-ended in character, interview dialogue was supported by an interview guide (incorporating probes for eliciting greater detail) to ensure key areas of interest, described above, were covered. I tailored the level of the discussion and wording of questions to the interviewees' experiences and character, as well as the flow of the discussion. However, I endeavoured to cover several of the key issues with as many interviewees as possible in order to facilitate a subsequent comparable analysis. In addition, the shape and content of the interview guide evolved during the period of fieldwork to reflect ongoing theoretical development informed by recurrent engagement with the literature, dialogue with research

colleagues, and data analysis. I now turn to the next method employed in this study – observational activity.

Methods theorists would describe the activity I carried out as 'non-participant observation' (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Yin, 2003) or 'participant as observer' (Saunders et al. 2007); my role was simply to observe rather than to participate in the interaction around me. Distinct from roles where the researcher chooses to conceal his identity, the 'participant as observer' reveals his purpose as a researcher to those in the observed setting. While this role applied to the majority of my observational activity, on the occasions where I was located in a public space (such as conducting general observation in a fully-functioning Customer Service Centre), some members of council staff and the service users had not been made aware of my presence or motives.

I chose to carry out observational activity for a number of methodological reasons. First, it provided me with an interesting insight into the organisation 'at work', in a more naturalistic mode than the interview scenario. Moreover, "…it heightens the researcher's awareness of significant social processes" (Saunders et al., 2007: 293). Second, this kind of activity can often open the researcher's eyes to issues that can be probed further in an interview. And third, observation yields another source of data with which to 'test' the often more formalised data collected from documents and the relatively more controlled interview environment. At the same time, a common criticism of this mode of data collection is the potential for observer bias – this issue is confronted below. Also, in practical terms, data recording is often very difficult for the researcher. (Saunders et al., 2007: 293) In my case, I was able to make notes at the time of the observation in most settings. However, I did, at times, feel reluctant to make very detailed notes during a period of observation so as to avoid creating unease among participants. This being the case, I would often make further reflective notes after the event.

As with the process for accessing interviewees, my approach to sampling here utilised a purposive (or snowball) technique. Negotiation with the main gatekeeper was key in obtaining access to a number of settings that I observed. As explained earlier, this mode of data-collection proved to be the most challenging in terms of gaining access. I had initially hoped to undertake observation of more meetings at a strategic level populated with senior management. In the event, most of the observation I carried out took place in operational settings. My approach to observational activities was relatively unstructured in that I did not have a highly structured pre-prepared schedule to complete. On the other hand, I *was* keen to

note participants' language and behaviour (in relation to the study's key interests) in each of the settings. I was also concerned to analyse the representational quality of non-linguistic phenomena (i.e. buildings, staff apparel, signage and so on).

One set of observational activities took place in team meetings of frontline staff based at a Customer Service Centre; the meetings had approximately ten to fifteen participants, lasted for approximately forty-five minutes, and were led by Centre management. As well as giving me access to routine information on, inter alia, customer numbers and enquiry turnaround times, these activities offered me the opportunity to experience naturally occurring discussion among staff members. I was particularly interested to note the order of the agenda and, more generally, the issues that management appeared to prioritise (and avoid). I was also keen to observe the reaction of staff to the issues under discussion.

At one point in the fieldwork, I was granted access to a meeting that represented part of the induction process for new frontline recruits. It was led by the Customer Services Manager, it lasted for one hour, and the session's key aim was to provide the new staff with a strategic and operational overview of the council's Customer Services division, including the investment in CRM-supporting technologies. In addition to the kinds of issues mentioned above in relation to the team meetings, I was interested to observe how, in organisational culture terms, the Customer Services Manager presented the council and its e-government efforts. As well as noting the language she used, I observed what was being emphasised (and what was not mentioned) about the role of generic officer.

Another dimension of operational activity that I observed during the fieldwork period involved me being located behind the main desk of a Customer Service Centre alongside a generic officer as she handled 'first point of contact' enquiries. In this setting, I was able to observe interactions between the local authority's frontline and service users at close quarters for approximately one hour. I was particularly keen to discern whether or not there were observable differences in the service user-officer encounter between this and other frontline service settings (from my own experience of the latter). In part, this was about the language that shaped the encounter. I was also interested to see if different officers handled enquiries differently – for example, in terms of how closely CRM scripts were followed or in terms of the depth of query resolution achieved. Reflecting on this experience, I did feel somewhat on show when sat behind the enquiry desk. I was conscious that service users may find my presence disconcerting. At the time, however, I noted that they did not appear perturbed

(perhaps they believed me to be a trainee). It simply was not practical for me to be introduced to each and every service user. It would have been useful (from a data collection point of view) to have carried out more of this kind of observational activity than I did. However, given the very 'public' nature of the activity (and the effort involved in organising it internally), I was conscious of not 'pushing my luck' and maintaining positive relations with my council contacts.

In addition to these more formal periods of observation, I also took the opportunity to observe the frontline 'at work' during several of the fieldwork visits I made – these periods ranged from 15 minutes to 30 minutes each. In practice, this tended to mean arriving at the principal Customer Service Centre early for a pre-scheduled meeting in order to sit and observe my surroundings. In this way, I was able to familiarise myself with a key organizational setting. I was able to observe service user-officer interactions (at a distance) and get a feel for the flow of activity. I was also able to see whether/how service users interacted with the various self-service technologies the council had invested in (including an automated queuing system and a cubicle housing a video link to other services) and their level of awareness and interest in the vast amount of customer information material (leaflets, information monitors, posters and so on). It was during this less structured activity that I observed, for example, how ubiquitous the 'Customer Services' branding was, how smart and corporate the staff looked in their uniforms, and that the staff of the centre was overwhelmingly female. Much of this kind of data-collection activity is what Robson (2002) calls 'descriptive observation', whereby the researcher is concentrated on observing the physical setting, the key participants and their activities, particular events and the processes and emotions involved. My task, then, was to conceptualise these data in relation to the study's key research question. Overall, the observational activity amounted to approximately eight hours.

Turning very briefly to the issue of the researcher's 'impact' on the observed setting, in keeping with my approach to interview data set out earlier, I am not claiming, in a *positivist* fashion (Silverman, 2001), to be objectively capturing 'facts' through the observational activity. However, I do recognise the value in reflexively observing a diversity of organizational settings within which local e-government is taking shape to consider alongside the other data sources. What this implies for concerns about 'observer bias' is not that they are wholly irrelevant but that they are not afforded the significance of more traditional positivist studies. Hence, in order to put participants more at ease with my presence, at the outset of the formal meetings I observed I asked my contact to introduce me and to assure attendees that

the aims of my research were academic and that I would be applying the usual safeguards of confidentiality and anonymity in handling the data. In addition, I subjected observational data to a process of constant comparison with data collected via other methods with a view to strengthening the validity of my inferences. In general, I approached the observation activities and the subsequent data analysis process reflexively, characterised by a process of continually questioning my conclusions (Saunders et al., 2007: 292).

The final data collection method employed in this study is what is commonly referred to as document analysis – the "…collection, review, interrogation, and analysis of various forms of text as a primary source of research data." (O'Leary, 2010: 177). While much case study data collection activity tends to emphasise interviewing and observational field notes, it is important not to overlook the significance of documentary material in helping one to piece together organizational realities (Silverman, 2001). For Atkinson and Coffey, it is imperative that our understanding of contemporary societies incorporates an appreciation of the processes and products of organizational self-description: "if we wish to understand how…organizations work and how people work with/in them, then we cannot afford to ignore their various activities as readers and writers." (2004: 57).

This is not to say, however, that analysing documents is straightforward; their function and the context of their production, circulation, and consumption are important factors to consider. Hence, the researcher should be careful not to fall into the "trap" (Silverman, 2001) of simply interpreting documents as reflecting 'reality'. Documents, according to Atkinson and Coffey, are 'social facts' "…in that they are produced, shared and used in socially organized ways,…they construct particular kinds of representations using their own conventions." (2004: 58).

Turning to the issue of which texts I analysed, certain documents (for example, internal Big City strategy documents or CRM scripts) were obtained via a snowball sampling technique as a result of requesting that interviewees pass on documents mentioned during discussions. In the main, however, I conducted a systematic trawl of the categories of documents I was interested in and the majority were in the public domain. While each category of texts afforded me specific insights into the authors' perspective on e-government, in all cases I paid particular attention to the language being used. Of specific interest was the language used to frame the relationship between service providers (and state institutions more generally) and members of the public. This process entailed identifying the different words used (for

example, service user, customer, citizen and so on) as well as the context in which they were deployed. As a consequence, I was able to identify how these relationships were discursively framed by the text's author.

One of the document categories is those emanating from central government departments, including the Cabinet Office, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now Department for Communities and Local Government), HM Treasury, and the Office of Public Services Reform. Such documents include White Papers, Green Papers, Select Committee reports, strategy statements, official reports, and key government Reviews (such as the Lyons Review, 2004 and The Gershon Review, 2004). These I considered to be the agenda-setting texts; texts that perform a debate-framing function and which are seen by various relevant communities of actors as representing legitimate voices. Another set of documents relates specifically to local government bodies. Part of the process of analysing these involved comparing dominant representations of service delivery priorities and practices with those found in central government documents. Apart from texts generated by Big City Council I have analysed outputs produced by other local authority bodies that have referred to the implementation of customer service initiatives or CRM-supporting activities.

Documents authored by a range of established commentators and interested bodies were also considered worthy of analysis. This group includes: The Improvement and Development Agency (now Local Government Improvement and Development), The Local Government Association, Local Government Online, UK Online, The National Audit Office, and Socitm. Publications from these bodies present another insight into how voices carrying varying degrees of legitimacy are framing debates and relationships.

As the case at the centre of this research, I was keen to analyse a diverse range of texts associated with Big City Council. Among the documents I obtained were internal research reports, documents setting out the council's strategy and vision, annual 'Implementing e-Government' (IEG) statements, a staff handbook, CRM scripts, and customer-oriented leaflets. As Bryman and Bell have suggested, in case study research, documents can be helpful in building a description of the organization and its history, particularly in processual studies of organizational change (2007: 566). The IEG Statements, in particular, provided a useful insight into the evolution of the council's approach.

The final ‘author’ of particular interest to me was Big City’s CRM system vendor. I was able to access documents such as promotional material and commentaries on the place of IT solutions in public service delivery generated by this organisation in the public domain. These allowed me to examine how the vendor framed debates common to many of the other documents being analysed and they provided a point of comparison to understand the degree to which claims being made for the functionality and strategic benefit of their technologies were re-produced by council-based actors and documents.

Most of the texts analysed were conventional documents. At the same time, however, I accessed and analysed a range of other materials that I deemed represented useful data. Among these were PowerPoint slides relating to presentations from various events (for example, the Life Events Access Project and the National CRM programme), websites; and online video material (particularly on the e-gov.TV channel). As Atkinson and Coffey suggest, “in the contemporary world, we should also include electronic and digital resources among the ways in which documentary realities are produced and consumed.” (2004: 57) The fact that online material is constantly being reviewed and updated allows the researcher to track any shifts in the kinds of issues being emphasised by the authors.

3.3 Data analysis strategy

During the course of this and the previous chapter, I have set out my broad interest in, and specific approach to, ‘discourse’. In this section, in the context of a discussion of how qualitative data tend to be handled, I will elaborate on how I approached the analysis of linguistic and other data en route to identifying the discursive framing of the settings and social relations being studied. As described earlier, one aspect of the methodology embraces a discursive approach to institutionalization in conjunction with a framework devised by Phillips et al. (2004) to guide the ‘textual’ analysis process. To avoid duplication, the details of this framework are provided in the Discussion of Findings chapter alongside the outcomes of the analysis.

A similar approach to analysis was adopted concerning data collected via each of the methods outlined above. In broad terms, this followed what O’Leary has described as the process of reflective qualitative data analysis, one which requires researchers to do a number of things: “organise their raw data; enter and code that data; search for meaning through thematic analysis; interpret meaning; and draw conclusions – all the while keeping the bigger picture,

i.e. research questions, aims and objectives, methodological constraints, and theory, clearly in mind." (2010: 257) In the case of the observational data, the process was slightly different in that the data collection and analysis activity was less distinct (Saunders et al., 2007). Ultimately, however, this latter process involved the generation of field-notes that were written up and analysed in a similar way to other textual data. Interview data was transcribed verbatim in the belief that it would help guide my analysis and reveal lines of analysis I had not anticipated. Despite the arduous nature of this task, I found that the process helped me become very familiar with the data, and made re-visiting and cross-referencing the data a more straightforward task.

O'Leary encourages the researcher, throughout the process of analysis, to keep a series of questions in mind in order to avoid getting lost in detail and so as to maintain what she calls an "overarching perspective". I found these pointers useful, including: What do I expect/not expect to find? Can my findings be interpreted in alternative ways? How do my findings relate to my research questions, aims, and objectives? Are my findings confirming my theories? Have my methods of data collection and/or analysis coloured my results? If so, in what ways? (O'Leary, 2010: 232) Throughout the process of posing and answering those questions, I was engaged in cycles of both inductive and deductive reasoning (this was elaborated on earlier).

Although these activities are rarely linear in practice, the data analysis journey I went on is usefully captured by O'Leary's figure (see below). The representation emphasises that qualitative data analysis involves making, sometimes difficult, choices about which data count more than other data in order to move from a mass of raw data to the articulation of theoretically-relevant conclusions. As Wolcott points out, "the critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to 'can' (i.e. get rid of) most of the data you accumulate." (1990: 35)

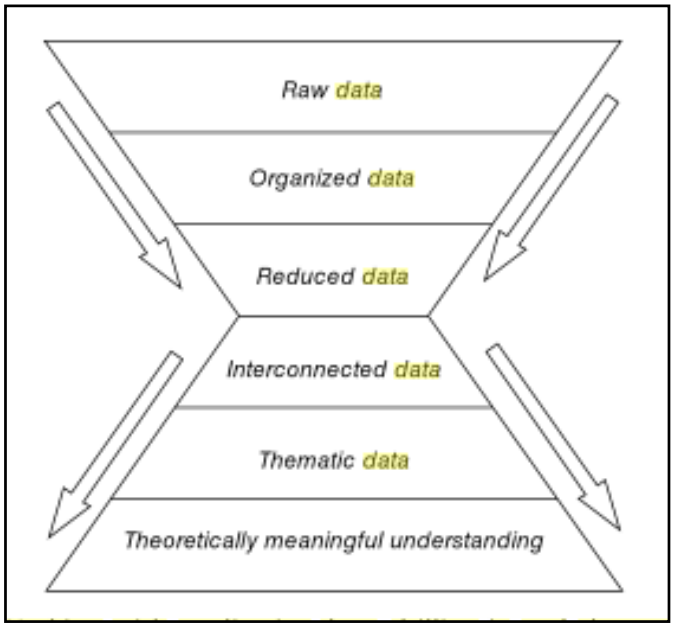

Figure 6: Working with qualitative data: Drilling in and abstracting out. Reproduced from O'Leary, The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010, 263, figure 14.3)

Focussing in on the 'nitty gritty' of the analysis, I engaged in a process of coding and categorising the various kinds of data on the basis of the identification of key themes and patterns. (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 26) Many studies utilising methods for generating qualitative data and with a particular interest in identifying discourses, have employed a similar kind of approach. For example, Booth et al. adopted a 'narrative-analytical' approach to explore how lecturers talk about their experiences of university education, identifying "core themes across the interviews, coding data broadly for 'self', 'others', 'society' and 'pedagogy'." (Booth et al., 2009: 931) As O'Leary has suggested, the line-by-line exploration of data in search of themes can be tackled in several ways, including "through the words that are used" and "the concepts that are discussed". (2010: 264) Words can be explored through their repetition, or through exploration of their context and usage, while concepts and meaning are explored in each text to be analysed before being compared with previously analysed texts to draw out both similarities and disparities. (O' Leary, 2010: 264) In this way, my analysis encountered, for example, widespread use of 'customer' (rather than a range of alternatives) to talk about local authority service users in conjunction with related concepts such as 'customer service' or 'customer profiling'. Ultimately, this kind of process led me to talk about a 'customer-focus' ordering narrative framing and legitimating many of the texts associated with the delivery of e-government.

Now whereas the analysis process was systematic – involving line-by-line examination, coding, and cross-referencing – in practice, it required me to be open-minded and creative in my thought processes. As Coffey and Atkinson argue, analysis is not about adhering to any one correct approach or set of techniques; "it is imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive." (1996: 10) In the case of discourse analysis in particular, Potter has argued "…it is sometimes more like sexing a chicken than following the recipe for a mild Chicken Rogan Josh." (2004: 204)

While there are no doubt social researchers for whom such terms are more appropriately used in connection with research relying on quantitative data collection, I am inclined to agree with Mason (1996) that notions of validity and reliability should be confronted whatever the nature of the data and the epistemological stance of the researcher. Silverman questions the idea that "once we treat social reality as always in flux, then it makes no sense to worry about whether our research instruments measure accurately." (2001: 226) This is not to say that, in keeping with structured, questionnaire-based research for example, the aim in this study is to devise a research design which, if executed at another time or by another researcher, would yield the very same data. Peräkylä sees the issue this way: "The aim of social science is to produce descriptions of a social world – not just any descriptions, but descriptions that in some controllable way correspond to the social world that is being described" (2004: 283).

First, in respect of the data-generation methods selected in this study, the combination of the in-depth interview, observation, and document analysis is seen to represent a robust research design. Each method can generate data relevant to understanding the discursive framing of participants'/authors' ideas, motivations, and behaviour and the combination of methods facilitates a data triangulation process that serves to validate emerging findings. My approach resonates with that adopted by Boonstra and Govers (2009) in carrying out a case study investigation of an ERP implementation at a Dutch hospital. To ensure "construct validity", they used a broad set of qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary research. Thinking of the data collection process itself, the recording and transcription of the interviews carried out – forming a data set available to other researchers – serves to enhance the robustness of the research design (Potter, 2004; Peräkylä, 2004).

As for data validity in the case of discourse analytic studies, the idea of searching for and examining *deviant cases* (Potter, 2004) or *negative instances* (Mason, 1996) was seen as

valuable. This has entailed identifying discursive trends which display alternative representations of the issues being studied. Linked to this technique is a strategy advocated by Silverman (2001: 238) known as the 'constant comparative method'; here, the qualitative researcher should "always attempt to find another case through which to test out a provisional hypothesis." Both of these methods played a part in the analysis approach taken here, an approach which, in practice, proved quite a challenge at times. This is, perhaps, inevitable given the exploratory nature of the data-collection process and what that implies for organising, coding, and generally managing the data.

As for the related issue of generalizability, in the kind of research being carried out here, generalising to a population is not of primary concern. Rather, many researchers who work with qualitative data, and for whom the notion retains relevance, are concerned to generalize theoretical propositions, tending to talk in terms of 'analytic' rather than 'statistical' generalization (Yin, 2003; Hartley, 2004). Mason has argued that qualitative researchers should be satisfied with "producing explanations which are idiosyncratic or particular to the limited empirical parameters of their study." (1996: 6) At the same time, rejecting generalizability as a search for broadly applicable laws does not necessarily imply rejecting the idea that "...studies in one situation can be used to speak to or to help form a judgement about other situations." (Hammersley 1993: 207) O'Leary (2010: 63) prefers the notion of 'transferability', whereby lessons learned are likely to be insightful in alternative settings or across populations.

In this way, I contend that the findings of this study have a resonance beyond the immediate local government context where the case study was carried out. First, this claim is made on the basis that the case selected is not untypical. And, second, given the extent to which the wider local (and central) government policy landscape is characterised by a customer-centric discourse of service delivery.

The in-depth analysis conducted here can illuminate aspects of a setting that may usefully guide further research interested in similar phenomena at other sites of enquiry. In keeping with the perspective adopted in this study, and following Peräkylä (2004), the concept of *possibility* may be a useful one in indicating that the kinds of discursive practices identified in this case study are also possible in other sites. Walsham (1995) has offered perhaps the most useful crystallization of this debate by proposing four possibilities, not mutually exclusive, of generalization from interpretive case study research that can provide explanations of

particular phenomena of potential value to other organizations and contexts. These are: the development of concepts; the generation of theory; the drawing of specific implications; and the contribution of rich insight (1995: 79). It is my ambition to make a contribution in each of these areas.

3.4 Ethical considerations

A key feature of a research project that takes seriously the notion of researcher reflexivity is a consideration of ethical implications. The first point to make in this regard is that the focus of the study is arguably a relatively nonthreatening one. It was deemed unlikely that discussing e-government initiatives would "distress, worry, or annoy interviewees." (Mason, 1996: 56) Having said that, as the fieldwork progressed and I found myself discussing processes of organizational change, strong emotions were sometimes expressed by interviewees. At no time, however, did I sense participants were distressed.

Regardless of the ostensible nature of the research topic, there are a number of more general ethical considerations which this study shares with most other social science studies. One of these relates to the issue of informed consent – where “prospective research participants [are] given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study” (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 137) With a view to gaining interview participants’ consent, both at the time of the initial approach and at the outset of the interview, I described the broad aims of the research exercise and my reasons for asking to meet with them specifically. The words of Silverman are instructive here: “…both qualitative and quantitative researchers studying human subjects ponder over the dilemma of wanting to give full information to the people they study but seeking not to ‘contaminate’ their research by informing subjects too specifically about the research question to be studied.” (Silverman, 2001: 55) As well as wanting to avoid leading participants to discuss issues in certain ways, in setting out the purpose of the study, I underplayed the extent to which I was interested in the precise language that participants used, with regard to service users for example. Having said this, at an appropriate point during the flow of interview discussions, I often initiated a discussion of service user labels directly. Further, if I sensed that participants were likely to have strongly-held opinions on a given subject that I was interested in broaching, I tended to introduce particular ideas or perspectives by using phrases such as, ‘some might argue that...’.

In studies such as this one, where a gatekeeper has aided access to participants, there is always a question mark surrounding the circumstances in which participants were recruited and the degree of obligation they may have experienced (this is especially so where the gatekeeper is in a managerial position and is tasked with identifying junior members of staff, as was the case with certain of the interviewees). In the event, it was not apparent that any interviewee was taking part against their will.

As far as the observation activities were concerned, I decided against trying to obtain the explicit consent of each member of organisational staff attending a given meeting or that of members of the public who happened to be in a council space at the time of observation. This was deemed impractical, and given the kinds of data I was interested in, ultimately unnecessary. On the occasions when I observed council staff meetings, my contact provided a brief explanation of my presence.

As outlined earlier, the recording of interviews formed an essential aspect of the methodology. I did not make it explicit when initially contacting interviewees that I intended recording the discussion, though I did check with participants that they did not object to this at the outset of the interview and assured them that the data would be treated confidentially as well as their anonymity respected. I also pointed out that they were under no obligation to continue with the interview if they did not wish to.
Whereas no participants raised an objection to the recording of the discussion, I am aware that the research interview situation may bring with it a certain amount of indirect pressure, especially in a formal, organisational context. In reporting findings, I have sought to respect the assurances given to research participants but, at the same time, ensure that the reader is afforded sufficient detail about the organisational context and the inter-relationship of the actors to justify the nature of the argumentation. In this thesis, and in any publications drawing on the research, I have used a pseudonym for the organisations/departments studied and referred to individuals by job title, altering this slightly where deemed appropriate (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 136).

Finally, during the period of fieldwork, I was conscious that I had a responsibility to behave professionally. This sense was heightened given that my access to the site had initially been gained due to a previously-established relationship between university colleagues and the council. I sought to avoid behaving in a way that might jeopardise that relationship, or, indeed, the prospect of other researchers carrying out research activities there.

Chapter 4. Research findings

4.1 Chapter introduction

As I concluded from the review of literature in chapter 1, the 'customer' has grown in stature over recent decades, finding its way into new service domains, and customer-focus has become a strategic imperative for organizations across sectoral boundaries. In a public services setting, I have argued that customer-focus is core to New Public Management thinking and, more recently, with the roll-out of the e-government agenda, is potentially taking root in materially new ways. Technologies supporting customer relationship management represent one important example in this regard. At the same time, an academic critique of customer-centric change in public services has been articulated by many concerned commentators. This sets the scene for an empirical examination of customer-focussed e-government 'in the making'.

The primary function of this chapter is to provide an account of the key research findings with a view to addressing the question driving this thesis: How is customer-focussed local e-government being realised? In terms of how this overarching question was operationalised, the orienting questions (see table below), developed in relation to extant knowledge/debates and my own concerns, listed below framed the mixed-method data generation processes. The questions are clustered in relation to the main areas of interest – the service user ('customer'); notions of customer service, customer-centric public services, and a public service ethos; and CRM in the context of broader techno-organizational change. Interviewees fell into four main groupings: council-based 'front' office staff, 'back' office staff, council management, and CRM technology vendor staff. As explained earlier, while elements of all of the following issues were pursued with the different participant groupings, discussions were tailored to the interviewee. Particular attention was paid to any differences among participants in terms of the language used and views espoused.

Service users
• How do the various participants view service users? • What are seen to be the expectations and priorities of service users? • What kind of relationship do participants believe service users desire in relation to the local authority?
Strategic agendas/organizational ethos
• What is the attitude of participants to 'customer service' in local government? • What is the main role of a contemporary local authority and where, if at all, does customer service feature? • How do the customer service and efficiency agendas relate to one another? • What awareness do participants have of the critique of customer-centric public service delivery? And what are their attitudes towards it? • What do notions relating to a public service ethos mean to participants? • What significance is attached to working in/partnering with a public sector organization by participants?
CRM-related change
• What role are CRM-supporting technologies in particular playing in translating customer-focus into local e-government practice? And what other organizational developments are important? • How has the CRM development process been managed? And what external support has this process entailed? • Has the roll-out of customer-focussed local e-government and CRM in particular been met with universal support? If not, where, how, and why has resistance become manifest? • How is CRM understood in a local authority context? • How distinct is the development and use of CRM from commercial settings? • How, if at all, are service users imagined in the CRM development processes?

Table 3 : Guiding interview questions

In approaching the task of structuring the findings of this study, I was mindful of Eisenhardt and Graebner's (2007) suggestion that the presentation of findings from a single case study tends to have a relatively simple story-like quality, typically consisting of a narrative interspersed with quotations from key informants and other supporting evidence. The story is then intertwined with theory, demonstrating the close connection between empirical evidence

and emergent theory. In this thesis, theory-building, as part of a deeper reflection on extant literature, is a task primarily addressed in the Discussion of Findings chapter. There, I interpret the research findings through theoretical lenses (set out in chapter 2) to make a series of substantive arguments about the instantiation of customer-focussed local e-government. The current chapter, meanwhile, exhibits the initial levels of data analysis – the outcome of coding, clustering and ordering the linguistic and material data.

The narrative of this chapter is organised around four major themes that emerged from the data analysis process – the rehearsing, refining, resourcing, and resisting of the public services' customer. These concepts provide a framework for understanding how, in one local government setting, customer-focussed local e-government is being realised. Taken together, they comprise an analysis of the multiple manifestations of a customer-focus narrative as well as those constituting narratives of resistance.

More specifically, the narrative incorporates verbatim excerpts and researcher inferences from in-depth interviews and observation activities combined with illustrative citations from relevant documents. In order to locate the findings, connections are made between the outcomes of the data generation processes and existing scholarly literature. At the same time, reference is made to a range of publications encountered as part of the data collection process; these include publications generated by the case study organization as well as those emanating from central government and other bodies associated with the e-government agenda.

4.2 Presentation of the case study

Big City Council is responsible for almost 30 wards comprising around a quarter of a million constituents, represented by around 80 councillors. The Council is split into a number of Directorates and led by a Chief Executive. Council officers are employed to give advice, implement decisions and manage the day-to-day delivery of services.

The Council's e-government programme was taking shape when the period of fieldwork began. The site of representation and the number of supporting structures demonstrates the significance of the e-government agenda at that time (the interrelationship between e-government and customer-focus is also reflected in these structures). In terms of key individual roles, the Council has a cabinet portfolio for e-government, with a Director taking on the role of e-champion with "corporate responsibility for customer services, ensuring

complementary development" (Big City Implementing e-government statement 2002). At the same time, there is a Member e-champion and three e-government Managers. In terms of key bodies, there is an e-Services panel chaired by the cabinet member for e-government, the role of which is to provide a strategic overview of ICT developments. Big City is also represented on a number of bodies that sought to take forward the e-government agenda at a regional level. These included a regional Committee of IT Managers Group and an ICT and E-government Partnership.

At a coordinating and operational level, the e-government management team, comprising a number of senior officers, is responsible for developing e-government in strategy, technical, performance, and operational terms. In parallel with these e-government structures, Big City set up a 'Customer Services Information Systems group' designed to deliver cross-organisational engagement with the agenda and to "strengthen the relationship between e-government and customer services" (Big City Implementing e-government statement 2002). Cutting across these structures is a Business Development and Transformation Team which was established to identify change needs and the mechanisms for meeting those needs and achieving change.

The initial focus of the fieldwork was the Council's Customer Services function. The rationale for this lies in the fact that the process of organizational 'transformation' that was underway at the time of the fieldwork included the creation of 'Big City Service' (further detail about its creation is provided later in this chapter) and, within that, the establishment of a corporate Customer Services facility. There, a technological infrastructure, including a CRM system, to support customer-focus operationally was under development. As the fieldwork progressed, the focus of my interest spread to other areas of the organisation implicated by the transformation programme (further details are given in the preceding chapter).

4.3 Rehearsing the public services' customer

The first of the major four themes entails an analysis of how the public services' customer is being 'rehearsed', both in the language of research participants and the formal documentation of e-government. Here, I explore data relating to representations of service users in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the e-government customer in practice – who s/he is and what s/he wants in relation to local authorities. The data drawn on include those generated

through interviews and those analysed from local and central government documents. The findings form a key part of exploring the discourses that constitute constructions of the e-government service user. The notion of 'rehearsing' is chosen to imply that a customer-infused language, one which has permeated many walks of life, is being routinely practiced in the research setting.

4.3.1 A customer at home: More uninvited guest than imposter

Although the encroachment of 'customer'-centred rhetoric into more and more areas of modern life has been well-documented, in the light of the sophisticated critique of customer-focus in public service settings set out earlier, I was keen to explore how this relative newcomer had been received on the ground, in the everydayness of local e-government service delivery. I expected to encounter, if not outright resistance, then at the very least a sense of unease towards the language of the customer. As the discussion in this section demonstrates, my expectations were largely unfounded – the 'customer' appears to be rather more 'at home' than the critique suggests it ought to be.

Having begun the period of fieldwork at Big City, it soon became clear that interview participants were in no way uneasy about referring to members of the public as 'customers' – this applied equally to frontline generic officers, IT managers, and social services staff. During interviews I would purposefully employ more neutral expressions such as 'the public' or 'service users', to avoid leading participants to use the 'customer' descriptor (this issue is discussed in Chapter 1, 'The 'customer' of public services'). Having come to appreciate the ordinariness of this language, I developed the interview topic guide to include direct questions around this issue so as to ascertain whether interviewees had any concerns about customer-oriented language and whether it had been the subject of any debate or tension within Big City. This sub-section sets out what I found in this regard.

The overwhelming conclusion from the data is that the 'customer' has been incorporated into Big City's vernacular with apparent ease. There is a strong sense in which this identifier is viewed as neutral, as non-controversial. These qualities appear to have assisted the customer in achieving the status of default identifier to refer to a member of the public (or a business) who comes into contact with the local authority.

This is not to say that the customer is devoid of meaning for the research participants. But the meanings it does imply are not deemed to be negative; it is a word that either has quite a positive connotation or is unremarkable. For some at Big City, particularly the more 'entrepreneurial' actors, customer is a positive identifier at the heart of a positive direction of change in the delivery of public services. During a discussion of appropriate labels for members of the public, the Head of Big City Service remarked "I like the word customer" (24th August 2005). He encouraged his staff to think of colleagues, as well as the public, as customers; for him, it is a notion very much aligned with a value system that he passionately advocated. For others, like this Senior Benefits Officer (5th October 2005), 'customer' performed a humanizing function, particularly now that she rarely interacted with service users who, in the past, she would typically have known by name. The participant explained how there was "a tendency still to refer to people as claimants" in her department, although staff were being encouraged to change this practice. The notion of a 'claimant', for this participant, made her think of the public "as their application form", "as an inanimate object", "just a form on your desk", whereas 'customer' helped her to think of "a person".

A more common perspective on the idea of the 'customer' is its versatility – its catch-all quality. When I was discussing this issue with the council's Customer Service Manager she recalled a dispute between her unit and an arms-length organization that manages Big City's Housing affairs (Big City Housing). Customer Services had written to those people receiving a service from the Housing organization, addressing them as 'customers'. This action was met with displeasure on the part of Big City Housing – they apparently address those they serve as 'tenants' and wanted Customer Services to do the same. The outcome was a stalemate – each party would continue to use its favoured form of address. The point being made by the Customer Service Manager was that Big City Housing's 'tenants' were, at the same time, 'customers' of the council:

> "…everybody's a 'customer' of us, but not everybody's a council-tax payer, not everybody's a tenant, so therefore we should call – to be on the safe side – everybody 'customer', cos they *are* a customer!" (1st August 2005)

The logic applied by this manager appears to reflect the council's official view. In an early statement of its e-government strategy (2001), Big City talks in terms of addressing the needs of its 'key *customer* groups'; these include "the community", "socially excluded groups" (those without access to IT), "individuals accessing health information and services", "businesses", and "visitors". Further, a more recent appraisal of Big City Housing's website (accessed 19th January 2009) suggests that it has softened its anti-'customer' stance. The

organization has devised a customer service strategy, entitled “Every Customer Matters”, in which it pledges all its staff are “100% committed to consistently delivering excellent customer services”.

While the ‘customer’ may have established itself as a convenient signifier in certain delivery contexts, its dominance is by no means total. For example, although the ‘citizen’ has fallen out of favour in much contemporary rhetoric it has far from disappeared. In the case of the Big City research participants, however, the ‘citizen’ was largely invisible. And on the occasions when I prompted consideration of this figure, the ‘citizen’ was viewed as a somewhat outmoded character, incompatible with the modern service delivery context. This was certainly the view of a Transformation Team member, who seemed dismayed that some of her colleagues had failed to adopt ‘customer’ language: “I don’t really like ‘citizen’. I think it’s very much again part of old-school type language. I know it’s starting to come back into context now, a lot more people are talking about it. But, no, I don’t like that idea, it sounds too political to me. (16th March 2003).

In terms of the council’s official rhetoric, the ‘citizen’ is invoked a number of times in the e-government strategy document mentioned above to refer to individual members of the service-using community, in much the same way that ‘customer’ tends to be used. Indeed, both terms are used apparently interchangeably. The citizen is similarly invoked in the council’s 2002 statement the following year. By 2003, however, this character has practically disappeared; in its place, we find the customer. And apart from Big City’s Charter, there seems to be very little mention of the citizen.

Gaining a clear understanding of the council’s rationale for which signifiers are employed in which contexts to refer to members of the public is something that has proved quite difficult. One document, however, does confront part of the issue head-on – Big City’s Customer Service Strategy:

> “One important point of terminology to note is that the term “customer” is used throughout the strategy rather than “citizen” or “client”. We have deliberately not used these words interchangeably because they have different meanings.
>
> - “Citizen” implies a resident of the city and someone exercising their statutory civil rights.

- "Client" refers to professional services and a person dependent on the protection of another.
- "Customer" can be defined as a person, company or other entity which obtains goods or services from another person, company or entity.

Our Customer Service Strategy applies to people who live, work, visit or study in [Big City]. It applies to businesses and other agencies. It also covers our internal customers (e.g. members of staff) in addition to our external customers. This is why we have chosen to use the widest possible definition by using the term "customer"."

So, we find here an acknowledgement that each term carries a different meaning as well as an appreciation of the utility of 'customer'. At the same time, there is very little evidence that this logic has been applied in other official documentation, and it certainly was not mobilized by any of the research interviewees, including senior management. Further, the definition of the 'citizen' offered here is a somewhat anaemic one – this issue is discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis.

The 'citizen' is a more familiar character in documentation originating from sources associated with central government. The 'citizen', here, tends to imply an individual (as opposed to a business) consumer of services, though the choice of descriptors is not consistent – the 'customer' is often used interchangeably with 'citizen'. Elsewhere, a Cabinet Office (2004) document discussing satisfaction with public services counts "patients, students, and victims" among the 'customer' groups being considered. It is interesting to note that Needham's (2006) analysis of 2003-04 *Best Value Performance Plans* from English local authorities found that the 'customer' dominated, although other identifiers including 'resident', 'user', 'citizen', 'client', and 'stakeholder' featured. A more up to date (November 2011) examination of central government websites suggests the customer has all but vanquished competing labels. For example, the Driving Standards Agency has customers, as does The Department of Work and Pensions. Personal budget-holders are customers, as are job-seekers. Even students are being made a 'customer promise' by Student Finance England. In conjunction with the widespread use of the 'customer' term, these online environments are increasingly using the personal pronoun 'you' (see Fairclough, 1994 and the notion of 'synthetic personalization') to address users (rather than impersonal terms such as 'service users', 'citizens', 'claimants' and so on). Interestingly, Barrett has argued that, in an Australian context, both 'customer' and 'client' service delivery have been used in public service terminology but "…perhaps reflecting a degree of discomfort in describing 'citizens'

as ‘customers’, virtually all departments and agencies now talk about ‘citizen-centric’ and ‘client-oriented’ service delivery.” (2009: 81) In a UK context, Clarke et al. have detected a decline in the use of ‘consumer’ in health and social care services, though they argue that what is not changing is the emphatic pursuit of “…the consumer centred model of market choice.” (2007: 156)

While there may be a lack of consistency in the labelling of users of different public services, many at Big City believed that, ultimately, the issue was of little consequence. The Head of Big City Service, for example, remarked that “…people in [central] government say they don’t like the word ‘customer’”; apparently, “they would *prefer* the term ‘user’ because they, I think they’ve got a problem with the philosophy, or the concept should I say, that people who’ve got no *choice* are customers”. When I asked what he thought about the apparent tension between ‘user’ and ‘customer’ he replied:

> “Well I just think it’s a non-issue personally, I think it’s semantics; maybe I’ve missed the point, but I like the word ‘customer’…” (24th August 2005)

The explanation offered by a Customer Service Centre Manager as to why her colleagues in social services preferred to talk in terms of ‘clients’ than ‘customers’ reveals a similar attitude:

> “They actually call them ‘clients’, I guess it’s just semantics; they’re ‘clients’ for some reason, I don’t know what the historical reasons for that are…But I think, in terms of what the word implies, and relationships and so on, I don’t think there’s a *vast* difference between ‘client’ and ‘customer’.” (12th July 2005)

The most important issue from this participant’s perspective was that her social services colleagues shared her own unit’s desire to deliver excellent customer service.

The sense of irrelevance regarding the categorization of service users extended to a trade union representative, who offered a somewhat blunt response to my suggestion that the ‘customer’ was a relatively new feature in the delivery of public services:

> “It’s what does a customer want to be called I suppose that’s the important thing isn’t it? You know, ‘What do you want to be referred to as?’ or ultimately, ‘I don’t give a shit, I just want…’”

This participant believed that neither the senior management within the council nor the service users themselves were concerned about labels – what mattered was the quality of service:

> "…I would certainly think that, you know, at the higher levels [of Big City], where it's being driven, yes it is important to have a 'customer focus' and that's being, you know, passed on to staff as a whole, but I don't think people sit and discuss the semantics of, you know, 'Do we say 'customer', 'client', 'service user'?'……the important thing is 'Are we doing a good job?'" (19th August 2005)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a Transformation Team member, though she believed that service users thought of themselves as 'customers' more than anything else.

> "I just think, to the little old lady who comes into here to pay her bills with her pension, she doesn't want to be a 'citizen', she wants to be a 'customer'…She's not bothered about what she's really called. But, I'm sure if you asked them, they would all see themselves as 'customers', because that's the language everybody, more or less, is coming up with isn't it?" (16th March 2003)

In the light of these findings, it is interesting to note that during her study of central and local government actors, Needham found that certain respondents, particularly local councillors, "…were nervous about the way the term customer conflated public and private service consumption" (2006: 856).

This issue raises the question of whether customers themselves are 'bothered' how they are referred to. A comprehensive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this study (see Clarke et al., 2007 for an examination of this issue). However, one anecdote relayed by Big City's Customer Services Manager demonstrated that some service users *are* deeply 'bothered'. This participant recalled a recent corporate complaint made by a member of the public who was furious at being addressed as a 'customer'.

> "We were calling him 'customer' but he said he's a council tax payer, he's a resident, but he's certainly not a 'customer', and don't ever refer to him like that again!…" (1st August 2005)

How typical this feeling is among the public is unclear. The evidence is ambiguous (Page, 2007; Clarke and Newman, 2005; Clarke et al., 2007) and will be discussed later.

We can conclude from the analysis thus far that the 'customer's' arrival on the public sector scene has, apart from isolated incidents, been largely uneventful. My experience of interviewing staff based in Big City's social services division did not alter this general finding, but it did indicate some of the potential shortcomings of the 'customer' in the context of less straightforward service delivery settings. My interview with a manager based in the Children and Families Team was most illuminating in this respect.

Whereas this manager was perfectly happy talking in terms of 'customers' during the interview, on being asked to reflect on the issue, he admitted that he and his colleagues "…talk about 'service users'." The interviewee went on to set out a number of reasons why the 'customer' was, in some ways, inappropriate for his service delivery context. First, this was because "…we're not manufacturing anything that they're buying". Second, service users tend to be denied choice in the service they receive. Indeed, often services are "imposed" upon users; "we have an element of power over them", "we have the power of the law behind our backs [for example] if we have to act to protect a child" – "people can't choose to let a social worker in the door". Finally, the participant suggested there was a degree of ambiguity about who exactly the customer might be: "The child might be viewed as the 'customer' and the family as the 'service users'. At the same time, "to some extent the 'customers' here for this team is the local authority, who has given us specific jobs to do, namely to protect the children of [Big City]". Furthermore, "the people who live in [Big City] have a right to know how social services is doing, how their money is being spent, and to some extent those – the 'customers' – we might not deliver a service to them, but you know, they're actually paying their wages." (4th October 2005) For these reasons, the 'customer' appears to be rather less at home in Social Services than elsewhere in the local authority.

An interview with two other members of social services staff (a PA to the Head of Performance and a Business Officer) at Big City suggested that not everyone in that department was necessarily able to articulate the quite sophisticated critique of the 'customer' offered by the Children and Families Team Manager. The following excerpt illustrates the lack of a coherent rationale 'on the ground' surrounding the appropriate language for describing members of the public who come into contact with social services. It also reinforces the idea that the 'customer' is widely viewed as a useful default identifier.

> *Interviewer*: "…Is that common language around Social Services? Are they your 'customers'?"
>
> *Both respondents*: "Yes"
>
> *Interviewer*: "Have they always been your 'customers'?"
>
> *Business Officer*: "Service users, clients, the terminology's changed…"
>
> *Interviewer*: "Right. Are they all those things now or are they primarily 'customers'?"
>
> *Business Officer*: "[sharp release of breath] It depends…"
>
> *PA*: "…service users…"
>
> *Business Officer*: "…service users…"

PA: "If they're existing, they're service users…"

Interviewer: "And if they're new?"

Both respondents: "customers [both laugh]…"

Business Officer: "…No, they're service users; they still have to be service users if they're using a service now…"

PA: "…Yeah, but if they're new, if they're coming to ask for a query about social services, they'd just be a customer, but if they're asking about a service they're receiving, they're service users…or if they're wanting more information about, if they're already involved…"

Business Officer: "…If they're already involved, I think they're service users, because they're already getting a service from us…"

PA: "Yeah"

Interviewer: "Sounds like you're making this up as you're going along [both laugh]" (15th August 2005)

Having reflected on the issue further, the PA adjudged that the idea of 'service users' "sounds awful"; it "sounds really impolite,…it's like saying they're a number". She personally preferred 'customer', while the Business Officer favoured 'client'. Ultimately, however, the interviewees agreed that both 'customer' and 'client' implied a service was being paid for and therefore 'service user' was probably more appropriate in the case of social services.

Even if the 'service user' or the 'citizen' is, at times, preferred to the 'customer' in talk or text, and although we have noted an attempt by Big City to differentiate between identifiers, there is a lexicon associated with the 'customer' that is employed seemingly universally. It is one that emphasizes strategies of customer focus, customer service, or customer care, often formalised in a customer charter, dedicated to the pursuit of customer satisfaction, sometimes delivered by customer service officers, supported by customer contact management and customer relationship management systems, and housed in customer contact centres and customer service centres. There is therefore a powerful sense in which this established and convenient 'customer'-related lexicon affords the 'customer' omnipresence even where the customer him/herself is less visible.

Throughout this discussion we do, of course, have to be careful not to assume that there is one universal understanding of what it means to be a 'customer'. However, on the basis of how Big City interviewees responded to the question of what service users wanted from their

relationship with the council, it is clear that they had in mind what might be termed a dominant view of the customer defined at length earlier.

In conclusion, we can view the 'customer' of public services as more uninvited guest than imposter (although the door appears to have been ajar). It is a character with chameleonic qualities who is perfectly at home in a variety of situations, though someone who, when probed, is not entirely credible in certain service settings. This was observed most perceptibly by Big City's Children and Families Team Manager, for whom referring to members of the public as 'customers' was not dismissed as "just semantics". Nevertheless, talking 'customer' came very easily to the participants. This represents one aspect of rehearsing the language associated with a character more typically found in commercial settings. In the next sub-section, I will set out the kind of customer that participants (together with council and wider e-government policy) have in mind.

4.3.2 A familiar customer

Here, we are concerned to find out more about the uninvited guest: What does this public services' 'customer' look like for participants? What does s/he want in relation to local services? Answering these questions involves examining the ways in which this character is framed by participants and by formal documentation associated with e-government. Some of the interview data cited here relate to participants' responses to the direct question – "What do you think the public want from their local authority?" (or a very similar question) – while other data have been taken from elsewhere in the interview discussions.

The results of a MORI study cited in a UK Cabinet Office (2004) document provide a useful means by which to structure this discussion. The study found that the five key drivers of customer satisfaction with public services in general were: delivery; timeliness; information; professionalism; and staff attitude (see figure 7 below) – drivers which map onto my case study data rather well.

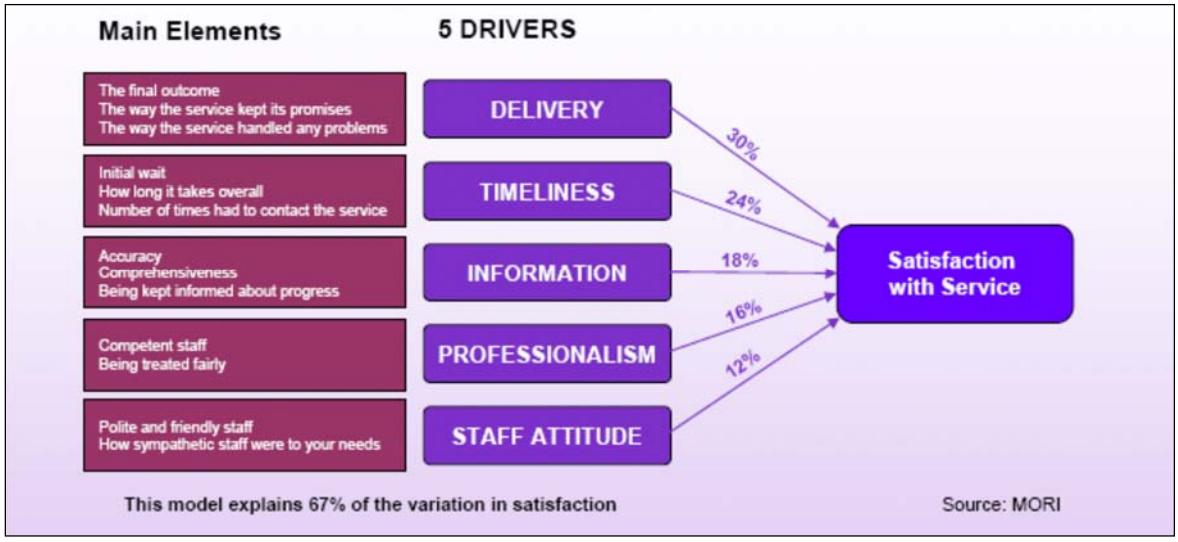

Figure 7: Cabinet Office (2004:3)

First, as this Senior Benefits Officer displayed quite emphatically, customers increasingly expect the council to provide useful *information* and, more importantly, they demand *timeliness* in the delivery of that information:

> "Don't you think though that's just the way society is, you know, everybody's expectations are they want it *here* [thumps table] and they want it *now* [thumps table], and they're not prepared to wait for it…If you don't move with the times, people become more and more dissatisfied with what you're offering…" (5th October 2005)

A similar characterisation of service users is reflected in central government texts articulating the rationale for service transformation. The Varney Review, for example, espouses services that are "…much slicker, more immediate, more convenient to the citizen and less intrusive on the busy citizen's time." (Varney, 2006:1)

When I asked a Big City Revenues Officer what she believed the council's primary function to be I was offered another insight into how service users are thought of and how they might be satisfied. Her account suggests an unqualified expectation of *delivery*:

> "I think at grass-roots level, as long as [customers] get their bins emptied and their roads are maintained and the street lighting's kept maintained and the schools and the social services are also there and [the council's] providing the services that they're supposed to, I think that's really all they want" (24th March 2005)

Whereas the service context may imply a more complex set of relationships (and one where it might be assumed service users would tend to adopt a more passive role), when I asked the Children and Families Team Manager what his 'customers' (the interviewee was referring to children and their families) wanted from his department he offered a not dissimilar image:

> "Our customers want…to have their demands met, as any other customer would, they would want to come in and say 'This is the service we want, or this is what we want fixed…erm, and we want it fixed as soon as possible'." (4th October 2005)

The discussion during that same interview moved on to the question of what members of the public more generally wanted from the local authority. The participant's remarks communicated a sense that the demands placed upon the council to *deliver* relate principally to those service areas from which customers stand to benefit from directly:

> "We would argue – 'Do we need more street lighting or do we need more social workers?', you know. The people in [Big City] are saying 'We need more street lighting thank you very much!'"

A little later in the interview I sought to clarify his views on how civic-minded Big City residents were:

> *Interviewer*: "Would you say that the average Jo or Jane wants council resources to be put into services such as those that you provide in order that certain vulnerable, in inverted commas, children/families get the best service they possibly can?"
>
> *Respondent*: "No, I don't think the average punter does…" (Children and Families Team Manager, 4th October 2005)

The interviewee felt that "…if you were to ask people in [Big City] around vulnerability for children they would say 'Oh yes, children must be protected, must be kept safe'", subject to certain caveats – "…there might be issues around that: 'Well, we don't want asylum seekers here' or 'We don't want young people who are offending living near us'." One reading of these views is that Big City customers are largely self-interested, that they have a narrow view of their relationship with their local authority. An alternative reading is that they simply prioritize safe streets (for the sake of the whole community) over the safety of children.

What else can we glean from the data about this 'customer'? As well as demanding to be *well-informed* and to be dealt with promptly and efficiently (*timeliness*), Big City service users, from the perspective of council officials, are seen to expect services to be delivered by appropriately trained and courteous staff – in other words, recalling the aforementioned customer satisfaction drivers, *professionalism* and *staff attitude* are prioritised. These ideas were articulated by a generic officer when asked how the customer service centres had changed customers' experience of interacting with the council.

> *Respondent*: "It's much more of a professional image, business-like image here"

Interviewer: "And you think people respond positively to that? That's a good thing in their eyes?"

Respondent: "I think so, why not? I mean, I can't see any negative things over it…At the end of the day if you're going anywhere you expect a good level of service and if you're going in there [the customer service centre] and you're getting somebody who's well trained, who knows what they're talking about and you're dealt with quickly and efficiently, that's all you want." (28th May 2003)

For some, an appropriate *staff attitude* entails customers "…being dealt with [so they] feel that [they] are someone, not a number…"; officers ought to "…make them feel like [they are] just there specifically to deal with theirs and only their query that day." (CRM system Scriptor, 18th November 2004) It is a view reminiscent of the well-worn aphorism – the customer is king.

One dimension of today's public services' customers that the MORI poll did not highlight, but which came through the data quite strongly, is their desire to feel they have received value for money. This connects with the anti-bureaucratic sentiment (shared by state organisations and customers alike) explored below. By way of example, this is how two interview respondents replied to the question – 'What do your customers want from the council?':

"I think they want cheaper council tax, I think they want more for less. I think they just like to see that the council are seen to be spending the money well and not wasting it" (Revenues officer; 24th March 2005)

"Well, they want improvements; they want to feel like we're a modern service…this idea of: 'I'm paying for something, I want me money's worth out of it'" (Senior Benefits Officer; 5th October 2005)

All in all, the customer being imagined, both in formal documentation and informally by council staff, is a familiar character – there is a striking similarity with the demanding, time-pressured, convenience-seeking, self-interested, rational actor typically associated with commercial market settings (*cf.* homo economicus). Indeed, the similarity is of no surprise given the tenor of much modernisation rhetoric coming from central government – that which extols the virtue of private sector service excellence and urges public bodies to follow suit (this is covered in more detail below). Neither should it be of any surprise that when I asked interview respondents whether they perceived any difference between the customer of public and private services – in terms of what they wanted and how they should be treated by the

council – they generally did not (though, as I will discuss later, there was some appreciation that public organisations were different from their private counterparts). From the perspective of many of those researched, a customer is a customer is a customer. This is reflected in numerous interviewees' comments along the lines of – 'that's just the way society is', or 'I think it's today's culture' when discussing the demanding nature of the council's customers. Importantly, this model, together with the descriptor, appears to be one that is accepted unproblematically by council staff. The data reveal no sense that council staff expect, or even desire, service users to adopt a different identity position – the 'customer' is perfectly 'natural'.

To develop this point, a Revenues Officer (who had previously worked for British Gas) described a customer of British Gas and Big City Council as "basically the same" (13th January 2005). Moreover, during a second interview, the interviewee believed "there shouldn't be any difference" between the customer service training at Big City and a commercial company; "…the customer service will be consistent with wherever you worked, so the staff here could go and work for Lloyds TSB and British Gas because it's transferable skills" (24th March 2005). As has been noted elsewhere, the view from the council's training department serves to support this undifferentiated view of customer service.

Even if we assume that service excellence is an unproblematic objective for deliverers of public services, it may be that members of the public view their relationship with a local authority in slightly different terms than how they view their relationship with their bank or telephone provider. The case study data suggest this is not the case from the point of view of some who deliver public services, as this Revenues Officer demonstrates:

> *Interviewer*: "Do you think they want more than that though, do you think people want…more of a relationship between themselves and [Big City] Council?"
> *Respondent*: "I think that if they have a query, they want to be able to see somebody or speak to somebody when *they* want to, and they expect that to be dealt with straight away or as soon as possible, and if it isn't, they'll ask why…"

Later in the interview, I pressed the point:

> *Interviewer*: "Do you think they want to have their voices heard by the local authority? Do you think they want to be part of any sort of decision-making, saying what money should be going towards what they care about in the community, this sort of thing?...Do they want to be more active?"

> *Respondent*: "I don't think so…not at our level. I think they play a part in it by their elected members…"I don't think they want to have any involvement with *us*." (24th March 2005)

What we find in the talk of council participants (and wider government text), then, is the rehearsal of a recognisable public services' customer, more or less synonymous with his/her private sector counterpart, even though individual participants may have emphasised different characteristics (see Needham, 2006 for a comparative finding). Now while the 'imagined' customer that guides routine as well as strategic decision-making is undoubtedly the product of a myriad of socio-cultural influences, service providing organisations like Big City are increasingly turning to more formal techniques to enrich (or refine) their understanding of *their* customer – this is the focus of the next section. An exploration of the means by which Big City's customer is coming to be 'known', puts into perspective his/her familiarity.

4.4 Refining the public services' customer

According to the UK Prime Minister's Adviser on Public Services Reform at the time, "…the ultimate judgement about the success of service reform will be made by the public and their experience of better quality services. To deliver that outcome, the real nature of the customer experience needs to be understood and built into the way we make policy, design and deliver services and judge their performance" (Thomson, 2004: 1). In this sub-section I set out some of the ways in which Big City is seeking to understand 'the real nature' of its customers' experience. This process I term 'refining' the public services' customer. And in order to carry out the job of refining its understanding, the council is turning to a series of formal techniques well-established elsewhere. As this Customer Service Centre Supervisor explained, the council's most important function is "to provide…not just the services that we *perceive* they need and want but what people actually *do* need and want" (Customer Service Centre Supervisor; 20th July 2005) Ascertaining what people *do* need and want involves listening: "…we're here to respond to the needs of the community, we have to constantly evaluate our performance and react basically…and be prepared to listen…to what our customers want." (Senior Benefits Officer; 5th October 2005) I now turn to the principle means by which Big City is engaging in 'listening' to and systematising its customers' needs.

4.4.1 Courting the customer

Big City's management have employed a range of methods (many of which constitute well-established practice for commercial service providers) for listening to customers, understanding their needs and so on – in short, techniques designed to court the customer. One set of techniques entails seeking out customers' views on their experiences or their preferences for the shape of future provision. In this mode, exit surveys are conducted at Customer Service Centres, customers are offered the opportunity to pass on feedback via comment cards when they come into contact with the council, and community focus groups have been utilized to seek out local customers' preferences prior to the setting up of one stop shops. The council's Customer Service Manager, seemingly passionate about customer consultation, gave an example of the council in listening mode:

> "They told us that they wanted *PayPoint* in customer service centres, so when they were coming to pay their rent and council tax, they also wanted to be able to pay their gas, their electric, top up their mobile phone; we listened, we did a business case – it's actually brought in revenue to the council…but it's also given the customers exactly what they want" (1st August 2005)

Many local authorities, including Big City, are investing in another set of techniques designed to facilitate a more complete understanding of customers. These techniques do not involve directly seeking information from service users about their needs or preferences; they exploit the ever-increasing data-gathering capability of new technologies. One way in which Big City is beginning to utilize such techniques is through developing partnerships with private information analysts, including Experian. According to the Head of Big City Service, while asking customers directly what they want can be a useful strategy for informing service design, a more effective indicator of customer preferences is what they actually *do*.

> *Respondent*: "Let's not try and imagine what customers want; let's *know* what customers want. We can *ask* them, but even they don't know. But their actions actually determine what they want and there are people who can help us with that; people like Experian, who have *incredible* demographics, the most *unbelievable* information about people…We're currently kicking off some work with Experian, to actually help us understand our customers more, so that we can identify the service mix, the prioritization of that service mix, the delivery of that service mix, the quality of the delivery of that service mix" (24th August 2005)

Aside from these approaches to customer 'insight', the most significant ICT-based method of refining the council's understanding of its customers embraced by Big City relates to its investment in CRM-supporting technologies. It is these systems that allow the council to collect data on service users' behaviour on an unprecedented scale, data which inform strategic decision-making around the shape and scope of service delivery. According to a Big City Customer Service Strategy document, the CRM system "…helps us to understand our customers and provide high quality, joined up and consistent services across a choice of delivery channels." In short, CRM facilitates organisational knowledge of the *whole* customer. Before looking at some of the ways the system is helping the council to get closer to its customers I will provide a brief description of the system.

As is clear from figure 8 below, it is the council's ambition that its CRM infrastructure will support a diversity of delivery channels. This research focuses on face to face interactions as, at the time of the data collection process, this channel was being developed in terms of being supported by the CRM systems. Plans were underway to support the telephone, and then Internet, channels.

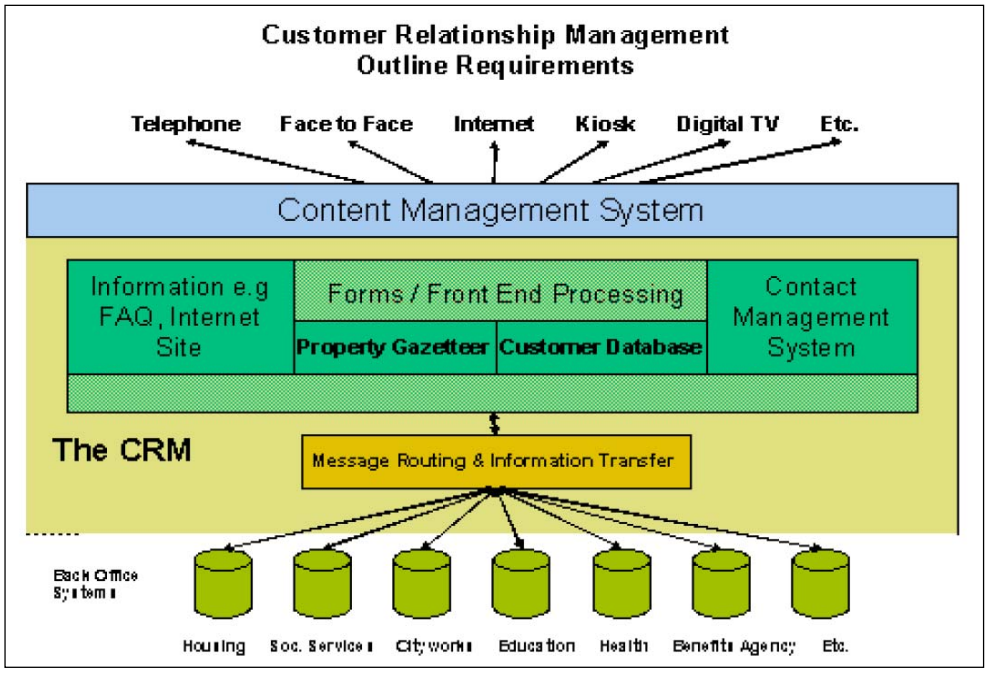

Figure 8: Big City's vision for CRM (Big City Customer Service Strategy document)

The solution chosen by Big City incorporates scripting technologies (founded on a case-based reasoning approach to enquiry handling) that support frontline officers in an effort to ensure the expert and consistent handling of enquiries. At the time of this study, the council was

exceeding its target for increased enquiry resolution at first point of contact, with 83% of queries successfully dealt with by the first member of staff seen by a customer.

As the diagram above shows, a set of message routing technologies sit between the content management application and the multitude of back office systems. In terms of the breadth and depth of Big City's CRM infrastructure, the Project Manager of the council's CRM implementation characterised its approach as 'hybrid' – they had CRM functionality for the majority of service areas but not all of the back office systems were fully integrated. For some service areas, customer-facing users were limited to 'view-only' access. The system uses a 'screen scraping' technique to reformat information from multiple screens in the back office systems into a smaller number of screens for use by the generic customer service agent. This form of integration was chosen by Big City as a short-term solution given that there were plans to replace many of their back office systems.

A typical approach to implementing these kinds of organization-wide systems involves proving the concept in certain strategically important areas before pursuing more widespread changes. A Technical Consultant at Big City's CRM system vendor (from now on 'CRM Vendor') explained the rationale behind this strategy:

> "…we can't do everything in one go…What we do is try and encourage them – 'What services do you think are the big wins, big hitters?' and that tends to be the revenue-generating ones; your council tax definitely normally always falls in there and your street services…like bulky waste…" (6th April 2005)

This broadly characterises the strategy adopted by the management of Big City Service, and one which echoes that of other English local authorities (King, 2007). And as King points out, it is interesting to note that "…the three typically highest cost and arguably most complex services, education, social services and housing, were lower down the list of CRM priorities." (2007: 53)

At the time of the study a number of 'big wins' had been achieved by Big City, including council tax services, and plans were progressing to deepen the integration of the Benefits function; the next major service to be supported at the frontline was Planning. A number of research participants viewed the successful integration of the council tax systems as a crucial political victory, both in terms of convincing senior management of the viability of a CRM technology-led strategy and in terms of overcoming resistance among back office staff.

Both public and private sector actors often cite the enhancement of customer service as the primary reason for investing in CRM technologies; Big City was no different in this regard. Improvements from the customer side include having enquiries (relating to multiple services) resolved at a single point of contact, with a higher level of consistency, and only having to provide information to the council once. Improvements from the organization side, apart from the ability to streamline and standardize service provision, tend to be expressed in terms of the systems' capacity to deliver a holistic view of the customer.

At the same time, it would be naïve to ignore the opportunities for cost-savings that tend to accompany the rhetoric surrounding CRM implementations. While Big City actors tended to emphasise the customer-centric qualities of the investment, senior management are also determined that their investment will, in the medium and longer term, generate efficiencies. First, savings can be expected as a consequence of the centralisation and amalgamation of service enquiry points. Second, the 'capture' and networking of expert knowledge promises further efficiencies – it means that more enquiries across a range of services can be handled to resolution at the first point of contact, thereby minimizing 'avoidable contact'. In this way, it "increases the time of a specialist officer to do really what they're employed to do" (ICT Applications Team Manager; 14th October 2004), and, in the case of Planning officers, to focus on generating grant income via an *Invest to Save* initiative. Transaction cost-savings can also result from exploiting CRM system functionality in conjunction with, for example, self-service Internet-based channels. It could also include conducting certain 'outbound' activities more cheaply; for example, sending a SMS message to leisure centre members "…if they've got a leisure facility that is closing for four months because of refurbishment…", something that was suggested by a Technical Consultant from CRM Vendor.

Another dimension of efficiency-making associated with CRM-related systems relates to the strategic value of the management information they can generate. For example, the systematic recording of data on customer interaction presents Big City management with new insights into their customers' behaviour. These statistical data represent a basis for a range of strategising, such as maximising the efficient deployment of frontline staff or rationalising service access points. In this vein, the Customer Services Manager (1st August 2005) explained that "people are very interested in the percentages of people that are coming in [to one stop shops] for the different service areas – 'What area are they prepared to travel to?' As a result, "…we can see by the calls that we've logged how many people have come from out of the area, and that also helps us shape sort of the future strategies about withdrawing

Benefits people from Benefits offices, cos if we can tell people are already prepared to travel cos they've got a bus route from a particular area of the city, then we can do some rationalisation there." Hence, as well as enhancing service quality, a refined CRM view of the customer also raises the prospect of efficiencies.

While the relentless search for efficiencies is a factor of organisational life, customer-focus dominates the CRM agenda. As well as being used operationally, CRM system-generated customer information is used analytically, via processes of segmenting and classifying customers, and modelling and predicting customer behaviour – what might be termed getting to know the customer better than he knows himself. Central government has been aware of the potential strategic power of these technologies for some time. Distinct from the use of CRM techniques in commercial settings to differentiate between customers based on their value to the firm, "…with citizens' consent, [public sector e-businesses] will be able to use data to inform the development of their services and build mechanisms for continuous improvement and better quality services" (Cabinet Office, 2000a: 12).

These potential benefits are not lost on the management at Big City Council. Having segmented service users in accordance with 'life events' (expecting a baby, moving home and so on) in anticipation of them requiring clusters of (rather than individual) services, the council can be more pro-active than in the past. Big City's Customer Services Manager explained how frontline staff are being encouraged to enact this more holistic approach:

> "…if somebody moves to the city, one of the sort of seven things that [we] should be mentioning to them, like: the city council website, which is the events and diaries and what's going on in the city; tell them about [the council's monthly magazine]; children – point out where 'births, deaths and marriages' is; they need to register their council tax account; Do they know when their bins will be collected? Do they know…how to go about reporting a streetlight? – that's sort of 'moving house'." (1st August 2005)

The participant explained that the council intended to build this service clustering into the scripting technologies so as to routinize a more pro-active approach to enquiry handling.

Another dimension of CRM functionality relates to systems' capability to predict behavior. At a strategic level, the gathering of insight on customer usage of services, including a greater appreciation of the cyclical nature of demand, is seen to help Big City management anticipate the level of customer requirements over time and undertake the necessary capacity planning. It can also facilitate the promotion of services individual customers may value based on their

profile – what a number of interviewees characterized as 'outbound' activity. While this aspect of service delivery was very much at an embryonic stage during the fieldwork, the council's ICT Applications Team Manager offered a flavour of the type of promotional activity that might be involved.

> "We store this corporate contact history, so a particular customer – we'll have a view of the customer…Ultimately, we're not like a private company…but perhaps we could identify people's likes and perhaps do outbound contacts rather than, at the moment, it's all inbound. We might want to market to particular people who have leisure cards: 'We've got a big leisure event in [Big City]'; along those lines." (14th October 2004)

According to a union representative at Big City, corporate contact information may prove to be valuable in supporting other types of outbound activity, including debt collection: "…ringing people up and saying 'You're in arrears with your such and such, I would like to give you the opportunity…if you pay now, doing this, doing that, you will avoid a whatever charge'…" This participant believed that "knowing about your customer base" in terms of their "whereabouts and when people are available" will help the council in its plan to "…interfere with somebody at tea-time, because they're gonna be sitting down." (19th November 2005)

While, on the whole, lower level staff viewed the notion of increased proactivity with indifference, seeing it as simply another element of being more customer-centred, when prompted to reflect on the issue some expressed unease. This generic officer, for example, did not have a clear idea of what being proactive might entail but feared that it might take on the character of commercial techniques: "I know that if I go to a bank to put money in and they start asking me, 'Have you got insurance?' and you're just like 'I only wanna put my money in, stop bombarding me with all this stuff!', and I would hate the Council to go down that line really" (12th November 2004) Related concerns were expressed by this CRM scriptor at the thought of frontline staff 'cold-calling' customers: "I think there's only so far you could go down that line, ringing people up and asking them things, you can only go so far when people get cheesed off." (18th November 2004) In this sense, the exploitation of certain CRM techniques could be encouraging local authorities to get *too* close to their customer, to know *too* much.

A key aspect of developing a customer-focus at Big City, then, entails refining the institutional understanding of service users by courting them with the aid of a range of technologies and techniques. What this means in general terms is service users enjoying an

experience more akin to that which they are used to receiving from commercial service providers. In the light of these findings, it is not at all surprising that Big City's customer is a familiar one – the principle knowledge-gathering instruments are equally familiar.

4.4.2 Systematising an institutional view of the customer

Another key element of the council's refining efforts is ensuring that what is 'known' about service users is captured and shared and that all customer interactions are of a consistently high quality, wherever they take place – in short, systematising an institutional approach to the customer.

Systematisation is being pursued by a range of customer service techniques and technologies well-established in private sector settings. Among these is the use of 'mystery shoppers' at the council, serving as a check on quality and service consistency. At the same time, Big City's Customer Service Strategy (nd.) document points out that "in the private sector, there is...a focus on identifying and prioritizing 'moments of truth'." This is a well-worn CRM-related concept relating to high emotion encounters that council management are urging council employees to be mindful of, thereby emphasizing a focus on customer expectations and continuous improvement of the service encounter. In the wider local authority landscape, there has even been talk of councils offering "…high street store vouchers to council taxpayer's to make up for missed appointments." (Publicnetbriefing, 2008) This was one of the options being considered by a review team set up by the then Communities Secretary (which included members from Tesco and the National Consumer Council) for occasions when services fail to meet service users' expectations. Alongside these methods, the most visible innovation inherited by the council from commercial settings relates to its investment in CRM – this will be the main focus of this sub-section.

Big City's customer-focused re-structuring exercise (to be discussed later) has involved the redefinition of front and back office roles and responsibilities in conjunction with the expansion of access channels. This has involved a parallel set of changes associated with the re-processing of workflow, appropriately supported by new ICTs, in line with the needs and perspective of customers. The business process reengineering (BPR) exercise undertaken by the council has entailed the mapping and scripting of its multiple service processes – a crucial element of systematising an institutional approach to the customer.

This seemingly mammoth task has been facilitated by the output of a major process-mapping venture carried out by a number of local authorities around the same time known as LEAP (Life Events Access Project). As mentioned earlier, LEAP set out to develop knowledge maps of services based around 'life events' to support a range of access channels. The resulting process maps identified processes – which often straddled traditional service area boundaries – such as 'leaving school', 'dealing with crime', and 'becoming a carer'. These have formed the basis of Big City's own process maps and scripts which have been assimilated into the CRM solution interfaces by a small team of Scriptors.

Scripting technologies are intended to support improved service delivery in different ways. First, if enquiry resolution is facilitated by a standardised script – designed to guide non-expert staff through the steps of specific interactions – it is not unreasonable to expect that a consistent level of service quality would logically follow. The idea of eliminating variation in the way individual staff members handle enquiries was highly valued by senior Customer Services staff at Big City:

> "It gives a consistent message, because a lot of services say 'Oh well, it depends on the situation', but it also depends on the individual what answer you'll get…somebody might take a slightly different view to somebody else and it forces them into making a consistent decision which is also good for the customer."

At the same time, the merits of these technologies are seen to go beyond minimising the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 1980) effect:

> "It's absolutely fundamental I think to the contact centre because…as we grow, we're gonna have to have scripts available to support staff, reduce the training times, promote multi-skilling, all that kind of thing – so we've *got* to get the scripts right from the start." (Contact Centre Development Officer; 29th November 2004)

Getting the scripts "right" is something which the data suggest has been anything but straightforward. Several participants who had been involved with mapping out their own service areas articulated difficulties and frustrations about the process. A common issue relates to the difficulty of capturing the variety of possible enquiries, as a Senior Revenues Officer explained: "The worst thing about Council Tax is… 'yeah but if you go down that route, there's this that can happen' and there's *so many* offshoots…they're being driven crazy…" (13th January 2005) Related to this issue is the problem participants have of recalling the variety of enquiries in the first place; it is a question of illuminating tacit knowledge accrued through experience: "…you have to map *every* eventuality and you can't think of

every eventuality until you're actually doing it…We're going grey with it I think [laughs]…" (Senior Revenues Officer, 13th January 2005) Another challenge posed by the mapping process is that of ensuring the maps reflect best practice and comply with a constantly shifting regulatory terrain, as this Parking Officer explained: "…it has taken quite a while because it's very difficult just trying to think what information you do actually need and as things change…you have to keep altering everything". (13th January 2005)

Despite these difficulties, and reflecting on the perceived benefits set out above, in the light of the data accumulated at Big City there is no reason to doubt that scripts have indeed helped to accelerate the training of new customer-facing staff. Similarly, there is evidence that frontline staff have found scripts to be a useful source of service-related information. However, there is less convincing evidence that the levels of consistency in enquiry handling hoped for by council management are being achieved.

As a result of generating data via interviews and observation, there is evidence that scripts are often viewed by officers very much as a back-up tool in practice:

> "We tend to use it if it's something that we haven't done for a while, or if it's something new, or if it's something we're unsure about, or even if it's something that we do all the time – like a Visitors Permit – but somebody comes in and asks a different type of question, then we can go in and use the scripting." (Generic Officer; 12th November 2004)

According to this respondent her use of scripts also depends on how useful she finds them – some are more information-rich than others. Another, longer serving, colleague viewed scripts more as a training device; they are "…more beneficial to less experienced officers coming in, without a doubt – I mean that's more or less what it's there for" (20th July 2005). This notion of relative utility was confirmed by the observational activity, during which scripts were hardly used. During an earlier interview, this same generic officer confessed to sometimes bypassing the frontline CRM interface altogether. He light-heartedly spoke of being wary of the 'Mainframe police' as he explained that "…I can work quicker on the Mainframe because it's using direct commands – if you know the codes you can *bam bam bam bam* and put them in and it's updating straight away – [whereas] with the [new CRM system], it's going back to the Mainframe, getting the information and scraping the information forward, so, it's been, to me, it's a little bit more of a slow process." (28th May 2003)

Indeed, at times, rather than *enhancing* query resolution, the script is seen as a barrier to delivering high quality customer service:

> "I think, although you can use it for every query…it's not always that practical when you've got a customer there in a hurry and you know what you're doing – it's just extra time-consuming when you could be like actually doing what they need you to do" (Generic Officer; 12th November 2004)

This comment chimes with what I observed during a routine Customer Service Centre team meeting at which an experienced council worker admitted to management that he would sometimes use the old mainframe system for enquiry-handling in parallel so that he could deal with more than one process at the same time (something the new system did not allow).

There is also variation of script use among Big City staff in terms of how far an officer will endeavour to resolve a query before consulting a colleague, either in person or by telephone (notwithstanding the level of resolution accommodated by the script) On occasion, officers simply hand the telephone to the customer to settle a matter. As such, the availability of 'expert' colleagues, in part, will determine the level and type of service that is delivered.

The most important thing, from the perspective of the generic officer, appears to be to handle the customer's enquiry in the most efficient way they see fit – in this sense, individual customer satisfaction is the priority for these workers. At the same time, there is arguably far from consistency in service provision at the CRM-supported front-line at Big City. It is also worth recalling that the complexity of life in organizations is such that the extent to which rules fully determine action will always be limited. As Canales argues, "individuals – who vary in their backgrounds and histories – exercise agency in the recognition, selection, and implementation of rules in work situations, unavoidably introducing improvisation and variability to the enactment of organizational scripts". (2010: 91) This is not to suggest that the council's service users are therefore necessarily unsatisfied with the outcome of their interactions; rather, that the means by which those outcomes are arrived at are not uniform.

Despite indications of innovative thinking at Big City regarding the utilisation of its investment in ICTs, the data also imply that, on the whole, new technologies – including those associated with CRM – are being under-exploited. A leading proponent of the service transformation agenda, the Head of Big City Service, was in no doubt that there was "massive" potential for extracting value from new technologies. It is, for him, a source of frustration that the council lacks the kind of innovative culture that could realise this potential.

In support of this view, the interviewees working for CRM Vendor felt that many of their local authority clients are culturally ill-equipped to more effectively exploit ICTs. During a discussion of why local authorities had been slow to utilise SMS in their contact with customers, a Technical Consultant suggested that "they don't maybe see the business case for it, or the need for it". (6th April 2005) It should be remembered, of course, that, as set out in Chapter 1**,** there is a good deal of evidence that organizations across all sectors are notoriously poor at fully exploiting the potential of CRM-supporting technologies, especially regarding the utilization of CRM-generated customer data.

Part of the reason for under-exploitation at Big City (and elsewhere) may relate to the differing and often undeveloped understandings of CRM among organizational members. In suggesting this, I am not claiming that CRM has *one* agreed definition; indeed, it could be seen as a somewhat vacuous term, open to multiple interpretations. According to a Technical Consultant at CRM Vendor, "…a lot of customers don't fully understand [CRM]". This is borne out by much of the data. On the frontline, one Generic Officer told me: "I'd been here ages before I even knew what CRM was and then I found out what it stood for, and even then I thought 'Oh Customer Relationship Management', I thought, 'Well, I'm still none the wiser'." When I then asked: "So what is CRM for you now?", the participant replied: "…just the fact that we can sort of track the customers and it's all recorded on one system, and it's like, it's a way of sort of managing all the contacts, not just individual departments having their own way of recording,…that's about all I know about it really." (20th July 2005)

The idea that CRM is little more than a shared database was in evidence elsewhere. For another officer (based in Benefits but with considerably more local government experience than her frontline colleague), CRM was a technological "tool", like having "a little notebook", that helped the council to "build up a history" of customers' contact. She acknowledged that "…it's all a bit over my head" (Benefits Officer; 5th October 2005). If we recall that the Customer Service Manager described CRM as "a big customer database" to a group of newly recruited generic officers, these views are hardly surprising. As Orlikowski and Gash (1994: 191) have argued, "…people tend to approach the new in terms of the old."

To find a perspective on CRM that moves beyond a technology-centric view, one has to climb the organisational hierarchy, or look in the IT department. The council's ICT Applications Team Manager viewed CRM as "an enabler…it helps maximise the…best possible delivery of the service – the people are the absolutely key thing." (14th October 2004) For a senior

manager based in Big City Service, IT was “the lowest form of life”, insisting that technology solutions procured under his leadership must be informed by the council’s overarching information management and customer service strategies.

Overall, therefore, CRM is a somewhat underdeveloped concept at Big City – the rhetoric is very much outpacing reality. Seen alongside the partial use of scripting technologies and the, as yet, untapped potential for courting customers, Big City is some way from developing a coherent understanding of what CRM means in a public service delivery context. Hence, in practice, a less refined view of the customer than the technologies might support is being achieved.

The next section deals with another crucial aspect of this story of change, the wider organizational resourcing of customer-focus, without which the programme of investment in technologies referred to already, would be largely futile.

4.5 Resourcing the public services’ customer

As well as investing considerable effort in refining the internal view of their customers, contemporary service providing organisations are expending equal energy and resources on preparing the institution to be more customer-facing – operationally, strategically, structurally, and culturally. This section focuses on how Big City is responding to this challenge; a challenge neatly articulated by the then Cabinet Secretary: “We must be relentlessly customer-focused!” (O’Donnell, 2006, cited Bollen and Emes, 2008:29)

4.5.1 A home for the customer

A vital part of embedding customer-focus at Big City Council, and crucial to the proper functioning of its CRM system, is a parallel programme of restructuring. For Big City, this has meant providing the customer with a ‘home’ of its own, a material and visible presence within the council, and somewhere that confronts head on the challenge to be ‘relentlessly’ customer-focused.

First, it is important to understand something of the meta-structural context within which the customer has come to find an institutional home. Big City Council published a Green Paper in 2001; its central aim was to publicize its emerging customer service strategy. Customers were

invited to complete a short questionnaire that sought their views on existing and proposed customer-facing facilities and elicited information on their preferred means of interacting with the council. Having received a broadly positive response from customers, one that was supportive of its strategic ambitions, Big City sought to accelerate its customer-focused efforts. While the official record (in the shape of the council's web-based strategic documents and so on) paints a picture of steady progression and rational reflection since this public consultation exercise, it was at this point, according to the Head of Big City Service, that the council began to appreciate that realising its vision would require fundamental organizational reform: "… our technology is not fit for purpose, our organizational form is not fit for purpose, our culture is not fit for purpose, our asset base is not fit for purpose, any way you want to look at it, we're in a mess and we need outside help…" (24th August 2005)

The subsequent period of organizational self-examination involved the council giving serious consideration to how its customer service strategy might be taken forward in conjunction with its obligations under the nationally-formulated local e-government agenda. This process included establishing a 'Business Transformation' team with a remit to assess the council's readiness to embark on a major programme of change. Big City invested considerable effort weighing up the possibility of outsourcing elements of service provision to a private sector provider – an option taken by a number of other UK-based local authorities in recent years. Ultimately, the council decided on an 'in-house option' which involved an extensive programme of organisational restructuring including the creation of a corporate division tasked with developing e-government and customer service within the council. Aware that they did not possess the capacity to deliver such significant change, Big City assembled a range of 'transformation partners'. These included a leading global provider of customer-focused IT and communications solutions, a smaller, UK-based organisation specialising in change management and ICT services, and an international professional services enterprise. This course of action is very much in line with central guidance. A key Cabinet Office framework document explains that, in order to deliver citizen-focused government, "we need to form partnerships with innovators in the private sector who can find new ways of meeting changing patterns of demand" (2000a: 1).

At its inception in late 2002, the newly-created organizational division (which I shall refer to as 'Big City Service' from now on) comprised a range of corporate functions, including Customer Services, IT, Payroll, and HR, and a collection of traditional customer-facing services such as Council Tax, Business Rates, Benefit Administration, and Cashiering. These

functions had previously been managed under the council's various directorates, which, following the reorganisation, sat alongside Big City Service in the council's meta-structure. Big City Service had become a corporate resource with the explicit responsibility for 'the development of e-Government and Customer Service' (Big City Internal Report: The creation of Big City Service, 2002).

It should be noted that the creation of Big City Service was inspired by a pro-efficiency agenda in addition to a customer-focus agenda. One of the primary official reasons for the council having opted for the in-house arrangement was the scope for immediate as well as medium-term cost-efficiencies in conjunction with substantial performance improvement. Set against an investment programme of around twenty million pounds, it was estimated that, over a period of eleven years, cost reductions of fifty million pounds would be made, which would largely be achieved through the loss of more than one hundred and fifty staff members. A council report prepared following the procurement exercise stated the official reason for not partnering with an alternative commercial provider as "the financial savings is unsatisfactory". Whatever the hopes for future cost-savings, in order to reap them Big City Council has invested heavily in resourcing the customer.

A major beneficiary of that resourcing programme has been the newly created Customer Services function, the council's new 'front office', where a new body of 'generic' are housed. The restructuring of customer contact means that all incoming enquiries (be they face to face, telephone and so on) are channelled into the new front office, replacing the multiple customer access points previously spread across council directorates. Generic staff are charged with resolving as many routine, multiple-service enquiries as they can (to the extent that they are supported by CRM systems) while the more specialist queries are dealt with by service-specific staff in the 'back offices'.

The newly conceived front office has become manifest in various forms representing a multi-channel environment, some of which pre-date the major reorganisation outlined above. The first significant structural endeavour undertaken by the Council to reflect its customer-oriented ambitions was the creation of a city-based call centre set up to handle telephone enquiries relating to a range of environmental services – a temporary home for the customer. Two years later, in 2000, came the formation of the council's first Customer Service Centre – a rather more conspicuous embodiment of customer-focus. Located in the centre of the city, this was designed to be the council's new 'front door'. Following the procurement of a CRM

system a number of years later this one-stop-shop came to comprise the key 'face to face' channel of the CRM infrastructure outlined above. Thereafter, the programme of change has escalated to include the creation of a series of one-stop-shops located in the city suburbs, the expansion of the council's online service provision, and the launch of a contact centre primarily designed to handle telephone contact across a range of services.

What we can observe, then, is that Big City's 'customer' has been resourced with a tangible and high profile home within the institutional landscape. Structurally, the customer sits in 'Customer Services', itself located at the heart of a new and strategically important corporate division – Big City Service. And materially, the customer is embodied in the council's chain of one-stop-shops and contact centres, manned by the newly assembled ranks of customer service officers.

Moreover, the customer's home is, in relative terms, a very well-appointed home. Given the level of resources invested in accommodating the customer, there is a risk of antipathy on the part of other council workers. A Customer Services Manager acknowledged that her department's high profile is indeed a source of resentment for certain colleagues, a claim that was confirmed by a Senior Benefits Officer working in a less celebrated part of Big City Service. Here, she was recalling a recent encounter with the council's chief executive at the opening of a one-stop-shop:

> "…[the new] Customer Service Centre, it's absolutely gorgeous…and I said to him, 'What are you doing about accommodation for your staff elsewhere?'; 'Have you been to [the Benefits unit's accommodation] recently?', and he's like 'Oh yes', you know, but I mean that's the thing…we're sitting in a hovel while they're sitting in like this beautiful building, you know, and people can sort of think 'Well that's a bit unfair isn't it?'" (5th October 2005)

My own observations confirmed a striking difference in the standard of office between the new front office (in the shape of one-stop-shops) and some of the back office services (for example, Social Services and Benefits).

The encounter between the Benefits officer and the chief executive may reflect a sense of 'them and us' among council colleagues that senior management would prefer did not exist and which the transformation programme – being a corporate endeavour, rhetorically at least – aims to break down. From a management perspective, all council workers should be pleased to see investment in a corporate customer services programme serving internal and external

customers alike. At the same time, the strategic and symbolic significance of the customer's new home as something of an organizational beacon is reinforced by a key council report which declared that "Customer Services will facilitate change in other services by embodying the new culture of the organisation" (Big City Internal Report: The Creation of Big City Service, 2002). And it is to culture that I turn next. The following five sub-sections set out the key elements of a customer-focus culture emerging from the case study data.

4.5.2 Customer service-oriented

Alongside institutional investments in new structures, buildings, and roles – and arguably of more importance – has been the council's investment in its human resources, those tasked with animating the programme of change. What is clear from the data is the sense among council management that a successful programme of e-government transformation is one that is underpinned by a corresponding set of values – what might be described as 'enterprising' values (*cf.* du Gay, 2000). The data show that the council is expending considerable resource in instilling these values. My interpretation of the data lead me to conclude that it is doing so via a programme of recruitment, training, partnering, and professionalizing, all of which are facilitating a process of 'catching-up' with more customer-focused organizations.

Displaying a commitment to customer-focus is arguably the principal of these values, around which a number of other complementary values can be identified. The key components of this value set are usefully represented within Big City Council's 2002 Implementing e-Government (IEG) Statement in the shape of the criteria it was believed should infuse the Council's approach to e-government:

- "Getting closer to the public
- Adopting a corporate approach
- Modernising how we work, reducing bureaucracy, increasing efficiency and becoming more open
- Valuing staff by communicating more effectively, providing more training and development and extending supportive policies"

Members of staff based in and around the council's Customer Services unit in particular were found to invoke these enterprising values. And as noted above, it is the members of this unit that the management identified as "embodying the new culture of the organisation", leading where other staff should follow.

The principal value sought by Big City – corresponding with the above-cited IEG Statement commitment to "getting closer to the public" – is a dedication to customer service. Two key approaches by which the council has sought to inculcate this value are a training and development programme and a purposeful recruitment drive.

Such is the importance of this agenda, Big City has rolled out a corporate customer service training programme – "*deep*, meaningful and wide, across the organisation"– to tackle outdated views of the customer, in deed as well as in thought: "in *values*, in *beliefs* and *behaviour*" (Head of Big City Service, 24th August 2005). A senior training and development officer explained that the notion of customer service permeates much of the council's wider training programme:

> "I think customer service now is moving into all aspects of training, whether it's customer service training in those inverted commas, or whether we're looking at Management Development Training or Project Planning, Project Management; the ultimate end is that the customer gets better value…If it hasn't got a benefit for the customer, most probably we shouldn't be doing it." (18th June 2003)

Reflecting the council's commitment to excellence in this regard, Big City Service recently earned a National Training Award in recognition of its efforts to help staff become more customer-focused. The council has also been nominated for 'Customer Service Team of the Year' (National Customer Service Awards). Further, recognition of individual excellence in this area is marked by bestowing the title of 'Customer Service Achiever' on deserving staff and publishing their achievement in the council's newsletter. On the national stage, we find Public Servants of the Year awards such as 'Tailoring the Fit' (the customer focus award); 'Raising the Standard' (the frontline worker award); and 'Demanding the Best' (the award for service transformation).

Beyond in-house training, council staff – particularly Customer Services staff – are encouraged to develop their level of customer service fluency by gaining external qualifications such as *Institute of Customer Service* (ICS) awards and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Both of these are cross-sectoral, representing a generic notion of customer service. Another development tool the council has invested in is the deployment of 'mystery shoppers'. The Customer Service Manager explained that "the union was against it" when this idea was floated "…but when I sat down with the staff and said…'We deliver a

good service, let's prove it!'…they were all for it, so the union…didn't have a leg to stand on." (1st August 2005)

More fundamental, in terms of how customer-focus is being embedded in the institutional fabric, is the council's recruitment of the 'right' people with the 'right' value set. First, the data revealed that a commitment to customer-focus was sought in personnel occupying positions at all levels of the council's organisational hierarchy, starting at the very top with the Chief Executive. According to the Head of Big City Service, in the late 1990s senior council management declared "we need somebody to come in who's got this kind of customer service ethos to move this organisation". And once that person had been appointed, he "…had a quick look around, [and] he said 'this Council is *way* off the pace in terms of customer service and we need a *paradigm shift* in our thinking'." (24th August 2005)

As for those staff responsible for enacting customer service on the frontline, one of the management team explained that these skills, above all else, were deemed to be of increasing value in the recruitment of generic officers:

> "We would look for people who had customer service skills and teach them everything else, so certainly if we are doing a person specification, the essential criteria on that is all gonna be about customer service rather than specific back office related experience. So we've totally moved away from that, as opposed to when we originally opened, when people did have to have x number of years local authority experience" (Customer Service Centre Manager, 20th July 2005)

This idea was supported by the observation of an induction meeting for new recruits to the generic officer role. There, the Customer Services Manager declared: "We know you've got the customer service skills we're looking for," the implication being that what they had to learn now was how the Council functioned and the processes relating to different service areas.

So resolute has the recruitment strategy been in this part of the council, the situation was compared to a *tabula rasa*:

> "It's difficult in an organisation like this…as a manager of a service, you never start with a clean slate…you've already got the cards, you know in terms of your staffing compliment…I think with Customer Services though, they got as close to a blank slate as you'll ever get. Yes…if the work was coming in, well the staff came with it, but

there were *new* areas as well,…[where] they could bring in the necessary expertise, and that's what they've done." (Trade union representative; 19th November 2005)

Whether a result of customer service development activities, a clear-minded recruitment policy, or some other factor, the idea of a customer-focused council was, in the main, wholly endorsed by the research participants. Interviewees' responses to the question, 'What is the main role of the council?' provide direct evidence of this. A common response to this question focussed on its responsibility to provide high quality services. For a Parking team member, "I think it's about providing a good service to all the clients out there; I think that's the biggest thing" (13th January 2005) In the case of a member of social services staff: "it's all about, it comes back to customer-focus…" (15th August 2005) For another participant, the imperative to deliver customer satisfaction transcends the notion of a responsibility – it is the council's very raison d'être. Moreover, she views colleagues who do not share this perspective with disdain:

> "The primary motivator is customer satisfaction…Because really traditionally the council has expected the customer to rearrange themselves to suit the council and that's completely the other way around and that's why we're having such a major culture shock because a lot of different directorates can't get themselves out of that mind-set: a lot of services [say]…'but we don't do it this way', 'we don't work those hours', 'we do things that way', completely failing to understand that *the whole point of their being here is to serve the customer*." (Contact Centre Development Officer; 29th November 2004)

A customer service culture such as that being championed at Big City is viewed by many practitioners and policymakers as standing in direct opposition to what was traditionally a fundamental aspect of a public service worker's ethos. It is to this dimension of the desired value set that I now turn.

4.5.3 Anti-bureaucratic

While, over the past three decades, the 'enterprising' organisation has achieved what today looks very much like a position of dominance, its putative 'Other' – the bureaucracy – has received a somewhat 'bad press', particularly in relation to the public sector (see, for example, du Gay 2000; 2004; Fountain, 2001; Tat-Kei Ho, 2002; Grey, 2005) – this set of issues is elaborated on earlier. It will suffice here to note that use of the adjective 'bureaucratic' (and

its close relatives, 'bureaucrat' and 'bureaucracy') has, in mainstream culture, become synonymous with entirely negative notions of waste, inefficiency, unresponsiveness, and impersonality.

Corresponding with the council's ambition to "modernise how we work, reducing bureaucracy", as set out in its above-referenced IEG Statement, the now prevalent view of bureaucratic ways of organizing was instinctively reproduced by many Big City participants. Here, a senior member of the council's Transformation Team was explaining that the council's contact centre must respond to customers' ever-increasing service expectations: "We can make it harder for ourselves by not changing and forcing people to go through bureaucratic hoops or we can make it easier for them to contact us and at least show that we're a streamlined organisation" (29th November 2004) From this perspective, bureaucratic procedures represent an irrelevance, an obstacle to the delivery of good customer service. And it was not only in the front office that this view was found. During a conversation about what service users want from local authorities, a Senior Benefits Officer expressed the opinion that "people want to think that if they're paying into something they're getting value for money; they don't like the idea of waste, they don't like the idea of bureaucracy, they want streamlined services." (5th October 2005) Bureaucratic ideals, therefore, are deemed to hold no value from the public's point of view – why would they if bureaucracy is equated to wastefulness and service users are posited simply as value for money seeking 'tax-payers'?

In the case of workers who had joined the council from a commercial work setting, the strength of anti-'bureaucratic' feeling appeared even more intense. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with a Revenues Officer who joined the council in the mid-nineties:

> *Interviewer*: "Are you a bureaucrat?"
> *Respondent*: "I don't think so…"
> *Interviewer*: "Is this [council] a bureaucracy?"
> *Respondent*: "I'd like to think not"
> *Interviewer*: "That's what they call these places isn't it? Why are you not one? Why is this not one?"
> *Respondent*: "Cos I try not to be [laughs]"
> *Interviewer*: "What is one?"
> *Respondent*: "Someone who sticks to the rules no matter what, and not budge. And I try, I try not to, but in our line of work, legislation does guide a lot of what we do, but

it's how you deliver that and how you explain that to the customers, so I try not to *sound* too bureaucratic, cos I think that's the challenge…" (24th March 2005)

The first message from this interchange is that the officer is eager to disassociate herself from her notion of a bureaucratic personality, thereby reinforcing a common theme in the data. At the same time, the respondent does accept, albeit reluctantly, that in carrying out her role certain statutory legislation must be adhered to.

Although questioning around this theme was not prioritized during the interview process – and therefore bold claims would be difficult to justify – the data do suggest a general disregard among council staff for the dimensions of their roles that emphasise bureaucratic impersonality and proceduralism. This applies to senior figures as well as foot soldiers; the Head of Big City Service being a case in point. This was his response to being asked what the council's main role was:

> "What are we here for? Well we're here to…well, sadly, we're here to make sure that we police and patrol all sorts of regulatory responsibilities that we have to undertake" (24th August 2005)

It would seem that this senior manager is not alone in this regard. A survey of 130 local authority senior managers (albeit one carried out by a software provider with local authority clients) found that "the amount of red tape and legislation is still the worst aspect about working in the public sector" (publictechnology.net, 2007).

Another common criticism of bureaucratic organization relates to hierarchical chains of command. The interview data suggest this is a source of annoyance for many participants. In contrast, council staff are being encouraged to act on their own initiative, to embrace personal accountability, in the interests of quality service provision. During an interview with a Senior Revenues Officer, I asked whether, in recent years, she had noticed any change in expectation in terms of how staff approached their work:

> "We're wanting to empower [members of the Revenues team]…you know, 'Be confident in your decision and stand by it'…because…several years ago, the front-line staff…[would say] 'Oh well I can't make that decision, I don't have the grade to make that decision, I'm not allowed, I'll have to speak to a manager'. Whereas now we're encouraging them to 'stand by your convictions and we'll back you'." (13th January 2005)

During a discussion with the Head of Big City Service around the importance of pursuing a customer service agenda he indicated that this kind of pro-empowerment stance is of benefit to staff as well as customers:

> "people enjoy working in an organisation that gives choice, not just to customers but to staff. So if you don't give staff choice when they're dealing with customers around making decisions – 'I'm gonna do this', 'We can do this for you today' – then…staff don't bring their customer service skills to the workplace, customers don't feel that they're being treated with dignity…" (24th August 2005)

Through analysing the case study data and texts associated with e-government reform, it is not difficult to conclude that the value set being championed is one that is typically associated with commercial actors and settings. While any suggestion that the dichotomy that has emerged between 'enterprising' and 'bureaucratic' ways of organising is synonymous with the distinction between private sector and public sector cultures may not stand up to empirical examination, this association is certainly in evidence in much public management thinking. Hence, we find the common refrain at all levels of government that public sector organisations need to 'catch up with' their private sector counterparts – which might entail learning from, sharing with, or working alongside actors from that domain. The ambition is that catching-up also entails eliminating bureaucratic waste. What seems more likely is that this kind of thinking will lead to a blurring of the line between traditional notions of 'public' and 'private' sectors in practice (as noted earlier in this thesis, this is something of concern to many commentators). Much of this catching up is, of course, being done in the name of the increasingly demanding customer.

The idea of catching up with levels of service quality seen in commercial settings was a recurring theme in the research data. For this Customer Service Centre Manager, it is seen as perfectly "natural" for service users to expect a similar experience to that which they receive elsewhere:

> "I think they've got a right to get the same level of service from the council as they do from any service provider they go to…Out there in the private sector they've got so much choice of who they actually go to, so naturally expectations are rising if you come to the Council…So it's about giving customers really what they want, how, when they want it, through whatever channel they want to get it by…because they can do that for everything else in their lives, so they *should* be able to do that for councils as well." (20th July 2005)

A contact centre development officer was concerned that the council was "…being left behind by other organisations who provide excellent customer service with modern methods of communication". If the council does nothing, the fear is that "…we're gonna be slipping further and further behind and people will start to react against that…" (29th November 2004) It is, of course, open to question whether all of our dealings with commercial service providers conform to the ideal being held up by public service change advocates.

As well as representing an enterprising point of view, the officer quoted above also represents one of the key ways in which the council has sought to 'catch up' – through recruiting staff from commercial settings, staff who it is hoped will bring a certain ethos with them. The council's approach to recruitment resonates with earlier policy pronouncements from central government: "We want the civil service to reinforce its efforts to be more open and to recruit more experience, skills and ideas from the outside. This must happen at all levels". (Cabinet Office 1999: 56).

Another catching-up strategy being endorsed by central government involves partnering with commercial players. Often this will entail a further catching-up tactic of deploying established techniques and technologies as part of "…follow[ing] the example of leading private sector providers who have rethought the ways in which they interact with people and businesses to improve customer value and reduce costs." (HM Government, 2007:3) In the case of Big City, its partnering efforts have resulted in the forging of what were reported by participants to be very successful collaborations, none more so than that with CRM Vendor. In the context of this discussion, what is significant about this relationship is that, according to the Head of Big City Service, the vendor is "…aligned with [Big City's] values…"; "…they've got a great set of values in their company – the staff live them." (24th August 2005) The values he is referring to centre on a willingness to share risk and reward, and a sense of dynamism and professionalism among the staff – in short, enterprising values.

Staff at CRM Vendor share the idea that Big City are among the more progressive of their government clients; but this is not the case universally. A Technical Consultant at CRM Vendor explained that "…some councils are actually bringing people in from the commercial world…"; meanwhile, others have to contend with "…local government unions – they say 'I'm not doing that, you're not changing my breaks, you're not changing my working practices, especially when you want to open at half eight or eight and serve through to

seven'… They're used to opening at ten and closing at half four, and taking a lunch break, but that's not customer service." (6th April 2005)

Engaging in practices of recruiting and partnering to 'catch-up' implies that something is being left behind. As noted earlier, part of what is being left behind is the language of bureaucratic organizing and, to some extent, the ethos suggested by the language. Related to this directional shift is the (specifically public sector) notion of a public service ethos – in keeping with the literature, the case study data suggest this, too, may be a casualty of enterprising approaches to service delivery. Participants' reflections on the role of a local authority, in terms of what they did *not* say, are illuminating in this regard. Might one have expected council officers and management to have talked more about local authorities having a responsibility to act in the public interest or to promote citizen engagement? Is it surprising that no one talked in terms of the "…critical roles of representation and trusteeship intrinsic to…public officials…" (Fountain, 2001: 71). Why did nobody (apart from a Children and Families Team Manager) articulate that a local authority must take account of and balance the, at times competing, interests of a range of stakeholders (direct service users being just one group)?

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that there is a general lack of awareness of a distinct ethos or set of values associated with public service. Commentators expressing concern at a perceived retreat from unique public service norms tend to have in mind, inter alia, citizenship, representation, accountability, equality, impartiality, openness, responsiveness, and justice (Haque, 2001). Reflecting on the data in broad terms, of the norms detailed above, only those of equality, (customer) responsiveness, and accountability (to customers) were seen to have contemporary relevance. At the same time, most of what Haque (2001) calls "business norms" appeared regularly during interview discussions and in policy texts. Where interviewees *were* able to offer an opinion on their sense of a public service culture, this was overwhelmingly negative; resonant of the anti-bureaucracy sentiment detailed earlier. For example, a member of the council's Transformation Team asserted with pride: "…I still have that private sector thinking rather than public sector." Bemoaning certain public sector working practices, she recalls how, in her previous job, "…you certainly didn't have unions beating your door down and staff threatening to walk out…" (16th March 2003)

Given these findings, it follows that when interviewees were asked why they had chosen to work for a local authority and whether their choice had been at all inspired by wanting to

work in the public (*rather than* the private) sector, their responses did not deviate from the theme of the findings thus far. A Senior Benefits Officer voiced a common response to this issue – "I never saw myself going into the private sector because I always perceived it to be insecure employment…The council's not going anywhere…" (5th October 2005). Others viewed their decision in purely opportunistic terms – a job they thought they could, and wanted to, do came up with the council, so they applied for it. This Transformation Team member provided a more emphatic response to this issue when asked if she had any sense of loyalty to working for a public sector organisation: "No there's not. I know it sounds a bit cold-hearted, doesn't it? But, no, I don't have any loyalty to that" (16th March 2003) As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, my findings are supported by a major research study (Lyons et al., 2006) into the motivations and values of knowledge workers in the public, private, and parapublic sectors.

The only participant who came close to invoking the idea that a distinct ethos exists in the public sector was the Head of Big City Service. He did so during a discussion of the council's relationship with CRM Vendor: "Their values are that they understand, that they'll take the time and trouble to understand – well the beliefs really – they believe in public service, they actually think that the services that we offer are valuable to society as a whole" (24th August 2005)

It is interesting that this senior manager referred to CRM Vendor in these terms for it is that organisation – more than any governmental body encountered during this case study – which has made the effort to articulate a set of arguments tackling the notion of a public service ethos as its client-base has become dominated by public sector organisations. These issues have been confronted in a 'White Paper', co-authored by the company's managing director and a CRM commentator. Here, the authors set out the terms of the debate:

> "At the heart of this debate is the realisation that many people – though not all – believe that individuals and organisations engaged in the delivery of public services subscribe to, or reflect a range of values which can be called a Public Service Ethos. Some supporters of this view hold that this is a priceless asset which is in danger of being undermined by the wider use of private sector service delivery, or the consequences of inferior employment practices. Others, however, argue that there is little significant difference between public and private service, and that even if the Public Service Ethos exists, it can smoothly evolve towards a set of principles which

> can apply to all relevant bodies and people. This means taking the best from both the public and private sectors and creating a Code to which all can subscribe" (nd: 4)

The reader is left in no doubt that the vendor aligns itself with the latter group. According to the authors, "potential service delivery partners from the private and voluntary sectors…believe that there is little in the Public Service Ethos that cannot be replicated within their own business models." (nd: 15)

If this 'White Paper' represents the formal expression of a corporate sensitivity to a public service ethos, albeit one it is anxious to revise, how does it translate into the working practices of the company's representatives on the ground? The answer would appear to be that this sensitivity does not translate at all. First, neither respondent was aware of the 'White Paper' their firm had published. Second, if the attitudes of the staff interviewed are at all representative, any notion of public service values that their clients may seek to uphold is treated with derision: "…we've definitely heard that but you always think: 'Yeah, OK' [cynical tone], it is an excuse. [Public sector organizations] would argue their customers or their citizens or whatever,…are more valuable than a customer to *Vodaphone*; *Vodaphone* would say opposite; they would say their customers are more valuable to them." (Technical Consultant, CRM Vendor, 6th April 2005) In the light of these data, it is unclear what the Head of Big City Service had in mind when he argued that CRM Vendor "believe in public service".

For these interviewees, and for many of those based in the council, the idea of a public service ethos is, at best, ambiguous, it is not a factor impacting positively on their employment decisions, and it is generally seen as an outmoded notion they wish to distance themselves from. On the whole, they were more comfortable thinking of themselves as adopting an approach to their work often associated with private sector organisations.

At the same time, however, when this issue was pursued during interview exchanges, a number of council-based interviewees did acknowledge differences between the public and private realms. Common distinctions related to a local authority's genuine interest in serving customers and its not-for-profit status:

> *Respondent 1*: "…cos travel agents and banks are there for themselves, …[whereas] the council needs to keep like the main goals of they're here for the people really…" (Generic Customer Services Officer; 12th November 2004)

> *Respondent 2*: "…we're more focused in a local authority on providing a better service to the customer rather than pure profit, pure cost reductions…we're not like that, we want to provide a better service"
>
> (ICT Applications Team Manager; 14th October 2004)

In the case of a trade union representative, he, too, did not totally conflate the public and private sectors. This did not, however, imply that the council could not learn from the private sector: "I think what we should be doing is…you cherry pick, just as…a fully functioning, good private sector company will pick the good and discard the bad." (19th August 2005)

Other data suggest an awareness, even among some of the more progressive voices, that the council must approach the 'picking' process judiciously. For example, the Contact Centre Development Officer (29th November 2004) who advocated exploiting council resources to deliver services for other organisations, recognised that not all innovations hailing from the commercial sector were worth emulating. She talked about wanting to implement in the council "what worked really well" in the insurance company where she used to work while being aware of "when to stop". The interviewee explained that her previous call centre workplace had become "too big-brother-ish", prompting her to leave. She advocated "…let[ting] people feel that they're free to manage their own workload…" and argued that it was counter-productive to "over-monitor" workers. Evidence from elsewhere suggests these concerns are not universally shared. According to a Technical Consultant (6th April 2005) from CRM Vendor, one major local authority had recently outsourced its customer contact centre to a private company and in doing so had transformed its performance (the percentage of calls answered rose from around 40% to around 95%). At the same time, however, he described it as "a traditional call centre, a sweat-shop", where the company "actually want[s] 'forced answer'," a system that relinquishes call management from the operative. Revisiting the participant's comment above, it is tempting to conclude that when state agencies beginning "picking" what is perceived as "the good" from the private sector, unless the process is very carefully managed, there is a tendency for "the bad" to follow all too easily (see Dunleavy et al, 2005; Chadwick and May, 2003). What certainly appears to be the case in Big City is that in the haste to 'catch up' with the private sector, notions associated with a bureaucratic and public service ethos are being 'left behind'.

4.5.4 Pro-efficiency

The converse of a bureaucratic (wasteful) organization is one that seeks to drive through efficiencies at every opportunity, something that is reflected in the complementary objectives set out in the council's IEG Statement: "reducing bureaucracy, increasing efficiency". An efficient organization in these debates also tends to imply an 'entrepreneurial' one, for it is through being 'entrepreneurial' that efficiencies can be won. As has been noted, local authorities (and all other state-funded organizations) have been pursuing a programme of efficiency-making at an operational level, through, for example, migrating to more cost-effective service channels, standardizing data capture, service sharing and so on. Central government have stressed that, underpinning such measures, an efficiency-focus needs to be embraced at a cultural level and across the entire organisation. According to the then Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit: "Departments have to make efficiency part of their culture…This is about questioning everyday business, not doing things in a particular way because it's always been done that way. Senior staff can make a particular impact, but all individuals are capable of contributing and will increasingly be expected to." (Watmore, 2006)

Looking at how Big City is positioned to respond to the efficiency agenda, certainly Big City Service is making some radical strategic noises, even if at the time of the research, the council had not put all of these ideas into action. Revealing a commercial instinct, some participants displayed an appetite for exploiting the council's investment in customer service technologies and its skill-base via the sharing of services with private as well as other public organisations, an agenda that rapidly gathered momentum in the middle of the last decade (see, for example, the Varney Review, 2006) and remains a live issue. This interviewee would "…very much like us to move forward – after we've cracked the council – into being…service providers for other councils, or other organisations who need the facilities that we can offer and to start to do some income generation." (Contact Centre Development Officer, 29th November 2004) According to another interviewee (the council's Customer Service Manager), Big City is "…starting to look at links with [a neighbouring council]; they may purchase our CRM solution and we will host it for them." She also explained that, in the light of the Gershon Review, the council was exploring the possibility of utilising *other* organisations' CRM-supported frontline facilities: "'What could the Inland Revenue do for the council between the

hours of midnight and 6 o'clock?', because…they've made a commitment to have people there etcetera." (1st August 2005) It is this kind of thinking that would undoubtedly represent music to the ears of the Head of Big City Service, who in an interview expressed his determination to "wring the neck of the council's investment" in its CRM-supporting systems.

Towards the end of the fieldwork period there were signs that Big City had begun to realise elements of this vision. Representatives of several non-council agencies (including *Job Centre Plus*, *Connexions*, and *Citizens Advice Bureaux*) had based themselves at a number of the council's satellite Customer Service Centres. There, frontline generic council staff were handling initial enquiries from customers of these agencies in accordance with service level agreements as part of Big City's efforts to engage in more entrepreneurial income generation activities.

This discussion of shared services reflects a wider debate around the efficient organization of public service delivery, a debate concerning which organizations are best placed to do what – when to *steer* and when to *row* (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).
For the Head of Big City Service, the inclination of some of his council colleagues to want to persist with *rowing* (or in his words, "clinging to wreckage") is a source of huge frustration. On being asked what the council's main role was, this senior manager gave an animated response:

> "We shouldn't be selling bio-degradable diesel through our depots! We shouldn't be running leisure centres! We shouldn't be, because other people do it better than us, but we still do it [thumps desk]! ...We still run our own internal repairs and maintenance operation, for council houses – what's that about? With out-dated purchasing and logistics arrangements – what's that all about? What are we doing? Why have we got depots for Christ's sake? So, you know, we're still doing the wrong things." (24th August 2005)

In keeping with the idea of stripping back the council's 'rowing' activities or of fronting other organizations' service provision, some council participants expressed a thirst for a shift to greater competition in the local authority sector in the expectation of stimulating more efficiencies and more entrepreneurial behaviour. In this vein, a member of the council's Transformation Team bemoaned the current absence of customer choice: "Our customers, unfortunately, are in a monopoly – they have to be with us. They can't go to [a nearby region]

and have their council services from there. It would be quite refreshing if, on a pilot basis…if we give them the option of 'Who would you like to be with?'" (16th March 2003)

It is worth pointing out here that signs of a pro-efficiency culture at the council, over and above the pressure being exerted by central government, may in no small part be connected with the very real, and increasing, threat of service outsourcing faced by some Big City (and other local authority) staff. The council's Customer Service Manager explained that if, by the year following the fieldwork, Big City Service fail to make "so many millions of pounds worth of savings, then we're all out! so that's Council Tax, Benefits, IT, Customer Service, Cashiering Services…, which is one of the reasons we're making the huge rationalisation that we are." (1st August 2005)

4.5.5 Professional

I will now outline some of the other, what might be termed secondary, values that featured prominently in the data and which help to clarify some of the traits that are highly prized by Big City Council.

During my observations on first visiting the council's principal Customer Service Centre I noted the sense of, what at the time I referred to as, 'calmness' and 'efficiency' with which the 'smartly dressed' staff went about their work. On reflection, I could just as easily have noted the 'professional' nature of the staff and the environment. Since that early observation, during interviews, many staff have made a connection between the council's customer service ambitions and professionalism. The meaning of 'professional' in this context implies competence and efficiency in carrying out a duty. When asked how the one stop shops had changed customers' experience of interacting with Big City a generic officer talked about how "it's much more of a professional image, business-like image here" (28th May 2003). He clarified this idea by referring to the prompt and efficient handling of enquiries. Similarly, a back office staff member described the benefits of CRM-supporting technologies in terms of being "a way of speeding up our interaction with customers, appearing more professional" (5th October 2005).

Alongside this first meaning of professionalism, we find the notion that 'customer service', as a competence or skill-set, can itself be seen in terms of a 'profession'. In this mode, profession implies "an occupation in which a professed knowledge of some subject, field, or

science is applied; a vocation or career, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification." (OED, 2009) Bodies such as the Institute of Customer Service have played a central role in promoting the professionalization of customer service through codifying customer service standards, offering a range of awards and CPD programmes, hosting conferences, and so on. As far as Big City is concerned, there are signs that this agenda is making headway. According to a contact centre development officer, "…we're really strong on promoting professional standards" (29th November 2004). The officer explained that frontline staff were encouraged to attain professional customer service qualifications. The council has also been awarded the *Charter Mark* (the government's customer service standard) which it displays on much of its literature.

Despite the emphasis on developing staff's customer service competency, the data suggest that the notion of the customer service 'professional', comparable with other local authority roles (for example, a council tax specialist or a social worker), is some way off achieving equal status. According to a Customer Service Centre Manager: "I think in terms of the way people perceive what *our* team do, it certainly has moved from being a glorified reception service through to being the majority of sections thinking 'Yeah, they are doing a very good job'…(12th July 2005).

4.5.6 Change-oriented and Corporate-minded

The final trait that is increasingly valued by the council's more progressive thinkers is that of staff being willing to act corporately, something which corresponds with the council's commitment to "adopt a corporate approach" (IEG Statement, 2002). It is, of course, a trait that acquires greater importance at a time of organizational change. Hence, it will be discussed here as a key feature of a staff member who is open to change. Being corporate-minded tends to manifest itself in terms of staff displaying a willingness to be flexible in carrying out their role, in their own, as well as the organization's (and, of course, the customer's) interests – what Korczynski (2002) refers to as a 'win-win-win ethos'. Given the speed and intensity of change at Big City (Customer Services), it is no surprise that the management of that function were particularly keen to present a positive view of change to new frontline recruits:

> "Change is about…….
> Being passionate, innovative and creative
> Encouraging a positive attitude towards change

Breaking down cultural and organizational barriers

Equipping, supporting and empowering staff

Turning strategies into practice…..

…to DELIVER the best possible service to our customers" (Customer Service Manger's PowerPoint slide 27th May 2003)

We find a mirroring of this rhetoric at a central level with the ODPM's Pay and Workforce Strategy stressing that modernising local authorities "require a workforce that can be recruited, developed and retained to meet and anticipate change" (2005b: 7).

The data suggest a mixed picture in terms of the compliance of council staff in the face of change (these issues are discussed at length later in this chapter). Within Customer Services, though, the response appeared to have been an overwhelmingly positive one. According to a Senior Benefits Officer**:** "The staff who work in the customer service centre really buy-in to this philosophy, you know, they'll stay late to attend meetings or…They seem highly motivated,…to be the best they can" (5th October 2005) An ICT Applications Team Manager remarked on how: "…from top to bottom, from [*name*], heading the service, to the customer services officers, they're all sort of focusing in the same direction…" (14th October 2004) When I asked a frontline staff member what made a good generic officer his response suggested that a similar sense of commitment to achieving corporate goals was key to how he understood his frontline role: "Somebody…who's flexible in their attitude to work…cos you can be changed from one [section] to the next, receptive to new ideas, erm… receptive to change as well and changes in working practices, cos that changes quite a lot…" (28th May 2003)

As well as acting with a corporate consciousness at an operational level, change-makers at Big City are advocating a similar attitude at a strategic level. A critical aspect of many contemporary customer-focused change efforts is better organisational joining-up, both internally and externally. This is particularly significant where change programmes involve the reengineering of cross-functional business processes and the support of new technologies – as is the case with Big City. A passionate proponent of a corporate approach to strategizing, the Head of Big City Service talked about the council "…*desperately* trying to come to grips with this idea of a 'one mind' – a 'one view', everything affects everything" (24th August 2005) in regard to its procurement strategy, asset management strategy and so on. As a specific example of this approach, the respondent recalled that on his arrival at Big City he discovered that one of his operational units was looking to procure an ICT solution: "They

wanted to buy a document management system in 'Revenues & Benefits'. I said 'No! you don't wanna do that, you wanna buy a system that's truly capable of providing a corporate solution'." As this example illustrates, the merits of a corporate approach is not shared across the council. Progress is being hindered by – in the words of this senior manager – "a load of mavericks who would much rather just buy their own stuff, build their own buildings…", while he and his Big City Service colleagues are "collaborative" and "altruistic", performing the role of a "marriage guidance counsellor" (24th August 2005) within the organization in an effort to foster collaborative working.

Beyond the idea of having a flexible approach to one's role, the data suggest what is highly valued is a culture of self-development whereby workers are encouraged to re-appraise their skill sets and their values in the context of corporate strategy. The broad idea is one that chimes with dominant trends in human resource strategy and centres on the worker viewing him/herself less in terms of performing a role or function within an organizational setting and more in terms of an evolving project, a project that will inevitably involve ongoing training and skill-development in line with the changing resource needs and strategic direction of the organisation. Big City Service's Contact Centre Development Officer explained how this kind of approach underpins efforts to move from a culture where staff are "pigeon-holed" towards a culture of genericization:

> "…what we're hoping to do is to put the meat on the bones of the career path that we could map out for [Customer Service Officers], because we really want to bring in a culture of training and development, which really they haven't experienced before, you know in terms of coaching consistently throughout their working life, they can be able to see that they can take on other services, the multi-skilling provides them with really good development opportunities." (29th November 2004).

The tenor of this approach very much echoes centrally-formulated strategy. For example, the ODPM's Pay and Workforce Strategy urges all local authorities to move away from the "traditional model of rigid hierarchical structures that involved a focus on procedures and a desire to retain the status quo" (2005b: 3) to one that provides "more meaningful staff development through skills and career pathways" (2005: 22).

In the context of an organisation in the throes of change, the value set demanded of frontline workers must, of course, extend to senior organizational figures. And senior figures at Big City were very aware that 'transformation'-oriented leadership was lacking at the outset of its e-government journey. The required model of leadership was articulated in the council's IEG

Statement (2001): “Leaders must have the capacity and ability to understand the e-opportunities and be evangelical about them…they must understand how to be, and act like, ‘champions’.” Now while I am not arguing that this is a universal phenomenon at Big City, the data do point to a genuinely ‘evangelical’ fervour being exhibited by certain senior actors towards service transformation.

The most obvious example of an evangelical leader at Big City was the chief executive at the time the council was drawing up its own e-government agenda. As this individual had left the organization when the fieldwork was conducted I am limited to secondary reports of his leadership, such as the comment that he was determined to drive through change “come hell or high water” made by an ICT Applications Team Manager.

Another Big City actor who came across as a passionate advocate of change, and about whom I have acquired considerable data via interviews with him and his colleagues, is the Head of Big City Service. This is someone who described the council as “lost in the wilderness” prior to his arrival. What this senior manager said in interviews and the manner in which he said it suggests a fervent belief in him knowing the route out of the wilderness and in his capability to realise change. At the core of this vision is a step change in the quality of customer service delivered by the entire council. On this, he expressed himself mantra-like: “The whole organisation needs to be procuring excellent customer service; it needs to think customer service, customer service, customer service – options, choices, access, priorities” …” (24th August 2005) In a similarly evangelical vein, the council’s Customer Services Manager delighted in informing a group of new recruits during a meeting I observed: “We’re trying to spread the Customer Service news right across the council” (27th May 2003)

The main point here is that both of these senior managers (along with a number of other senior council staff) exhibited a personal investment in the idea of service transformation. This was demonstrated most visibly by the Head of Big City Service, who gave the impression of being engaged in an emotional and profoundly personal ideological struggle. Describing himself as “an agent of change”, he declared that he would be prepared to part company with his employer if it meant compromising his value set:

> “[Change] never stops, and if it stops, and it can sometimes stop in an organisation when an organisation just decides it’s not gonna have any more change – which is the wrong decision – which is where I was at the last organisation, or ‘We’re gonna change in a way that I just can’t deal with’, and I’ll say ‘That’s been great, it’s been a

> great time, we've done some good work, it's time to go, bye!'. So I will go through that…journey…" (24th August 2005)

During the same interview, this senior manager conveyed a sense in which his own beliefs had, at long last, been vindicated by the transformational tone of current modernization rhetoric. In other words, less progressive peers had 'seen the light':

> "I've been in local government for a hundred years and when I first started [thumps desk] I had the views that I have now; I had the values and beliefs that I have now. And I was like a fish out of water and I could *not* get a job…I just couldn't get one" (24th August 2005)

Data collected from other interviewees remarking on the personality of the Head of Big City Service support his self-image – more 'missionary' than manager. The most effusive participant in this regard was a trade union representative (19th November 2005), who painted a picture of swashbuckling senior managers (he also spoke admiringly of the Head of the Business Development and Transformation Team) taking on the "barons" and "empire-builders", fighting against the odds, taking personal risks, in pursuit of transformational goals.

The personal stories recounted by Big City's 'champions' of change have a visceral quality, leaving one with a sense that the underpinning enterprising narratives hold a certain seductive appeal for the storytellers. They communicate dynamism, transformation, and innovation – concepts which seem all the more appealing in institutional settings characterised by reformers as out-moded, rule-bound, risk-averse, and reactive. On an individual level, they pit Osborne and Gaebler's (1992) "hero", the pioneer, pursuing a public management "perestroika", fighting for improvements in the name of the customer, against the bureaucrat, the traditionalist, concerned only to carry out their role within the confines of their service silo in a manner that they have always carried out that role – in short, those with "a grey mentality" (Trade union representative; 19th November 2005).

In this context, it is logical that those council staff who are seen not to conform – 'non-believers' so to speak – are encouraged to do so, via training or direction from management. Failing this, they should be squeezed out of the organisation:

> "There's always gonna be certain pockets where traditionally people aren't particularly very good at customer service – that may be the case for a good number of years yet until the culture entirely changes and that might be to do with losing those members of staff in the end. But I think it's just got such a high focus now, from the

> Council itself and also from government as well, so people really are left with no choice other than to embrace customer service really" (Customer Services Centre Manager, 20th July 2005)

The words of the Customer Services Centre Manager above, by displaying the organizational momentum that has built up around customer-focus, set up the final section of this chapter. Despite, or in some cases because of, the rehearsal, refinement, and resourcing of Big City's customer, analysis of the data suggests certain kinds of 'resistance' to the council's direction of change.

4.6 Resisting the public services' customer

The story of e-government change at Big City so far in this chapter tells of how customer-focus is being realised at multiple levels – the linguistic, the technological, the structural, and the cultural. And while, in the preceding section, it was argued that those at the forefront of change see themselves as engaged in a battle of values with traditionalists, there is a danger that this story takes on a dichotomous quality, pitting the customer-focused pioneers against a group of undefined 'others'. The data suggest that more subtle manifestations of 'resistance' are at play, often cutting across those crude categorisations. This issue is explored in this final sub-section. The notion of 'resistance' is utilised to encompass various ways in which council-based participants articulated views or displayed behaviour at odds with elements of the formal change agenda (or ways in which participants reported colleagues as having done so). As such, in certain cases 'resistance' may appear to overstate the case. However, it is a word that was used by a number of participants. Importantly, I am not arguing that resistant attitudes or behaviour are necessarily being directed at the principle of customer-focussed e-government but rather its organizational implications.

4.6.1 Sources of resistance: fear, fatigue, cynicism, envy, and protectionism

Perhaps the most obvious, and most understandable, motive for exhibiting resistance is the fear of losing employment. A number of interviewees reported that the nature and extent of internal reorganisation has prompted a range of council workers to be concerned about the prospect of job losses. The most significant group comprised those who have come to be thought of as 'back office' workers. This, of course, follows the introduction of new customer channels, whereby many initial enquiries are handled by a new frontline operation supported

by ICTs. When asked if these changes had given rise to any tensions between 'front' and 'back', a member of the council's transformation team was emphatic: "Oh God yes! Oh my goodness, yes! The whole exercise created tension. The first question I was always asked, not by the managers, but by the [back office] Mappers themselves was, 'Are people gonna lose their jobs for this?'" (16th March 2003)

Arguably, one group that stood to lose more than others was management. Those managers who did not necessarily perceive their job to be under threat may well have feared a loss of status at the very least. According to another member of the council's transformation team, "middle managers" in particular represented a considerable impediment to change compared with their lower-level colleagues. While the latter group will generally "give it a go" provided "they have strong leadership and somebody pointing out the benefits", "…there's a hard core of middle management who feel themselves threatened; first of all because they worry about their own role in a change – which is understandable – and also because they're frightened of change themselves…" (29th November 2004) A similar picture was painted by the Head of Big City Service, who spoke of "wars being fought at the lower level…by people who used to have the power". In his words, these people have "lost influence"; as such, they are "clinging to wreckage", they behave like "grieving parents". (24th August 2005) A trade union representative talked about people "at quite a high level" displaying "petty jealousies". He also believed there to be "a lot of resistance still at all levels", even at a senior management level, where "there are battles being fought on a daily basis" (19th August 2005).

Another group of council workers reported to be displaying low-level resistance comprises long-serving, older staff, in their case, inspired by a general antipathy to change. A number of interviewees identified this group as being somewhat reluctant to engage in re-skilling and other change-oriented activities. For the participants from CRM Vendor, it was something they encountered regularly with their local authority clients. The appearance of this intransigence is seemingly magnified when viewed alongside the relative flexibility of younger colleagues, particularly those brought in because of their customer service experience. In this extract, a Revenues Officer is explaining how her colleagues might react to the prospect of Big City entering into shared service partnerships regarding frontline facilities:

> "I think the older colleagues might be a little bit resistant to it, because they like what they know, they don't like change, they resist change…[and] you have young people coming in all the time and I think the newer people would be more receptive to it…I

> think when the contact centre staff are appointed, this is what they'll look for: their flexibility, their motivation, their ability to…change." (24th March 2005)

Now whereas the arrival of new staff seems to be having a positive effect on some of their more experienced colleagues – "because there's more newer people, the older people, if you like, are starting to come round a little bit…it's chipping away" (Revenues Officer, 24th March 2005) – this is not the case universally. The same interviewee explained that a sense of change fatigue was driving some older members of staff to exit the organisation: "We've got somebody in the office who's leaving next week, she's in her fifties, she just doesn't want to change anymore, she's sick of all the changes that come up – taking on new training, new technology – 'Oh, I've had enough! I'm off!' Simple as that!"

To re-invoke the religious nomenclature utilised earlier, at one end of the spectrum we can find what might be termed zealots. These individuals were described earlier as exhibiting a missionary-like passion to bring about change. Towards the other end, we can talk about the different categories of resisters as non-believers, or at the very least doubters. However, unlike the zealots, who can marshal a range of legitimating allies in support of their vision – among them, customer service, the choice agenda, and efficiency –the non-believers/doubters tend to lack any clear underpinning rationale to bolster their opposition. They favour the status quo for a variety of ostensibly self-serving reasons; be that unease at the prospect of redundancy, anxiety over losing status, or simply fear of change. Between these poles, however, we find differing degrees of ambivalence that, importantly, seem to carry differing levels of legitimacy. Each of the motives for displaying resistance noted so far has been *attributed to* council-based colleagues by research participants. Now, I will go on to argue that the words of participants themselves suggested that some of their own views were out of alignment with the prevailing corporate approach.

During the wide-ranging and in-depth research interviews, many participants expressed opinions that suggested they largely supported (or at least did not directly oppose) the direction of change in the council. At the same time, when participants were offered the opportunity to reflect on issues at length, they would sometimes offer views at variance with that broad stance. For example, the data suggest a degree of cynicism towards some of the rhetoric employed to justify customer-focussed change. This participant was asked why she thought Big City had embarked on a major change programme:

> "[long pause / laughs to herself] …Well, I think the truth is, it's cost…but the line that they would have us think is to better…to serve the customer, to provide a better service and a more streamlined service…" (Revenues Officer; 13th January 2005)

Another participant – a Senior Benefits Officer – displayed an even deeper sense of cynicism towards aspects of the change programme. During a discussion about commonplace frustrations related to interacting with offshore call centres and an ongoing internal "debate" about the council's own contact centre technologies, the interviewee remarked "…but we've been pushed down that road cos computers are cheaper than people aren't they…– ultimately, everything's cost-driven isn't it?" Having reflected, "Now I'm starting to sound like a Bolshevik or something aren't I?", the interviewee added, "…but we've *all* gotta move with the times, whether you agree with it or not, you know, and if you don't agree with it, you have to put on a façade to make out that you do…you might be privately seething about it but you wouldn't dare say…'Well actually I think this is a load of pants!', you know, 'Let's go back to the way we were before', so…" (5th October 2005) There is a sense from this extract of someone struggling with issues of authenticity, even if the participant expressed broad support for the council's customer-focus efforts during the interview. In other words, she (and the Revenues Officer above) is drawing on different, and at times competing, narratives.

Another source of cynicism (mixed with frustration) relates to an increasing sense of unrest among generic officers over not being adequately rewarded for taking on more and more duties. In response to the notion that some frontline officers may be uneasy at the prospect of handling more enquiries more fully, one generic officer remarked: "…if I was honest, yeah…definitely!...I mean it's like anything else, you think, 'Oh, fucking hell! How many more things can they get us to do?'" He added that "…from a financial point of view as well, you know, I'd be a liar if people hadn't said 'Bloody hell [we're] doing this, I mean Christ, we do x, y and z but we're not getting paid any more'." (20th July 2005)

The consequences of technological change for back office roles have also given rise to a sense of cynicism, displayed here by a Senior Revenues Officer. She explained that members of her team had put it to her: "...we're taking on this new technology, should we not have an upgrade?" (an upgrade here refers to a promotion on the pay scale). While she sympathises with this point of view, her senior colleagues appear not to: "But the argument is...'Well, there's only so many hours in the day and you're doing that *instead* of that, it's not an 'as well

as', you're not being expected to work longer hours and do more, it's just, it's working smarter', to quote the managers." (13th January 2005)

A further motivation for demonstrating 'resistance' is rooted in a sense of resentment towards the institutional attention being paid to the customer-focused frontline. The earlier-cited remark made by a Senior Benefits Officer about her unit being a "hovel" in comparison to a new one-stop-shop is illustrative of this attitude. A trade union representative had also detected "resentment and resistance" being directed towards Customer Services in terms of some staff saying "…'Oh, they get everything they want'…" (19th August 2005) The focus of this kind of resentment is a Customer Services unit which has received a series of industry accolades over recent years and is intent on exploiting any accomplishments to raise its organisational profile. During one interview a Customer Service Centre Manager declared that "we publicise quite a lot what our successes are" (12th July 2005), and it is seemingly helped in that task by senior council figures. This point came across very clearly when the Customer Services Manager explained how Big City's chief executive responded to her department winning a National Business Award for customer service excellence:

> "…the chief exec wrote out to *every* member of the council via e-mail and just said how proud he was of the success of Customer Services etcetera…so he holds it in very high regard. The councillors – we've just done another sort of mini open day for them, we showed them the technology, we brought them round here, we've been pushing it – so therefore wherever you go they're singing our praises…" (1st August 2005)

Indeed, as another of this manager's comments suggests, the chief executive could be accused of exhibiting a hint of favouritism towards that part of the council: "…he always buys the team a big box of chocolates at Christmas – nowhere else in the authority gets a big huge box of Quality Street – …so I think he does appreciate what we do." (1st August 2005)

A final illustration of discord between the corporate view and that of participants was articulated by a trade union representative. More than most, this participant displayed a keen sense of commitment to much of what Big City Service was trying to achieve. At the same time, he articulated opposition to other elements of local e-government with equal passion. Despite voicing considerable support for the council's partnering strategy, he fiercely opposed the idea of local authority services being totally outsourced – for him, such an outcome was "the enemy of the staff side of the trade union". In the following extract, the participant was calling to mind the merits of a commercial actor's bid to deliver a suite of council services

relative to those of the council's in-house bid. It reveals an underlying suspicion of what Linda Penny (2005) would refer to as 'corporate bullshit':

> "Any sort of private provider, even if they're coming on a partnering basis, *always* try to suck you in on the basis of, 'We will enhance your position as a regional capital'. But they were saying the same to [a neighbouring city] down the road. You know, it was 'Can we provide better service for less?', and our argument was 'Well, rather than making the assumption that someone else *can*, you know, can we put together a service improvement plan and lump it together as an overall package of options that is *as* viable, if not *more*, than anything that the outside can offer?'" (19th August 2005)

While it is the case that it is in the above-cited participant's interests, as a trade union representative, to hold these opinions, taken at face value they constitute the only example of an ideologically-informed narrative of resistance. However, his protectionist stance – in common with the other critical positions set out above – lacks legitimacy in the face of the case for change. Crucially, what unites this interviewee's perspective and the other sources of resistance (based on fear, fatigue, cynicism and so on) is that none represent a fundamental challenge to the notion of customer-focussed e-government but, rather, the organizational changes that such a programme heralds.

4.6.2 Expertise – the site of legitimate resistance

Looking across the case study data, the only position of resistance that could be said to carry any sort of wider legitimacy rests on expertise grounds. It is identified here as a narrative of 'resistance' in that it centres on an issue – the demarcation of enquiry-handling between generic and specialist staff – that has proved to be a contentious one during Big City's period of customer-focused change. From the perspective of the resisters, while some may be acting entirely self-interestedly, others appear to have genuine concerns about what enquiries can, and therefore should, be dealt with generically.

One service area where expertise was invoked by participants as being of particular relevance to the issue of enquiry handling was social services. And it is in social services, unlike certain other areas, that the legitimacy of this position appears to be broadly accepted by those coordinating (and championing) the restructuring of enquiry handling:

> *Interviewer*: "So you're saying that if you have a vulnerable social services customer, comes in here [one-stop-shop], has a query, you deal with them as far as you can, but then you have to, what get somebody down to…?"
> *Customer Service Centre Manager*: "Yeah we would need to refer to a specialist, particularly for social services, where the decision was made that we only deal with them up to a *limited* level – quite rightly I think" (20th July 2005)

This stance was supported by the council's Customer Services Manager, who gave the impression she would rather her staff did not have to deal with challenging customers. She explained how, in the past, they would have social services customers waiting "for hours and hours". In response, her team met with social services management and "made them more aware of the pressures we were under if we've got an agitated or distressed customer here – which inevitably if it is a social services enquiry they will be – and it got gradually better…" (1st August 2005).

The expertise narrative was articulated by interviewees working in different parts of social services. Most expansive in this regard was the Head of Big City's Children and Families team. This participant knew very little about the council's investment in CRM-supporting technologies or about the mapping and scripting of certain social services processes. And although at the time of the interview it was not clear which, if any, aspects of the council's Children and Families services might be fronted by generic customer service staff, these issues were broached to gauge the manager's attitude.

The thought of very basic social services enquiries being mapped and handled by non-specialists raised few concerns for the Children and Families Team Manager but beyond these he suggested professional judgement would play a critical role in decision-making: "I think if we were to describe something like that to the social duty team managers they would potentially be saying 'It's not for somebody else…to script out…you have to decide that on the assessment of the child's needs'." The participant went on to give examples of the types of enquiry that he felt ought, and ought *not*, to be dealt with generically:

> "Unless it's a script around somebody who…has just arrived in [Big City] and is wanting to know where they can get the *Childline* number or where the nurseries are or, 'I have a child with a disability', something like that I think would be relatively easy to script. For somebody who's actually coming in saying 'I know somebody's being hit', or 'I've hit', or 'I'm concerned this is happening', we would want that

passed straight over to social services and not actually gone into in any further detail whatsoever." (4th October 2005)

The idea that exercising professional judgement is an important part of delivering good public services is, of course, supported by other voices (see for example Mintzberg, 1996; Barberis, 2012).

At one point during this discussion I mentioned that one-stop-shop staff had reported that they *do* find themselves confronted with acutely vulnerable customers, including, as an example, women fleeing domestic violence. The participant said he would feel uncomfortable having a generic officer without specialist training handling this type of enquiry beyond signposting specialist providers, especially if children were involved:

> "What I would be unsure about – if that person then had two small children in tow – [is whether a generic officer could] recognise signs that perhaps a Social Worker could recognise [in] those children; perhaps the risk still exists or the parenting has broken down slightly, around their basic needs because the person is having to flee domestic violence…" (4th October 2005)

Another set of criticisms articulated by this participant was targeted more directly at the efficiency agenda, certain features of which he argued ran counter to the requirements for providing a high quality service in a Childrens' Services setting. For example, at one point, the participant explained that there had been speculation for a number of years in the council about rationalising community-based social services offices (of course, as mentioned elsewhere, similar rationalisation efforts in other service areas were already underway at the time of the fieldwork). On being asked how he felt about the prospect of services being centralised, he replied: "I'm totally opposed to it." He went on to explain that "...the research around working with children and families is very much to deliver services in their local community." During the same discussion, this participant expressed more general concerns with the current preoccupation with seeking efficiencies in every corner of service delivery: "I think there's a conflict at the moment between being efficient and actually doing safe work with children, because risk management is a necessarily inefficient process." As well as pointing to tensions raised by efforts to transform the service experience, these arguments also highlight the complex and, at times, contradictory relationship between customer-focus and efficiency, a subject that is discussed at length in the next chapter.

The expertise narrative was also articulated by other participants (a Personal Assistant to a senior manager and a Business Officer) attached to Big City's social services function. Both had been involved in the mapping of social services enquiries in anticipation of generic enquiry handling by Customer Services. The following excerpt demonstrates that, in the view of the Business Officer, many social services enquiries are best left for trained professionals to handle, and as such, the cut-off point (the point at which the generic officer ceases to handle the enquiry and a specialist colleague enters the picture) tends to be quite early on in an enquiry – hence legitimating the expertise narrative:

> *Business Officer*: "There has to be a cut-off point I think in the nature of some of the enquiries that we get here, so…someone might ring in and say 'I'm having problems with my daughter's behaviour', or something – there's no set answer. There has to be a cut-off point where we have to say 'You've got to refer to a social worker'."

On being asked how that cut-off point tends to be negotiated with Customer Services personnel, the participant was clear that social services staff are in the driving seat: "There was very little negotiation in it – it was a statement that was made…" (15th August 2005)

Social services perhaps represents a rather obvious example of a service area where the exercise of professional discretion is paramount to service delivery. The fieldwork, however, revealed that many local government services involve routine judgement calls to be made. By way of an example, during a discussion of the division of enquiry handling between generic and specialist officers, this Senior Benefits Officer explained the part that professional discretion plays in handling Benefits-related customer enquiries:

> "The whole Benefits system is a piece of legislation. Built in with that is guidance, and in [Big City] we tend to have quite a holistic approach, so we understand that a lot of our customers, for one reason or another, can't always provide the information that we need…and we can broker a deal with them, you know, to get something – in payment or whatever. So…that's an understanding of how the process of applying Housing Benefit works, because if you have a script which says you need five payslips in order to get your benefit processed, the Customer Service Advisor may not realise that we can do it on a shorter timescale or we can apply a [*participant's words indecipherable here*] calculation, or something like that – that's something that is technical and you would only know that if you were…a benefit processor basically." (5th October 2005)

Staff experienced in handling council tax enquiries (and many other service areas) also emphasised the level of discretion required to conduct negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion. Most emphatic in this regard was a generic officer – who had previously worked as a council tax specialist – describing the difficulties he encountered in mapping council tax enquiry processes: "It was an absolute nightmare…there's that many grey areas and a lot of it's open to your own discretion…when you're talking about people's finances and that, there's nothing ever black and white, so it was quite tough to get it sorted." (20th July 2005)

These data lead one to conclude that social services enquiries are, on the whole, seen as being less amenable to generic mapping and scripting than those relating to some other service areas. This is not to say, however, that all other enquiries are viewed as being systematisable in a straightforward way – as the participants' comments above show. The data also suggest that even the most enthusiastic change-makers accept that there ought to be an enquiry cut-off point for most services. What is less clear is the process the council has been following for arriving at that cut-off point. In the case of social services, it appears from the participants' comments above that the voice of the back office specialist is dominant in this decision.

It is useful at this point to briefly look at a service area where power was alternatively distributed, where 'expertise' has been interpreted as preciousness – the case of Benefits. This service area was in the process of being mapped at the time of the fieldwork so that frontline generic officers would be able to handle initial enquiries. The Customer Services Manager explained that generic officers were restricted to dealing with processes of verification and were not yet able to handle claims. What was clear, however, was that she was committed to expanding the level of generic service. According to this participant, the mapping process in this instance had proved to be quite problematic, largely because back office staff and management had been displaying resistance to the changes: "There's been a culture that's developed there, of 'This is a specialist role, we need to hang on to everything; we don't need to tell anybody anything that we do'. The managers are exactly the same…'This is *my* baby'…and… 'We're precious about it' type of thing, so the staff therefore feel exactly the same way." (1st August 2005)

This notion of back office 'preciousness' in the face of change was echoed by some of the more progressive participants, including a trade union representative in connection with staff located in the council's Exchequer Services unit: "Yeah there was a resistance, you know, 'They can't do our job better than us! Ahh, there's no way; *they* can't deal with Payroll

queries…we are too specialised'. And I think we just needed to get past that…er, preciousness about what we do and how we do it." (19th August 2005) The same sentiment was articulated by a transformation team member: "They're…very conceited and think that nobody else on this planet can do their job like they can." (16th March 2003) What we can see here is an expertise narrative – viewed as legitimate elsewhere – being discredited by front office actors.

By way of demonstrating in visceral terms the degree of conflict that has arisen between the front and back offices over ownership of enquiry-handling, the Customer Services Manager recalled a situation involving her Council Tax colleagues. The scenario serves to test the robustness of an expertise narrative, whether it can withstand accusations of preciousness. At the beginning of the restructuring process, relations were clearly frosty. She described how, when her frontline staff would spend time with the council tax team in order to understand their working practices, "...they were just so awful to them when they went over there…". According to this participant, "...over the years, the council tax specialist team have took every opportunity to sort of slate the Customer Service team who are delivering front-line services for them, and they seem to spend a lot of their time looking for errors that the customer service centre team did..." In this context, she explained that things had recently come to a head when the Council Tax Manager proposed that all frontline staff and council tax specialist staff should "do an exam" in order to identify training needs. In the event, "...the customer service centre team came way up there and beat some of the council tax specialists, and since then I've never heard another word from council tax about the level of service." Indeed, the Manager went on to say that her council tax counterpart "...wants to push the parameters back further now – he has total confidence in the [frontline] team, knows the training's working...so we can do more on the front-line without referring to his specialist team." (1st August 2005) This anecdote can be seen to illustrate how, in certain areas, Big City's frontline has tackled and, to some extent, undermined the potency of an expertise narrative.

Returning to the case of the Benefits service area (where a degree of preciousness had been identified by the Customer Services Manager), I interviewed a Senior Benefits Officer who had been involved in the Benefits mapping process. In common with other specialists, she encountered difficulties mapping certain parts of the processes owing to their complexity and the degree to which everyday decisions are based on tacit knowledge built up through experience: "We struggled with quite a lot of the applications…we did attempt to map out

areas but we did come to the conclusion quite early on that…with the best will in the world, without an intensive familiarisation course, you wouldn't necessarily be able to give the information…" (5th October 2005) In short, she articulated an expertise narrative.

The officer claimed that the primary motivation for her concern related to the potentially damaging consequences of generic officers making incorrect decisions. At one point she posed the question: "What would be the consequence if we had to go to tribunal and it was discovered that early on the correct information hadn't been given out?" While it is important that we do not overlook the clear benefits to the customer of local authorities instigating a range of process and structural innovations such as those at Big City, neither should we ignore the contradictions and the (possibly unintended) consequences of these changes. Ironically, it may be that generic officers' eagerness to please customers, to provide an efficient service experience, may lead to costly mistakes being made and ultimately poorer customer service. According to this officer, a desire to avoid embarrassment or a response to feeling pressured may give rise to this outcome. She could imagine a situation where generic officers "…don't want to have to pass the buck, they don't want to say 'You know what? You need to see a Benefits Officer but there's already five people waiting'." (5th October 2005)

Another dimension of an expertise narrative invoked by this participant related to the idea that specialist officers, regardless of service area, are likely to 'know their customer' rather better than their generic colleagues, something which also has implications for the quality of customer service that can be delivered. She argued that "over the years we've gained a *huge* amount of knowledge about what type of customer comes in…" Claiming that she and her Benefits colleagues deal with "…a lot of customers who wouldn't necessarily interact with the council in any other way…", this Officer talked of how "…we pride ourselves on knowing our customer and knowing what their expectations are, but you can only learn that through practice." (5th October 2005)

The following excerpt demonstrates that this participant recognises the tension between the back and front offices associated with claims of specialism. It also demonstrates the limits of such claims in contrast with the equivalent negotiation over social services enquiry handling noted above:

> *Respondent*: "The Customer Service Managers, they wanted to evaluate, they wanted to make their own decision, they didn't want me saying 'Actually, no, I think this is too difficult'…I suppose they thought that we were being a bit protectionist…that we

were looking to hold onto our little world and we didn't want anybody else involved but – which is fair enough, I can understand that – but…from my position as Senior Benefits Officer, I see the consequence of poor advice…so, people would maybe say I was relatively jaded, you know, I've written too many letters to people apologising because they've been told the wrong thing, or they've been given a false impression, so I thought it was in our interest to protect…ourselves, from recourse, from the customers. But the view of the senior managers wasn't that – they wanted to see the whole process, they wanted to evaluate it, decide on their training requirements or whatever, and then they [bangs desk] would make a decision where the cut-off was, so…"

Interviewer: "So you weren't involved in drawing the line…"

Respondent: "…No…"

Interviewer: "…Was that a process of negotiation or…"

Respondent: "…No, I had to take the process from start to finish, you know, whether I thought that was appropriate or not" (5th October 2005)

Interestingly, despite frontline management dismissing this attitude as "preciousness", there is some sympathy with it among those whose task it is to deliver a generic service. Reflecting on the fact that Planning enquiries were soon to be added to the portfolio of frontline services and the possible effect on service quality, one Generic Officer said "I've got absolutely no idea [about Planning] whatsoever – so that is a bit daunting." Describing herself as a "…jack of all trades, master of none", she saw the situation as one where "…you might know a bit about all of [the service areas] but you don't know enough on all of them to give a good service." (20th July 2005) However, I got the impression that this kind of criticism was not commonly articulated beyond the interview room. The various implications of frontline decision-support systems for service quality, officer discretion and so on are discussed in the next chapter.

In summary, the data show that some council workers, at different levels of the organizational hierarchy and for different reasons, have been resistant to Big City's customer-focused change agenda. It is, however, important not to infer from this statement that all other council staff affected by these change efforts are necessarily advocates of them – rather than black and white, the situation is better construed in terms of shades of grey. It is also important to note that certain 'resistant' voices appear to carry a higher degree of legitimacy than others. How long this remains a static situation is very much open to question however. As the data

analysed in this section illustrate, the momentum that a customer-focus narrative is generating at Big City feels unstoppable to some participants. The words of a Senior Benefits Officer neatly illustrate this feeling. This is someone who, despite expressing ambivalence towards certain elements of the change agenda, twice during the same interview uttered the same phrase, without any obvious sense of irony: "…but you can't fight progress." (5th October 2005) Moreover, 'progress' is seen as epitomised by the Customer Services unit: "…the success of the [Customer Services] centre has proved that…that is the way forward and that that is the way the council is going, the government's going, you know – it's either jump on the bandwagon or stay behind basically" (Generic Officer, 28th May 2003)

4.7 Chapter conclusion

The narrative of this chapter is the outcome of a process of analysing the language (both that formally documented and that generated via a series of research interviews) associated with the rolling-out of e-government in conjunction with the observable organizational change at one local authority. As such, it provides a rich picture of how Big City Council is realising customer-focused e-government.

While the initial focus for this research study centred on the deployment of a CRM system, it soon became clear that, while this technology is performing a significant strategic role in driving organizational change, it is the 'customer' (for whose benefit CRM systems are developed) who emerges as the most powerful and most interesting agent of change. And it is the customer in whom the greatest organizational effort has been invested, located at the centre of concurrent processes of rehearsing, refining, and resourcing, albeit that CRM is key to clarifying the customer's character, needs, and potential preferences.

Calling to mind the multi-layered critique of customer-centric change in public services, and positioning it against one of the key findings of this study – namely the relative ease with which the public services' customer has settled in Big City Council – stimulates further questions and demands deeper analysis. This is the task of the next chapter, where established theoretical lenses are applied to the data in an effort to develop an explanatory argument about the instantiation of customer-focussed local e-government, one which highlights the potency as well as the shortcomings of the public services' customer.

Chapter 5. Discussion of findings

5.1 Chapter introduction

The findings set out in the previous chapter provide a rich account of how, in the case of Big City Council, the public services' 'customer' as part of a strategic customer-focus narrative is being recruited and invoked, although its recruitment is not complete nor its invocation universal. However, more than one message can be taken from this broad finding.

First, one might seek to underplay the success of the customer in that there have been multiple forms of resistance to the structural and cultural changes that champions of customer-focus have sought, and in that the operational reach of customer-focus has been stymied in certain service areas. From this view, rather than penetrating the heart of the local authority, customer-focus has attached itself to the edge of the organization (in the form of Big City Service), from where it is seeks to advance further and further into the operations of local e-government.

At the same time, given the well-established critique of customer-focus (in public services) and given the sites of organizational resistance set out in the last chapter, another reading might emphasise that the gains that the customer *has* made have been hard won, concluding that this character has done remarkably well to have gained a foothold in the previously 'foreign' territory of local government. For, notwithstanding many difficulties, the organization has demonstrated a good deal of commitment to customer-focus as a corporate strategy and there is evidence of the customer lexicon being uncontentiously used by all of the research participants. Even among those who exhibit a degree of reluctance to the change agenda, the idea of pursuing a 'customer-focus' is a wholly neutral (if not a positive) progression in the organization of public services delivery. Further, a corporate customer service culture change programme is underway, there is a suite of customer service centres, a number of strategic partnerships with external service providers have been successfully negotiated, and so on. In short, from this view, the public services customer is a striking achievement! What, in one sense, began as an organizational endeavour with an *externally-focussed* objective – to better 'know' its customer – has in fact entailed an immense *internal* effort of reorganisation to accommodate the idea of a public services' customer.

Both of these readings are valid. Although the second variant is the one that will be developed in this chapter; it is the relative success of customer-focus at Big City that demands explanation. This will be achieved by marshalling key elements of the theoretical framework set out in Chapter 2 to argue that customer-focus is being naturalised, institutionalised, and heterogeneously performed in the local e-government setting. Further, through reflecting on literature concerned with the customer's unique and multiple features, it will be argued that the polyvalence of the customer, in conjunction with customer-focus as an organizational mission, represents an important aspect of this organizational accomplishment. At the same time, this latter discussion will facilitate an exploration of what the, at once seductive and dissatisfying, public services' customer implies for those charged with delivering customer-focus and for the relationship between the individual and the state.

5.2 A constructionist account of customer-focused local e-government

Before addressing the main aims of this chapter, and in order to contextualise the explanation of organizational change that I am advancing, I will first set out what might be termed a conventional account of Big City Council's situation. This account represents a distilled version of the council's e-government journey from the perspective of the voices encountered during the empirical research. It is also an account that posits the emergence of customer-focus in the council as the consequence of a set of strategic and rational choices made by management; choices that are wholly logical, given the wider policy environment and the existence of incentivization schemes for councils pursuing e-government change. It posits management as the primary agents of change. As such, it can be characterised as 'managerialist' (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000) and reliant on an objectivist understanding of organization. The use of the first person plural to represent the voice of the council management is for narrative effect:

> The world in which Big City operates is changing rapidly and we need to be able to respond to those changes. We need to achieve a greater sense of alignment between that environment and our working practices; that includes changing our corporate values to underpin those practices. UK local authorities need to be entrepreneurial organisations; that means being dynamic, flexible, anticipatory, efficiency-focused and customer-oriented.
>
> Our customers increasingly demand better, quicker, more convenient services. They are used to increasingly higher levels of customer service in the commercial sector and are

less tolerant of poor service levels in their dealings with state bodies. For far too long organisations like ours have been inward-looking; it is time we started to organise ourselves around our customers. All parts of government recognise this and management here and elsewhere are driving through change on a number of fronts simultaneously.

Around the time when central government was formalising its e-government and modernisation agenda, we looked at ourselves and soon realised that we were not fit for change. Since then we have entered partnerships with a range of specialist commercial organisations to support our change efforts. More generally, we are determined to adopt strategies, technologies, and values that deliver benefits in the commercial sector.

We have implemented a substantial restructuring programme that saw the creation of Big City Service following a lengthy tendering process. Within this new structure we have established a Business Development and Transformation Team to drive our vision forward. We are investing substantial resources in developing a series of Customer Service Centres and a new contact centre in an effort to improve customer access channels by joining-up across traditional service silos. Alongside these developments we are engaged in a process of rationalising our community-based presence to make cost-savings where we can. These actions are being guided by new insights on the behaviour of our customers.

We are undertaking an extensive reprocessing exercise across the council's portfolio of services in conjunction with introducing ICTs designed to streamline our CRM activities. These systems help us to deliver higher quality service *and* deliver cost-efficiencies by pushing resources to the front-line. They also help us to better understand our customers' needs and provide our management team with valuable information on our customers to help shape future service provision. Further, we are developing and promoting our self-service capabilities, thereby delivering customer convenience and cost-savings.

To deliver this vision we need staff that are committed to the corporate strategy. That is why we have recruited people with experience and skills in leading customer-focused change projects and why we value staff that are willing to develop their skill-set and adopt a flexible approach to their work roles. That is also why we have a council-wide customer service training programme. And we are getting better at listening to our customers as

> well as our staff. This programme of change emphasises our determination to put customer service at the heart of the council.
>
> Yes, of course, organisational change can be painful and difficult. But we have no choice but to change. Yes, there will always be some who are opposed to change; those who want to cling to the past. We must not allow them to impede the long-overdue process of transformational change in this council.

Though caricatural, this constructed account offers a condensed version of events from the perspective of research participants and supporting documents; as well as describing what has happened it also explains what has happened. The underlying narrative is one that positions the pursuit of a particular change path as necessary – indeed inevitable – and the shape of the corresponding programme of reform as instinctively right.

What I want to emphasise here, however, is that the above account is but one, albeit a dominant, representation of events and that what has occurred at Big City can be interpreted differently. An alternative, constructionist version of events – one that rests on a different set of epistemological and ontological assumptions – problematises the objective nature of 'reality' and the assumed rationality associated with the actors and actions underpinning the story. As far as occasions of organizational change are concerned, it is a perspective that distances itself from managerialist accounts of organizational change, those that assume a straightforward consequentiality between senior managerial decision-making and organizational outcomes, and in doing so ignore the complexity and ambiguity of change processes. Rather, from this perspective, the exercise of agency is a more distributed process, and the performative nature of language and textualization is emphasised. The change process is conceptualized more as one of creation rather than description followed by action.

Central to the mobilisation of an alternative explanation is the idea that, in the case of Big City Council, the story of change events are constituted by a customer-focus 'ordering narrative'. It is a narrative that encapsulates the core idea that local authorities are best organised around the needs of their customers, in strategic, structural, cultural, and technological terms. Integral to this idea are the related notions that different categories of service users are posited as 'customers', customer interactions are governed by a commitment to a professional customer service ethic, and local authorities are obligated to develop their capacity to better know and respond to the needs of those customers. In talking of a customer-

focus narrative in this way, there is a risk of over-simplifying the organisational reality, the lived experience, of the council actors studied. As is clear from the previous chapter, I am not claiming that there was universal support for the customer-focused change programme being pursued by Big City. Rather, my claim is that, a thorough analysis of the research data has resulted in the identification of a customer-focus narrative as representing a particularly powerful sense-making framework connected to the process of implementing e-government at a local level. It is a narrative that has descriptive power and, in conjunction with this study's chosen theoretical lens, explanatory potential.

The most visible, and legitimate (from the perspective of Big City's change makers), mode of narrative opposition has come in the form of what I have termed an 'expertise' narrative. It is one that, in this localised context, attaches significant value to professional judgement in the delivery of high quality customer service and one that emphasises the limits of ICTs in supporting customer enquiry handling. Arguably, an 'expertise' narrative limited the potency of certain aspects of a customer-focus narrative (in some service areas more successfully than others). At the same time, however, the data lead one to conclude that there is a lack of a coherent alternative narrative, one that possesses strategic force.

What I call a customer-focus narrative can be understood as closely related to, and underpinned by, what other writers (Keat, 1990; du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay 2004) have referred to as an 'enterprise' or 'entrepreneurial' discourse. The manifestations of this discourse – including a trend towards contractualization as a way of representing relationships between institutions, the valuing of a particular entrepreneurial 'ethic of personhood', and a vigorous rhetorical opposition to the 'bureaucratic' – were clearly in evidence during the data-collection process. In speaking of a customer-focus narrative my aim is in no way to attempt to supplant the heuristic potency of the 'enterprise' discourse; on the contrary, I see them as complementary. I would draw a parallel with the analysis of Doolin (2003), in which he identified an 'enterprise' discourse that operated to support the embedding of a 'clinical leadership' narrative in a health service context. My intention is to draw attention to the numerous and diverse ways in which a 'customer-focus' narrative, in conjunction with other prevailing discourses of organization, is being instantiated in public sector organisational terrains and to argue that it is an ordering narrative worthy of recognition.

It is important to remember that the organizational positioning advocated by enterprise and customer-focus narratives in public sector contexts, to a large extent mirrors dominant

thinking of the past few decades in commercial and other organizational settings. In making this argument, I am drawing attention to the relationship between organizational sense-making and practice and wider socio-cultural, historically-situated narratives. Simply put, all organisations are shaped by prevailing trends, in strategic and operational terms, and public institutions are not immune to these shaping narratives.

There is an important point of clarification to be made here regarding the degree of political intentionality associated with the operation of organizational narratives. I envisage this process as more one of organizational actors utilising dominant modes of understanding than deliberately deploying sense-making strategies. Again, Doolin's approach is instructive. While he construed the hospital's change management actors as engaging in 'sense-giving' activities he was keen to emphasise that he was *not* "…trying to imply that the corporate managers consciously manipulated the meaning effects of discourse as a political tool. [Rather], [t]he discourses were available to them in the broader societal context, and they drew upon them in their daily construction of organizational reality without any necessary subjective intentionality" (Doolin, 2003: 761-762). Within the organizational studies landscape, it is a position allied to those that consider organizations as "material practices of text and talk set in currents of political economy and sociohistory – in time and space" (Boje et al., 2004:571). In this sense, the organization of Big City can be conceptualized as the ongoing re-performance of a locally interpreted set of framing social narratives by actors with differing degrees of legitimacy. Prevailing narratives, then, are seen to play an important role in framing organizational behaviour. And a key dimension of this process relates to how the organizational environment is viewed and what organizational behaviour it 'demands' – this is the focus of the next sub-section.

5.2.1 Naturalizing the path of customer-focussed change

Having clarified the discursive terrain in broad terms, this sub-section begins to develop an alternative, constructionist account of change at Big City. As stated above, it is important to take account of the broader narrative terrain within which many contemporary customer-focussed organisations (including Big City) envision themselves operating. That is, the core principles of customer-focus flow from, and make sense when contextualized by, a particular view of the organisational environment. My argument is that the data compiled during this study suggest that a broadly similar (and cohesive) image of the organizational environment is

re-presented by key actors and key texts. More importantly, I argue that these processes of re-presentation play a critical role in the legitimation of a customer-focus narrative.

In his examination of 'enterprise' discourses in public sector organizations, du Gay (2004) remarks on the "spectacular agency" that has been attributed to the environment within which public institutions operate, citing Osborne and Gaebler's (1992) highly influential text to illustrate the point. In that text, the authors repeatedly talk of the *demands* made of public institutions by "today's environment", i.e. that they are adaptable, that they deliver high-quality goods and services, that they are responsive to the needs of their customers, and give their employees a sense of meaning and control. The implication of these 'demands' is the necessity of 'entrepreneurial government'.

Applying a similar lens to the Big City experience, there is compelling evidence that the council actors studied unproblematically accept that this view faithfully represents the organizational environment they inhabit. Once this view is accepted as legitimate, a series of propositions logically follow. Public institutions *should necessarily* be taking steps to align themselves with the challenges presented by that environment. In their analysis of enterprise discourses, du Gay and Salaman (1992) neatly sum up the 'real' impact of organizational re-articulations. Rather than viewing processes of translation as a "side-show" or "ideological distortion" of the reality of restructuring efforts, they emphasise that when an activity or institution is "redefined, reimagined, or reconceptualised", it does not maintain some "real, essential, or originary" identity separate from its dominant articulation, it "assumes a new identity". (1992: 90)

Developing this line of thinking, complementary to the idea of a dynamic environment is the notion that the current modus operandi is outdated and new and better ways of working are demanded. In Big City's case, I argue that such rhetorical conceptualizations played a role in legitimating the case for change. I am referring to the way that, in the data, the 'old' (systems, practices, culture and so on) are pitted against the 'new', de-legitimating the former and legitimating the latter. Recalling the words of the Head of Big City Service "… our technology is not fit for purpose, our organizational form is not fit for purpose, our culture is not fit for purpose, our asset base is not fit for purpose…" (24th August 2005)

A key element of the council's internal restructuring programme relates to the division of enquiry-handling tasks and how ICTs can best support these operations. While the

'inevitability' of an ambitious change programme may be more readily recognised at more senior levels of the council (where the necessity of 'entrepreneurial government' is most acutely understood and where the potential for cost savings and improved customer service are seen as immediately attractive outcomes), this may not necessarily be the case lower down the organizational hierarchy. There, council management had some narrative 'work' to do in terms of presenting the case for change as not only being about enhancing customer service but also about improving staff working conditions and developing staff. This can be seen in the way that managers attempted to enrol different communities of workers directly affected by CRM-related changes.

As can be seen from the previous chapter, support for change at the lower levels took different forms; unambiguous in certain cases, more ambivalent in others. On the whole, however, there was broad acceptance that the council had little option but to pursue an e-government, customer-focused agenda – "You can't fight progress!" (Benefits Officer, 5th October 2005). At the same time, there was little evidence that the multi-layered strategic and operational rationale for change was fully appreciated by workers at these levels. A broad sense of staff compliance appears to have been achieved by management emphasising the more tangible benefits for workers associated with the reorganisation, and in so doing problematizing the old ways of working. Two communities of workers are key here; frontline staff and back office specialists.

The benefits of reorganisation for specialists are being emphasised in terms of the kinds of tasks that will be passed to the frontline. The language used by a number of respondents when referring to the transition of workload is important in this regard; the tasks in question were commonly described as 'mundane'. One of the CRM scriptors talked about specialist officers, in the past, "being stuck with mediocre tasks", and viewed the scripting technologies as "taking away some of the drab bits and pieces" (18th November 2004) from the specialist's workload. A member of the Transformation Team articulated the enrolment 'strategy' in more blunt terms: "The way we sold it to [the back office functions] was – the more information they could give us the less telephone calls they were going to receive and the less hassle they were going to get." (16th March 2003) The flip-side of diminishing the status of routine tasks is exalting the nature of the tasks back office specialists are left to focus on – the 'real' work. A Project Manager from the CRM Vendor outlined how she endeavours to secure the 'buy-in' of back office staff: "You can explain to them that we're taking away the *mundane* tasks of answering those questions *forty* times a day to allow you to do real work." (6th April 2005)

It would seem from the data that the architects of change had a much simpler task enrolling frontline workers – after all, their role was new and many had been recruited externally to perform a customer service function. Nevertheless, another dimension of time-saving has been underlined by management to help engender acceptance. A Customer Service Centre Manager explained that, while "…at a higher level you've got this thing about getting a holistic view of the customer and being able to provide services at one point of contact…", the practical benefits of a CRM system were emphasised to frontline operators. The Manager vocalised "how it was sold" to them: "Right, at the moment, you've got x number of passwords, you need to learn x number of systems, these passwords change every 28 days, you've gotta re-input people's name and address for every system that you need to access for that enquiry…is it not much better then just to input their name and address and just, at a click, access all of the different records that you need through CRM and have access to scripts and…consistent information?" (20th July 2005) In addition, frontline staff are being encouraged to view a shift to genericization positively as part of a new "culture of training and development", where "…multi-skilling provides them with really good development opportunities" (Contact Centre Development Officer, 29th November 2004) – a key aspect of what I have called elsewhere the professionalization of customer service.

An appraisal of the data indicates that key aspects of the managerial discursive framing of the new systems have been broadly accepted by both specialist and generic officer communities. A back office specialist argued that the reorganisation has "…given us the opportunity to spend more time on the varied, and the interesting, and the meaningful tasks, rather than getting bogged down with the mundane, what you could call '5-second tasks', that you can do straight away." (Revenues Officer; 24th March 2005) At the same time, in keeping with his manager's message of simplification (cited above), a Generic Officer remarked that the CRM system is "…much easier, it's revolutionised it for us…" He explained that prior to its implementation, "…they were *all* separate systems and you had to have a different log-in for every system…" (28th May 2003)

Reflecting on the argument set out in this sub-section concerning the naturalizing of the path for change, it is useful to recall that Doolin made a comparable argument in claiming that, to facilitate organizational change in a hospital setting, "…assumptions about the appropriateness of what was done in the past were changed and organizational history was to an extent rewritten" (2003: 760). This, he characterised as the "disordering" of the old order –

what was once introduced as cutting-edge and wholly rational comes to be discarded as old-school and irrational.

In Big City's case, the de-legitimising (or disordering) of the old order went beyond its internal structures, processes, and technologies. More fundamentally, council workers and their value set were subject to a process of disordering. I am referring here to the way that interview data – supported by formal government rhetoric and Big City's recruitment strategy – adds up to the discursive construction of a 'right' (and 'wrong') type of officer.

The representation of the 'right' (or 'new') council officer is reinforced by the analogous framing of – what at times comes across as the ridiculing of – the 'wrong' (or 'old') type of officer. There is a sense of 'Otherness' in the way that the latter category of workers are framed; they are stuck in their ways, behind the times, apathetic, lacking in dynamism – altogether rather "grey" characters (Trade union representative; 19th November 2005). More emphatically, the Head of Big City Service characterized them as "clinging to wreckage". This discursive framing allows for the dismissal of the motives of many change-resistant staff as illegitimate. At the same time, Big City management can be seen to frame the 'right' type of worker as someone fit for change, someone prepared to view the challenges of e-government change as opportunities to engage in a process of self-reappraisal in terms of both skills and values. There are clear echoes between the 'right' type of council worker and du Gay and Salaman's (1992) notion of the "enterprising self", the product of organisational processes that seek to "empower", "responsibilize" and "enable" individual members of the organization to "add value" – both to the company for which they work and to themselves.

By way of taking stock here, this sub-section has drawn on conceptual insights developed by key contributors to organizational theory (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Doolin, 2003; and du Gay, 2004) to begin the task of setting out a constructionist explanation of customer-focused change at Big City Council as a significant discursive achievement. I have argued that an important element of this has involved naturalizing *one* view of the world, a view which implies that certain courses of action and ways of behaving appear rational (and others irrational). Of course, this discursive achievement is underpinned and legitimated by textual instantiation of a more diverse kind than has been suggested so far. The next sub-section will utilize an established analytical framework to systematically develop this argument by drawing attention to the everyday processes of textual production and consumption that are

seen as instrumental in explaining how a customer-focus narrative is becoming 'institutionalized'.

5.2.2 Institutionalizing customer-focus

In their 2004 paper *Discourse and Institutions* Phillips et al. set out how discourse analysis can be used to explain how processes of institutionalization are more likely to occur under certain conditions than others. I argue that their framework holds valuable lessons for understanding what has been observed in this case study from a constructionist perspective.

As stated in Chapter 2, within the categories of 'texts' that Phillips et al. suggest are amenable to discourse analysis – "written documents, verbal reports, artwork, spoken words, pictures, symbols, buildings, and other artefacts" (2004:636) – technological artefacts are of especial significance in this study. In this sense, I am constructing a theoretical bridge between the ideas of theorists who traditionally have not been specifically concerned with the role of new technologies in organizational settings, and those who *have* (primarily John Law, whose work is connected with that of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour on the sociology of technology). Importantly, I argue that both perspectives share a complementary ontological position; both understand human experience as being ordered and made durable through a multiplicity of social (or socio-technical) structures across space and time. At the same time, those writers who share Law's perspective articulate a more all-encompassing notion of the operation of 'ordering' narratives, and one that emphasizes the relational quality of these processes – "the materially heterogenous organizational arrangements [narratives] generate include talk, text, people, machines, technologies, architectures, naturally occurring entities and processes" (Doolin, 2003: 757). These latter ideas will be worked through later in this chapter.

An overview of the theoretical model for understanding institutionalization devised by Phillips et al. (2004) is provided in chapter 2. Integral to that model is a series of theoretical propositions of use in guiding the empirical analysis of organizational text production, discursive formation, and institutionalization. Six propositions will be described in this section to facilitate the discursive analysis.

The first proposition is: *Actions that require organizational sensemaking are more likely to result in the production of texts that are widely disseminated and consumed than actions that do not* (2004: 642). Informed by Karl Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking, the authors

claim that while organizational actions produce all kinds of texts all the time, only certain texts "leave traces". The latter tend to be the result of "novel moments in organizations", perhaps crises, which inspire sustained sensemaking activity; for example when innovators write reports or management continually articulate stories to illustrate a new practice.

These processes of textual production/consumption can be identified in relation to actions at different institutional levels in this case study. First, sensemaking (and arguably sensegiving) activity at a central government level over the last decade has given rise to the production of a multitude of texts – formal expressions of strategic policy and guidance centring on the e-government and transformation agendas – prompted by the widespread sense that traditional, bureaucratic public service delivery mechanisms are unfit for purpose and demand a radical overhaul. Similarly, at a local level, councils like Big City have felt compelled to take remedial action for the same reasons, leading to the production of formal texts, including a series of Implementing Electronic Government statements, Customer Service Strategy documents and so on. Such texts are the product of an organizational effort to make sense of a set of environmental conditions that demand a specific course of action. In addition, we can point to everyday sensemaking activities and the concurrent articulation of narratives in support of those formal expressions of change (for example, during formal and informal 'internal' encounters concerned with service delivery strategy, or those with 'external' actors such as transformation partners).

Closely linked to the first proposition is a second that highlights the importance of 'legitimation' to discursive formation. It states that: *Actions that affect perceptions of the organization's legitimacy are more likely to result in the production of texts that are widely disseminated and consumed than actions that do not* (2004:642). The production of those texts referred to above can be implicated in these processes given that they relate to actions that, at once, call into question the legitimacy of existing mechanisms and cultures of service delivery and assert the legitimacy of alternatives. To these we can add actions taken by Big City that open up the question of legitimate ways of organizing local public service delivery to a key audience – its customers. These actions have given rise to the production of formal texts such as the council's 2001 'Green Paper' and the 'Customer Service Charter' that accompanied it. In communicating the council's strategy to service users and in seeking their views on existing and proposed service delivery mechanisms, those texts also perform the role of presenting preferred 'answers' to the challenges faced by the council. In addition, ongoing organizational actions can be identified that affect perceptions of legitimacy such as those that

lead to the production of texts which are communicated to internal and external audiences in the form of written and verbal accounts of data on customer satisfaction levels, the achievement of efficiency targets, and so on. At the same time, it is difficult to identify actions and textual production that challenge the legitimacy of entrepreneurial government (much less champion an alternative position) – those that do tend to be confined to certain academic circles.

This final point concerning the legitimacy of the text producer connects with the next series of propositions defined by Phillips et al. (2004). These aim to clarify which types of texts become 'fixated' (Ricoeur, 1981, 1986) or embedded in discourse. What the authors mean by embedded is "the extent to which texts are adopted and incorporated by other organizations to become part of standardized, categorized, generalized meanings" (2004: 643). First, it is proposed that: *Texts that are produced by actors who are understood to have a legitimate right to speak, who have resource power or formal authority, or who are centrally located in a field are more likely to become embedded in discourse than texts that are not* (2004: 643). The research data that can be marshalled in response to this proposition are particularly rich.

First, it is uncontentious to assert the legitimacy of central government actors and text producers – both well-established and newly-created departments and groupings (such as the *e-Government Unit*, part of the Cabinet Office's *Delivery and Transformation Group*, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), the CRM National Programme, the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM), and more recently, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships) – against each of the dimensions expressed in the above proposition. To these we can add the creation of a range of centrally-based, strategic roles charged with advancing IT-based transformation; these include e-Government Minister, Local e-Government Minister, e-Envoy (later Head of e-Government), and Information Age Government Champions. Apart from the mass of written and verbal guidance originating from these sources and the framework of targets characterised by Public Service Agreements (and more recently Service Transformation Agreements), their 'resource power' is demonstrated in the setting of tied targets (in the case of Big City, the council was to receive one million pounds provided it successfully opened a number of customer service centres, achieved a certain number of customer visits, and achieved 90% customer satisfaction within a specified time period).

At a local level, the data point strongly towards the significance – and in this context legitimacy – of Big City's chief executive in pushing through a programme of customer-focused change. Other key discursive agents at the council include the Head of Big City Service (described as a 'missionary' in the earlier analysis) and his management team, as well as senior members of the IT department. Alongside these authoritative text producers we can identify powerful external voices whose actions serve to reinforce processes of discursive legitimacy. Among them is one of the council's 'transformation partners', CRM Vendor, an actor that carries legitimacy given its track record of delivering successful IT projects in the public and private sectors. This argument offers a framework for explaining the arguments of commentators (see Dunleavy et al., 2005; Chadwick and May, 2003) who suggest that the proliferation of private-public strategic partnering arrangements around ICT projects can have real cultural implications for public sector organizations.

Another noteworthy set of legitimate voices is those bodies that grant awards to organizations in recognition of them having attained a certain standard or implemented a significant programme of change, many of which, increasingly, make no distinction between public and private organizations. In Big City's case, these text producers include the Institute of Customer Service, the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE), and UK Skills, from whom the council has received awards. To these legitimate actors, we can add those from the consultant community (project management, technology and so on), academic contributors that adopt a normative perspective towards current change efforts, and a burgeoning collection of online information brokers. My argument is that these actors, alongside the array of others mentioned, play a significant role in the processes by which a customer-focus narrative is being legitimated and embedded in the organizational fabric. Phillips et al make a similar point regarding the institutionalization of the multidivisional form, something which "…did not occur because actors in the various organizations directly observed it in action but because of the accumulation of business, professional, and academic texts that explained, legitimated, validated, and promoted it." (2004: 639)

To clarify, while much of the textual production I have referred to thus far takes the form of what Phillips et al. refer to as "written documents", "verbal reports", and "spoken words", as described in the previous chapter, there are a host of other material texts that have been produced by the legitimate actors identified. In the case of Big City actors, for example, these include new buildings, new organizational structures, new officer roles, customer service

techniques, and CRM technologies. All are implicated in the institutionalization of customer-focus.

At the same time, developing the earlier argument, because actors who propose an alternative position lack resource power and sufficient authority, there has been little in the way of alternative textual production. In Big City's case, the actors found to have a *legitimate right to speak* and, arguably, a degree of *formal authority*, were those back office specialists who mobilised an 'expertise' narrative in relation to the limits of generic enquiry handling. Importantly, however, it is likely that this narrative is confined to spoken texts and is articulated in terms of limiting an established direction of travel, not reversing it or offering a coherent alternative. In short, it operates *within* the broader customer-focus narrative.

In addition to the idea that the producer of the text matters, Phillips et al. propose that the *form* of the text is also significant: *Texts that take the form of genres, which are recognizable, interpretable, and usable in other organizations, are more likely to become embedded in discourse than texts that do not* (2004: 644). In speaking of 'genres' the authors have in mind recognized types of communication following certain conventions that are invoked in response to a recurrent set of circumstances and that share similar substance and form – for example, letters, memos, meetings, training seminars, and announcements. Several of the texts already cited conform to these criteria, including Customer Charters, customer feedback questionnaires, 'mystery shopper' exercises, and data on customer satisfaction levels. All of these represent standard practice in commercial organizations.

We can also point to the plethora of online 'texts' (at both central and local levels) that are designed to attract as well as inform service users of all kinds and that tend to address users in much the same way as commercial service providers might. This entails adopting a style in keeping with what Fairclough (1994) refers to as the 'conversationalization' of public discourse and involves "the simulated individuality of personalization ('synthetic personalization')" (1994: 260), where users are addressed directly and individually ('you') and 'we' is used to personalize the organization in terms of a collective identity (see Keat et al., 1994 for a critique of the empowered consumer thesis). These features also apply to one other genre worthy of mention – CRM technologies – given that the systems that tend to be deployed in local authorities share a great deal with their commercial counterparts.

Having looked at the types of actions that tend to be associated with the production of texts, and which texts are more likely to be embedded in discourse, we briefly turn to Phillips et al.'s framework for understanding how these discourses affect action. The authors basic argument is they achieve this through the production of 'institutions'. Scholars of new institutional theory define institutions as "historical accretions of past practices and understandings that set conditions on action through the way in which they gradually acquire the moral and ontological status of taken-for-granted facts which, in turn, shape future interactions and negotiations." (Phillips et al. 2004:637)

But which discourses are more likely to be involved in the production of 'institutions'? According to Phillips et al., some discourses "present a more unified view of some aspect of social reality, which becomes reified and taken for granted" (2004: 644). As a result, it is difficult or costly to enact behaviours not consistent with such discourses. This may be because "…it is difficult to conceive of and enact alternatives or because proscribed/prescribed behaviour can be defined and connected more clearly to clear, strong sanctions/rewards" (2004: 644-5). Hence: *Discourses that are more coherent and structured are more likely to produce institutions than those that are not* (2004: 645).

To illustrate this proposition, the authors refer to the widely accepted discourses associated with public accounting (i.e. the existence of clear rules about what goes on a balance sheet, how auditing is carried out and so on) in contrast to the discourse of environmental accounting, the latter being fragmented and diffuse. On this basis, over recent decades, we have seen the emergence of a set of widely shared understandings concerning the shape of the delivery of public services – of most relevance here is a customer-focus discourse. The enactment of this discourse has been underpinned and legitimated by a variety of 'rewards' (in the shape of, for example, funding frameworks like the Implementing e-Government Funding scheme) and 'sanctions' (for example via the Comprehensive Performance Assessment). Again, the dominance of this discourse is reinforced by the absence of alternatives.

This brings us to a consideration of Phillips et al.'s final proposition: *Discourses that are supported by broader discourses and are not highly contested by competing discourses are more likely to produce institutions than discourses that are not* (2004: 645). The dominance of a customer-focus discourse is allied to and supported by a whole series of related and well-established discourses (many of which have achieved a high degree of coherence in

commercial organizational contexts). These include, most notably, discourses of the market and consumerization (Fairclough, 1994), to which we can add discourses of entrepreneurship. Arguably, these are, in turn, underpinned by discourses of liberalism and individualism.

Two further discursive trends, accommodated by a dominant managerialist perspective, are of note here, both of which have arguably acquired a 'taken for granted' status. First, that relating to innovation. I refer here to the fetishistic appetite for 'change' (whether strategic, technical, or cultural) displayed by management across all sectors; change that is often espoused by those communities referred to by Abrahamson (1996) as management 'fashion setters' (consulting firms, management gurus, business mass-media publications, business schools). Moe (1994: 113) has identified this trend in the specific context of the 'entrepreneurial paradigm' shift in public administration: "Change, almost literally for change's sake, has acquired a theological aura discouraging discussion within the public administration community" (also see Barberis, 2012). The second, and related, discursive trend surrounds technology (particularly information and communication technologies). It is a trend that underpins contemporary shifts towards the flattening, networking, and virtualizing of the organizational form. And it is one that is achieving legitimacy via the elevated status of the IT function in the organizational hierarchy and the IT manager in the organization's governance systems. This set of discourses, then, serves to underpin the institutionalization of a customer-focused approach to delivering local public services.

In summary, the framework set out by Phillips et al. represents a valuable heuristic for thinking about and, in part, explaining the key findings of this case study from a constructionist perspective. It is particularly valuable in drawing attention to what the authors refer to as the 'trajectories' of texts (as well as their content) – "where texts emanate from, how they are used by organizational actors, and what connections are established among [them]" (2004: 646). This process has aided the development of a textual 'map' depicting *which* texts and *which* discourses have come to stick in Big City Council as well as *which* text 'producers' (with what degree of legitimacy) are implicated in these processes. The result, in part, explains how customer-focus is being institutionalized and, in so doing, supports my argument that establishing customer-focus at Big City is a significant achievement.

5.2.3 Heterogeneously performing customer-focus

By way of developing the argument set out in the previous sub-section, here I will explore at a deeper level *how* the textual and discursive instantiation can be seen to be operating within the organization at a mundane level. I will do so by drawing on notions of inscription and of the performance of strategic logics. Importantly, this analysis will facilitate a more focussed examination of the narrative performance of new technologies and of human agents, as part of a heterogeneous network. So while the discussion of institutionalization above took account of both linguistic and material phenomena, the theoretical lens being used here provides a more complete, relational means of conceptualizing human and non-human actors acting to generate specific and enduring organizational effects.

As reviewed in Chapter 2, many writers have made valuable contributions to the development of an understanding of organization that is shared here. However, the work of a small number of them will be drawn on for the purposes of this discussion. A key theorist in this regard is John Law. Law (and in a similar vein, Bill Doolin) writes from a different disciplinary tradition than Phillips et al. – Science and Technology Studies – and much of his work is particularly concerned with the notion of materiality and with how materials 'tell' or 'perform' what he terms 'ordering narratives'. The work of the sociologist, Paul du Gay (including his earlier writing with Graeme Salaman), and that of the political philosophers, Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, who have written widely on current trends within public management from a discursive perspective. are also of key value here.

Importantly, the work of these diverse contributors is informed by a Foucauldian philosophical standpoint, and, more specifically, the notion that everyday 'practice(s)' need special consideration for understanding the relationship between organizational behaviour and discourse. However, while Foucauldian-inspired approaches to organizational analysis (in particular organizational change) are valued by many discourse theorists, as Doolin (2003) has pointed out, many tend to underplay, if not ignore, the significance of technologies. Thus, Doolin chooses to utilize the ideas of Law to develop a more adequate framework for understanding the relationship between discourses and practices, one which more usefully supports the analysis of the 'material or technical' as well as the 'social and discursive'. From this perspective, 'ordering narratives' are seen to possess strategic, discursive, and, crucially,

performative dimensions, facilitating an understanding of "how it is that entities are performed into relations that are stabilized for long enough to generate their effects" (Doolin, 2003:757 drawing on Law, 1991, 1999). Key to the achievement of durability from this viewpoint is the notion that ordering narratives are "recursively told, embodied, and performed in a series of different materials" (Law, 1994: 259), including those of talk, text, machines, technologies, and human agents – i.e. 'heterogeneously'.

Complementing these ideas, but from a political philosophy standpoint, Rose and Miller (1991) also advocate the study of "the humble and mundane mechanisms" – or "technologies of government" – by which political rationalities articulated through programmes of government become deployable. Such heterogeneous mechanisms include "techniques of notation, computation and calculation; procedures of examination and assessment; the invention of devices such as surveys and presentational forms such as tables; the standardisation of systems for training and the inculcation of habits; the inauguration of professional specialisms and vocabularies; building designs and architectural forms." (1991: 13) In this thesis, I identify a range of precisely these kinds of mechanisms – or technologies of customer-focus – to explain the instantiation of a specific political rationality in certain parts of local authority organization. This sub-section will employ an analytical lens influenced by these perspectives.

Central to the idea of ordering narratives being performed heterogeneously is that humans – as one of a range of material constituencies – are 'told' and 'performed' in accordance with specific 'strategic logics' (Law, 1994). In the case of a customer-focus strategic logic, in basic terms, we can identify, on the one hand, a 'customer' subjectivity and, on the other, a customer-focused, entrepreneurial, service-providing subjectivity. At an individual (rather than corporate) level, I argue that the corollary of the citizen-as-customer is the (local government) worker-as-service-provider, just as Scott has observed that "the corollary of the student-as-customer is the academic-as-service-provider." (1999:194)

The kind of 'customer' imagined by the architects of e-government and by Big City actors – in other words, the customer subjectivity at the heart of a customer-focus narrative – was discussed at length in the Findings chapter. Demanding, time-pressured, self-interested, and information-seeking, customers of public services are located at the heart of a set of relations that configure them in a particular way, whether or not individual service users embrace or reject their assigned role.

As for the issue of the customer's interlocutor, this can be tackled in two ways. First, if we think in terms of the corporate subjectivity of state agencies, there is a sense in which they are being framed, first and foremost, as organizations with a responsibility to deliver service excellence in response to the demands of their various customer groups, reflective of the role played by their commercial service-providing counterparts. This has meant demonstrating a commitment to rooting out inefficient bureaucratic practices and to pursuing an agenda of transformation as a united force.

Second, thinking of how the individual (local authority) worker is constituted by contemporary public service narratives, many of the same characteristics come to mind. In the case of Big City, technologies and practices inscribed with the 'enterprising self' (cf. du Gay and Salaman, 1992) – among these, customer service developmental activities, customer service award schemes, CRM technologies and so on – support the individual's narrative performance in forming a mundane yet powerful human and nonhuman network of relations. Moreover, the newly created role of customer-facing generic officer, decked out in a uniform emblazoned with the function of the unit housing the role-holder ('Customer Service Centre') embodies this narrative in a striking fashion. Further up the organisational hierarchy, we find an array of 'customer service' managerial roles who generic officers report to, and at a higher level still, such roles as an e-Government Cabinet Member and an e-Champion – each of these role-holders form part of a greater performance of customer-focussed public services. Hence, while Phillips et al.'s propositions help to identify these actors as legitimate text producers, the current framework views them as ongoing performers of dominant narratives.

Other empirical studies help to locate and reflect on this analysis. First, Law's ethnographic case study identified four organizational narratives at work – 'enterprise', 'administration', 'vision', and 'vocation' – each of which told and performed humans (and non-humans) in different ways. The most germane narrative to this discussion is the 'enterprise' narrative; it is one that "…told how agents – heroes *and* organisations – are or should be adaptable, sensitive, and able to capitalise on shifting opportunities and demands" (1994: 255). The "perfect agent" in this narrative Law described as a "mini-entrepreneur". The echoes between this character and some of those identified at Big City are clear; of particular relevance are the entrepreneurial, indeed evangelical, Head of Big City Service and the previous chief executive. Within Law's 'enterprise' narrative, he identified workers "…lodged in large organisations [who] might resist change because they were too comfortable; preserving their

status and their privileges, such 'civil servants' might impede enterprise." (1994: 257) Again, there are obvious echoes with those Big City workers characterised as "barons" and "empire builders".

Second, Doolin's (2003) study also represents a useful point of reference and contrast. Doolin argued that the hospital's corporate managers, having introduced the discursive notion of clinical leadership, perceived a need to enrol clinicians in their own control as 'clinician managers'. It is notable that, in Doolin's case study, the performance of the clinical leadership narrative was short-lived. For many clinicians, the role of clinical manager conflicted too much with the "medical professional narrative" notwithstanding that "…managers imported from the private sector attempted to secure commitment to change from disillusioned healthcare professionals." (2003: 759) In Big City's case, however, recalling the efforts made to recruit staff at all levels with an established customer service value set, including those from a commercial setting, it may be that these individuals are more accomplished performers of a customer-focus narrative which may bode well for the stability and durability of this narrative. It may also be that the shift to this narrative is experienced as less radical than in the case of Doolin's clinicians. Related to this point, a medical professional narrative may be more fundamental to the subjectivity of the clinician than the equivalent situation for the council officer.

So, as part of the heterogeneous performance of the ordering narratives operating in Big City Council, humans (in the shape of service users and service providers) are told and performed in specific ways, operating in concert with the reinforcing performance of non-human actors detailed elsewhere. The first thing to say is that the everyday performance of these roles serves to legitimate and naturalize these subjectivities. Second, while we can talk about processes of naturalization these identity positions are, of course, not natural – they are contingent upon a particular 'political rationality' (Rose and Miller, 1991) and a particular view of organizing. And third, these processes inevitably marginalize alternative narratives through ruling in and ruling out what is apparently 'self-evident'.

An important clarification is required here. In arguing that organizational members (and by extension, members of the public) are seen to be carrying out roles that tell and perform particular subjectivities, I am not making a deterministic argument – "…management are not in control in any grand sense" (Knights and McCabe, 2000: 434). Rather, they are seen to "…participate in the constitution of their own subjectivity as they reflect on, and reproduce

the social world" (Knights and McCabe, 2000: 424). At the same time, I do discern certain constraints insofar as the understanding of self held by all of these constituencies is developed in relation to prevailing intra- and extra-organizational discourses, and as has already been noted, there is little evidence of robust, competing narratives offering up alternative subjectivities.

Aside from human actors, I will now identify other (non-human) material phenomena that are viewed in this analysis as important performers of a customer-focus narrative, and in so doing, legitimate the specific subject positions discussed above. Of chief importance for their 'ordering' capacity at Big City are the technologies procured to support CRM at the council. My argument is informed by other ICT-focussed studies, one of which was carried out by Law (2002), and whose 'semiotics of materiality' stance (outlined in Chapter 2) makes the point that ICTs are more usefully conceived of as performing a particular set of relations than as 'passive tools' deployed by 'active agents'. Law's study focuses on a laboratory director whose view of a project is shaped by two technological artefacts – a spreadsheet and a 'manpower booking system'. Law (2002) imagines these technologies in terms of a set of heterogeneous elements performing to produce relations – including managerial subjectivities, organisations and culture. As such, he views the spreadsheet as an 'agent of homogenisation'; it enacts quantitative relations and represents a major socio-technology of 'simplification' and 'centring', through 'drawing things together' (*cf.* Latour). In another relevant study, Doolin (2003), argues that a casemix management system was key to effecting change at a hospital. He argued that the system had been deployed to manage medical practice and had the effect of allowing hospital sub-units or even individual clinicians to be evaluated in terms of profitability.

In the case of Big City, everyday (face to face, telephone-based, and online) interactions between the local authority and members of the public – or more broadly, the relationship between these actors – is shaped by the set of CRM technologies which structure those moments of contact. These technologies are part of a set of relations that perform those moments as occasions of structured information-gathering in accordance with standardized scripts, information retrieval (in terms of the re-presentation of the customer's enquiry history to the generic officer to facilitate the effective resolution of his/her latest enquiry in accordance with prescribed pathways), and information dissemination. By presenting information linked to a raft of previously disparate information systems relating to different service areas, the systems interface enacts a putatively complete (or 'simplified' cf. Law,

2002) view of the customer. Further, segmentation techniques frame the service relationship as one where customers' experiences are ordered in terms of a series of 'life events', each prompting a set of prescribed service responses. Most importantly, these non-human actors can be seen to perform a customer-focus strategic logic, one which constitutes the subjectivities analysed above and which serves to delimit the 'service user-service provider' encounter.

Beyond the customer-generic officer interaction, these technologies perform a customer-focus narrative as they mediate other organizational relationships. Thinking, for example, of data analysis and system reporting activities facilitated by the technologies, or the creation of outbound contact campaign events, they mediate and inform the relationship between generic officers and managers, and between middle and senior managers. Generic officer team meetings involve middle managers reporting back system-based performance statistics, such as the number of customers served, the number of complaints received, and customer waiting times. Doolin makes a similar argument about the casemix management system at 'Central Health' where it was "…implicated in the daily work of many organizational participants, providing a technical vocabulary to mediate the meanings given to events and relationships, such as those between clinical units or with the purchasing authority." (2003: 763-764) As well as providing a structure to these encounters it is important to point out that the incorporation of ICTs into everyday working practices reproduces and reaffirms their "importance, form, and content." (Doolin, 2003: 764)

By way of reinforcing the argument stated earlier, this perspective on organizational technologies supports the claim that the subjectivities associated with the Big City context are not 'natural' but are performed in practice. Chiefly, Big City's CRM-supporting systems are implicated as a key set of non-human actors in the constitution of a 'new' set of customers. While traditionally, different parts of the organisation would see the same individual assuming a range of different roles (e.g. benefits claimant, social services user, council tax payer and so on), the frontline technologies have stitched these roles together at the first point of contact, repositioning them as 'customers'. As such, they are performing a 'simplification' of the relationship between members of the public and the council.

From this point of view, therefore, Big City's CRM-supporting systems are key performers of a customer-focus narrative and its concomitant subject positions. In partnership with the entrepreneurial frontline worker or customer services manager, these systems perform a

complementary and relational role, a role borne of the rhetoric surrounding CRM systems that emphasises their part in supporting enterprising decision-making at all levels of the organization, whether operationally (by encompassing best practice) on the frontline or strategically. At the same time, CRM (in this mode) relies on, and inscribes, a notion of the demanding, convenience-seeking customer who insists on streamlined moments of interaction, is amenable to organizational approaches with information about services related to his service portfolio, and whose rational behaviour serves as a reliable indicator of his individual service preferences.

The constitutive force of material phenomena is shared by Rose and Miller (1991) who borrow Latour's notion of "inscription devices" to refer to government mechanisms that transform events and phenomena into information, such as those mentioned above. Far from simply reflecting a pre-existing reality, such devices render reality "stable, mobile, comparable, [and] combinable" (1991: 15) In this way, the valuing, the recording and the dissemination of information such as monthly data on customer satisfaction levels or the percentage of customers whose enquiries are dealt with at first point of contact represent an incitement to local authority staff and users of their services "to construe their lives according to such norms." (Rose and Miller, 1991: 18)

The significance of ICTs in the analysis of socio-technical networks and organizational narrative performance is clear. The 'heterogeneous' nature of these processes reminds us, however, that the durability of specific narratives rests on a diversity of performance. In this respect we can identify a range of 'material' non-human performers acting alongside CRM-supporting systems. Ranging from a suite of one-stop-shops, to a Customer Services unit, to a corporate customer service training programme, they will not be rehearsed here in full as they were identified in the previous sub-section as forming part of the textual institutionalization of a customer-focus narrative. What the current discussion adds to the previous analysis is that such phenomena are inscribed with the presuppositions of the demanding, time-pressured 'customer' and the responsive, customer insight-armed service provider.

The theoretical insights set out in this sub-section are designed to complement and develop the overarching explanatory framework seeking to provide a constructionist account of how the 'customer' and a 'customer-focus' strategic logic appear to be gaining a solid foothold in the organizational terrain of local government. A socio-material perspective has reinforced the idea that stability resides in material heterogeneity. It allows us to argue, for example, that the

CRM-supporting system at Big City exists as a ‘set of relations’ – that includes hardware, software, business processes, a user training programme, a systems vendor, compliant system users and compliant customers, a willing local authority and so on – that has managed to achieve a degree of stability.

Law and Mol (1995) remind us, however, that relational stability is a precarious achievement – there is always the possibility of insufficient representation for an ‘imagined world’ to come into being. These authors recall Michel Callon’s ‘story’ about the unsuccessful creation of the electric vehicle in France. This technology took the form of a set of relations constituting electrons, accumulators, fuel cells, industrial companies, consumers and so on. Ultimately, the imagined world of the project sponsor was not successfully translated into other material forms – “Renault was supposed to make bodies for electric vehicles, but it didn’t fancy this”; “French consumers didn’t fancy their new role…as ‘mature’ and ‘ecologically responsible’ members of a post industrial society, instead they went on seeking social distinction by buying conventional cars”; and “the local authorities refused to favour public transport and restrict private petrol-driven cars” (1995: 284).

In the case of Big City, the CRM-supporting system *is* achieving a degree of stability because the local authority management *do* ‘fancy’ committing to the procurement of an established technology and the adaptation of an organizational infrastructure; because system users *do* ‘fancy’ (albeit after a considerable struggle in some cases) adjusting their working practices; and because members of the public *do* ‘fancy’ being customers of public services (or at least have not articulated an alternative position). However, given that it was found that system users have a limited understanding of CRM, that the system’s capabilities are not fully exploited, and that some council workers are unconvinced of the system’s capacity to support non-routine interactions, this apparent stability can be seen as precarious.

Reflecting on the contemporary dominance of an enterprise discourse, Reed points out that its position of cultural and ideological privilege is always open to challenge by alternative discursive formations such as public service, professionalism, community or citizenship, “…which struggle to displace and replace dominant discourses and the techniques of government which they require” (1998: 194). At the time of this study, there was no sign that customer-focus was in danger of ‘failing’ as a narrative constituting public services delivery. Nor was there much in the way of evidence of robust alternative narratives, be that ‘public service’, ‘community’, or ‘citizenship’ (Reed, 1998). Arguably, a ‘professionalism’ narrative

(within public services delivery) has, in part, been colonized by customer-focus (thinking of the gradual professionalization of customer service), though is still eclipsed by an 'expertise' narrative, as discussed elsewhere. In this sense, the dominance of a customer-focus narrative is by no means total at Big City (or across public services delivery contexts more generally), but it has certainly made substantial inroads and is yet to face a significant discursive challenge.

5.3 The paradoxical customer: explaining the success (and failure) of the public services' customer

This thesis started out with a sense of curiosity about the character at the heart of the local e-government agenda. It sought to understand how the 'customer' is being realised in a local e-government setting. In the course of this chapter thus far, I have applied a constructionist lens to the empirical findings in order to demonstrate that the, albeit partial, institutionalization of customer-focus can be usefully seen as a considerable discursive achievement. Another, closely related, conclusion of this study centres on the remarkable appeal and versatility of customer-focus, both as an organizing principle and as a narrative that constitutes individual subjectivities. The case study findings lead us to conclude that the customer's polyvalency performs two useful functions. First, it helps to further explain the relative success of its institutionalization – in this, the subsequent analysis represents a theoretical contribution to the understanding and functioning of contemporary customer-focussed settings, including, but not exclusively, public service delivery settings. In short, I am arguing that the unique character of the customer has significantly aided the change process. Second, it serves to highlight the paradoxes associated with this character in a public services context. This entails setting out a series of implications – largely unintended – for organizations, their members, and users of public services.

In presenting these arguments, I will marshal the thoughts of other authors, also intrigued by the contemporary cult of the customer. As discussed in chapter 1, many writers have commented on the ubiquity of the 'consumer'; others (in particular Gabriel and Lang, 1995) have examined the consumer's versatility, at once "god" and "pawn". Developing these contributions, I will argue that the customer (and its material entourage) represents a seductive notion to various constituencies and, as such, is an important agent of change – it is the character's seductive qualities that endows it with explanatory potency. At the same time, I will argue that, in a public service delivery setting, the customer is an ultimately

dissatisfying and limiting notion. In order to explore these arguments, the following three sub-sections are structured in terms of a series of paradoxes relating to customer-focussed public services. This process will involve, in a limited fashion, incorporating certain verbatim excerpts and researcher inferences from the Big City-related in-depth interviews and observation activities (some of which have been cited in the previous chapter).

5.3.1 Ally yet Traitor

The first of these positions refers to how the customer – as constituted by customer-oriented discourses and practices – can be seen as both ally and traitor. From the perspective of those seeking to push through a transformational programme of change, customer-focus is arguably a valuable (strategic) ally. As I and my co-author have argued elsewhere, "customer focus has provided a much needed master narrative for e-government, which would otherwise be an 'empty' signifier – little more than a commitment to use more technology in public services." (Richter and Cornford, 2005) Importantly, we have also argued that its potency as a master narrative is in no small part due to the fact that it successfully marshals two key strategic forces – economic rationality and technological efficiency. As such, customer focus has provided a relatively un-contentious rationale for change; "it effectively soothes fears about the use of technology to automate (resulting in job cuts) – 'we're not doing this to save money, we're doing it to improve customer satisfaction'." (Richter and Cornford, 2005).

It would be easy to suggest that the force of this rationale is being deployed expediently by organizations such as Big City. Indeed, as described in the Findings chapter, there are interview data that support this cynical viewpoint. Also, it is quite clear that council management were acutely aware of the potential for cost savings directly associated with e-government technologies and practices. However, an examination of the data gathered at Big City in the round, does not point to widespread rhetorical sleight of hand on the part of management. More typical of the pro-change council actors was the view that, while cost savings was an important driver for change, it was "not the primary motivator" – that was "customer satisfaction".

Another way of articulating the ally role of the customer in this narrative is in terms of it being an organizational *obsession* or the *raison d'être* (Rosenthal et al., 2001). These authors associate these images with a 'managerialist/prescriptive' perspective (reflected in trends such as *Total Quality Management* and *Excellence*). While some of the language and ideas relating

to these movements may have gone out of fashion, their central emphasis on customer satisfaction delivered through optimized organizational processes is still very much relevant to local e-government, and with it the notion of the customer as *raison d'être*.

A series of other, related, customer metaphors suggested by Rosenthal et al (2001) reveal further significant features of the public services customer in ally mode – those of *spy*, *accomplice of management*, and *the final arbiter of quality*. What I have in mind here is how a range of techniques are commonly deployed in customer-facing environments that can be seen to be carrying out a 'spying' function (on frontline staff) and at the same time providing management with feedback data regarding staff performance. Such techniques include customer feedback forms, contact management systems that record the length of waiting and enquiry times, and mystery shoppers. Big City utilises all of these, thereby providing an ongoing commentary on the behaviour of customer-facing employees. Framing this discussion within the wider analytical approach being deployed in this chapter, organizational groupings located in these settings are (dis)advantaged differentially by the performance of a customer-focus logic (as explicated in the previous sub-section) by these non-human actors.

Some commentators have emphasised the darker side of this customer-as-ally role. du Gay and Salaman (1992) describe as oppressive the ways in which customers are being "…made to function in the role of management" (1992: 82), via customer reports, 'professional' customers, and random staff visits (see also Fuller and Smith, 1991). Given that, according to Big City's Customer Services Manager, certain local authorities are taking mystery shopping techniques so seriously that they have "…actually employed people who have cameras in their handbags..." (1st August 2005), the notion of customer as spy takes on a new, and some would argue, rather malign significance.

Most of the following discussion in this sub-section will focus on how (council) management, the architects of change in local e-government, can be positioned as the 'victims' of the customer in traitorous mode. First, however, I will reflect on how some of the tools of customer-focus render the ordinary council officer the object of the customer's 'treacherous' actions. The most obvious example of the customer in this mode relates to the discussion above – that regarding the customer in the role of spy or management accomplice, for it is the customer-facing operative who is being spied on, it is his/her performance that is being judged, at times, surreptitiously.

Another side of the customer-as-traitor (to this constituency) relates to an idea that has been explored by a number of writers over recent years (see in particular Hochschild, 1983 and Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) and one which posits the customer as *emotional vampire* or *thief of identity* (see Rosenthal et al., 2001). These representations relate to the way that a service sector employee is expected to manage his/her emotions in the interests of customer service – "the imperative to smile and mean it" (Sturdy, 1998 cited Wright, 2005: 299) – and the potentially detrimental effects on his/her sense of self. du Gay and Salaman (1992) add another dimension to this issue by highlighting the importance of employee discretion to the process of gaining their emotional commitment. Referring to the origins of the customer-focus movement, these authors have argued that the government of the enterprising firm operates through the "soul" of the individual employee.

Reflecting on the Big City data, frontline employees are being encouraged to tap into their creative resources in the name of customer satisfaction. Part of this involves an effort to display a customer-friendly demeanour. It also involves embracing a renewed sense of empowerment by using discretion to a greater extent than they might have in the past (this is the case notwithstanding what was said above about the curtailment of frontline worker judgement in the following of technologized scripts). In conjunction with rhetorical, culture-shaping strategies, I argue that the professionalization of customer service – in the shape of a corporate training programme and a range of qualifications and internal award schemes – plays an important role in connecting the personal development ambitions (and therefore emotional commitment) of frontline staff to the pursuit of excellence in customer service. Viewed through a critical lens, this positions the customer, simultaneously, as a source of empowerment and a *thief of identity* – and hence, a traitor. Here, we observe another instance of the micro-level strategic performance of non-human customer-focus actors; in this case, their performance heralds both beneficial and detrimental implications for the public servant.

Turning now to the customer as traitor to the strategists of change, the constituency for whom this character, it has already been argued, is a powerful ally. As mentioned earlier, one of the key strategic strengths of a customer-focus orientation is its mobilisation of an efficiency narrative. What this might facilitate, in practice (as in the case of Big City), is the rationale for a programme of service rationalisation – in the shape of centralising fragmented, localised service settings for example – something which, paradoxically, may herald unwelcome outcomes for certain service users in whose name such changes are being made. In particular,

this may be the case for those service users who desire something more than (or different from) an optimised, streamlined service.

According to the data, some service users value the relationship (friendship even) that can be developed through regular contact with council staff. This idea was alluded to by a Senior Benefits Officer (who used to work at a small, community-based Housing office before it was closed down). She talked about the loss of certain types of regular personal interaction between staff and service users – "…we used to have people who would bring us in cakes…when they brought their review form in and things, or…they would come in and tell you…'My son's leaving and he's getting married' and you'd hear the story behind it…" (5th October 2005). The same Officer remarked that "there's been quite a lot of resistance", that "some of the public were unhappy about it". She vocalised the kind of conversation she had with regular customers prior to the relocation:

> "…'we're not gonna be operating from here anymore; you're going to have to go down to the civic centre'
> 'Will I still be able to see you?'
> 'Well, no actually, you won't,…I won't be there, if you need to see me you'll have to make an appointment'." (5th October 2005)

The participant bemoaned how local authorities had "gone from being corner-shops to being supermarkets".

In contrast with this version of 'customer service', the comments of a Customer Service Manager, during a discussion about keeping customer waiting times down at one-stop-shops, reinforce the idea that anything more than a courteous, efficient interchange is not encouraged. The Manager recalled an incident where a frontline officer was, to her mind, over-delivering. While acknowledging both that the officer had "...the very best of intentions..." and that elderly customers "...like coming in...for that face to face contact with somebody...", "...because that [frontline officer] is the way he is – bless him – he was taking an awful long time with each customer and it wasn't necessarily just about the service, he was having a chat with them and so on…" (12th July 2005). The manager went on to point out that this kind of situation "certainly had to be addressed" and, indeed, was in that case. It should be noted, of course, that not *all* customers are traitorous in this sense but *do* value the kind of streamlined, minimal relationship envisaged by the architects of local e-government.

Alongside the idea that certain (traitorous) service users may derive 'satisfaction' from something more than a swift service experience, some commentators have argued that the marketization of public services more broadly, may put some user groups at a disadvantage (Needham, 2003; Aberbach and Christensen, 2005; Jilke, 2014), even creating a 'two-track' public service (Clifton et al., 2011). For Moffatt and Higgs (see also Wilberforce et al., 2011), a UK welfare system emphasising individual choice, autonomy and control is ill-suited to older citizens used to a different relationship with the state, one "…where welfare programmes were articulated in a more universal manner than now and entwined with the idea of citizenship." (2007: 450) More bluntly, these authors observe that older citizens "…may largely fail to operate as citizen consumers" (2007: 450) Here, we observe the customer as traitorous in failing to fully function in 'customer' mode. At the same time, we observe that the heterogeneous arrangement of frontline actors (both human and non-human) at Big City's customer service centres perform the interaction space in such a way that certain kinds of relationships are facilitated and others proscribed. There is dissonance between the customer subjectivity constituted by a customer-focus logic and that performed by certain service users, one that reflects a more deferential relationship with state bodies.

Another facet of the 'traitorous' customer, relates to how a renewed focus on satisfying needs may be resulting in a more demanding, difficult-to-please customer base, one that is increasingly evaluating its relationship with government agencies in value for money terms. A number of Big City frontline staff alluded to this kind of consumerist attitude. One Generic Officer talked about having to deal with a lot of 'awkward' and 'irate' customers. Some of her customers "…come in and they just refuse to speak to you, they just say 'I want to see your supervisor!'" (20th July 2005) A Senior Revenues Officer (13th January, 2005) remarked how some service users make a transactional association between paying their council tax and the satisfactory provision of basic service elements to them as individuals: "…'I didn't get my bins emptied this week; I'm not paying me council tax!'…it's as basic as that with some people." The same Officer went on to explain that a lot of customers now view financial compensation for poor service as a realistic expectation in their dealings with Big City: "…if they have a query, they want to be able to see somebody or speak to somebody when *they* want to, and they expect that to be dealt with straight away…and if it isn't, they'll ask why, and they'll maybe complain and you'd be surprised at the amount of people that think that they're entitled to compensation because they haven't had their query answered or got their refund soon enough…" This discussion calls to mind Fox's concern that an emphasis on

customer service "promotes hypersensitivity to customer wishes and promotes a culture of whining and complaining." (1996: 260)

While this research has not yielded sufficient data to make any grand claim about local authority service users becoming significantly *more* difficult than in the past, it is noteworthy that another Generic Officer, with many years' experience of working for Big City council, believes "…there's more expectancy…[than] what they expected ten years ago". Further, "…when the service that an Officer's providing falls short in any way, I think they're a lot more prone to get agitated or het up, irate, a lot more likely to kick off than what they would ten years ago…" (20th July 2005) In the same interview, the interviewee also talked about his customers being "…more likely to get aggressive". These findings are a reminder that pledging to deliver increased satisfaction is likely only to increase individual users' expectations. Gabriel and Lang (2006) have talked about the 'dark side' of customers, while Boyd (2002) has analysed the phenomena of customer abuse and violence towards service workers. Clarke et al.'s (2007) empirical studies found that service users' propensity to 'challenge' service providers is not welcomed by those delivering services, especially in police and healthcare settings. Hence, rather than failing to fully perform as customers (a trait attributed to some older service users above), the traitorous customer in this mode is fervently embracing this dimension of the role.

The earlier-cited data excerpt (from the interview with a Senior Benefits Officer) prompts consideration of another way in which rationalization programmes carried out in the name of customer-focus may, unintentionally, adversely affect service provision. This is connected with the loss of familiarity on the part of council staff with the lives and situations of frequent customers, the loss of what the participant called "local knowledge". Having worked in a "deprived area [with] quite a high incidence of drug abuse and things like that…", the Officer explained that the regularity of contact meant that "you would know who these people were, you would recognise the addresses, you would recognise people in agitated states, whatever, and you were used to dealing with them." In contrast, "…when you've got a Customer Service Centre, you're drawing in people from a *big* area, and you lose that." What are also lost are informal systems of "sharing knowledge". The participant described how Estate Management colleagues "…would know who these people were…and if there was a particular problem, we would go to them and say, 'Oh, I'm trying to get in touch with Mr. Jones and he's not responding, can you go out and have a word with him…'." Alternatively, service users "…would come and say…something had happened to that person, they'd been

taken into hospital or whatever…" (5th October 2005). The implication is that contemporary one-stop-shop solutions – designed to maximise service quality – do not allow for this level of highly localized interaction. The performance of an organizational logic that allows for a higher degree of engaged, community-oriented interaction is proscribed by this heterogeneous arrangement.

As we reflect on these participants' comments, there is a danger of romanticising the past. It would be easy to overlook the obvious organizational and customer service benefits associated with newer generic service arrangements. At the same time, there is an argument that processes of informal information exchange and a high level of staff-customer familiarity go some way to delivering a rather different version of customer satisfaction than that imagined by the architects of current public service delivery efforts. Ironically, this may be a version that plays a part in achieving the current administration's 'holy grail' – service personalisation, albeit an informal, unsystematised form of personalisation. As one generic officer remarked, in the context of plans to rationalise the council's cashiering service, "I can see what they're saying – it is saving money and things – but…I think the service is gonna be worse for the customer…it's like some of the aims of social inclusion and things like that – making sure people can do things easier – and we're making it slightly worse for them at the minute..." (20th July 2005)

My argument resonates with that of Russell (2005), who has argued that the last UK government, while accepting the necessity of building 'social capital', simultaneously proceeded to dismantle "…the very structures that make it possible for us to lead small-scale, local lives." Russell has in mind the programme of closures affecting Post Offices, small chemists, and small GPs' practices, fearing that "what is important to us as social, vulnerable human beings has lost out to our interests as taxpayers and consumers."

In this mode, it is the strategy of customer-focus (more than the customer) that is traitorous. By training its gaze exclusively on satisfying the *individual* customer it loses sight of the relational quality of certain service encounters. Moreover, the introduction of CRM technologies (designed to support *any* user in conducting service interactions) means that the likelihood of developing sustained relationships (such as those alluded to above) are diminished – the system purports to 'know' all that is important about the customer.

The earlier discussion about the hyper-demanding, challenging customer raises the possibility of an even more traitorous aspect of a customer-focus strategy – that is, rather than herald transformative cost-savings, it could in fact inspire a negative effect on the bottom line. Given the cost-cutting imperative that continues to characterise UK public services, most recently in the form of the 'austerity' programme, any suggestion that the strategic direction of public services is running counter to this efficiency drive would be most unwelcome.

Apart from the obvious costs associated with customer-focused e-government, efforts to keep pace with the public's ever rising expectations in line with the best of the commercial sector arguably have significant cost implications. The current enthusiasm for increasing the degree of service personalisation and user choice add weight to this argument. According to a study carried out by the think-tank, Demos, in the case of personal care budgets, local authorities "…should expect "rocketing" demand for personal assistants, education and leisure services." (Local Government Chronicle, 2009) The report warns that, as "…increasing numbers of people have the power to demand new services to meet their needs in new ways, providers and local authorities need to be ready to meet these requirements." (Bartlett, 2009: 9) In addition to the cost of gearing up for these delivery innovations institutionally, resources will be required to support the 82% of service users who know "nothing or very little" about personal budgets and the "potentially large number of people, especially older people, who do not wish to manage their own personal budgets". (Local Government Chronicle, 2009) – another sign of the recalcitrant (traitorous) and costly customer?

Another way in which local authorities are, not so much incurring additional costs but rather failing to realise the efficiencies they anticipated, relates to the relatively low levels of user migration to self-service access channels (seen by strategists as a key route to cost-savings). Many users prefer (more expensive) telephone or face to face contact. An Ipsos MORI survey found that the most common way that public service users interact with agencies is in person (48%) and over the phone (46%), while just 16% of users had used a website (2010: 8). Further, according to a recent SOCITM report, 'failure rates' for council web enquiries are high, running at between ten and forty per cent. As a result, "…the web ends up being a source of wasteful 'avoidable contact' rather than what it should be, which is a means of reduced 'cost-to-serve'." (PublicNet, 2009) Further, in a healthcare context, a recent study concluded that patient demand for GP services is seen to be borne out of "…convenience or dependency rather than need, at huge cost to the health service". (BBC, 2010) Goode and Greatbatch, writing about the current discourse of personal responsibility in the health

domain, suggest that the "internalization of surveillance" that is implied by this discourse may account for "…greater rather than lesser demand on professional services." (2005: 334)

On the basis of the above findings and observations, and in keeping with the idea that actors are "performed into relations" (Law, 1991), if users of public services are addressed and treated like 'customers', they will be more inclined to think and act like (undesirable) customers than they might otherwise. And apart from being (or as a result of being) demanding, self-interested, value-for-money oriented, even aggressive, customers may be more costly to satisfy than other characters, in that they are likely to view their side of the service relationship in passive terms, as 'receiver'. While the traditionally deferential client may have been inclined to put up with what they received, and the active citizen might be more inclined to act either independently or in union with his/her community – or at least endeavour to engage with the complexities of service delivery contexts and funding priorities – the newly 'empowered' customer is more likely to expectantly and passively make new and sustained demands of those service providers pledging to satisfy his/her needs. The notion that service users will need to be more independent as demand for services increases and government budgets tighten is coming to be widely accepted by policymakers and service providers. Talk of service 'coproduction' – an approach which advocates "self-help", eschewing the idea that service users are merely "drains on the system" (Boyle and Harris, 2009: 6) – is entering the mainstream of public policy. The question is, just how inclined or, indeed, able is the needy and entitled 'customer' to help him/herself?

The debates outlined in this sub-section leave us with the customer (and customer-focus) cast, on the one hand, as a powerful strategic ally, and on the other, as not quite conforming to the vision of e-government's architects. In practice, s/he either wants something other than, or is ill-equipped to take advantage of, a hands-off, convenient service experience; or he is a rather *too* self-interested, sometimes aggressive, and potentially *more* (not less) costly to serve – in short, s/he can be traitorous. As Gabriel and Lang have pointed out, "consumers…do not always act as predictably as would-be-managers desire." (2006: 4)

5.3.2 Universally appropriate yet ill-fitting

The preceding discussion of 'customer' as ally served to emphasise its utility as a driver of organizational change. Another key dimension of this character that I argue has been instrumental in its rise in public service delivery contexts is its seemingly universal

applicability combined with an apparent benignancy (qualities that were discussed at length in the previous chapter). There, I argued that the customer has acquired the status of default identifier for service recipients (both internal and external to many public service organizations), appearing to be rather more 'at home' than the academic critique suggests it ought to be. Fountain, too, has remarked on the conceptual power of 'customer service' on the basis that it means "almost anything, may simultaneously mean many different things to many different people, and represents an idea that attracts little or no opposition from the mass public or political elites." (2001a: 56) In this sub-section, I will focus on the opposing notion – that beneath a thin veneer of universality, the public services' customer can also be seen as a flawed, often inadequate, signifier. For while research participants overwhelmingly viewed and used the term 'customer' unproblematically, when prompted to reflect on the issue directly, the façade showed signs of cracking. This discussion seeks to develop the critique (also see Alford, 2002; Ciborra, 2003; Gray and Jenkins, 2002) of the chameleonic customer.

To begin this discussion, I argue that there is a dissonance between the type of customer which is embedded within the language and techniques of customer-focussed e-government and that encountered by some local government service delivery mechanisms and practices. The former character – demanding, time-pressured, ICT-literate, information-seeking – resonates with the resident who has a planning enquiry related to a loft conversion or who wants to request a new recycling box, but sits less easily with the child who is being abused by her mother's boyfriend, or the lonely pensioner who prefers to pay the rent for her social housing in person. It is not that the latter group of service users necessarily want to be dealt with *in*efficiently or *denied* a choice of access channels, it is that they may have a set of priorities and needs which what might be called a dominant understanding of the 'customer' fails to fully express. In other words, the functioning of the heterogeneously-performed customer-focus network is compromised by ill-fitting subjectivities, in relation to both service users and public service professionals.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that the needs of some council customers may not be best served by the generic service model (which itself relies on a dominant understanding of customer-hood) was reflected by some Big City interviewees. For example, a PA working in social services explained that "because of the type of customers we have…they don't want to hang around and go through lots of different avenues, because they're sometimes distressed or irate…and you would think that the Customer Service Centre wouldn't be really conducive to those sorts of [customers]" (15th August 2005). Moreover,

this kind of argument is accepted (for the time being in any case) by the council's customer services management. The data demonstrated that "agitated" or "distressed" customers are not the kinds of customers they would rather deal with.

The perspective articulated by the council's Children and Families Team Manager serves to highlight another dimension of the ill-fitting public services' customer. That is, the nature of their work and their 'customers' means that it is often difficult for social services professionals to adhere to the common principle of customer service whereby (despite service differentiation practices relevant to the perceived value of certain customer groupings in commercial settings) each customer's concerns are deemed to be of equal importance; in short, the kind of commitment that is codified in instruments such as customer charters. In the case of the Children and Families Team, staff are routinely compelled to make tough prioritising decisions concerning the *relative* needs of customers. By way of illustration, the team's Manager spoke of how, on any given day, his staff may take a phone call from a concerned mother along the lines of, "'I'm having real problems with my daughter, she's suddenly become fourteen, she's started staying out late, coming in drunk, covered in love-bites and she's suddenly saying 'She hates me!' 'What am I going to do?'" On that same day, his team could receive "…a call from a hospital because a baby's been admitted with a fractured skull". In such a situation, the former case would be deemed "low priority" compared with the injured baby. As a result, the concerned mother, as is quite often the case according to this Manager, would be "left in limbo". He told me that his team "*frequently* hear from people saying: 'I rang and asked for help and *nobody* ever contacted me back'." (1st August 2005)

The key point here is that the driving principle is to act in the best interests of the vulnerable party in accordance with the team's statutory duty. Carrying out this duty will sometimes entail removing a child from its family against that family's wishes. Hence, unlike many service interactions, the idea of delivering 'satisfaction' to that injured baby or its parents is an inadequate, if not a perverse, notion. And unlike their colleagues handling generic enquiries in one-stop-shops, one is left with the sense that members of this team are not motivated to drive up customer service standards nor do they see themselves in a competitive relationship with other service providers. As the team's Manager put it, "…we deal with things that other people don't want to deal with". (1st August 2005)

As hinted at above, this discussion raises the broader issue of how the notion of 'satisfaction' becomes strained (if not perverse) in situations where the user is reluctant about being the customer of a service in the first place. As much as to the parent of the injured baby, this applies to the subject of a police arrest (see Heward, 1994) or, less obviously, the jobseeker. In the case of the latter, during their investigation into the experience of customer-facing *Jobcentre Plus* staff, Rosenthal and Peccei (2006) found "the customer label was not widely used…– it seemed to many an inappropriate term for the role occupied by users of the agency." (2006: 670) Further, they found that these users were judged not to behave like conventional sovereign customers. Rather, they were seen as "…passively uncooperative and lacking interest in the resources/values on offer…,and less often, as overtly resistant to the aims of the interaction/agency." (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006: 670)

Turning to another dimension of the, at times, inappropriate notion of customer 'satisfaction', as well as perverse, the idea can also be seen as disingenuous. First, I argue this on the basis that state agents are obliged to operate in accordance with certain prescribed statutory duties, whereby the satisfaction of an individual customer's needs must be adjudged relative to the needs of other, possibly more needy, customers (this reveals another facet of the tensions faced by social services teams discussed above). Second, talk of 'satisfaction' is disingenuous in that it implies that the duty of public service providers is restricted to the delivery of private value to individual customers (overlooking the importance of public value) – this is something that may be rather frustrating for the customer who finds her needs appear to be subordinated in the process of interacting with an agent of the state; for example the patient who finds that NICE (The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) has decided that a potentially life-saving treatment will not be publically funded (see Jones and Needham, 2008: 74 for a similar argument).

Finally, and related to this point, some service users may buy into current rhetoric around 'personalised' public services only to find that their local council is not as joined-up as it claims to be, or that they are unable to fully transact with their council online. These users may feel deceived by the customer-focus rhetoric, especially when state bodies are found to articulate an aspiration to deliver a user experience comparable to that provided by the *best* of the private sector. As Needham has pointed out, "if the customer care approach is a response to public demand, there should be concerns about the capacity of government to keep responding to demands that are effectively limitless" (2006: 856). These issues indicate a

failure on the part of certain non-human and/or human actors to fully perform in accordance with the inscribed customer-focus logic.

Many of the issues discussed so far in this sub-section intersect with the notion of professionalism and that of street level bureaucracy. They raise questions around the degree to which the frontline customer services agent might be thought of as a 'professional'; the potential impact of this role on that of well-established local government professions; and how the generic frontline agent role relates to extant contributions to the street level bureaucracy literature. As such, these debates represent another dimension of the fit between a customer service paradigm and the public services delivery context.

Much of the deliberation in this thesis in relation to professionalism has considered the emerging frontline customer service role. This role is, on the face of it, quite distinct from those commonly understood to constitute 'the professions' such as medics or lawyers. Professional work has tended to be defined in terms of incumbents whose work is characterised by the application of theoretical and scientific knowledge. This is where "the terms and conditions of work traditionally command considerable autonomy and freedom from oversight, except by peer representatives of the professional occupation, and where claims to exclusive or nearly exclusive control over a task domain are linked to the application of the knowledge imparted to professionals as part of their training" (Leicht and Fennel, 2008: 431) – what Scott (2008) terms the functionalist interpretation of professions. By any of the above measures, the notion of a customer service 'professional' would be a difficult one to defend.

Arguably, it would also be questionable to claim that customer service 'professionals' have 'clients' in the sense that they employ cultural authority over dependant client groups – in other words, that they are 'cultural-cognitive agents' (see Scott, 2008). This stands even though frontline staff of this kind do act as gatekeepers for client access to traditional professional civil servants and are able, with the support of decision-making systems, to guide service users through aspects of the 'knowledge territory' that was once the privilege of their back office counterparts. It is the Social Services professional, for example, who would more readily be counted among what Scott (2008) terms the 'regulative professions', those who have privileged access to the use of regulatory powers (e.g. the power to remove a child from her family).

As Scott (2008), and other commentators (including Leicht and Fennel, 2008; Muzio et al., 2013) have argued in recent years, however, the boundary and the make-up of 'the professions' is an increasingly blurred one. It is here that the contribution of Fournier (1999) is particularly useful for considering a closer examination of these issues in relation to Big City Council. From a Foucauldian-inspired perspective, Fournier has charted the emergence of a 'professional' discourse, claiming that "the most unlikely occupations are becoming candidates for professionalization. Secretaries, restaurant staff, security personnel, furniture retailers (among others) are all allegedly offering 'professional services'." (1999: 281)

While, on the one hand, this "casual generalisation" of professionalism can be seen as simply another marketing device by employers, Fournier argues that the trend is of more significance. She characterises it as a disciplinary mechanism in "allow[ing] for control at a distance through the construction of 'appropriate' work identities and conducts." (1999: 281) In doing so, Fournier finds parallels between the functioning of this disciplinary logic of professionalism and the regulation of autonomous conduct within well-established professions. The managerial motives for the extension of a professionalism logic to new occupational domains connect with attempts to resolve the control/consent dilemma faced by contemporary organizations by seeking to align individual employees' autonomy with the advancement of corporate interests. In short, drawing on Townley's (1989) phrase, Fournier (1999) identifies professionalism in this sense as one of the new "softwares of control".

In Fournier's case study, the version of professionalism she identifies "was not used to refer to certain groups of employees possessing specific skills and knowledge (such as say accountants or engineers) but to index a certain form of conduct or work ethic, often centred around the customers, and applicable to all [organizational] staff." (1999: 294).
The disciplining processes are generated by formalised organizational frameworks of employee behaviour. These include a set of fifteen standard 'competencies' (one of which is 'Technical/Professional competence') that staff are expected to attain, which, in turn, flow from the firm's 'core values' (among which is 'We are professional'). These competencies serve to translate the firm's core values "into norms of personal conduct for employees [thereby serving] to articulate the appropriate forms of conduct and work subjectivities in the name of other actors (e.g. the client, the customer…)." (1999: 296) Hence, Fournier draws an analogy between the notion of 'professional competence' serving to inscribe a disciplinary logic of professionalism in the person of the (traditional) practitioner and the function of the

organizational competencies in her case study which inscribe a disciplinary logic of enterprise within the personal conduct of staff.

Turning to Big City Council, Fournier's analysis usefully complements my earlier argument concerned with articulating the means by which customer-focused change is being 'naturalized' in that organizational setting. There, I argued that a key aspect of the re-imagination of the enterprising local authority entails re-scripting employees' roles, which includes the representation of the generic frontline officer within a professionalizing narrative. Customer Service role-holders are being responsibilized, they are being encouraged to embrace the developmental opportunities that come with genericised service provision and to pursue 'professional' qualifications via bodies such as the Institute of Customer Service. And such trends are taking place at a time when 'professionalism' is one of the five drivers of customer satisfaction with public services (Cabinet Office, 2004). Hence, Big City's frontline officer can be located comfortably alongside 'professionalised' Fournier's secretaries, restaurant staff and so on. Fournier may place a greater emphasis on viewing these organizational moves as managerialist devices for regulating employee behaviour, but my analysis too recognises the potency of a professionalising narrative in shaping subjectivity – it feeds into what I have termed the discursive construction of a 'right' type of council employee. In the case of Big City, however, its significance is bound up with a wider organizational effort to position itself in relation to its customer. More, I have argued that this effort is characterised by senior council voices as one of 'catching up' with the best of the commercial service providers.

Unlike Fournier's case study (a private sector service provider, albeit one that had been privatised by an earlier British government administration), Big City presents a different set of occupational characteristics which have a bearing on these issues. Of key interest are the potential effects of a 'professionalising' customer service role for the well-established professions in a local authority setting. Could developments of this nature be seen as acting to erode the domain of the 'back office' professional? Arguably, yes. At the same time, however, it is here that the ill-fitting nature of the customer service 'professional' is felt. In the case of Big City, as was set out in the last chapter, the limits of the generic frontline role are acutely recognised by certain back office employees. The main grounds for declaring such limits relate to professional judgement, even though claims of this kind are sometimes characterised by Customer Services management as "preciousness" as it seeks to shift wider organizational perceptions of the new frontline beyond that of "a glorified reception service"

(Customer Service Centre Manager, 12th July 2005). The issue hinges on the degree to which technical knowledge and the practice of exercising professional judgement are seen as standardisable and captured in CRM system scripts.

As concluded in the Findings chapter, there are certain domains of local government practice (e.g. Social Services) where a 'professional' logic – which I have articulated in terms of an 'expertise' narrative – is deemed universally as legitimate (non-standardisable) while others (e.g. Benefits and Council Tax) are subject to substantial encroachment by a customer service logic advocating generic service provision. This discussion brings the matter of new technologies into a consideration of shifting professionalism. Scott (2008) identifies the increasing significance of technologies, those capable of mechanizing and routinizing knowledge, in displacing tasks that formerly required "expert experienced dexterity" to semiskilled technicians operating machines. While Scott has a different organizational terrain in mind (clinical settings), a parallel process can be seen in the kind of front and back office restructuring achievements researched at Big City Council. The degree to which it is defensible to talk of processes of professionalization in front office settings, however, remains open to question. Despite declarations from change agents such as "we're really strong on promoting professional standards" (Contact Centre Development Officer, 29th November 2004), frontline officers were found to express reservations about their capacity to offer a 'professional' service: "I've got absolutely no idea [about Planning] whatsoever – so that is a bit daunting…you might know a bit about all of [the service areas] but you don't know enough on all of them to give a good service." (Generic Officer, 20th July 2005)

The potential consequences of customer-focussed public services for professional decision-making in local authorities demands consideration of debates connected to the practice of the street-level bureaucrat. The main area of interest in these debates in recent years relates to the question of whether or not the exercise of discretion is being curtailed and the implications of any such curtailment. As set out in earlier chapters, some commentators (e.g. du Gay, 2000; Fountain, 2001) are concerned about the undesirable consequences for service users – resulting from street-level bureaucrats' increased use of favouritism, stereotyping and so on – and the public more broadly of entrepreneurial thinking in public services delivery. Closely related to developments towards an 'entrepreneurial' culture, it is managerialism (Barberis, 2012) and the increased use of organizational ICTs, in particular those which support decision-making (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; Snellen, 2002), that tend to be identified as the key forces of curtailment.

While Lipsky (1980) was interested in the practice of the street-level bureaucrat in a range of public service settings (including teachers, police officers, judges, lawyers, and social workers), much of the debate is being played out in the context of social work. It is here that commentators (Clarke et al., 1994; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Howe, 1991; Lawson, 1993) have emphasised the "significant seizure of power by managers in social work organizations, with concomitant curbing of professional room for manoeuvre" (Evans and Harris, 2004: 874), some highlighting the role of information technologies (Harris, 1998) in these processes.

Others (Ellis, 2007; Ellis, 2014; Ellis et al., 1999; Evans, 2011; Evans, 2013; Evans and Harris, 2004), in keeping with Lipsky's (1980) thesis, are less ready to accept the triumph of management over the social work professional. Here, there is a recognition that, while the scope for exercising professional discretion may have been compromised in recent decades, the street-level bureaucrat is bound to continue to apply individual discretion in the space between policy and organizational rules, even if some (e.g. Baldwin, 1998) are less sanguine about this reality of social work.

Given that, at the time of the data collection activities at Big City, the frontline technologies being studied had barely impacted the council's social services, there is little to conclude about the curtailment or otherwise of social workers' discretion. When asked to consider the prospect of generic frontline officers handling social services enquiries, however, participants located in social services were very clear about the limits of such ICT-supported standardisation measures. Of primary concern was that an appropriate decision on each user's requirements could be arrived at; hence, a fear of curtailment was expressed by participants given the necessity of professional judgement being exercised to establish such requirements.

At the same time, however, the practice of street-level bureaucrats working in other local authority service areas (e.g. Benefits, Council Tax) was being directly affected by the customer service improvement programme. In these service areas, again, staff expressed concern and doubt at the ability of generic service staff to exercise appropriate judgement in service encounters. This is something which was also reflected in the reported difficulty of mapping and scripting certain services. Here, one is reminded of what Evans and Harris say about the practice of the street-level bureaucrat: "the situations they face are too complex to reduce to prescribed responses." (2004: 878) Rather than the curtailment of professional

discretion, what these processes represent is the removal of the (back office) street-level bureaucrat from certain decision-making processes – a version of that professional discretion is seen to have been captured and systematised for the use of colleagues at the new frontline.

One question raised by this discussion is that of whether the frontline customer service officer can be thought of as a 'street-level bureaucrat'. It is a question that calls to mind the above consideration of the same employee as a 'professional' and the resulting awkwardness of fit in the absence of a clear body of knowledge. At the same time, it would be unduly hasty to conclude that the generic officer operates free from 'favouritism', 'stereotyping', and 'routinizing' "…to cope with uncertainties and work pressures…" (Lipsky, 1980: xiii) notwithstanding management efforts to standardise service encounters via mapping and scripting technologies.

To conclude this discussion, it is worth recalling the contribution of Dubois (2010). Dubois, who carried out an in-depth study of 'reception' agents in a French benefits office offers scope for a more positive interpretation of street-level bureaucrat discretion. His starting point is that "neither impersonal bureaucrats nor standardized clients exist". Rather, public service settings are constituted by "social agents with individual personalities who, within certain conditions and limits, are required to play the role of the impersonal or standardized bureaucrat or client." (Dubois, 2010: 3) Dubois qualifies this idea by conceiving of the frontline (welfare) agent as having "two bodies" – an institutional, bureaucratic, impersonal one and a human one, what he calls a 'concrete individual'. So, on the one hand, street-level bureaucrats "…still work with objects (computers, forms) and a language (acronyms, administrative jargon) which make their person disappear behind their affiliation to an institutional entity." (Dubois, 2010: 73) On the other hand, the "double face" of the agent constitutes a "…major resource that allows [her] to retain the upper hand and 'gently' obtain the visitors' consent." (2010: 74) It allows the agent to play on two levels: "the neutral language of bureaucracy or the personal and familiar language of ordinary life; the strict allegiance to the administrative norm or personal involvement in an interpersonal relationship." (2010: 74)

A consideration of Dubois' conceptualization in the case of Big City's 'reception' agents suggests a continuation of the paradoxical theme characterising this sub-section. On the one hand, there is an argument that the accent on customer-focus that has inspired the organizational changes studied here opens up new opportunities for Dubois' 'concrete

individual'. I am referring here to the emphasis that Big City's change actors are putting on excellence in customer service terms; that is, getting closer to service users, better understanding their behaviours and needs, treating users with courtesy and respect, offering choice, and so on. As Dubois argues, "clients do not only come to obtain what institutions are officially meant to provide. Apart from solving administrative problems, they ask for advice, consideration, compassion and express their pain and resentment." (2010: 2) Moreover, Dubois suggests that the expression of this face of the agent has taken on renewed importance at a time when traditional means of socialisation (work, family and friendship networks) are under increased pressure for many economically disadvantaged service users. When social bonds are deteriorating, "an administration's desk is especially a space of dialogue and of 'exhibition of humanity'." (Dubois, 2010: 14)

On the other hand, it can be argued that the pursuit of customer service excellence in the way that I have charted at Big City serves to blunt the potential for more meaningful 'human' relationships. Of key importance is Dubois' idea that the "double face" of the street-level bureaucrat operates in tandem; it is a product of the inherently asymmetrical power relationship between agent and user. As Dubois argues, what he calls bureaucratic domination, "is carried out by individuals who are not just cogs in a machine but whose position of authority allows judgements and injunctions that the administrative functioning does not impose but makes possible." (2010: 15) A similar dynamic comes to mind in the findings of Rosenthal and Peccei's (2006) Jobcentre Plus study. The authors argue that the personal adviser's job is "to build a rapport, to sympathise, to empathise, to convince [clients] it is better to work." (2006: 669)

The implication here is that the newly created generic frontline agent, as argued above, is neither a 'true' professional nor a 'true' street-level bureaucrat. As such, the role holder, in lacking the authority that comes with a professional status, is limited in his scope for mobilising the bureaucratic, impersonal body in conjunction with the human one; he is less able to perform the required "acrobatics of the self" (Zacka, 2011: 303). One might conclude, therefore, that in their haste to eschew 'bureaucratic' modes of service delivery, Big City's management are, perhaps unintentionally, overlooking the nuanced "double-faced" practice of the street-level bureaucrat. More, could it be that frontline efforts to 'satisfy' users, through the deployment of generic agents lacking professional, bureaucratic authority, in fact encourage demanding, at times aggressive, traitorous customer-user behaviour? That is, given agents who are less able to "help…coax applicants into consensus." (Dubois, 2010: 6) At the

same time, while the human face of the agent is, in some respects, encouraged by a customer service culture, in the light of the increased use of ICTs to structure and standardise service encounters it may be that such humanising impulses are toned down. In other words, the institutional 'body' is paradoxically reinforced.

In summary, then, in a public service delivery climate characterised by squeezed budgets, a propensity to rationalise resources through consolidation and institutional partnering, and the increased use of ICTs to standardise decision-making processes, customer-focus raises new questions about the universally appropriate (in the vein of Fournier, 1999) yet ill-fitting notions of professionalism and street-level bureaucracy.

Many of the issues discussed so far problematizing the fit between the customer and the public service delivery setting are made even more visible by further consideration of the CRM-supporting technologies adopted by Big City. Earlier discussions strongly suggest that there are question marks over whether *all* of the council's service users are able (or willing) to perform the kind of customer subjectivity offered up by these technologies.

Part of the difficulty may arise from the fact that CRM, among a host of ICT-supported organizational activities, is born of an enterprise view of organization. As such, it relies on a consistent idea of the 'customer', something that is arguably more problematic in a public service delivery context than others. Arguably, the capacity of CRM systems, as currently configured, appears to be largely limited to supporting the handling of certain routine, non-expert enquiries in a local authority context. It is useful to note here that evidence from elsewhere in UK local government suggests that the strategy adopted at Big City – in terms of the service areas targeted for the provision of thoroughgoing generic support at the frontline – is a common one. In 2004, the CRM National Programme commissioned case studies of twelve local authorities which were seen as CRM pioneers and a survey of all English local authorities. And as King remarks, the survey found that "the most frequently targeted service was environmental and waste management, followed by general inquiries and then benefits. Interestingly, the three typically highest cost and arguably most complex services, education, social services and housing, were lower down the list of CRM priorities." (2007: 53)

This argument triggers the question of whether the commercial sector provenance of CRM is a significant issue in considering its merits and its overall suitability in terms of supporting public service delivery. Given, as argued above, that these systems are seen as inscribed with

the presuppositions of the demanding, time-pressured 'customer' and the responsive, customer insight-armed service provider, the answer is clear. CRM-supporting technologies are likely to open up certain possibilities for customer interaction, to encourage certain types of organizational structuring, and simultaneously close down others. While on the one hand – and running the risk of being labelled a technological determinist – this argument suggests that provenance *does* matter, I argue that what matters *equally* are the mutually constitutive social processes that mediate the understanding of these and any other technologies or practices. That is, it also matters how CRM (as a set of technologies and techniques) is conceptualised, presented, and re-presented during the various phases that bring it into being; i.e. procurement, implementation, user training and so on. And, as argued earlier, in the case of major ICT initiatives surrounding CRM, powerful (legitimate) external actors from the system vendor and business consultancy communities play a significant role in shaping user's "mental models" and "frames of reference". (Orlikowski, 1992) In the light of this argument, the customer's awkwardness that is the subject of this sub-section may, in part, be a product of the uncritical (or ignorant?) acceptance by public service actors of the dominant meanings inscribed in ICT-supported solutions like CRM.

What we can conclude from the discussion here is that, on the one hand, the customer, and associated techniques and technologies, possess a seemingly universal appeal and applicability, while on the other hand, the fit is often poor when considered in the rather unique context of public services delivery. The central tension involves the kind of 'customer-service provider' relationship imagined by the architects of customer-focussed e-government and performed by the heterogeneous network of actors that represent it, set against the multi-layered context of the public services delivery encounter. Current technologies fail to reflect that each encounter implicates multiple stakeholders in terms of expressing preferences and deriving different kinds of value, and that choice, even *to be* a 'customer', for the direct recipient of the service, is often absent. Further, by individualizing the act of service delivery – after all, 'satisfaction' can only be an experienced on an individual level – the concept of customer satisfaction disingenuously sets up false expectations that one's own needs/desires are paramount and that they will be met by the agent of state. Overall then, the recruitment of the public services' 'customer' appears somewhat opportunistic, as if the customer lexicon (and its entourage) has been adopted without sufficient thought about its nature and consequences in unfamiliar territory. This idea resonates with Needham's finding that the public officials and councillors she studied employed differing conceptions of 'customer care'

– "…they are not working internally to develop coherent approaches to the user as customer" (2006: 853).

5.3.3 Appealing yet Limiting

Thus far, discussion of the seductive qualities of the customer has been confined to the perspective of those enacting customer-focus from the organizational side. Here, I will argue that the descriptor is equally appealing to the customer him/herself. At the same time, the theme of paradox continues in the sense that, beyond being awkward or disingenuous, there are more profound implications for customers in terms of how their relationship with the state is envisaged.

First, there is an obvious appeal associated with the prospect of being served more attentively, of being able to conduct transactions in new ways and at the time of one's choosing, of the service provider being able to resolve enquiries on a range of service areas during the same interaction, and so on. It would be a peculiar service user who, when asked if s/he would like these kinds of service reforms, said 'No thank you'. As Aberbach and Christensen have pointed out, "not many people would advocate a government that treats its citizens with disdain or that ignored their preferences." (2005: 235). In short, who would *not* want to identify with the hackneyed refrain 'customer is king'?

Second, the notion of being a customer of public services is likely to be an appealing one inasmuch as it is a familiar role, one that members of the public are used to performing in interactions with a diversity of service providers (a feature discussed at length in the previous chapter). More than this, it is not a particularly challenging role to undertake. Indeed, on the face of it, it is an empowering role and yet one that requires little more of the customer than to register his/her preferences about one good/service or another (an act which, with the advance of sophisticated profiling technologies, increasingly involves providers inferring such preferences from customer behaviour, thereby lightening the customer's burden further).

Expressed through current trends towards service personalization, the allure of customer-focus is widely recognised by central and local government actors, whether that is because it is perceived to be a strategy that can deliver tangible service benefits (and cost-efficiencies) or, more cynically, because they take the view that satisfied customers are more likely to vote for the status quo. As the then chief executive of the Office of Government Commerce

argued: “We live in a world where we can so personalise our coffee that it takes longer to order it than to make it; and we expect a bit of that individualised service where it really matters. Call it the ‘half-caf, non-fat, double-foam, extra shot’ approach to public services” (Oughton, 2007)

While, in the UK, we may be some way from seeing meaningfully individualized service delivery – beyond personalised social care budgets or smartcard schemes – local authorities like Big City claim to be making real progress in terms of service improvements according to measures such as enquiry resolution at first point of contact. Which begs the question: Given the easy appeal of customer-focussed public services, how satisfied *are* users? Do we want the same from public services that we want from our coffee shop?

In terms of evidence of whether or not the considerable investment in service reform is having a discernible effect on (individual) customer satisfaction levels, this is both limited and ambiguous. At a European level, it has been found that “only about a third of European users of e-government services rate the services as an improvement over their offline counterparts.” (e-government bulletin, 2005) In the UK, in the early days of e-government, Ipsos MORI research on public attitudes (Page, 2007) suggested that overall satisfaction with public services actually declined between 1998 and 2004. A similar mixed picture emerged from the Cabinet Office’s (2004) attempt to review user satisfaction across a range of public services, finding that, in respect of local government, overall satisfaction “has dropped notably over the past three years” (2004: 6). More recent data, associated with the 2012 UK Customer Satisfaction Index, indicate that satisfaction with public services does not compare favourably with the public’s experience in other sectors. This survey found that 74% of UK adults were satisfied with local public services while 72% of customers were satisfied with national public services. Only the Utilities sector fared worse.

It is also interesting to note, in view of arguments made earlier concerning the particularly ill-fitting nature of the ‘customer’ in relation to certain areas of service delivery, that the lowest scoring group of services were those which users “…will generally only have contact with out of necessity – often due to difficult personal circumstances or other complex needs” (Ipsos MORI, 2010: 6) According to the comparative data cited above, relative to other episodes of customer-ship, it appears that engaging with public service providers is somewhat dissatisfying. Exploring why this should be raises not only the, at times, awkward fit between customer-focus and public services (analysed earlier) but also (the focus of this section) the

limiting experience of consuming public services, thereby raising serious questions over the appeal of being a public services' customer.

A number of possible explanations come to mind, many of which have been articulated by Cornford and Richter (2007). In the specific context of e-government, these tend to have a technology focus – the failure to adequately capture the organisational and individual 'requirements' at the design stage (Heeks, 2006); the quality and usability of government web sites; the capacity of public servants to manage large and complex IT projects; overselling on the part of the IT and systems supplier community; or, more straightforwardly, poor service outcomes relative to those experienced at Amazon, Marks and Spencer, and John Lewis (as is the case in the UKCSI survey mentioned above).

Echoing earlier arguments concerned with the ill-fitting nature of customer-focus, another way to interpret any sense of dissatisfaction is to question the model of the customer underpinning a customer-focus narrative and the ICTs designed to support that orientation (see Cornford and Richter, 2007). This is the idea that the techniques and technologies of customer focus enable public services to see certain aspects of their users while obscuring other aspects. It is reflected in the increasingly noted opinion of public service users that 'they're not listening,' that the management of public services are ill-equipped to process and comprehend certain aspects of what their users are trying to tell them. From this perspective, the devices being utilised by public service deliverers to engage with users are equipped only to recognise a rather limited range of 'customer-like' behaviours. This prompts the question of whether dissatisfaction arises from the relative performance, in customer service terms, of current e-government efforts, or whether members of the public do in fact desire something more (or different) from their relationship with public agencies than the 'half-caf, non-fat, double-foam, extra shot' model (Oughton, 2007) assumes.

The evidence on this issue is also rather unclear. First, reflecting on Ipsos MORI data, Bollen and Emes pose the question, *In one sense, why should the customer relationship be any different in the public sector?*, on the basis that 81% of survey respondents agreed with the statement, 'Britain's public services need to start treating users and the public as customers' (2008: 28). And given that almost the same percentage (79%) agreed with the clarifying statement, 'Britain's public services need to start treating users and the public as customers *in the same way as the private sector does',* it appears that most people do not discriminate between the relationships they have with private or public bodies. However, without doubting

the validity of the survey approach employed by Ipsos MORI, eliciting responses to a series of closed questions in a questionnaire provides a very limited understanding of public feeling on these issues. This is partly due to the lack of alternative positions offered by the questionnaire. I wonder, for example, how respondents might have reacted to the statement, 'Britain's public services need to treat the public as citizens and not simply customers'.

Interestingly (and as set out in the previous chapter), the open-ended nature of the data generation process conducted in the case of Big City yielded data that suggest council workers assume the public to be driven exclusively by their individual needs. As a Revenues Officer declared in response to the suggestion that users may wish to have their voices heard by the local authority or be part of any sort of decision-making, "I don't think so…I don't think they want to have any involvement with *us*." (24th March 2005) These kinds of assumptions hardly call to mind the civic-minded citizen.

The work of other commentators offers competing insights. The in depth research of Clarke and Newman (2005) has shown that at least some individuals, in at least some specific public service contexts, are wary of the customer label. Clarke and Newman found that health service users are far more inclined to think of themselves as 'patients' or 'service users' than 'consumers' or 'customers'. According to these authors, neither 'citizens' nor 'consumers' are the "primary categories" through which people live, and think about, their connections to public services. Added to this, the work of Moffatt and Higgs (2007) and Wilberforce et al. (2011) cited earlier reminds us that older users are less adept than other groups to perform as 'customers'. Further, although anecdotal in nature, it is interesting to recall the Big City service user who, on being addressed as a 'customer' of the council, lodged a corporate complaint in which he stressed that "he's a council tax payer, he's a resident, but he's certainly not a 'customer'" and asked not to be addressed in that way again. (Customer Services Manager, 1st August 2005) In summary, it would seem that further research, particularly that designed to elicit in-depth understanding, is required into the kind of relationship(s) which the public would like to have with those who deliver public services. What seems quite clear is that it is wrong to *assume* that all service users are comfortable with the idea of being public service 'customers'.

A survey-based examination of public attitudes to e-government and e-governance (despite the methodological concerns expressed above) offers food for thought about the breadth of relationship some service users are receptive to. For while Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley found

that "…users currently see little added value in exploiting e-governmental portals for citizen engagement and participation in democratic decision making," they also found that the factors which are influential in making users 'feel part of an active democracy' included: 'have my say', 'decision-makers listen', 'communicating effectively with the state', 'my opinions matter', 'I am being consulted', 'I help make decisions', and 'I am working in partnership with the state' (2008: 732). Therefore, even if current attitudes towards e-government portals imply they are inadequate conduits for such engagement, there is a suggestion that the public is open to a more meaningful, two-way relationship, a notion supported by the findings of another study: that the public "want public services to be based on notions of the public good, rather than just what's good for me." (Ipsos MORI, 2010: 4)

These survey findings highlight how the relationship being constituted by e-government (as documented in the Big City case study) can be viewed as a profoundly limiting one, one where members of the public are encouraged to view their side of the relationship with agents of the state more broadly (i.e. beyond the local authority setting) in passive terms. State agencies, from this view, are scripted as being determined to make service encounters as slick, infrequent, and stress-free as possible for users. In this mode, it is assumed that the individual citizen has little concern for the nature and quality of government service provision more widely, especially if that individual is not a direct recipient of any given service. To this extent, the operation of public services is – with the best of intentions – being 'black-boxed' from the service user's perspective, they are deterred from gaining an appreciation of how, for example, difficult decisions are required to be made about competing priorities, or of the specific pressures experienced by different service areas.

The delivery of private value (or 'satisfaction') is paramount in this mode; there is no space for a consideration of public value, there is no script for Sennett's (2006) 'citizen-as-craftsman'. As Aberbach and Christensen have argued, neo-liberal reforms have a market logic that "…downplays or even disregards the legal and moral aspects of citizenship…" The neo-liberal citizen's obligation is only to make choices; there is no obligation to participate in the political process "…if his or her self-interest is better served by non-participation" (2005: 234) As such, this direction of travel may serve to confuse – if not totally undermine – efforts elsewhere by governments to engage with the public on a more active footing, be that in the shape of citizen juries, people's panels, or other citizenship-oriented initiatives.

Bollen and Emes (2008) have examined the range of relationships that exist between individuals and organisations in both private and public sector contexts – their findings are useful for assessing the kind of relationship I argue customer-focus in public services is promoting. The authors utilise a typology of consumer-brand relationships developed by Fournier (1998) to hypothetically map how individuals feel about a range of cross-sector customer-supplier relationships (see figure 9 below).

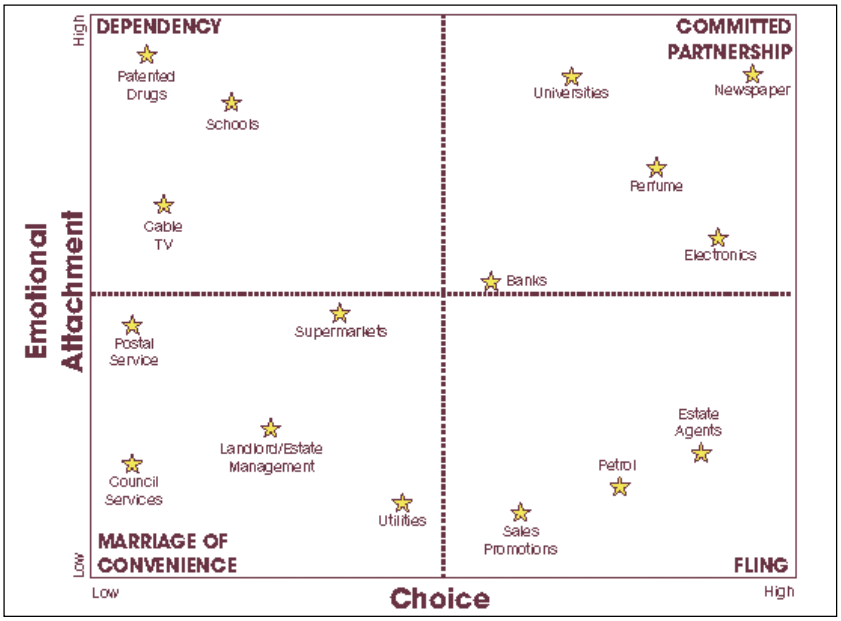

Figure 9: Reproduced from Bollen and Emes (2008: 17)

Bollen and Emes locate customers' relationship with local authorities ('council services') in the lower, left quadrant – firmly in 'marriage of convenience' territory. According to Fournier's typology such a relationship is typically "long-term, committed, and governed by 'satisficing' rules". In the light of the findings from my own research, there is a fierce ambition to shift that relationship along the 'choice' axis towards the lower, right quadrant, which in these terms constitutes more of a 'fling' relationship. As such, it is a relationship characterised by a "short-term, time-bounded engagement of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands" (2008: 16). More significantly, this is happening at a time "…when the one choice that so many people want in their public services – a continuing and respectful relationship with a supportive professional – is less and less on offer." (Boyle and Harris, 2009: 6)

Thinking about the sort of 'council services' relationship that would call for involvement on a deeper, more engaged level – reflecting a more meaningful notion of citizenship – one would need to look towards the upper, left quadrant of Fournier's matrix. Even though that would

suggest a relationship that implied a sense of 'dependency' (which may have rather negative connotations for some) it would reinforce the notion that public services might be more successfully designed and delivered via a set of processes that involve more meaningful engagement between (interested) citizens and state actors, and in doing so, recognise a certain level of inter-*dependency* between those communities. It would also de-emphasise the significance of 'choice' on the part of the citizen while simultaneously raising levels of 'emotional attachment'.

Again, the significance of CRM technology deployment have implications for this debate. For different reasons than Zwick and Dholakia (2004), I share their concern that the process of individualization associated with CRM technologies makes for a limited, impoverished relationship. Unlike these authors, I am also concerned with the 'customer' quality of the relationship conceived within a CRM paradigm; one that is primarily concerned to record, respond to, and anticipate individual customer needs (insofar as such needs have been pre-scribed by the supporting systems). King's (2007) critique of CRM in public service delivery settings is relevant here. He has argued that the implicit relationship embedded in CRM systems fails to accommodate the customer in his role as 'co-producer' in the service delivery process: "the private sector model of CRM assumes that the organization which runs the system owns the customer data and does something 'to' the customer rather than 'with' them." (2007: 58) In short, the CRM paradigm privileges certain service user traits while obscuring others. I go on to discuss in the concluding chapter the kinds of subjectivities that an alternative paradigm might usefully support.

To conclude, this section has sought to examine the remarkable appeal and versatility of customer-focus, both as an organizing principle and as a narrative that constitutes individual subjectivities. Developing existing analyses of the 'customer', I have set out three paradoxes of customer-focus in the public services setting to demonstrate that its seductive qualities – an appealing, universally appropriate, and powerful ally – are offset in practice by its dissatisfying properties – traitorous, ill-fitting, and limiting. On the face of it, a straightforward concept, I have concluded that the public services' customer can be viewed as an unpredictable character, a source of profound drawbacks as well as benefits.

5.4 Chapter conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to substantiate my claim that, in the face of organizational 'resistance' (in the case of Big City) and a well-established academic critique, the linguistic and material instantiation of a customer-focus narrative should be considered a significant achievement. In order to do so, I have made four overarching arguments, each drawing on the theoretical and analytical literature set out in previous chapters as well as the case study data. Each argument has played a part in developing a constructionist account of change at Big City Council, thereby offering an alternative account from that encountered during the data generation process.

First, I argued that the organizational (and wider e-government) efforts to articulate the past, present, and future of public services delivery and the environment within which they operate are serving to construct and justify (or naturalize) the path of customer-focussed change. Second, I utilised the conceptual framework developed by Phillips et al (2004) to map which texts embedded in which discourses have played a legitimating role in the process of institutionalizing customer-focus. Third, I examined the significance of e-government technologies and human agents as 'performers' of ordering narratives within a wider heterogeneous set of relations to explain the generation of specific and enduring organizational effects. Finally, I argued that the polyvalence of the 'customer', in conjunction with customer-focus as an organizational enterprise, represents a further important aspect of this organizational accomplishment, albeit one that reveals their drawbacks in a public services setting as well as their affordances. Taken together, this analysis suggests we are witnessing the insufficiently reflexive adoption of an organizational logic, the performance of which relies on a heterogeneous network of relations, and which in a public service delivery setting throws up a series of often undesirable tensions.

The effect of this process – the result of a deeper, theoretically-informed, analysis – is to reconceptualise the findings set out in the previous chapter. Hence, the 'rehearsing' of the public services' customer is less a process of reflecting a pre-existing reality than creating a new set of service users. The processes I described in terms of 'refining' the customer are better seen as processes of strengthening a particular view (and simultaneously shutting down alternatives) than those of deepening organizational understanding. Likewise, 'resourcing'

processes are serving not only to accommodate the customer and equip the organization with the means to serve him/her but also to inscribe customer-centrism into the material and cultural fabric of the organization. Finally, the ‘resistance’ to the public services’ customer is not only the playing out of intransigence on the part of those who do not buy-in to the corporate ambition but, more profoundly, a demonstration of the multiple tensions inherent within that descriptor. The task addressed in the concluding chapter is an exploration of what this analysis implies for the prospect of alternative conceptualizations of the service user.

Chapter 6. Conclusion: Looking beyond the 'customer' of public services

6.1 A task of re-imagination

I began this thesis by arguing that much of the e-government literature has largely ignored the character at the heart of contemporary customer-focussed service delivery agendas, despite a wide-ranging academic critique of customer-centrism in government contexts. Having explored how customer-focus is taking shape in a local authority setting, this study argues that the techniques and technologies of e-government should be recognised as significant actors within the heterogeneous performance of customer-focus. These technologies underpin the organization's systems, structures, processes, and staff in coalescing to rehearse, refine, and resource the public services' customer, in the face of internal resistance to certain change efforts. At the same time, this analytical process revealed the resulting limitations and tensions associated with e-government's customer. The implication of the constructionist analysis deployed in this thesis is that the emergence of any alternative service user subjectivity requires processes of re-thinking and re-acting on a number of levels. As such, the intended beneficiaries of this concluding discussion include public policy figures and public service practitioners as well as scholars.

The first thing to say is that a post-customer paradigm of whatever shape and colour is likely to require (further) innovation. For all that the e-government change agenda, both in the case of Big City Council and more broadly in terms of the public service 'transformation' programme, has been framed as driving *innovation* through public services delivery – at the level of organizational structure; strategy; the technological support of operational processes; a shift in corporate culture and so on – in fact, the result is, from one perspective, profoundly lacking in innovation. I argue this on the basis that, to a large extent, we are witnessing a shift towards, not 'new', but existing models of organization – those seen in commercial contexts – to better understand service users' needs and in a bid to improve service quality. Much of the 'transformation' task has been articulated time and again by its architects as one of 'catching up' with commercial counterparts in response to higher user expectations. My characterisation of this process as one lacking in imagination and ambition is rather more eloquently conveyed by this allegory:

> "A policeman sees a man on his hands and knees under the lamppost, obviously searching for something.

> "What have you lost?" he asks.
> "I have lost my keys," replies the man.
> "Are you sure you dropped them under the lamppost?" the policeman queries.
> "No," says the man. "I lost them over there," motioning toward the darkness.
> "Then why are you looking for them here?" asks the bewildered policeman.
> "Because," the man continues steadily, "this is where the light is."
> (Zuboff and Maxmin, 2002: 18)

From this perspective, the pursuit of customer-focussed public services looks to be a somewhat opportunistic, poorly thought through notion. The customer service paradigm, in conjunction with the technological means to deliver customer-focused service delivery, exists – a ready-made 'solution' waiting to be implemented. Hence, a preparedness to look beyond the lamplight, in search of a more ambitious relationship between the individual and state, is likely to require imagination and may involve looking back as well as forward.

A core task in imagining an alternative relationship is a re-appraisal of the figure at the heart of the e-government agenda. Rather than a natural state of being, the customer is a significant organizational achievement, and in order to make it 'work' (as in the case of Big City), the service provider tends to employ technologies inscribed with a dominant view of that customer to develop a unified view of service users' needs that can be responded to corporately. Importantly, while the needs that customer service technologies are designed to ascertain tend to be envisaged as "…exogenous to the system that might satisfy them" (Richter and Cornford, 2007: 215), from a constructionist perspective they are more appropriately seen as "…at least partly endogenous to the system…" (Richter and Cornford, 2007: 215). Hence, the methodologies being relied on for *discovering* user needs are more accurately regarded as key elements of a needs-*creating* apparatus.

In the light of this analysis, what may be necessary is not that public service deliverers endeavour to gain intimate 'knowledge', constructed through the categories and classifications of customer service, but rather that the user is given some space to define themselves and their priorities. (Cornford and Richter, 2007: 43) Rather than investing in increasingly sophisticated 'insight' technologies, public servants might consider how to better develop relationships with users that promote mutual understanding and respect and where individual (or groups of) users are offered the opportunity to co-construct their citizen identity. There have been signs that, in certain parts of the public sector reform movement, this kind of notion is being taken seriously. For example, a piece of research carried out for

local government showed that young people "want to set the agenda not just respond to [the council's]." (Back/RBA Research, 2006: 7-8) Campbell has neatly expressed how those working within governmental settings can foster publicly engaged citizens. Her recipe is simple: "We need to begin by talking with and listening to citizens about their concerns as expressed in their own language. How can we expect citizen engagement if we do not engage with them in all of their complexity?" (Campbell, 2005: 700)

The potential benefits associated with a freeing up of the service relationship are, of course, unknown. There exists the possibility that it may serve to provide space for both members of the public and agents of government to reconnect with notions of 'publicness' (Haque, 2001). Of the deficiencies associated with customer-focus that have been highlighted in earlier chapters, it is the silencing of the 'public' dimension of the relationship that is seen as particularly damaging, as well as the most counter-productive (recalling the arguments made earlier about *traitorous* customers) and therefore most in need of re-imagining. This argument does not only apply to discrete service interactions with local authorities – where each interaction could more readily be framed as a public as well as a private act – but to an individual's wider contact with government, where, as argued earlier, customer-focus may be serving to undermine governmental efforts to engage with the public on a more active footing (see Needham, 2003).

Needham (2008) agrees that we ought to be aiming for something more ambitious than an individualist model of public services allows. She argues in favour of reclaiming "…a richer view of public life than consumerism can offer", urging us not to "…give up on more collectivist conceptions of the good life." (Jones and Needham, 2008: 76) In one sense, then, the argument is about the importance of maintaining a sense of connectedness in our interactions with bodies designed to serve the public good. My argument does not imply the erosion of individual liberty. It is about raising the possibility of a more rounded conception of the self, one which explicitly acknowledges – more readily than the 'customer' does – the 'social' self *alongside* the individual self. As Dudley has argued, "we are at all times socially situated selves" (1996, cited Stout, 2010: 15).

As mentioned above, the realisation of a post-customer paradigm in public services demands attention on a number of levels. I propose that re-imagination is required at the level of the language that constitutes the roles of citizen and public official, at the level of policy that animates and legitimates such roles, and at the mundane techno-organizational level. Each of

these is implicated by the following consideration of current trends in e-Government in the light of the conceptual contributions articulated by this thesis, trends which show signs of promise in relation to the task of reimagination called for above.

e-Government debates in more recent years have begun to coalesce around issues of transparency, accountability, and service coproduction; trends that are captured in notions such as ‘e-Government 2.0’ (Boughzala et al., 2015; “collaborative government” (McGuire, 2006); “Wiki Government” (Noveck, 2009); “government as a platform” (O'Reilly, 2010) among others that represent a shift towards more ‘open’ government. The prospect of Open Government has emerged in tandem with the possibilities offered by the rise of Web 2.0 and social networks. (Boughzala et al, 2015: 3) Debates around Open Government are of specific interest here because of the prospect they hold for the relationship between the public and government, a relationship which – in contrast to that of the ‘customer’ of government analysed in this thesis – demands a great deal of individual members of the public. According to Janssen and Estevez, “instead of embracing the customer role as was done in e-Government, the citizen orientation is back.” (2013: S4)

Linders (2012) offers a useful typology of the range of coproductive activities citizens can potentially engage in. In terms of participation in service design, citizens can contribute to consultation/ideation activities and input into “e-participation” and “e-rulemaking” initiatives. They might also be part of community organizations that are deploying community portals to enable collaborative decision-making. Regarding involvement in service delivery and execution, citizens may respond to crowdsourcing initiatives where they would use their skills and expertise to solve government challenges. They might also ‘self-perform’ functions of government that the state has refused, or is unable, to provide on its own (e.g. running community parks, car-pooling). Finally, in terms of what Linders calls service monitoring, we see citizens engaging with reporting technologies that allow them to efficiently and conveniently share knowledge with government (e.g. potholes, crime), holding government to account by sifting through vast amounts of government data, or providing feedback on the quality of services offered by a particular office or official (e.g. NHS Choices system in the UK).

Given the nature and range of coproductive activities associated with Open Government, the benefits anticipated by contributors to the debate are many and various. These include strengthening civil society and fostering social capital among all members of society,

fostering local activism beyond the scope of the direct focus of coproduction, promoting service innovation, and improving service differentiation. (Linders, 2102: 452) Others emphasise the anti-corruption benefits associated with the citizen in scrutinizer mode. For Bertot et al., this implies promoting good governance, reducing the potential for corrupt behaviour, and enhancing relationships between government employees and citizens. (2010: 265) At the same time, "it is clear that citizen coproduction's primary appeal is first and foremost about providing a shortcut to cash-strapped governments for addressing budgetary pressures rather than any attempt to "empower" citizens or improve performance." (Linders 2012: 452) It is a sentiment shared by Dunleavy and Margetts who characterise the UK's *Big Society* agenda as an attempt to "delegate welfare-loads" (2010: 27) to citizens as part of a shift to 'do-it-yourself' government.

Whatever the main motivations of policymakers and government actors taking forward Open Government, the constitution of service users as engaged, participative, scrutinizing citizens is certainly an interesting development when set against the key findings of this thesis. The contrast with the passive, entitled, self-interested public services 'customer' is striking. Linders (2012) characterises the contrast in terms of a transition from "e-Government (citizen as customer)" to "We-Government (citizen as partner)".

Unsurprisingly, the enthusiasm for Open Government is tempered by warnings and reservations about the realisation of its aspirations. Apart from challenges such as those related to data security or the exposure to hacking that accompanies a shift towards government transparency, many relate to the capability and motivation of the actors who it is presumed will embrace the opportunities presented by e-Government 2.0. Janssen and Estevez – who have coined the term 'Lean Government' to describe efforts to 'do more with less' – position governments in an 'orchestration' role. They liken this role to "having the coach of a team, enabling and empowering team players and facilitating interactions and collaboration between players, for them to achieve the goals the coach has envisioned." (2013: S4) A key question is whether or not governments are up to this challenge. Are public officials able, or even willing, to empower service users? Evidence cited earlier (Barnes, et al., 2008; Boyle and Harris, 2009) suggests that government officials' ability to perform a wider, more engaged role in keeping with ideas of coproduction is highly questionable.

Some contributors to the Open Government debate have argued that governments' record of utilising ICTs in pursuit of transparency is unenviable. Bertot et al. (2010) cite a number of

studies over the past two decades which have found that governments have created *new* opportunities for corrupt behaviours (as well as using new technologies to combat corruption). Other studies have concluded that the same technologies bring about widely divergent results depending on the degree of acceptance by government officials in differing nations/cultures. Then there is the issue of data management. Given the current emphasis being placed on social media as a means of engaging with the public, Kavanaugh et al. (2012) have questioned the capacity of governments to analyse user-generated data. Lee and Kwak have called social media-based public engagement "an uncharted territory" (2012: 492) where government agencies lack experience and knowledge. These authors argue that Open Government in practice is going to require non-trivial investment in skill-acquisition, training, new ICTs and the upgrading of network infrastructures. At the same time, Dunleavy and Margetts (2010) remind us that public management digitalization changes tend to be "in catch-up mode". They argue that, "in a period when 26 million UK citizens are on Facebook…the UK government still struggles to get beyond text-based websites, to operationalize modern search within government sites, and to grip either the tech or social aspects of Web 2.0 changes." (2010: 23)

In addition to the above-mentioned shortcomings, Worthy (2015) has emphasised the importance of government agencies making public data available to citizens in a form that supports manageable interpretation and action. He points to the practical difficulties that have been encountered in connection with the UK Transparency Agenda where data have found to be "inconsistent, raw, and difficult to interpret." (2015: 4) This experience highlights an important conceptual issue regarding public data: "the idea of transmission indicates one of the misunderstandings about data – they are not 'power' by themselves: they require narrative and explanation." (Worthy, 2015: 10)

Given the present climate of austerity that guides the spending decisions of many governments, including the UK's, the prospect of substantial investment in gearing up administrations to meet the challenges touched on above are bleak. Dunleavy and Margetts argue that smaller nations such as those in Scandinavia have been investing heavily in Web 2.0 public services while bigger states have been slow to adapt: "most government networks and databases have been built for adequate capacity assuming text-only web formats – adding in video, images, social web functionalities can easily trigger a need for substantially scaled new investments in networks and equipment, which are expensive even with falling IT prices." (2010: 25) More concerning for advocates of transparent government, Worthy argues

that, in the case of UK councils, “a few…are clearly deeply engaged and keen to innovate, a majority appear to be displaying minimal compliance, and a few have engaged in outright resistance.” (2015: 11)

Apart from doubts over the capacity and inclination of government actors to embrace Open Government, similar questions can be raised about the would be Web 2.0 citizens. Enthusiasts tend to assume that citizens are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to occupy the role of “team player” under the coordination of the “orchestrating” government agency (Janssen and Estevez, 2013). First, in the light of research cited in the previous chapter, it is questionable that the public is quite as Web 2.0-ready as much of the Open Government commentary assumes. I am talking about the results of empirical studies investigating preferred channels for service user interaction where, for example, Ipsos MORI (2010) found that just 16% of users had done so via a website (versus 48% in person and 46% by telephone). Contributing directly to the e-Government 2.0 debate, Bertot et al. reinforce such findings: “citizens in many places still show a strong preference for in person or phone-based interactions with government representatives when they have questions or are seeking services. (2010: 266) This is not to say that there are not certain social segments who are very active Web 2.0 participants and, therefore, certainly have the skills to engage with government in a similar fashion. As Linders points out, however, “surveys show that less than 10% of the U.S. population are active online content contributors.” (2012: 452) More, these contributors tend to be highly-educated, networked, relatively affluent professionals. As such, reliance on a small, unrepresentative group raises questions about legitimacy, participant “burn-out”, and the further marginalization of less advantaged service users.

Initial evidence of Open Government in practice suggests that ‘success’ is, at best, patchy. Worthy (2015) has appraised a number of studies looking at UK government efforts to ‘open up’ and it appears that the main areas of public engagement are those which tend to posit users in what I would term consumer mode. This is where users are seeking data to help them make more informed choices about how safe an area is that they are considering moving to, or about the quality of education their children will get based on the examination results of a given school, or about the risk of dying if they are operated on by one surgeon versus another. In this vein, Worthy (2015) identifies the notable success of the data.gov.uk portal and the crime map police.uk. In the case of the more deliberative government-inspired crowd-sourcing experiments – in my terms, those that offer the opportunity for users to respond in more of a public-spirited fashion – success has been less forthcoming. Such initiatives have

included the *Spending Challenge*, *Your Freedom*, and the *Red Tape Challenge*. Similarly, Worthy remarks that "the government's e-petitions initiative has been undermined by a very low success rate." (2015: 4)

Linked to the earlier critique about which citizens are best placed to engage with these kinds of government-driven exercises, the evidence suggests that those users who are participating in Open Government tend to share certain characteristics. In this regard, Worthy's research into engagement with the UK Transparency Agenda found that "far from being an 'average' member of the public, the auditor is very much atypical; needing a rare combination of time, interest, and skills, from IT and statistical literacy to a good knowledge of local government finance." (2015: 9) His research concluded that David Cameron's anticipated "army of effective armchair auditors" (Cameron, 2010) is comprised mainly of businesses, journalists, and NGOs.

I will now briefly reflect on the dawn of e-Government 2.0 in the light of the conceptual framework developed in this thesis which may be of use to scholars concerned with these and other trends in public administration, especially those that emphasise the utilization of new technologies. This suggests paying greater attention than is reflected in much of the existing commentary to the idea that the realization of these initiatives in given localised settings can usefully be seen in relation to macro and micro socio-political discourses and their interrelationship with a material assemblage of actors. The implication here is that the technological actors that e-Government 2.0 relies on, for example, or the principal human actors that are afforded specific roles by the policy discourse are not simply given but have historically-embedded capacities and interests and that such actors may or may not perform in a strategically aligned fashion to bring about the effects desired by the architects of change. Hence, in my study, I have argued that a customer-focus narrative within the broader e-Government agenda is enjoying a certain degree of success (notwithstanding the multiple limitations discussed earlier) because of its effective heterogeneous performance.

A consideration of the 'success' of Open Government might usefully entail, first, a closer examination of wider socio-cultural, historically-situated narratives that shape organizational sense-making and practice (Boje et al., 2004), rendering certain future directions logical and others undesirable or unimaginable. In this case, that could include prevailing narratives concerning the involvement of customers/users in innovation processes. In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the value associated with developing commercial organizations'

capacity to engage with users as part of their approach to innovation (Franke and Shah, 2003; Kleemann et al., 2008; Lüthje, 2004; Lüthje et al., 2005; Tietz et al., 2005). This can imply user-engagement in processes of product/service design, development, or evaluation and often relies on Web 2.0 technologies to support these endeavours. This trend may lend encouragement to Open Government enthusiasts in that some users are growing accustomed to occupying a coproduction role with product/service providers. At the same time, as a leading voice in this area points out, a crucial variable in user-innovation is the functional relationship through which the innovator derives benefit from the innovation. (von Hippel, 1988) This raises the question of whether ordinary citizens will be inclined to participate in e-Government 2.0 only to the extent that they perceive a (private) benefit to them.

Another set of framing narratives of importance here are those that represent the relationship between government agencies and the public. These include representations of citizenry as feeling dislocated from the political class and the culture of political engagement more broadly, resulting in weak trust in the operations of the state. Such a trend does not bode well for the hoped-for animation of participative citizens. Then there are the narratives that frame specific interactions with government agencies, such as professional-client, housing provider-tenant or service provider-customer. The coproductive relationship underpinning e-Government 2.0 represents a disruption to these familiar modes of operating and as such requires careful thought about how it might be accommodated into this territory of roles. A sensitivity to prevailing narratives can help make sense of outcomes of Transparent Government initiatives of the kind referred to by Worthy (2015). He describes monitoring exercises that have given rise to highly politicised means for assigning blame “shaped by pre-existing negativity” (2015: 3) and the generation of stories of government waste, corruption and failure. The approach I am advocating demands a critical appraisal of a-political characterizations of e-Government 2.0 that posit government and citizens interacting “as equals” (Boughzala et al., 2015: 5).

Turning to the micro-organizational context, the conceptual underpinnings of this thesis suggest a related set of considerations. First, in terms of the organizational change implied by Open Government trends, my approach cautions against managerialist accounts of change processes that assume a simple consequentiality between senior managerial decision-making and organizational outcomes. Rather, it entails conceiving organization as a continuous process of sociotechnical accomplishment characterized by a more diffuse arrangement of power and one which demands an analysis of the inter-relationship between organization,

materiality and subjectivity. Hence, what is key to the durability of change narratives is an understanding that they are not exogenous but told, embodied, and performed heterogeneously in talk, text, technologies and human actors (see Law, 1994).

This kind of analysis may contribute to the e-Government 2.0 debate by, for example, drawing attention to existing socio-technical arrangements involving social media technologies in which their everyday use tends to be characterized by ad-hoc, fleeting participation, demonstrating low levels of user attachment to the instance of communication. Hence, the incorporation of such technologies into the functioning of government may support the performance of certain citizen opinion-gathering exercises but may be less amenable to the performance of more deliberative interactions. Recalling the above-cited tale of the man who had lost his keys (Zuboff and Maxmin, 2002), is it possible that an over-reliance on existing technologies to bring about a new set of relationships represents government futilely searching for its 'keys' under another convenient lamppost? Indeed, there may be a need to ensure that low-tech, human-centred methodologies of the kind studied by Needham (2008) are not overlooked as viable means of organising coproduction. Needham identifies the staff–user workshop as a forum "in which users and providers can discuss service provision away from the point of delivery" and one which can facilitate "collective, dialogical and positive-sum co-production" (2008: 225). Importantly, Needham argues that this arrangement provides a setting for users to articulate what I would call their public 'self'; "they are more likely than in individual or user-only consultation exercises to give accurate (rather than exaggerated) accounts of service limitations and to suggest service improvements that will benefit users generally rather than only themselves." (2008: 225)

In the case of (the meaning attached to) organizational ICTs more broadly, my analysis emphasises the significance of a range of human actors – software developers, system consultants, IT trainers and so on – whose frameworks of understanding may be more or less sensitive to the distinctive public service context and whose voices carry differing levels of legitimacy. Such an approach may help to investigate Janssen and Estevez's concerns about the potentially divergent values between platform-developers and state agencies: "the long-term values might be fundamentally conflicting between governments and businesses. Governments have the intention to reach out to their constituents, stimulate interaction and enable participation to accomplish pubic values, whereas business's goal is to make profit by making use of platforms." (2013: S6) Hence, any coproductive value generated by activities

like Needham's staff-user workshops cited above may be diminished by ICT-mediated interaction performing conflicting narratives.

Similarly, and in the light of the earlier-cited evidence concerning the challenge of securing the participation of government employees and citizens at all, it may be useful to consider the narratives that order existing professional-user relationships and the degree to which they may be configured to perform a relationship constituted by a new ordering narrative characterised by the coproduction of value. This analysis may help make sense of Bovaird's call for "a new type of public service professional" (2007: 858) to help overcome the reluctance of many professionals to share power with users and their communities. Developing Bovaird's argument, I would point to the importance of any such new role being constituted by an appropriate narrative and being told and performed heterogeneously. Further, I would argue that a significant actor within any new socio-technical arrangement is a corresponding 'new type of citizen user'.

At the same time, due consideration should be given to the countervailing ordering force of existing narratives; those could include professionalism in the case of government employees and customer-focus in the case of users. As my study demonstrated, the potency of both narratives is considerable at a local authority level. In the case of customer-focus, it is difficult to envisage its displacement in view of (the resources invested in) its heterogeneous performance and its allure to multiple actor communities not least service users themselves. Hence, the approach I adopt in this thesis opens up questions such as: Will citizens perform the active, scrutinising role being ascribed for them or government agents the facilitative, coproductive role being ascribed for them? Or: Will the technological actors perform the required ordering narrative? Alternatively: Will the assemblage of actors pursue their own separate interests and undermine the aims of the e-Government 2.0 agenda?

6.2 Contributions of thesis

Much of the preceding discussion in this chapter raises lessons for policy and practice in public services – it has raised the possibility of a more imaginative (and more adequate) appraisal of the roles that might be performed by both service user and public official. Here, I will clarify the other, empirical and theoretical, contributions of this thesis of primary relevance to e-government, Sociology of Technology, Public Policy, Public Administration, and Sociology of Work literatures.

I have made an in-depth, multi-method empirical contribution to our understanding of how e-government is taking shape, through an examination of one UK local authority, with a specific concern to explore the customer-centric nature of the change agenda. The research incorporates a detailed account of the perspective of local authority officials/managers (located in 'front' and 'back' offices) as well as that of an important external voice, the council's technology vendor. It does so by framing the findings in terms of a series of novel conceptualizations, thereby adding a valuable insight to existing studies in this under-researched field of enquiry (including, Goode and Greatbatch, 2005; Needham, 2006; Clarke et al., 2007) concerned to explore the customer paradigm in public services contexts.

The thesis offers an empirical mirror in which to examine the well-established critique of customer-focused service delivery and against which to judge how, if at all, such concerns are being realized on the ground. Regarding concerns about the diminution of a bureaucratic ethos (Bellamy and Taylor 1998; Haque, 2001; Fountain, 2001; du Gay, 2000, 2004; O'Toole, 2006; Lyons et al., 2006; Barberis, 2012), the research has found significant evidence of a broad antipathy towards the language of the bureau and certain of the ideals traditionally associated with bureaucratic organization. Much existing research in this area has a central government focus; my findings add a local authority dimension. Thinking of related concerns about the lack of accountability, both hierarchically and to elected representatives, implied by changes, the research data do suggest a sense in which accountability (for both council management and officers), rhetorically at least, was primarily to customers and to customer service targets. Further, the use of personal discretion to meet customer needs is being actively promoted; something that certain back office specialists are concerned about. At the same time, given the focus on CRM technologies, the research found that the use of standardised scripts to support enquiries, suggests there is scope for curtailing officer discretion (something which, ironically, is simultaneously being sought by management). It has also highlighted the (current) limitations of the reach of CRM's public services' customer, where it comes up against legitimate 'resistance'. This has been articulated in terms of the curbing function of an 'expertise' narrative, albeit one that appears to co-exist with a customer-focus narrative. These findings may allay certain concerns about the potential for a customer service culture to deepen service inequality (Fountain, 2001).

The thesis also responds to calls for more empirical research related to how the customer is conceptualised by those engaged in service work (Rosenthal et al., 2001; Korczynski, 2001, 2005, 2013; Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Gabriel and Lang, 2006).
In addition to finding evidence of the customer being invoked unproblematically in a public service delivery context, the analysis confirms and develops existing contributions in this debate by locating the customer within a series of paradoxes. While these and the other empirical contributions set out here are of most relevance to public service delivery settings, they represent valuable insights for service settings more broadly, especially those characterised by occasions of customer-focused organizational change.

As well as descriptive utility, I argue that the thesis holds explanatory value of relevance to a number of theoretical debates. First, this relates to the analysis of techno-organizational change. The implications of arguments connected with the shaping force of customer-centrism are of value, not in 'predicting outcomes', but in informing the analysis of comparable service settings, both in public sector and other service contexts, particularly those where customer technologies are key to change efforts. In doing so, the approach taken here represents a consolidation of those perspectives on the implementation of organizational technologies which emphasise the social dimensions of change processes.

The study utilises and extends our understanding of the heterogeneous operation of ordering narratives in organizational settings and public service settings specifically, applying the analysis to a novel local government setting to explain the 'achievement' of customer-focussed local e-government. Hence, by way of developing existing analyses of e-government, the implication is that the deployment of e-government technologies involves concomitant processes of ordering and 'performance' at the levels of organizational structure, process, and culture. More than this, the explanatory framework utilised here indicates that the deployment of CRM technologies has implications not only for the shaping of technology 'user' groups but also for the 'customer' of those technology users. That is, these technologies, at the heart of a multi-level change process, imply the de-scripting and re-scripting of subjectivities.

These insights are also of value to those concerned with the public policy dimension of customer-centric public service delivery (Needham, 2006; Clarke et al., 2007) Such studies often do not take account of the mundane organizational processes and mechanisms which represent a key dimension of the enactment of change in this area. This thesis argues that

these mundane processes matter, when conceptualised as the everyday human and non-human 'performers' that serve to stabilise ordering narratives.
In this, the research develops existing explanations of the naturalization of the public services' customer/consumer. Simultaneously, it provides a theoretical basis from which to explain why alternative descriptors (e.g. citizen) may be less visible: because this character is less *familiar*; more difficult to articulate; (organizationally) *homeless*; deficient in cultural *resources* (i.e. lacking professional qualifications, organizational specialists, or training programme); and, above all, is not inscribed in existing technological solutions.

Finally, my thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the above-mentioned debates relating to customer metaphors. My analysis confirms the conceptual potential of certain existing metaphors to explain the potency and polyvalency of the customer in organizational settings. At the same time, it extends these contributions through the development of a set of customer paradoxes with specific relevance to the further study of public services delivery settings but with wider resonance for other service settings. By paying specific attention to technologies of the customer, I argue that this character can act as a (convenient and appealing) *ally* to change-makers; a *universally appropriate* signifier that knits together service domains; and a *seductive* and easily inhabitable role for service users. At the same time, my analysis reveals how the same character can be seen, simultaneously, as *traitorous*, inadequately expressive, and as *limiting*, from the perspective of the same range of constituents. Further research could usefully develop/'test' such paradoxes.

Having made these claims for explanatory value, it is worth recalling certain caveats relevant to this kind of analysis advanced by John Law. He argues that narrative analyses can appear somewhat reductive, given that "…there is much to do with organisation in the [research setting] and its management that cannot be reduced to, or interpreted, in terms of [the identified]…narratives" (1994: 258) Further, Law urges humility on the part of the researcher in stating that those who claim to describe organisation from the outside "…are no more able to offer a single and coherent account of the way in which it orders itself than those, such as the managers, who are performed within it" (1994: 259) To tell a story such as that told in this thesis, is, Law argues, "…also a way *not* to tell other stories." (emphasis in original. 1994:250)

I turn briefly to aspects of the research that may limit its value and reach. The main limitation relates to the level of organizational access I was able to achieve. I had envisaged gaining

greater access to senior management voices within the council to provide more data on the higher level discursive framing of service users and the place of customer service among the council's priorities. In addition, carrying out more observational activities than I achieved (both in terms of strategic meetings and frontline 'shadowing' of generic officers) would have added robustness to the analytical claims. Finally, while it was not part of the research design, the opportunity to generate data directly from the service user side of the relationship would have offered an extremely valuable data set with which to evaluate the claims I make for the constitution of the 'provider-user' relationship.

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