

Risks

Exploiting recent technological innovation always carries a risk of a 'digital divide', excluding those without access to that particular technology. Sceptics have questioned the value of technology to an inclusive democracy, and whether new technologies widen access or simply normalise and enhance the access of those that already participate.⁶³ One drawback of IPAB was its restriction to a relatively narrow, albeit significant, demographic, an online survey revealing that that nearly all portal visitors were between the ages of 18 and 40, with either a graduate or post graduate degree.⁶⁴ In the UK, the principal risk is that older people, unfamiliar with online or App technology, lack the same access to this reporting mechanism, with 2011 ONS data showing that 5.7 million people aged over 65 had never used the Internet.⁶⁵

Implementation of this proposal will therefore focus on minimising this risk. The IVRS, an automated telephone dialogue system, and the opportunity to arrange in-person appointments, will ensure that the ability to use online and App technology is not a pre-requisite for reporting corruption. A further key strategy is to publicise the service through a variety of media. The use of face-to-face marketing techniques as well as leaflets and posters will extend this scheme's reach to different groups of people. In addition, older people's rapidly increasing familiarity with online technology will further mitigate if not remove this risk, with an August 2011 study finding that 1.3 million over 65 year olds had gone online for the first time since 2009.⁶⁶ Permanent and long-term exclusion of the elderly is not an insurmountable risk, and current trends suggest that this risk will only decrease as time goes on.

As a related risk, the use of a web portal and App might also discourage users lacking the ability to articulate what they have witnessed in written form. In England, the International Survey of Adult Skills in 2012 found that 16 percent of adults achieved Level or 1 or below in a literacy proficiency test, showing a limited ability to both interpret and produce written text and suggesting that many adults would not feel comfortable describing their experiences in a form on a web portal.⁶⁷ To address this problem, callers through the IVRS would have the opportunity to arrange an appointment with a Home Office employee responsible for raising public awareness of fraud at one of a small number of regional centres. This would limit the expenditure on extra staff while ensuring that every citizen's claim is given the attention it deserves.

⁶³ Sonia Bussu, *On technology and democracy* (July 2014), accessed 26/02/15, <http://www.involve.org.uk/blog/2014/07/09/on-technology-and-democracy/>.

⁶⁴ OneWorld Foundation India, *ICT Facilitated Access to Information Innovations*, p 138.

⁶⁵ Cyan Distribution, *Surfers increase in age and numbers* (December 2011), accessed 21/02/15, <http://www.cyandistribution.com/blog/internet-users-age-and-numbers-increasing/>.

⁶⁶ Race Online 2012, *Getting On: A Manifesto for Older People in a Networked Nation* (August 2011), p 4, accessed 21/02/15, http://www.go-on.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Getting_ON_August_2011.pdf.

⁶⁷ Department for Business Innovation & Skills, *The International Survey of Adult Skills 2012: Adult literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills in England* (October 2013), p 57, accessed 25/03/15, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/246534/bis-13-1221-international-survey-of-adult-skills-2012.pdf.

Another serious risk is that users will make inaccurate or deliberately false claims, unfairly damaging an individual or organisation's reputation. This is the main difficulty of applying innovations like IPAB to the UK context: whereas IPAB generally examines clear-cut occurrences of corruption, such as an enrolment officer asking for a bribe, corruption in the UK is rarely as obvious. As a result, the danger exists not that individuals - whether misinformed or acting maliciously to damage personal or political rivals - will table false claims. The difficulty of proving or disproving these claims one way or the other could allow such false claims to wreak serious political damage, even if unproven, if they enter the public domain.

Any effort to minimise the risk of false claims must not come at the expense of citizen confidence that the service will take their claims seriously. Removing user anonymity and so making users responsible for their claims is not an option for countering false or inaccurate claims; the aforementioned Public Concern at Work (PCaW) research shows that legitimate whistle-blowers making accurate claims would have good reason to fear reprisal if identified.⁶⁸ Instead, to prevent claims from entering the public domain before they are proven or disproven, there would need to be clearly defined procedures for restricting access to the specific details of corruption claims. Only the specialist NCA investigating unit and Home Office employees responsible for maintaining the service should have access to these details until evidence is passed on to local police forces to commence prosecution proceedings. To allow the Home Office to map and present perceptions of corruption in infographic form, the data would be anonymised and stripped of certain identifying details, such as the individuals and departments implicated.

⁶⁸ Transparency International, *Corruption in UK Local Government*, 59.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed the implementation of an online service as a citizens' reporting mechanism and information hub as an integral part of any future strategy to tackle corruption in UK local government. This proposal possesses the key advantages, firstly, that it will provide a central bank of corruption information that will help to inform not just the law enforcement response but also anti-corruption policy generally; and secondly, that it will strengthen links between local government and the communities it serves, promoting greater community engagement and oversight of responsible officers. Finally, it has addressed the risks of a 'digital divide' and the abuse of the system to make false or inaccurate claims, suggesting effective mitigation strategies and highlighting the need for considered, committed implementation.

2015 promises to be a defining year in determining a coherent and wide-ranging government policy on corruption. The Anti-Corruption Plan published in December 2014 finally recognised the need for a coordinated policy response, based upon, firstly, improving knowledge of the nature of the threat, secondly, increasing protection against corruption and strengthening the institutions of government, and thirdly bolstering the law enforcement response.⁶⁹ The precise shape of these policies is still to be decided, in part through a forum with academics and civil society groups to outline what data should inform this effort in June.⁷⁰ There are signs that the government is increasingly open to incorporating new ideas and innovation into its approach, especially ideas which envisage the use of digital technology to build accessible, user-oriented, and cost-effective online services.⁷¹ An online service for reporting and learning about corruption is an innovative, potentially very effective idea that is worth developing and pursuing further.

⁶⁹ HM Government, *UK Anti-Corruption Plan*, 8.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 11.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 13.

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