

Shared New World

Cheap, agile and collaborative: it might be wise – and politically astute – for councils to heed the new Government Digital Service's operational model in the year ahead. Mike Cross reports from Socitm's annual conference in Birmingham.



Mike Bracken, GDS, addresses conference. © Socitm

Socitm chose an interesting day to open its 2011 national conference in Birmingham. November 30 was the public sector's 'day of action' against the government's pension reforms, but it was business as usual at the NEC Hilton.

I don't know if the decision to ignore the political issue of the day was deliberately taken, but it was surely the right one if Socitm wants to position itself as a credible partner in the coalition's agenda for localism, and 'digital by default' public services - not to mention the Big Society.

The opening plenary session heard a call for another essential first step to being taken seriously: stop behaving like victims. In a provocative speech, Martin Reeves, chief executive of Coventry City Council, told delegates that innovation doesn't happen around a boardroom table, so there is no point in fretting about whether they have a place there. Indeed such a fixation can be counter-productive. "I still hear far too much whingeing about where IT might or might not sit in the organisation," he said.

While IT is fundamental to public service transformation, Reeves accused the IT community of not doing enough to sell itself, while at the same time perpetuating "myths" such as that IT-based change is cheap. He urged managers to engage with politicians, to ensure that they understand the full implications.

Of course this presupposes that politicians are willing to engage with IT managers, however innovation-minded. One such individual who does enjoy access to the corridors of power is Mike Bracken, head of the new (and so far, scandal-free) Government Digital Service.

Predictably, Bracken packed the hall for one of his first public speeches since taking up the post. And his own unconventional background (mySociety and the private sector) ensured he had a warmer welcome than might have been expected when he rebuked local government for its tribalism. Naming no

names or projects, he said that e-government efforts in the past have been blighted by rivalry between local and central government. "That parlour game completely ignores user needs. We've got to get our act together, we've got to collaborate more."

Specifically, he invited local government to join an effort to develop techniques for measuring the usability of online transactions. Bracken rebuked previous e-government projects for neglecting the 'user journey', which will be at the heart of his effort to create 'digital by default' public services.

Tactfully, he picked a villain from a central government agency, the DVLA car registration transaction. This, he said, lands successful users of the service on a page asking: "Do you want to register a vehicle?" – exactly the process they have just completed. At the exact moment when users are the most satisfied they will ever be with online government, this clodhopping design represents a missed opportunity to invite them to try another e-government service, he said. How this will happen in practice remains to be seen, however – Bracken was careful to rule out Amazon-style prompts based on collaborative filtering.

Designing government transactions around users rather than departments or administrative tiers will require going back to basic principles, Bracken said. One problem faced by government – in contrast to the private sector – is the lack of data on the way individuals use services. "Unless we have a baseline for services then it's going to be hard to map user journeys," he said. For example, "About the most important metric we can capture is how often does the user fail to transact; we don't even ask that question."

Bracken also set out an ambitious work programme for the Government Digital Service, which formally came into being on 8 December. Its central task is the creation of a single web domain for government websites, with a single look and feel for users.

He emphasised the team's use of cheap and 'agile' methods, citing the rapid development of the e-petitions service. This was built by five people in one room in four weeks, he said, with the web hosting paid for with a credit card. It fell over on the first day, he said, but "we kept on developing". The entire project cost less time and money than preparing the average traditional procurement tender, he said.

The agile approach would be used in bigger and more critical programmes, he said – including work on identity assurance. "We don't want to be starting with the biggest and most important services," he said. "We'll probably start with something high volume but low value."

The applause, and constructive questioning, suggested that Bracken could be pushing at an open door. So long as he remembers that, when it comes to designing citizen-facing public services, the Cabinet Office's track record is decidedly patchy compared with the best of local governments.

Not to mention the third sector. For me one of the most memorable presentations of Socitm 11 was from a completely unexpected source, the Salvation Army. Martyn Scott, the organisation's CIO, added a new ingredient to the Army's historic recipe of "Soup, soap and salvation": digital inclusion. While the Salvation Army's clients "may not be able to or want to use social networks like Facebook or Bebo", Scott said the time would come when every bedroom in Salvation Army homes would have internet access. Most importantly, 'e-citizen' skills thus instilled would accompany the client in their return to normal life. He asked for support to help create a safe online community to make it happen. The community "would have to be robust, simple, easy to manage and secure," he said.

While Socitm members already have full inboxes for the year ahead, it would be nice for Socitm 12 to hear that something concrete is happening with this very Big Society proposition. It would be politically astute, too.