

Forecast: Cloudy

The clouds are gathering over Westminster, but will G-Cloud arrive in time or will a public utility win out?



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The future is cloudy in more ways than one. Socitm is warning that G-cloud may never deliver in the timescales needed in which to make savings and that the sector needs to look towards the public cloud.

Conversely, government CIO, John Suffolk, is warning that the public cloud will never be a safe place for citizen data.

Indeed, the security risks of cloud computing concern many. No doubt technology will soon solve these risks, but in the meantime Suffolk is right to state that citizen data should always be kept on a 'secure' G-cloud.

But Socitm is also right to voice concerns over the achievability of a secure and workable G-cloud within the timescales dictated by unremitting pressure on the public sector budgets.

Indeed, work has yet to begin on this panacea for cheap, efficient, secure 'technology as a utility'.

"It will be horses for courses," says Suffolk. Public cloud could well be used for non citizen data – "if there are benefits, why wouldn't you?" he asks. Meanwhile, he assured attendees at the launch of Socitm's IT Trends 09/10 report on 21 Jan that "work is progressing as quickly as it can" on G-cloud. A first report on the future of G-cloud is due this month.

In the meantime, Suffolk reiterates that

"Cash is King" and that cloud technology offers the opportunity to radically cut the public sector's costly technology infrastructure. It offers, he says, the opportunity to turn technology into a utility: "It cannot be sustainable that we have tens and hundreds of systems and data centres" across the public sector.

Slashing this number to "nine to twelve" says Suffolk would deliver up to £900m savings over five years with a further £300m every year thereafter. However, in reality, much depends on where organisations are in their contract life cycle.

There is much common sense in the idea of standardising, opening up, sharing and joint procurement when it comes to technology.

For example, the new Public Sector Network is being trumpeted as another potential £500m a year saving from the standardisation of communications technology - and its purchasing - across the sector.

And shared services? Well, they are inevitable over the next two to three years, agree both Suffolk and Socitm. After all, the biggest cost in local government is people. "And you need to deal with that," said Suffolk. "The party is over." The days of everyone doing their own thing are gone.

With G-cloud, sharing becomes such a cost saving inevitability that it will be hard for the public sector to dig its collective heels in any longer.

Indeed, the G-cloud is burdened with so many promises – to slash infrastructure costs, turn technology into a utility, enable re-use of government funded developments via the 'government app store' and even open up the market to open source and SMEs that currently struggle to break in to the sector.

There is an awful lot riding on this promised cloud – indeed a whole ICT strategy. Let's just hope that February's report reveals a foundation substantial enough to carry this burden.

Meanwhile, as Suffolk says, "2010 is a year of two halves." Much depends on the outcome of the looming election and who is in power to make decisions – future strategy, policy and, more closer to home, people's jobs.

The much vaunted (leaked and then crowd-sourced) new government IT strategy has finally seen the light of day, promising clouds, shared services, open source and a government applications store.

The test of the strategy, of course, will be its flexibility to accommodate an uncertain, but no doubt cloudy, future.

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the end of last year, 'Connecting the Public Sector'.

Encouragingly for the citizen, respondents say that ICT services are more secure than ever, and reported losses from ICT failures have fallen for the second year in a row. The main threat perceived today is that from within the organisation

Reducing carbon footprint is still a priority. However the focus within this green endeavour has now moved to realising the promised cost savings from virtualisation and the lower support staff requirements from standardisation of the desktop estate. 'Going green' has become a cost saving affair.

It is indeed 'time for a radical rethink about how technology can be exploited for the public's benefit'. As Serle says, "Transformation will only come about through bold decisions and significant investment, with leadership from the top of our organisations."

However, whilst suppliers and the converted preach technology's potential to transform services – and radically reduce costs along the way – the chief executives and leaders are yet to endorse and engage in this world view.

The root problem here is that ICT has never made it to 'the top table'. It has never managed to engage with those steering the ship through this

unchartered territory. Why? This has been a long stated aim of Socitm – a 2006 report urged members to step up to the plate as the CIO, 'an agent for transformation'.

It is time for technology to get over itself and break out of the ghetto - to put the potential into language that is recognised by the rest of the organisation. Time to engage internally.

Make no mistake, tough times are ahead. Frontline organisations are stretched to breaking point. Someone, please, walk up to that top table before it is too late.

www.socitm.net
www.gartner.com

www.ukauthority.com/connecting