

# Net Wars

*In the run up to a general election Tim Hampson reports a sharpening of knives on the battleground of public sector IT.*

Shadow minister Welwyn & Hatfield MP, Grant Shapps, is worried that government employees are spending too much time posting entries on Facebook and selling unwanted Christmas gifts on eBay.

Indeed he is so worried that he has placed a series of questions asking ministers which sites are banned from use by civil servants.

In reply, secretary of state for health, Phil Hope, made clear that his staff would not be found searching their family trees or sharing photos on social websites while at work. He said that his department's IT policy makes it clear the types of websites that are deemed unacceptable such as online gambling, operating a personal or

freelance business, selling items on internet auction sites, or participating in political activities.

And of course sex was on the proscribed list. But the minister didn't elaborate what would happen if a member of staff keyed 'sex' into the NHS Direct site.

Meanwhile the increasingly active Shapps also wanted to know how much the Audit Commission had spent on its Oneplace website.

The site, which brings together reports on health, education, police and the justice system on a local basis, cost the Audit Commission a whopping £484,000.

In a parliamentary written answer, the commission's chief executive, Steve Bundred, said that costs included £220,000



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for design and consultation with members of the public to ensure the website meets their needs. The rest of the costs were not explained.

The Tories have been quick to seize on this. They are no fans of the website, which promotes Comprehensive Area Assessments - if elected the Tories have said that one of their first acts will be to hit the delete button and transfer the site into the recycling box.

Shadow local government spokesman, Bob Neill, said that the CAA was costly, centralist and disconnected between what's important on the ground.

Many local authorities have shown their lack of enthusiasm for the CAA, and are certainly not impressed that the site has had more than 100,000 hits in the two months since it opened. Several authorities are just refusing to play ball with the Audit Commission and have declined to send the watchdog the information asked for.

## E-borders

Gordon Brown has become a huge fan of e-borders. No doubt he would probably like to find a way of using them to exclude his political opponents from the country.

In a statement to the House of Commons, he pledged that all major ports and airports would be covered by the Home Office's e-borders scheme by the end of this year.

Under the programme, passengers must provide detailed personal information when buying their tickets so they can be checked against watch lists before travelling.

Mr Brown said that the e-borders system was "a vital component of our strategy to strengthen and modernise the UK's border controls" and claimed it had already achieved significant successes enabling nearly 5,000 arrests for crimes including murder, rape and assault.

He said that by the end of the year the £1.2bn system would be able to check all passengers travelling from other countries to all major airports and ports in the UK against a watch list 24 hours prior to travel: "This will give a better picture than ever of people coming into and out of our country."

But, the ball is not in Mr Brown's court. It has been handed over to his home secretary, Alan Johnson, who now has the unenviable job of persuading European ministers on the benefits of sharing data with the UK government.

## Policing in the age of technology

Debates on the police are always welcomed by the commons. For Members of Parliament they are a fertile opportunity for their local papers to take an interest in what they are saying, even better the story might even be picked up by the national media.

And with the general election looming MPs hoping to stay in parliament are certainly keen to court publicity with their electorates.

The second reading of the Crime & Disorder Bill, presented Keith Vaz, chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee - a man who is no stranger to generating publicity, an opportunity to wag a finger at home secretary, Alan Johnson.

The Labour MP for Leicester East wants the government to speed up the introduction of technology in an effort to reduce police bureaucracy. "There is a need to invest in new technology and give every police officer a hand-held computer, whether that be a BlackBerry, a blueberry, an iPod or whatever," he said.

"I am 53 and I do not know what the technology is; I just know whether it works when I switch it on and I can communicate. We should give the police what they need so they do not have to run back and take statements, but can take them from witnesses at the scene.

"We should save time and reduce bureaucracy by investing in technology," said Vaz.

And banging the drum loudly he urged the home secretary to "get on with it".

However, Mr Johnson declined to march to Mr Vaz's beat. He claimed instead that the government had made "huge efforts" to cut police bureaucracy.

"Thirty-six data collection requirements have been either removed or significantly reduced. Scrapping activity-based costing alone has saved around 260,000 hours of police time. The foot-long stop-and-account form has gone, saving another 690,000 hours. The Bill will advance that agenda by significantly reducing the length of the stop-and-search form," he said.

Unperturbed Vaz pressed Johnson on why best practice from Staffordshire Police's experience of cutting bureaucracy had not been shared with more police forces. He added that legislation is not required for this best practice to be adopted.

In his reply, Johnson admitted that Staffordshire was a good example, but tellingly he said that it can sometimes take a very long time to share best practice between the 43 different police forces.

A long time? The relationship between the Home Office and the country's police forces is always uneasy and many a home secretary has struggled with how to get police forces to share anything.

For 43 different forces also read - 43 different IT strategies, 43 different ways of recording information and 43 different computers systems.