

What Future a Strategy?

Michael Cross ponders the outlook for government IT strategy for the second half of the year.

Against expectations, it's been a bumper year for government IT strategy announcements. From official quarters, we had the Digital Britain plan, with its ambitions for universal broadband. We have a new refreshed Transformational Government strategy, 'Smarter, cheaper, greener'. More importantly, perhaps, we had the 'smarter government' strategy 'Putting the Frontline First', which pulled together many interesting ideas - and put the prime minister's stamp on the result.

The question now is what elements of these strategies will still be in place in six months' time, assuming (as nearly everyone does) that there will be a change of government. History offers a worrying precedent - the fate of the Government Direct strategy announced in the last six months of John Major's government. Although only a faltering and little noticed step towards e-government, it proposed several good ideas. Yet the supposedly modernising Blair government threw it out with the bathwater, and took nearly two years to put the e-enablement of public services on the agenda.

Will history repeat itself? Certainly there will be temptations to announce a clean sweep of the past year's strategic announcements. Some underlying themes, however, are likely to survive.

One candidate for an early chop looks likely to be the Digital Britain levy of 50p a month on fixed lines to pay for next-generation broadband. The latest voice in a mounting chorus of opposition is the Conservative-leaning think-tank, Policy Exchange. Its report 'Changing the Channel' condemns the levy as an 'unfair tax', stating that the case for investing in next generation broadband 'seems to be based on consumer uses not yet proven' and 'social inclusion in as yet unproven uses'. If the case can be proven, Policy Exchange says, next generation networks should be funded via general taxation, as wider social benefits such as more cost effective public services are likely to turn up in greater GDP and/or reduced government spending in the future.

Which leads us to the new ICT strategy, 'Smarter, cheaper, greener'. Although an incoming Tory government would no doubt bin the title and the first few pages as symbols of Labour over-centralisation,

many of the underlying themes will survive. Not least because of their cost-cutting potential.

Top of the list is a move to shared services based on cloud computing, though the survival of CIO John Suffolk's vision of a 'Government Cloud' is very much open for debate.

The Tories have already committed themselves to another of the strategy's big ideas, a stronger commitment to open source, and appear to believe that this alone will deliver free applications that will be shareable across the public sector.

As a result, the Cabinet Office sponsored 'government app store' could face the axe.

Also under scrutiny will be the strategy's plans for ruthless centralisation to put into effect the Varney review and Operational Efficiency Programme targets for savings. While the idea of moving all government IT activities to '10-12 highly resilient strategic data centres' may make economic sense in the long term, its up-front costs will be a natural candidate for swingeing cuts.

Plans for 80% of central government desktops to be procured through 'a shared utility service with increasing levels of adoption by the wider public sector, including local government' may clash with wider Tory plans for more local autonomy.

One target in the strategy that may find its way into the Conservative election manifesto is the commitment to more transparency in IT project management. The target that by 2020 'we will follow the lead of the Office of Management and Budget and public sector CIO community in the USA by publicising the objectives and progress of our major projects, including naming the leaders and the results of all external assurance reviews' is crying out to be brought forward, from the safety of opposition.

By contrast, we can expect a Conservative government to distance itself dramatically from the more overtly political line of the smarter government strategy. The Tories are lukewarm at best about the 'Tell us Once' service, which after a decade of dithering finally received the go ahead in the strategy. Likewise, from opposition there seems



little enthusiasm for the strategy's aims to move transactions such as student loans online 'as rapidly as possible'.

Of course there are places where smarter government very much chimes with Tory policy. Ideas like more freedoms for local authorities, reducing the number of national indicators for local areas and above all 'stepping back from the day-to-day management of public services' could have come straight from Conservative central office.

However, political pundits have long observed that it is easier to call for local freedoms when you're in opposition than when you are in government. It's not impossible that a new administration, for all its decentralising, 'small is beautiful' and open source rhetoric, may see some virtue in a strong central IT directorate. For the reasons, look at the Institute for Government's 'Shaping Up' report on the future of Whitehall. The institute says that in tackling the combined challenges of eliminating departmental silos and cutting government spending 'the centre could play a crucial facilitating and coordinating role'.

Although otherwise highly critical of the Cabinet Office, the report points out that the department 'is often best placed to tackle issues where the current use of IT inhibits government effectiveness: for example, to standardise the patchwork of systems that have grown up across central government, operating to different standards and frequently unable to talk to each other'.

The institute even has a good word to say for the CIO Council, which it says 'has succeeded in sharing best practices across government and developing strategy'. However difficulties arise because the council has no capacity or authority to enforce its decisions - while the report calls for a strong central presence overseeing and coordinating the use of IT in government, enforced with intervention 'when necessary' on the front line.

Whatever promises appear in the manifestos, it is almost certain that a new government will eventually come around to the need for a strong central IT strategy - perhaps more prescriptive than those of recent years.