

# Empowering the e-Union

Europe's e-government ministers have set out their next five-year plan for e-government. Michael Cross reports from Malmo.

English local government provided two of the three UK finalists at this year's European e-government awards, announced at a ministerial meeting in Malmo, Sweden, in November. The projects were Kent TV, the web TV channel led by Kent County Council, and Liverpool Direct, the joint venture multi-channel service organisation set up by Liverpool City Council. (The third was the Scottish Executive's e-procurement project.)

Both English projects chimed very much with the emphasis on empowerment set by the next e-Europe action plan. However they were beaten to the prize by the Danish municipality of Gentofte, which has developed a one-stop shop to online services provided by national and regional agencies as well as private organisations.

That is a vision of future e-government likely to be emphasised heavily in the next European e-government action plan, which will be drawn up by the European Commission to implement the philosophies of a ministerial declaration signed at the Malmo meeting.

Unveiling the declaration, Sweden's e-government minister Mats Odell (his formal title is minister for local government and financial markets at the Finance Ministry) stressed that a central aim of the plan is to underpin the mobility of individuals and businesses across the EU. "The aim is to make it as easy to study in London, retire in Italy and work in Sweden as it would be to do all three in one country," he said.

However, no matter how desirable that lifestyle, the vision may be difficult to sell in the highly Euro-sceptic atmosphere of UK politics. Significantly, the UK's representative at the meeting, Cabinet Office minister, Angela Smith, stressed the extent to which the declaration "reflects" British ideas.

Up to a point, this is true: the 'power of information' idea of encouraging the re-use of public sector information is very much a UK idea. But, although ministers are loath to admit it, Britain's e-government programme has tended to follow, rather than lead, the EU's 'information society' agenda. Ever since the e-Europe plan of 2000 – which first set the 2005 target for e-enabling public services – UK officials have been fighting guerrilla actions to ensure that pan European e-government plans are based on ideas that their

ministers (and the tabloid press) will stomach. Hence the i2010 action plan's emphasis on digital inclusion – it was inserted at the 2005 Manchester ministerial summit by a UK Cabinet Office desperate to deflect attention from ideas about pan-European identity cards.

However an official evaluation of the i2010 action plan, released without fanfare at Malmo, concedes that the approach to digital inclusion was flawed. The plan was that member states would identify flagship e-government initiatives and exchange information on them. In reality, "The identified flagships have been somewhat disappointing, probably because of the uncertain quality of many of them, who selected them, why and how, even though they have had some awareness raising value. This approach should not be the priority for the future."

Significantly, digital inclusion makes only a fleeting appearance in the Malmo declaration. The pledge is that: "We will develop inclusive services that will help to bring down barriers experienced by digitally or socially excluded groups."

However there is no indication of how such barriers might be tackled, or targets for doing so.

The Malmo declaration is deliberately pitched at a higher level than its predecessors, eschewing targets in favour of general directions of travel.

The declaration sets out four 'policy priorities' for 2010-15. These are:

- Empowering citizens through services designed around users' needs and developed with third parties. This aspiration includes access to public information and freedom to re-use it, more transparency and 'effective means for involvement of stakeholders in the policy process'.
- Mobility enabled by 'seamless e-government services' for setting up a business and living, working and retiring anywhere in the EU. The stated target is to create 'noticeable and positive change' in the ease with which a business can be set up and run, and 'noticeable and positive change' in the ease of moving to another member state to study, work and retire.
- More efficient and effective administration, reducing administrative burdens and carbon emissions.



Cabinet Office minister, Angela Smith (right), with Liverpool Direct in Malmo.

- Underpinning these priorities by putting in place 'appropriate key enablers' and 'legal and technical preconditions'. These include electronic identities and electronic signatures as well as a 'joint infrastructure' based on interoperability. Here there is strong support for the adoption of 'open specifications' but less for open source, which the declaration merely suggests 'could be promoted for use in e-government projects'.

Technically, it is only a statement of intent and an invitation for the European Commission to create a new action plan. However officials are already at work turning these pledges in to specific points for action.

Will anyone take any notice? Up to now, the record of pan-European e-government has been patchy. The i2010 progress report reveals plenty of 'challenges'.

Specific targets for e-enabling 'high impact' services are likely to be missed, the evaluation says. Particularly embarrassingly, the low-hanging fruit of public e-procurement remains out of reach. Despite 'considerable progress... it is not likely that all countries will have reached the 100% online availability and 50% usage targets by 2010,' the report states. As for identifying Pan-European high impact services, only 'a minority of countries' have bothered; most national and regional administrations have other priorities.

On the 2010 plan's proposals for efficiency and effectiveness, the report finds that evidence for actual achievements is 'mostly anecdotal' - for example the Austrian government's 38% savings from digital archiving.

The review recommends that the next plan should concentrate on the demand side of the e-government equation. This will involve 'more open, engaging and porous forms of governance which permit a plurality of stakeholders, intermediaries and channels in the service value chain'.

Such ideas figure strongly in the Malmo declaration, which promises to 'strengthen transparency of administrative processes' and 'involve stakeholders in public policy processes'. Such sentiments are easy to insert in a ministerial declaration but difficult to translate into specific measures, let alone those with measurable outcomes. The 2015 action plan, when it appears, should make interesting reading for all, not just for e-government wonks.