

Future Prospects

Technology has much to offer the council of the future but policy from the centre will determine whether or not that potential delivers, says Michael Cross, reporting from Socitm 09.

Edinburgh in October can be bracing – but at least two workshops at this year's Socitm conference were literal, as well as metaphorical, hot-houses. Sessions on social media and the council of the future both drew more-than capacity audiences.

The main certainty about the council of the future is that, given the looming pressures of the next spending round (not to mention the next government) it will be with us very soon. Doug Maclean, manager of Socitm Consulting, warned that managers would be living with cuts in budgets not on the mildly belt-tightening Gershon efficiency scale of 3%-5% but "twenty to thirty percent - or even more".

In response, councils will become much more virtual organisations, having rid themselves of expensive and constraining offices and grand buildings.

There cannot have been anyone in the room, whatever the colour of their ruling group, who had not already considered what that might mean.

Maclean assured the workshop that he had the recipe for making such a transformation. It obviously includes cutting transaction costs by 90% by boosting the use of e-channels (and realising the benefits - for example by throwing out redundant paper rather than paying to store it). But the real savings he said would come from cutting the costs of central offices and of key services.

And there's no point in being half-hearted, he said. "You can't pick and choose, you have to do the whole picture."

Socitm Consulting was not the only organisation promoting wholesale transformation. IBM, meanwhile, presented a vision of a 'smart' council in which the commoditisation of sensors makes it affordable to measure the condition of everything. 'Through sensors embedded in cars, appliances, roads, pipelines, even medicine and livestock, we can know where they are, their condition and even see what they are seeing.'

That possibility isn't new – the 2009 touch is to connect the electronic municipal panopticon with its citizens through social networking techniques. "Streetlamp HB43 is now following you on Twitter," perhaps?

But first, more basic uses of social networking need to be embedded in local government.

The feeling from another packed workshop was there is still some way to go. The session heard that, if the council of the future is a Twitterer and Facebooker, about one in 10 local authorities is already there. That is the percentage allowing staff unrestricted access to social networks, according to a preview of Socitm research to be published shortly. However, attendees suggested that any survey based on a self-selecting sample may be biased towards social media enthusiasts.

The society's Vicky Sargent told a workshop entitled 'Social media - are ICT managers blocking modern ways of working?' that 49% of councils block access entirely. And yes, ICT managers are often to blame. Leading concerns include security, time-wasting and reputational risk, the survey will show. Not to mention the sheer strain on the network, delegates added.

The conference's plenary speakers certainly reflected the new enthusiasm for Web 2.0. Opening the event, Geoff Mulgan called on the public sector to make a break from "over-engineered and under-delivered" projects by exploring Google and Wiki-type initiatives.

David Cameron could not have put it better. The Socitm conference coincided with a refreshing new interest by front-ranking politicians in the power of setting data free. As Socitm was meeting a distinctively Tory local government policy was emerging around the power of free data to encourage experiment – and audit.

As Cameron put it last month: "A necessary counterpart to decentralisation is greater transparency. That's because information is power, so by giving people more information we give them more power. This is true internationally, where our plans for aid transparency will allow poor people in developing countries to see whether what has been promised is being delivered. And it's true back home, where our plans to publish details of all central and local government spending will not only provide a powerful check on waste, they will help open up the provision of state services to small businesses, social enterprises or charities as they see what is being done by the state and how they could do better."

However one significant Conservative-controlled council provided a reality check to the possibilities for local innovation.



Birmingham city's experience of piloting the government's Total Place concept has revealed the need for radical reforms in public funding and governance, Jason Lowther, director of policy and delivery, told a plenary session. He said the city has identified seven barriers to organising services around individual citizens rather than organisations. Top of the list was "short term financial horizons" making it impossible to create a business case for early interventions. "We need to talk to Treasury about paybacks over a ten to fifteen year period," Lowther said.

Every pound Birmingham spends on early intervention in child welfare saves £4 over 15 years, he added, "But three quarters of those savings will accrue to organisations other than the city."

Meanwhile, a "plethora of conflicting performance management regimes is hindering joint working". Lowther described as "a betrayal of trust" the Home Office and Department of Health's retention of specific performance management measures, rather than relying on the local area agreement.

He said that the administration is "very upfront" about reducing the city's £7.5bn annual expenditure. "Unashamedly this is about saving money as well as about improving services."

Cameron and his policy makers might do well to examine Birmingham's experience closely before setting too many new policies in stone. The council of the future may emerge through the dynamics of drastic budget cuts coupled with free data and new technologies. But it will also need some strategic helping hands from the centre.

Local Government IT Excellence Awards 2009

Service Transformation Award - Cheshire West and Chester Council for its Revenues and Benefits Systems Convergence project.

Sustainable ICT Award - Hampshire County Council for the Green IT Action Plan.

Customer Access Award - London Borough of Hackney for its Citizen Index project.

Highly Commended - Flintshire County Council for its Green, Agile and Efficient project.

Highly Commended - Crawley Borough Council for its Streamlined Customer Transactions through Integration and Tracking project.

Graham Williamson Challenge Award IT assistant, Scott Mansfield, from Leeds City Council's web team, won this year's award.