

Now it's time for c-gov

The storms that savaged the country in November add a physical backdrop to the devastation that is Britain's finances.

Climbing out of recession, for the public sector – which must carry the burden of both savage budget cuts whilst picking up the pieces of a society in recession – will take much longer than the commercial world. Indeed, the bankers are already looking forward to Christmas and bonuses.

Right now, in the public sector, the talk is all about cuts. This is no longer e-gov, or t-gov. It is c-government – the government where cuts are king. But don't let the standards drop while you do it mind, or the wrath of the great British public, the media and your political masters will rain down on your heads.

Technology must have a part to play in maintaining service standards and scope whilst operating within reduced resource. After all, is that not what technology promised? Operational efficiency, the paper-less office, more with less?

Somewhere along the line there has been a breakdown in communication – indeed, if there ever was communication.

Technologists have promised, leaders have bought, and rarely is either side completely happy with the result.

Chief executives say that technology people 'don't speak my language'. And truly, there is a duty for IT to engage. But technology people – both inside and outside local government – are still not able to translate the bits and bytes, the widgets and the infrastructures, into plain English that imparts exactly 'what' the technology will 'do' for local government and, crucially, what cultural change is needed to fully deliver these benefits.

It has been notable over the years that Solace draws the chief executives, CIPFA the finance directors and Socitm the heads of IT. And never the three shall mix. Surely there is now a solid case for communication across all three as to how the vision can best be technically implemented within financial constraints – not just within councils but across entire frontline public services. And how culture can be moved forward, en masse, to being performance driven but value led with enthusiastic uptake of the enabling technologies.

Socitm has long urged its members to 'take their place at the top table'. So why has this never happened? To truly help the public sector through the most challenging time of its history, technologists must engage with chief executives and finance directors to outline how, why and where technology can effect change.

Helen Olsen, Editor

Bonfire of bureaucracy

LGA is pointing its finger at central government bureaucracy for wasting public sector money.

Simply by relieving local government from the data burdens of performance indicators and central government reporting, at least £4.5bn could be slashed from the annual public sector bill – without affecting frontline services.

Nicely timed to come out just before the Pre-Budget Report 2009 on 9 December, the LGA has published, 'Delivering more for less: maximising value in the public sector'. The report includes examples of unnecessary activity, identified by councils through their experience of working with Whitehall, which is 'taking serious resources away from frontline resources'.

"Billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being spent on needless bureaucracy. We need a bonfire of red tape so that taxpayers' money can be freed up to protect frontline services," said Margaret Eaton, LGA chair.

"We need to make sure there is no unnecessary bureaucracy and that the vast array of different bodies providing public services do not waste money by duplicating the work others already carry out."

Eaton said that the recession is forcing "everybody who spends taxpayers' money to think about how they can do more with less... Staying the same is not an option."

The report suggests that government make immediate savings of up to £4.5bn a year from removing unnecessary administration and red tape before implementing cuts affecting local services:

- £400m from removing the current performance and reporting data burden;
- £250m from halving costs of regulating local government from the centre, abolishing government offices and reallocating improvement funding to local government;
- £1.5bn from reducing departmental administration costs of seven departments with close links to local authorities by 20%;
- £1bn saving on departmental resource budgets through reducing unnecessary policy activity;
- £900m savings from giving councils greater spending flexibility;
- £430m from unnecessary spending by quangos on administration.

Over the last ten years the number of full time employees working in central government has increased by 21%. Communities and Local Government (CLG) has reported a 10% increase in permanent staff in financial year 2008/9. Quangos have also significantly increased their expenditure – by £24bn to £43bn in 2008.

www.lga.gov.uk

OS data to be set free

From as early as next April the public may have access to Ordnance Survey (OS) data about electoral and local authority boundaries, postcode areas and mid scale mapping for use in digital innovation and to support democratic accountability.

Prime minister, Gordon Brown, made the announcement in response to "the demands for better use and access to data held by government. In this new world, smarter government is not an option but a necessity."

Communities secretary, John Denham, added, "Any public service reforms must be open about what is going on so that those outside it can examine what is happening and to propose alternative ways of doing things if necessary... This can only happen if the necessary information and data about what is currently delivered is easily and readily available."

Minister for Digital Britain, Stephen Timms, who has responsibility for the 'Making Public Data Public' initiative, said that the announcement was "an important step in our public data strategy. About 80 percent of public sector data mentions a place. Making Ordnance Survey data more freely available will encourage more effective exploitation of public data by businesses, individuals and community organisations."

Making public data available also enables people to reuse it both commercially and in social initiatives – apart from generating an estimated billion pounds for the economy the move would open up new tools for citizen engagement and public information.

The move is seen as a victory for the Guardian's three-year Free Our Data campaign to persuade the government to "abandon copyright on essential national data, making it freely available to anyone, while keeping the crucial task of collecting that data in the hands of taxpayer-funded agencies".

Putting people on the map:

Sir Stirling Moss and Alan Hinkes helped Ordnance Survey launch Locatorz, a new mobile phone-based locating service that



allows you to view a person's position to within 10 metres. It uses a mobile phone's GSM connection to transmit its position to the Locatorz server, which plots the information on an OS map and sends it to a secure internet page.

www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk