



Working together to deliver Information Age Government

Speech by Rt Hon Mo Mowlam MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office at the LGA/DeA Information Age Government Conference, 24 November 1999

Check Against Delivery

I am delighted to be in Birmingham this morning to speak to this year's joint LGA/DeA Conference.

You have asked me to speak on the Government's vision for the Information Age. Well, there's a long answer and there's a short answer. Which would you prefer?

Short answer first. Put simply, the world is changing. And if government - local and central - is to do its job effectively, it must adapt and change as well.

The challenge for this government - a government that believes in the value and in the values of public service - is to make sure that the benefits of new technology are shared by the many not just the few.

As Bill Clinton and Tony Blair said at the Third Way Summit earlier this week, it is about government playing its part in helping to bridge the digital divide between the 'information haves' and the 'information have-nots'.

IT is not an end in itself, but a means to providing much more responsive and accessible services, so that in the 21st century Britain will be a better place to live in, work in, and do business with.

Now for the long answer. Relatively new to this job, and relatively new to such concepts as 'a corporate IT strategy for government' or 'an Electronic Public Sector infrastructure', I'm constantly comparing the view of services from the inside with the view people get from the outside - the punter's eye view.

And looking at it that way round, there are a lot of things, which don't make much sense. Getting the simplest thing done - like renewing a licence or getting help for an older relative - can often involve a confusing number of different government agencies.

And the more agencies you have, the more queues to stand in and forms to fill in - and the more people think that public service isn't up to scratch.

Surely we have to see an end to the silly situation where people on benefit have to inform up to six agencies if they move house, or young people have to go to 11 different bits of Government in order to get help or guidance.

Because - surprise, surprise - people do not live their lives according to the departmental boundaries of Whitehall, they shouldn't have to worry about what part of government they are dealing with.

When they come to my surgery up in Redcar on Teesside, my constituents don't draw boundaries around how I can help them, although it is likely that the problem will involve a range of services and agencies.

New technology means we can turn government the right way up - starting with the individual, family or business that need a service rather than with the people who provide it - that's what modernising government is about - putting the user first.

They should have services that are joined together and responsive to their needs. And that's why we're committed to delivering public services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, where there is demand.

As the Modernising Government White Paper set out, we should be able to do a quarter of all central government transactions electronically within the next two years. And by 2008, all transactions could be done that way.

As the Prime Minister has said, Britain must aim to be the best place to do e-commerce in the world.

And last week's Queen's Speech sets out what we're doing to deliver e-commerce, and e-government as well.

The e-commerce Bill will help to make Britain a dynamic, knowledge-based economy and improve our ability to compete in the digital marketplace. This important measure will be accompanied by legislation to:

- address over-complex regulation;
- introduce the latest accounting methods to improve value for money in Whitehall and boost the chances of investment in public infrastructure and services; and
- bring in Freedom of Information, which will give everyone the right of access to information held across the public sector for the first time.

And we will introduce bills to make local government more accountable, innovative and dynamic and to reform our election procedures to introduce rolling electoral registers and to pilot innovations in local election procedures.

These will make dramatic changes to how all of us in government work - whether in Whitehall or in the town hall.

They're the legislative background to the vision we've already set out in the White Papers on Modern Local Government and Modernising Government.

A vision of government working together, removing the barriers between different organisations in government so they can work together to meet our policy objectives and deliver services effectively on the ground.

Working Together - To Deliver Better Services

To deliver this vision central and local government need to work together. They need to listen to, learn from and understand people's perceptions about our public services.

We're already listening together, through a range of tools such as the People's Panel, the Better Government for Older People programme and the Listening to Women initiative and more recently conferences with people from the ethnic minorities which have been very informative.

And we'll continue to listen. The Modernising Government White Paper had five commitments - on how we make policy, on how responsive and how good are public services are, on how to value all those who work in - and believe in - public services; and on how we use IT to deliver better services.

In fact, IT underpins the other four. There's no point using IT for the sake of it. It has to be motivated by a determination to improve policy, services and the job we do.

I believe Information Age Government is at the heart of how together we find new ways to join up policy on the ground.

That is borne out by the Social Exclusion Unit's strategy for Poor Neighbourhoods, which many of you will know is being drawn up for next Spring.

The local government IT community is being widely involved in work on how we can overcome the technical barriers that prevent us managing information and providing co-ordinated services to socially deprived neighbourhoods.

When it comes to using IT to deliver services, of course I'm aware that I'm preaching to the converted. Local government leads the way. To name just a few:

- Bexley have pioneered the "infoshop" system which allows front-line staff to answer complex customer queries.
- Knowsley's Community Information Programme has won international awards for offering local people a wide range of electronic services - from notification of housing repairs to a state-of-the-art "electronic" library service.
- In Lewisham people can now claim income support and housing benefit on an electronic form. Working with Benefits Agency, this has cut the time taken to process a claim from 10 days to a day and a half.
- Newcastle upon Tyne's GOSIP kiosks provide local people with ready access to information about council and other local services, such as advice on benefits and tourist information.
- Cambridge On-line gives anyone living or working in Cambridge direct access to local services, businesses and the voluntary sector.

Inspired by your endeavours, I hope you will agree that central government has not been idle.

Aside from the IT targets I have already mentioned, we have appointed Alex Allan as the E-Envoy. Alex will work with Patricia Hewitt on promoting e-commerce in the UK, and with Ian McCartney on implementing our e-government commitments.

We are working together to make improved and integrated services a reality. Within the next three years, we want people to electronically:

- look for work and be matched to jobs;
- get information and advice about benefits;
- apply for training loans and student support;
- submit tax returns and VAT returns;
- access health care advice through NHS Direct;
- book driving tests;
- apply for regional business grants;
- be paid by government for goods and services;
- and notify different parts of government of details, such as change of address, in one transaction.

In the last Budget, Gordon Brown allocated an extra half a billion pounds to set up new ICT (Information and Communication Technology) learning centres.

Our target is a national network of 1,000 computer learning centres - in schools, colleges, libraries, Internet cafes and drop-in centres on the high street.

In the same way as local libraries have loaned books in the last century, we want computers to be leased in the next. We aim to have 100,000 computers on loan by end of 2001.

This is part of the biggest public education programme ever attempted by a government. There will be one million Individual Learning Accounts to finance computer courses. The University of Industry will provide education direct into the home.

Earlier this month the Department for Education and Employment announced trials to look at how digital TV services could be used to support delivery of the GCSE curriculum.

It is a programme which opens up new opportunities for millions of people - and one which is only possible through technology.

And today I can announce that the Performance & Innovation Unit (PIU) of the Cabinet Office will begin today work on a study which will take a strategic view of which public services could be delivered by electronic means.

Working closely with the e-envoy, the Central IT unit and the Modernising Public Services group in the Cabinet Office, and with local government and other government departments, the PIU will look at how the public and private sectors can work together to deliver services electronically - including internet access through PCs, interactive Digital TV, and even mobile phones and games consoles.

The study will give us a clear view of how we should use technology to give people the first class services they deserve.

If we take these developments, and map out how local government will continue to adapt and improve the services it provides, what will this mean for people in their daily lives?

It will mean computer access to the greatest libraries and museums in the world for every child in every school in every community.

It will mean a new job for the unemployed worker who has the chance to go on an IT course and acquire new skills.

It will mean freedom and opportunity for the housebound to work from home through their personal computer.

Information Age Government is about enabling and empowering people so that they can play their fullest part in our society.

But we all know that central government cannot do this on its own. We need the help and experience of local government in ensuring these services are designed and delivered effectively and efficiently. And that is why we are working together in so many areas.

From initiatives such as Better Government for Older People to the New Deal for the young unemployed, which has already found jobs for 145,000.

From programmes such as NHS Direct to Employment Service Direct, which provide help and advice on health care and jobs.

From Health and Education Action Zones to Employment Zones, from the New Deal for Communities to the LGA's New Commitment to Regeneration

These are all examples of central and local government joining together with other partners to deliver successful, citizen-focussed services.

And we're working together to develop new technical solutions, such as the ONE pilots (Single Work-Focused Gateway), which will use IT to bring together in one place the services provided by the Benefits Agency, the CSA, the Employment Service and the benefits departments of local authorities. A single point of entrance to the benefit system for everyone of working age.

Working Together - To Invest in Innovation.

In keeping with the Government's commitment to restructure Britain's public services, we have set up the £2.5 billion Capital Modernisation Fund to support investment in improving public services as a whole.

And we have also introduced the £230 million Invest to Save Budget (ISB) to fund new ways of delivering services. Jointly run with the Treasury, this will promote projects that bring together public bodies to deliver services in a responsive, innovative and more efficient manner.

Types of projects which the ISB might support include:

- projects increasing electronic access to services for individuals and business;
- new websites giving the public increased access to information;
- and projects making electronic data exchange between public bodies easier.

The first round of the ISB provided a total of £120 million to 33 projects. The second round is open to the wider public sector, including local authorities, and £45m is available for projects in 2000-2001.

The response from local government has been very encouraging, and we plan to notify the winners before the end of the year.

Working Together - To Improve Quality

But this sort of investment will be of little value unless it is accompanied by our public services continuing to strive for quality.

Recognising this need to improve, we have set Information Age Targets for Departments in the Public Service Agreements, and under Better Quality Services we will be reviewing all government services and activities over the next five years to identify the best supplier in each case.

Likewise in local government, you are showing your commitment by implementing Best Value and Beacon Council status.

And I know that the IDeA in particular is doing a great deal of good work in supporting councils as they strive to develop Best Value regimes and go for Beacon Council status.

By measuring performance we get an idea of how well central and local services are meeting the challenge of delivering high quality services fit for the Information Age.

Working Together - On The Corporate IT Strategy For Government

As I have said, technology is a key enabler and not a goal in itself. To articulate this we are developing the first-ever corporate IT strategy for government.

This will set out the key principles and guidelines for a more collective approach across the public sector on the use of innovations in digital signatures, websites, smartcards, callcentres and digital TV.

It will also set out a "route map" for how we go about achieving our vision - for example, how we develop the Electronic Public Sector Infrastructure (E-PSI), which will lead to effective electronic public services and the speedy take up of e-commerce across government and the wider public sector.

Or how we can set up electronic government gateways which allow local and central government to share the widest possible range of services and information.

The new E-envoy will lead a Champions Group - which includes LGA representatives - to drive this strategy forward.

As I have said the E-envoy is also charged with ensuring that Government's own actions drive the take-up of e-commerce so that the Public Sector can respond effectively to the new Bill.

I want to see us practising what we preach, by accepting electronic documents and electronic signatures with the same ease as we currently accept the letter written on paper and signed in ink at the bottom.

Of course the IT Strategy must also address people's concern that information technology can lead to "big brother" government.

Data protection and privacy should remain an objective of information age government.

As Stephen Byers put it recently - we will control technology - not be controlled by it.

Working Together - In Partnership

We have sought to engage local government at every step we have taken in translating our vision of Information Age Government into action.

There is still much more long-term work to be done in these areas, and that is why we need to work in an ever more closer partnership with one another - the relationship we have is like a two-way street - we learn and share from each other.

That is why John Prescott and my predecessor Jack Cunningham joined Jeremy Beetham of the LGA and Len Duval of the IDeA in signing the Information Age Concordat in July - a dynamic partnership that will provide integrated and effective services, which are accessible, seamless and citizen focused.

Under the concordat a new Central-Local Information Age Forum was set up to make sure this happens, bringing together the key players from Whitehall departments and the local government community.

Conclusion

Local and central government can be a formidable partnership. We have a lot to learn from each other - and to learn together - and we work to bring about the changes in public service provision that really matter to people, as citizens and as consumers.

Information Age Government and the wider modernising agenda isn't about quick fixes. It is a long-term change programme, only to be achieved by forging partnerships not just between central and local government but with the voluntary and private sectors, to exploit benefits of new technology to the full.

Only in this way will we be able to see new technology make a real difference to people's lives and prove that we have banished the words old-fashioned and mediocre from people's perception of public services.

I believe then that Information Age Government provides us with a unique window of opportunity to do just that - Central and Local Government working together - together we will succeed.

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