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TRANSFORMATIONAL GOVERNMENT – enabled by technology

Note:

In submitting these comments, ABFL Groupe Intellex (www.groupe-intellex.com) represents the aggregated views of a number of informed parties who are well-positioned to observe public sector deployment of ICT technologies, systems and services. Groupe Intellex is not currently engaged in advising on procurement or marketing and provision of systems and services for the Public Sector but has a viewpoint that is informed by our commercial work on behalf of innovators and designers of novel technologies. The principal author is a long-standing member of PITCOM, a member of the Strategy Panel for the DTI/OST Sciencewise Programme, Leader of the CMA's Networked Services group, and Managing Director of Advanced Business Facilities Ltd.

General Comments

Groupe Intellex welcomes the publication of the Strategy and congratulates the authors for their clarity in describing the step beyond 'transformation' (of government services) to the much-more proactive stance of government becoming 'transformational'. The implicit undertones of a shift in public sector investment analysis from Cost Justification towards Value Justification is both welcome, overdue and deserving of much higher awareness and appreciation within the wider business community.

At various points throughout the Strategy reference is made to 'government', 'the whole public sector', 'multi-agency', and 'channels'. It supports 'coherence', being 'joined-up', 'shared services' and 'cross-Departmental' activities. The areas between government and 'near government' agencies may be expected over time to become (from a citizen perspective and outside of accounting conventions) increasingly blurred. It is to be hoped, therefore, that the Strategy is not seen as applying exclusively to a very narrowly-drawn definition of government organisations but should reflect the intense inter-dependency and inter-operability that reaches into the wider economy. This sense is partly reflected in, for example, Para 22(a) in the context of learning from the private sector, but a pro-active *transformational* approach would surely demand a strong statement of at least reciprocity if not actual leadership.

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Specific Comments

Para 6.

The description of the imbalance between spending on old 'legacy' and new systems might have provided an opportunity to express the distinction as not so much as 'old' and 'new' but 'proprietary' or 'hard-wired' in contrast to 'Open' and flexible designs. In Para's 13 and 14 this type of distinction is more clearly recognised but we would suggest that the Strategy would benefit from stronger highlighting of the contrast because it would chime with the calls for innovation and diversity in design that are (a) included in the remit for the Transformation Board and (b) essential for future systems sustainability.

In the context of calls elsewhere for aggregations and amalgamations to deliver cost savings and scale-economies there is a danger that a reduced number of over-large lowest-common-denominator system designs will lead to a reduction in innovation, diversity and adaptation to local needs - and a less competitive market for systems supply.

Taking a small Local Government example, the diverse and competitive market in systems to support Planning and Environmental Health services illustrate the value of this Government's positive leadership in the use of XML transaction standards – enabling a choice of system designs that are interoperable and therefore easily adapted to future and unforeseen needs. This healthy, diverse and innovative choice might, however, inadvertently be weakened by excessive calls for standardisation and ever-larger systems from fewer suppliers to serve a much-reduced number of Local Authorities. It would be helpful, therefore, to note that design quality is at least as transformational as scale economy and that this is not just a technical issue but flows through to the effectiveness and relevance of services design and the vision statement in Para 5 'about better using technology to deliver.....'

Para 18.

It is perhaps unfortunate that the 3rd bullet repeats the oft-quoted but mistaken assertion that broadband is available to almost all homes and businesses. It is true that almost all BT exchanges are so enabled but there remains a significant proportion of locations that are underserved because of the quality of the local distribution network – underserved either because of non-availability of ADSL or because of limited availability in terms of data-rate. A recent analysis by Point Topic¹ shows a deeper and still increasing 'Digital Divide' and it is only in the most advanced UK Boroughs that Broadband Density beginning to approach the national average levels of countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark.²

It is in this context that the Strategy seems to give some encouragement to those who identify scope for Public Sector infrastructure investment to redress market failure. Para 33 has much to offer and Para 39 (3) suggests that the Public Sector might even consider adopting the recent trend towards Corporate Peering. There are many examples of inspired and innovative local-government and agency-led infrastructure provision (justified on operational grounds) but the legitimacy of utilisation for wider commercial use remains uncertain – even in these times when CIC models are available for appropriate governance and planned investment transitions from public to private ownership.

¹ www.point-topic.com

² Such is the widespread assumption by media commentators that everyone now has Broadband, that Prospect magazine (current issue) can carry an article entitled 'Digital Exuberance' calling for 'digital speed humps' to curb excessive enthusiasm!

Para 19

We note that the 3rd bullet point identifies emergent mobile technologies and it is here that public sector adoption could have a truly transformational impact – not simply learning from the private sector but taking a positive lead. The current planning, for example in Northern Ireland, for use of HC-SDMA³ mobile broadband access is of interest to Health, Police and Public Safety, Transport, Education, Social Services, Harbour Authorities and many other agencies who would like to emulate the sort of service capabilities that are available in Australia and South Africa.

Para 26

In support of the role of the proposed 'Customer Group Directors' – and particularly their remit to understand needs and manage 'branding and communication' we would encourage the use of Awards and case studies – as used very effectively by the Treasury ISB programme – to build shifts in perception. During the 1990's the 9-year run of the then 'e-Business Innovation Awards' regularly identified winners from the Public Sector – somewhat counter to popular perceptions – and there is no doubt that appropriately managed and rigorously assessed programmes (as opposed to superficial sales gimmicks) that confer significant prestige, can be a valuable and effective tool to secure 'buy-in' and collaboration and legitimise innovation.

Para's 29 and 30

Returning to our initial comment on definitions and boundaries it is interesting that the Service Transformation Board appears to be exclusively comprised of 'officials from the public sector'. Would it not better serve the Strategic vision if there was some prescribed element of private sector input and interchange to reflect the interdependence and reciprocity implied by the distinction between 'transformation' and 'transformational' ?

³ <http://www.groupe-intellex.com/HCSDMA.htm>