

Response to the Cabinet Office report *Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology*, by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

1. Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council welcomes “**Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology**” the Cabinet Office strategy document published on 2nd November 2005.
2. We are pleased that the strategy indicates an understanding that public services are delivered by all parts of the public sector, including local government, police, the health service, etc., though we would like to see a greater acknowledgement that recent progress and successes have largely been driven in these areas as well as by central government (paragraph 18).
3. We fully support the three key areas identified by the strategy, and endorse the general approach outlined therein.
4. Firstly, that services enabled by ICT must be designed around the citizen’s or business’ needs, not the provider or product, and provided through co-ordinated delivery channels.
5. Secondly, the move towards a shared services environment that releases efficiencies through a standards-based approach is seen as a positive.
6. Thirdly, we agree that IT professionalism has to be further developed, encompassing capacity, project management and supplier management.
7. We look forward to practical demonstrations by central government, that it is serious about reaching these goals; not least in terms of providing help, advice and resources for the many organisations that must change in order to achieve them.
8. We recognise that this is necessarily a high-level view and that the key areas will have to be developed in detail. We hope that the comments that follow will help to develop the strategy in a practical and achievable manner.

Key area 1: Citizen and Business Centred Services

9. Customer research and engagement is a key precursor to the successful implementation of customer- (and business-) focussed services (paragraphs 23-25). The strategy needs to elaborate on how it will meet *local needs* and *segmentation* as well as the national level that is described.
10. We would like to see some detail on how this element of work is to be funded and coordinated. We would also recommend that policy and standards are developed or there is the risk that information collected is incompatible across regions and between disciplines/segments.
11. The idea of establishing customer champions overseen by a strategic Service Transformation Board (paragraphs 26-30) is a good one. The strategy should state that part of the Board’s remit is to ensure that new silos do not develop – there is otherwise the risk that the customer champions (and the inevitable projects teams that will arise around them) will work in separate, uncoordinated streams.

12. Access channel development is key (paragraphs 31 -38). The proposal for web site rationalisation needs more thought. This is a much more complex area than the high level view implies, e.g. how will information be segmented to cope with local needs but retain national consistency, how will it be provided and maintained, how will it link to varied back office infrastructures? We would prefer a more cautious approach which incorporates a good deal of feasibility work and planning ahead of definite statements about rationalisation.

Key area 2: Shared Services

13. In the same way that rationalisation of web sites needs more thought, Customer Service Centre rationalisation (paragraphs 39.1 and also 33.1) needs more research first, e.g. taking account of emerging evidence that large, outsourced centres are unproductive and disliked by customers – witness the recent advertising campaign by a well known bank that majors on the fact that it is returning to providing local services backed by real people. As stated in the strategy, government is playing catch-up; let us not ignore the lessons that the commercial sector has learnt, therefore, by blindly enforcing developments along the lines that the commercial sector has followed in the past but is now abandoning. The strategy states that services should be customer centric; evidence shows that rationalisation of call centres is not a customer centric approach.
14. The assumption that modern off the shelf systems integrate well with each other (paragraphs 39.2 and 39.3) is not borne out in fact. Corporate systems and infrastructure do indeed need to modernise and adopt a shared approach where practicable, but the notion that this will be as easy a task as the strategy implies is somewhat naive. Indeed suppliers of off the shelf systems continue to quite deliberately develop incompatible interfaces knowing that integration services will provide them with a significant future revenue stream. We recommend that the strategy both acknowledges this fact and develops this idea in the Supplier Management section of the strategy (paragraph 50).
15. We are concerned that the unlocking of spending from legacy systems, which needs significant up front investment to achieve this, will be “financed by user investment”. In an environment where local authorities are being forced to continually trim their expenditure now, where will this investment come from (paragraphs 6 and 39.3)? Given that shared service integration will not be easy to achieve (as stated above, 14) a locally funded mechanism is less likely to achieve these goals than one that is funded and organised sub -regionally or regionally (and cross-discipline). We suggest that the strategy takes a different view on funded than that adopted at present.
16. Data sharing and information management (paragraphs 39.and & 39.5) has proved to be a legal and practical minefield in the past, e.g. populating CRM from Council Tax systems, getting agreed standards for ICS under the Every Child Matters agenda. This needs a coordinated approach across government, including legislative issues, and we would recommend that the strategy recognise this challenge and risk factor.
17. On similar grounds, information assurance and identity management (paragraphs 39.6 and 39.7) represent another legal minefield. Furthermore, how will existing parallel developments be reconciled? For example there are parallel authentication projects as part of Government Connect, national ID card scheme, the NHS. We suggest that the strategy takes these factors into account in an explicit fashion.

Key area 3: Professionalism

18. We welcome the ideas behind portfolios (paragraphs 44 and 45) and projects (paragraphs 48-49). However, in any environment where governance models are to be established, there is a risk of “bean counting” becoming a hindrance to the service it is supposedly measuring. The strategy should recognise that public bodies are already heavily burdened with performance indicators, audits and the like, and should strive to ensure that its governance model is helpful rather than burdensome.
19. The wish to establish better professionalism within ICT, through development and accreditation, is to be commended (paragraphs 46 and 47). We would like to see engagement with acknowledged standards and policy setters in this arena explicitly stated in the strategy, e.g. IEEE, BCS, relevant universities.

Timetable

20. Our experience with timetables in the past is that the detailed requirements are often worked out quite late, and that the delivery plan requirements are therefore “squeezed” into tighter timescales than is realistic. We would like to see an acknowledgement of this in the strategy, and a promise that the detailed delivery planning needs will be given realistic timetables.

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