

‘TRANSFORMATIONAL GOVERNMENT ENABLED BY TECHNOLOGY’ Response from RSe Consulting Ltd

3rd February 2006

INTRODUCTION

RSe Consulting was established four years ago to provide strategy consultancy services to Local Authorities and other public sector agencies. We work exclusively with the public sector and do not have any financial relationships with solution providers, which means that we are focused solely on giving the best and most appropriate advice to our clients.

We are the leading specialist independent provider of strategic consultancy services to Local Authorities in the UK and in the past two years alone we have worked with over a third of all English Local Authorities. We have been at the leading edge of helping clients deliver the national e-government agenda, and have been heavily involved in delivering four ODPM National Projects.

WHAT WE THINK THIS STRATEGY GETS RIGHT

The strategy’s analysis of the current shortcomings of public sector IT delivery is accurate and hard-hitting. In particular, the following observations struck a chord with us:

- New electronic channels have been grafted onto paper-based processes, rather than being used as the basis for service transformation
- Too much IT investment has been focused upon back-office functions, at the expense of systems to support front line staff
- Organisational silos mean that customers are not receiving a joined-up service across organisational boundaries

Neither does the strategy pull any punches in putting forward solutions such as rationalising government call centres and making electronic transactions the norm. Only through such an aspiration to “think the unthinkable” will it be possible to transform the delivery of public services.

The strategy is straightforward and well-communicated. However intelligent and insightful a strategy, its impact will be limited if it is not clear and readable. That is why we are pleased that this strategy successfully communicates its key messages and makes a persuasive case to stakeholders.

Too frequently strategy documents are turgid and overlong, but this document makes its point succinctly and makes successful use of selected examples to add authority and interest to the document.

We think that the three priorities of this strategy (customer-centred services, shared services and IT professionalism) are the right areas of focus. It does mean that important areas of transformation such as customer take-up, business process improvement, benefits evaluation and partnership working will receive less attention, but we nonetheless believe that the choice of those three priorities is the right one.

WHAT WE LIKE LESS ABOUT THIS STRATEGY

It is aimed squarely at IT professionals rather than Chief Executives and business managers. We agree that IT professionals have a central role to play in delivering improved public services. However, we think that IT people already understand the need for business change – the real challenge is to convince business leaders that IT needs to be at the heart of their transformation of services.

The biggest obstacle that we at RSe come up against when using IT to deliver service improvements is the failure of Chief Executives and business managers to realise that IT is a crucial component of these changes.

A number of organisations have noted that the Transformational Government strategy does not have great relevance to Local Authorities. We disagree. As an overarching vision for the public sector it is pitched at the right level. What is critical is the next stage, namely how it is interpreted for Local Authorities.

The messages that the strategy delivers on customer services and shared services fail to capture the complexity of implementing them – particularly around knowing how far to take the process and being able to gauge when the process has been taken far enough:

- No Local Authority would try to argue that customer services aren't important, but few, if any, authorities have yet begun the process of transformation. The journey is a slow one, and strategy alone won't do anything to speed it up
- For shared services too, no authority would disagree with the sentiment of the shared services agenda. However, the complexity of implementation and the lack of clarity about the size of the rewards available at the end of the process are preventing authorities from taking the plunge

More needs to be done to manage expectations about the force of this strategy. It is not currently clear whether the document has the weight of a think piece or that of a formal roadmap for a programme of change.

THE ONE THING WE WOULD CHANGE ABOUT THIS STRATEGY

This strategy will live and die by its ability to convince Chief Executives and business managers that they cannot transform service delivery until they begin to build services around IT.

The priority of the strategy should therefore be to engage Chief Executives and encourage them to own the strategy within their organisations. We think that the most effective way to secure the interest and commitment of Chief Executives is to place the e-government agenda in the wider context of the biggest challenges facing public sector organisations today:

1. Demand for improved and wider-reaching services continues to grow at a much faster rate than the growth in government budgets
2. There is also fast-growing demand for government organisations to deliver more joined-up services to customers through collaboration with other public, private and voluntary sector organisations

If the strategy can convince Chief Executives and business leaders that IT is at the heart of meeting these challenges, then it will succeed.

OTHER CHANGES THAT WE'D LIKE TO RECOMMEND

The strategy should do more to recognise that transforming customer services and implementing shared services is a highly complex task that requires many difficult choices to be made.

There needs to be a great deal more clarity provided about what it really means to deliver customer-focused services. Local Authorities can only act upon the mantra of designing services around customers if they are supported to develop a clear vision of what that means in practice. If central government can provide authorities with some frameworks and ideas for new approaches to customer service, it has a real chance of successfully selling the strategy to Chief Executives.

Local Authorities also need clear guidance about how they should decide where to draw the line when designing services around citizens, because with scarce resources it will be impossible to meet every need of every citizen all the time.

The immense complexity of implementing Shared Services also needs to be acknowledged, and Local Authorities should be given:

- a) Some estimation of the potential scale of the rewards available from implementing shared services
- b) A sense of how much pressure will be placed upon organisations to implement shared services – for example, will it become part of the CPA scoring?
- c) Practical ideas for how the complexity of implementation can be overcome and/or worked-around

Finally, we would like the next iteration of the strategy to clarify the status and weight of the strategy and to spell out what actions will immediately follow on from it.