

3rd February 2006

Dear Sirs,

Staffordshire County Council's response to the Transformational Government Consultation Paper

Please find detailed below our response to the Transformational Government Consultation Paper:

General Commentary

The County Council generally accepts that the paper is an excellent start. The direction provided in the document is an agreeable approach and from the customer's point of view nobody can argue with the plans for customer-centric services; efficient delivery of support and front-line services all driven from highly skilled professional staff. There are very close obvious links into the work we are doing at a Staffordshire-wide level with Local Area Agreements which have a focus on a joint approach to the Gershon / Efficiency agenda. We feel we would be able to add value to the strategy and would welcome the opportunity of early involvement in the further development of the strategy from a variety of sources.

Current Position - The importance of technology

Points: 10-13 The paper suggested that Government and more specifically Local Government is very much dependent upon technology. In fact Local Government would not be able to function effectively without ICT yet alone technology in a wider arena. ICT is the backbone of Council Service delivery. When this is done well then customer facing services usually serve the public well and vice versa.

Focusing on the technology issue - Increasingly computer/application suppliers have enjoyed a prosperous environment when doing business with Councils and have been able to command what amounts to very high prices with unfavourable margins (in the eyes of the Council). It is easily argued that if it wasn't for Councils then there would be no "Housing Benefits Specialists" or "Planning Specialists" within the computer application market and generally speaking it is fair to say that these organisations have historically developed and sold (at extortionate amounts) very narrow service/department or directorate silo based applications.

What is being proposed in the paper will have huge consequences for the way Government offices procure technology. In the past there has been little intervention from the centre with technology providers and in order to engender a climate where partnership working proactively thrives, some

action must be taken from Government to suppliers that they must work in a more collaborative way.

Point 14 (3) There is a real difficulty within Local Authorities to truly join up the application portfolio as described in this point. It is evident that this joined-up approach would yield both improvements in both cashable efficiencies and improved customer service but in order to achieve this investment would be required. If the opportunity of funding was available then the County Council would be willing to carry out some pilot work in this area – demonstrating real achievements across two-tier authorities.

Point 19 (2) We agree with this sentiment and whilst Government generally needs to embrace current technologies we also need to look ahead to future channels and developments. We have been using mobile working devices effectively for some time and also utilise current trends such as SMS for library services as a way to engage with customers more effectively.

Point 20 – Whilst in agreement with the of doing IT differently rather than simply doing IT better; the old adage of change is 20% technology and 80% culture is well and true and whilst the concept at strategy level is a sound one - actually putting this into practice without a clear government directive (either a carrot or a stick) will prove to be a very difficult task. We endorse the comment of doing IT differently to support the next phase for delivery of public services – as Community and neighbourhood agendas depend upon technology to enable the true effectiveness to be realised.

Strategy

Point 21 (2) – There needs to be clear links back into Performance Management where Government needs to concentrate on key targets with the relevant information needed for collection in a similar way. We also need to get rid of perceived sacred cows.

Whilst we agree that Local Government Corporate Services/Direct Service Delivery Departments all need to work together so does Central Government. So there needs to be collective commitment to this work not just from Cabinet but also from DFES/DOH and all the quangos – especially those involved in regulation.

Customer Centric Design and Shared Services

The drive for a true customer-centric approach to service delivery is a sound strategy which Staffordshire County Council supports and is working towards through “Customer First” which is the name given to its own significant and county wide Change Management Programme. This is a very large initiative which will deliver real measurable benefits and savings involving huge cultural and organisational challenges, not just internally but also around two-tiers and three-tiers of Local Government; and with other partnerships such as the Police, Health, Fire and Voluntary services.

We approve the Shared Service Agenda and we do not think anybody will argue that in a two-tier environment (County/District) it does not make sense practically or commercially to have a HR/Payroll system for the County Council and then in Staffordshire’s case eight separate systems for the District Councils with each of the DCs having its own processing department. To have all of this “under one roof” is a logical concept but to move to a Shared Service Centre will require fundamental changes in governance arrangements, internal organisational structures, re-design of

costing/re-charging models and very firm benefits realisation plans. Generally speaking and specifically in two-tier environments there are parties which welcome the challenge and very often parties which can get very defensive when talk is made of a perception of outsourcing departments to a big-bad County Council – no matter what the business case.

Point 33 (2) The County Council has carried out some investigative work around the 311 concept and we would be very keen to be involved in the project work around a central non-emergency number such as the 311.

Point 33 (3) There needs to be clarity about the rationalisation of websites – if the plan is to remove the local context of websites from a mass reduction exercise then we would be very much against this. However we are in favour of sub-regional portal representation to service delivery where that makes more sense and a national approach to service delivery where that makes sense.

Point 35 Consideration needs to be given to the mass production of scanning services.

Point 36 Whilst we are in total agreement of a need for change and are working towards this we do not believe in a One-size fits all approach, and there is a risk that some of the suggested workstreams may unwisely adopt this:

For example there is a lack of clarity as to the role of the Customer Group Directors – It is generally acknowledged that Local Government is far closer to the customer than Central Government so is to be assumed that the Directors and the Departments will mainly come out of Local Government organisations? Will there be Elected Members to sit over these? If it is simply reporting to Ministerial level then what plans are there for local democratic representation? The Service Transformation Board will require significant levels of input from Local Government – so from our perspective we would want to have representation at the right level in the Board.

ICT Professionalism

We are in general agreement for a step change in professionalism is within Strategic ICT with more joined up leadership, portfolio management and development of ICT skills and professionalism. We are making significant steps in all of these areas within our own organisation and would welcome a voice within the developing strategy.

The Leadership and Governance angle must also take stock of the wider private sector models and use this experience and expertise wisely through trusted consultancies that have no application specific allegiance.

On behalf of Staffordshire County Council

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