

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to you on behalf of the West London Alliance e-Government Group¹ in response to the *Transformational Government Enabled by Technology* paper released on the 2nd November 2005.

We are very pleased to have been offered the opportunity to respond. As a group, we certainly appreciate the aspirational nature of this paper. Indeed, the focus on personalised, citizen and business centric services and the move to a shared service culture which the paper discusses are already in line with much of the work that we are taking forwards either in partnership or at an individual authority level.

There are three elements of the paper that the West London Alliance e-Government group would like to express particular support for:

1. The notion of a standard national IT qualification for local government IT professionals
2. Increased support from central government in relation to procurement
3. Ministerial focus on information sharing

A National standard qualification for IT professionals would be extremely beneficial to the professionalism and effectiveness of local government IT officers. We would recommend that the qualification seeks to become 'the IT version of chartered accountancy' and that it focuses on specific technical skills that are high in demand but low in supply. Furthermore, a focus specifically and solely on the public sector would be beneficial as not only would it be highly tailored to the needs of local government but it could also reduce the amount of skilled workers lost to the private sector. However, we add the caveats that overlap with existing initiatives, such as ODPM's leadership programme, should be avoided and that, equally important, local delivery models need to be taken into consideration. Equally the British Computer Society already has considerable experience in this area and could be potentially supported by SocITM.

The West London Alliance e-Government group concurs that Central Government has a useful, positive role to play in procurement, particularly around providing a more consistent framework for procurement activities, including standards for both local government as a customer and the private sector as a supplier. We would also support a greater focus small and medium enterprises (SMEs), an emphasis which, at present, seems absent from the paper.

Thirdly, we support the proposed ministerial focus on the legality of information sharing. This is long overdue. The legislation in this area is currently confusing and vague and, as such, frequently undermines local government initiatives designed to achieve appropriate information sharing, improved outcomes and more effective multi-agency working. We are keen to see much greater clarity in the future.

¹ The West London Alliance e-Government Group was set up in 2001 and is one of 18 West London Alliance service groups. Consisting of senior IT and e-Government officers from 6 boroughs (Ealing, Brent, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Hammersmith and Harrow), the group now thrives as a self-funding body, with equal monetary contributions from all partners. One of the few e-Government partnerships in the UK (and in London) to survive the end of LGOL funding, the group has a proven track record in successful delivery of joint projects and has even won an e-Government National Award for the work it funded and directed relating to choice based lettings. The group funds and oversees a documented work programme of projects and initiatives designed to ensure that the partner authorities are achieving the highest and most practical level of joint working in the areas of e-Government and IT.

We have the following recommendations in relation to the next steps for this paper. First, we feel it would benefit from more appropriate targeting. Either it is intended for Chief Executives, in which case it needs to be shorter and to clarify the wider vision and implications of such large-scale business change or it is for IT and e-Government managers, in which case more specific detail relating to intended timings, funding mechanisms and targets will be required before buy in can be achieved. Secondly, local authorities need to be confident that the power to drive such an ambitious strategy forward truly exists, particularly in light of the departure of Ian Watmore from his role as Chief Information Officer. Any measures to counteract potential scepticism about the power behind this paper should be considered.

Finally, whilst we are in support of the general theme of more personalised, citizen and business centric services we would like to express our concerns in relation to two of the mechanisms proposed:

First, we disagree with implied closure of legacy channels. This is wholly unrealistic. Of course, five years is long time in technology terms and by 2011 the ability of local authorities to provide multi-channelled access to services, as well as public take-up of these, will have significantly increased. However, there will always be a section of the community who refuse, or unable to use, new channels. As local authorities, we have a responsibility to provide services to all users, regardless of their usage of e-channels, and in line with recent Central Government policy, do not want to create a 'digital underclass' of people barred from services owing to their lack of e-enablement.

Secondly, we share concerns about the proposed 'Customer Group Directors' and Transformation Board structures. We would question how achievable this approach will be especially as, at present, it does not appear that there will be sufficient allowance for local government input as no direct representation has been proposed. Partners are also concerned that, given the proposed timescales and the amount of time that this sort of structure generally takes to become embedded, practical and useful, authorities may have completed much of this work alone.

Thirdly it is our view is that the emphasis of this paper is overwhelmingly biased towards Central Government. To achieve the transformation of aspiration into reality requires the buy in and support of the whole of the public sector and we would urge that very real attention is brought to this area.

We are more than happy to discuss these comments in detail. Indeed, as a very robust and successful e-Government partnership with a track record of delivery and sustainability we are particularly well placed to pilot some of the ideas in this paper and look forward to being involved in realising this ambitious agenda in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Palmer
Chair
Head of ICT Hillingdon Council