Tom Watson launch speech on Greening Government ICT – 17th July 2008 – Science of Survival Exhibition, Science Museum

Introduction

Welcome to the Science Museum and the Science of Survival Exhibition – a fitting place, I think, to launch the Greening Government ICT Strategy. I am delighted that Chris Chant, CIO at DEFRA, John Higgins, Director General of Intellect, and Andrew Lee, Chief Executive of the Sustainable Development Commission have been able to join us today.

One of the dominant themes in this exhibition is that the world is a contained system. Everything works in cycles, and we can't escape the consequences of our actions. Whether it's Lovelock's Gaia or the water cycle.

The Al Gore Cycle

Governments and Green ICT have their own cycle – the Al Gore cycle. This is the amount of time it takes to go from 'discovering the internet' to realising that technology is playing havoc with our environment, and setting out to save the world.

It took Al about fifteen years to move from championing the information superhighway to An Inconvenient Truth.

And here in Government we've gone full circuit too.

- From 1994, and the then government's report on oppurtunities for the public sector in the use of information superhighways.
- To our green ICT strategy, which I'm publishing today, here in the Science Museum.

Those very computers that drove fundamental changes in the way society communicates are now responsible for 2% of global CO2 emissions – the same as the airline industry.

I'm sure you have heard that figure before. But, the thing is, it's not going away. In fact, the figure is growing.

We can't ignore this issue any longer, it is real and we need to act.

Core messages

This is about immediate action. Doing the things that can make a difference now. The things that we can do without having to know what the baseline is. Things that we know will have an immediate impact. Switching machines off at night, using sleep modes, having less equipment.

This is also about thinking long term. I see this very much as a 'first step' policy. There is a lot more we can do with our ICT that will have a positive impact elsewhere. For example - increased flexibility, less travel and smart buildings. We are going to go beyond the easy changes and look to industry to help us develop our thinking on longer term solutions.

Changing our behaviour

Here today we have the chance to meet Buz, Eco, Tek and Doug, who give us a glimpse of what the world of 2050 may be like.

They each have their own opinions about what's best for the planet, just as I'm sure each of you here today does. But one thing they would all agree on is that the various choices we all make, and our different priorities, have major effects on the world of tomorrow.

The shifting climate and resource availability means that the way we live and work will have to change.

Switch it off

The strap line for this exhibition is: ‘Your Planet Needs You!’ It sums up that the future isn’t primarily about the government setting rules – it’s about all of us changing our behaviours as individuals.

For Green ICT that means starting with switching off your computer, and making sure it stays off when you don’t need it.

It’s a little thing. But it’s the kind of thing that people notice – exactly where this strategy first started.

By turning off just one computer overnight we can save 235kg of CO_2 in a year. Over the whole estate the potential is enormous – turning off every one of Whitehall’s 500,000 computers at night would have the same effect as taking 40,000 cars off the road.

Now, it could quite easily have ended there, but it didn’t. We decided that there was more we could do in the Cabinet Office, across Government, and with industry.

We know that lots of small actions can make a big difference. By defaulting our printers to duplex where we can, we can save 60 kg of CO_2 for every 1 million print jobs. That may seem like a lot of printing, but in the Cabinet Office alone last year we printed 35 million sheets of paper.

A photocopier left on standby overnight wastes enough energy to make 30 cups of tea a night – across Whitehall that’s a lot of tea.

So we turn off equipment at home as well as at work, reminding those around us of the need to be responsible. And we encourage the organisations we work for and with to do the same.

<u>Setting an example</u>

I said before, it's about individual action, not about government setting rules. But we do have a corporate responsibility. We need to show leadership.

That's why we've set tough targets on cutting greenhouse gas emissions – by 26% by 2020 and at least 60% by 2050.

To set a positive example on this, we're working to make our central government office estate carbon neutral by 2012.

Not a simple task. In fact, the 2007 Sustainable Development in Government Report shows that we, as departments, need to do a lot more to meet the tough targets we've set ourselves, particularly on carbon emissions from offices and road vehicles.

And this is where ICT becomes good news for the environment.

ICT can make buildings work smarter, reducing heating, cooling and lighting requirements, increasing efficiency and reducing carbon emissions.

But, in order to achieve these benefits, it's likely to require an increase in ICT investments. So, it's essential that we start off by getting the basics right. Think of it as building the right foundations.

These changes aren't big, they don't require a massive lifestyle change, but they do have the potential to have a significant impact. This is what our strategy is about – things that can be done now without having to debate, or measure outcomes or monitor targets.

We know that:

- Turning off a PC overnight, at weekends and during the holidays will save energy.
- Turning off active screen savers will reduce the power consumed by our monitors when we leave the room.

- Ensuring that printers default to duplex will cut the amount of paper wasted.
- Putting printers into sleep mode when they're not in use will save energy.
- Re-using or redistributing equipment we don't need will be better for our environment
- Turning off servers in our data centres that aren't running anything, and better utilising those we are using, will reduce the energy consumed in those colossal buildings.
- Reducing data-centre cooling by a small amount will have a big effect on the energy we're pumping in.

This strategy covers a huge range of departments and offices, from the colossal MOD or DWP down to very small organisations. A total IT expenditure of £13 billion.

We've set ourselves two overarching targets.

- Firstly, that the energy consumption of Government ICT on the office estate will be Carbon Neutral by 2012.
- And that, by 2020, Government ICT will be carbon neutral across its lifecycle.

Alongside this, we've developed a list of actions we expect CIOs to implement within organisations. And a series of tools to help them keep track is being piloted across departments, and the results shared.

Closing words

This Strategy sets out the first steps towards achieving our long-term vision. We know there's a long way to go. We know there's more that can be done, and I can promise you today that we want to do it. This will come later.

But let's not waste any more time – let's get started now.