

Tomorrow never comes

Des McConaghy considers the likelihood of the online town hall becoming a reality and finds both Government and Opposition less than enthusiastic in their response to the concept

It's a good start. The Local Government Management Board's *Tomorrow's Town Hall* gives a "customer's" view of an imaginary local authority (Wellstown) in 2000*. It sets out to show what it may be like for citizens and their "electronic town hall" in five year's time. It is one vision of "digital democracy" and should be widely read. But it's only a start.

It leaves out the most critical bit. It leaves out, too, crucial decisions to be faced not in the year 2000 - but right now. Nearly all Wellstown's technological innovations are already piloted in one place or another - and *Tomorrow's Town Hall* usefully brings them all together in one model. But technology is simply no longer the problem. access to information remains the key problem and the Wellstown scenario will not work without first opening up Whitehall.

CALLING THE SHOTS

Why? Because central government will go on calling the shots. Because central government's own constraints, programmes and will go on pressing in on all local circumstances and at every turn. So this article looks at Whitehall's attitude to public sector online information systems and, more to the point, what is now on offer from both Government and Opposition. And since there may be an election this year local government must get a move on if it wants to screw a commitment out of reluctant ministers or wriggling shadow ministers.

Nor must we deceive ourselves. *Tomorrow's Town Hall* side steps the issue with its "wider picture". This finds the business rate back under local control, expenditure capping totally abolished and a chance to experiment with a sales tax. This is vaguely meant to suggest a local autonomy where councils run most services and where their own information systems cover most people's needs.

NOTHING SO RADICAL

Nothing so radical can happen. After rebates councils raise a mere 14 percent of their own expenditure. Consider then the separate budgets of central agencies providing life chance services such as housing, health, education and welfare. Add this and then the percentage of the overall local budget raised and determined by local councils can be as little as 4 percent in many urban areas - giving ministers over 90 percent of the action.

So for the moment let's leave Wellstown's glittering "home page", "information kiosks", "optional" ID cards, "plug-in neighbours", video-conferencing* - and the domestic "Black Box" where "

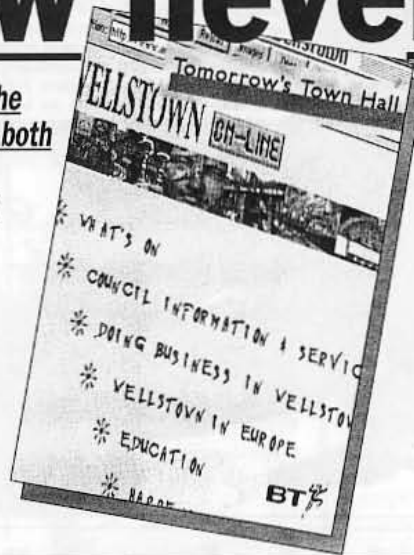
Wanda", the "IS Navigator" (friendly electronic and automated personal assistant) voice recognises each constituent (sorry, "customer") with a "Hi!" All this - and "participation" ("button power"), exciting e-mail chats with councillors, internet fun at the "Millennium Cafe" or interactive exchanges with Baltic states - cannot happen if there is limited information to share.

Meanwhile 1996 net-surfers find local and central government looking much the same. Local content is basically little more than an electronic "AtoZ guide to Council Services". Coverage of government departments is generally much the same but even more patchy. To this is added press releases, message facilities, local gazetteers and occasionally a gateway to tourist facilities, help lines and voluntary bodies. Splendid but fairly boring - and very uneventful.

NOT EXPENSIVE

The radical challenge is to cover the mechanisms that deliver all local services. That has to include online coverage of resource allocation, and its rationale, over the full range of services! I can speak with some authority because I piloted a database doing just that ten years ago. It was neither difficult nor expensive if one knew how government works and if one stood well outside any bureaucratic boundaries. You simply found the right official for each bit and downloaded it. Ten years ago this meant an army of dedicated "Community Programme" workers "tapping in" - but most data is now machine readable and downloads cheaply in seconds.

This was a useful pilot because it crossed all jurisdictional and territorial boundaries and so the service information could bring data together and/or aggregated it up or down at will. This was accessed by diverse agencies including councils, housing associations, two government departments, the Housing Corporation, the AMA, the BBC, the House of Commons Library and, importantly, the construction industry. That a handful of previously unemployed Merseyside graduates could manage this speaks volumes about our crippling subservience to administrative barriers. Even benign bureaucracy can become a conspiracy against the public!



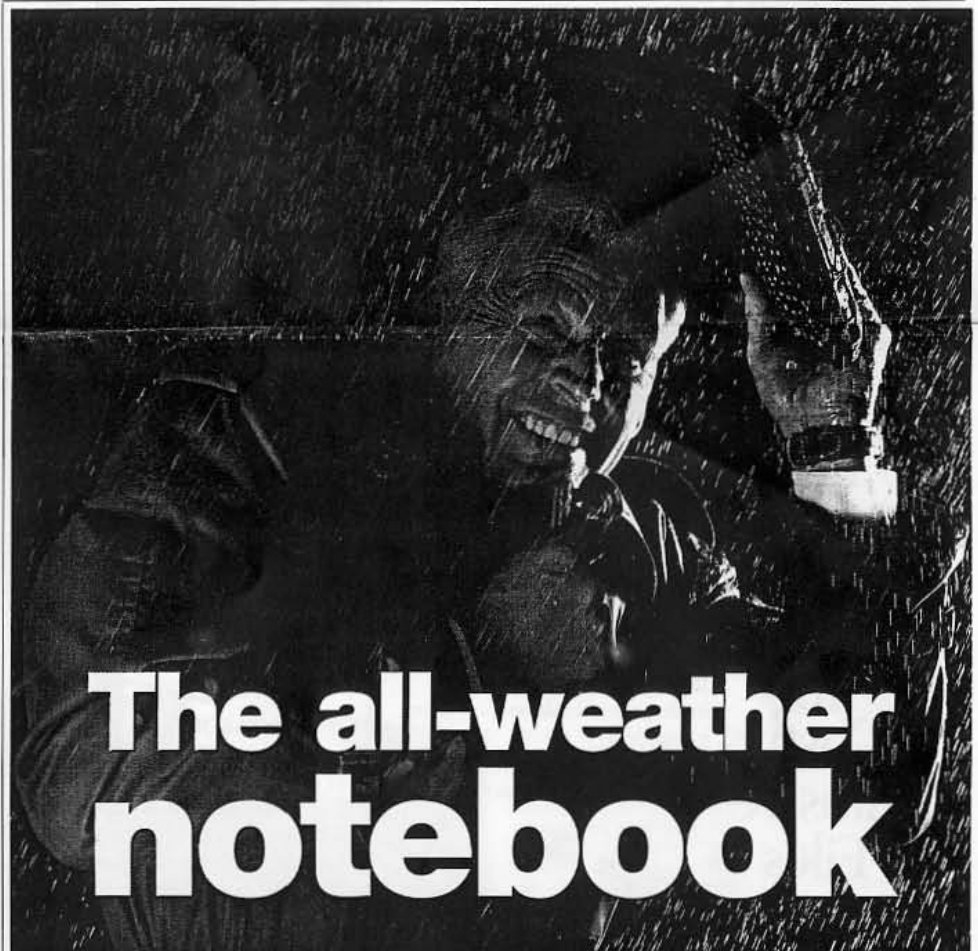
So what went wrong? The killer is the 1986 DTI Guidelines to Whitehall departments that require the maximum market rate for "government-held tradeable information". Any such "citizen-orientated" information system, embracing a necessarily wide spread of services must now effect, and service, commercial contracts with diverse departments (and with HMSO for copyright) for ongoing access to and usage of official data. An impossible task! Henceforth, only officially sponsored information systems could attempt adequate coverage.

In the meantime it is democracy to the highest bidder! In some industries commercial information providers have

pushed up the cost of official data several times a year. Nor did the Open Government White Paper (Cmd 22) always help. Beyond the "exceptions to disclosure" we read "The Code does not require documents...to provide information which is provided as part of an existing charged service". As Sir Humphrey said of his Open Government White Paper, "Always dispose of the difficult bit in the title!"

Citizen's Charters can be just as unhelpful. By setting down performance standards for publication they effectively exclude other information that was previously available. Thus our education database went well be-

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yond school and student performance to include such vital comparative data as educational needs, capital and revenue financing and pupil/teacher ratios. But the "definitive" response of the DFE is now to refer to very limited Charter criteria and to DTI's trading policy for the rest.

STOPPED IN TRACKS

Before Kenneth Clarke's tenure as Education Secretary any citizen could use our interactive programs to access our education database and make their own comparison of relevant information anywhere in the country. But we were stopped in our tracks. It was hard seeing Clarke as chancellor getting a recent award from the Campaign for Freedom of Information; hard, because a decade later - (and moreover ten years of children later!) - the

massive differentials between rich and poor areas - between, say, Liverpool and Surrey, are worse than ever.

Clarke is one target because he is now at the very peak of the information mountain - and Maurice Frankel of the FoI Campaign is impressed by the Treasury budget on internet. That is just an electronic version of the usual papers but a separate initiative by the Institute of Fiscal Studies ("Be your own Chancellor") is a wonderful hint of things to come. Anyone can try out the effects of their alternative Budget on the Institute's tax model (<http://www.ifs.org.uk>) and similar software would now let ratepayers try options for council budgets and council tax.

However, Treasury budgets are still just about money - rather than what can be done with the money by departments or local government! Recently, Gordon

Brown promised more online "consensus and transparency" in the process leading up to the Budget. One objective of democratic reform (or even competent government!) is to incorporate major sectoral, regional and

local government impacts in that otherwise top down process. The Treasury itself recently opened a Pandora's Box (innocently enough) by requiring an overall reform of "output measures" and even that may offer some objective progress.

And there are more immediate, smaller, but significant opportunities to explore. For example, faced with our housing

database (whose 600 attributes uniquely covered all Housing corporation and housing authority data by local areas) the DoE Housing Directorate will now consider extending online services "if there is a real demand." Geoff Mulgan of Demos has also made a similar case for the online scrutiny of the SRB. Its performance measures are too much a validation

Smith or media spokesperson Graham Allen was then complete without reference to the technology's power to revolutionise democracy. It seemed Labour could not fail to promote public sector online information systems to open up programmes and the way government conducts its business.

Technically, again, no problem! But none of the senior shadow ministers was involved in the Forum, nor have they been prepared to support public sector online information systems in principle. Housing spokesman Nick Raynsford passed the housing case down to the Forum and thereafter to the junior DTI spokesperson, David Blunkett at education and employment reacted - and still reacts - in much the same way. And so on! The Forum marginalised itself and virtually ignored "content".

Universal access - and the BT deal - became the priority, the principle is indeed important but effective participation still depends on relevant information. So the Forum just ensured that a homeless kid can access a ministerial press release, can search the internet for every conceivable recipe for sundried tomatoes or, if really desperate, can personally e-mail Bill Clinton! But the obvious case for opening up government business was side lined and the resulting "glossy" offered no radical alternative to the status quo.

DEEPLY INTERTWINED

What's to be done? Firstly, we must acknowledge that the affairs of local and central government are so deeply intertwined that local government cannot launch an effective information system unilaterally. Secondly, it is also clear that traditional obstacles blocking effective open government are formidable and familiar, so they should be top of the political agenda as the country approaches an election. Thirdly, and by the same token, any me-tooism should be blasted as shadow ministers dream of office and consolidate their fiefdoms. Fourthly, we need to seize every current opportunity, no matter how small, which advances the cause of public sector online information.

Finally, I refer to one earlier example; encouraging DoE to extend online information to cover all the various forms of publicly assisted housing and provide helpful access programs. Chris Holmes of Shelter says: "I believe the availability of online data on housing conditions and need and housing investment for each LA area would help in the development of housing strategies and in comparing different areas." The ACC's Robin Wendt claimed he had no expertise nor responsibilities in the housing field, but "as a general proposition it would seem sensible, in the spirit of partnership, that online facilities should be available between central and local government for the exchange of data, subject of course to demand." Single Regeneration budget next?

* Tomorrow's Town Hall, Local Government Management Board, November 1995.
(and from Karen Swinden - Kable on 0171 410 9046.)



Keeping things boxed up! Chancellor Ken Clarke is at the "peak of the information mountain."

of its byzantine bidding bureaucracies and sensibly enough initiatives are fast becoming a wasteful lottery. "Bidding" is good but bidding for everything leaves nothing that is stable. So here is another immediate application where a thoroughly confused urban population needs a properly informed debate.

And so to Michael Heseltine! In spite of various "open Government" initiatives, the Cabinet Office (and Office of Public Service) has not explored any interdepartmental assessment of how the technology enhances public scrutiny. It is true that OPS minister Robert Hughes DID give the Cabinet Office's own computing arm (the CCTA) the task of "building a public sector online information system", but that had too little political clout to cut any ice with departments.

KEEP IT LOCKED!

The Catch 22 is the golden departmental rule (central and local government) to keep important data in the bottom drawer and keep it locked. There is always, too, the inevitable stand off between a department's policy community (with its specialised expertise) and outsiders treading down the grass. The result was just more gloss and glorified gazetteers!

Can Heseltine square the circle? His new caper is to set up a "Central IT Unit" in the Cabinet Office - and the CCTA departs as a Next Steps Agency. Very little is known at the time of writing but there is a promise to promote "a strategic approach to IT across government". Funding for the Private Finance Initiative will emphasise reducing cost and generating income. There is certainly a vast scope for bureaucratic savings and the self same public sector online systems can increase public procurement profitability for industry. So some progress is always possible.

What about the Opposition? New Labour's Information Superhighway Forum was intended to range over all the ground: "regulation", "infrastructure" and, bless me! "content"! no speech by chairman Chris

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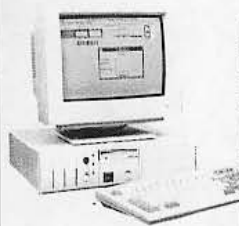
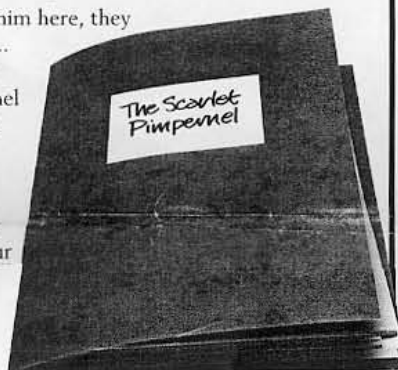
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