

## **Take the 'e' out of e-government**

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E-government should not exist by 2010. For those unimpressed by new technology, the appearance of this new prefix everywhere must be irritating. And its use can be dangerous as well as annoying. E stigmatises technology, splitting debates about the use of technology from debates about the problems that we face in delivering world class public services. These are two discussions that should be one and the same. After all, e-government is just government.

Those employed in this supposedly new policy area of e-government concern themselves with nothing more than the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in government. This isn't radically new but rather is just a continuation of the centuries old process of governments adopting new technologies where they serve their purposes. Often obscured by the e is one fact: that in this context technology is only useful so far as it contributes to achieving the aims of government.

The utility of ICT is hard to discern for many politicians, civil servants, doctors and nurses, teachers and others involved in the development and delivery of public services. It is hard to see clearly how technology has significantly enhanced the Labour Government's attempts to modernise public services. Such a positive impact will have to be shown soon if the use of technology to help deliver public services is to remain politically viable and if debate about its use is to enter the political mainstream.

Improving public services was politically imperative for Labour when they arrived in government in 1997. Not only had two decades of underinvestment had a near disastrous impact but in addition the public no longer perceived public services as being built around their needs. Without significant improvements, not only might Labour's electoral prospects be under threat, but support for public services overall might decline.

The response to this threat through the provision of more joined up and citizen focussed public services began in earnest in March 1999 with the publication of the Modernising Government White Paper. This document made clear the importance of e-government and another Cabinet Office paper published the following April, as the NASDAQ peaked, provided a more detailed picture of the ways in which ICT would help to deliver on the reforming agenda, applying lessons learnt in the e-economy to government.

Today, improving public services appears even more politically critical, with voters expecting to see improvements in key public services such as health and education as a consequence of the largest programme of public investment in British peacetime history. The Government needs to utilise every means possible to deliver those improvements which are at the core of its programme and upon which its future electoral viability rests. In spite of this continued pressure to improve public services and the commitment to use new technology for this purpose, there is little evidence of benefit being derived from e-government.

This failure can be traced in part to a decision taken in the early days of the Labour Government to ensure that all government services should be made available online by 2008. In 2000, even as targets in other areas were being simplified and adapted, the timeline was shortened with all services now due online by 2005.

The problem with the target is clear: rather than focus on the improvements in services that technology might enable, it looks only to increase the use of technology, based on an assumption that doing so will automatically bring benefits. While some targets set for the NHS, for schools or for other public services have faced criticism, they at least looked to improve outcomes that were a core part of Labour's programme. The 2005 deadline for online services did not do this and addressed only process rather than impact.

The e-government landscape which we face now can be seen to be a consequence of the adoption of this target. An international benchmarking study conducted for the Government last year by consultants Booz Allen Hamilton illustrates this. In comparison with other countries the UK has a high level of spending on IT and a reasonably well developed range of online services, a result that you might expect the targets to deliver. But levels of use of those services by citizens have been very low, with only one in ten interacting with government online compared with almost one in two in Canada.

Perhaps the Government would have fared better if it had followed the approach taken in Italy. Eight hundred services provided by the Italian government were pared down to just eighty to be put online. Selecting services according to the likelihood that they will be used and will add value for users has led to a level of take up of online services in Italy three times that in the UK.

Despite the setbacks faced, there remains considerable support for the e-government agenda at the highest levels. In his speech to last November's e-Summit, organised by the Office of the e-Envoy, the Prime Minister told delegates that, "the real opportunity is to use information technology to help create fundamental improvements in the efficiency, convenience and quality of our services".

One might argue that this was simply modernising rhetoric for a sympathetic audience if it weren't for the huge amount of money that is backing up the oratory. In his spending review last summer, the Chancellor set aside over six billion pounds for spending on ICT over the next three years. It demonstrates that Gordon Brown and Tony Blair still believe in the potential benefits of new technology that they are prepared to invest in ICT a quantity of money that would pay for thousands of new teachers, doctors or police officers.

It is fortunate that as they make this new investment in ICT, the Government is moving away from the 2005 target. For the last year, ministerial speeches on e-government have emphasised the importance of take-up of services and a new target has now been adopted: "to make all government services available electronically by 2005 with key services achieving high levels of use". This new emphasis on use is welcome, even if the Government continues to dilute its efforts by attempting to put all services online, whether they add value or not.

Focussing on getting people to use online services will help to ensure that those services are designed to deliver maximum value to citizens. This shift presents an opportunity to alter the terms of the e-government debate. Rather than being about the rush to get everything online, discussions about technology could now genuinely become about the best way to harness that technology to create value. Such a change would widen the group of participants in the debate from those concerned with technology to all those with an interest in improving our public services.

There are considerable obstacles to be overcome before the initial benefits might be delivered that would change the debate in this way. Government knows too little about how citizens use its online offerings today so it starts from a position of weakness. In addition there remain significant concerns around security and privacy of individuals' data and delivering services in this new way will also clearly necessitate considerable organisational change.

There is also, rightly, concern about equality. With under half of all households having internet access at home, and that proportion dropping to below one quarter among the poorest third of households, considerable work will be required if service improvements through technology are to be available to everybody. While the Government has achieved its target for last year of having six thousand public internet access centres, they have limitations and the potential exclusion of those who aren't online in their own homes should still be of concern. Ultimately though, all these challenges will be overcome if the benefits of technology are sufficiently great.

The new 2005 target will encourage the development of services that add benefit, but knowledge of any benefit generated will have to be uncovered and disseminated if politicians and others are to be engaged in the e-government debate. This, again, will be a complex process but it is one to which the ippr will contribute as we use the concept of public value to examine existing uses of technology to deliver public services.

Only developing e-services that add value and then demonstrating that value will build support among politicians, policy makers, providers and users of public services for sustained investment in the appropriate use of online services. Only when the value of technology is demonstrated will the 'e' debate be abandoned and discussions of technology will be, as they should be, integrated with wider policy discussions. It may seem ironic, but as soon as e-government is working, it will disappear.