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Electronic Government and Public Service Modernisation: Experience from the frontline

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Abstract — The paper is based on research into public service modernisation initiatives undertaken in County Donegal, reviewing these initiatives and setting out the progress achieved to date. Progress is evaluated in the context of international and national public service modernisation developments and the contribution made to the overall vision of delivering integrated public services. The interdependence between local and national initiatives is examined with the impact on outcomes evaluated. Key lessons emerging from the experience of using technology (eGovernment) to modernise service delivery are synthesised with a view to distilling the imperatives to be considered in maximising the benefits from eGovernment initiatives. EGovernment has a critical role to play in service modernisation with best results likely to be achieved through incorporating technology into an integrated service modernisation strategy. Imperatives to be addressed are set out, along with a roadmap for use in undertaking a complex public service modernization programme.

Keywords — Ireland, eGovernment, Public Service Modernisation, service delivery, change management.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. Background to project

Donegal County Council embarked on a service modernisation programme in 1995, with the decision taken by the Council to establish a network of new area based Public Service Centres throughout the County. The initial aim was to deliver the full range of Council services locally to customers through these Public Service Centres. An awareness that customers of the Council were also customers of other public service agencies, with overlapping needs, led to a widening of discussions with these other agencies to consider the customer-centric integration of public services across public service agencies.

Donegal Integrated Service Delivery Project, a partnership of public service agencies, was formally inaugurated in June 2001 to advance the interagency collaboration required to deliver on the evolving vision of integrating service delivery around the needs of the customer. The Partner Agencies in the project are Donegal

County Council, FAS, the Health Service Executive North West, Comhairle and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. This Project has also had a key role in informing the development of the Irish eGovernment programme, with County Donegal named as a pilot site for eGovernment initiatives.

This paper reviews the initiatives undertaken in the modernisation of service delivery and outlines the progress achieved to date. Initiatives undertaken are set in the context of international and national public service modernisation trends and developments over the period and the contribution made to the overall vision of delivering integrated public services evaluated. The interdependence between local and national initiatives is examined with the interdependence and the impact on outcomes evaluated. The developing role of eGovernment in service modernisation and delivery is also analysed.

B. Background to public service modernization developments

The present wave of public service modernisation in Ireland commenced with the launch of the Government's Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) in 1994. Borrowing from public service modernisation developments in Australia and New Zealand it set out the objective of presenting public service management with an opportunity to make a substantial contribution to national development, through the provision of services to the public which were both excellent in quality and effective in delivery. The emphasis was placed on delivering improved quality services to the customers and the initiative set in place a framework to support the required work. The supporting framework was further developed in 1996, through the second report of the Co-ordinating Group of Secretaries [1]. This report set out a vision for the Irish Civil Service based on the provision of quality services, including sound policy advice as the essence of an excellent Civil Service. It stated that the conditions necessary for achievement of the vision included a new management structure and new approaches to human resource management, a fully integrated performance management process, reform of the financial management system and effective use of information technology. The immediate implementation process was based on widening and deepening the SMI

process within the whole public service. The achievement of the vision for the Civil Service was to be built around six key organisational themes:

1. A framework for change emphasising, in particular, a customer orientation, results orientation and the embedding of a strategic management process at the heart of Departments
2. Delivery of quality services
3. High quality policy advice to Government
4. Reduction of red-tape and regulatory reform
5. Open and transparent service delivery
6. Managing cross-departmental issues.

The development of these key organisational themes over the remainder of the decade provided the organisational backdrop and framework within which the Donegal service modernisation programme evolved. Plans were developed in Donegal to localise service delivery and to organise these services around the needs of the customer. Delivery on these service modernisation plans would make an important contribution to addressing a number of the key organisational themes, specifically through the contribution to delivery of quality services, the resultant cross-departmental working and the more open and transparent service delivery. The effective use of information technology was identified as a key enabler in the Irish Governments modernisation initiative and has also been recognised as having an important influence on the unfolding developments in the Donegal ISD Project. The service delivery model would be underpinned by eGovernment policy developments in Europe and Ireland as outlined below.

The European Union [2] recognised the importance of Information Technology and the role it could play in modernising service delivery in the agreed action plan from the Lisbon summit. This action plan set the goal of establishing Europe as the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world. Four distinct stages were identified in the development of online public services with action plans set out to ensure that administrations in member states worked towards this goal. Information provision online was identified as the starting point followed by interaction, two-way interaction, and finally full service transaction online. Recognising the important role of information technology in the modernisation of service delivery and in furtherance of the eEurope agenda the Irish Government published its second action plan on the Information Society [3] setting out the Government's programme for the three years to 2005. Picking up on the eEurope agenda [2] it placed the emphasis on the integration of services stating as a priority the, "*Rearrangement of information and service delivery around user needs, and available in an integrated manner through a single point of contact with government*" (3.2). It also recognised the need for, "*...a greater internal e-government focus on streamlining background processes, facilitating cross-organisational collaboration, continuing*

to develop an organisational culture with a user-centric focus". (3.4). In setting out these objectives the Action Plan aimed to address the issues required to facilitate the full transaction of public services online.

This change of focus onto the organisation and delivery of services around the needs of the customer conferred an additional legitimacy on the Donegal ISD Project. As outlined in the next section work was now well underway in County Donegal on developing an infrastructure capable of supporting a localised delivery of service and work had commenced on tackling the background processes and issues required to facilitate customer-centric service delivery. Planned eGovernment developments as outlined [2] [3] provide the supporting framework to effectively meet the challenge.

II. INITIATIVES AND REFLECTIONS

A. Initiatives implemented in project

The Donegal ISD Project has taken a lead from these national and international trends, developing strategies to translate modernisation initiatives into action at the service delivery level. In the main, this has involved developing the infrastructure to support the new localised service delivery model with a network of five area based Public Service Centres (Carndonagh, Milford, Letterkenny, Dungloe and Donegal) covering the different geographic areas of the County opened for business and delivering services to their local communities. The main innovations arising from the development of the Public Service Centre (PSC) infrastructure and Inter Agency collaboration include the following:

- Independent Information and advice units are in place as a first point of contact in each PSC. Funded in partnership by the participating Agencies, their role is to ensure customers get impartial, independent information on all public services, to connect customers to the relevant service and to act as advocates on behalf of the customer where this is required.
- The full range of services delivered by Donegal County Council has been localised and is now delivered through the Public Service Centres. This includes the accepting of Applications, all follow up activity relating to service applications and requests and the making of all decisions on applications.
- The Public Service Centres have been developed as a first point of contact to services. Customers requiring services from Agencies not based in the Centres are facilitated through the provision of information, application forms and appropriate referrals, thereby removing the need to make further enquiries in regard to basic public services.
- Partner Agencies have relocated and are delivering services from the Public Service Centres adding to customer convenience through increasing the

range of services directly available from the centres and the range of service delivery staff available for consultation in each Centre.

- The provision of new Public Service Centres in each Electoral Area in County Donegal provides an important infrastructure for the staff and customers of public services, providing state of the art meeting facilities along with private consultation facilities where customers can transact business in complete privacy.
- The Public Service Centres also provide the infrastructure (space, systems, people, etc.) and the opportunity to test new concepts and initiatives. This includes testing concepts around the Public Service Broker and alternative methods/channels of service delivery as these come on stream.

The result of these developments is that an infrastructure, physical and people, is now in place capable of delivering a localised public service to citizens and customers in County Donegal. This infrastructure and the underpinning interagency collaboration has been used to undertake an extensive research programme aimed at increasing the understanding of issues involved in integrating service delivery and at developing new service delivery channels. The research undertaken has focused on the issues to be addressed in delivering services on a cross agency and customer focused basis, addressing the organisational, structural, technical and policy issues among others. Research has also been undertaken to identify the most suitable services to be deployed and tested in a pilot Contact Centre and to project the willingness of customers to use alternative channels. This research also reported on the sustainability of a pilot Contact Centre, forecasting the implications of scaling the pilot to National level; and attempted to gauge the effects of the Contact Centre pilot on the traditional points of public service delivery. The most recent research focused on cross-departmental issues in the administration of social housing support schemes and has led to an Irish Government decision in July 2004 to take an integrated interagency approach to the provision of social housing supports and to differentiate more clearly between short and long-term accommodation needs.

In summary, the research programme, made possible by the unique circumstances developed through the project has increased the knowledge of the issues involved in moving to an integrated delivery of public services.

These lengths include appendixes and references.

B. Reflections on progress made

The Public Service Centres developed in County Donegal have made a difference to the customer. Customer surveys undertaken confirm that the effort to date on co-ordinating service delivery across agencies and delivering these services through the new Public Service Centres has made a difference. It has brought the services closer (physically) and made them more accountable through the localisation of the decision-makers. Regrouping services in

the Public Service Centres has made it easier for the public to access services and transact business with government. This addresses the emerging theme [4] [5] [6] of placing the customer at the centre of the reform programme and of developing services around customer needs as opposed to the interests and needs of the individual agency [7].

While the Public Service Centres provide customers with a localised and personalised service, recent research [7] indicates that the customer should have a choice of interfaces available in their dealings with public services. The research undertaken by the Donegal ISD project has identified how other channels (phone, online, etc.) can be used to deliver services and the most suitable services, from the customer and service provider viewpoint, for delivery through alternative channels.

Joining up the front end (where customers interact with services) has contributed to an improvement in service quality and delivery. Research studies on the work of the Donegal ISD Project [8] [9] further confirm that the initiatives implemented have contributed to an improved service to customers. However, real improvements and efficiencies await a re-engineering of the back end (systems and processes) to support the new delivery of services. Process re-engineering is still very relevant and vital to public service modernisation. The national service modernisation effort to date has centred on automating existing services, making information available and getting application forms online with little attention given to rationalising processes. The Donegal project provides the foundation for testing all of the issues surrounding the re-engineering of the back-office processes that are essential to the development of e-government services.

Issues identified and dealt with in enabling the co-ordination and integration of services in the walk in mode, as facilitated by the Public Service Centres, will contribute important information and should help identify the issues to be addressed in delivering services effectively through other channels (online, phone, etc.). This will be important in offering the customer choice of access channel and in utilising technology and systems efficiently to deliver value to all stakeholders. The OECD [10] concluded that the impact of eGovernment at its broadest level is simply better government and noted that eGovernment is more about government than about "e".

Leadership has been identified as a key requirement, with a need for clarity around roles and responsibilities [6]. Top management within each of the Agencies locally has provided a firm focus and leadership to the initiative and has formed a strong guiding coalition among the partner Agencies. It is crucially important to the success of a project of this nature that similar leadership and support is demonstrated at national government level. Support is required from central government and central government Departments to ensure maximum progress is made. The Centre is required to set out the supporting national framework mandating Agencies to collaborate in service provision and to take an active role in co-ordinating the

process. Frameworks envisaged under the SMI initiative and intended for this purpose remain to be fully developed.

The experience to date indicates that technology is not the main or only issue, concurring with the EURIM [11] view that technology is a key enabler in service modernisation but not an end in itself. The Donegal experience has been that people, organisational and structural issues require much attention. An early assumption was made by the Project that Donegal had sufficient control of the agenda to influence upwards and to achieve the desired level of service integration. Over time this has developed into a realisation that there is a bigger game being played out and that the Donegal ISD Project is only one component of the service modernisation process.

Service modernisation involves a major cultural change programme [11] [12] taking time to deliver and implement. The Donegal ISD Project has adopted an inclusive approach involving staff at all levels from the partner agencies in work groups and in the various research initiatives undertaken. This has helped raise awareness and to create the conditions necessary to support a new way of doing business with the customer and has helped in securing the commitment and engagement of staff required to support the ongoing change effort.

This review of the initiatives implemented and progress to date validates locally a number of imperatives emerging internationally on joined up service delivery, summarised as follows:

1. The customer needs to be placed at the centre of any reform programme.
2. The customer should have a choice of interfaces available, including the option of personal contact.
3. Services should be joined up, in advance of offering through electronic channels to have most beneficial results.
4. Real benefits will come from reorganising services and service delivery around the needs of the customer as opposed to the desires or needs of the individual agency.
5. Leadership is vital, with the need for clarity around roles and responsibilities as outlined.
6. Technology is a key enabler in modernisation of services but is not an end in itself.
7. Finally, this all involves a major cultural change and will take time to implement.

The challenge ahead is to build on progress to date, developing and agreeing plans to deal with these imperatives in an integrated manner (between local and national levels) in the drive to deliver joined up customer-centric services. The following section explores this challenge further, setting out the main considerations and issues facing the next wave of modernisation activity.

III. THE CHALLENGE REMAINS

A. Co-ordination of service delivery has made a difference, but integration remains the goal

Co-ordination of service delivery as experienced at present through the Public Service Centre initiative in County Donegal has brought services closer to, and made them more responsive to the customer. While this initiative has brought benefits to the customer, international experience [6] [10] [11] confirms that further steps to integrate service delivery around the needs of the customer are required in order to deliver the full potential to the Agencies and other stakeholders. The efficiencies to be gained through the elimination of the duplication of effort and the introduction of a shared service concept remain untapped. The next wave of activity nationally and locally will have to deal with rationalising processes and integrating services in order to maximise the benefit to all stakeholders.

B. Structural issues require attention

Lack of strong leadership, co-ordination of effort and a coherent framework at the centre have been identified as key inhibitors to service modernisation. These key issues remain to be addressed and are required urgently to facilitate the collaboration required at central, local and all levels in order to deliver customer-centric services. The level of interagency work and collaboration experienced in County Donegal does not exist elsewhere and requires a coherent national support framework if it is to be successfully replicated.

C. The value of local projects

Donegal ISD Project provides an infrastructure that can facilitate further innovation in service organisation and delivery. More importantly, the co-operation and collaboration at all levels in the partner Agencies provides a framework and context to support innovation. The willingness to collaborate and to engage in innovation provides an ideal opportunity to test initiatives before having to migrate them into the wider public service.

D. Finding quick wins

In order to sustain a project such as this for a long period it is important to identify areas where progress can be made and quick wins achieved. In the context of the Donegal ISD Project social housing provision and housing support services have been identified as one such area and will be used by the project to further promote interagency service provision around the needs of the customer over the coming period. Successful design and implementation of this interagency initiative will involve change to back office processes and prove the concept of joined up customer-centric service delivery.

In conclusion, the following quote from a EURIM paper [12] confirms the scale of the challenge involved:

"Modernising Government is a huge change programme on an unprecedented scale".

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