

Ray Whitehouse Head of IT at Havering LBC discusses the impact of the forthcoming National eService Delivery Standards in ICT

What are e Standards?

When ODPM asked us to lead on The NeSDS programme to deliver a range of e-service delivery standards we were happy to do so. It is important that we all help each other as local authorities to provide efficient and consistent levels of service to our customers. Havering LBC is committed to providing the best in Customer Service through all our service areas and we are making excellent progress in reaching our goal – the efficiency agenda is high priority for us and the NeSDS programme is part of those key drivers for us.

The NeSDS programme will develop a series of national eService standards across a number of local authority work streams that will provide best practice and guidance in each service area. This will assist local authorities to benchmark the e-efficiency of the services they provide to their customers and most importantly help develop a consistent level of customer service nationwide. The standards will be developed as a collaboration between senior local authority professionals, professional bodies and practising specialists in each area. This will draw on the excellence already available in the local authority departments and make it available to the local authority community as a whole.

Why did Havering IT want to get involved?

A key part of the ICT Strategy at Havering is to work with other agencies and partners to allow us to accelerate our IT capability. When I joined Havering LBC four years ago, there was a lot of work to do in bringing the basic ICT infrastructure up to date and also start work on the e-government agenda. We all talk about working in silos in local government for example between Social Services and Environmental Services which gave us serious obstacles to overcome for supplying joint services to our customers.

One issue is that a lot of councils worked on their own in this area when in fact working together would allow us to significantly improve our services - for example why do we all need our own computer centres when sharing them would give us all an efficiency gain?

So over the past 4 years I have looked to improve our partnership, working to both improve our capability and to enable the start of merged service delivery. The NeSDS programme is the obvious next step.

Why are the IT standards important to the Post Gershon Environment?

Gershon implies that efficiencies can be improved by joint working, but joint working can only come to fruition if the values and ambitions of each organisation working together converge. Just like IT Technical Standards, you can only really work together if the different elements work to the same standards. So the standards give you a platform for common delivery of services which makes it easier to work together and learn from each other. It is a lot easier to move a 'best practice process' from one

organisation to another if they are working to the same standards. This also fits into the wider agenda of joined up government that lies behind the e-Government Programme as a whole and the Government Connect programme in particular.

How will the IT standards help the LA IT departments as a whole?

I have already talked about how the standards can improve efficiency through partnership working. One of the common issues with e-Government is the interpretation of the various requirements - what does it mean to become BVPI 157 compliant? What does your service look like in the e-enabled world? How do you measure your progress at becoming a true e-enabled service organisation? All these questions have been difficult to answer, everyone has a different viewpoint on what it means.

So by developing the IT e Service standards, it allows every IT team to focus on what they have to do to become an e-enabled service, what actions they have to take to get there, and what progress they are making. The IT e Service standards will provide a baseline so we can at last measure ourselves and our progress. Once we understand where we are and where we have to get to in a common framework, then we can concentrate on getting there quickly.

What benefits will Havering IT get from using the standards?

Quite simply we will be able to measure our performance and put targeted actions in place to accelerate our service improvements in this area. By using common standards, we can more easily import best practice from other organisations and share in the creation of that best practice. This is the power of joint working – we need to share what we do well and learn from other Local Authorities when they excel in any given area.

How will Sharing Best Practice amongst local authorities help drive efficiency?

Sharing standards and best practice will enable us to accelerate towards a shared service environment which will deliver a significant contribution to efficiency. I have already mentioned shared computer facilities; let's talk about sharing support facilities to deliver further efficiencies. Using revenues, benefits and council tax as an example, since there are only a few application suppliers in this market, many of us use the same systems.

This means that every authority on the same platform have the same annual upgrades, and the same statutory changes to the systems each year. We all have to test these changes and make them available to our users and customers and e-enable these applications to support web channels, so we all develop interfaces to allow them to do so.

Taking London, imagine if ten councils using the same application decided to merge the service supply of that application, the upgrade has to be done just once, tested once and made available to the customers once rather than ten times over. We can share support expertise rather than have ten support teams.

Admittedly creating merged capability is a major project, but a very quick efficiency win is available meantime if all those ten councils shared best practice for that application. Application development and support efficiencies should be done once and re used many times - this is a cross industry norm and a proven technique to drive down costs.

With a number of programmes looking to rationalise IT across LA's including Government Connect, how will the IT standards simplify the process of creating shared working processes and help the implementation of priority outcomes?

Other than shared service delivery, it is only a simple step to take the argument one step further. By sharing standards, best practice and working together, we can accelerate the move towards achieving the priority outcomes.

The eService standards actually help you map to Priority Outcomes because the minimum required standard for the eService standards are the same as those required by the Priority Outcomes. Havering is also working with its North East London Partners and London Connects to understand how best to use the Government Connect offerings in partnership to further deliver the priority outcomes as part of the joined up government agenda. A simple example is that by working in partnership we can easily and cheaply deliver single registration and authentication purely by using a more cost effective charging model which benefits everyone in the partnership. We are also working together to pilot services so we do it once and then share the outcome – joint working efficiency in action.

You can download information on the NeSDS programme at www.NeSDS.gov.uk