

Local authority data-sharing and digital transformation

Transcript of a speech given by Jason Kitcat, former leader of Brighton & Hove City Council at 'Everything Happens Somewhere' GeoPlace conference, 19 May 2015

Introduction from Richard Mason: Jason Kitcat has just stepped down from the award winning local authority Brighton & Hove City Council, the UK's first Green led principal authority. Jason sits on the leading members' group for the Key Cities Association of 25 mid-sized cities, and also has a number of roles in the Local Government Association. Up until recently he was a Green City Councillor for Brighton & Hove for eight years. Before becoming leader in 2012, he was a lead member for finance. His professional background is in technology and online business.

Good morning! Let's try that again - 'good morning'! Oh good, you're awake, that's a good start! Excellent.

Hello, thank you very much for having me. Look at you all, you're so wonderful and good looking and smart. It's great to be here. I mean look at you, you together have created this marvelous, single database of address and street information for the UK, you really are fantastically clever. That is brilliant. And you've come such a long way. (But still we don't know how many roads we've got – I think that's quite interesting isn't it).

But I do think so much more is possible, and I guess I'm here to give you a bit of a pep talk. Because I don't think enough of your chief executive and leaders know you exist, and I think that needs to change – do you agree with me on that? Ok, good. And I think it's kind of boring but we need to say it: the truth is the jaws of doom – the scissors of hell – they are coming down on us, the budgets are being squeezed are they not? Yes.

And what we do know for a fact is that going digital does save money. A digital transaction can be pennies, a phone call can be pounds and a face to face transaction tens of pounds. And yet progress is somewhat underwhelming in local government. A recent survey found that chief executives and leaders thought that their councils were 70% transformed digitally, and yet citizens thought only 26%. Hm, bit of a disconnect there isn't there.

So I think the policy exchange reports, 'Small Pieces Loosely Joined', is a fantastic piece of work, it was referred to earlier. And I think my argument would be that in five years time local government will be dead unless you up your game on digital, basically. And without you and the work you do it's not going to happen. So it's interesting to see that Camden were one of the four Exemplars. Camden are pushing forward on the digital agenda.

So what I think we need to do, is we need to up our risk appetite, because the natural inclination when budgets are being cut, things are squeezed, is to retreat, and to go 'I'm just going to do what I do, and I'm going to not worry about that other stuff,

because it's difficult'. And I believe unfortunately that that is the wrong approach. Now is the time for you to speak up and to shout out more than you ever have done before about why what you're doing is important, and how it can make a difference across every part of public services in your area.

Now councils are big and complicated places. Brighton & Hove: £750million budget, 9,000 staff – that's a lot of people, a lot of things that can go wrong. But also think of the impact they can make in peoples' lives, and when they join up with the clinical commissioning group, with the fire authority, with police, that's a lot of data, a lot of 'place' information being mashed around, and a lot of mistakes being made with poor systems, puddles of data not talking to each other. There are huge opportunities to do this better, smarter, faster, cheaper.

So, what I would like you to do is to find a pet Councillor. You need to find someone who gets digital a little bit on your local authority. Have them become a lead member for this stuff, and maybe they'll whisper in the ear of a cabinet member, and then the leader. Find a way to have a conversation with the chief executive and executive directors. Unfortunately not enough of them know what's going on here. Admittedly there are rather too many acronyms so maybe scale down the acronym soup a bit. But you need to get out there and explain what is going on and why it's important.

And don't be afraid. Most Councillors are trying to do the right thing, and they are looking for answers and for ideas. And if they don't know about it, they're not going to support it, they're not going to back it up in that budget process when they're having to take £23million out or whatever number it is for that year. So education of your decision makers is a key task for the next year, if I may be so bold.

I also would argue on data sharing that risk appetite again has been rather de minimis. Generally what happens in data sharing, whether this is social care and health, or it's between two different public sector authorities, is Legal come in and go, 'Ooh, well, yes that would be really good, however.....'. Now, my take-home from this, having been through an equal pay settlement process that was extraordinarily painful, is that legal advice is not life advice. Legal advice is just there about a balance of legal risks. So you go, 'Thank you very much Mr Lawyer that was very interesting'. But then you have to balance it off with other benefits, like the public good, like the fact that collaboration is the only way that we're going to survive for the next five years.

So when it comes to data sharing, again, up the risk appetite, because there are places like Hampshire, who are sharing care records – sensitive personal data – just by doing something simple and saying, 'Dear person, would you like us to share your data so we can help you better?'. 'Oh yes please, I'll have that'. And it's fine, the world hasn't come to an end. And I've been party to too many conversations recently where everyone says that data sharing is really important, but we need government to solve it for us. Well, don't wait for the big guy to come along and make it all better. It may not happen.

And I think, finally, because I believe in being quick, and helping you now all march out and change your local authorities – oh sorry you have to wait around first for the rest of the conference – you need to find a way to be change agents, to talk to people and encourage them to understand why this stuff's important. Because this is

transformational stuff. All the stuff you're talking about here changes so much about how the systems in local authorities and public services can work. Almost every single part of local government I can think of can change for the better, if people were using those reference numbers, if people were using open data, if they were connecting, if they were talking to each other.

What happens too often is that people don't even know about it, and they go off and buy a product that doesn't talk to anything else (has this ever happened in your local authority? People have gone and bought a product... yep, I'm seeing nods!). They've gone and bought a product that doesn't connect to anything else, but they've paid the money now so they think they might as well stick with it and make it work for me. And then you're stuck in another 5+2 contract: 7 years lost. So you need to not assume that people know about this stuff. You can't assume that, you have to educate them.

My experience, having been a leader of a council, and on the Key Cities group, of I think it's 27 mid-sized cities now, this is just not on their radar, because their backgrounds generally aren't of a technical bent. So unless you talk to them and find a way to get this on their agenda, they're not going to know and they'll keep making the same mistakes.

So, more power to your elbow, well done for the progress so far, and keep going, be bold, be proud, be change agents.

Thank you very much.