InOurView

Special feature | Summer 2016

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Leaving with ideas: lessons from Europe's cities

Major Cities of Europe – IT Users Group: experiences of the Florence 2016 conference. A special feature from Socitm's 'In Our View' magazine, issue 9

City renaissance

City innovators from Europe and beyond met recently in Florence to discuss digital government. Martin Ferguson was there

"Have e-government, digital government and smart cities implementations been worthwhile?" The questioner was Glyn Evans, a past President of Socitm, sporting the horns of the devil himself.

The answer from participants in a debate of the Major Cities of Europe (MCE) annual conference held in Florence in Italy was yes – if a qualified one. Formed in 1982, MCE is a non-profit and independent membership organisation of CIOs, IT managers and heads of departments, all leading experts on innovation in cities.

Alan Shark, chief executive of the US's Public Technology Institute, proposed that we are moving into an era of smart government that needs smart citizens engaged in open policy-making and co-design of holistic, integrated services. Peter Parycek, professor of e-governance at Austria's Danube University, reinforced this point saying that citizens expect personalised, simplified and mobile services borne out of cooperative development.

Name of the rose: the event was held at a converted monastery in Florence

But those at the sharp end were not convinced this is being delivered. Moira Benelli of the Italian Association of Local Authorities said that there has been no systematic approach to the digital agenda. She added that the focus has been on technology rather than people, while employees remain inadequately skilled in innovation and digital transformation.

Nevertheless, Alessandra Poggiani, director of Venice City Council's IT company Venis, pointed out that the world is becoming digital whether we like it or not. Florence Tornare of Villes Internet, a French group of towns and cities, advocated a role for local government in creating the conditions for digital innovation, in particular by opening up data. My own contribution was a very personal story of adoption – a broken 'relational service'. I cited the progress made with 'transactional services' and nascent 'data analytics' enabling better targeting and prevention, while relational services remain undiscovered territory.

The debate concluded was that progress has undoubtedly been made, but there remains much to be done to engage citizens and to really transform the way that government and citizens support each other in creating smart, sustainable cities.

Earlier, Stefano Devescovi, business development executive at IBM Italy, had introduced a major theme running through the conference – the shift in focus from technology to people, from city as a platform to a platform for digital citizenship. He set out a model of horizontal ecosystems spanning public-private-third sector and vertical ecosystems such as e-justice, e-welfare and e-governance.

Horns of a dilemma: Glyn Evans questioned worth of e-government

This theme was reflected in IBM's presentation on Digital Cities for a better citizen's life, enabling organisations or individuals to consume value created by others or to deliver value to others in areas such as managing tourists' behaviour, economic growth, facilitating constituent-led innovation and working with business.

Other speakers covered the Italian Government's move to establish a charter of digital citizenship – the right to a digital ID and address – to provide a platform for citizens to fulfil their rights and responsibilities. Norbert Weidinger, deputy CIO of Vienna City Council, built on this citizen focus by explaining the Austrian capital's shared approach to its digital strategy comprising three phases: the online collection of ideas, composition of digital agenda and discussion of digital agenda online. Both he and Jörn Riedel, CIO of the City and State of Hamburg, emphasised the importance of addressing the digital gender gap and the digital literacy of citizens and employees.

Rafael Monterde, general manager of Valencia City Council, demonstrated how power was being given 'back to the people' through Valencia's urban planning app – designed around citizen's needs, not around legacy systems, staff and the organisation. In a neighbourhood slated in a 1990s plan for redevelopment, public resistance spans over 17 years leading to a change of approach by the city council.

Around 6,000 citizens have used the app to generate new proposals, to validate and debate investment options and to vote on the outcome. Interestingly, this compares with just 337 offline participants.

Michael Grüebler, head of innovation and technology for the City of Zurich, demonstrated how participation can be increased through conceiving the city as a digital platform for connecting public administration and its communities. He explained how government can be made invisible, increasing digital literacy of citizens by using wikis, natural language query and a shared Internet of Things network to open up data to them as 'data scientists' in their own right.

Gabriele Folli, the deputy mayor for environment at Parma City Council, demonstrated to those of us from the UK that we have hardly scratched the surface of smart waste collection. Parma's smarter waste app tells users when the bin collection will arrive, including holiday variations, and combines with sensor technology that scans waste as bins are opened, reducing the amount of green waste contaminated by accident. Parma's pay-as-you-throw system has also made it possible for the majority of citizens to reduce their waste bills.

> **Parma uses sensor technology to scan bins and operate a pay-as-you-throw system for residents**
> **Gabriele Folli, deputy mayor, Parma City Council**

Julie Oxley, head of information management and technology at Leeds City Council, brought everyone down to earth with Bob, a person with multiple needs. (News, p10) Combining and analysing multiple datasets enables Leeds' social services to pinpoint people like Bob who are at risk of social isolation and to facilitate community-based solutions to meeting their needs. That and the integrated digital care record now deployed throughout Leeds saves public services money and resources, by facilitating new models of care and significantly reduces costs in areas such as hospital admissions and re-admissions following discharge.

Leveraging innovation and benefits to citizens through fostering the conditions for start-ups featured in presentations from Barcelona, Tel Aviv and Issy-les-Mollineaux – the latter featuring a multi-modal transport app.

Phillippe Quevauviller, a research programming and policy officer at the European Commission, reminded us of the importance of getting the right information to citizens – a focus of his EU research programme on disaster resilience and citizens' response to flood warnings and risks.

6,000 citizens have used Valencia's urban planning app for proposals, debate and voting
Rafael Monterde, general manager of Valencia City Council

A much-anticipated presentation came remotely from London with Dr Catherine Mulligan, a research fellow in the Innovation and Entrepreneurship group at Imperial College, explaining how blockchain technology is set to change the relationship between independent parties to co-create a permanent, unchangeable record of an exchange of value.

Mulligan told the event that the removal of middlemen along with a transparent, permanent record of transactions can redefine how we run cities and how government provides local services. She suggested examples such as smart contracts in areas such as waste management, where smart bins could be connected to the blockchain, residents could give feedback to the same source and contractors could use it for access and claiming payment.

Blockchain technology can also be used as a platform for identity management and for protecting critical infrastructures such as sensors liable to attack by having the system monitor all changes to firmware and the network.

Blockchain technology can redefine how cities are run and how government provides local services
Catherine Mulligan, research fellow, Imperial College

Both the digital gender gap and digital literacy of citizens and employees needs addressing
Jörn Riedel, CIO of the City and State of Hamburg

Nick O'Reilly, director of ICT at Derby City Council shared his 'journey to the cloud' at the event. (Personal view, p12) Later in a blog post he summed up the conference in a set of 10 'takeaways': it is people that matter and we need digital services that benefit people; we can share art and culture digitally to enrich lives; cities have a role to incubate innovation; we need to design for now and the future and the digitally native generations, while continuing to support those who find it hard to access and use digital services; we need to learn more about blockchain and we achieve far more through collaboration than through competition including regionally, nationally and internationally.

He added that we need open platforms, open source and open data, as one without the others will limit what we can all achieve; a smart city brings together all the city agencies; keep it simple – the more simple and easy it is for people to use, the more benefit it will bring; and the digital gender gap is a major challenge across Europe.

As O'Reilly wrote: "The different perspectives, context and insight I gained have certainly given me new and increased motivation and new evidence and insight to continue to build my digital journey and the approach in Derby City. I have a much richer set of examples and case studies, I hopefully have a new network of experienced contacts and I have a new interest in how we bring art, heritage and culture to life digitally."

Martin Ferguson is Socitm's director of policy and research

Major Cities of Europe: www.majorcities.eu

Digital Vienna: https://digitalcity.wien

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Socitm Annual 2016

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- Eddie Copeland, Director of Government Innovation, Nesta Innovation Lab
- Martin Ferguson, Director of Policy and Research, Socitm
- Aileen Murphie, Director, Local Government VFM, National Audit Office
- Dr Sue Black OBE, Advisor, Government Digital Service; Honorary Professor, UCL & Founder, BCSWomen and #techmums

17-18 October 2016
Milton Keynes

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