



# Putting the **'e'** back into reform

A recent OECD report warns that Ireland is seriously underperforming in the delivering of services through IT. **Kevin Kernan** argues the time is now right to reinvest in e-government

Amid the political and economic turmoil of the last six months, the publication of an OECD report “Ireland – Towards an Integrated Public Sector” has received far less attention than it otherwise might have. Examining how the public service works in Ireland, it provides, in essence, a roadmap for reform, something for which the new Taoiseach previously declared support for as Minister for Finance and which is once again an administrative imperative in more straitened economic circumstances.

The OECD report expressed particular concern that Ireland has fallen behind in international benchmarks of online service provision, often termed e-government. E-government is not a term we hear used too often now, but it was on everyone’s lips a few short years ago.

### Embracing IT

Those were the heady days when Ireland seemed on the cusp of embracing the IT revolution in an integrated and innovative way. With the Lisbon Strategy aiming to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, Ireland was launching Science Foundation Ireland (with its particular support for Information and Communications Technology) and establishing the now sadly defunct Information Society Commission. There was the launch of electronic voting; the development of Ennis as Ireland’s Information Age Town; Bertie Ahern and Bill Clinton using digital signatures to sign an inter-governmental e-commerce document; excitement over the Digital Hub and MediaLab; and much talk of the advent of cheap, ubiquitous broadband. E-government, the cost-effective delivery of online Government services in a customer-centric fashion, was seen as part of the overall package. Major improvements in online access for citizens, businesses and government employees were just around the corner.

Ireland initially ranked respectably in the Accenture global rankings on e-government progress, mainly due to the successful implementation of ROS, the Revenue Online Service, while information portals such as BASIS (Business Access to State Information and Services) and OASIS (Online Access to Services, Information and Support) were being designed around the major life events of businesses (start-up, development, employment, paying taxes) and citizens (birth, marriage and death). Other sites were not just informational but also transactional, allowing for example, the online payment of motor tax and waste charges. Queuing for many Government services was set to become a thing of the past.

### Joined up government

However, many of these e-government initiatives did not live up to expectations, with high profile projects scrapped, delayed or way over budget. Electronic voting, PPARS and integrated ticketing have become part of the



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Irish lexicon for failure. As a result, momentum has been lost and there is now a distinct lack of political appetite in Government to make Ireland a leader in the information society.

But why is e-government important? Most discussions of a government’s role in the economic activity of a country centre on its function as a shaper of economic policy. However, as the country’s largest employer, largest procurer and with the largest customer base, the role of government as a direct contributor to the national economy is often overlooked. Typically, about 30 per cent of government administration expenditure supports direct, usually face-to-face interactions with citizens attempting to complete transactions requiring government involvement. So the potential for improved services and cost savings is considerable.

This is no simple challenge. Progress in e-government is often characterised simply by personal or business experience. While a positive front-end or customer experience is critical, it is improvements at the back-end that really characterise a sophisticated approach to e-government, and where real productivity gains can be realised.

“Joined-up government” is the Holy Grail but unfortunately, present government

structures are islands of automation, with poor information-sharing and little horizontal integration. Automatic sharing of information horizontally across diverse Government back offices has the potential to reduce errors, minimise duplication and eliminate unnecessary customer intervention. For example, the use of electronic health records could help increase physician efficiency, improve collaborative working, reduce medical errors and promote a more standardised approach to healthcare.

### Learning from others

This is where benchmarking can be important, both with the private sector and experiences in other countries. However, benchmarking with the private sector should not be restricted to salaries and pensions. Best private sector practices in organisational structures, process design, project management and speed of execution must be examined. In the private sector, firms typically make IT investments to eliminate business inefficiencies such as multiple data entry, to improve information quality and accessibility and to manage their customers more effectively. ERP (enterprise resource planning) and CRM (customer relationship management) are business-speak for linked IT systems providing an integrated, whole-company approach to meeting customer needs – exactly what is necessary in the public sector. As far as benchmarking with other governments is concerned, Ireland is overly reliant on the European Union. For e-government, the approach of Singapore would be more relevant and innovative than our EU counterparts.

Finally, vision and leadership are the real essentials to progress the e-government agenda in Ireland. At present, there is no single Government minister charged with e-government responsibility. As result, no one is able to provide the drive and energy necessary to implement effective e-government. Such leadership is critical to develop and communicate the vision for an e-enabled government and overcome the significant organisational challenges ahead.

### Investment

Taoiseach Cowan has already committed to full implementation of the current National Development Plan and Transport 21, though certain investments such as Metro North may be deferred due to the state of the public purse. Counter-cyclical investment in major projects is necessary for our economy, both to address the historical under-investment in transport, water and waste infrastructure, and to encourage investment and employment. In responding to the OECD report and in line with his stated commitment to public sector reform, Mr Cowan should ensure that e-government progress becomes a central platform of his tenure as Taoiseach. ■

Kevin Kernan (pictured above), Head of ACCA.