


GCC

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New options for ID

Ken Eastwood

Leader of Nomads

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Nomad's new life

Ken Eastwood, the national lead for Public Sector Nomads, tells Mark Say the programme has taken a new direction since moving under Barnsley's wing

A few relieved cheers went up in November of last year, when Barnsley Council announced that it would rescue Project Nomad from extinction. The programme to develop mobile working for local government had begun life as one of the National Projects for local IT services, then flourished for a few years under the ownership of Cambridgeshire CC. But tightening budgets led the county to cut the purse strings. It was announced that the programme was coming to an end, then Barnsley stepped in at the eleventh hour.

Almost a year later its future is still uncertain, but under the leadership of Ken Eastwood, the borough council's assistant director and one of the founders of Nomad, it has spread its wings to take in other areas of technology. A look at the website (www.publicsectornomads.com) shows that it is getting into virtual worlds, touchscreen technologies and the broader areas of efficiency and new working practices. Eastwood says this reflects the fact that these are beginning to link with each other in different ways.

"What we've seen over the years is that these things overlap. It's not just about mobile, but about new ways of working supported by technology. This can include, for example, the use of social media.

"I see this in a very broad way; there are a lot of tools and issues we need to consider to really maximise the potential of new ways of working. It's bigger than silo applications and particular lines of business. I'm more interested in what is really going to change the way we



think about the way we work and how we provide or commission services."

He says the current financial outlook for the public sector, with cuts already beginning to bite and likely to get worse, makes it a necessity to get into these areas. Although the technologies are yet to meet their full potential, Eastwood insists there are big opportunities in experimenting with them as early as possible.

"The public sector is going to look significantly different when it comes out the other end of this change process," he says. "How we're going to meet some of

the challenges; we need to deploy new ways of working.

"Things we've been talking about for a long time will become important: sharing assets, reducing our building stock, reducing our travel costs, being more collaborative in how we work together. These are the sorts of things that will be deployed.

"Previously they have been 'nice to do' sometimes, and I guess in some areas have been a little bit of a step too far, but with the challenges we face now nothing is too difficult to consider. A lot of the cultural issues that have stopped some

of these developments are now going to be confronted."

For example, mobile technology will remain a key part of all this, although Eastwood says that the applications are now just "one part of the jigsaw". Getting the most from them will involve tying mobile up with how buildings and collaborative work spaces are used, how technology and HR policies can support people in working from home, and how public bodies manage change. He says the opinion at programme workshops has been strongly in favour of bringing all these things together.

Significant progress

There has already been significant progress with some of the technologies, on a much broader scope than Public Sector Nomads. He emphasises the importance of videoconferencing and webcasting for reducing the need for travel, and says that while take-up has been limited this is likely to change out of necessity.

Online conferencing also has its potential, and there is a lot of scope for the public sector to make more of social media. Eastwood's council has its own project in the shape of BarnsleyBuzz, which is piloting a media platform named Social Text for local government (see box). He is also particularly impressed by the potential for smart phones, talking of projections that in two or three years about 85% of the population will have one.

"I'm trying to think ahead of the curve on what that will mean in terms of people's access to services," Eastwood says. "There's a huge opportunity there, and we need to get behind what it will mean in terms of reporting and requesting a service, and for access into our organisations for citizens. But also

for how we can push information back into our communities."

The development of the Public Sector Network and the G Cloud could provide a further boost, and Eastwood talks up their potential to help public bodies cut their costs through rationalisation and standardisation. But he suggests there is still plenty to do to ensure they can help to get the best from mobile technologies.

"I guess for me I'm really interested in mobile access to those networks. Is enough happening around next generation broadband infrastructure to overlay that with wireless networks covering wide areas? I'm not so sure; I think there's more progress we could make there."

He says there are plenty of small scale but interesting pilots on using mobile apps to handle service requests, take reports and push out information, and that these could soon prove as significant as website transactions. But it demands more strategic thinking, "the future visioning thing" as he describes it, to work out how to get the most benefit for public services.

It leads to a term that is often used as a buzzword but which seems appropriate for his perspective – holistic. Eastwood says this is where he would like the programme to cement its reputation.

"Things are changing very much, almost on a daily basis, but as the big quangos disappear the public sector will be left with little source of support and facilitation, I see a niche for Public Sector Nomads to fill that gap and provide some

"As the big quangos disappear the public sector will be left with little source of support and facilitation"

thought leadership, facilitate an active network of practitioners and join these things up.

"The other way people are describing this is about enterprise wide change, getting away from individual services and business. We've got to change the way they deliver."

Funding obstacle

He acknowledges, however, that the programme is still in transition.


"We don't have any secured funding to maintain the programme, so we're really bobbing along, looking for opportunity and revising what are core work should be.

"It doesn't mean we haven't been doing anything. We are still providing a telephone and online support service for people who are aware of Nomad, we're maintaining the content, and we've been involved in a number of events.

"Our ambition has been for a relaunch and to have some funding for the programme to make it sustainable. I'm still looking for that."

There have been efforts to do a deal with a strategic partner, but there is also the possibility of something less ambitious emerging. This could involve a facilitator to maintain the network with the scope to grow incrementally. Eastwood has been in negotiations with various parties and is still optimistic that he will achieve the preferred option.

"I do think we're going to find a way through this, there is a need for it. At the moment we're in the slash and burn stage, disassembling the machinery. We're then going to reflect on what we're left with, then think where are we going to go now?"

"It's at that stage something like Public Sector Nomads could come to the fore." 

A buzz in Barnsley

The council's internal social media pilot is designed to create an online collaborative community, accessible via any internet connected device, PC or smart phone. It says it is one of the first local authorities in the country to evaluate enterprise social media. BarnsleyBuzz is going on for six months and will be assessed on how widely the platform is adopted, evidence of improvement in communication at all levels, and perceptions of improvements in how staff work together, with an emphasis on fewer meetings and less email. Users create profiles and can join or be invited into groups based on organisational structures, along with other more social communities. Whether the groups are open or closed

depends on their nature.

The communication tools differ to email in being more like chat rooms, albeit focused on council activities, with users being visible to others in the system. It also involves the use of blogs, microblogging, collaborative workspaces and wikis to simplify joint working on documents and procedures. Audit logs are available if required, although the council does not expect managers to routinely measure employees' usage. The cost of the pilot is £20,000, which the council says is a small sum for an enterprise wide solution with the potential to provide significant improvements in how its staff works together.