Local Government as a Platform – the power to transform

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The advent of austerity, more complex organisational delivery arrangements and the disruptive influence of rapid technological change have all contributed to a different sort of strategic environment for local government: one where quick responses to changing circumstances, the rapid transfer of resources from one activity to another, and the ability to experiment and innovate, are likely to determine success.

Radical transformation is a necessity and the obvious place to look for inspiration in relation to these challenges is the technology sector, where small, innovative organisations regularly steal a march on large established ones, despite inferior capacity and resources.

At central government level, the Government Digital Service has achieved some notable advances with Government as a Platform (a digital platform that acts as a base for providing public services) and it is currently focusing on standardised government-wide platforms for payments or booking appointments. However, while a cheap and reusable standardised IT platform for this type of function, available across local government, could cut costs, it can also be seen as the antithesis of what is good about local government.

Government as a Platform will only succeed if it is seen as being about than technology, but it is in danger of being reduced to something that is only understood by those who know their APIs from their Open Standards. Even more importantly, the notion that standardised IT systems represent the full potential of the concept as Government as a Platform could undermine one of the most intriguing ideas about how technology can change the delivery of government functions and public services for the better.

In the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, as in many others, instead of public services being binary transactions between councils and their residents, where the resident has the need and the council provides the solution, we believe that by working together we can deliver better for less.

The council will not always provide a direct solution to challenges within the locality, but instead will look to marshal all the available resources (public sector, voluntary sector, business, community and individual) and create an environment in which a collective response can flourish. Government as a Platform can be the catalyst and the launch pad for this.

In the technology sector, many well-known businesses that are growing exponentially are 'platform businesses' that are using the power of technology to connect consumers and providers on their 'platform'. Think, Ebay, Amazon, AirBNB or Uber.

All part of the 'sharing economy' they harness the collective power of the system by providing a way for it to connect. In the case of Uber for example, they don't seek to meet the demand for taxis by providing a fleet of taxis, they do so by providing a platform so that those who already have the necessary resources are put in touch with those who need them.

A platform provides a foundation on which others can build. It doesn't have to be a technological solution. The parallels with a local authority looking to promote strong and mutually supportive communities within its local area are clear. Instead of looking to provide direct point to point solutions, authorities can seek to manage and regulate the market so that demand can be met within the system.

Crucially, in the same way that AirBnB enables individuals with a spare room to compete with global hotel chains, Local Government as a Platform must bring together established care providers with socially aware citizens who want to play their part in helping fellow community members. Now that really could be transformational.