

BREAKING DOWN THE SILOS

Nick Smee argues that the time has come for local authorities to break down barriers and reap the rewards of working more collaboratively on infrastructure projects

A great deal of planning and investment goes into maintaining and developing the UK's infrastructure. It is important that operational units and departments within agencies and local authorities across this sector work together collaboratively. There is much to be gained from coordinating activities to address the goal of keeping infrastructure assets in optimum condition, while carrying out maintenance and development efficiently and keeping the public informed and happy with the work done.

Unfortunately, individual departments within local authorities have tended to work in isolation. They have developed their own plans and strategies and focused on executing them as efficiently as possible. In doing this, however they have generally worked alone. There are multiple reasons why.

Each individual functional area has generally recruited and retained people with the skillsets to provide these services.

Designing or rolling out new highways



'We are now on the verge of a breakthrough in terms of cross-department collaboration' – Nick Smee, CEO, Yotta

infrastructure is different to conducting electrical inspections of streetlights, or managing bin collections, for example, and particular aptitudes are needed for each area.

Departmental staff have often also followed specialist training programmes, designed to make them professionals in a single aspect of local government activity. Each of those operational areas has specific assets to maintain and manage and seeks particular skills and services to do just that. Furthermore, software has been aligned to support those activities with, e.g., specialist applications to deal exclusively with streetlights or highways.

Added to this, the way local authorities have been funded by central government has encouraged them to develop dedicated departments focused on green spaces, or waste collection, etc., together with their own often jealously-guarded data stores.

In other words, we are still working in a world of operational silos. We have seen examples of different approaches being loosely brought together - gritting services being aligned with adult social care data to help prevent the elderly from falling, or road condition cameras placed on bin lorries to pinpoint pothole locations – but these have largely just reached proof-of-concept

stage. Moreover, they typically have not involved collaborative working across the highways, environmental; neighbourhood or place-based services spaces. In those kinds of areas, local authority departments have largely continued to work in isolation from an operational point-of-view.

Obstacles in the way

Local authorities and agencies are now generally aware of the benefits of moving away from this siloed approach to service provision, but they also understand that there are barriers to doing this. Cultural issues around change remain and you still hear the well-worn phrase, "we have always done it this way, so why change now." In an age of digital transformation, this kind of viewpoint does not stand up to scrutiny from an operational or financial perspective, but a focused change management approach is imperative to keep staff on-side.

Technology has historically been a barrier. Historically, there was no software available on the market capable of giving councils that single view of all their service areas and then looking at how they interplay, using the results to support better cross-department decision-making.

Change is going to come

We are now on the verge of a breakthrough in terms of cross-department collaboration and several factors are coming together to drive change. Funding is becoming tighter and council workforces are shrinking, making the need to cooperate outside the confines of the department ever-more urgent.

Coupled with this, senior council staff are increasingly tasked with transforming the customer journey; making it easy for residents to log service requests

and streamlining the way operational teams deliver that service to them.

Moreover, heads of departments are generally now responsible for a larger number of operational areas, in many of which they have little real experience. Councils are also concentrating on doing more with less. In line with this, there is a recognition that multi-skilling staff to do multiple types of work will make them more effective.

Finally, we are seeing technology emerging that is capable of connecting multiple assets, systems and people; bringing together different data sources; driving efficiencies, and giving senior decision-makers a single digital view of services and how they interact.

Reaping the rewards

Overall, we predict these factors will coalesce as part of a 'perfect storm' to drive through change. We are increasingly witnessing waste provision, for example, factored into the planning process for new house building programmes. This has entailed the coming together of local authorities' planning and environmental services departments. One benefit of this kind of collaboration might be more careful planning for the location of wheelie bins when new housing developments are being planned and the provision of underground bin storage and communal bin stores when required.

There are also potential benefits to be had here for departments whose funding is particularly tight, to work in close partnership with those benefiting from more generous budgets, thereby driving operational efficiencies. For example, local authority tree or arboreal teams that are already typically small and with limited budgets, have seen their funding shrink further in recent

times. However, they have benefitted by joining forces with better-funded highways departments, both to plan out greener and more aesthetically pleasing road schemes and to help conduct their ongoing maintenance. Again, street cleansing and highways have typically worked in silos but, generally, the former is delivered on the latter. By coordinating their activities in such a joined-up approach, councils can drive further operational efficiencies.

Beyond the confines of the council itself, this kind of collaborative approach could also be an opportunity for the local authorities to communicate with network providers and plan that, when digging to install the latest new streetlights, for example, they also install 5G cables - if planned for that area. This more cost-effective and operationally efficient approach also helps councils drive up levels of public engagement and satisfaction.

It seems we may have reached a tipping point in terms of local authority service delivery. Many councils still have siloed approaches in place, and many face barriers to closer collaboration. Yet today, there is a growing sense that change is in the air. Digital transformation; a desire among council decision-makers to do more with less and, more recently, the latest advances in connected asset management technology, are coming together to make this change a reality. The result will facilitate the kind of cross-departmental working that rewards local authorities and their residents long into the future.

Nick Smees is CEO of Yotta, the connected asset management software and services provider, based in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire (<https://weareyotta.com/>)