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Beware the Salami Slicer

The cuts in public spending. Andrew Coote discusses.

No matter what the ultimate outcome of the UK election, we can be sure of one thing - the incoming administration will be imposing harsh cuts in public expenditure. The European Commission's most recent economic outlook report predicts that the British budget deficit will swell this year to become the biggest in the European Union, overtaking even Greece, at around £170bn. The political parties are consequently looking to reduce public spending by between £25bn - £40bn year on year, and the IMF is suggesting even this is not enough.

These numbers are so big they defy the imagination— so let's do some simple maths. Just to make the sums easy, say an average public sector worker costs £25k- £40k per annum (with overheads) to employ. Sure, the majority of the cuts will be in externally awarded contracts, stopping maintenance etc. and we'll ignore the effects of that on private sector growth for the moment, but say a modest 25% of the cuts are made in staff costs, this represents 250,000 posts.

Store that thought, and then consider that all political parties are committed to focusing remaining spending on front-line services. The problem for geospatial is that although it underpins an increasing proportion of both the frontline and back office systems in most Councils, the linkage is not always obvious. Furthermore, there is an increasing temptation for senior executives to think that, as their staff have access to Google Maps, they've "done" geospatial.

So despite all the truly impressive applications which fill the pages of this special edition, those involved in geospatial have reason to be anxious about where the cuts in public spending will fall.

I believe however, that there are a series of actions that "geo" staff can take to make sure they are better prepared for the "salami slicer" when it come calling in their organisation.

i) Strategic Marketing

As an industry, not just in local government, the geospatial industry is notoriously bad at marketing what it does and why it is



important. We tend to focus on getting on and doing the job, which is laudable, but does not necessarily get you noticed at the senior executive levels in the organisation. Look for opportunities to advertise your services on the intranet and write material for the Council newsletter. Many users may not appreciate that the web mapping they use daily is provided by your group. Take every opportunity to remind user managers, particularly those who run frontline services, how important you are to their work and what you can do for them in the future.

ii) Intercept the Corporate agenda

Have you read the corporate business plan? Take some time out and think what strategic objectives in that plan you support and what wouldn't be possible if your group wasn't there, or reduced in capacity. Focus particularly on the decision-making you improve and other deliverables that are visible to senior executives and members.

iii) Efficiency Savings

When budgets are under threat all managers will be looking for "quick wins" – projects that can be implemented relatively quickly and offer real, cashable savings. Geospatial offers a number of such opportunities.

One of the easiest to explain and implement, with wide application across multiple services, is route optimisation. All services rely to some extent on road transport, whether for waste collection, school buses or journeys by their own staff and gains of 5-15% can typically be realised from reduced fuel costs and vehicle maintenance, without considering the positive effects on carbon emissions.

Another attractive "no brainer" is the data sharing made possible by the Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG). One of the "big ideas" in the information management world at the moment is Service Oriented Architectures (SOA) based on the concept of shared master datasets accessed by many applications through web services. Again the maths is very straightforward, on average, there are thought to be more than 30 sets of address data in most local Government organisations. Calculate the number of updates per annum, the time taken to apply an update and the number of datasets which would no longer have to be maintained if a single master LLPG database was available.

Reading this you might be tempted to think, this is easy for him to say... but where do I start? The articles in this issue are a great resource; the LGA, AGI and IDeA websites are also excellent sources of case studies and shortly the LGA will be publishing a wide ranging economic assessment of the value of geospatial information by local public service providers. Short courses in building the business case for geospatial are also available.

Finally, don't use the excuse "but I haven't got the time".

I would suggest it's in your own interests and those of your staff to find time now. Otherwise you might have more spare time in the future than you'd like!