
InTransition Episode 105 - Martyn Wallace

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thank you very much for your time.

Today we head overseas to a guest who has, what I believe, will be one of the most interesting jobs in government communication anywhere in the world. But before we come to our guest we start, as we do each week, with the definition of content communication, so we all know exactly what it is that we're talking about.

So content communication is a strategic measurable, an accountable business process, that relies on the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

So to our guest this week, his name is Martyn Wallace, and he is the Chief Digital Officer of the newly created Scottish Local Government Digital Office. His task is to change the way local councils engage with citizens in Scotland through the use of technology. He is currently working with 27 of the local councils in Scotland and he joins me now.

Martin, thanks very much for joining me InTransition.

Martyn Wallace: Hi, thank you very much.

David Pembroke: Just to get started, I suppose at that larger contextual level with the changes that have been and happening in the UK and the ongoing discussions at those higher levels, just how much is context important, in terms of the way that you're going about communicating your story about digital transformation?

Martyn Wallace: I think if you look at the UK, or Scotland in particular, obviously where I work we have ageing population, we have reductions in budgets for local authorities over the next two to three years, and then we've got the rise of Brexit happening at some point as well, which will put more pressures on the councils, and basically we've got to do more with less and deliver outcomes and services for the citizen, but with reduced costs. So digital, or my job of being Chief Digital Officer, is to look at how technology can support those outcomes.

David Pembroke: So obviously, that context is massively important in terms of you delivering the outcomes that you're looking for.

Martyn Wallace: Massively so. Some people might see digital technology as cuts but, in fact, it's actually an enabler to help get them a better standard of life while still being able to function with council services.

David Pembroke: So given that is your context and they are the challenges, and I think you've described that very clearly, and indeed it's the eternal lament of probably everyone working in government communications around the world that we are being asked to do more with less, just what sort of a hearing are you getting at the moment as you go about to the councils trying to encourage them to adopt more digital technologies?

Martyn Wallace: I think the biggest challenge is culture. Traditionally we've got masses of council services, we do things in certain ways and there's a massive, massive change in approach and thinking to then go down the digital route. Some see it as fanciful, some see it as eye candy, but there is actually a sort of true value can be derived from digital technology. The thing is it doesn't even have to be complex, even just something like communicating through text messages, because text messages are obviously are a very, very simple technology. They can have maximum effect.

Just with councils in a previous role, I worked with an NHS hospital down South in England where they used text messages to remind people to take statins, so it prevented the people actually having to be admitted to hospital because they were able to remind themselves for taking medicine at particular times in the day.

David Pembroke: So how is it at the moment that when you are going around to these various councils and you're sitting in front of someone who's looking at you thinking, "This is impossible," as you say, "This is just a bit of eye candy, this is not something that I believe that we could reasonably integrate into our service offering."

How do you go about the process of convincing that person that some level of test or experimentation might be a good idea?

Martyn Wallace: I think if we have a conversation around what smartphone they use and what's their favourite Apps, or how do they work with their bank just now, or how do they shop, they will see that digital has already disrupted other markets. So the question is why can't they bring the lessons learned from those markets into local government?

Traditionally, we've seen big changes in the high street in the UK, we've seen a lot of demise of big brand names. Across in Australia you still have Woolworths. We lost Woolworths several years ago because it didn't change with the times of the digital age, so I think by bringing other examples of how digital can actually touch their lives can actually have them to think differently, in terms of how digital can actually do something different in local authorities as well.

David Pembroke: But do they think that government is different to the high street, different to these other industries that have been disrupted?

Martyn Wallace: Yeah, I think there's that traditionalist view of, we do it this way because we are government and we can't change it. Don't get me wrong, my background has been private sector. I've worked for large telecommunications companies, I've worked for mobile phone manufacturers in the past, I've worked for IT companies ... so traditionally it's my bread and butter, it's my background, but I think if they don't embrace digital technology then somebody else will come and do it to them, and I think that's a big issue that has to be looked at just now.

David Pembroke: So you're working across a large number of councils at the moment. Whereabouts are you having your most success in terms of introducing the new services?

Martyn Wallace: I think all councils are ready to embrace it. I think it's just getting that mindset to actually go and do something. The word I hate the most is hearing "pilot." I've joked before, I've seen more pilots in British Airways in some instances in the past, but I think if we change that pilot culture to version one, something we actually have to build on and actually make replicable around the piece.

Ideally, what I would like to do is do something once and replicate it 32 times, as in the 32 local authorities in Scotland, rather than the existing methods which seems to have been in some instances, we do something 32 times and replicate it only once. We don't have the money, we don't have the budgets, we don't have the timescales to actually do that old-style method, so therefore doing things like agile methodology prototyping has to be the way forward to actually make a difference.

David Pembroke: But trying to achieve that level of team work across that number of councils, I imagine would be extremely difficult, because I'm sure you get told every day that we're different.

Martyn Wallace: Yes, absolutely. If you actually look at what a local authority does, there's no real difference about collecting bins in Dumfries in Galloway on the border of Scotland to collecting bins in Orkney, which is one of the islands across the top of Scotland. But I think it's just trying to find that commonality of something that actually makes a big difference.

In Scotland we have 32 local authorities. I've got 27 local authorities on this programme, though I will have two others announced very, very shortly, so I'll have 29 out of 32. But out of those 32 local authorities, I've got 9 affected by a solutions providers announcement that they're pulling out of the market in 2020, which gives me some 9 councils that have to do something now to get better outcomes in 3 years' time. So by having a common purpose should actually help drive a better value out of collaboration out the way.

David Pembroke: That is probably a pretty good example of when you're trying probably to get 32, or 27 who are signed up at the moment, that that would be extremely

difficult but perhaps that 9 might offer you a really good opportunity to try to get in there and be able to trial something.

Martyn Wallace: Yeah, absolutely. When I started there was 9 challenges given to myself and I have only been on the road for 6 months, I might add, it's not as though I've had a long, long time in this. So it's a massive, massive learning curve for me, obviously given my background in private sector, but it's trying to find that commonality, and I was given 9 items to look at.

At Christmas I had 50 consultations with the councils. When I went back to my Board and said, "What's the priorities?" they said "All of them." I'm not a magician, unfortunately. But going back to my Board in January we divided it down to about 17, 18 different programmes, which we have just finished off the project briefs on, and we'll be going out to create cohorts within the councils to work on. So we're looking for a minimum of 3 councils, say per programme, to actually get the value out of it.

David Pembroke: But still, that's a lot isn't it? That's a lot of work.

Martyn Wallace: Absolutely. We've broken it down to three main columns, or three main programmes of work, shall I say, or themes, which is leadership, so looking at the skillsets, the culture. What do we have to do at the overall cultural level across all councils? We've got digital services, which is looking at the service redesign, and every single service we are going to look at will be co-designed with the citizen and the end-user plus the staff, and then the last part is digital foundation, which is the platform, so looking at the technology stack and the things that need to support that overall transformation within the councils.

I sometimes call it a cake, where you've got the three layers of the cake and then the two cherries on top of the cake, where the destination point would be digital council, so having a council flexible for any circumstance, and then digital place. And digital place is basically where datasets will talk to each other to drive better outcomes to the system. So things such as integrating with police, fire, third sector organisations, even private sector organisations if necessary. Obviously giving the citizen control over that data and what they share, but you can drive better values by having common datasets that talk, and being able to work together in a more collaborative manner.

David Pembroke: Now obviously that's the future state, but when you've gone out and built these business cases that you're looking at the moment, or project cases around these three key areas, in each of those three key areas could you just give us your assessment of the current state as to where people are, and maybe start with that level of skill and understanding, that ability to be able to apply the new digital technologies.

Martyn Wallace: Yeah, in leadership we actually have a skills track in there, because skills is obviously very, very crucial. Deloitte had put out a report back in October last

year, three weeks into my new role, to say that 85,000 jobs would go within the next 15 years in Scottish public sector due to artificial intelligence. Now that puts a big, big scare in people that they're going to lose their job, but if you actually look at the basics of it all, if we also look at predictions from technologists, within the next two years we won't have any admin roles left, we'll have data analysts, so we have to make sure we equip the staff into that role now rather than later.

The other flip side of that one is if we look at streamlining business processes and platforms at the back end, then we can redeploy people into front line services roles where we actually need that interaction with the public for people that need the services the most.

You're never ever going to lose your job. At the end of the day, jobs just evolve. The industrial revolution has come on a long way and now we're in the digital revolution that's just a ... I don't know what the next thing will be, the artificial intelligence revolution? I don't know, I can't predict that far.

David Pembroke: Chatbots. Chatbots, everyone will be interacting with a chatbot.

Martyn Wallace: Well, we are seeing a lot more of those things rise in other sectors just now with chatbots, but at the end of the day we can redeploy people back into that face-to-face role, which is more value than sitting moving spreadsheets around.

David Pembroke: I know you've got it down to 17 projects, three different areas but still, where is the first step, or where is the first place that you've got to go, to make a difference in order to enable this improvement of services for the community through the local governments in Scotland?

Martyn Wallace: I think that the first thing is the "can do" piece, it's the skills and the culture. When we look across any public sector organisation in any part of the world, there's always horror stories of bad implementations of IT projects, or things have overran, or things have not turned out the way that they've happened, and I think that's underpinning ... Whatever we do with agile methodology, so doing things pre-discovery, discovery, beta, alpha and then live in small stages, means we can keep testing, keep checking that we've got the right things.

Traditional methods of waterfall, so say for instance we're looking for a social work system, ideally what we would do in the past would be create a big massive functional spec, go out to market, award it and then the supplier would win, the supplier would then implement it, say it takes two years to implement, at the end they sign it off, and low and behold, the business process or the policy legislation's changed, and then we're all back to square one, or the supplier says, "Well actually, do you know what? It wasn't in the original contract, so therefore it's going to cost you X thousands or hundreds of thousands of pounds to change."

So doing things in an agile method helps approach that, so I think that skillset and that mindset has to be there first, and I think there'll be some low-hanging fruit in some small ways just to prove that methodology does work, and public sector is the way forward.

David Pembroke: Yeah. So in terms of that building that culture, how are you going to go about doing that?

Martyn Wallace: So, we're having innovation, work streams, skillsets, we're talking to HR managers to look at what's the future of you, what do we actually need in the work place to support what we need to do? And then working back in terms of, what do we have to have in skills? And I think from that piece is working with other organisations in public sectors in Scotland, so for instance, Scottish government, looking at what's been done in third sector organisations and just trying to create a best value practise for skills development in Scotland around local government.

David Pembroke: And it's not unique to Scotland. We had on the podcast, over the last couple of weeks, we've been speaking to Sean Larkins from WPP, and they did a major piece of research around government communication globally, and this particular issue of skills was identified really as one of the main factors holding back. The communication function is that a lot of people in government don't have the skills and this is in, as I say, the communication function and that's looking at more towards being able to manage issues through media and through advertising. But drawing a line through it, I think that there's a paucity of skills, not only through digital services, but through content creation and distribution as well. I think it's a long way before we're going to get to that ideal state that we talk about.

Is that patience there, do you think, within the cohort that you're dealing with that they know that these things aren't going to happen in five minutes?

Martyn Wallace: Yes, absolutely. Every public sector organisations has got challenges around policies, constraints, privacy, security and it's just puts out a map exactly what is the destination point and work backwards, where Stephen Covey says, "Start with the end in mind."

So I think just having that vision of what is the outcome you want, and then working back in terms of what are the challenges we have to overcome. It's not going to be done overnight. There's no way, because it's a massive, massive sector to do, and you have to be realistic in terms of timescales.

I'm somebody that likes to get things done quickly, but it's been a massive learning curve for me coming into public sector about the terms of the policy and constraints that sometimes happen that it might take a little bit longer than usual, but as long as everybody's on board then we should be able to achieve what we want to achieve.

David Pembroke: I'm intrigued by your transition from private sector to public sector. What motivated it?

Martyn Wallace: Personal reasons from perspective of my ageing parents, but also just wanting to do something different.

My mother has multiple sclerosis and had done for many, many years and confined to a wheelchair, and my dad has had a long-term chest complaint. It's nothing serious in terms of cancer, but has had issues and difficulties with that, and then last year my dad took a stroke and just seeing it from the elderly parents' piece and trying to get them support when they needed it most, I kind of thought, do you know what, you could actually do something a bit more streamlined digitally than the un-joined up approach that I saw and witnessed with both my parents. But also just terms of it's a big, big challenge, why not? Why not have a nice thing to go and do, and do something different for the whole of Scotland?

David Pembroke: Yeah, and making that transition, so day one you've walked in to your new job, tell me ... you haven't be there for long, but what are those changes? What are those differences that you've seen that you've found, and how have they been explained to you that these are the constraints and you're just going to have to live with it?

Martyn Wallace: I knew it was going to be hard, I didn't realise how hard it was going to be, I think that's one thing. I think the second thing is that it is a massive challenge, it's a moving feast and a I think there's a lot of private sector ...

When you're in private sector you don't really respect, well I certainly didn't, in some instances, what public sector actually does, or local government does. It's a myriad of different services and in most cases they're actually keeping people alive and out of danger, and you don't actually really think about that because you can be selfish thinking, "Well, they just pick up my bins, they fix potholes in the road, or they change a light." Where actually they're dealing with the most needy people in society, which really need support to be able to live day-to-day, and coming into that piece and then getting under the bonnet, so to speak, of different services and organisations within local government, it's actually quite humbling to actually realise what they do.

So it has been a massive learning curve and I think for me where traditionally I've been able to do things at pace, at speed, especially at the telecommunications company I worked for, to come here and find that actually we can't quite do that because we've got to deal with this policy and this legislation and this law, and then we've got to consider the security and a bit more tighter control, it's an eye-opener but thoroughly enjoyable in trying to work out how we can deal with the challenges.

David Pembroke: And how have you found the receptiveness to change? When you're there and you're saying, "Well look, here are some ideas," how receptive have people been to that?

Martyn Wallace: Mixed, I think. The fear is that digital is going to take their job away and I totally and utterly understand that, I get that. I'm not daft, but at the same time it's trying to think of the bigger outcome, it's trying to think of the citizen.

End of the day, we are working for local government, but at the same time we're also citizens as well. So for best experiences that I want to do ... I was 40 recently, I feel as if I'm about 60, but I was 40 very recently ... the mid-life crisis early. But I think when I retire in 20-odd years, or so, maybe later given current legislation on pensions, but when I retire how do I want to interact with my local NHS, my Social Work Department, et cetera?

The good example with going back to my personal circumstances of my mum and dad, when my dad had his stroke last year ... my dad reads newspapers all the time. Doesn't really do the online user thing yet because he thinks it's fake news ... don't think we've heard that before. But my dad asked some key questions when he was filling in his twelve forms in hospital, paper-based forms, he says, "Why can't I have a Netflix experience?" And for a 70 year old man to turn around and say that, I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, why don't I fill in that form once and then I'm served up other content on ... if you like this form then you should be looking at this form and this form and just tick a box and it'll fill it for you." And I thought, "That's really quite cool," for my dad saying that, not that I'm saying that anything in my office has actually come from my dad, may I add. It is actually my own thinking with my team, not my dad, but the adage is the citizen wants more, local government and digital, so how do we make that a reality?

David Pembroke: Would you agree that it's happening fast, and again it's a story ... a couple of weeks ago I visited one of my ... well, she's almost 90 year old aunt, and she's a fanatic on Facebook. She's on there all the time because she sees it as a great way to stay in touch with everyone, all of her children and her nieces and nephews and grandchildren, and she's always liking things and commenting on different things, and it's surprising me at the pace that older people are picking up digital technology once they get the hang of it.

Martyn Wallace: Absolutely, it's an expectation now. We do with every single day of our lives and I think the way this has happened was 10 years ago with the rise of the iPhone. We expect things to be smartphones. The catalyst for this transformation, from my previous life that we still see today, is the rise of the smartphone, faster network speeds, Cloud computing and Cloud computing can be AI, business intelligence, IOT sensors linked into that Cloud system, so there is that expectation from the citizen to do things and as I said earlier, we expect this from using Amazon, or Uber, or Airbnb. We've seen that transformation happen in other sectors, so now the time is right to do local government as well.

David Pembroke: In terms of this podcast, we focus very much on content and the role that content can play to inform and engage with citizens, be it to produce better policy, to inform them about services.

What are your thoughts about where you're going to take the content piece of your puzzle once you've got your services, your processes, your platform in place, you've got the culture. Whereabouts are you going to fit the content piece of the puzzle?

Martyn Wallace: I've just awarded a provider in Glasgow to build my website last week, but I think it's a multichannel approach. So we've got a system across here called K-hub, in fact I think you can use it anywhere around the world. It's actually funded by a company in the UK, but K-hub's a collaborative where you can collaborate and work on different items and projects by setting up groups.

So we've got some stuff on there just now in terms of the programme. We've got small teams, so I think council's looking at to pull them together helping us with the project briefs. We've also got pieces being looked at through social media, so using Twitter, LinkedIn groups and the website just to have that open approach. Everything we do we'll share with the partners, and then the way the context, in terms of case studies of how we've done it, what was the approach, what you needed to look at and how to do it.

Content is absolutely key in getting the messages out so that everybody can buy into it and I think also having citizen engagement. So I have got a couple of projects in the programmes for what I call digital eye-candy, but there's a benefit at the back of it, but some things, in terms of headline grabbing, to what we're actually doing in terms of, "Well look, the digital revolution's here and this is how it's going to transform local government, so this is what is actually achievable if we work together and co-design it with the citizen and other parties that need to be involved in this."

David Pembroke: Yeah. It's one of the great opportunities and we're seeing that, certainly here in Australia, with this notion of co-design around policy very much. Because now there is that opportunity to be able to publish, to get it out to a wider audience than previously people who used to be involved in the development of policy. There were the usual suspects who you would go out and ask and they would give their views, be they an association, or whoever else, whereas now there's a much greater opportunity to get much more diverse input, and we've seen quite a number of examples where they've sought wider input and it's led to better policy outcomes, because again it's been co-designed with that specific audience in mind.

Then longer term though, in terms of the sustainment of content, being able to use the channels and being able to produce that video content, audio content to distribute it, to listen, to then incorporate those insights. How do you see that taking place down the path? Do you think that there'll be a greater role for

people with communications backgrounds as part of the future that your building?

Martyn Wallace: I think you have to tell stories. Policies don't speak for themselves. It's actually having a story how that actually impacts the individual or citizen, and I think having that story written out, spoken out, videoed, communicated in any way, shape or form is crucial in terms of the success of what digital can actually do.

Some people hear digital and think it's very, very technical and very cumbersome, so actually having the stories, as I said earlier on. Hospital using a text message to remind people to take statins so they didn't get admitted into hospital is a very, very simple message. Rather than the policy behind that was, "Well, we have to reduce X number of admissions per night, we have to make sure we have this amount of care and this amount of portion of budget ...," that's boring. You have to make it sexy and it's very difficult in some instances, as in councils, how do you make collecting bins sexy?

But having a story using smart bins, for instance, where a sensor in the bin tells it's full, which then goes back to base to send the local binman who's nearest in to go and collect that bin, or empty that bin, so to speak, is a bit more interesting than saying, "Well actually, we've got this bin that's overflowing and it's recycling." Yawn! You have to get that story right to make it engaging, so people buy into the concept in the first place.

David Pembroke: No question at all. I think that notion of relevance and reaching into the hearts and not only the minds and the hands of people, but getting them to engage because as you tell that story about the text messages, I can hear that, I can see that, I can see that and so therefore I'll remember that now as a story as opposed to, as you say, a dry piece of policy and the reasons behind it.

I don't know about you but I'm sure that ... and I've just come from a day of it, sitting down wading through a manual and trying to turn it from double-speak into English. Trying to turn it into a language that ... and it was amazing just how complex it was in the written form, but then I think I'm getting there.

It's hard work because often I know when I go back and take it in tomorrow, I'm going to be told, "Oh no, you haven't put that in and you haven't put that in and that bit's not there and that's not quite right and that's not the technical term that we use ..." and so, it's a battle. But it's a battle worth having I think, and I think with this particular client we've introduced a few changes to the way that they've been doing things in the past and they're immediately starting to see reaction, and I think that's the key isn't it? Is getting those quick wins up, building a bit of credibility and then once you get the credibility then you can start to engage in deeper conversations about the changes that do need to take place.

Martyn Wallace:

Absolutely, but I think it's even gone down to the basics of presentations. I've sat through PowerPoints which are just dull. Whenever I open up, and you probably can tell from speaking, I'm quite shy ... not, so whenever I do presentations traditionally, I used to have on the very front screen, slide 1 of 564 and you actually see the audience's horror before I started doing the presentation about this, and I would actually make light of it and say, "This is actually true, and I don't have any pictures. I've got a dodgy YouTube video that I can't get connectivity in here, so if you just sit down, I speak faster as I get excited, I'll take you through a journey about digital transformation," and you see people just horrified in terms of what's coming next. But the message is lost in the action. I think using PowerPoint as little as possible and actually telling stories is the way forward for comms in this space because everybody can relate.

And just thinking there as well, a previous role, and something I will be bringing into a council near you soon, so to speak, is I created a bit of a controversy in England. A couple of housing associations I was working with, we looked at using drones for roof inspections and storm damage, and the housing association called it dronagate because it had some of the citizens complaining about privacy, thinking they were using cameras to peer into their rooms, which is not the case, and there was also then health and safety officers getting involved in terms of cutting people's heads off, I mean, come on ... the blades are not the size of a helicopter.

The comms was lost in the message of all drones barred, and because you've seen Sci-Fi movies they think they're going to get shot or something, but the reality was that drones are being used down South and will be in councils in Scotland soon for doing building inspections in a more productive manner. Cause what they were doing was putting up scaffolding at £500 to £1,000 per day to go up to a roof to then look at it, to then take it down, to go and get the tiles and stuff they needed to go and do to then go and do the job, whereas a drone can be deployed in minutes to go and have a look at the roof, or look at the building, make the assessment and then put the scaffolding up once and then do that work there and then. It just saves time, money and also safety, having scaffolding up for long periods of time. So a simple drone would do that, but the messages were just hilarious in terms of health and safety regulation and privacy, just like, come on ...

David Pembroke:

But then again it's this notion, isn't it? Work health and safety ... because the messages are around workplace health and safety to individual people are this is your responsibility, so if something goes wrong, you're in the gun for it and this notion of change, it's hard for people.

But I think one day at a time. I think we will collaboratively collectively go through, there will be great successes, there will be resistance to change, but thanks for your story because I think it will motivate people to not get too, I suppose, down in the mouth about not being able to make change overnight,

and I think the fact that you've come in from the public sector and you've maintained your motivation because it comes from the right place.

I think often people working in public sector are driven by mission, they're driven by purpose, just as you are, and I think that we need to keep that mission and purpose close to us on a daily basis to remind ourselves about why we're doing this and then as we make the change over time, and we'll strengthen communities, we'll improve the well-being of citizens and hopefully contribute to a better society all round, because heaven knows we need it.

Martyn Wallace: Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree with that, absolutely.

David Pembroke: Okay Martyn, well mate listen, how might people stay in touch with your, or stay in touch with the journey in digital transformation in local government in Scotland?

Martyn Wallace: You can follow me on Twitter @digital_mw, or find me in LinkedIn at Martyn, with a y, Wallace, no relation, I don't think, to William Wallace the famous Braveheart, but you never know, I'm still to do that family history piece. But find me on Twitter, hook up with me on Twitter, I'm more than happy to have conversations and hopefully I can come back across to Australia ... it's been six years since I was last over -

David Pembroke: Very good.

Martyn Wallace: - and maybe meet you face-to-face next time as well.

David Pembroke: No, that'd be fantastic and it would be great for you to come back over and bring some examples, some case studies because again, your experience is the experience of many, and I think if we can continue to share, tell stories ... hopefully there's a lot of learning we can encourage between countries, and changes will come.

So Martyn than you very much for joining us and to you, the listener, thank you very much for joining us once again. A great chat there with Martyn Wallace doing wonderful things as the Chief Digital Officer there with the Scottish Local Government Digital Office.

So thank you very much for your time again this week, and I will be back at the same time next week. So it's bye for now.