Remit Case Study: Statsbygg – Data Research Project

Statsbygg, the Norwegian Government's Building agency, has a problem common to many such bodies all over the world: it doesn't have a clear picture of what properties the Government actually uses.

The Agency has a database of the properties owned and managed by it – which is about 35% of the total properties used by the central civil government. The balance is made up of properties which other parts of the state own, and then properties which the state rents on the private market.

At present, however, "in Norway there is no central database of all the premises the state occupies," says Øyvind Foldal of Statsbygg. "For coordination and cost-savings purposes, there's a clear need for a central database collecting information from all three sources, so they can get an overview of all the property the state occupies. It's a precondition for efficient management of the premises."

The idea of implementing a central database was first mooted in a 2012 White Paper dealing with questions of building policy in general. The paper referenced the project undertaken in the UK by the Office of Government Commerce (now the Government Property Unit) to create a centralised database and it was acknowledged that it would be a good idea to establish this in Norway.

Statsbygg receives an annual "Steering Document" from its overseeing Ministry. The 2013 Steering Document assigned the Agency the task of considering the need for a database - and requested it to deliver a sketch of how such a database could be established, maintained and operated.

"When we started the work on the sketch, we were delighted to get the assistance from Bridget Hardy. Bridget is a well-known figure in the European public real estate network, and we knew she had extensive knowledge on the subject matter and that she had worked first-hand on the British database."

Remit's Bridget Hardy had been instrumental in establishing the UK Government property database during her time at the Office of Government Commerce.

Of course, a project like this, with a tight turnaround (kicking off in January 2013, with delivery in April) needs a team behind it. So, Bridget was supported by Melita Thomas, a Remit Partner, and Jamie Henderson, an Assistant Consultant. "A central database of all Norwegian Government occupied property is also an ICT-project. Melita's first-hand knowledge on public ICT projects and their political, organisational and technical success factors, provided us with key learning points which will be useful when setting about creating the database."

The project Remit was requested to undertake was specified and designed, following translation, to be directly incorporated into the sketch for the Ministry.

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It had two principal elements:

1. Discussion and recommendation of the best method of establishing the database, the likely pitfalls and the critical success factors;

2. An analysis of what data was currently available and this could be incorporated into a useful database.

Bridget and Jamie travelled to Oslo to kick off the project, and went through the task in detail, interviewing people and researching documents - to understand the starting point. All the interviews were carried out in English - with some translation support provided by Øyvind Foldal.

With less than a month available from Remit's final report to the deadline for integration into the sketch for the Ministry, Statsbygg needed regular interim reports to ensure relevance. They were given draft reports regularly, with Jamie providing a snapshot of the work completed each week and planned for the next. This ensured that Statsbygg could be certain that Remit was moving in the right direction - and that the report was tailor-made for the sketch.

"We didn't want any surprises at the end," said Øyvind, laughing.

There were some significant differences from the British version of the project: for example some Key Performance Indicators are quite different because of policy areas that hold more importance in the Norwegian political context. In particular, universal access provisions and environmental indicators are highly political issues in Norway.

The second part of the report - working with the existing data - was more tricky. Foldal had tried to locate existing data that the Remit team could work on. Not much to his surprise, the information is not well centralised – there are many different databases, categorised in less than ideal ways for transfer into a central database.

"However, this wasn't a problem," he says. "It just strengthened the business case for creating a database."

Bridget, Jamie and Melita presented in Oslo in mid-April. The audience included two representatives from the Ministry. The conclusions of the Remit report were clear: a central database is feasible, it would have great benefits - but it would not be a quick, simple project. The Remit team recommendation was to start with motivated Ministries first to do a pilot project.

"Yes, it won't be a simple project," says Foldal. "But now we know what needs to be done, how we can do it and have a clear picture of the huge benefits we could gain."

For more information:

Remit Consulting
Melita Thomas
melita.thomas@remitconsulting.com
+44 20 7969 2738