For the last several years austerity has been the government buzzword in much of Europe.
Nial Anderson speaks to those involved in pro AV projects in this sector to see if things are easing up.

Large conference hall in
Serbian Parliament building

State of play

With the shadow of recession now moving safely away, confidence in the private sector is increasing and in turn so are spending levels. But how is the public sector faring?

The last time InAVate examined government spending in pro AV projects was in 2011 which revealed spending in AV projects was beginning to increase.

However public spending never bounces back with the same vigour, and in the same way, as the private sector. Government spending only occurs due to need, and while retailers use pro AV to wow consumers into spending, government projects tend to shy away from anything flashy for risk of being accused of squandering the public purse. But there are several technologies that have become popular with central and local government for improving their efficiency, and for taking the taxpayers money farther.

For instance video conferencing systems help save travel costs, webcasting systems offer the electorate more opportunities to become involved in the political process and mobile audio conferencing systems serve as an upgrade on existing permanent installation which have the advantage of being able to be taken out and used in meetings and events in smaller districts.

> ## " One of the things we've seen a rise in is the adoption within council meetings of social media feeds for participants. "
> *- Jon Dew-Stanley, Polar Audio*

Technology like this clearly demonstrates the benefits of investment and can always boast a better energy efficiency than the technology it is replacing. This fits nicely into the age-old public sector justification that the government is "spending money to save money" and as a consequence the value add element is the main selling point of AV in government projects today.

The types of systems used in corporate and government markets are the same, according to Jon Dew-Stanley, director of British pro audio distributor Polar Audio. What the systems need to deliver is different, he said.

"Systems going into corporate installs may be more focused to providing more information within their organisation whereas the systems going into the public sector tend to be more focused outward," he explained.

"It is about the portrayal of what is being discussed in the hope of empowering people in the community to get involved. Both central and local government are only investing in things that are definitely needed and they are looking for good value in what they are spending money on."

For integrators, there are many benefits to winning government AV projects as Ibrahim Saad, AV department manager of Qatari company Techno Q explained.

"For us they are the best to compete for because the payment is guaranteed and the client is guaranteed," he said.

"It's a little bit different than working for the private sector as the government is a bit more hesitant to use new technologies. Also the projects are largely being managed by electrical engineers who are a bit removed >

< from the technology. "They prefer to have something that's been there for a while and used for several years."

So what projects are on the horizon that will be driving government investment in pro AV?

"This year the Qatar government has announced its biggest budget in its history," Saad explained.

"We are expecting more spending in the AV sector so we are getting more engaged with the government at every stage. We are doing marketing and gathering knowledge of all the projects that are coming up through the consultants, end users or even manufacturers to try and help in the design, to create demand and propose ideas to position us in a better place. We hope they will continue to focus on the quality of the partners they are choosing."

Saad said that the closer they came to the 2022 World Cup, the greater number of big money projects will increase.

He also explained that in the Middle East there were major developments happening in the education sector.

"You find in the whole region a lot of projects related to universities – whether in Saudi, Qatar, Kuwait or UAE – and you will find the same for the medical sector and for infrastructure," he explained.

"The Qatar Government has a special drive toward funding sports infrastructures. With the award of the 2022 World Cup it has put more focus on this direction and the majority of the young people support this government attention in sport.

"We are seeing more money is dedicated to infrastructure projects than what I would call optional entertainment projects. Unfortunately a large number of clients and even consultants look at this sector as an additional thing not as an absolute requirement."

"In the UAE, we see more work going towards hosting large exhibitions and global shows. The tourism industry is also a major focus for them."

Technology plays a large part in achieving the goals of government in these areas, explained Saad.

"Technology is a must in education," he said, "Without technology, the teaching process is not complete – and I would say this is now the same for sports, tourism and medical sectors as well.

"With our focus on sport in Qatar we have technology related to it such as the scoreboards, banners, broadcasting technology and fancy lighting solutions using the latest LED technology."

In Europe, Dew-Stanley said he found that it wasn't so much that old technology was being removed and replaced by new technology, but new technology had to be more flexible to enable it to integrate with existing IT systems.

"We have to make more flexible wireless solutions so our systems integrate nicely alongside IT infrastructure such as wireless networks and wireless arrays which are commonly deployed in council buildings," he explained.

"It's more than products needing to change – it's more about the symbiotic relationship in the need for IT and AV to work harmoniously in these same places - that has driven the change. Technology needs to evolve to keep working in the same scenarios."

Dew-Stanley said one trend was toward wireless audio systems being able to integrate with existing LANs.

"One of the things we've seen a rise in is the adoption within council meetings of social media feeds for participants.

"Some of the councils I've been to have 100 councillors in a meeting and in real time they will be tweeting about what they are discussing to the people they are representing.

"So what that has meant is councils have had to implement significant wireless networking capability within their building."

Governments do not make impulse purchases. So how do integrators successfully rise above the competition to win these coveted projects?
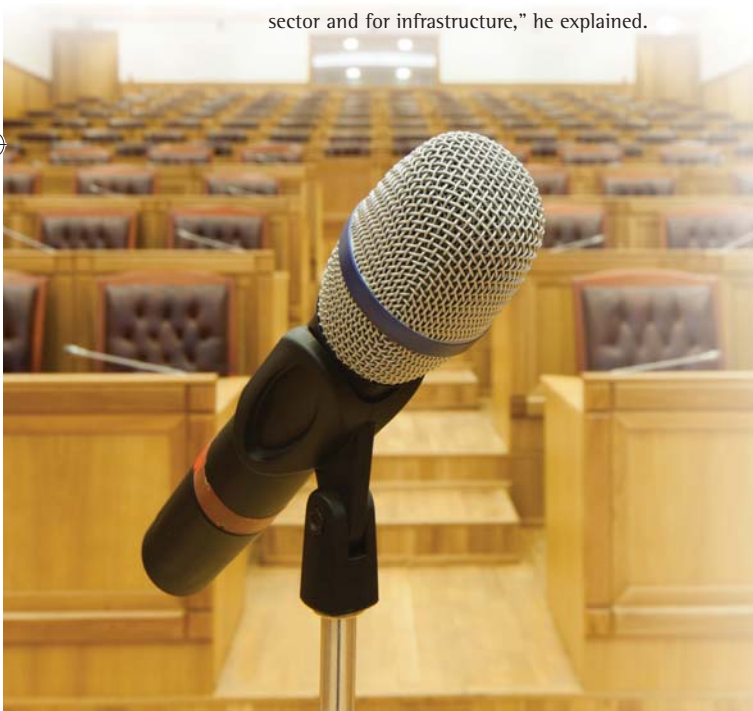
"Our mission is to try and educate and explain the benefits that technology will deliver to those clients," said Saad.

"We work continuously with our end users, we try to educate and provide demos and invite them to the major industry shows like ISE or Infocomm Dubai or USA.

"In our response to the many tenders we receive we try to draw their attention to different ways to do what they are looking for. There may be simpler or more advanced ways of accomplishing the same thing."

With large infrastructure projects emerging from Europe to the Middle East, combined with an ever evolving range of pro AV products that help government and operate more effectively efficiently, integrators have many reasons to be positive about the size and number of government projects available to them.

With government departments increasingly using a points system taking into account a broad range of factors including the size, experience and professional connections of a company – not just the price of the tender – the skill and creativity of the integrator is often the key to winning such projects. ɅＶ