

# REFORM

June 2020

Government after  
COVID:

A digitally enabled  
civil service

Policy roundtable

  
FUJITSU

# Government after COVID: A digitally enabled civil service

*Reform* was delighted to host a policy roundtable on a digitally enabled civil service in June 2021, in partnership with Fujitsu. The discussion was introduced by Paul Willmott, the newly appointed Chair of the Central Digital and Data Office, and Anwen Owen, Head of UK Public Sector and Vice President of Fujitsu. Below is a high-level summary of the key themes raised none-of-which are attributable to either speaker or any attendee.

## The COVID-19 effect

Digitising public services has been a long-term ambition in the public sector. From the 1996 "Government Direct" Policy paper, which outlined the benefits of electronic delivery of services, to the 2017 Government Transformation Strategy, successive governments have pointed to the enormous potential benefits of a truly digitally enabled civil service.

However, despite some well documented successes, this agenda has been marred by slow progress and, in the case of certain projects, high profile failures.

The benefits of digital transformation accrue to both service users directly and the wider civil service. By 'joining-up' information through data sharing, digital tools can make services more targeted and personalised to meet individual need.

For the civil service itself, technology can automate back-office processes, freeing up civil servants' time to work on other projects. Further, real-time sharing of data can actually improve decisions by providing more information, vital in times of crisis.

The benefits were brought into sharp focus during the pandemic, providing a burning platform for long overdue change. Those departments which had made progress in updating digital infrastructure were able to rapidly respond to the emerging crisis, while those who had been slower to adopt the digital transformation agenda were left exposed.

As the pandemic recedes, the Government will be mindful of the need to learn the right lessons. Going forward, it must equip the civil service with the right infrastructure, capabilities, and leadership to digitally transform the public sector for the future.



Matt Fetzer  
Researcher  
*Reform*

*"Going forward, it must equip the civil service with the right infrastructure, capabilities, and leadership to digitally transform the public sector"*

### Seizing the moment

Once the pandemic hit, an unprecedented number of digital services were created almost overnight. In weeks, telehealth went from being an anomaly to the norm. To provide financial protection to individuals and businesses, HMRC built three new services from scratch. In total across government, 69 new services were placed online just two months after the start of the pandemic.

These services were enabled by the right regulatory regime. While much commentary has focused on how the urgency of the pandemic response meant the usual bureaucratic hurdles were overcome, what is less understood are the actions taken to make this happen. For example, the Government Digital Service suspended its 14-criteria standard before a service could go online, replacing this with two-hour remote peer review meetings.

### Laying the foundation

Beyond COVID-19, legacy technology is holding the public sector back from further realising the benefits of digital transformation. Currently, around half of government's IT spend is on servicing legacy IT – old or outdated computer systems. These not only present a security risk but make digital service delivery more difficult, chiefly by limiting information sharing.

These issues are well known, but success in managing them has been mixed. The Department for Work and Pensions had spent the best part of a decade putting Universal Credit online, and when claims hit 2.9 million in the first lockdown – almost double the number of the previous total – 90 per cent were paid in full and on time. By contrast, when the NHS needed to share real-time data on the virus spread it had to commission private companies to rapidly build a data store, slowing down the initial response.

A cross-government push to move away from – or at least better manage – legacy IT is therefore required. The new Central Digital and Data Office is well placed to take control in this area, standardising practice where needed to help departments migrate away from legacy IT.

However, as different departments have different needs, it also must play a role in empowering departments to design their own digital future, and this will require the right staff with the right capabilities.

### Equipping the workforce

To use the new digital infrastructure effectively, the right capabilities in the workforce are needed. Gaps in technical skills – from systems architecture to data analysis – are widespread in the public sector. Recruitment to these roles is difficult: there is a supply shortage globally and the government is at disadvantage when it comes to pay. This often results in areas of the public sector contracting out entire digital services, which can represent poor value for money and exacerbate the skills gap.

Hybrid working models offer a new opportunity to deepen the potential talent pool. COVID-19 saw the explosion of remote working technology, this will expand the geographical scope of recruitment. Further, by no longer requiring digital professionals to move to London they can simultaneously achieve another key aim – moving core civil service functions out of Whitehall.

As the existing talent pool can only be expanded so much, more skills will need to be developed in-house. Progress has been made in recent years, as of 2019 nearly 10,000 people had been trained through the recently formed GDS Digital Academy.

## Policy roundtable summary

Despite this, the skills gap is growing and this is on track to continue into the future. Government will need to redouble efforts to encourage underrepresented groups into training courses, and create more flexible ways of learning to increase accessibility.

### Focus on the business

The pandemic has demonstrated that changing how individuals work is essential to successful digital transformation. The NHS Long Term Plan had set out the ambition for digital-first primary care by 2023, however there had been widespread reluctance from the staff due to patient safety concerns.

It was only when lockdown forced staff to change how they work that remote consultations were widely practiced, and 9 in 10 GPs now want this to continue.

Without the impetus provided by the pandemic, putting the right leadership in place will be necessary for consolidating operational changes in the future. In practice, this means having a clear understanding of the problem digital will help to solve, engaging with the users throughout the product design process, and having the confidence to change back-office processes where necessary. Ultimately, leadership here means understanding technology as a means to achieve a policy outcome, and not as a policy outcome itself.

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