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Professionalising Whitehall: responsibilities of the Head of Function for Digital, Data and Technology

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Since 2013, civil service leaders have tried to professionalise key government activities such as policy making, financial management and procurement by creating new cross-departmental functions. The Institute for Government has supported these efforts, which will help the Government develop the specialist capabilities it needs to operate more effectively.[1] In this paper we examine the responsibilities of the head of function for digital, data and technology (DDaT). We recommend that the head of function should focus on spreading standards across government and the public sector; work more openly, including by publishing an implementation plan providing targets for digital transformation; and become a member of the Civil Service Board.

Digital, data and technology are dynamic areas that affect much of what government does, and have great potential to improve government and public services. The Government has said that making improvements in these areas is a priority and that it intends to build capability in them.[2] The recent announcement about giving everyone access to GPs through online booking and advice is simply one example.

There are also potential savings to be made by digitising services and the internal operation of Whitehall departments, and by reducing duplication across government and the public sector. Government has made some progress in digitising services and reusing digital services across government; GOV.UK Notify, for example, is a service that sends messages to citizens.[*] But in key areas such as creating a secure digital identity for those using public services, progress has been slow.

Clarifying and improving the effectiveness of the role of head of function for DDaT will make it more likely that the Government achieves its priorities in these areas.

What is the current role of the head of function for digital, data and technology?

The head of function for DDaT – currently Kevin Cunnington – is also the Director General of the Government Digital Service (GDS). These two roles overlap, as GDS carries out most of the head of function's responsibilities. GDS was established in the Cabinet Office in 2012, and has grown to 860 staff and an annual budget of £128m.[3]

In March 2018, the Prime Minister announced that responsibility for some areas of data policy would move from GDS to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), removing these responsibilities from the head of DDaT.[4] Although only a small number of staff are moving, the change is significant. DCMS now has responsibility for data policy, governance, ethics, sharing and openness, as well as the wider digital economy.

In June 2018 the media reported that DCMS had also taken responsibility for policy on digital identity, which covers the various services that the public sector and companies use to check citizens' and companies' identities in the UK.[5] However, management of Verify, which is a service that checks citizens' identity, remains with GDS.

As with other heads of function, the head of the DDaT function is responsible for standards, building capability and shaping cross-government strategies for the DDaT function.[**][6]

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*   Notify is described as both a "component" that can be integrated into wider services, and as a "platform" that aggregates demand from the public sector. "Digital services" is used in this document to refer to components and platforms.
** John Manzoni, the Chief Executive of the Civil Service, recently highlighted these three as the primary roles of civil service functions.

Digital, data and technology standards

One of the key responsibilities of the role is to set, coordinate and enforce common standards. There are three digital, data and technology standards which reinforce each other:

- The **Digital Service Standard**,[7] which provides standards and guidance on how to build services. For example, service designers must "understand user needs."

- The **Technology Code of Practice**[8] which sets criteria to help government design, build and buy better technology.

- The **Open Standards for government data and technology**,[9] which require government to adopt international standards where possible.

GDS has used 'service standard assessments', supported by controls on digital and technology spending, to enforce standards. It also does this through its control of GOV.UK, a website for central government, as any service which departments want to run on GOV.UK needs GDS's permission. In GDS's early years, it exercised detailed control over digital services and technology spending.[10] More recently, GDS has delegated greater responsibility to departments – particularly large departments with large digital teams – and engaged in more strategic discussions with departments about their plans, rather than focussing on specific services.[11] Where business cases have a digital component but are otherwise subject to Treasury spending controls, GDS advises the Treasury.

The adoption of digital, data and technology standards across government has had three main effects. First, it has raised the quality of services. Second, it has supported interoperability, making it easier for separate systems to exchange and make use of data. Third, security and privacy requirements have improved security in government as a whole, by reducing weaknesses in one part of a network that can make the whole network vulnerable.

Building capability

In terms of building capability, the head of function's work involves:

- **workforce:** managing the DDaT profession of 17,000 civil servants,[12] including setting pay scales and capability frameworks for DDaT professionals, and supporting and participating in recruitment of DDaT professionals across government

- **skills:** improving DDaT skills in civil servants outside the profession, including running the GDS Academy to meet its aim to train 3,000 civil servants a year

- **appointments:** participating in the appointment of senior DDaT managers across government, including to transformation programmes with a significant digital component.

Cross-government strategies

The government published a Transformation Strategy in 2017.[13] Transformation involves changes in the way departments and public bodies work, often made possible by digital technology. According to the strategy, "the transformation of public services...will be delivered by government departments, who are responsible for service delivery, with GDS providing leadership, support and expertise from the centre."[14]

The head of DDaT co-chairs the Transformation Peer Group, the network of senior civil servants involved in transformation programmes across government. The other co-chair is Tony Meggs, Chief Executive of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA). As of July 2017 (the latest available figures), over £70 billion was due to be invested in the biggest and most complex transformation programmes in government: 40 programmes across 12 departments and one public body. At least 17 of these, with an estimated whole-life cost of almost £35 billion, involve a significant digital or technology element, which provides the rationale for the involvement of the head of DDaT.[15]

Brexit is likely to require new services or the adaptation and expansion of existing services, such as customs and immigration, although obviously these depend on the terms of the UK's exit from the European Union. Several of these will be largely digital or have a digital component. Some will require large transformation programmes, requiring overhauling legacy IT systems or the creation of completely new ones. The head of DDaT will have a strategic role in ensuring that there is capability in place to manage these, and that relevant standards are applied.

Through leadership of GDS, the head of DDaT is also responsible for some cross-government digital services. These include:

- GOV.UK, the website for central government

- Verify, which checks citizens' identities

- Notify, which sends emails, text messages and letters to users

- Pay, which is used to receive payments from citizens

- Registers, which create reliable sets of data such as the names of local authorities

- the Digital Marketplace, which is used to find and contract with companies that provide technology or people for digital projects in the public sector.

GDS does not have responsibility for all cross-government digital services. For example, Government Gateway, a way to access government digital services, pre-dates Verify and is run by HMRC. HMRC has maintained Government Gateway, and makes limited use of Verify.

How is the head of DDaT function role working?

Standards

Developing and spreading standards for digital, data and technology have been one of the main achievements of successive heads of DDaT. In Autumn 2017, in *Improving the Management of Digital Government*, we recommended that digital standards should be clarified, including by distinguishing better between guidance and standards. We also concluded that the head of DDaT should encourage the adoption of standards more widely across the public sector, for example by encouraging the spread of the Local Government Digital Service Standard.[16]

There has been no clarification of digital standards since we made those recommendations. However, more local authorities have adopted the local government standard,[17] government has published a Local Digital Declaration,[18] and NHS Digital has amended its service standard, making it similar to GDS's service standard.

Openness

When GDS was formed in 2011 it placed a heavy emphasis on "working openly".[19] This meant publishing software code, blogging about work that was underway, and publishing service standard assessments so that others could learn from the assessments.

In Norway, the central government equivalent of GDS publishes assessments of digital services run by departments. Publication has helped to encourage improvements in these services.[20] GDS previously argued that "The more eyes there are on a service the better it gets – howlers are spotted, better alternatives are pointed out, the bar is raised."[21]

Since 2016, however, there has been a decline in the frequency of blogging on digital government,[22] and service standard assessments have been published less frequently.[23]

The Government Transformation Strategy, published in 2017, celebrated openness as a way of working. But it lacked specifics about what would be done, by whom, by when. Many departments referred to digital transformation in the Single Departmental Plans (SDPs) that were published in May 2018:[24] 11 departments referred to transforming the way they work internally,* and eight departments to transforming the services they deliver.** But most of the published SDPs are not specific enough to be used to assess progress on digital transformation.[25]

It is not clear why GDS has become less open, but this and the fact that published SDPs are not specific has had two effects. First, it is harder to assess the performance of the

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*   Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Ministry of Justice; Department for Work and Pensions; Department of Health and Social Care; Department for Education; HM Revenue and Customs; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Cabinet Office; Department for International Trade; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

**   Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Home Office; Foreign and Commonwealth Office; HM Revenue and Customs; Ministry of Justice; Department for Work and Pensions; Department of Health and Social Care; Northern Ireland Office.

head of DDaT function. Secondly, GDS and those working on transformation across government have lost the benefits of working in the open.

Cross-government digital services

A major part of GDS's work in its first phase was the launch of GOV.UK in 2012. The website is used by all departments, although not all services run by departments are on GOV.UK. GOV.UK has won design awards, and its code has been used by other governments.[26]

The widespread adoption of GOV.UK can be contrasted with the limited take up of Verify, the identity service. The NAO has found that "Verify has been difficult for some people to use, departments have taken longer and found it more difficult to adopt than expected."[27]

HMRC has maintained Government Gateway as an alternative way to access government services, and can still be used to sign on to 138 public services, compared to 17 for Verify.[28] Verify has not met its targets so far and is not on course to meet its target of 25m users by 2020.[29] The NAO has found that this is partly because the strategic case for Verify "has not been sufficiently developed, tested and communicated."[30] This has been an issue for successive heads of DDaT since Verify was launched in 2013.

These examples illustrate the importance of the head of DDaT developing services which meet departments' needs, and which form part of an agreed cross-government strategy.

Accountability

The head of DDaT is accountable to the Chief Executive of the Civil Service for the development of cross-government digital services. The head of DDaT and departments need to agree on the use of those services by departments. The Government Transformation Strategy makes the case at a high level for these services to be used, but does not include specifics about what the head of DDaT and departments will do.

Publication of an implementation plan for the Government Transformation Strategy would improve accountability, both of the head of DDaT and of departments.[31] Single Departmental Plans could also play this role, but the published versions are not specific enough to do so.[32] In the example above, an implementation plan could have clarified the role of Verify and its relationship to Government Gateway.

The head of DDaT and heads of departments have a shared responsibility for the take up of cross-government services, and departments are responsible for digital transformation, supported by the head of DDaT. The Civil Service Board, which is responsible for the leadership of the civil service,[33] discusses digital, data and technology from time to time, but the head of DDaT, and the other heads of function, are not members of the board. This is in contrast to large companies with federated structures – analogous to the Whitehall model – where it is typical for heads of cross-cutting functions to sit on a central management board.[34]

Recommendations

The head of DDaT should:

1. Continue to encourage the adoption of DDaT standards across government and the public sector, including by clarifying these standards.

2. Lead a return to the practice of open working at GDS, including by publishing service standard assessments.

3. Publish a Government Transformation Implementation Plan, which should:

   • set out how many services have been digitised, how secure they are, and the extent to which departments are using shared digital services

   • be reflected in the Single Departmental Plan of each department.

4. Be a member of the Civil Service Board, and report on progress on the Government Transformation Implementation Plan to the Board.

A revised job description for the head of digital, data and technology function

Since 2010 the role of the head of the digital, data and technology function has grown, reflecting the Government's ambitions to make improvements in these areas. Clarifying the responsibilities of the role will help to meet these ambitions and should be a priority for the government. This is particularly urgent as EU exit approaches, given the new and adapted digital services that this will require.

Our recommendations should be reflected in a revised job description for the head of DDaT function. The existing responsibilities of the head of DDaT are set out below, with proposed changes underlined.

1. In conjunction with the IPA, support EU Exit and help departments transform their services. Agree a Government Transformation Implementation Plan with departments and publish the plan. Track implementation of the plan. As a member of the Civil Service Board, report to the Board on progress.

2. Make the strategic case for cross-government services as part of the Implementation Plan. Provide support for the cross-government services such as GOV.UK, Verify, Notify, Pay, and the Digital Market Place and meet adoption targets set out in the Implementation Plan.

3. Support the 17,000-strong DDaT profession across government, by:

   • setting the overarching strategy for professionalising DDaT, creating the engagement model for this professionalisation strategy and aligning departments to this and previous strategies

   • setting technical standards and ensuring that work in departments meets these standards

- developing the DDaT workforce though the development of career paths (job families), aligning grade and pay to these career paths, providing appropriate training, managing the recruitment of senior staff and actively managing the development and placement of senior staff.

4. Clarify standards by distinguishing between measurable standards and guidance. Support and advise overseas governments on standards. Help the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to encourage the adoption of standards in local government, and help other departments to encourage the adoption of standards across the public sector. Publish service standard assessments.

About the author

Daniel Thornton was a Programme Director at the Institute for Government from 2015 until 2018. He led the Institute's work on ministerial development and its civil service-facing work, including on digital government. Daniel began his career in the Foreign Office, and subsequently worked in Parliament, HM Treasury, the Cabinet Office, 10 Downing Street and as a director in the Department for Communities and Local Government. From 2009 until 2015, he worked in Switzerland for Gavi, a public–private partnership that funds immunisation in developing countries.

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