

Submission to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee for its Inquiry into Digital delivery of government services

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Introduction

1. This submission primarily addresses strategies for government digital transformation, but has relevance to most topics in the terms of reference of the Inquiry.
2. Since 2013 I have been researching in depth the challenges of “digital government”, working with colleagues at Brunel and Bradford Universities and a wider network that includes a number of associates in Australia. Prior to that I was a senior civil servant in the UK Cabinet Office, involved from 1997 in its e-government and digital government strategies and representing the UK in international forums. A short biography is annexed.
3. In 2016 I and a colleague published a substantial paper that forms the basis of this submission. Entitled “Digital Government: overcoming the systemic failure of transformation”, it is openly available at <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/12732> and attached.
4. Our study analysed 20 years of academic and public sector material from across the world. We were involved in some of that work ourselves, but we saw the same things being said, done and researched over and over again. Nothing had fundamentally changed so we chose to stand back and ask why, and what needed to change.
5. Our paper is not specifically about the UK, though we are UK-based, as it addresses phenomena that are found in all countries across the world. We believe our findings have universal applicability, not least because they acknowledge that the constitutional structure of every government at every level is different from place to place.

Key points from the research

6. Our paper’s message is that for over a decade there has been no progress on digital government, and no sign of any “transformation” — in fact nowhere is the concept of “digitally transformed government” defined nor measures of progress developed. Early this century, good things were done with information on government web sites and useful online transactions. Since then, academia, governments and industry have been stuck in a loop, failing to find a way beyond these initial steps. Published strategies have changed little in 20 years.
7. The research throws into a lot of doubt many of the things that have been said and done about e-government and latterly digital government, by academics and international benchmarks but also in the statements of governments around the world. Before the internet we wouldn’t have set out to transform public administration by redesigning the forms and guidance leaflets. We might do that to make people’s experience of them more straightforward, but that’s all: we wouldn’t expect it to alter anything else. We used to have forms design and plain language units in government agencies — now we have “digital transformation” teams doing essentially the same thing at greater cost and in some cases detrimentally distorting policy design processes to fit their model¹.
8. Acknowledging a lack of transformational results, more recent government strategies assume that the overall concept is correct but that execution has been the problem in not achieving expected changes. Consequently what we see around the world now in strategies for digital

¹ See for example

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/work-and-pensions-committee/universal-credit-rollout/written/70146.html>

government are an assortment of propositions about technology, data, platforms, methods, and so on that do not have a coherent theory of change for the core functions of governments and public bodies as they really are. Their underlying assumptions are in fact not correct.

9. The problem as we see it is a dependency on applying business and technology models from commerce, centred on web sites, and the use of associated language that influences thinking (especially the confusing homonym “services”). Nowhere does any governmental, academic or industry document on the subject take account of the real functions and processes of governments and public sector bodies. Their constitutional, political, policy, legislative and administrative contexts are massively different to a commercial one. This failure to locate technology in the real governmental environment has led to stagnation, and indeed counter-productive effort.
10. We conclude that there needs to be a complete turnaround in the way governments and researchers think about how digital technologies can change the public sector. Public sector bodies operate within legal and constitutional constraints — most exist to administer law uniformly, meaning that they have limited scope for self-directed change in purpose or processes. So rather than addressing digital government from the point of view of providing services like a newspaper, supermarket or airline, we must start with the political process of policy design. Instead of building web sites to support existing administration, we must look at how technology can be embedded in policy realisation, through policy instruments.
11. Policy instruments are the tools that governments choose from to intervene in the economy, society and environment to make change, such as taxes, benefits, licences, information campaigns and more tangible things like public services and infrastructure. They are the practical results of government. To transform government and public administration with technology means changing a set of policy instruments. Digital technology (including how it can manage data) can change the economics —thus feasibility — of instruments and open up possibilities for new ones.

Conclusion and key challenges

12. Our paper shows a way forward by looking at the core government functions of policy design, legislation, implementation and administration, and exploring how technology might change the selection of policy instruments used to realise governments’ policy goals. It defines transformation in terms of employing a different set of policy instruments — aligning it more closely to policy reform than technology change.
13. To re-orientate digital government towards achieving such genuine transformation entails significantly changing a global received wisdom. Authority and momentum has lain so far with the technology community, which has sometimes derided the policy and legislative community as a barrier to progress. This reflects a failure to understand that policy and legislation is actually the core business of governments, so technologists must learn, adapt to and support it to be effective. A new balance and co-operation between the communities must be achieved, with a switch of language and concepts from that of technology and commerce to that of policy-making and administration.
14. International comparisons and sharing of “good practice” have perpetuated and embedded the flawed approaches. These cycles need to be broken. This is a big challenge indeed, but someone needs to start somewhere.

Annex — contributor biography

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Paul Waller is pursuing research interests in the impact of information technology on politics, democracy, government, public policy design and administration, public sector innovation, and social investment appraisal. He is also undertaking research, advisory, and speaking engagements for international bodies, public authorities and companies. Formerly he was a UK senior civil servant working on policy development and delivery in e-government, including leading e-government work for the UK Presidency of the EU, developing European policy, and hosting the 2005 'Transforming Public Services' ministerial conference. He has held a number of IT-related policy and strategy posts including being head of IT Management in the former Department of Transport, leading the Government's Year 2000 policy and e-democracy policy, and directing a five-year national programme within the local government sector to transform front line public services to challenging and disadvantaged groups through the innovative use of ICT. He has presented on innovation, e-government, e-inclusion and e-democracy at numerous top-level EU and international conferences. In a personal capacity, he was an advisor and consultant to the European Commission on digital inclusion and inclusive e-government. Before joining the civil service he was a technology market analyst and leader of an advanced technology group in the telecommunications sector.