

On Strategy: The strategy is delivery. Again.

January 6, 2013 by Mike Bracken.

In 2011, early in my current role, I discussed with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude, the strategy I recommended we adopt for all things digital. The strategy was to be disarmingly simple: to deliver. Often, iteratively and repetitively.

Here's my take on why delivery is such an attractive digital strategy in Whitehall. Ministers are inundated with policy directives and advice, most of it of the risk-averse variety. When it comes to digital, the voices of security and the voices of procurement dominate policy recommendations. The voice of the user barely gets a look-in. (Which also explains much of the poor internal IT, but that really is another story.)



[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/users1.jpg>]

A reminder of why we are here, on the windows of the GDS offices

There are two inarguable truths about the creation of policy when it comes to digital. Firstly, there's far too much of it, especially in relation to subsequent delivery. A 2009 Institute for Government [report](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20making%20in%20the%20real%20world.pdf), [http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20making%20in%20the%20real%20world.pdf] claims 19,436 civil servants were employed in 'policy delivery' in 2009, while each government department produces around 171 policy or strategy documents on average each year.

One of the many lessons in my 18 months in Government has been to watch the endless policy cycles and revisions accrue – revision upon revision of carefully controlled Word documents, replete with disastrous styling. Subs to Ministers, private office communications, correspondence across departments and occasional harvesting of consultation feedback all go into this mix.

Rarely, if ever, does user need get a look-in. User need, if referenced at all, is self-reinforcing, in that the internal user needs dominate those of users of public services. I've lost count of the times when, in attempting to explain a poorly performing transaction or service, an explanation comes back along the lines of 'Well, the department needs are different...' How the needs of a department or an agency can so often trump the needs of the users of public services is beyond me.

It's usually the way with all large, rules-based organisations: that more time and effort is spent on internal logic and process than on listening to and understanding real user needs. But in the case of public service provision, it is too often a completely closed loop, the ultimate insider job. There are many better analysts of why this occurs, but a lot is to do with motivation of those inside the system, and [Le Grand](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/3120/1/Knights,_Knaves_or_Pawns.pdf) [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/3120/1/Knights,_Knaves_or_Pawns.pdf] is possibly the best place to start that discussion.



[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/BusinessCards1.jpg>]

These business cards – the work of GDS design genius Ben Terrett – act as a useful reminder when stuck in meeting

The second policy fact is that when it comes to digital strategy, and technology related issues in general, the absence of knowledgeable input from those delivering services is alarming. In 2009, the Public Administration Select Committee criticised the policymaking process in general as hurried, hyperactive, and insufficiently informed by practical experience. My italics, because it's this characteristic which is the killer for the digital agenda. The people who can 'find the quick do' as one of my business cards says, would much rather actually deliver than try and influence policy makers. While many digital issues require clear policies, many more do not. What they require is very quick delivery of a working version of the product. Throughout the creation of GOV.UK in 2012, time and again, we encountered issues where it was just quicker, cheaper and more efficient to build, rent or pull together a new product, or at least a minimum viable product, than go through the twin horrors of an elongated policy process followed by a long procurement.

Back in 2011 I took time to meet several previous holders of exalted job titles such as mine. From e-envoys to CIO's, Executive Directors to corporate change agents, Whitehall has a glittering track record of giving ambiguous but eye-catching job titles to newly arrived reformers, especially in the technology field. I should thank them firstly for giving their time and thoughtful advice. Many of these people I count as friends, and I will spare them all direct references. While many of them banked some high-profile achievements, the collective reflection was frustration with and at the system. As one candidly put it, 'the strategy was flawless, but I couldn't get anything done.' And there's the rub. Delivery is too often the poor relation to policy.

Since we started the Government Digital Service we have at all times tried to make user needs the driver for all decisions. Delivery based on user need is like kryptonite to policy makers and existing suppliers, as it creates rapid feedback loops and mitigates against vendor lock-in.

Old process

1. Policy
2. Process
3. Systems
4. User
5. Stasis

[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Old-process.png>]

Policy led digital service creation
closes down responsiveness, builds
in long-lead times and results in
services which are dictated by
legacy IT thinking, not by user
needs

Let me explain. For digital services, we usually start with a detailed policy. Often far too detailed, based not just on Ministerial input, but on substantial input from our existing suppliers of non-digital services. We then look to embed that in current process, or put simply, look for a digital version of how services are delivered in different channels. This is why so many of our digital services look like clunky, hard-to-use versions of our paper forms: because the process behind the paper version dictates the digital thinking.

Then things take a turn for the worse. The policy and process are put out to tender, and the search for the elusive 'system' starts. Due to a combination of European procurement law and a reliance on existing large IT contracts, a 'system' is usually procured, at great time and expense. After a long number of months, sometimes years, the service is unveiled. Years after 'requirements' were gathered, and paying little attention to the lightning-quick changes in user expectation and the digital marketplace, the service is unveiled to all users as the finished product. We then get the user feedback we should have had at the start. Sadly it's too late to react. Because these services have been hard-wired, like the IT contract which supplied them, our services simply can't react to the most valuable input: what users think and how they behave. As we have found in extreme examples, to change six words the web site of one of these services can take months and cost a huge amount, as, like IT contracts, they are seen as examples of 'change control' rather than a response to user need.

If this 5 step process looks all too familiar that's because you will have seen it with much of how Government approaches IT. It's a process which is defined by having most delivery outsourced, and re-inforced by having a small number of large suppliers adept at long-term procurement cycles. It is, in short, the opposite of how leading digital services are created, from Amazon to British Airways, from Apple to Zipcar, there is a relentless focus on, and reaction to, user need.

New process

1. Users
2. Service (re)design
3. System development
4. Policy check
5. Feedback

[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/New-process.png>]

By putting user need first, and then allowing policy to changes to be understood in the context of user needs, we will have responsive digital services

If we put user need at the front of our thinking, the 5 steps look very different. When we created GOV.UK, we created an alpha of the service in 12 weeks. Its purpose was to create a working, but limited, version of what GOV.UK could become. We made it quickly, based on the user needs we knew about. (Using referrer and search information, it's not too difficult to determine mainstream user needs, like driving licenses and passport information)

We can then design services, or re-design them, and rapidly react to user feedback. As we move towards a Beta version, where the service is becoming more comprehensive, we capture thousands of pieces of feedback, from user surveys, A/B testing and summative tests and social media input. This goes a long way to inform our systems thinking, allowing us to use the appropriate tools for the job, and then replace them as the market provides better products or as our needs change. This of course precludes lengthy procurements and accelerates the time taken for feedback to result in changes to live services. In the first 10 days after we released the full version of GOV.UK in October 2012, we made over 100 changes to the service based on user feedback, at negligible cost. And the final result of this of this approach is a living system, which is reactive to all user needs, including that of policy colleagues with whom we work closely to design each release.

Looking at the highlights of what we have delivered, it is notable that delivery of services, whether they be information or transactional, has come before final strategy work is completed. Or put more simply, in an analogue world policy dictates to delivery, but in a digital world delivery informs policy. This is what agile means for Government and its services, and if delivered in this way, the ramifications are profound.

While I am very happy with the [Cross Government Digital Strategy](http://publications.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital/strategy/) and more so by the [subsequent response from departments](http://www.gov.uk/digitalstrategy/) , which has given us all a mandate to transform our leading transactions, I believe that these strategies have real weight because of the reputation for delivery which precedes them.





[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Tim-OReilly.jpg>]

Tim O'Reilly said of the Government Digital Strategy: "This is the new bible for anyone working in open government" Photo by Paul Clarke www.flickr.com/photos/paul_clarke/

Delivery Highlights 2011

May: [GOV.UK](http://gov.uk/) [<http://gov.uk/>] [Alpha launched](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20111004104716/http://alpha.gov.uk/) [<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20111004104716/http://alpha.gov.uk/>]

Aug: E-petitions launched

Nov: Identity strategy re-set

Dec: [Launch GDS](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about/>]

2012

Jan: [Beta GOV.UK](http://radar.oreilly.com/2012/01/with-govuk-british-government.html) [<http://radar.oreilly.com/2012/01/with-govuk-british-government.html>]

Feb: Established [Digital Leaders](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital-leaders-network/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital-leaders-network/>] across Govt

Mar: [Digital Advisory Board](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/profilebrenthoberman/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/profilebrenthoberman/>] set up

Apr: [Budget commitments](http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/budget2012_complete.pdf) [http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/budget2012_complete.pdf] : Digital Strategies and Cost Per Transactions

May: [Social Media Guidelines](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/05/17/cabinet-office-launches-social-media-guidance-for-civil-servants/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/05/17/cabinet-office-launches-social-media-guidance-for-civil-servants/>] and delivered alpha service for Office of Public Guardian (Lasting Powers of Attorney) with Ministry of Justice

Jun: [Digital Performance Framework](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/06/26/introducing-the-digital-performance-framework-alpha-release/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/06/26/introducing-the-digital-performance-framework-alpha-release/>] and digital actions throughout the [Civil Service Reform Plan](http://resources.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf) [<http://resources.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf>], plus we joined [OIX](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/06/14/cabinet-office-joins-open-identity-exchange/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/06/14/cabinet-office-joins-open-identity-exchange/>] to develop the Identity programme.

Jul: Launched the [Transactions Explorer](http://transactionalservices.alpha.gov.co.uk/) [<http://transactionalservices.alpha.gov.co.uk/>] which shows the key data for all 672 Central Government transactions

Aug: [E-petitions birthday](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/08/16/happy-birthday-e-petitions-a-year-in-numbers/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/08/16/happy-birthday-e-petitions-a-year-in-numbers/>]

Sep: Delivered alpha of Student Loans Company service.

Oct: Finalise the [Digital Efficiency Report](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/11/06/the-digital-efficiency-report/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/11/06/the-digital-efficiency-report/>]

Nov: Release the [Govt Digital Strategy](http://publications.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital/strategy/) [<http://publications.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital/strategy/>] and [Inside Government](http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/12/06/inside-gov-traffic-demand-engagement-numbers/) [<http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2012/12/06/inside-gov-traffic-demand-engagement-numbers/>], and launched [GOV.UK](http://gov.uk/) [<http://gov.uk/>]

Dec: Three major departments migrate to [GOV.UK](http://gov.uk/) [<http://gov.uk/>]. [All government departments release their digital strategies](http://www.gov.uk/digitalstrategy) [<http://www.gov.uk/digitalstrategy>]

What we will do in 2013 is to continue to deliver. All Government departments will migrate onto GOV.UK by April, with hundreds of agencies set to follow through the next financial year. Our identity platform will allow third-party validation of users for some Government transactions. An increasing number of transactions will be transformed to become digital by default. Our commissioning and partnership development will continue to open up the supply chain in ways the Government Cloudstore has demonstrated. These are just a few of the delivery challenges ahead.

Delivery will be more distributed across Government in 2013, which gives us more challenges to co-ordinate and support across agencies and departments. But deliver we must. Late last year I presented this digital delivery view to Sir Bob Kerslake, Sir Jeremy Heywood and all the other permanent secretaries, many of whom have been very supportive of our digital ambition.

The UK population has embraced digital - if we're bold enough to redesign our services we can serve people better and save real money

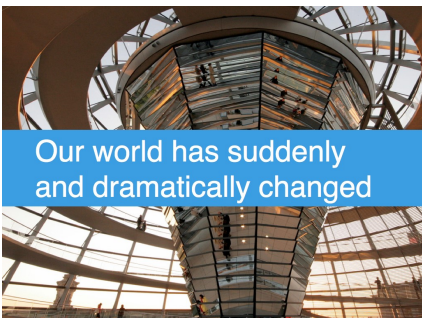
GDS

[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/GDSslide1.jpg>]

We need to build a Civil Service that really understands digital and really focuses on users

GDS

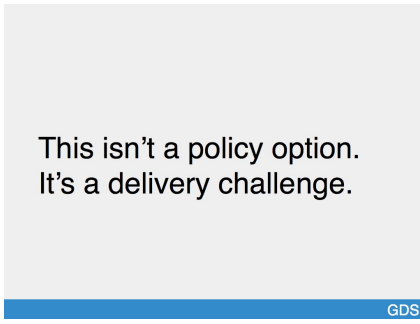
[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/GDSslide2.jpg>]



Our world has suddenly and dramatically changed

[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/GDSslide3.jpg>]

Image by [Ana Paula Hirama](http://www.flickr.com/photos/anapaulahrm/3577653936/sizes/l/in/photostream/) [<http://www.flickr.com/photos/anapaulahrm/3577653936/sizes/l/in/photostream/>]



[<http://www.kb-client-area.co.uk/mikebracken/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/GDSslides4-2.jpg>]

As you can see, there is no backing away from the delivery challenge. The challenge this year is to deliver new, re-designed transactions to meet our digital ambition, and to do that we must change our approach to delivery. And we can only do it together, by placing user needs at the forefront of our thinking.

I look forward to helping Government make 2013 a great year for digital delivery.

Onwards!

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