

GIVING PUBLIC SERVICES A TECH INJECTION

Steven George-Hilley, Director of Technology for Parliament Street, sets out a plan for the digitisation of public services.

After years of bruising economic chaos, at last Britain is finally on the road to a sustainable recovery. Thanks to a dedicated long-term economic plan from David Cameron and George Osborne, the deficit has been cut, welfare has been capped and, since 2010, there are now 1.75m more people in work.

More people are now earning a regular wage and there are 700,000 fewer workless households, providing dignity and job security that our country so badly needs. However, we may be on the road to recovery now, but history will repeat itself if we ever allow ourselves to overspend again once our economy improves.

The confused wisdom of the left tells us that the only way to improve public services is to pour billions of pounds of taxpayers' money into the Civil Service furnace, but this theory has been proved false time and time again. In the last five years, public services have maintained high standards, despite a reduction in funding and none of the catastrophes predicted have occurred.

So as Britain moves into sustainable economic growth, how can we build a financial surplus to secure our future whilst still protecting and improving public services? The answer is giving our public services a long overdue injection of technology.

One of the main reasons the UK public sector has been slow on technology adoption is the numerous bad headlines associated with previous IT schemes. Everyone knows that when a public sector IT

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project goes wrong, it goes badly wrong. Take, for example the NHS supercomputer, designed to create a central database of patient records, which crashed out, costing taxpayers an incredible £20billion.

One of the reasons that public sector IT catastrophes are so painful is that, all too often, due to ludicrous clauses in contracts; major providers get to bill the government even if the project is a disaster. The challenge for departments is to reverse the culture of mega-vendors profiting from technical failure, by installing new procurement processes that protect the taxpayer and not the IT giant who caused the mess in the first place.

IT suppliers to the British government need to offer new levels of flexibility, and understand that public services must come first and that their lucrative revenue streams are based on performance-related work. For too long, the complacency around public sector IT projects on both sides has meant that work is delivered late and over budget, and a smarter government of the future must ensure that this approach is confined to the history books.

In this new era of accountability, technology vendors have the opportunity not only to provide value for money to the government and the public; but also the ability to transform public services for the long-term.

The golden rule for government must be that digitisation is the route to successful and cost effective transformation. Delivering a paperless National Health Service (NHS) will ensure that patient records can be accessed anywhere, anytime by medical professionals at the touch of a button. This means doctors and nurses can make diagnoses faster, with the patient's full medical history available to ensure that treatment is correct.

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Last year the paper-based tax disc was phased out by the DVLA, and replaced by a digital alternative. In addition to saving a large sum of public money, these processes also made life much easier for motorists, and the DVLA no longer needs to print endless replacements and upgrades, saving paper and enhancing the organisation's green credentials.

Yet these examples in isolation, whilst notable, represent the piecemeal approach to digitisation in public services. The same principles of digitisation should be applied to HMRC, the DWP and many other major departments as well as local councils. Digitisation is a long-term strategy and not a gimmick to be deployed in specific areas alone.

The public sector must also embrace Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) schemes to ensure more members of staff are using tablets and mobile devices to work on the move. The practice involves enabling workers to use their personal devices in the workplace, with access to emails and other services, securely tested and tracked. The explosion of personal devices such as smartphones and tablets means that, very often, members of staff actually own more expensive and impressive gadgets than their employer. With this in mind, it makes economic sense to enable them to use these devices at work, saving the department money and ensuring the workforce is able to work from home and the office.

Anyone sceptical of this approach to mobility in the public sector should examine how this would impact health and social services. Just imagine if carers doing home visits to the elderly could check-in and register any concerns via a tablet computer. Or order extra services or medication at the touch of a button. The use of these devices will transform carer services beyond recognition, and the upfront investment in technology would provide huge savings in the long term.

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In education, for too long digital exclusion has meant that children from poorer families are denied access to the online resources of wealthier pupils. This simply has to change, so schools and local authorities should investigate providing funding for broadband and laptops for families who have neither the means nor understanding of the importance of the connected, online world.

Those who dropped out of school or never had the chance in life to study properly can now log on and digest billions of pages of online information, breaking down social barriers that once blighted our country. The government should work with universities to set up free online courses and webinars for anyone with an internet connection to log-on and view. This will enable lost generations to gain further education that would previously have been beyond their financial means, rebalancing the society and giving others a chance.

At a local government level, online tools should be used to tackle the obscurity that is loneliness and isolation of elderly people. By providing those living alone, with limited means, access to the internet and a dynamic interface of applications for meals, local chatrooms and medical care, our elderly will remain connected and in touch with the services they need and deserve. Online applications should be used to alert charities to those who are left in isolation and ensure that every pensioner in our country spends their final years in a life of dignity and inclusion.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, it is time for the government to embrace online collaboration to deliver a lasting technology transformation which will improve our economy. Cities like London, Manchester and Birmingham are engines of financial growth for Britain, and they need to be better connected to attract global investors, businesses and talented people from around the world.

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To achieve this, we need faster broadband, connected vehicles and driverless cars, and better management of traffic to enable the smooth flow of goods and services around our great cities. The city is no longer simply a base for money-making; it is the infrastructure for rapid business growth, job creation and is critical to our country's future. Britain needs more smart cities if it is going to compete on the world stage. To achieve this, the major IT providers need to work with Mayors and city planners to deliver game-changing technology initiatives.

In summary, Britain's public services deserve a technology injection to boost their performance, save money improve lives. For too long our elected officials and civil servants have taken a cautious approach to ambitious IT adoption, and this means that we have fallen behind other major countries in terms of innovation.

The next government needs to embrace technology wholeheartedly and without reservation. It needs to develop policies that are intrinsically linked to IT, enabling interactive services that improve our society and empower economic growth. Above all, it needs to show that bold, ambitious vision that encapsulated the Victorian era and saw our country make huge strides forward.

Britain has an opportunity to lead the world in delivering high-tech public services - failure to do so will see our country fall out of step with a an exciting, brave, new world of bold IT innovation. We have the credentials, the vision and the ambition to deliver this much-needed change and the sooner we get started, the better.