

Digital By Default?

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A little bit of history

In the previous UK Parliament Her Majesty's Government decided that, after a long and inglorious history of very expensive failures at the hands of a "powerful oligopoly" of large suppliers, any new central government IT projects should be run in a different way. The Cabinet Office, under the leadership of Francis Maude, the then Paymaster General, established the Government Digital Service to lead this endeavour, under the guidance of a Digital Advisory Board chaired by Martha, Baroness Lane Fox—founder of Lastminute.com—and with membership including other representatives of the digital private sector. But, as was noted by some at the time, no particular representation of the users.

In 2013 it was proposed to transform 25 major government services into "Digital By Default" offerings within 400 days, specifically by March 2015. This was to be achieved through the adoption of Lean and Agile practices, and to be delivered by small teams combining staff from the relevant Department of government, from GDS—in a largely consultative capacity—and from a multiplicity of smaller IT suppliers. Zuhlke was one of those suppliers. Never again should a government department have to pay one of a (very short) list of very big suppliers a huge amount of tax payers' money to go to the back of the (very short) queue for new projects after already spending a huge amount of tax payers' money with them to fail to deliver an IT system which was even marginally fit for purpose, never mind representing any sort of value add.

Back to the present

At the time of writing, March 2016, of those 25 "exemplar" services fifteen are in "Live", which is the stage of the GDS service lifecycle model that represents a full-strength implementation of a service: general availability, but with ongoing enhancement. That's a very good result for UK tax payers, such as myself, and this approach has been used as a model by, for example, the US federal government through its [18F](#) initiative. And also by Zuhlke on private sector projects, we like it so much. Five of the exemplars are in a very unclear and probably quite badly compromised state and the remaining five are in "Beta", which is the lifecycle state corresponding to limited availability to selected user populations who provide feedback on limited services that still being actively developed. One of those Beta services is Rural Payments.

The EU Common Agricultural Policy ("CAP") includes what are called Direct Payment schemes that member states must implement—the "Basic" payment—and some that they can opt to

implement if they wish. The UK has, as usual, chosen to implement the EU policy in a complex and idiosyncratic way. These payments are for “active farmers”, a class of person with a specific but broad, definition. Then there are various other funds that can be made available to support work to keep the British countryside clean, tidy and generally agreeable—plant trees and hedgerows, reduce pollution of watercourses, enhance habitats for wildlife, and so on. The Rural Payments Agency (“RPA”) exemplar, carried out by that arm of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (“DEFRA”) would have moved the creation and maintenance of claims for payment in these schemes onto the GOV.UK site as a Digital by Default service. It’s worth noting that the EU regulations do not mandate this—or any other—mechanism for implementing the payments. The numbers involved are not trivial: billions of pounds are disbursed through hundreds of thousands of payments every year—or at least, that’s the goal—and many farmers rely on these funds as a significant component of their annual income.

The move to GOV.UK has partly happened, but is substantially delayed and highly compromised. A largely paper-based backup solution has been deployed, much to the relief of farmers.

A [recent report by the Public Accounts Committee](#) of the House of Commons (“PAC”) on this programme notes that many farmers’ finances are already severely stretched and that the delayed payments resulting from the compromised IT programme has made matters worse for them. The new system is not merely late and over budget, it also offers significantly worse performance than what it sought to replace. The report Summary states that:

“The Government Digital Service [“GDS”] was created to help improve IT projects, but instead hindered delivery of this Programme. In addition to delaying payments to farmers, Programme costs have risen by 40% and penalties from the European Commission are likely to increase significantly.”

Since many of the other exemplars have been so successful—and they have—we might wonder why this one has struggled, and why the PAC lays the blame at the feet of GDS. The PAC report and the evidence behind it offers some clues

GDS as change agents

Part of the remit of the GDS was to change how government departments planned, operated and paid for IT work. And also to change how HM Government provided its services to its citizens. Being an agent of change is not easy, especially not when what you need to change is something as stuck in its ways as a department of government. And especially a department concerned with such a conservative industry as agriculture. DEFRA replaced, in

2002, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—known, with greater or lesser affection, to generations of countryside dwellers as “Min of Ag-n-fish”—which itself replaced the Board of Agriculture in 1919, that Board having been created in 1889. That’s an enormous amount of legacy thinking to try to overcome.

The PAC Report notes that:

“GDS introduced a level of innovation and risk to the Programme, without assessing whether the Department was capable of managing the changes, and did not provide sufficient support during implementation”

and that

“The failure of the Department, the RPA and GDS to work together effectively resulted in serious detriment to the Programme. ”

the evidence given to the Committee last year offers some insight into quite how bad some of this was. For example, Liam Maxwell, CTO of HM Government, said:

“The programme was on one floor of the Department, and the Rural Payments Agency was on the rest of the floors of the building, and they were culturally very different. People dressed differently; people used different methods of reporting. Instead of using much more traditional ways of reporting management information, the programme itself used modern digital techniques to help to report what was going on, and I think people [in the Department] found that very difficult, as a different way of managing a project.”

GDS exemplar teams were actually quite bullish about this sort of thing when they started—they did quite deliberately have the teams working on exemplars dress, talk and even decorate their office space differently, to reinforce the idea that *things are different now*. As Mr Maxwell notes, drily, that “was something that different Departments took in different ways, and different Departments reacted in different ways to it”. Indeed. At HMRC and BIS it seemed to go perfectly well.

Technical Problems

There were immediate technical problems with the system. Work was done in silos with an attempt at big-bang integration near to the go-live, which never ends well. A crucial piece of the architecture, a combined GIS and rules engine, was purchased very early in the programme but performance and load testing of it happened very late—and that product turned out not to be able to handle the intended load. Or at least, not out-of-the-box. Note that the number of transactions per year faced by the Rural Payments service is orders of

magnitude less than that faced by other services which are in Live.

It is claimed though that the actual functionality, if used by few enough people, has been got to work.

There is a non-technical problem, however, and it lies with the idea of a GOV.UK service being “digital by default”, which is the idea that everyone who can use a service on GOV.UK will chose to do so, and those who can’t will be helped to.

Personae

The first criteria for a Digital by Default service is whether or not the project team has ensured that they

“Understand user needs. [and have done] Research to develop a deep knowledge of who the service users are and what that means for the design of the service”

Well, who are the users of the Rural Payment service? They are farmers. “Farmer” covers a range of personae, let’s think of some...

from:

- **The Hon. Tarquin Cholmondeley-Featherstonhaugh**, 35, who’s diverse portfolio of local businesses includes a thousand acres of wheat on land outside Cambridge that his family has owned for seven generations. The Hon. Tarquin leases GPS-guided semi-automated equipment with ground-penetrating RADAR to work the crop and he went to school with the sons of the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development and several Secretaries of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. His Estate Manager has an Executive MBA from Harvard Business School. All of his buildings have gigabit fibre, all his vehicles are on a WiFi mesh.
via
- **Flora Ashley**, 28, bought a herd of alpacas after selling her Shoreditch startup (it’s the “Instagram for aquatic marsupials“ one) and uses Etsy to operate the world’s dominant NFC-enabled alpaca-wool music-festival friendship bracelet empire. Flora wrote—and self-published on Lulu—a popular series of guide books for “technomads” and “anarco-downshiffters”. Flora had to pay OpenReach to put fibre into the village she lives in for three months of the year between consciousness-raising trips to sub-Saharan Africa and presenting at TEDx.
and

- **Tom**, 40, and **Barbara**, 38, quit their jobs in local government and Higher Education, respectively, to pursue the good life. Both have post-graduate education in their erstwhile career specialisms and a subscription to Smallholder magazine. They own 25 acres with a barn on it that they are turning into a house. They have a small flock of rare-breed chickens, a small herd of long-horn highland cattle, a small flock of coloured-fleece sheep, and two heritage pigs. They make and sell their own organic unpasteurised cheese and hand-spun wool and plan to cure their own bacon. The barn—house—has a 56k modem on the land-line and no 3G coverage.

and

- **Manor House Farms Ltd**, incorporated 2007 in the States of Jersey, has been quietly buying up parcels of land all over the county as smaller operators go bust. It's not entirely clear, least of all to the Land Registry, exactly what Manor House owns. Nor how big its flocks and herds are. A lot of animal transporter wagons move around at night between remote parcels. There's a large, windowless intensive unit on one of them, no-one has ever seen anything go into or come out of it. Or if they have, they aren't saying. The unit has a surprisingly large satellite dish outside it.

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- **Jack Anderson**, 72, left school at 14 and holds an unbreakable peppercorn lease for his lifetime on a hundred acres of rough pasture (belonging to a cousin of the Hon. Tarquin, as it happens) up the side of a mountain in what's called a "Less Favoured Area". All of his sheep were destroyed during the F+M outbreak and now he subsists by subletting the fields to: larger farmers as grazing, some clay-pigeon shooters, an illegal hare-coursing club, and a magic mushroom syndicate. Jack does not have a bank account, running hot water, or a telephone. His spinster niece, Rose Mary Anderson, 60, does all of his administration. On a typewriter.

and lots of others. I grew up on a farm and still have links with farming and farmers and while the personae above are not based on any specific individuals they do represent very recognisable types. Which is as it should be. And, if you are thinking that they all rely on shocking gender, class—and other—stereotypes for effect, you'd be right. What about the ones on your project?

Assisted Digital

Almost the only thing that those personae have in common is that the government is obliged to give them money in relation to land. In particular, their degree of "digital literacy" varies enormously, as does, orthogonally to that, their access to digital channels. Tom and Barbara, for example, would be very comfortable with digital services if they ever could get the front page of GOV.UK to load cleanly in the barn—house—whereas the Hon. Tarquin is awash with bandwidth but doesn't like to "bother" with any of that "techie stuff".

The Digital by Default Service Standard has this to say about some of that, under the rubric of Assisted Digital Support:

“Assisted digital support is for people who can’t use online government services on their own. The support can be someone guiding a user through the digital service or entering a user’s information into the digital service on their behalf. It can be provided by the private, voluntary or public sectors.”

This is a sort of accessibility-writ-large, which is a good thing! But there is a sense that what it really boils down to in a lot of cases is that a GOV.UK service web site offers an easy and secure way *for someone else to go through it for you*.

It’s disappointing that GDS would have let a project go wrong in the way that the Rural Payments one did. Over and above the specific problems of that programme, there is perhaps a bigger problem with GDS and the GOV.UK digital transformation programme—they have a solution in hand.

The comments section on [this Register post](#) on the topic is the usual sewer but does have this very pertinent contribution:

“Consultancy, my first ever boss told me, is a listening business. Stop trying to interrupt your clients with the solutions you want to sell them. If you think you’ve already got something to sell them before you’ve finished listening to them, you’re already on the path to deliver them something they don’t want[...].”

Indeed. But GDS, as the leading edge of the UK government digital transformation programme as a whole arrive in Departments armed with a solution that they very much want to sell—a Digital by Default service on GOV.UK It’s what they exist to do. The problems that DEFRA have seen are partly of their own making, and partly of GDSs making but also largely because a Digital by Default service is not the right solution for many of DEFRA’s users. Not yet.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP a member of the PAC described, in critical terms, “the miraculous digital by default world we are all going to live in, including, magically, the farmers who have no broadband“. It looks a lot as if GDS, for all its very genuine commitment to building projects in departments that really do carry out very sincere user research, cannot imagine that magic not working.

No magic

But it doesn't. And so as Mark Grimshaw, Chief Executive of the RPA, said in his evidence to the PAC:

“To pick up on [Mrs Trevelyan's] point about digital by default, we have evolved that so that is [sic] now digital by design, practical by implementation. Those farmers that need to apply with paper, because they do not have broadband or access to the system, will be able to do so. ” [emphasis added]

This is very different from even an “assisted digital” solution, and one wonders how many millions—not just in project costs, but in EU penalties for non-payment—could have been saved if that had been recognized as an option in the first place.

There are a lot of good lessons for anyone running any sort of “digital transformation” or “innovation” programme to be drawn from those very successful exemplars that GDS established in 2013—it's a treat to go to an iteration boundary showcase and be told about (my, and maybe your) money being saved by newly implemented features, every two weeks for years, as we did at HMRC. There are also lessons to be learned from the compromised ones, like the one at the Rural Payments Agency.