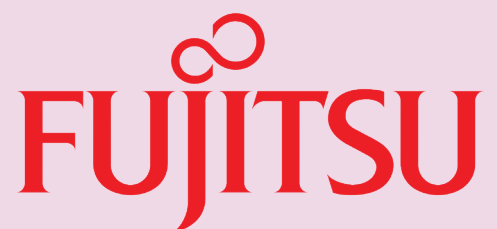


REFORM

June 2022

Delivering value:
Building a smarter
post-COVID state
Policy roundtable



Delivering value: Building a smarter post-COVID state

Reform was delighted to host a policy roundtable on the theme of building a smarter State in May 2022, with the generous support of Fujitsu. The discussion was opened by Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, and Christian Benson, VP, Client Managing Director at Fujitsu.

The pandemic placed a huge strain on the public sector and public finances. It also demonstrated both the strengths and weaknesses of the State apparatus. As we focus on the recovery, it is vital that lessons are learnt to build a smarter, more resilient and more effective State.

It is also essential that, as the Chancellor stated in his speech laying out the 2021 Budget and Spending Review, government applies a laser-sharp focus on delivering value for taxpayers' money. With the public finances under pressure, driving efficiency across government by transforming how services are designed and delivered will be vital to ensuring money is spent to the greatest possible effect.

Data-driven everything

While improving the quality and use of data has long been a government priority, the pandemic provided a burning platform for urgent action. In a rapidly evolving crisis, access to real-time information to inform decision making was essential.

Huge strides were made to improve the data infrastructure in Whitehall, with the adoption of data dashboards to ensure insights were easily extracted and understood.

Building on this to ensure the right, high-quality data is available in all public services must be a priority. In turn, this will not only enable government to deliver better results, but also embrace greater automation and apply more advanced technologies.

Truly digital government

One of the most striking aspects of the response to the pandemic was the rapid shift of services online. The need to quickly move away from in-person provision accelerated long-standing ambitions to build a digitally enabled public sector, with many beneficial results both for users and taxpayers.

This ability to act at pace – in part due to streamlined processes and a reduction in bureaucracy – must be retained.



Charlotte Pickles
Director
Reform

“Digitisation is not the same as digital transformation, and building a smarter post-Covid state will require the latter.”

Policy roundtable summary

However, digitisation is not the same as digital transformation, and building a smarter post-Covid State will require the latter. That means redesigning processes end-to-end, and crucially it means embedding technologists upstream right at the start of the policy formulation process.

When this doesn't happen, unnecessary complexity is built in, and the full value of technology can be missed. Multi-disciplinary teams, used much more extensively during the pandemic, should be the norm.

Smart tech

Government isn't Google and the pace of technological change requires a smart approach to transformation. In practice that means future proofing investments and approaches as much as possible.

Low code/no code should be the default where possible, and government should be buying not building unless there is clear added value in doing otherwise. Government can't compete with the private sector when it comes to technologists, instead it needs to create the environment where everyone can behave like a technologist. Business teams must be built with the skills to configure rather than code.

Achieving a genuinely digital government also means understanding the full use-case for any technological investment, recognising that benefits may accrue across departments and a greater upfront investment may deliver much greater value in the longer-term.

Short-termist decisions focused on minimising costs can undermine value for money. That also means procurement must be more commercially intelligent and flexible.

Public-private partnerships

During the pandemic, public-private partnerships were key to tackling the crisis, with private sector expertise deployed to support large scale public programmes – of which the vaccine taskforce is the most powerful example.

Innovation often happens faster in the private sector and the public sector should be comfortable 'plagiarising' new ways of working and technological approaches. Rather than purely transactional, the relationship between the sectors should be meaningful and outcomes-driven.

Clarity of purpose

The clarity of purpose present during the pandemic enabled a quicker, less bureaucratic response. Where there is a lack of unifying purpose, inefficiency develops. Government must be clear about what it wants to achieve, and the government machine must be deployed to achieve it.

This clarity should be underpinned by a focus on results, not process. During Covid, scrutiny was applied to the 'what', not the 'how'. Individuals and teams were given problems to solve and encouraged to take calculated risks where necessary. Outcomes were king – which should become the norm.

Eco-systems of trust

Retaining and building on that streamlined model is central to the smarter State. A culture of trust is needed in which people are empowered to do their jobs and take decisions. During the pandemic, the usual multiple layers of sign-off were abandoned to reduce delays. The focus was delivery, not dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't'.

This is particularly crucial when it comes to technology where the pace of innovation outruns current approaches to business plan sign-off and procurement processes. It is vital that bureaucratic processes do not impede efforts to build a smarter State.

Clear accountability and high standards

In this model, clear lines of accountability are essential, with timely data enabling transparent performance management.

Greater trust and autonomy should lead to improved efficiency and effectiveness. Base performance standards should be high, with minimum service commitments seen as just that, the minimum the public can expect.

"A culture of trust is needed in which people are empowered to do their jobs and take decisions."

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info@reform.uk



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