UK Government Digital Service: Moving Beyond a Website

In late 2012, Mike Bracken sat at a London café as he waited for his meeting. Just over two years earlier, Bracken had been appointed the leader of the UK Government Digital Service (GDS), a new, entrepreneurial agency in the UK government. GDS had been charged with "championing a 'digital culture'" in government, and Bracken hoped that it could unleash a wave of innovation that made everyday government services like renewing a passport or applying for a welfare benefit more efficient, equitable, and user-friendly.

Bracken was preparing to meet with Tom Loosemore, Deputy Director at GDS and fellow veteran of the tech industry, to discuss their strategic plan. As Bracken waited, he reflected on their progress to date. Bracken and his team at GDS had significant successes of which they were proud. GDS had already helped save billions of pounds with better information technology systems, and had centralized the government's web presence into a single domain (called GOV.UK) where citizens could do everything from schedule a driving test to register for government benefits.[1] Rohan Silva, a policy advisor at the Prime Minister's office, had praised GDS as the "centre ground of public service reform in the UK today," and Tim O'Reilly, the famous technology writer and founder of O'Reilly Media, had tweeted that GDS's action plan and design principles were "the most significant since Apple's."[2] Bracken felt that his team's success had, for the first time, collected significant political capital within government.

This recognition was especially important to Bracken because it gave credence to his unconventional—and often controversial—beliefs about how government should operate. To him, the UK civil service was overly focused on creating complex policy and too little concerned with the low-glamor work of implementation. Bracken's approach, which he dubbed "the strategy is delivery," was based on the idea that by simply implementing improvements to government services (even if they were imperfect), he could learn from users, save money, and provide improved services with significant speed.

Despite the success of GOV.UK, Bracken knew that he had more work to do to realize his vision of a civil service that was oriented toward implementation, focused on users, and fluent with providing digital services. After all, GOV.UK was only a website. Underneath GDS's good press, there was also brewing discontent among some civil servants: to them, GDS was naïve and inexperienced, and their ideas

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represented a dangerous break from the status quo. Large government IT contractors, in particular, were beginning to push back against GDS's growing influence.

To Bracken, these criticisms underscored both the challenge and the opportunity GDS faced. As Loosemore arrived at the café for their meeting, he wondered: how would they leverage their success to remake government to be more efficient and user-centered? He knew they'd have to act quickly, before their political capital disappeared and the inertia of the status quo took hold again.

Background

History of Government IT in the UK

The early 2000s was a time of enormous technology innovation in the UK and across the world. During those years, large technology companies such as Facebook and Google grew rapidly, while new websites, applications, and online services proliferated. However, during that same period, the pace of innovation within the UK government was much slower. According to Bracken, this was at least partly because the UK government typically procured digital tools in multi-year cycles, which were too long to keep pace with innovation in the private sector. The gap between the level of service citizens expected when working with private companies and when working with the government widened dramatically.

Traditionally, government IT in the UK had been treated similar to a policy issue, with technology procurement following the same patterns as policy development. IT procurement involved a long legislative process, in which IT requirements were often determined. After the law had been passed, the relevant department typically continued to plan the required technology, before ultimately rolling it out. After roll-out, it was relatively uncommon for either the policy or technology requirements to be modified significantly.

Because most civil servants were knowledgeable in policy but not experts in technology, almost all technology development was outsourced to a small number of contractors known as systems integrators (or SIs), which included companies such as Accenture, HP, Microsoft, Capgemini, and others. The number of typical government contractors was small: a report commissioned by the House of Commons found that "government is currently over-reliant on a small 'oligopoly' of large suppliers, which some [experts] referred to as a 'cartel'. Whether or not this constitutes a cartel in legal terms, current arrangements have led to a perverse situation in which governments have wasted an obscene amount of public money."[3] In all, the process of drafting legislation, requirements, and contracts required between several months and several years of planning and implementation.

This traditional process for IT procurement had many advocates within government. Lara Sampson, a civil servant in the Department for Work and Pensions, noted that this project management approach had some significant successes, both in IT and elsewhere, such as the successful launch of several hundred offices by the Department for Work and Pensions. The system was particularly successful for problems that, although highly complicated, could be solved in a known, linear fashion.

However, this traditional process also had many detractors, particularly when it was applied to more

complex problems where the solution was not well known in advance, such as in technology. As Sampson recalled, while this process could be used for IT procurement, "Nine times out of ten the thing delivered was not the thing originally conceived of, and having taken longer and cost more than originally intended." Not only were overruns on cost and time common, but the process was also slow to adapt to changing needs of citizens. Frequent news stories about botched IT projects had left the public with little confidence in government's ability to deliver digital services.[4]

In response to this challenge, there had been a short history of efforts to "modernize" the government's approach to providing digital services, dating back to the early 1990s. Most of the early efforts centered on creating a central government website. Early attempts, such as open.gov.uk and UK Online, were essentially directories of other departments' websites. Visitors could search for information and be directed to the relevant departments' information portal. A small number of services had been digitized, such as the ability to apply for a passport or register to vote online, but were only available on the individual departments' website. In 2004, the UK government launched Directgov and its business-centered counterpart, Business Link, meant to further centralize the government's internet presence. However in practice, the vast majority of transactions still went through hundreds of separate websites for individual department and agencies. Although Directgov received millions of unique hits each month, it also received criticism from technology bloggers who argued that the website could be improved by replacing it with a custom Google search for a fraction of the cost.[5,6]

Impetus for Change

By 2010, a series of factors had converged to raise the profile of technology reform within the UK government. "I felt there were a number of forces acting on government in the UK at the time that had never been in sync in my lifetime," said Bracken. Among those factors were several high-profile IT failures, "a groundswell of people from industry with digital skills in the UK," and the presence of a coalition government between major conservative and liberal parties, "which meant that it was much likelier to get cross-party support because you had two of the three main parties in power," said Bracken.

Perhaps the most immediate impetus for change was an acute financial crisis that was compelling the government to seek dramatic spending cuts from the civil service. As Francis Maude, the Minister of the Cabinet Office, recalls, "We had a budget deficit of 11% of GDP. We had half of Europe in sovereign debt crisis, and we were about to be there. So, we needed to show that we were doing something differently." The Conservative party campaigned on a promise to reduce the size of government, and upon taking power in a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, committed to broad spending cuts. As Mike Bracken analyzed, the Conservative Party (of which Maude was a part) "wanted money out of the system, and would have happily privatised services if that was possible, but the combination of having the Liberal Democrats in a coalition and that the big stuff (utilities, telecoms) had already been privatised ages ago meant that an array of reforms were necessary instead." To Maude, reforming the government's digital strategy was one approach among many. Nonetheless, it was an attractive one: "When you're an opposition party, you use technology more," Maude said. "You become early adopters of technology because you don't have a lot of money or resources. Then we got into government and we found how unbelievably bad the technology was that the civil service – and ministers – were expected to use." Based

on this experience, Maude became a major advocate for using technology to reduce costs and improve government services.

With these goals in mind, Maude commissioned a report to review the government's web presence by Martha Lane Fox, an internet entrepreneur who had been appointed the government's "Digital Champion." In the resulting report (titled, "Directgov 2010 and Beyond: Revolution not Evolution"), Fox recommended reforms not only to Directgov but to the government's entire approach toward digital service delivery. Fox wrote: "There has been a reinvention of the Internet and the behaviour of users in the last few years. Digital services are now more agile, open and cheaper. To take advantage of these changes, government needs to move to a 'service culture.'" Fox recommended significantly strengthening and centralizing the government's digital presence, as well as appointing a "Digital CEO" for the government. (See **Exhibit 1** for full list of Martha Lane Fox's recommendations.)

Maude took Fox's recommendations to heart, and within a few months created a new team labeled "Government Digital Service." He appointed Chris Chant to serve as the interim Executive Director, and Tom Loosemore as his deputy.[7] Shortly thereafter, Mike Bracken was appointed as the government's permanent Executive Director for Digital.[8]

Mike Bracken & Tom Loosemore

Even before Mike Bracken joined Tom Loosemore at GDS, the two had led broadly similar careers, leading digital transformation efforts across both the public and private sectors.

Bracken began his career as a technology writer and editor at several publications including the Guardian and EMAP, a publisher targeted to businesses. Over time, Bracken migrated from writing about technology to leading technology efforts at several media companies. At a time when newspapers were struggling to adapt to a digital world, Bracken led digital transformation efforts at Chello (from 1999 to 2003) and at the Guardian (from 2008 to 2011). At the Guardian, he was responsible for managing all the newspaper's websites, apps, and other digital products.[9] In between roles at newspapers, Bracken also was a director at several major IT companies (including Wavex and chello), focusing on service delivery.

During the same timeframe, Tom Loosemore had a parallel career as a writer and editor for several technology publications, including Wired Magazine. Following that, Loosemore led several technology transformations at major publishing companies including the BBC, Ofcom, and Channel 4.[10]

Since 2002, Bracken and Loosemore worked together to explore how digital technology could transform government services. Both were involved with mySociety, an organization dedicated to using digital tools to improve governments, such as developing web applications to report potholes and monitor Parliament. According to Bracken, mySociety was part of an "astoundingly small number of people who realized that internet technology and culture would have profound implications for our state and our government." (See **Exhibit 2** for early photo of mySociety members). Bracken and Loosemore had both also advised government officials informally, and had written about government services and technology.

By the time Bracken and Loosemore were together again at GDS, they had a long history of working

together and a small team who had followed them from project to project. As Loosemore remarked, "We had all been on a journey together over 15 years and we were quite a tight clan." (See **Exhibit 3** for resumes of key GDS leaders.)

Founding GDS

Francis Maude located GDS at the center of the Government, as part of the Cabinet Office (of which Maude was minister). Acting as the corporate headquarters for government, the Cabinet Office supports the Prime Minister and ensures the effective running of government. At that time, it also included an Efficiency and Reform Group created by Maude to drive transformation throughout government.

From the start, GDS was unlike most other government agencies. Although GDS had a staff of approximately 200, most of them had never worked in the civil service before. GDS' office was a set of large open spaces, decorated with ribbons and flags, filled with screens, and walls covered in post-it notes. Sheila Bennett, a public civil servant who was recruited to work at GDS, described her reaction when she first entered the office: "I had looked up GDS before and liked what I saw, but nothing prepared me for actually walking into the offices, which was quite unlike any public service office I'd ever worked in. It had a rather stereotypically hipster techie look, with the jeans, the beards, the post-its." For Bennett, the feel of GDS was new, energizing, and exciting.

To Bracken and other GDS leaders, recruiting non-traditional civil servants was a conscious strategy. Their goal was to develop digital literacy throughout the civil service, enabling government to better manage IT contractors, develop technology in-house, and to provide a fresh set of perspectives on common problems. However, to critics, the non-traditional civil servants GDS recruited were inexperienced in the difficult challenges of working in government and providing public services. Moreover, critics disliked that so much digital talent was centralized in one government agency, preferring instead to distribute the digital expertise within departments, which they reasoned had a better understanding of the needs and challenges of their constituents.

Introducing Spending Controls

Because reducing government spending was a major priority of the coalition government in 2010, and indeed one of the primary reasons for founding GDS, identifying cost savings became one of GDS's first and most important challenges. However, Bracken successfully convinced Francis Maude that unlike many other government, GDS should not be given an explicit target for cost savings. As Bracken recalls, his argument to Maude was: "You're going to get more money out of this if our motivation is to make great services. If we do the right thing, the money will pour out the other end. If we go into it looking for money, our incentives will be all wrong." Maude acquiesced, even though he notes that "GDS was always very frustrating to my data people because they wouldn't say what they were going to deliver…Because I trusted Mike and knew he would deliver big savings, I let him get away with that as a little bit of an indulgence." Bracken believed that focusing the work on service improvement rather than cost savings was crucial not only to give his staff the right incentives, but also because it made GDS appear far less threatening to the departments it would need to work with.

Bracken's intuition that identifying savings would be easy turned out to be well-founded. In the early years, savings primarily came from spending controls: Maude instituted a rule that he would personally need to approve any IT purchase above £1 million, and used GDS as a key advisor. Bracken recalls one meeting where a department "had gotten all the way to the procurement stage, ready to spend £200 million on an identity service technology,[a] even though we had one that we'd already spent a year and a half creating and was perfectly good." The vendor-produced technology was ultimately not approved for purchase. Another tactic that Bracken employed was to ask software engineers, employed by GDS, to sit in meetings with major IT contractors. Unlike most procurement officers, the engineer could push back on contractors when discussing why a change would cost so much or take so long. In general, Bracken recalls that finding major cost savings was hardly a challenge at all: as he puts it, "It wasn't like fish in a barrel; it was just like fish everywhere. It was easy. You just couldn't miss." (See **Exhibit 4** for overview of estimated savings from shifting to digital.)

GDS's use of spending controls did lead to some friction with other government departments. As Lara Sampson, an employee of the Department for Work and Pensions, remembers, "That amount of power definitely made GDS unpopular. There was a feeling that not only did they have a great deal of power, but the situation didn't warrant it. They didn't have the experience of complicated, end-to-end transactional delivery that justified them having it." Nonetheless, GDS was popular with Francis Maude and several other senior politicians, who provided political cover when GDS received push-back.

Another big reason identifying early savings was crucial to GDS was because it put the organization itself on firm financial footing. Loosemore recalls that much of GDS's early funding came directly from the savings it identified: "We did this deal with the Treasury where we said we'd close one website which cost tens of millions of pounds per year, and we'd keep the money. The Treasury was happy enough to oblige, given that they didn't have anything to lose. The result was that we didn't have to go scrambling for money for the first few years."

Developing GOV.UK: the front door to the government

Along with instituting spending controls, GDS was to build a new web-presence for the UK government. This came directly out of Martha Lane Fox's report, which recommended the creation of a "front end [website] for all departments' transactional online services to citizens and businesses."[11] GDS decided to replace the existing central government websites, Directgov and its business-centered counterpart Business Link, with a single website known as GOV.UK.

Bracken had at least two overarching goals with the creation of GOV.UK. The first was to align the government's web presence with the needs of users. "GOV.UK puts user needs above all else," Bracken wrote.[12] This not only meant that services should be online (and therefore accessible whenever was most convenient for users), but also that users should not need to know which department (or departments) was responsible for any particular service in order to find it online. As Loosemore tweeted, "Every superfluous page we create is one more dead end for an angry, frustrated, confused user."[13] GOV.UK

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[a] An "identity service technology" is a system of tools and procedures to verify the identity of somebody making an online transaction.

would be built with user needs, rather than department boundaries, as the organizing principle.

A second goal of GOV.UK was financial. Because government services were so rarely digitized, every time a user interacted with government—via an in-person visit, submission of paper forms, or phone call—it was expensive. Every year, the government received millions of calls from citizens for answers to questions or for help with services that could have been completed online. According to Maude, "online transactions can be 20 times cheaper than by phone, 30 times cheaper than face-to-face, and up to 50 times cheaper than by post."[14,b] By moving more government services online, Bracken felt that he could not only improve services, but also save money in the process.

Once GDS began building GOV.UK, the process was a lesson for many civil servants in what it meant to operate like a technology company. GDS set several rules for itself in the process, including "Start with User Needs" and "Iterate. Then iterate again." (See **Exhibit 5** for the full list of GDS design principles.) For many civil servants, the notion of constantly iterating (an approach to technology development known as an "agile" approach), was a difficult change in workstyle, compared to their previous approach of meticulous planning followed by a dedicated roll-out. However, the GDS team firmly believed that the agile approach increased the likelihood of success of an IT project, as it allowed engineers, designers, and policymakers to quickly determine user needs and adapt to them in nearly real-time.

In practice, applying these principles to the design of GOV.UK meant beginning by designing a prototype (known as an "alpha"). The GDS team catalogued all existing online articles from various departments' websites, grouping them into approximately 1,800 distinct user "needs," which included things like "I need to report a lost passport" and "I need to learn what Jury Service involves." From there, the GDS team prioritized them into approximately 600 user needs that they would tackle in their initial prototype.[15]

The prototype was a space to try a variety of different designs for each of the hundreds of user needs. Trials often began as hand-drawn sketches of what a web page may look like, based on interviews with users.[16] For some services, the prototype involved a decision tree, while for others it involved an answer page, how-to guide, calculator, or other service.[17] Unusually for a tech company, this prototype was open to the public (housed at the website alpha.gov.uk), to gain as much feedback from real users as possible. There were over 100,000 visits to alpha.gov.uk, with nearly 1,000 people leaving direct feedback.[18]

The website was launched in 12 weeks, and for £261,000.[19] Although Bracken and Loosemore, veterans of agile internet development processes, were confident of its success, even strong advocates like Francis Maude were slightly apprehensive. As Maude remembers, "I didn't know much about this territory. I'm not technical. I'd been persuaded that this was the right way to go, but there had been lots of people who'd launched things in government with lots of fine talk that didn't turn out." However, when the website launched and Maude saw how much it improved the status quo, he became a fierce advocate. When other departments expressed skepticism, Maude was among the first to champion GOV.UK: "There

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[b] Estimates of the costs of various transactions varied. One estimate suggested that the average cost of a transaction completed via post was £6.62, the average cost for transactions via phone was £4.11, and the average cost per digital transaction was £0.22. Other estimates placed the cost of a transaction via post as high as £8.62.

were plenty of niggles from different departments about GOV.UK. People said the search doesn't work, or something. And we had to explain: 'This is a work in progress. We're not in the old world of contracting to a big systems integrator, and any change will cost tons of money. It's going to be constantly iterated and constantly improved based on the user experience.'" While some veterans immediately understood the new process, others required more active coaching and re-training.

Reactions from the public

The launch of GOV.UK was the first major introduction of GDS to the rest of Britain, and it was met with wide applause. Particularly within the technology industry, reporters lauded GOV.UK's clean design, streamlined user experience, and simple architecture. (See **Exhibit 6** for screenshots of GOV.UK beta.) Onlookers hoped that the website would be a harbinger of even deeper improvements in the government's approach to IT.[20] Within the tech community, GDS was particularly praised for its focus on the user: Tim O'Reilly commented that "this is the revolution we are seeing here - this strategy is the new bible for government systems."[21]

One group of public stakeholders had a much frostier reception to GOV.UK: major IT contractors. Because of GDS, the UK government was for the first time directly employing hundreds of software developers, significantly diminishing the need to contract out major IT work, and increasing pressure on contractors when it did. Moreover, the government had begun a concerted effort to shift contracts away from large system integrators and toward more small and medium enterprises. In a speech to IT professionals, Maude observed, "Shockingly when we came into office SMEs [small and medium enterprises], despite accounting for half the turnover in the UK economy – were winning only around 6.5% of central government's procurement spend. This government has set out an aspiration for a quarter of our business to go – directly or indirectly – to SMEs."[22] In some cases, contractors pushed back, contending that the government was adopting an unnecessarily adversarial approach, and threating to look outside the UK government for business. When large projects were awarded to small and unproven vendors, some major systems integrators also warned of the possibility for catastrophic failure. Within GDS, statements like this were mainly dismissed: as Francis Maude remembers, "All the main suppliers to government used to moan like hell about me. It was because we took away the government teat which they'd been suckling on for a long, long time." Nonetheless, nearly all agreed that, regardless of their motives, these major government suppliers wielded a great deal of power and lobbying influence, and some worried that such a dramatic shift away from them may produce a backlash against GDS.

Reactions from government departments

Initial reactions to GDS from within the civil service were even more varied than those from outside government. While many were energized and enthusiastic by GDS and their user-centered approach to working, others were confused, skeptical, or outright opposed.

One of the surprising findings to many early GDS employees was how enthusiastically so many government employees greeted the changes that GDS brought. As Andrew Greenway, an early GDS employee who had previously worked elsewhere in the civil service, remembers:

One thing I found quite striking was just how many people in departments knew perfectly well how to do proper user research, the need to build services inclusively, who recognized how broken the procurement market was, and so on. They didn't need that explained to them; what they needed from GDS was essentially the top cover and the permission to get past the blockers in their own departments. So the strongest supporters of GDS were in fact career civil servants who had been quietly fuming about what was going on in their departments and had never had a powerful backer and the mandate to get on and fix it…We didn't need to create allies in a sense, we just needed to find them.

Sheila Bennett, another early GDS employee who came from elsewhere in the public service, remembers her feeling upon joining the GDS team: "It did feel like a liberation to be encouraged to work in that way." Many civil servants were more slowly convinced that they needed GDS's help, often encouraged by the reality of major spending cuts, which GDS promised to help them navigate without sacrificing the quality of their service.

Not all civil servants were as welcoming to GDS. Neil Williams, who in 2010 was the head of digital communications for the Department of Business, Innovation & Skills, remembers his initial reaction to Martha Lane Fox's report: "I thought, 'who does she think she is?'…How could she possibly make this suggestion so flippantly?"[23] Williams had just finished a major overhaul of his department's web presence, and was receiving widespread acclaim, even being asked to help other departments do the same. As Williams reflected further, he realized that there were potentially even larger negative consequences for his organization:

What would happen to our ability as an organization to communicate our message to our users? What would happen to our control over our message? How could you bring all [these disparate government websites] together and it still make sense and be findable and navigable?...And what would I do about all these things that are in train, all these projects that I've got going on? What would I tell all these people who are currently spending money and time doing stuff that is now going to be a waste of time?[24]

As Sheila Bennett, a civil servant recruited to be part of GDS, summarized her take on the resistance to GDS: "The people we had more trouble with were senior people and people who had a background in technology. For them, we were far more of a threat. Because effectively they perceived us as saying that the way you personally have been doing things isn't good enough and we're going to tell you how to do it better. And if our solution worked, it meant maybe they or their team could be out of a job."

Often, this resistance was born out of loyalty to different government departments. As Neil Williams remembers, "It was kind of my job to write [my] thoughts down and say why [GOV.UK] shouldn't happen. It wasn't in the organization's [i.e. department's] interests, and as the head of digital communications for that organization my job involved writing briefings…about why that shouldn't happen."[25] Francis Maude, by contrast, rejected the notion that departments should ever advocate for their own interests over those of the government as a whole. Maude remembers his revelation upon discovering a document, written around 2008, about what to look for when hiring Permanent Secretaries: "One of the criteria it specified was you need to be able to balance the needs of the department against the wishes of ministers. Well I found that deeply, deeply shocking. What that was basically saying was you have carte blanche not to do

what ministers want if you think it's not in the interest of the department." Throughout every department, a variety of rules and norms encouraged civil servants to resist changes to department processes that had been long established, and had proven successful in the past. The result, according to Maude, was that "At every stage, people were trying to find failure with GDS."

More broadly, GDS leaders felt they were swimming against a strong cultural current which required deep re-education of nearly everybody in government. Simple habits, like the desire to tell Ministers when they could expect to see a digital service, became impossible when employing a more agile approach. When civil servants tried to explain that they could not provide certainty because it was a falsehood, they were labelled hippies or incompetent. Likewise, when department leaders supported GDS's work, they often offered to loan GDS more staff, even though GDS leaders far preferred fewer staff who were more empowered to make quick decisions. At every stage, GDS staff felt that minor misunderstandings like these constantly reinforced the status quo, and made even simple collaborations more difficult.

Moving beyond a website

Despite the early successes of GDS, Bracken and Loosemore felt they had only barely begun the digital transformation of government. Their vision, first articulated by the technology writer Tim O'Reilly and commonly called "government as a platform," was for a government that did far more to empower people inside and outside government to innovate.[26] Through tools such as open data, common services that cut across departments, procurement reform, and recruiting digital talent into government, Bracken and Loosemore hoped to create a radically simplified, more efficient, and more user-focused form of government. They saw GOV.UK as only the beginning of "a new approach to digital delivery of public services in the UK. It is the start of a new approach to all things digital in central government."[27]

In many ways, the work of creating GOV.UK only illustrated exactly how much more work Bracken and Loosemore felt there was to do. Making cosmetic improvements to the website laid bare how rudimentary the back-end IT of government services often was. For instance, one service that was digitized on GOV.UK was the ability to book a visit to see someone in prison. Bracken and Loosemore hoped that making it easier to visit friends in prison would help rehabilitate inmates and reduce recidivism rates. However, they learned that behind the scenes prison staff were forced to manually copy bookings from the new digital service into their old software. These back-end IT services, too, they realized, would need to be updated.

The deeper into the bureaucracy that GDS attempted to influence, the stronger the pushback often was. As Lara Sampson, civil servant from the Department for Work and Pensions, recalls, "A very common phrase across government leveled at GDS was: 'They built a good website. Who are they to know how difficult the rest of this is?'"

Changes to deeper IT systems also reinforced the same political difficulties that GDS first encountered when building GOV.UK. For instance, each department traditionally maintained its own set of basic IT services, even for functions that were common across almost every department like identity verification, payments, address lookup, and so on. This led to enormous and duplicative IT expenses; Bracken hoped to develop common platforms for these shared services as a more cost-effective solution. However, to

many departments, this was anathema: they had already spent millions (if not hundreds of millions) of pounds developing a customized system that they knew worked for their own particular needs. Loosemore recalled some of the pushback he received from other departments. "Departments might say: We went through a lot of effort to make sure our systems plug in together. It's clunky, but it's working. It took a lot of pain to get it working. And you want us to carry all the risk of performing open heart surgery on our service that's working at the moment just to save 20%? You've got to be kidding." In addition to worrying about the implications for their service, some department leaders also feared that if GDS controlled basic services like payments and identity verification, it could, in effect, control what the department could and could not do by regulating access to these essential services.

While the idea of developing common platforms was threatening to many departments, it felt like common sense to Bracken. Bracken recalls one early conversation suggesting the idea to a colleague: "I would suggest a common platform in the most basic plumbing, like payment systems, which is a complete commodity. And people would say 'No, I must have my own.' And I would say, 'It's all the same, there's no such thing as your own.' I remember saying to somebody, 'Do you need your own electricity?' And the guy said, 'Well I would manage my own electricity supplier.' That was the depth of this sentiment." To departments, driving deeper changes in IT was unproven, possibly dangerous, and disempowering. However, to Bracken their resistance was maddening and inefficient: "There has been no function toward collaboration and consensus in our government since the second world war!" he complained.

Next Steps

With the warm reception of GOV.UK, and with the political goodwill that GDS had won through successfully reducing IT costs, Bracken and Loosemore felt that they had a rare window of opportunity to advance their vision of "government as a platform." Their power over IT spending and the steadfast political support from Francis Maude also gave them enough leverage to potentially make major changes. However, given the resistance that was already forming within the civil service and from established industry, they also knew that they would have to be careful in how they chose to do so.

As Bracken and Loosemore sat down at the café for their meeting about strategy, there were a number of questions on both of their minds. GOV.UK was still an unfinished work: although they had transferred content from 25 major department websites (focusing on the largest user needs), there were still hundreds of agencies worth of content to bring onto GOV.UK, totally approximately 150,000 new web pages that would each need to be migrated, updated, and made consistent with the new GOV.UK style. Beyond GOV.UK, Bracken and Loosemore had been considering several different courses of action, including embedding themselves in departments to help digitize transactions, building common services themselves that could be shared by departments (such as identity verification and payments), developing more stringent spending controls, tracking key performance indicators across each of the transactions on GOV.UK, training department leaders in digital service delivery, and other avenues.

In addition to working with departments, Bracken and Loosemore also knew that they would need to find some ways to gain favor with the political leaders of government. Despite the tremendous support that Francis Maude provided to them, Bracken and Loosemore knew that it was possible that these

leaders would be removed with the next election. The duo wondered whether they should be lobbying political leaders within government, as well as other institutional powerbrokers such as the Treasury.

All of these different projects and approaches had the same goal: a digitally-native civil service that focused on user needs and on delivery. However, Bracken and Loosemore knew that no one approach would ever go far enough to transform government the way they wanted to. With so many efforts underway, they would need to decide: which approaches should be prioritized? How should they ensure buy-in and support from the rest of the civil service? What were the best ways to ensure durable political support, even beyond the next election? When should they be bold, and when should they be accommodating? How much was too much for their small but growing team to take on? As Loosemore sat down, the two began to discuss.

Exhibit 1: Summary of Key Recommendations from Martha Lane Fox's report ("Directgov 2010 and beyond: revolution not evolution")

1. Make Directgov the government front end for all departments' transactional online services to citizens and businesses, with the teeth to mandate cross government solutions, set standards and force departments to improve citizens' experience of key transactions.

2. Make Directgov a wholesaler as well as the retail shop front for government services & content by mandating the development and opening up of Application Programme Interfaces (APIs) to third parties.

3. Change the model of government online publishing, by putting a new central team in Cabinet Office in absolute control of the overall user experience across all digital channels, commissioning all government online information from other departments.

4. Appoint a new CEO for Digital in the Cabinet Office with absolute authority over the user experience across all government online services (websites and APIs) and the power to direct all government online spending.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Directgov-2010-and-beyond-revolution-not-evolution-a-report-by-martha-lane-fox

Exhibit 2: MySociety early photo

Source: Tom Loosemore

Exhibit 3: Abridged resumes of Francis Maude, Mike Bracken, and Tom Loosemore

Francis Maude	Mike Bracken	Tom Loosemore
Experience	Experience	Experience

Francis Maude

Experience
- Minister for the Cabinet Office, 2010 -
- Shadow Cabinet, 1997 - 2010
- Managing Director, Morgan Stanley, 1993 - 1997
- House of Commons, 1983 - 1992
- Councillor, City of Westminster, 1978 - 1984

Education
- Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
- College of Law

Mike Bracken

Experience
- Executive Director of Digital, UK Cabinet Office, 2011 -
- Director of Digital Development, The Guardian, 2008 - 2011
- Commercial and HR Director, Wavex, 2004 - 2008
- VP Interactive Products, Chello, 1999 - 2002
- Technology writer and editor, various publications (EMAP, The Guardian, etc.), 1994 - 2002

Education
- Brunel University London
- ILAS, Liverpool University
- Henley Business School

Tom Loosemore

Experience
- Deputy Director of Digital, UK Cabinet Office, 2011 -
- Head of 4iP, Channel 4, 2008 - 2010
- Head of Strategic Innovation, BBC, 2004 - 2007
- Head of Broadband and Applications, BBC, 2001 - 2003
- Director of Applications, chello broadband, 1999 – 2001
- Senior Consultant, Aztec Internet, 1998 – 1999
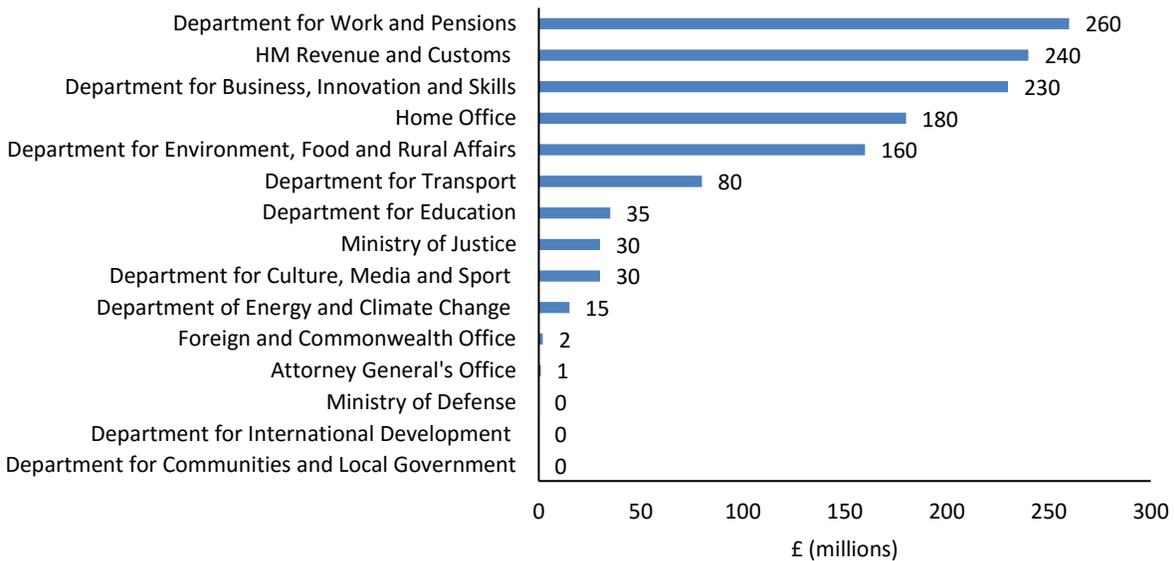- Section Editor, Wired Magazine, 1995 - 1997

Education
- University of Bristol

Source: LinkedIn

Exhibit 4: Estimated Savings from Shifting to Digital

Projected savings from shifting to digital
(conservative estimates)

Department	£ (millions)
Department for Work and Pensions	260
HM Revenue and Customs	240
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills	230
Home Office	180
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	160
Department for Transport	80
Department for Education	35
Ministry of Justice	30
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	30
Department of Energy and Climate Change	15
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	2
Attorney General's Office	1
Ministry of Defense	0
Department for International Development	0
Department for Communities and Local Government	0

Examples of cost savings by converting to digital:

- "The Driving Standards Agency started offering an online channel for booking practical driving tests in 2003. More than three-quarters of almost 2 million transactions are now digital, with only 23% of people still booking via phone. As people have migrated to digital, costs have fallen. The principal sources of savings have been reductions in employee numbers and accommodation costs. One of 2 dedicated contact centres closed in 2008, while the total number of employees working on the transaction has fallen from 400 in 2003 to 75 in 2012. Stationery and postage costs have also been removed from the digital channel."

- "HMRC first offered online tax return filing in 2000, with the pace of take-up accelerating following the Carter Review in 2006. Last year, digital take-up across all 4 main business taxes (Self Assessment, PAYE, Corporation Tax and VAT) was over 80%, equivalent to tens of millions of transactions. Dramatically reduced volumes of paper applications has meant fewer people are required to process them (resulting in a full-time equivalent (FTE) reduction of over 2,700 over the last 5 years), a corresponding reduction in the need for their accommodation, less space to store the paper forms (cumulative savings of almost £5 million), less stationery (cumulative savings of £34 million) and a smaller spend on postage."

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-efficiency-report/digital-efficiency-report

Exhibit 5: GDS Design Principles

1. **Start with user needs**: Service design starts with identifying user needs. If you don't know what the user needs are, you won't build the right thing. Do research, analyse data, talk to users. Don't make assumptions. Have empathy for users, and remember that what they ask for isn't always what they need.

2. **Do less:** Government should only do what only government can do. If we've found a way of doing something that works, we should make it reusable and shareable instead of reinventing the wheel every time. This means building platforms and registers others can build upon, providing resources (like APIs) that others can use, and linking to the work of others. We should concentrate on the irreducible core.

3. **Design with data:** In most cases, we can learn from real world behaviour by looking at how existing services are used. Let data drive decision-making, not hunches or guesswork. Keep doing that after taking your service live, prototyping and testing with users then iterating in response. Analytics should be built-in, always on and easy to read. They're an essential tool.

4. **Do the hard work to make it simple:** Making something look simple is easy. Making something simple to use is much harder—especially when the underlying systems are complex—but that's what we should be doing. Don't take "It's always been that way" for an answer. It's usually more and harder work to make things simple, but it's the right thing to do.

5. **Iterate. Then iterate again:** The best way to build good services is to start small and iterate wildly. Release Minimum Viable Products early, test them with actual users, move from Alpha to Beta to Live adding features, deleting things that don't work and making refinements based on feedback. Iteration reduces risk. It makes big failures unlikely and turns small failures into lessons. If a prototype isn't working, don't be afraid to scrap it and start again.

6. **This is for everyone:** Accessible design is good design. Everything we build should be as inclusive, legible and readable as possible. If we have to sacrifice elegance — so be it. We're building for needs, not audiences. We're designing for the whole country, not just the ones who are used to using the web. The people who most need our services are often the people who find them hardest to use. Let's think about those people from the start.

7. **Understand context:** We're not designing for a screen, we're designing for people. We need to think hard about the context in which they're using our services. Are they in a library? Are they on a phone? Are they only really familiar with Facebook? Have they never used the web before?

8. **Build digital services, not websites:** A service is something that helps people to do something. Our job is to uncover user needs, and build the service that meets those needs. Of course much of that will be pages on the web, but we're not here to build websites. The digital world has to connect to the real world, so we have to think about all aspects of a service, and make sure they add up to something that meets user needs.

9. **Be consistent, not uniform**: We should use the same language and the same design patterns wherever possible. This helps people get familiar with our services, but when this isn't possible we should make sure our approach is consistent. This isn't a straitjacket or a rule book. Every circumstance is different. When we find patterns that work we should share them, and talk

about why we use them. But that shouldn't stop us from improving or changing them in the future when we find better ways of doing things or the needs of users change.

10. **Make things open: it makes things better:** We should share what we're doing whenever we can. With colleagues, with users, with the world. Share code, share designs, share ideas, share intentions, share failures. The more eyes there are on a service the better it gets — howlers are spotted, better alternatives are pointed out, the bar is raised. Much of what we're doing is only possible because of open source code and the generosity of the web design community. We should pay that back.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/design-principles

Exhibit 6: Screenshots of GOV.UK Beta
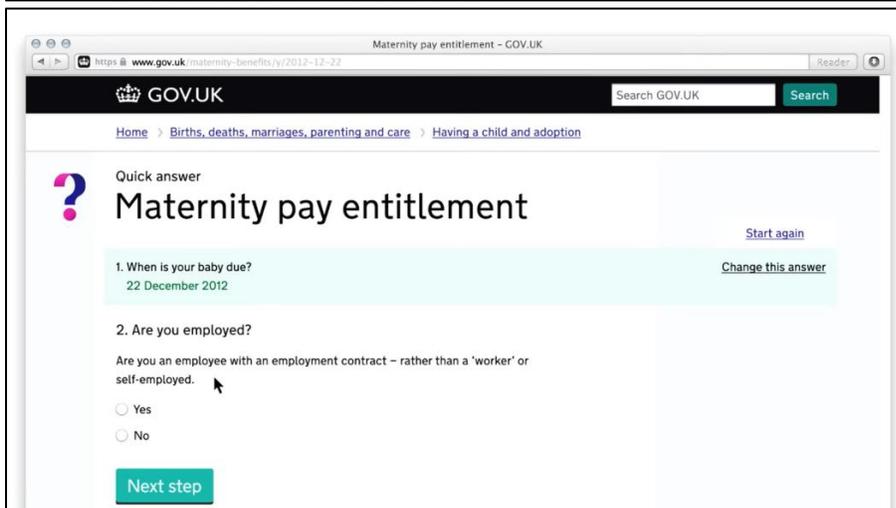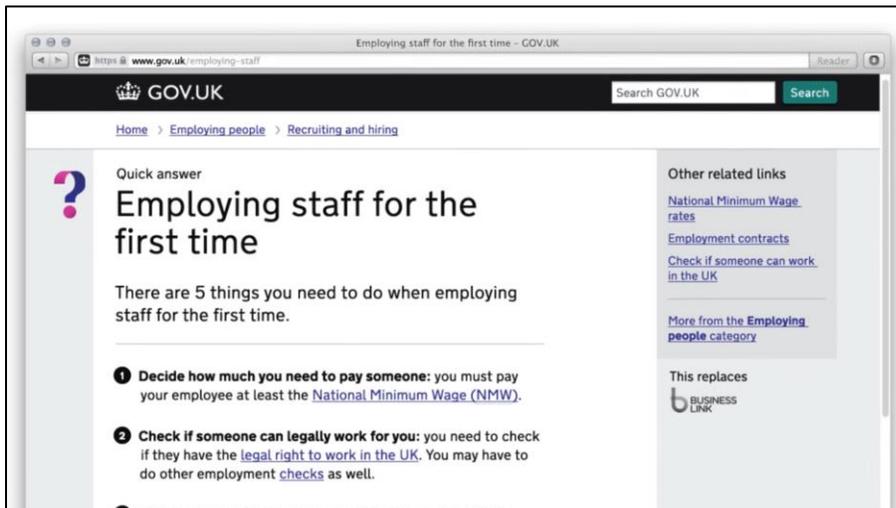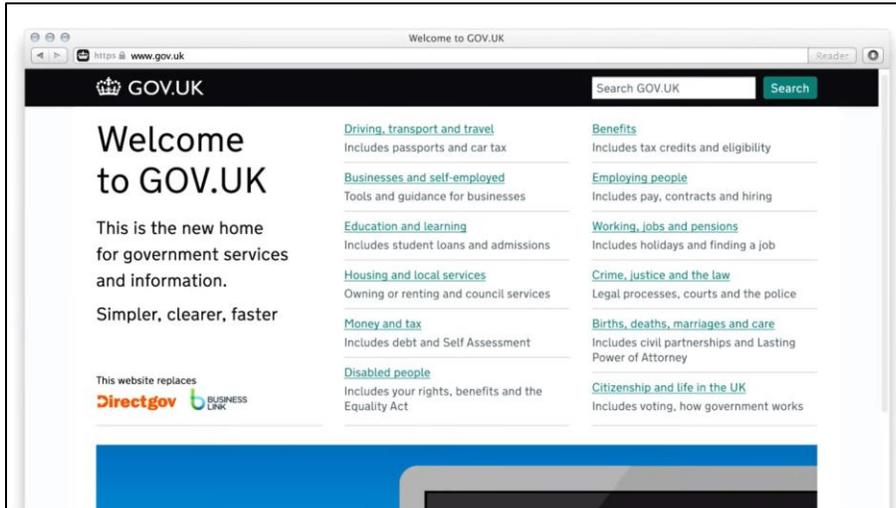
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvVaUBEibXo&feature=youtu.be

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