

# Digital and Data in Government

Digital transformation has stalled in policy debates where it should take a lead. It used to be the case that, when there was a complex policy with difficult trade-offs, digital transformation offered innovative and realistic solutions from an integrated Whitehall. It appears that the DExEU – while having the most technically savvy Permanent Secretary – has been let down by the support in digital discussions. Under the current GDS leadership, this is absent. Where has GDS leadership been on current important public questions?

The epitome of the current delivery failure around digital is the DWP NCC1 “rape form” to receive child benefit. Whether that policy is an abomination (or otherwise) is no excuse for not minimising the burden and pain for filling in what does exist. On paper, it is a brutal intrusion of the State into the citizen; digitally transformed (read the PDF sections backwards) it could be a form for the support services to complete that only requires the signature of the citizen at the end (as the only step they have to do). That this did not happen is for the same reason that mediocre or toxic data projects continue.

Digital tools – even before we get to AI – offer unprecedented abilities to perversely incentivise actors within institutions, and modern communications mean the actions of a Job Centre middle manager reach the press and Minister’s Office. The mistakes of the few characterise the many – and the Sir Humphrey stereotype stands as there is no alternative narrative.

Political claims can be stymied by implementation. As the first example, GOV.UK was very public (as are the tradeoffs that were made to get to success), but that same transparency must be visible to those who use services, and the data those services use; secrecy from the vulnerable may be easier, but it is ultimately more harmful.

Digital transformation must help the furthest first – policy as well as citizens. Data use, and transparency about data use, should provide a tool for those who are most disconnected, with support, to have evidence of actions.. The harm caused by the rape form could have been minimised, and should have been minimised. That it was not was either a deliberate choice, or a systemic failure. Why did it fail?

Whatever follows “digital transformation” can provide a new basis – an accountability to citizens is the alternative to top down. As the NHS has found in moving towards transparency, otherwise large and intractable problems incrementally become solvable, if there is a guarantee of no coverups. It is denial and coverup that is toxic to trust, not an honest mistake.

This is the distinction between the ideals of the civil service and its caricature, of Lord Armstrong and Sir Humphrey, of what GDS was and is. Given current challenges of both digital and transformation, both leadership and Brexit, it would be helpful to be led wisely.

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# Identity in Government: Verify

The importance of the Verify programme was highlighted in the Government's Spring 2017 Manifesto. Yet it has taken over a year for the Government Digital Service to appoint a new Director of the programme. It is abundantly clear that the political and technical capabilities of Verify are being failed by the current GDS management.

The Verify infrastructure and Principles are sound; they allow for identity attributes to be asserted without the need for a centralised identity database, with all the problems that brings. Registers are of things, and of those who have chosen positions of power, not private citizens.

For digital services to operate within GOV.UK Verify, they must make efforts to ensure their data meets basic standards of accuracy. This should not be controversial.

However, the default assumption to copy data from one place to another in secret and with limited accountability contains no mechanism to detect or correct errors – meaning such mistakes will replicate. Examples of this are numerous.

A well-meaning civil servant – in assuming that the data they have been given is perfect and complete, and making a decision based on that assumption – can cause disproportionate distress, on the sole basis of the belief that they could not possibly be wrong, or lack a key piece of information. The Home Office is particularly egregious in this respect.

Those who believe in such an approach cannot, by definition, simultaneously believe in the Verify model of accountability and attribute exchange.

Verify was designed to facilitate working across silos, and to allow a number of complex and pernicious data problems around Government to be solved. Verify does what it was designed to do; the question is whether it will be allowed to do what it was designed to do. Additionally, it provides an international standard for verifying identity of non-UK citizens to HMG standards.

The approach to data and records inside Government – making copies as if they were nothing more than large filing cabinets – is recognised to be flawed. Digital transformation is not simply a matter of 'providing faster photocopyers', and requires leadership.

Yet Government keeps doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. Verify was designed to facilitate that different result, but it does require doing something different.

Digital transformation is extremely powerful, and it clearly gives significant power to those Ministers who know how to wield it. Either leaders who will take decisive action, or a hierarchy that picks self-interest by default. Government's reforms means such choices will be made under the Digital Economy Act policy and implementation. If transparency on data copying and use is a public expectation, it can never be turned off again without the public wanting to know what is being hidden by a future administration.

The public cannot prevent HMG doing anything, but transparency does make it hard to say one thing and do another, and also very much allows HMG to demonstrate how it is keeping its word to citizens. Just as Governments believe that citizens should see how taxpayers' money is spent, citizens should also see how their records are used.

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## How the Government uses your data

Report on  
**Alison Smith**

Period covered  
**October 2016**

✓ There have been no reported breaches or losses of your records this quarter.

For NHS records, please see your [Health and Social Care Data Usage report](#).

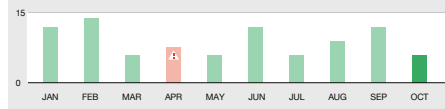
### Operational uses

When you were present your data was accessed **6 times** by **3 different services**

Service	When
JobCentre Plus Manchester, M22 5RA*	1 April, 14 April, 28 April
HM Passport Office First Adult Passport Interview Manchester, M1 3HU*	27 April, 29 April
Online electoral roll registration GOV.UK Website	20 April

Report an issue

Monthly overview 2016  
Amount of times your data was accessed, in your presence



When you weren't present your data was accessed **12 times** by **4 different services**

Data relating to your use of items marked \* will have been sent to ONS for the production of Official and National Statistics.

### Research undertaken using your data

Your data is distributed as part of a variety of datasets. Academics and researchers use them to try and learn more about all aspects of our society. The research below may have been conducted in any of the last several years, on any event since the dataset was collected. You may have been included to examine differences against the general population from those at the focus of the study.

#### What we learnt

Your data was used in the creation of **8 academic research reports**

[View these reports](#)

There were **205 articles** published in the time period.

To read all publicly available scholarly papers that used data, and search by keywords, please see: [www.ons.gov.uk/whatwelearnt](http://www.ons.gov.uk/whatwelearnt)

#### New Data Releases

Data releases this month will lead to publications in the future. Most non-commercial users list all their outputs as part of the public benefit of receiving your data. Not all commercial recipients are required to report what they learnt.

[Requests for Statistics](#)

[ONS Longitudinal Study](#)

[National Pupil Database](#)

If you have any other questions about the content of this report, please contact: [enquiries@ons.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ons.gov.uk)

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