



Reimagine an age of more personalised services for citizens



As citizens, public services belong to us all and access must be fair – decided on the basis of individuals’ needs, not status, wealth or connections. This principle of universal access underpins some wonderful British achievements such as free healthcare service, welfare and tax systems.

However, the principle of universal access for citizens does not mean that everybody must receive exactly the same service. It simply means that there should be no discrimination by the public sector in assessing and meeting individual needs.

This is important because the delivery of a more citizen-centric government means that the services offered to the public need to become increasingly more personal, tailored to the specific needs of the individual.

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Historically, government has been slow to provide personalised services, fearful that this concept somehow breaks the universal access principle, however, the launch of a new generation of digital services now offers government the opportunity to accelerate its approach to tailoring services to meet an individuals’ personal needs.

The process of transforming public sector services has begun. The UK government already provides different service levels to those willing to embrace new approaches. For example, in persuading taxpayers to complete online self-assessments over paper form filling, HMRC offers an individual an extension for year-end tax submissions, as well as other benefits such as instant online confirmation and faster repayments. And, in encouraging citizens to provide full biometric passport data, UK Visas and Immigration ensures that automated iris-scanning gates offer a faster passage through border control. But much more needs to be done – and the pace of change needs to accelerate.

Building services around citizens’ needs

Let’s reimagine personal services built around online portals which incentivise and encourage individuals to trust government and share crucial information. New initiatives across the major departments to personalise government could produce huge productivity benefits for citizens and government alike. The sharing of this invaluable data could be a catalyst for more effective cross government departmental collaboration.





This concept has emerged from the private sector which has been on a steep learning curve ever since the emergence of digital technologies. The days of a one-fits-all, mass market approach are slowly evaporating and personalisation is taking centre stage. For example, Spotify, the digital music platform offers a personalised service to its customers called 'Just for you'. By tracking music accessed by subscribers, the platform has the ability to suggest new artists, playlists and albums to individuals' based on their personal music tastes and preferred genres. Spotify has tapped into the benefits of delivering great customer experience and understands that the personal touch gives customers the warm feeling of being recognised.

The application of the basic principle of citizen-centric thinking in government is straightforward: the more government knows about an individual, the better it can serve them. And there's no reason why the majority of government departments couldn't deploy these tactics.

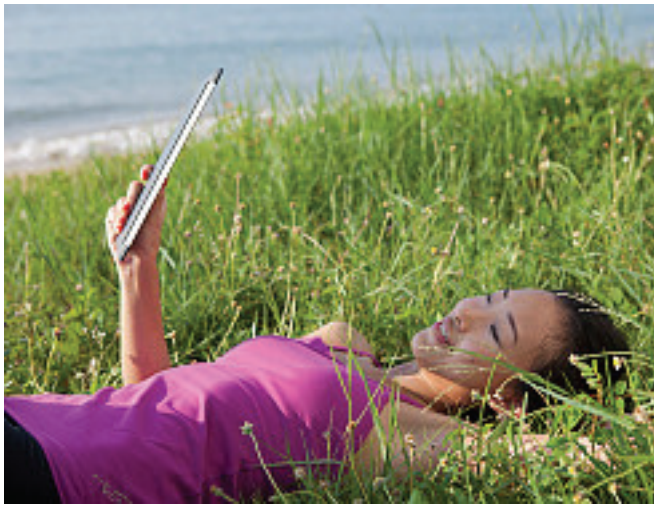
All departments will benefit from powerful customer insight from the data produced when citizens sign up and register online. This information will prove invaluable. The ability to analyse this data, track and record online behaviour. It could even allow for government to request additional information; all of which would help inform strategic and policy decision making whilst easing operational delivery.

Harnessing the power of data

Consider the potential benefits - data provided by individuals and held in their online profile could be used to help point them to suitable services tailored to their needs and to help pre-fill application forms. Individuals would retain ownership of this information, and would permit different departments to access it in order to simplify and streamline services. Citizens would be in charge of their data and retain control. Permission would be sought before data was shared. This 'opt in' approach would meet the requirements of the Data Protection Act, addressing a major bar to the development of digital services.

Central coordination would be important here. The Government Digital Service is already developing common platforms to support identity authentication and user queries across government, namely Verify and Notify, and could produce a similar data platforms to permit the holding and sharing of citizen data. In the private sector, providing such personalized services builds strong and trusting relationships with customers which enhances brand reputation, increases advocacy and generates greater revenues.

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For the public sector that would equate to greater citizens satisfaction and a happier tax paying public. Potential for government to tailor services and advice. So there's potential here for a better tailoring of advice. If government has access to basic demographic data which can be segmented by groups, they can offer relevant information to that audience. So citizens in their early 20s and their late 50s would be presented with quite different advice and guidance on pensions.

Disabled students, for example, entering the labour market must currently withdraw from a scheme (formerly run by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) and make a fresh claim for benefits provided by the Department for Work and Pensions. However, if their funding was managed through an online profile, as their course draws to a close, they could be provided with tailored advice. Relevant benefits could be highlighted well in advance, and if notified, students could offer DWP access to relevant data – this would permit the department to automatically kick start the benefit application process.

Shift in mind-sets, for greater collaboration

Ultimately, this kind of an approach could reduce friction and administrative costs in our public services. But to produce these benefits, government departments would have to start working collaboratively – creating cross-departmental links and building new access points into public services.

Still, any moves in this direction would have to be incremental and consent based. And their success would depend on a shift Whitehall's outlook, from how best to provide services, to how best to meet citizens' needs. As the private sector has learned, if citizens are offered the right incentives and trust the provider, they'll share their data. And if companies meet customer needs more closely, they will reap the rewards and enhance relationships.

This means building services around the user, not the department; a shift that is essential to realising the potential of digital, but sits awkwardly with the civil service's top-down structures and culture.

Reducing waste, increasing satisfaction

The rewards here are clear. The more information means more closely targeted services which involve less waste. Less waste also means departmental budget holders can allocate and invest money more wisely, and better outcomes means satisfied ministers.

The idea of building new services around individual users is not a concept hard-wired into government, where the citizens' expectations must be balanced with political and organisational objectives. But here, that approach is essential. For it's easy to design such a system to produce benefits for government; the key is to tempt citizens into participating. If that is done well, then citizens should find that they get a great service, in turn making life easier for government departments – and that has to be a great result all round.

About the author

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