



# Voices of experience

Passport Office

Citizen Experience Excellence 2024-25





# Passport Office: Customer-centred digital evolution with no expiry date

**His Majesty's Passport Office is often held up as an exemplar of service digitalisation in the public sector, with a smooth and intuitive process for ordering or renewing a passport that allows most citizens to complete their application online in just a few minutes.**

It's a prime example of quick and seamless self-service that makes life easy for the customer and brings efficiencies in the delivery of the service HM Passport Office staff.

Whereas most public sector bodies are at the beginning or somewhere in the middle of their digital transformations, HM Passport Office is nearing the end of its journey that started back in 2014 to move from a predominantly paper-based to a mostly digital service. At the same time, aware that they are a service for every eligible citizen, other options remain open to those that want or need them, including paper forms, the Check and Send service via the Post Office, and contact centres for those who need the human touch.

Tom Greig, Director of Passports, Citizenship and Civil Registration at the Home Office, is keen to stress that improvements to the passport service will continue beyond this period of 'transformation'. "I don't like the transformation word because that suggests a beginning and an end that doesn't exist," he says. "The end of the project won't be the end. Rather, we'll use it as a landmark, a pause, and focus on our ambitions for the next ten years to make the service even better."

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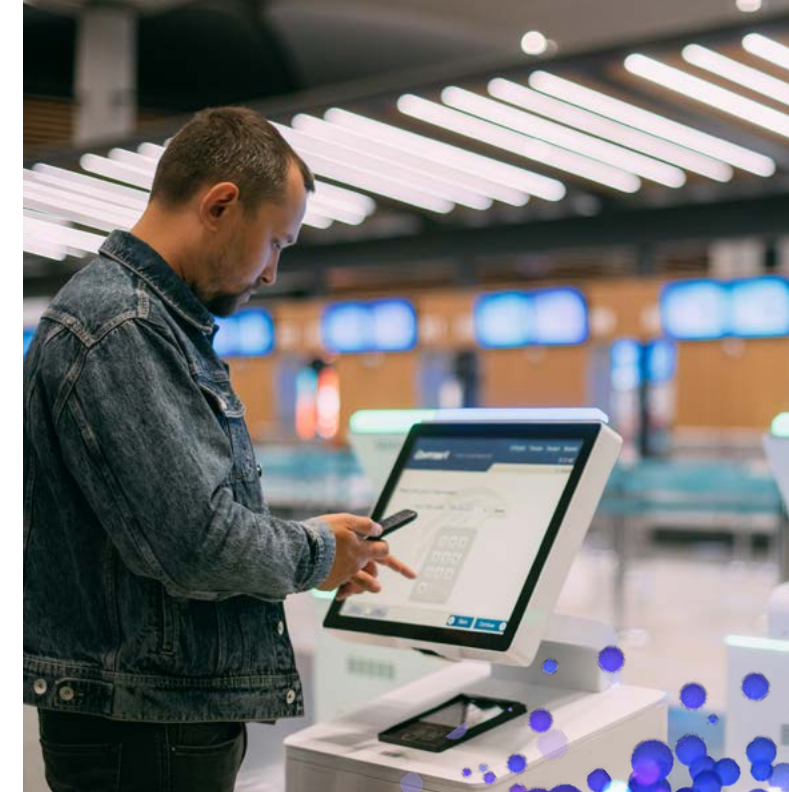
### Culture as the cornerstone

Looking back at the ten-year journey, what does Tom see as the key foundations for success? He is quick to say that before any work on technology design and systems started, the first step was to focus on culture.

“It was actually before I joined, but a lot of time was spent defining the cultural properties of the customer-focused organisation that we wanted to evolve,” Tom says. “This was about making sure that every process was designed with the customer in mind, thinking through what the impact of any step or decision would be from the customer’s point of view. After all, as well as being staff at the service, we are all customers ourselves so it’s about encouraging everyone to think from that perspective and put themselves in the customer’s shoes. Leaders were asked to personally commit to the customer-centric vision. There was staff engagement, and training along Operational Excellence principles. This phase lasted perhaps 18 months. It was a cornerstone for what happened next around transformation design and implementation, because everyone was starting from a shared position. We continue to reinforce the customer-focused view today.”

### Building momentum and applying learnings

Tom says that around 80% of passport applications are relatively straightforward, while around 20% may be more complex for various reasons. But rather than try to create solutions for every scenario from the outset, the approach was to focus on the 80% first. This meant that momentum and progress were quickly established, creating natural positivity and motivation. In addition, the continuous learning helped when it came to more complex cases. As Tom observes: “When you get the initial design right, you also learn better about how to tackle the harder cases. You can see how the system is going to respond and how to implement it. Also of course, by getting the process for the great majority of applications done, you free yourself up more quickly to get onto the more difficult work.”



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### Responding to challenges along the way

The process hasn't been without its challenges. In particular, the service ran into quite serious difficulties when the international travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 were lifted, and the demand for passports soared in 2022. But the situation was brought under control – and led to a number of very useful learnings.

The first of these, as Tom says, is to think hard about how you will manage the transition stage within a transformation. “The transition stage could last a long time. In our case, we've been running two systems concurrently for eight years. You have to ensure that you have very clear and practical ways of managing processes during the transition. It's essential to map that out very carefully.”

### Focusing on the customer experience

Another learning, and an ongoing feature of the passport service now, was to focus on addressing issues in the customer experience by setting up a Service Line Improvement team. This team acts on referrals from caseworkers, as well as customer feedback through complaints and social media posts. The team has the internal autonomy and authority to devise improvements to processes that will benefit customers.

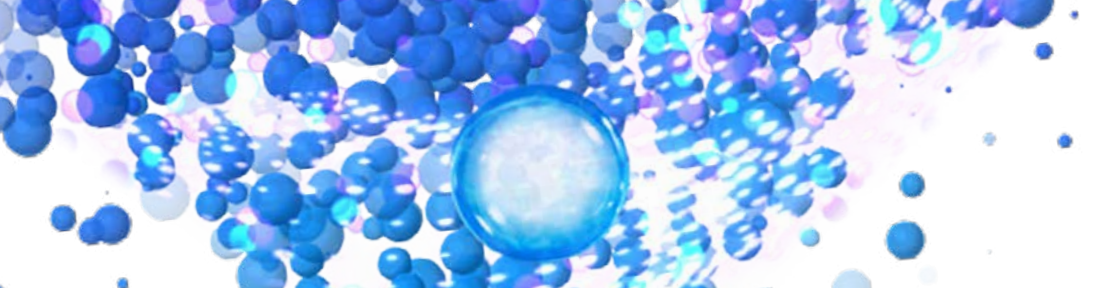
They have also set up a Resolution Centre which works to resolve specific customers' problems. While its contact centre is largely made-up of call handlers who log enquiries or complaints, the Resolution Centre team has the ability to take action and move an application along. For example, if a customer repeatedly contacts the customer service team about the same issue (perhaps because they keep getting asked by the system for a piece of documentation that they don't have), they will automatically be routed to the Resolution

Centre the next time they get in touch to help progress the application. This creates a better balance between regular call handlers and highly skilled agents who can manage complex cases. Little fixes of this sort may be more tactical than systemic, but they help the customer and can unblock problems more quickly.

System solutions to complex cases are harder to devise, as Tom reflects, but this remains the service's long-term goal. “Ultimately, we want customers with straightforward renewals and those with complex situations to experience the same level of service. The process should be as simple and easy to go through, even if there may be more steps for a customer with a complex case. As excellent as they are, digital systems tend to be quite binary, i.e. has this piece of information been provided, yes or no? The solution has to be either to make systems less binary, or to detect and intervene quickly when that becomes necessary.”

### AI and the future vision

Tom sees the potential for use of AI to further enhance the passport service, whether on the customer side – to help them navigate and understand requirements in some circumstances – or on the internal side by helping caseworkers in complex situations. More broadly, the service has a vision of the future where digital credentials may remove the need for physical passports, such as for proof of age.



## Top tips

Having come so far on their digital and customer experience journey, what would Tom's advice be to others in the public sector who are earlier in the process?

"Start with the culture piece before you do anything programme-wise. Then, get going! If you start moving, the problem will look smaller as you begin to do it. Another critical thing is balancing optimism and pessimism: you need to be enthusiastic about the endpoint you're going to reach and sell a really strong vision around this to motivate and inspire your teams but be conservative in your operational planning. That conservatism will reduce tensions and pressure internally. Related to that, don't 'bank' savings or benefits before you've actually achieved them. Getting the optimism/pessimism balance right is really hard to do, but I think it's one of the keys to success."

With HM Passport Office now looking ahead and formulating ambitious plans for the years to come, this balance is sure to remain critical into the future.



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