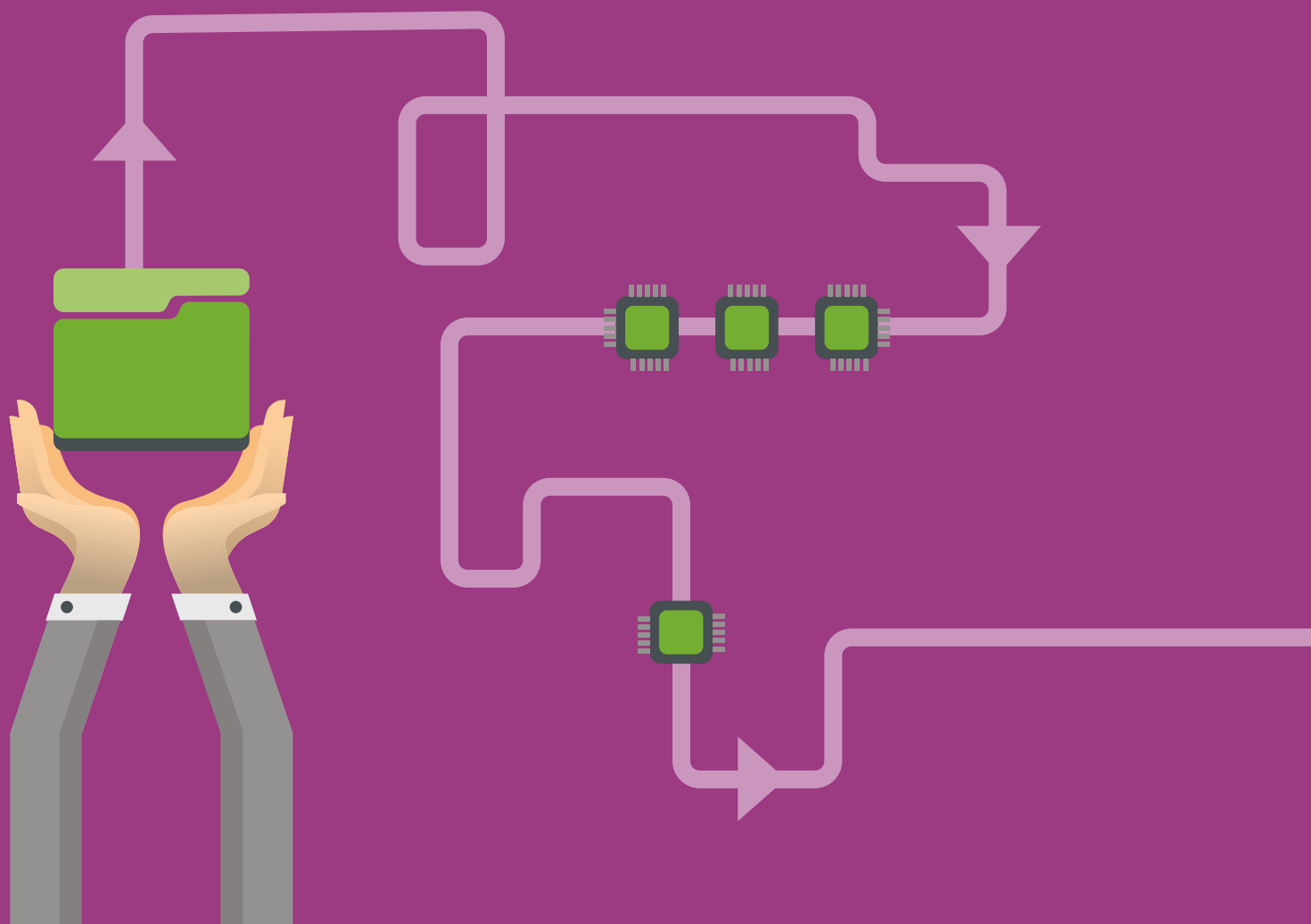


A Local Government Executive Briefing Paper:

The case for a local GDS and
local GDS standards

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Digital service standards

From my discussions, local government CIOs seem to be in two minds about whether creating a local equivalent to the Government Digital Service (GDS) and establishing local government digital standards would be a good idea. Whilst most seem to agree with the need for digital standards, there is a view that these must be broader than just websites and transactions.

There is little doubt that GDS has done a lot of good for the whole sector, not just in Whitehall departments, where its original mission was founded and where its main focus has been. Through their development of digital standards and the creation of a vision for digital government, they have challenged past entrenched IT practices in government.

The GDS 'digital by default' 18-point service standard, launched last June, is a good example – used as the measure for all Whitehall transactional services before they can appear on GOV.UK: www.gov.uk/service-manual/digital-by-default.

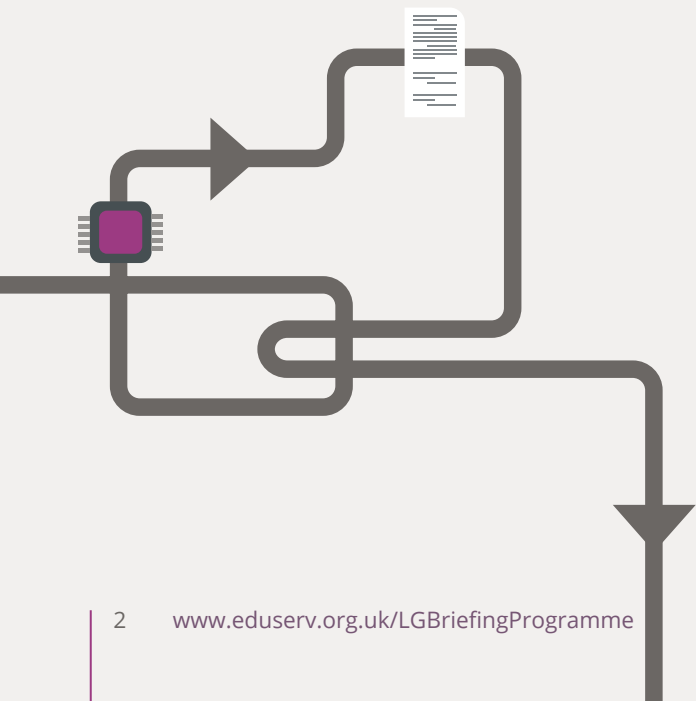
But these GDS standards are neither very specific, nor do they set the bar very high. That is not to decry their value, but “understanding user needs” (the first criteria, for example) should be pretty obvious to all but the most incompetent teams building IT-based systems.

It is this set of standards rebranded that GDS published last month as a proposed local government digital service standard, having worked with 'LocalGov Digital', a recently formed group of digital leaders from across local government (<http://localgovdigital.info/about-us/>).

On the one hand this is good news – not only is GDS consulting with local government, but it is also recognising that the existing standards ought to work just as well across the public sector as it does across Whitehall. At the same time, it is primarily focussed on on-line transactions (since Whitehall activity is more heavily transactional than local government) and it does not cover the thorny area of data and information flows across local public services, which are at the heart of many local government services.

The list has been reduced to the current 18 points from a previous set of 26. I think they can easily be simplified and précised still further, to seven points for transactional digital services:

1. Know what your users really require and keep design simple and intuitive.
2. Be consistent with the GOV.UK platform and encourage widest accessibility.
3. Plan for on-going improvement and phase out non-digital channels.
4. Use appropriate resources – multi-disciplinary teams, tools and agile methods.



5. Use open source and reusable code if possible and where appropriate.
6. Test effectively and consider security, 'end of life' and DR requirements.
7. Assess service performance and measure 'take up' success.

But for these points to be really valuable, they need to be embedded in practical guidance relevant to local government – answering the 'how?' question in each case.

More importantly, there is a powerful need for common digital standards across local government. This is growing, particularly as a result of devolution, shared services, service 'join up', funding and demand pressures, and 'digital transformation' which are all shifting the focus from government departments to local, place-based delivery in local government.

But any standards for digital local public service also need to meet the 'digital by design' challenge facing the high cost, high value, so-called 'relational services' – e.g. adult care, isolation, troubled families, safeguarding, adoption services, etc. These are a much greater digital challenge than the pursuit of online 'digital by default' transactions and channel shift.

I believe that the whole public sector should just adopt the 26 criteria (or 18, or 7!), without the need for lengthy consultation, but in addition a more specific set of digital architectural standards is needed, relevant to the nature of local public services.

I don't know what they should be – there needs to be sector-wide consultation and co-production. But to give you some idea of what I have in mind, I've listed my 'starter for 10' at the end of this briefing note.

I would also like to see something more focused on outcomes than on methods.

Methods certainly matter, especially in order to change technology management culture in the public sector. Methods, for example are things like:

- Use of open source where appropriate and possible.
- Reuse of code and reusability of developed code.
- Have effective testing regimes and data management practices.
- Adopt cloud models where appropriate.
- Use small, quick and focused development, based on agile methods.
- Move away from outdated, long-term and large-scale IT outsourcing contracts.

But outcomes are the real key to local government transformation, with measures of success being much more than rationalising the local public sector web estate, such as:

- Take up of digital services relevant to target user base.
- Satisfaction of service users and reduced complaints.
- Channel shift, (measurable reduction in non-digital channels).
- Reduced avoidable contact and failure to meet demand.
- Integration and linkage of related transactions, services and information.
- Use of low cost, easily accessible technologies – smart phone apps etc.
- Lower operating costs and greater measurable efficiency of operation.
- Improved public service outcomes measured from the point of view of citizens.

A local GDS

Which brings us to the subject of a local GDS.

Arguably, a pan-sector digital team could help to achieve the focus required: driving up standards, placing a premium on digital skills, developing common solutions and enforcing best practice – in the same way that GDS has done across Whitehall.

But, GDS has not actually delivered much in the way of digital government. Their achievement has been in creating the ethos, culture and behaviours for a different way of doing IT. They have put the user at the centre of design and prioritised low cost or free technology, rather than the previous reliance on big, slow and expensive solutions.

This is a huge achievement in itself, given the starting point in the Civil Service before GDS arrived on the scene. But the issues for local government are different and need a different approach.

First of all, by its nature, local government is more diverse. There are commonalities, but there are also huge differences in geography, demography, service tiers, politics, economy, service demands and cultures. That's why local delivery is so important in being able to reflect local priorities. Whilst much can and must be shared across councils, there will be genuine and important differences.

Secondly, local government is much bigger and more diverse than central government. There are over 400 local authorities, most of these delivering more than that number in distinct public services. Some deliver by working in partnership, some still largely insource, some mostly outsource, some are in mature shared services with other councils. Consequently, supply chains supporting this delivery are large, complex, fluid and designed around these differences, and a challenging legacy of systems and practices.

It is this range that has created some of the most innovative, entrepreneurial and creative responses to challenges such as austerity across the whole of the public sector. But there are also some very poor examples, as you might expect with such a large sector. Much money has been spent and continues to be spent on duplicated tools and implementations of insular solutions, poor value supplier contracts and solutions optimised around service models no longer fit for purpose.

So some uniformity is essential, to reduce costs, duplication and wasted effort and to increase interoperability and service quality. It can also help to raise the awareness of digital potential in the sector, provided we don't speak the language of 'IT' to service leaders across the sector.

But total uniformity will not be fit for purpose in some cases, and will stifle ingenuity and creativity. Diversity is a strength, not just a weakness in local government, provided best practice grows and is shared, and poor practice is exposed and withers.

So, if there is to be a local GDS, it would need to reflect and understand this complex landscape and ensure that local digital standards can acknowledge the differences. Simply adopting the code base for GOV.UK across local government, will not be anything near enough for what local public services need, and may focus too much on the technology and method, rather than the outcomes.

It would also need to be appropriately resourced – the resource level invested in GDS over the past few years has been very large indeed and the challenge in local government is arguably greater.

So, a more careful analysis of local public service digital standards is required:

- What can simply be assimilated from the national GDS standards?
- What standards should be developed and applied within and across the local government sector in addition?
- Where can local choice and diversity be encouraged in order to deliver best value services?

I would argue that this can readily be done within the sector, without creating a new group. The recently announced 'digital coalition', for example, a digital alliance involving the LGA, DCLG, SOLACE, Socitm and the Local

CIO Council, should have access to the skills, capacity, influence and insight to do this. Furthermore, creating a new bureaucracy in parallel will create new costs and tensions at a time when this can be least afforded.

This coalition has the credibility it needs in the sector and, with appropriate financial backing, could call in the specialists from within and outside the sector when required, to accelerate local digital public services implementation, digital best practice and support for struggling councils. But it does need to be done, since without it, large parts of local public services will remain in a digital backwater, and with the increasing inter-dependence of services, this could hold back the whole of the sector.

Local public services digital standards – A 'starter for 10'

1: Focus on the citizen

User insight and their service experience (e.g. citizen, service user, tax payer, client, supplier and employee) are the key criteria in design and delivery of digital services. Design around the user journey to reduce demand and improve efficiency through higher take-up of well-designed digital services. Build digital solutions that are proven to meet user need and which anticipate growth in demand and expectation. Simple, intuitive, accessible, fast, 'one and done' service.

Implication: Digital services must be designed from the user perspective and co-produced wherever possible. Service information and transactions will be clear and intuitive, designed and linked around the user need. Customer service and access channel strategies will be continually assessed for improvement. Choice and performance of digital services will be transparent. The Council staff, partners and citizens should be able to access information and digital services as they would expect – wherever, whenever, however they want, using common technology tools such as smartphones.

2: Consider service integration

Related local public services must be linked together from the user perspective (e.g. health, social care, community services). Identify and make the links work. This includes how to work with suppliers and other local public service organisations to create a joined up local digital service landscape from the perspective of the citizen.

Implication: Stop designing services around a local departmental and organisation structure of the past. Use digital to create essential cross-services links, data sharing and shared services. This includes everything from creating a 'smart digital locale', where digital businesses can prosper and citizens can access and use digital services intuitively to enrich their lives, through to adopting PSN as the service standard for secure interconnection between all local public services (local government, Police, health, housing associations, education establishments etc).

Local public services digital standards – A ‘starter for 10’

3: Digital democracy

Support politicians in exploiting digital means to represent their wards and constituents, and to be effective and efficient in their council activities. Minimize democratic overheads of internal decision-making processes.

Implication: Council members having access to the tools and the training and support they need to be digital ambassadors – such as integrated electronic diaries, use of social media, digital support, access to electronic information and service on the move. Internal processes for decision-making should be digital, not paper, with simpler and more compact data visualisation (for example) to support better decision making.

4: Use digital operation for lean and efficient services

Digital is about more than improving customer service. It must also significantly reduce public service costs in all areas by moving to a new model for service operation, creating both cashable and non-cashable savings, including workforce savings and productivity improvement. Process reengineering, services redesign, change leadership and business case preparation are all key skills required.

Implication: Examples would be reducing travel, paper handling and post, less management, employee self-service, lower supply chain costs, reducing avoidable contact, better demand management, automation, partnership and shared services. Productivity benefits from fewer meetings, better communications, increasing commercial activities, better integrated systems leading to better use of data and information, shorter and simpler processes. Staff need to be ‘digitally literate’.

5: Design for flexibility and reuse

The digital architecture (or in GDS terms ‘Government as a Platform’ – GaaP) must be flexible – responsive to changing needs, technologies and the unpredictable nature of service challenges. Also, the ability to unlock data from systems for data sharing across services and organisations – using GPS for location based services, telecare, assistive technology, virtual teams across professions supporting those in need. Contracts may need to be re-negotiated for greater flexibility and adaptability.

Implication: It should be easy and low cost to replace a technology component. An integration layer may be required to handle system links, including between cloud services, separating data and system functions to allow reuse. Long-term outdated inflexible outsourcing contracts will need to be replaced with contracts based on ‘cloud’ principles. Diverse service areas can share digital components where possible, avoiding bespoke systems and duplication of practices and tools. Systems design will allow data exchange across traditional services silos (departments and organisations) for reuse, reducing development time, effort and cost.

6: Use open standards and don’t tailor

Solutions must use open industry standards where possible, taking account of wider industry and government led developments such as GDS standards, G-Cloud and GaaP. Buy ‘off the shelf’ solutions where possible to avoid building systems and services. Use standard product functionality and customise only for regulatory/compliance requirements. Open Government standards will apply to all organisations spending public taxes, e.g. publishing expenditure on-line.

Implication: Open standards make it easier to exchange information and to share services with partners. Local authorities will not be tied into one single supplier or technology. Time, cost and risk to deploy digital capabilities will reduce and it will cost less to implement and maintain the solution. Reuse of existing core digital components will be easier. Ensure this is reflected in supplier contracts for IT services.

7: Design digital channels and their use holistically

Digital solutions must be able to capture, use, publish and delete information across all delivery channels in a consistent way, improving the data and functional links between channels and so increasing the value of information assets. This includes designing for assisted digital access to services.

Implication: Don't design systems and digital services in isolation. Not only co-design with service users, but consider the wider integration of service components and data reuse across systems, services, organisations and delivery channels. Service channels should be able to use the same data and user information safely and securely where necessary, to deliver a better service at a lower cost, ensuring at all times that the citizen is in control of their data. This will not only reduce costs but ensure digital services offer consistent and accurate information for users.

8: Efficient IT acquisition and ownership

Digital solutions and IT components must optimise software and hardware licensing to maximise life-time return on investment and support of the other digital principles. IT sourcing strategy should reflect a changing IT landscape, including new-style ‘cloud’ contracts, less in-house ‘build’, social media use, ‘apps’, open source and more flexible IT portfolios.

Implication: Most IT strategies of the past will need re-configuring for a digital operating model in order to exploit new tools and new methods. This includes revisiting IT contracts, fewer big IT projects, use of agile methods, faster procurement and a greater proportion of small, low cost solutions. A consistent approach to the underlying IT strategy and infrastructure will avoid unnecessary independent departmental systems development and purchase. IT components and services not fit for purpose will need to be replaced or modernised.

9: Design for safe and secure use

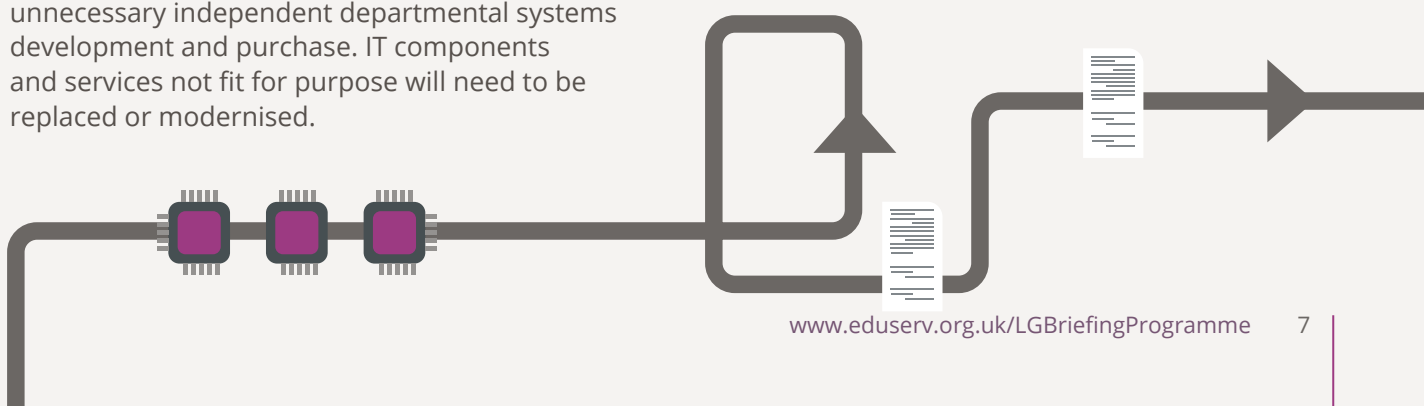
Digital solutions in local public services must be compliant with public sector and industry standard security, privacy and confidentiality, ensuring users can operate all digital services provided, safely and with confidence. Adopting best practice from GDS along with national solutions such as PSN compliance should be mandated.

Implication: Digital solutions will be compliant with the required regulations and policies and offer the appropriate levels of authentication, authorisation and audit capability. Local public sector digital services must be trusted to encourage the widest possible adoption and take-up. That means regular and transparent audits and security checks, along with comprehensive disaster recovery and business continuity planning for digital services.

10: Design for information use and reporting

Information is the power behind the best public services. Information reuse and reporting must be capable of using data from multiple sources and provide the required customer analytics and business intelligence.

Implication: Information management policies and strategies will be aligned to communications and access channel and adopted across the whole organisation and with partners (e.g. in Health and Social Care). A strategic approach to customer insight and data analytics across all services should be considered, working with partners. Council staff will be able to generate, share and reuse insight from information captured through digital capabilities.



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