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UX is the great enabler of public sector digitisation

How the public sector can put the citizen at the heart of plans for digitisation.

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Introduction

UX is the great enabler of public sector digitisation.

The UK public sector is going digital, and the citizen lies at the core of the ambition. But how can user needs be identified, championed at all levels, and reconciled with the public pressure to reduce cost across government departments, the sectors' desire to increase automation and simplify processes, and the need to validate identity across virtual touchpoints?

In this white paper, from cloud-native consulting and implementation agency Ensono Digital, we look at how the public sector can put the citizen at the heart of plans for digitisation and identity management and create flexibility and robust solutions for the future.

Background

Post-pandemic, global digital transformation has accelerated by several years[1] driven, in part, by consumer demand for remote, data-centric services delivered in an easily accessible, intuitive way. The COVID-19 crisis has changed the way many people work—with an estimated 25 percent of the UK workforce now based wholly or partly remotely for the long-term—and these trends and expectations are reaching every part of our lives. From the way we shop for groceries, fashion, holidays, and cars, to the way we work and interact with colleagues and customers, online is king and looks to remain so.

Faced with budget cuts across departments and a continual—often public—pressure to deliver more, better, and with less, the UK public sector has long been looking for opportunities to cut costs. Although requiring significant up-front investment, widespread, transformational digitisation could provide the answer.

However, maximum benefits will only be achieved if solutions are developed with the user—the UK citizen—front and centre of service design. The private sector has already recognised the strategic importance of technology, not just a source of cost efficiencies, but as a critical component of business. Having suffered for some time with a lack of modern tools to support citizens, government departments have a task to catch up with user expectations that have evolved through commercial solutions driven by this strategy. From an Ipsos MORI report of April 2020[2] looking closely at 'What do people want, need, and expect from public services?' it is evident that citizens expectations are "shaped by their experience of services in the private sector" including quick response times and convenient ways of accessing services. Amongst the five factors revealed to drive customers' satisfaction with public services, delivery, timeliness, and information—all of which can be significantly enabled by technology—were cited first.

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[1] McKinsey & Company. "How COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point—and transformed business forever."
[2] Ipsos. "What do people want, need and expect from public services."

The Government Digital Service (GDS), the department sitting at the heart of the UK Public Sector digitisation, laid out in early 2021[3] that—following the impact of COVID-19—"now, more than ever, digital must be front and centre of government's priorities to meet user needs and this is the perfect time for us to accelerate the digital transformation of public services across the whole of government."

As well as leading the community of DDaT (Digital, Data and Technology) professionals across government, and providing them with the strategies and mechanisms to enable transformation at scale, the GDS is also focused on "building, supporting and iterating digital products, platforms and services that can be built once and used across government".

This ambition—to build once and use across all—is a key tenet of Public Sector digitisation. This is where the real unlock of cost saving and efficiency lies, and this is where user centred design adds its greatest value. In their introduction to the Ipsos report on citizen engagement, Paul Buddery and Henry Kippin of the 2020 Public Service Trust stated that

"
Without properly understanding what the public want and value, and how they relate to today's services, it will be impossible to design services for tomorrow that fit the lives they live and develop the capabilities they need to fulfil their aspirations."

Paul Buddery and Henry Kippin

In this whitepaper we look at how the public sector can put the citizen at the heart of plans for digitisation and identity management and create flexibility and robust solutions for the future.

Rob Pearson
Head of Customer Experience

Rob Pearson is Ensono Digital's Head of Customer Experience. He and his team are responsible for guiding our clients in designing experiences that are simple, intuitive to use, and meets users' needs.

Leo Barnes
*Senior Business Analyst, Consultant & UX Designer*

Leo Barnes is a Senior Business Analyst Consultant and UX Designer at Ensono Digital. For the past 18 years, Leo has worked with clients to define and deliver large-scale customer focused products in complex business environments through research, analysis, feature definition and user interface design.

[3] GOV.UK. "The next steps for digital, data and technology in government."

1

Citizen first

Putting the customer at the heart of digital transformation can be complex for even the most straightforward of businesses, but with the GDS ambition to build out services once to use across government, the challenge is even greater—and the potential benefits even wider reaching.

The task starts with understanding the customer of these services—the UK citizen—and determining not only what they are looking to achieve in their interactions, but also what their motivations are to achieve this goal, what their circumstances are when they are first engaging with the service, and what their levels of understanding might be. Establishing this requires knowing the types of users that most frequently use the service and building a picture of their current and expected behaviour. On one hand the public sector is in a superb position, with access to information about the majority of the population, but whether there is an easy route to seeing a complete picture of the user across potential engagement points is debatable. What is certain is that GDS is focused on delivering a digital identity through the GOV.UK Account, and a trust framework that will enable citizens to identify themselves quickly and safely when engaging with public sector services. More of that later.
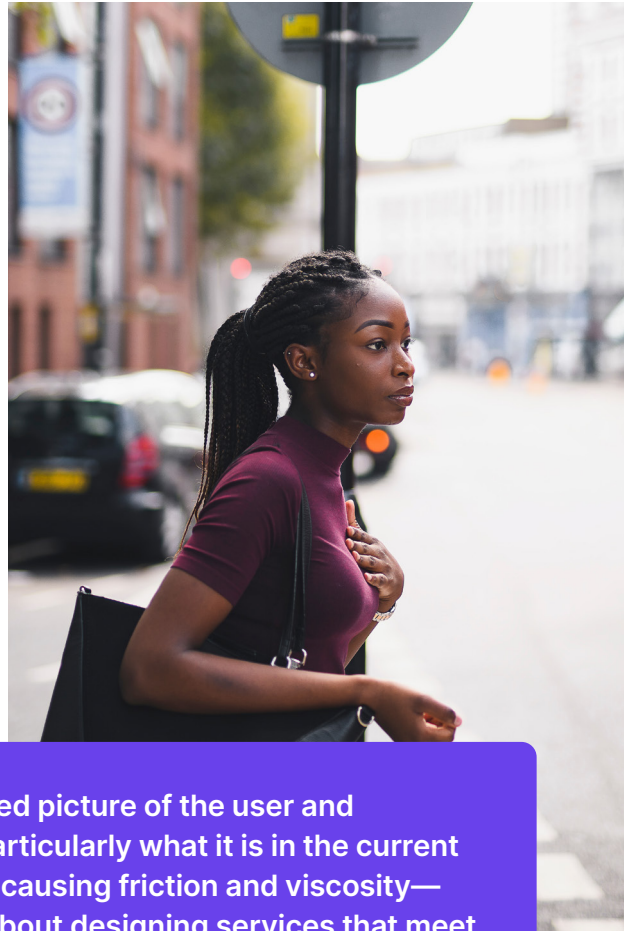
With enough data to build a detailed picture of the user and understanding the status quo—particularly what it is in the current service engagement paths that is causing friction and viscosity—user experience experts can set about designing services that meet the needs of the citizen while achieving the ultimate goals of the department.

2

What is UX?

User experience (UX) design is not business analysis, nor is it user interface (UI) design. Rather, user experience design takes detailed input from business analysts, user research, the business leadership, sponsors and leads to articulate customer paths with a product, through services, or with a system.

The design looks to champion the end user first and foremost and enable experiences that lead them, in a fluid, pleasing, and intuitive way, to achieve their ultimate goal. Unlike UI—which determines the appearance of a service, or how a product surface looks—user experience is focused on solving a problem and describes the feeling the user gets when interacting with the solution, product, or application. UX design considers all factors that will form the experience—from the feel of a product in a user's hands to the simplicity of an online application form.

> **"**
> *User experience encompasses all aspects of the end-user's interaction with the company, its services, and its products."*
>
> **Don Norman**
> Cognitive Scientist & User Experience Architect (Coined the phrase 'user experience' while at Apple, 1993)

The value of UX

Although often hard to isolate, the value of UX is considerable and goes far beyond simple monetary returns. The Gartner model[4] for calculating the value of user experience design uses key performance indicators from four perspectives: the business, the brand, the customer, and the employee. For the public sector this translates to benefits to governmental departments and the civil services, the national perception of public services, the citizen, and public sector employees. Commercial businesses have seen KPI uplifts of over 80 percent as a direct result of improvements to customer experience[5] and Forrester research shows that, on average, every $1 invested in UX returns a significant $100.

For public sector services and agencies, where it is harder to put a direct value on user engagement, measures such as Net Promoter Score (NPS) and System Usability Scale (SUS) can help to indicate the benefit that a new system or product design is delivering. NPS can help measure the overall user experience with the product and predicts future levels of engagement. Developed by Bain & Company, the system identifies three categories of user: promoters, who are brand loyalists and high satisfied users; passives, satisfied but neutral individuals who are vulnerable to disengagement; and detractors, who are actively—and often vocally—dissatisfied. SUS was devised in 1986 by John Brooke and is an industry standard measurement of a product's usability. Gartner talks about SUS as "a reliable measurement of customer perception, satisfaction, and a strong predictor of future behaviour."

[4] Stewart, Brent. "How to Prove the Value of User Experience Design." *Gartner*.
[5] Kucheriavy, Andrew. "100 UX Statistics Every User Experience Professional Needs to Know." *Intechnic*.

The UX quadrant

There are many different approaches to delivering good UX but, essentially, four fundamental disciplines underpin any user experience design:

Experience strategy

UX design is not purely about the end user; it holds the tension between the customer desire and the business goals. Best expressed in an experience strategy, these articulate a holistic business strategy that will incorporate both the customer's and the company's needs.

Interaction design

This discipline seeks to describe how a user will use the product, system, or service, detailing the steps they might go through, the buttons, page transitions, menu selections and even animations.
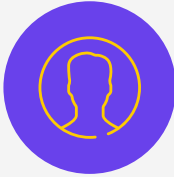
User research

UX design requires a deep understanding of the problems that a user is trying to solve, the goals they are trying to achieve, and their motivations. This demands extensive user research and, during this phase, UX designers are likely to look at user data, conduct interviews and usability tests. Ultimately these activities will unearth the profiles of specific types of users—or 'personas'—that help shape the ultimate design and keep the user at the heart of decision making throughout the product creation or service transformation.

Information architecture (IA)

Finally, IA is the vital practice of organising data, user facing information and content in a way that is easy to navigate, access and understand. Information architects consider how and when content will be most useful, and how sets of content might relate to each other, and design structures for this data to be presented to the user.

Essential to the work underway across the public sector is the redesign of user facing services

3

Designing services for the public sector

A highly valued application of UX is service design, where these disciplines are applied to plan and organise resources, infrastructure, communication tools—and other components of a service—to improve the quality of the service, particularly the interactions between the service provider and its users.

A decade ago, the Royal College of Art collaborated with Imperial College London to create a Master's in service design and defined the principle as "the application of human centred design methods to complex systems in order to create pragmatic and visionary services that improve and transform human experiences and outcomes."[6]

Essential to the work underway across the public sector is the redesign of user facing services.

As part of the initial User Experience phase of exploration or inspiration, where the focus is on understanding and observation, UX designers will look to establish service principles to further inform the shape of the service design. At Ensono Digital, the discipline of Service Design centres on understanding how the elements of delivering an experience— or part of an experience—fit together from the business's point of view and designing a cohesive service around these.

This might be a simple e-commerce shopping journey—browse, add to basket, checkout—or the complete end to end engagement of a service user. In the context of public sector services this might be the journey from initial contact and establishing a relationship, to accessing multiple services, raising issues with accounts, changing details, or—indeed— closing a relationship.

This knowledge and design can inform everything from the way that resources are deployed and the manual processes they need to follow, through to which digital elements are needed at what point in the journey, and how they might work. In our work with the housing sector, Ensono Digital's User Experience

experts employed service design principles to understand and map out the repairs service process—from how and where issues are raised, and assigned, to when they are actioned and marked as 'complete'—in order to design a repair management portal for housing officers.

And, with knowledge of the processes for manual repairs themselves—for example, the plumber's approach to accepting the job, carrying out the job and completing it—the design of messaging the housing officer and the resident can be even more accurate, relevant, and useful.

Unlike UX design principles, service design principles will also talk about how a service might be built. Examples include:

Automate where possible

Always provide an option for the user to speak to a human

Remove superfluous steps

Trust the employee, and minimise approval steps

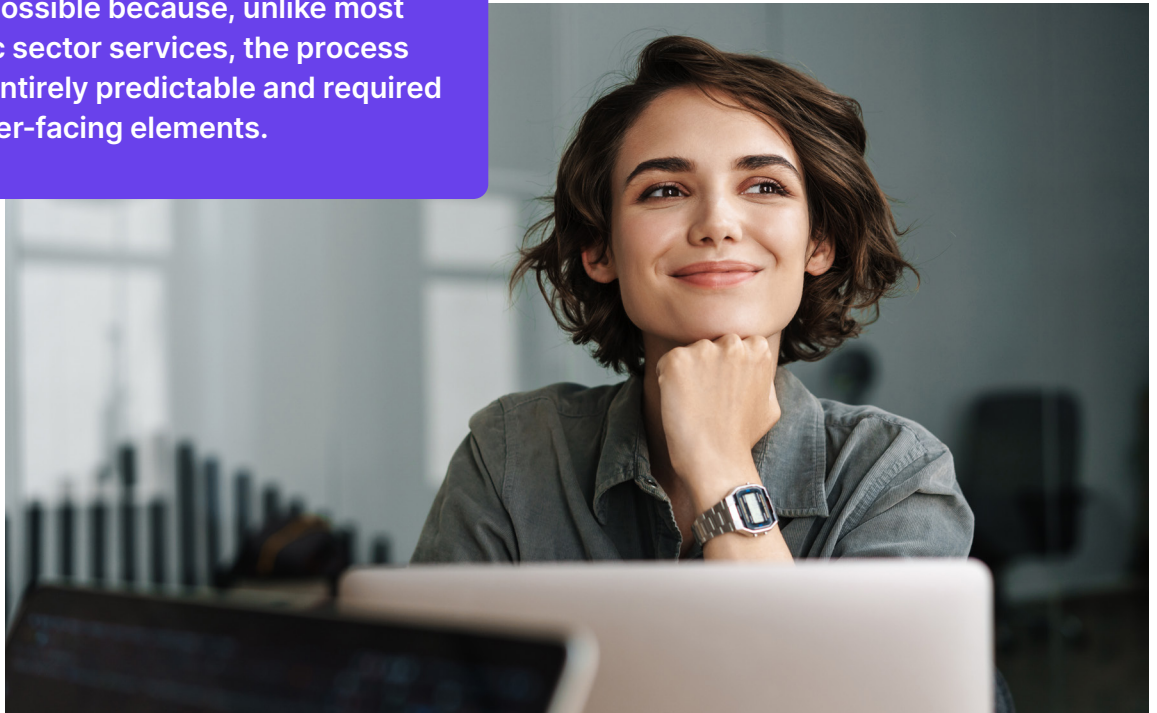[6] Royal College of Art. "A new frontier for designers."

In a technology driven transformation such as the public sector digitisation programme, it's important to define the levels of automation that would be appropriate in any given service

In an engagement that delivered a highly lucrative new service for one of the world's leading media & entertainment groups, Ensono Digital designed a solution that replaced a previously entirely manual process—that of identifying all mentions of a sponsor brand in audio content in order to generate revenue—with a sophisticated automated data search. What was previously a time-consuming and only marginally profitable activity, instantly became an efficient, highly profitable service that could be upscaled to generate significant revenue for the business.

In providing services to people, particularly with such diversity of audience and circumstance as the public sector, the amount of automation to create efficiency needs to be carefully held in tension with the optimal user experience. It is the UX function that will ask and posit the answer to the question 'at what point does this automated service create friction for the user?'.

Potentially this is in the edge cases—where certain behaviours or requirements are identified in the discovery phase of the project as being low frequency—but it could also be relevant for services used at a point of human stress, or where reassurances are required. Such as in the event of registering a death through the Tell Us Once service or reporting an issue with the emergency response service.

This wholesale automation however was possible because, unlike most public sector services, the process was entirely predictable and required no user-facing elements.

Designing a frictionless process aligned to a 'people first' initiative

Client

Working with one of the biggest housing associations in the UK, Ensono Digital developed a solution to help the business with their goal of dramatically cutting repair booking speed so that they could spend less time on admin and more time adding value to their communities.

Challenge

Like the public sector ambitions for widespread digitisation, the initial contact was focused on a technical solution to meet the need. The Housing Association (HA) knew they needed to overhaul their housing repairs booking system to increase productivity, deliver a frictionless experience for staff, and significantly reduce both system costs for the business and waiting times for residents. And, like the public sector transformation, the change needed to start at the roots, with a service redesign to underpin and inform the technical design.

Solution

Through data, interviews and research the UX team identified that, with multiple siloed systems required to drive the service, repairs were difficult and time consuming for staff to book; data was duplicated across different systems, causing friction and frustration for both their team and residents.

Armed with this knowledge, UX designers collaborated with the HA staff to design a more streamlined service that helped inform the technical design of a digital system to reduce repetitive manual tasks and create a phased roadmap against their business strategy.

Results

The resulting service design was a frictionless process aligned to the HA's 'people first' initiative, that gave staff an effortless and accessible experience to quickly fulfil resident requests.

60% of residents' calls couldn't be resolved first time around due to a lack of accurate real-time data.

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Designing for humans, not machines

According to the Director of Design at GDS Ben Terrett "GOV.UK gets 12 million visitors a week and almost everyone has to interact with government at some point, so it's vital that we make that as user focused as possible." Such ease of use saved the government £210 million in 2014 alone.

Armed with a set of mandated service design principles, a solid understanding of the principal users both behind the scenes (staff) and accessing the services (citizens) the User Experience team in any public sector digitisation change will be able design experience paths that establish fundamental journeys. They will employ everything they know about these users to determine the words they use, the location of buttons on the screen, the options provided to move from step to step, and more.

Maintaining this approach through that experience design phase—and particularly when working in an agile way, iterating design and build across a programme of continuous improvement—doesn't just assure a successful, intuitive system. Applying UX principles and methods and using the concept of user personas to make design decisions, helps transformation leaders manage stakeholder influences throughout. How often do project leads have to juggle the opinions of C-suite influencers, maintaining stakeholder engagement, while ensuring the needs of the user are the primary driver of a design? User personas—that have been bought into from the start—and solid UX and service design principles can provide that cut through, as well as providing traceability and credibility for every design decision.

£210M

government savings in 2014

5

Data and trust

The Rt Hon John Whittingdale OBE MP, Minister for Media and Data, stated in the 2020 report tackling [The Future of Citizen Data Systems](#)[7] that "by harnessing the power of data, we can boost growth and productivity, drive innovation, improve public services and inform a new wave of scientific research." The government has laid out clear ambitions to maximise the value of data in the digitisation of public sector services, and initiatives are underway to create flexible, secure, and scalable ways of managing citizen data. But how do these initiatives align with a citizen first principle for digitisation?

In 2021, the UK government approved £400 million to begin the rollout of a universal digital identity system—One Login—April 2022. The GDS mission "to build a simple, joined-up and personalised experience of government for everyone"[8] will stand as a defining principle for both the UK's Identity Asset Management (IDAM) platform, and the user experience across public sector services.

The One Login system will work on the principle of a single sign-on (SSO) capability which has been developed by the GDS for the gov.uk website and will guarantee digital identity verification, allow citizen's access to many public services.

With such a vast network of services, and an array of partners and service providers, and large number of citizen attributes that could be required to unlock or enable any given service, the UK digital identity needs to be strictly managed. The trust framework has been designed to do just that and this set of rules includes legislation, standards, guidance and rules for organisations to follow if they want to benefit from the One Login system.

Although highly valuable for organisations - giving identity, attribute, and orchestration service providers, relying parties or scheme owners quick, reliable and accurate access to validate citizens' identities or eligibility for services—this approach delivers benefit to the user in spades. A single-signon supported by a trust framework delivers increased usability, a heightened sense of security and makes services easier and quicker to access.

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[7] GOV.UK. "Evidence and scenarios for global data systems."
[8] GOV.UK. "Government Digital Service: Our strategy for 2021–2024."

Ensuring all data is designed for quick and easy retrieval

6

Reacting to change

Continuous improvement across services must maintain an understanding of the user by gathering and analysing data and knowledge as their needs, behaviours, and influences change. Take the pandemic, for example, which had a significant impact on user behaviour, accelerating the move to digital first for some by as much as 8–10 years.

It is important for the public sector to have confident, imbedded methods to identify and execute opportunities for continuous improvement. Equally important is creating the systems, and building the platforms, that provide flexibility not just for growth but diversification or even the withdrawal of services or traffic. Again, looking to the recent past, those business who were prepared with the tools and approaches to react quickly did the best in the pandemic and were more likely to survive in dramatically changed circumstances.

A successful data system will need to be flexible and react quickly to changes."

Rt Hon John Whittingdale OBE MP

A key part of Ensono Digital's work with Hackney Council was working closely with departments across the organisation to establish a single source of truth for data. Data engineers consolidated and restructured recovered data from Universal Housing and interim spreadsheets to produce one clean and reliable data set for the new tenant and leaseholder management system. This single source of the truth now sits alongside a powerful and easily searchable system to meet user and administrator needs in an efficient and intuitive way. Combining with the event driven architecture, dependent systems now automatically sync data in real time to help maintain this single source as a clean database, ensuring all data is designed for quick and easy retrieval.

Hackney

Create a first-rate experience for both users and staff

Client

In 2021 Ensono Digital started working with Hackney Council to create a first-rate experience for both users and staff.

Challenge

After a serious cyber-attack in 2020, the Council had been using interim procedures to manage their housing stock of over 30,000 homes. Hackney's Housing Services teams were working hard to support vulnerable residents and prioritise wellbeing initiatives in the context of the pandemic, with a severely compromised legacy system that was no longer able to support them in booking repairs, managing housing finance, and administrating the neds of tenants and leaseholders.

Solution

To help shape the design, Ensono Digital worked with a 'supergroup' of 11 Hackney Council housing officers who championed the views of the people at the heart of the system and provided regular user feedback on early designs. Their invaluable collaboration ensured that the platform was designed with focus on serving the needs of its day-to-day users.

Results

The result was a secure management system 'Manage my Home' developed by Ensono Digital to provide a frictionless, user-centric, self-service platform for both tenants and leaseholders that frees up time for Hackney housing officers to prioritise the safety, security, and welfare of their tenants. Covering three workstreams—Repairs Hub, Finance and Managing, and Tenants and Leaseholders—the transformation brought these services together to deliver a seamless experience for both staff and residents.

> *The new platform empowers our tenants to have more autonomy around managing their homes, frees up our employees from admin to focus on delivering more value to our tenants and helps us build an even better community".*
>
> **Cate McLaurin**
> Head of Delivery for Hackney Council

Conclusion

With Public Sector services such an important, central part of so many citizens' lives—from managing housing and applying for benefits, to accessing healthcare and proving identity—the experience of navigating these services need to be smoothed to make them as easy and stress-free as possible.

Centralised secure and scalable data solutions will allow for users to move smoothly between services, and user flows that recognise the motivations and circumstances of those users will make Public Sector services easier to engage—with putting less pressure on core staff and freeing them to be able to focus on edge cases and people with the need for additional help.

In short, putting citizens first—and maintaining this view—will create opportunities for cost savings and make services more engaging, robust, flexible, and more prepared for whatever the future brings.

Smarter engineering. Better business.

Ensono Digital is the cloud-native consultancy for better business outcomes. We design, build and manage technology solutions to help our clients improve efficiency, accelerate growth and innovate to stay ahead of the curve.

We work with smart clients across a number of sectors, including impactful public sector work with Hackney Council, the DVLA and NHS 24 to give them the confidence to take on their toughest challenges and improve the lives of their people, citizens and patients.

Our clients consistently tell us that we make their lives better with our focus on driving better organisational outcomes, the depth of our technical understanding, and our collaborative approach to delivering high-quality work, on time and on budget.

If you need advice on your getting more value from your technical strategy, please get in touch:

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