

INSIGHT

Lessons learned:

Smarter delivery –
improving operational
capability to provide
better public services

Operational Delivery Profession


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Lessons learned:

Smarter delivery – improving operational capability to provide better public services

Operational Delivery Profession

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

6 June 2025

Lessons learned reports

Our lessons learned reports bring together what we know on important recurring issues to make it easier for others to understand and apply the lessons from our work.

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Summary

Introduction

1 In 2024-25, central government departments were expected to spend over £450 billion on the day-to-day 'current' running costs of public services, grants and administration. This is approximately 35% of public spending. Operational capability will enable government to be smarter in how it manages and improves services, and to find innovative ways of getting the best value from that spend, in the face of emerging challenges. The size of the prize from improving operational capability is significant even when just considering the potential financial impact. For example, the Institute of Customer Service estimates that the cost of poor service to all UK organisations is £7.3 billion per month when employees' time dealing with problems, complaints and service failures is considered.

2 Operational expertise is required for roles in a range of contexts and in all government organisations. This includes front-line work with users of government services, support services (such as recruitment, IT, asset management and logistics), and business management work (such as finance processes that help front-line teams plan and operate effectively). Our work shows that operational capability and knowledge matters for effective delivery, regardless of whether the government organisation considers itself to have a policy or delivery focus.

3 There are over 290,000 members of the Operational Delivery Profession (ODP) across central government. It is the largest profession in government; it has members in all organisations and is based in all regions. Its members are the public face of the civil service, often living and working in the communities they serve. ODP has responsibility for building leadership capability for its members and has curated a learning and development offer for its members at various stages of their careers.

4 Our report provides our insights on what matters for government to get right to improve operational delivery. Good operational capability contributes to government achieving:

- better outcomes for service users;
- more efficient and productive services; and
- increased employee engagement.

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5 The report shares learning and examples of how organisations apply the operational capabilities that our evidence shows matter most and which government could adopt more widely. In particular, the report contains several case examples where organisations are attempting to improve services in challenging and complex circumstances, such as prisons and the asylum system. The report's examples showcase the work practitioners are doing to build stronger operational capability in adverse conditions, including in areas where there is currently poor value for money overall.

6 The changing expectations of users of government services, the predictable and unpredictable patterns of service demand each year, new fiscal goals or workforce pressures, and new or revised policies mean that operational delivery is rarely stable and must evolve. This creates new operational risks, which results in challenges, but also opportunities to innovate and improve. The current operating challenges for government organisations include the following.

- **Responding to new and changing levels of demand for services:** Our work has shown the importance of having the resilience to meet expected variations in demand as well as to respond to unexpected changes, such as those caused by external, sometimes global, shocks to supply or demand.
- **Improving productivity and reducing costs to meet fiscal challenges:** There are opportunities to make services more efficient by getting services right first time for users and reducing failure demand, and to understand the consequences of trade-offs between meeting user expectations and operating within financial constraints.
- **Changes to the operational capabilities and workforce needed to manage and improve services:** For example, the capabilities that a good operational delivery professional needs are merging with those of other professions, such as the Digital, Data and Technology Profession's expertise needed to build and provide digital services, create the apps that service users expect and make appropriate use of artificial intelligence opportunities.
- **Implementing the government's new 'delivery agenda' to improve outcomes from government's services:** This needs a whole-system approach and collaboration between those government organisations responsible for policy and services, as well as with people and organisations outside of government across the wider system.

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The focus of our report – operational capability lessons for government

7 Our work shows that operational capability is varied and often lacking in what matters most. We have produced a series of good practice guides for senior leaders and operational practitioners which set out the operational challenges we observe in government organisations and capabilities required to meet them.¹ In this report we focus on four capabilities.

- **Taking a whole-system approach:** Dealing with complexity and uncertainty by understanding how the different parts of the system connect, working with people outside of your specialism or profession, and adapting ways of working for different contexts.
- **Understanding and dealing with demand:** Designing and running a service so that work moves through processes and provides people what they want, when they want it, right first time.
- **Using information to improve:** Understanding how the service is performing and deciding what to change, why and how.
- **Embedding a systematic approach to innovation and improvement:** Knowing where problems happen or where there are opportunities to improve, prioritising what to fix and having an approach for doing that.

8 Our work – not just in operations management – shows the importance of leaders supporting their people to contribute to their fullest. When they do this well, leaders and managers of operational teams create an environment where people know how to apply the principles of good operations management, and are encouraged to do so. This is a foundational organisational capability that underpins all four of the other thematic capabilities.

9 This report shares lessons about these four capabilities and the management and leadership environment that is required for government to provide better services (**Figure 1** on pages 8 and 9). The capabilities do not cover everything that organisations need to do and are not exhaustive. We also examine the role of ODP in building cross-government operational capability and conclude that it needs to continue focusing on two areas.

- Ensuring that it gets the contributions it needs from its members right across government to achieve the outcomes in its strategy.
- Measuring progress to understand the link between its initiatives and outcomes, and how they might contribute to improvements in public services.

¹ National Audit Office, *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*, March 2021; National Audit Office, *How to improve operational services*, February 2023.

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- 10** There are two parts to this report.
- Part One covers the four key capabilities and management and leadership environment described above, and the lessons government organisations need to learn for smarter delivery. Each lesson is illustrated with at least one case example that other organisations can learn from.
 - Part Two describes government's approach to building cross-government operational capability. It focuses on the role of ODP, and its future plans and strategies to address capability challenges, including those outlined in Part One.

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Figure 1

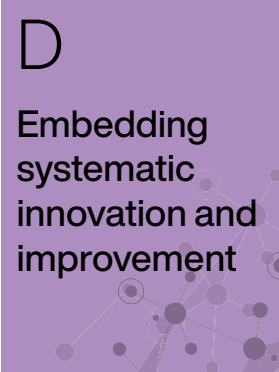
National Audit Office lessons and insights for government on improving operational capability

Our work identifies 20 lessons and insights to improve operational delivery

Capability	Lessons
A Taking a whole-system approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good services require all organisations and people connected with the system to build and maintain a shared understanding of the outcomes they are trying to achieve. You need the people and organisations involved in policy formulation through to operational delivery to be open about these outcomes and any competing priorities. • Service users expect organisations to work together effectively to provide good services. You need to be clear about what success is and whether you are getting there.
B Understanding and dealing with demand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Users expect to access services at a time that suits them, and receive a good service. You need to know if your services can adapt to changes in the level of demand and still meet those expectations. • What matters to service users should inform the way you work. You need to apply the principles of good service design and provide the right support to make it easier for people to use the service. • Service users expect a seamless right first-time experience. You should understand how demand flows through the steps of the process and where there are pinch-points and dependencies. • Everyone using the service is unique and may not have the same needs. You need to know if your ways of working and processes are flexible enough to accommodate that variation in user needs. • Make it easy for users to give you the quality of information you need to provide a good service for them. This will allow you to complete work faster and right first time. • Service users expect good services, and good services require capable people. The people providing the service must have the skills and tools they need to do their jobs.
C Using information to improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service users judge performance based on what matters to them. You need measures that tell you if you are meeting their expectations. • Service users will complain or chase progress when problems occur. You need measures that help you understand where and why service performance is failing. • Identifying and fixing issues that cause your service users problems requires specific operational capabilities. You need to give people providing services the skills they need to make decisions using performance information, and support them to do it. • Improving service users' experience requires the right people to have the right information at the right time. You need to routinely challenge the information you collect and report, and whether it is helping you to improve service performance.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of our operational management good practice guides and reports

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Capability	Lessons
 <p>D Embedding systematic innovation and improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Service users have invaluable insight on how to improve services. You need ways of understanding what the problems and opportunities are from their perspective.• Improving services for users requires specific problem-solving and operational improvement capabilities. You need to give people the skills, tools and time to improve services.• Service improvements can come from people anywhere in the organisation. You need to make it possible for everyone to contribute.• Opportunities and learning about how to improve can come from organisations involved in your end-to-end service or similar services. You need to fix problems with others and share learning.

Our insights on the management and leadership environment foundation required for effective operational delivery include.

- **Ensuring that organisational behaviours support whole system working.** You need to build shared perspective and trust with people in other parts of the system and make collaboration the norm, sharing or pooling resources for the best overall outcome.
- **Building awareness, among senior leaders and managers of teams, of how the questions and reports they ask for will inform how their people respond in dealing with demand.** You need to ask questions that are aligned with a good technical understanding of how to manage demand well to influence how people respond and the decisions they make.
- **Giving people the information they need to perform their role in the organisation.** You need the people leading an organisation, running a directorate or managing daily processes to have the information they need to make the decisions their role requires and equip them with the technical skills and tools to analyse this information and use it well.
- **Creating a working environment that encourages openness and innovation and challenges current thinking.** You need leaders who ask what barriers and problems people need help with, that are clear spending time on improving is a priority and see failure when innovating as an opportunity to learn rather than an exercise in sharing out blame.

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Part One

Our lessons on improving government's operational capability

1.1 This part of the report covers the key capabilities government needs to achieve smarter delivery. It sets out lessons, illustrated with case examples of learning from operational practice, which show it is possible for teams working across government to continuously improve and be innovative – even in adverse circumstances where operational delivery is highly challenging. It also describes some of the characteristics of an effective management and leadership environment that are the foundation for these capabilities. The capabilities government needs link together, and there is overlap between some of the lessons. It is important to understand that there is not a single 'recipe' to follow for good operational delivery. Organisations need to adapt the lessons and principles in them to their context, including trade-offs in meeting user expectations and operating within financial constraints, rather than treat this part of the report as a 'how to' manual.

1.2 Our work, and many of the operational capability lessons and case examples in this report, shows that good outcomes require participation and collaboration between people in a range of roles and organisations. It includes those with responsibility for setting the funding approach, policy design and front-line delivery, or for overseeing whole sectors or policy, as well as those from central government departments, local delivery bodies and non-governmental organisations.

1.3 Operational capability across government is varied and often lacking in what matters most. Our evidence shows examples of organisations improving operational management capability but limited collective progress across government. Government's aggregate operational capability is low. We have produced a series of good practice guides for senior leaders and operational practitioners which set out the key operational challenges we observe in government organisations and the capabilities required to meet them.²

1.4 Our lessons focus on four capabilities to help government improve capability to deal with its complex operational challenges. These capabilities do not cover everything that matters but are those where we observe gaps in government most frequently. These capabilities are important regardless of the type of service.

² National Audit Office, *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*, March 2021; National Audit Office, *How to improve operational services*, February 2023.

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- **Taking a whole-system approach:** Dealing with complexity and uncertainty by understanding how the different parts of the system, service users' needs, and processes connect; working with people outside of your specialism or profession; and adapting ways of working for different contexts.
- **Understanding and dealing with demand:** Designing and running a service in a way that provides people what they want, when they want it, right first time.
- **Using information to improve:** Understanding how the service is performing and deciding what to change, why and how.
- **Embedding a systematic approach to innovation and improvement:** Knowing where problems happen or where there are opportunities to improve, prioritising what to fix and having an approach for doing that.

1.5 Management and leadership capability is a foundational organisational characteristic. We cover how this applies in an operational setting within each of the four capabilities. Our work shows that leaders and managers of operational teams need to exhibit behaviours that encourage their staff to innovate, implement new ideas and share learning from their experiments to improve operational performance. They also need to provide their people with the technical skills they need to manage and improve services.

1.6 Organisations that demonstrate these capabilities can provide better services. However, there is a limit to the benefit that excelling in one capability brings to an organisation. For example, understanding user needs and demand to decide how to design and provide a service is not enough by itself – the measures used to manage and improve service performance must reflect those user needs too.



Why this matters

1.7 The benefits of getting this right:

- Policy goals achieve outcomes and benefits that change users' experiences in their locality.
- The likely outcomes for service users inform conscious trade-offs between any conflicting objectives and priorities of organisations in different parts of the system.
- You understand how the different parts of the system connect and where and how changes might impact other parts of the system.

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1.8 What it takes: Taking a whole-system approach is about ensuring that objectives, funding, governance, and regulatory and accountability processes support a cross-cutting focus on service design and users' outcomes rather than being barriers. Central government and delivery bodies, including those within local government and those independent of government, work together to provide high-quality services to people locally.

1.9 What is happening if you do this well: There is a focus on overall effectiveness and outcomes for service users, rather than what is good for one part of the system. There is a shared understanding of risks that cross operational boundaries. Those responsible for policy and operational delivery are working with each other, and with the people that use services, to understand the impact of changes to policy or of introducing new policy. Policy and service design, or redesign, considers the cumulative capacity of organisations in different parts of the system to absorb more work. It is informed by understanding how well the service is provided, focusing on quality of service from a user perspective, not just on what is easy to measure, such as activity completed. Governance mechanisms support collective accountability arrangements and decision making.

1.10 An effective management and leadership environment: Organisational behaviours need to support whole system working. People managing and leading teams need to build shared perspective and trust with those people in other parts of the system, and make collaboration the norm, sharing or pooling resources for the best overall outcome. Managers and leaders should ask whether organisational behaviours support openness and transparency and allow information to flow freely to those in the system who need it.

Our lessons and case examples

Lesson

A.1 Good services require all organisations and people connected with the system to build and maintain a shared understanding of the outcomes they are trying to achieve. You need the people and organisations involved in policy formulation through to operational delivery to be open about these outcomes and any competing priorities.

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- Why is this important? By working collaboratively with all organisations across the system, you can establish a shared understanding of objectives and service outcomes. You can agree ways of working to make consistent trade-offs between conflicting objectives and priorities in different parts of the system, informed by the likely impact on outcomes for users. This is often difficult, needing time and investment from senior leaders, particularly as each organisation's goals can evolve.
- Our work has shown numerous examples of conflicting organisational objectives making it difficult to achieve whole-system outcomes, in sectors such as education, justice, housing and the environment. However, there are examples where government has made some progress in meeting this challenge.

Case example A.1

Home Office: creating new roles and setting up new structures to encourage joint working and accountability for outcomes across a system



Problem: Tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs is complex.

Central and local government bodies are involved, ranging from police and law enforcement agencies, who seek to disrupt organised crime, to local authorities and service providers, who offer treatment and support to people with a drug addiction. The government at the time recognised that the situation was deteriorating, with deaths related to drug misuse increasing by 80% between 2011 and 2021. An independent review in 2021 concluded that “the public provision we currently have for prevention, treatment and recovery is not fit for purpose, and urgently needs repair”.



Approach: The previous government published a new 10-year drugs strategy in December 2021. The strategy focuses on breaking drug supply chains, creating a “world class treatment and recovery system” and achieving a “generational shift” in the demand for illegal drugs. The government established a ministerial role to provide leadership, set up a Ministerial Forum and Systems Leaders Board to ensure clear cross-system senior level accountability, and created the Joint Combating Drugs Unit (JCDU) to encourage government departments to work together to achieve the strategy's aims. The JCDU was based in the Home Office but was consciously formed of secondees from the other relevant government departments. To provide focus and a greater degree of accountability, the JCDU invited local areas to create Combating Drugs Partnerships to better coordinate the work of relevant bodies, including police, probation, healthcare and treatment providers.

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Benefit: While it is still early in the strategy's 10-year cycle to assess outcomes, the new ways of working have had a positive impact in relation to implementing the strategy. The creation of a ministerial post focused on illegal drugs and of a senior officials board has raised the profile of the strategy. The creation of national boards and local partnerships has helped to coordinate activity, facilitated joined-up working and strengthened accountability. Stakeholders commented that government had created a “national expectation” to work together and enabled local areas to develop plans relevant to their local needs.

Note

- 1 This case example is based on a National Audit Office report published in 2023. The government is expected to set out its approach to drugs later in 2025.

Source: Comptroller and Auditor General, *Reducing the harm from illegal drugs*, Session 2022–23, HC 1864, National Audit Office, October 2023

Lesson

A.2 Service users expect organisations to work together effectively to provide good services. You need to be clear about what success is and whether you are getting there.

- Why is this important? You need to manage the tension between accountability for whole-system outcomes and individual organisations' objectives. Having the right measures will help you to spot potential operational problems and to trigger intervention. Making performance information available to everyone involved, alongside having formal and informal ways of working to bring people together, will enable everyone to understand performance and agree actions.
- Our work has shown that you need to understand what good outcomes are for the whole system – success for one organisation may not equate to successful outcomes for the customer overall, or for overall system efficiency. It is critical to have effective end-to-end process ownership and accountability to achieve successful outcomes when a service crosses boundaries within an organisation or across organisations. A lack of transparency and effective data sharing can also be a barrier to whole-system working. However, there are examples where organisations have been able to work together effectively for shared system outcomes.

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Case example A.2

Ministry of Justice (MoJ): bringing organisations together to deliver seamless end-to-end services



Problem: The process of releasing prisoners from prison, though a function of MoJ, relies on several organisations working together as part of a wider system. This system includes organisations within MoJ. For example, prisoners will be released into the supervision of the probation service. It also includes other parts of government – released prisoners may need benefits, healthcare and housing. If the system does not operate in a joined-up way, there are likely to be significant negative consequences for those who are released. This risk became particularly acute during the implementation of the SDS40 prisoner release scheme. SDS40 brought forward the release date for prisoners on standard determinate sentences (certain more serious types of offender were excluded) and many people were released across the country over a relatively short period of time.



Approach: It took several weeks to implement SDS40, and MoJ used that time to build the networks they needed to release prisoners successfully. MoJ worked with Chief Constables, the Department for Work & Pensions, the Department of Health & Social Care, as well as local authorities, sharing data at a granular level about the number of prisoners who would be released, where and on what date. The aim was to build a shared picture of the amount and type of demands for support that releasing prisoners would have in specific geographical locations, to aid their resettlement back into the community.



Benefit: MoJ said that having the right data helped it have the right conversations with the right people and established a better footing to implement SDS40 as planned. For example, if it knew it was releasing 12 prisoners from a prison in Birmingham on a certain date, it could liaise with the relevant organisations at a national and local level to ensure that there was housing and healthcare available in the Midlands for them. MoJ said that the feedback from the other organisations about how it handled this was very positive.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

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B

Understanding and dealing with demand

Why this matters

1.11 The benefits of getting this right:

- People using the service enjoy a better experience that provides what they need.
- Services are more efficient, and organisations are more likely to meet their objectives.
- People providing the service enjoy a better place to work with less pressure responding to unexpected peaks in demand.

1.12 What it takes: Ensuring you can provide what the people using your services need, when they need it. You need to understand their needs and behaviours and what those simple or complex needs mean for the work you must do. You design and provide simple processes that meet those needs and resource to meet them.

1.13 What is happening if you do this well: Your services adapt for different circumstances or needs of people using them rather than treating everyone the same way. Work is done right first time and there is little failure demand – such as issues with quality that cause rework and workarounds that take time and become the norm. Work moves through the process at the pace needed to meet the service users' needs without backlogs or delays – hand-offs between different people and steps in the process are seamless, so you spend little effort having to track where work is or responding to questions or complaints about delays. The way you assess performance of the service relates to the needs of different people using it and what matters to them.

1.14 An effective management and leadership environment: The questions and reports that senior leaders ask of people in their organisation may have unintended consequences in how demand is managed. Asking questions that are misaligned with a good technical understanding of how to manage demand well can unduly influence how people respond and the decisions they make. For example, conversations with staff and requests for reports that focus only on past performance will not encourage forward thinking on quality, learning, wider system issues, or the end users' perspective.

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Our lessons and case examples

Lesson

B.1 **People expect to receive good services regardless of when they decide to use them.** You need to know if your services can adapt to peaks and troughs in demand and still meet those expectations.

- Why is this important? You will know how many people you need to provide the quality of service that people expect. You will be able to respond to demand in a more agile way, changing your processes and how you work rather than always needing to recruit to fill resourcing gaps.
- Our work has shown the importance of having the resilience to meet expected variations in demand as well as to respond to unexpected changes in demand, such as those caused by external, sometimes global, shocks to supply or demand and service users' behaviour in response to them. If you do not have this capability, service users experience extended delays and backlogs, often with significant consequences for them.

Case example B.1

Office of the Public Guardian (OPG): building in flexibility to deal with backlogs and react quickly to changes in demand



Problem: OPG administers the Lasting Power of Attorney process, which enables people to appoint others to help them make decisions, or make decisions on their behalf, relating to their health, welfare, property and finances. Because the service was completely paper-based, it needed staff to be in the office to deal with customer contact. During COVID-19, OPG was unable to have all of its staff in the office, and sizeable backlogs quickly built up in the Lasting Power of Attorney process.



Approach: At the outset of COVID-19, OPG identified some technical solutions, such as pre-existing governmental remote print and post services, and online payment services, which it could quickly adopt to enable staff to work remotely. But it also moved to a more flexible working approach, based on a data-based model that identified how many staff it needed, where and when, to address the backlog. OPG trained its staff so that they had multiple skills and could be moved to work on different stages of the process where more capacity was needed, and it used temporary agency staff so that it could quickly deal with issues when they arose. OPG also extended its operating hours to 20 hours per day to better meet customer demand.

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Benefit: OPG says that, while the key aim was to address the backlog to improve the service customers receive, new ways of working have had further benefits. Technical solutions have increased process efficiency, and the more flexible and multi-skilled approach has been retained within OPG so it can react to and manage demand on an ongoing basis. Its workforce and demand model helps it decide its staffing approach, whether to modify recruitment and how it uses agency staff – which still make up to 20% of the administrative officer grade workforce for the Lasting Power of Attorney process. As a result, OPG is able to give customers greater certainty about how long it will take to process a case. OPG says that the ability to work in a hybrid way has made its staff with additional responsibilities (such as carers or single parents) feel more equal as members of the organisation.



Additional learning point: Prior to COVID-19, OPG had embedded an organisational approach to continuous improvement, which included training in basic principles of continuous improvement for all staff, and a specialist central team. An internal review concluded that this organisational capability was a key factor in enabling OPG to react quickly to changing circumstances.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

B.2 What matters to service users should inform the way you work. You need to apply the principles of good service design and provide the right support to make it easier for people to use the service.

- Why is this important? If the way you work is informed by what matters to service users, people can access the services they need in a way that works for both you and them. They experience a better service, and you will reduce the time, effort and cost of responding to people chasing outputs or complaining about the service, doing work again or dealing with follow-up questions.
- Our work has shown that weaknesses in guidance, support and reassurance for service users can cause them difficulties in accessing services, and additional concerns once they have accessed them, which increase levels of avoidable customer contact. Understanding the problems faced by service users helps both them and government achieve positive outcomes.

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Case example B.2.1

Rural Payments Agency (RPA): understanding how people use your services so you can support them better



Problem: The mechanism for supporting farmers financially, overseen by RPA, changed when the UK left the EU. Where previously 85,000 farmers received EU subsidies for owning farmland, the new domestic grant payment system came with conditions – in return for payment, farmers had to take specific actions aimed at achieving environmental outcomes. The previous regime also had a strong compliance monitoring focus, which RPA felt had eroded some of the trust farmers had in them. A combination of these factors meant that initial take-up of the grants was likely to be low, which would have risks for the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs' ability to meet its environmental objectives.



Approach: RPA told us that its new approach is about understanding the needs of farmers and providing them support to 'get it right', in the interests of the customer and end outcomes. RPA described how a new customer intelligence team uses customer segmentation techniques to build a picture of what each farm looks like and what it does, to determine how RPA can best support it. The team is tasked with gathering feedback and identifying and fixing issues (such as by simplifying guidance) which get in the way of farmers applying for grants and taking the actions required of them. The team also follow up after a field visit to see how the farmer felt and whether any improvements could be made to the process, and are embedding proactive advice and guidance visits to support customers and prevent error occurring.



Benefit: RPA said that this new customer-focused approach has moved it away from backwards-looking compliance checks and penalties, and towards forward-looking ways of working aimed at giving better outcomes for the environment and for farmers. RPA said it thinks the new approach is giving farmers increased confidence to apply for schemes for which they are eligible, with 45,000 in receipt of the domestic grants. It also said it is improving its ability to harness the data it collects to better understand and support its customers. This work includes creating heat maps of where issues are occurring, exploring opportunities for machine learning models to identify potential risks to outcomes at an early stage (such as flooding or wrong soil types). It can then intervene to support farmers to take corrective action to avoid error, and to avoid the ultimate environmental aim not being delivered.

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Additional learning point: When creating policy, it is important to consider the operational reality into which it will land, and to be quick to adapt where it does not work on the ground. In considering whether customers have complied with the requirements to receive grants, RPA said it is recognising that there are some instances in which it needs to use discretion and have some tolerance for variation – for example, a farmer may not have the right equipment to precisely measure the length of a hedge. This approach is improving its ability to identify common and recurring errors and identify the most suitable lever, be that policy, guidance or communications, to help farmers meet the terms of their agreements and achieve better outcomes.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example B.2.2

HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS): improving quality of service and reducing costs via centralised service centres



Problem: There are hundreds of courts and tribunals across the criminal, civil, family and tribunals jurisdictions in England and Wales. Each court and tribunal was responsible for administering its own workload, for example processing work and dealing with contact from court and tribunal users. This caused several problems from a user perspective. Processes varied across different locations, which was confusing for users, and it was hard for users to work out who to contact. The quality of service also varied from location to location, such as different waiting times for responses. The IT systems were not always linked, so people working in one location could not answer a query if it related to a different location. Outdated telephony systems meant that staff had no visibility of the number of people waiting to speak to them or how long they had been waiting.



Approach: HMCTS started out on a multi-year reform programme, part of which involved setting up Courts and Tribunals Service Centres (CTSCs). HMCTS designed and set up five CTSCs and created new staff roles that focused on a more customer-facing approach. Some existing staff moved across to these new roles, and some were filled by new staff. The people recruited into the roles were provided with bespoke training from an in-house academy and used new technology for customer contact.

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Benefit: HMCTS says there are numerous benefits from this new way of working. Users now have one number to call and can do more things digitally without having to travel to a court building. For example, citizens can apply for probate digitally, rather than having to navigate a complex paper-based service and attend a Probate Registry. HMCTS says that users can now follow one standard set of processes within each of the reformed services, removing geographical differences, which helps professional users who work across multiple court and tribunal locations. HMCTS also says that the resource required to deliver services has reduced as a consequence of better technology and centralised, more efficient administration. HMCTS also has better user insight as a result of these reforms, which it can use to develop, refine and improve the services further.



Additional learning point: The programme meant significant changes for HMCTS's people in local courts and tribunals and for their roles. HMCTS recognises that there were lessons learned along the way, notably the need to draw upon the staff knowledge and expertise. HMCTS had to adapt its approach to reform during the programme, learning and applying the lessons from the first services to reform.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example B.2.3

Home Office: putting customer needs at the heart of service design



Problem: Following the UK's exit from the EU, the Home Office had to quickly design and implement the EU Settlement Scheme that would grant a new immigration status to EU citizens who wanted to continue living in the UK. The likely scale of demand, an estimated initial 3.5 million applications, meant that it would not be possible to process this number of paper-based applications – so it had to be a digital process. In line with political commitments made by the government to Parliament, the public and the EU, the solution had to be a customer-friendly process.

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Approach: The Home Office told us that it took an approach which put the customer at the heart of designing the new process from the start. It consulted with customer groups including those representing EU citizens, the EU consulates and those with a particular interest in the needs of vulnerable customers. This helped the Home Office understand if what they were designing, including the language used to describe what people needed to provide for a successful application, would make sense to different people who would use the new service. The Home Office said that, operationally, it put a huge emphasis on a 'here to help' culture, instilling this in the new staff it needed to run the service from the outset at pop-up recruitment centres. Processes were designed so that the vast majority of customers would have a simple and straightforward path, including using face recognition and passport chip technology in smart phones. The Home Office also took a pragmatic and flexible approach to the evidence people could provide to support their application as well as building links with HM Revenue & Customs and the Department for Work & Pensions to automate the vast majority of applicants' applications and minimise the levels of evidence customers had to send. It supplemented this with outreach work with stakeholder groups representing those who would need additional assistance to complete their application.



Benefit: The Home Office said that ensuring consideration was given to design elements that would benefit the maximum number of people focused the project team on what mattered most. As a result, 8.2 million applications have been concluded. Heads of missions across Europe congratulated the Home Office – if this process had not worked so well, it would have caused diplomatic issues for them.



Additional learning point: The EU Settlement Scheme was a new process, and the Home Office team feels that made the design and implementation easier. They created a multi-disciplinary team with policy, operational, digital, legal and communications expertise for the project. This created a shared purpose about what they were building and why, which the Home Office said helped maintain a ruthless focus on creating a simple solution from those different perspectives.

In contrast, our work shows that government is often dealing with legacy operations that have layer upon layer of processes that have evolved over time – sometimes in response to the evolution of policy, and sometimes additional processes that have been added to deal with failure demand and backlogs. When organisations do not know how existing processes are connected and why, or there is a lack of alignment on the purpose of the service, it can be difficult to understand where and how to make changes that will result in improvements.

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Lesson

B.3 Service users expect a seamless right-first-time experience. You should understand how demand flows through the steps of the process and where there are pinch-points and dependencies.

- Why is this important? It helps to ensure work is done on time, complete and correct throughout the process, and there are no bottlenecks or unintended consequences elsewhere.
- Our work shows that, without a good understanding of what service users must do in completing a process and the effort it takes them, opportunities to improve their experience are missed. A good understanding of where problems occur can help to identify opportunities to improve services and make them more efficient, including by using digital solutions such as automation.

Case example B.3.1

Office for National Statistics (ONS): using real-time information to improve the flow of work and work allocation



Problem: ONS collects and publishes statistics related to the economy, population and society at national, regional and local levels. After COVID-19, ONS faced new challenges in collecting the amount of survey data it needs. For example, people have been less willing to be interviewed in their homes, increased use of smart home doorbells has created a new barrier to contacting people and collecting subsequent interviews, and there is a general survey apathy among citizens. As a result, the survey data ONS collected were becoming less representative and lacked diversity.



Approach: ONS has a fieldwork management allocation tool that tracks interviewers, but it was not making full use of the information it could provide to understand and fix its data collection problems. It started to interrogate the data to get a better understanding of the day-to-day reality of the job as a fieldworker – this provided insight on calling patterns, visits, bias in samples, coverage of hard-to-reach communities, and what days and times people were more productive. Its fieldworkers have an application on their phones to collect survey data in real time, which helps ONS analyse the impact of location. The management team had previously only used these data for internal boards but now shares them with fieldworkers so everyone can see what is happening across their own team.

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Benefit: ONS says the insight on work tasks and performance has helped it change the work allocation process. This has included interviewing at different times and on days, such as Saturdays, when respondents are more readily available. It understands better where its fieldworkers are working and has fewer under- or over-resourced locations. ONS says that using real-time insights to change work allocation ‘in the field’ has improved the flow of work through the process, and productivity. ONS says that the changes have reduced bias in the data and improved the amount and richness of the data collected. Additionally, ONS says that sharing the performance data has given fieldwork staff more autonomy and accountability for performance – for example, a sense of co-ownership of problems and solutions.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example B.3.2

Ministry of Defence: improving transparency on workflow to better prioritise and distribute tasks, and increase productivity



Problem: The Royal Navy’s workforce is spread across several locations, including the Devonport, Clyde and Portsmouth Naval Bases. Since COVID-19, people working in the various directorates of the Navy, as well as working in the office, spend more time working remotely or from home. Managing the teams’ workloads across different locations can be challenging.



Approach: The entire Royal Navy set out to increase transparency over work tasks, responsibilities and task progress to mitigate teams working in silos, distribute its workload better and improve productivity. It adapted ‘agile’ approaches from managing work in a project environment, and applied them to its work across all of its headquarters directorates.

Through planned fortnightly delivery periods, teams estimate their ‘activity points’ reflecting their available capacity and capability. This is after considering leave, training, reflection time, and the learning they have gained from previous delivery periods. At the start of each delivery period each team discusses and allocates ‘activity points’, equating to effort, to estimate task duration and complexity. This provides a better understanding of the time involved, including for preparation and follow-up. Teams allocate tasks to people based on their ‘availability points’ and expertise, using software to record the tasks, effort and their allocations. Everybody can see what work people have, no matter where they are based. The approach allows teams to see real-time task progress, and where there are blockers or where support is required.

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The Royal Navy teams have daily touchpoints to check on progress. These are normally short catchups as the real-time visibility of task completion means most time can be spent on reallocating work to priority tasks or to people who have spare capacity.



Benefit: The Royal Navy says that the new approach is enabling teams to understand and respond to demand in a more informed and efficient way, and to balance work between people more smoothly. Teams find it easier to allocate people to priority tasks that align with business objectives, and the overall visibility of tasks is encouraging individual ownership of output, leading to improvements to workflow and better productivity overall. The visibility of work, capacity and effort required for tasks means managers spend less time on monitoring progress and can have better discussions about overall demand, including being able to say no to additional work, and why.



Additional learning point: The new approach is encouraging a change in behaviour in the Royal Navy. By teams conducting their own estimation and allocation of points to effort and availability, team members are more actively thinking about the value that individual tasks create, rather than treating everything as equal priority and as ‘work that has to be done’.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

B.4 Service users have different needs. You need to know if your ways of working and processes are flexible enough to accommodate variation in user needs.

- Why is this important? You will be able to identify what work needs to flow through different processes. Straightforward types of demand will not end up stuck in bottlenecks behind more complex types, and you will be better able to service the diverse needs of people using the service. This will ensure the service works efficiently and provides a good-quality service for all users.
- Our work has shown that people with more complex needs may struggle to access government services that are designed with the ‘average’ user in mind. By building an understanding of different types of demand into their design, services can better accommodate user needs and are more productive.

Case example B.4

Department for Work & Pensions (DWP): understanding the diverse needs of your customer base to provide services that work for them

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Problem: DWP administers working-age, retirement, disability and ill-health benefits to more than 23 million people across Great Britain. The number and diversity of people using DWP's services makes it both more important and more challenging to understand how those people interact with services – for example, what their individual customer journeys are, what problems they encounter with DWP's processes, and how any changes will impact on people with their particular circumstances. Providing a one-size fits-all process will not meet the needs and circumstances of such a diverse set of people using DWP's services.



Approach: To better understand the needs of its diverse customer base, DWP has cultivated relationships with around 60 charities and other organisations representing customer groups including elderly people, blind people, homeless people, and people with learning disabilities. It holds an Operational Stakeholder Engagement forum with these stakeholder groups most months to communicate its plans, such as future changes to benefits or guidance, and gather feedback from them. For more targeted issues, DWP engages on an ad hoc basis with specific stakeholders. DWP meets with these stakeholders to discuss pain points in customer journeys and test improvements. It has invited other government departments, such as HM Revenue & Customs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, and the Scottish Government, to attend its stakeholder groups to work on issues where there is overlap.



Benefit: DWP believes that its routine collaborative contact with stakeholder organisations has improved services for customers. During the past year, DWP has conducted an increasing number of insight sessions with numerous organisations, which it says has led to more user-focused service improvements. Stakeholder feedback has informed policy changes, including on the overlap between tax credits and Universal Credit, which has led to changes in Universal Credit statements to help users understand them better. DWP has obtained valuable insights into problems customers face, and how people with particular challenges interact with DWP – for example, stakeholders have supported the development of training for staff within DWP's Child Maintenance Service who are dealing with victims of domestic abuse.



Additional learning point: DWP has stressed that developing a successful network of stakeholders to engage with takes considerable time and effort. DWP invites government organisations to get in touch with it to discuss how best to use its established forum or best practice in setting up their own.

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Lesson

B.5 Make it easy for users to give you the information you need to provide a good service for them. This will allow you to complete work faster and right first time.

- Why is this important? It will enable you to improve the speed and quality of services. People will not waste their time providing things you do not need, and you will not waste time chasing things you do not get. People in other parts of your organisation or in other government organisations will provide consistent and timely inputs to ensure you meet the goals of the process.
- Our work has shown that complicated processes and guidance that is hard to understand make it difficult for customers to access services and cause delays when departments must ask customers for more information. Where it is done well, digitising paper-based application processes can make services both more efficient and easier for customers to use.

Case example B.5.1

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO): using artificial intelligence to reduce demand in contact centres for consulate enquiries and provide better service



Problem: FCDO offers support to British nationals who get into difficulty while living or travelling abroad. Of the nearly half-million enquiries it receives each year, ranging from subjects such as lost passports to more sensitive and complex issues involving arrest or harm to the individual, around 100,000 were written enquiries. People looking for assistance found it difficult to find information within 1,500 gov. uk webpages and would instead call the consular contact centre. FCDO wanted its people working in the contact centre to spend more time assisting people in emergency situations requiring one-to-one support. It set out to improve its online support, rather than rely on British people needing to get in touch with the contact centre.



Approach: FCDO decided to pilot an artificial intelligence (AI) tool on its 'Contact FCDO' webpage to answer people's questions for support with more personalised information. It chose an older, previous generation AI tool, which FCDO says is cost-effective and good enough for its needs, and a low-risk approach to deploying it. When people ask a question, the tool uses a curated knowledge bank of information controlled by FCDO, rather than a higher-risk approach of generating a reply based on searching the internet. The AI tool provides consistency by using the templates curated by the consular contact centre. For emergencies or sensitive cases, people are given a telephone number and advised to call the consular contact centre.

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Benefits: FCDO says that, since introducing the AI tool, written enquiries handled by the consular contact centre have dropped by 60%, a drop of more than 50,000 enquiries per year. It says that the same responses to enquiries are now instant instead of taking around two days, and there has been no increase in calls or complaints about the service. It says there is less failure demand, such as having to deal with non-FCDO enquiries, and fewer written enquiries relating to visas and passports. FCDO says this has freed up contact centre staff to deal with more complex and urgent cases.



Additional learning point: FCDO recognises that the skills and capability required for good operational delivery are changing. For example, people in its consular contact centre need to be able to deal with more sensitive and complex enquiries. The range of roles is changing too – FCDO needs people who know how to manage an AI tool, including developing and curating content for it.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example B.5.2

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO): improving the quality of guidance for customers to reduce overall demand



Problem: The approach to whether evidence can be obtained from a witness overseas, as part of a UK civil court case, has been historically governed by the Hague Convention on the Taking of Evidence Abroad in Civil or Commercial Matters 1970. However, a gap was identified in that, in the UK's view, the Hague Convention did not cover cases with an administrative tribunal element, such as those relating to immigration. FCDO took ownership of a new process to deal with this gap, but found it was inundated with enquiries – it expected 200–300 a year but was receiving 350 each month. Its small team of six people was overwhelmed.



Approach: FCDO recognised that the number of enquiries it was dealing with was caused by a lack of clarity for service users about what the different rules were in different countries. It collaborated with the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office on a different approach, which began by sending a note to all 197 countries with whom the UK had diplomatic relations, asking if they would have a diplomatic objection to someone giving evidence. After a year of chasing responses, FCDO gathered the evidence it had and published a list on its website of all 197 countries, stating whether they objected, did not object, or had not replied.

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Benefit: Because of this clearer guidance, the number of enquiries reduced to 140 per month. FCDO went from having someone monitoring the inbox all day to just one to two hours per day. It could release people to do other work and no longer had to borrow staff from other parts of FCDO. FCDO thinks that further analysis of the nature of requests that are coming in will allow it to continue reducing the amount of demand.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

B.6 Service users expect good services, and good services require capable people. The people providing the service must have the skills and tools they need to do their jobs.

- Why is this important? People get the same levels of service, no matter who provides it, if staff have easy access to the right tools and best ways of working. Everyone knows who does what to meet demand in the most effective way and ensure the best possible service.
- Our work has shown that, unless staff are given the training, guidance and reliable systems they need to do their jobs, they can make mistakes, and customers may suffer from inconsistent service. Complex rules also mean that new staff will need more support and more time to become fully productive.

Case example B.6

Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA): building models to forecast and understand demand and why changes occur



Problem: DVLA is responsible for issuing vehicle registrations and driving licences. Demand for these services had typically followed cyclical patterns – seasonal demand for new car registrations and predictable year-based renewals for driving licences that expire after one to five or 10 years. The COVID-19 pandemic led to more complicated demand patterns and backlogs. For example, there was a legislative extension to the validity of all driving licences during the pandemic, which has impacted future demand patterns for drivers renewing their licence at 70 years of age and those with restricted period licences as a result of medical conditions that need monitoring. DVLA needed to find a way to manage the backlog it had at that time and to better forecast future demand so it could provide a more efficient service.

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Approach: DVLA set out to modernise how it forecasts demand for driving licence and vehicle registration services, making it less ‘experience-based’ and more scientific. It employed data scientists to build a demand-forecasting model and incorporated factors that influence demand for these services. This included life-event based factors such as the number of people reaching the legal minimum age to drive, birth rates and death rates. It then worked on continuously improving the model by adding other real factors such as the impact of net immigration rates, decisions about service priorities, and DVLA’s communication about its services that could cause a spike in demand. The model also accounts for changes in the number of customers who apply for services by channel (online or by post). The data scientists test the assumptions in the forecasting model with operational staff and use their input to refine the model.



Benefit: DVLA says that combining its forecasting work with real-time data on capacity and demand produces a clear picture of what it needs to achieve in its driving licence and vehicle registration services and what the impact will be on the work staff need to do. It says this helps it clear work right first time and spend less time dealing with follow-up contact when applications do not process quickly, such as people calling to ask about their case. DVLA can now use its forecasts to investigate why capacity or demand is under or over the forecast, enabling conversations with operations about the reasons for the difference – which could be mis-reporting available staff time or a problem with the model’s assumptions – which it can use to continuously improve the model. DVLA brings together its forecasts for individual services at group level, which it says helps it understand and make decisions about resource allocation across different workstreams.



Additional learning point: Testing and refining the model on an ongoing basis with operational staff builds in critical day-to-day service knowledge and experience. DVLA says this close working gives operational teams confidence in the insight produced and provides the basis for continuous improvement by adding to or adjusting the factors in its models.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

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Why this matters

1.15 The benefits of getting this right:

- The service for users improves over time and you meet your organisation's objectives more often too.
- People who manage and provide the service have evidence about what is causing problems for service users and can prioritise what to fix.
- Work is done right first time more often, which means services are more efficient.

1.16 What it takes: Using information to improve is about having the right data at the right time to inform decisions about how to improve services. You need data about how well your services are performing, including 'lead' measures that tell you what is about to happen rather than just 'lag' measures that tell you what has happened. You also need the capability to analyse those data.

1.17 What is happening if you are doing this well: Your information tells you whether user expectations are met and what is happening at stages throughout the process, as well as what output is produced. Process information is used to spot patterns that tell you if issues are one-off or repeating. This tells you what to change and how to improve the service. People are using measures to spot emerging issues and anticipate their likely impact on performance, rather than reacting after issues occur. They focus on improving service quality routinely instead of simply relying on quality assurance checks of work after it is done. Services improve by addressing root causes of problems for service users instead of implementing temporary workarounds for the symptoms of problems.

1.18 An effective management and leadership environment: People must have the information they need to perform their role in the organisation. If people leading an organisation, running a directorate or managing daily processes are all using the same metrics, then they are unlikely to have everything they need to make the decisions their role requires. For example, equip the people managing services with skills to analyse and understand variation in process performance. This allows them to identify and respond to different types of problems effectively. Real-time data should inform decision making. Those who use data to make decisions should be given the statistical tools, techniques and capabilities to do so.

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Our lessons and case examples

Lesson

C.1 **Service users judge performance based on what matters to them.** You need measures that tell you if you are meeting their expectations.

- Why is this important? Users get a better, more efficient service and you have fewer complaints. Your measures help you identify problems and act when you are not providing a good service for specific groups of people.
- Our work shows that organisations often lack information on the different needs of service users, and how well they are meeting those needs, which can have considerable negative consequences for those service users. However, we have seen some good examples of organisations improving their data on customer satisfaction and variations in outcomes to provide better services.

Case example C.1

NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE&I): using daily data on geographical and user demographics to decide how to improve service uptake



Problem: NHSE&I's overall objective for its COVID-19 vaccination programme was to roll out COVID-19 vaccines safely and securely to the maximum number of eligible individuals within England. The COVID-19 vaccine rollout programme was one that had to be delivered with speed in a landscape of considerable uncertainty. The programme initially assumed that 75% of people would take up a COVID-19 vaccine offer; previous (non-COVID) vaccination programmes had shown that uptake varied for different groups and in complex ways.



Approach: NHSE&I combined pre-existing data (for example, GP and hospital patient data) with new data collected through the COVID-19 vaccination programme in real time. It enabled daily analysis by the programme's leaders of vaccination delivery and uptake by site, region and local area, and individual characteristics such as ethnicity and priority groups for vaccination.



Benefit: Analysis of these data allowed both central and local bodies to understand quickly and in detail differences in uptake. The programme and other parts of government undertook a range of actions to try to increase uptake of COVID-19 vaccinations in different groups, such as producing a range of general and targeted material, sharing good practice between regions and local areas; and cross-government communication campaigns focused on groups that were more likely to be vaccine-resistant or hesitant. Inequalities persisted, but they could have been still greater if actions such as these had not been taken.

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Note

- 1 Since the date of the original publication of this case example, it was announced that NHS England, which included NHS Improvement, is to be brought into the Department of Health & Social Care.

Source: National Audit Office, *How to improve operational services*, February 2023

Lesson

C.2 **Service users will complain or chase progress when problems occur.** You need measures that help you understand where and why service performance is failing.

- Why is this important? You understand the quality of what is being done, not just the numbers being achieved. You can track and act on problems as they occur, or even ahead of time, and provide a better service at lower cost. You can reduce failure demand by helping you get work right first time more often.
- Our work has shown that understanding the causes of avoidable customer contact, complaints and concerns is key to improving services. We have also seen how changing the way staff performance is measured, away from a focus on target numbers towards providing good quality service, can help to identify and address issues for service users.

Case example C.2

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO): using data analysis to identify where problems are happening in end-to-end processes



Problem: After the creation of FCDO, which merged the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, there were backlogs in its human resources processes. These resulted in poor service for its internal customers. The process of appointing people to overseas roles was affected by significant delays, and it was taking too long to recruit and onboard new staff.



Approach: FCDO adopted a data-driven approach to identify problems in the process of appointing people to overseas roles, and used that to develop solutions. It examined the nature of queries it was receiving and then focused on improving the support for staff. FCDO made guidance more accessible, including introducing a kick-off call to explain induction steps and timelines, and a Microsoft Teams channel to share relevant guidance with everyone who needed it. For recruiting new staff, FCDO captured data on what was happening at all stages of the recruitment process (for example, advertising, sifting, interviewing) which showed bottlenecks it could address via better distribution of resources, and by running time-consuming steps (such as obtaining security clearance) concurrently. Its data enabled it to identify problems with different types of roles, and within directorates.

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Benefit: FCDO says its use of data has led to significant, lasting improvements. By improving the support and guidance for staff, the number of outstanding queries for overseas appointments decreased from 1,710 in 2023 to 56 in 2025. Its work to identify bottlenecks in the recruitment process has enabled it to address problems which were causing delays and failed recruitment exercises.



Additional learning point: While this case example is about internal customers, the same principles apply to external customers. Understanding the specific needs of different customer groups can help tailor support and reduce inefficiencies. Measuring the performance of a service right the way through, rather than just at the end, can highlight where problems are occurring and enable them to be addressed before they impact on customers.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

C.3 Identifying and fixing issues that cause your service users problems requires specific operational capabilities. You need to give people providing services the skills to make decisions using performance information and support them to do it.

- Why is this important? People have the skills and tools they need to identify and respond to different types of problems effectively. You create a working environment that encourages openness, curiosity, innovation and challenging current thinking, to benefit service users.
- Our work shows that not being able to access or interrogate data effectively is a barrier to effectively managing services, preventing a true understanding of how well the service is delivering for its users. Where the capabilities are built to do the right sort of analysis, such as forecasting how demand will flow end to end through services, it provides a solid foundation for making the right decisions about how to meet that demand.

Case example C.3

Ministry of Justice (MoJ): involving operational colleagues in forecasting work can improve your ability to meet demand for services



Problem: In 2024, there was a serious risk that England and Wales were going to run out of prison places. This would have significant knock-on consequences: police would be unable to hold those arrested and courts would be unable to sentence criminals. MoJ needed to accurately model the future prison population and take action to avoid the public losing confidence in the entire criminal justice system.

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Approach: MoJ told us that analysts and policy leads worked together with operational leads to produce robust forecasts that reflected the reality of what was likely to happen. They forecasted the supply of prison places, such as when a new prison would be likely to become available, or when essential maintenance would need to take place which would reduce capacity. MoJ described how it modelled demand for prison places several months ahead, for example considering the impact of trends, increased court productivity and the impact of new policies. It also closely tracked the short-term consequences of events such as riots in summer, which meant a sudden spike in arrests by police. MoJ told us that the data were updated regularly, at the pace required to inform weekly decisions.



Benefit: MoJ said that the amount of internal challenge and scrutiny of the data meant that forecasts of prison capacity were reliable – the actual data were always between the upper and lower limits of forecasts – which meant that the forecasts were routinely accepted by everyone in the organisation, as well as MoJ's ministers. MoJ said this provided a trusted data source that could be used to devise and implement the SDS40 prisoner release scheme, which meant conversations focused on what action to take, not on whether the figures were reliable.¹

Note

- ¹ The SDS40 prisoner release scheme brought forward the release date for prisoners on standard determinate sentences and is discussed in more detail in case example A.2

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

C.4 Improving the service user's experience requires the right people to have the right information at the right time. You need to routinely challenge the information you collect and report, and whether it is helping you to make decisions in a timely way that improve service performance.

- Why is this important? People have the information they need to do their jobs and can share information or escalate current or future problems to others. You adjust what information you collect for the current context and your users to ensure you are always focused on your priorities for improvements. You have balanced performance information across the end-to-end service, including on quality, cost and output, to make evidence-based decisions about how to change services.

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- Our work shows that it is important to understand and learn from what has worked or has not worked previously to take better informed decisions about how to improve service for users. Identifying and addressing issues with the quality of data, such as through better data sharing or making it more real-time, can help you to make decisions quickly in response to issues as well as to anticipate them before they arise.

Case example C.4

Home Office: making better use of data to use available resources efficiently, provide better outcomes for service users and reduce avoidable costs



Problem: While their asylum claims are being processed, those entitled to accommodation are housed first in ‘initial’ accommodation followed by ‘dispersal’ accommodation (typically houses, houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) or flats in residential areas in local authorities) as their claim progresses. Due to the number of asylum seekers and limited number of initial and dispersal accommodation beds, a significant proportion of the asylum population are housed in ‘contingency’ accommodation, which are mainly hotels. The use of hotels comes at a considerable cost to the Home Office. Rising numbers of asylum claims meant that there was pressure on the available estate, and a financial necessity to ensure that it made the most efficient use of it, while still providing safe, habitable and fit-for-purpose accommodation. Available data suggested that there was scope to improve occupancy rates, but the data were not good enough to tell the Home Office how to do it.



Approach: The Home Office launched two projects which involved improving and then using data, and working with providers to maximise the number of usable beds. For contingency accommodation, it sought to maximise available space – for example by converting double hotel rooms to twin rooms, and other large spaces (such as conference rooms) into dormitories. This required the Home Office to gather detailed information on bed spaces and room-sharing constraints (such as medical and safeguarding issues), and analyse data on empty rooms, enabling conversations with providers about bringing them back into use. For dispersal accommodation, the Home Office worked with providers to map the estate using a digital tool to visualise available space in real time and optimise its usage. A performance mechanism was implemented to quickly turn around beds that were out of action, for example due to repairs. The Home Office has also shared more data about demand, such as family sizes, to help suppliers maximise occupancy. The new approach has meant that the Home Office has taken a greater role in matching people to accommodation spaces than was anticipated in the contract as originally drafted.

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Benefits: The improved understanding of performance resulted in financial benefits. The Home Office says it created 11,800 contingency accommodation bed spaces, saving £76 million by January 2024. The dispersal accommodation project facilitated a shift from ‘pushing’ demand to providers to identifying available accommodation and ‘pulling’ a suitable match to accommodate. For example, if a house that could safely accommodate a family of five became available, the Home Office identified a family of five to fill it. In April 2025, we reported that the new approach has helped providers increase occupancy from 75% to 80% between November 2023 and June 2024, avoiding £109 million being spent on hotels.¹ The Home Office says that, since that date, occupancy has risen to 85%, bringing the total avoided cost to £221 million.

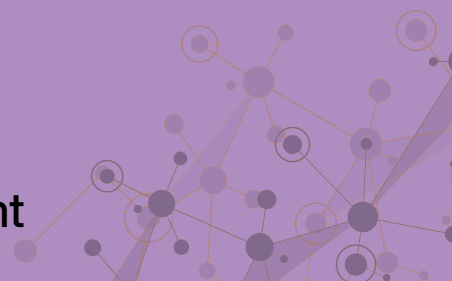
Note

¹ Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Home Office’s asylum accommodation contracts*, Session 2024-25, HC 874, National Audit Office, May 2025

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

D

Embedding systematic innovation and improvement



Why this matters

1.19 The benefits of getting this right:

- The insight and expertise of everybody involved in providing the service is used to make changes that continuously improve services.
- You provide better services for users by spotting, prioritising and fixing those problems which have the biggest impact on their experience.

1.20 What it takes: Giving people in your organisation the capabilities, methods, support and time needed to make services better for users. Encouraging them to talk openly about problems to solve, and to raise ideas about improvements. Taking well-managed risks to achieve better service delivery and quality or user experience, or to reduce costs. Making informed decisions about what needs to improve which consider potential impacts elsewhere in the end-to-end service or wider system.

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1.21 What is happening if you do this well: Learning and improvement is embedded in how all teams think and work. Your improvements to services combine daily incremental improvements and bigger step changes in how services are provided. Problems that re-occur are solved so people do not waste time dealing with the same issues or on workaround processes. You use the knowledge and ideas of the people who know best how the service works when considering what to change and how. Teams that provide services are trusted to make changes routinely, and, when processes change, everyone is aware and using the new best way of doing things. People are encouraged to speak up and to try new ways of working without fear of the consequences for them. People are learning from and collaborating with people in other parts of the service, inside and outside your organisation. You take opportunities to learn from and adapt existing practice for your context, such as from other teams and organisations that have solved similar problems.

1.22 An effective management and leadership environment: Some of the most successful organisations credit their success to a working environment that encourages openness, innovation, and challenge of current thinking. Leaders should ask what barriers and problems people need help with to improve how they work. If improving is a priority, then show it by making clear that spending time on improving the organisation is as valuable as providing services. Senior leaders should see failure as an opportunity to learn rather than an exercise in sharing out blame.

Our lessons and case examples

Lesson

D.1 Service users have invaluable insight on how to improve services. You need ways of understanding what the problems and opportunities are from their perspective.

- Why is this important? You have all the information you need, at the right time, to tell you what your priority problems are, and can take timely action to fix them. You get the perspectives of people using the service, and your colleagues providing it, on what to improve.
- Our work shows that getting and responding to feedback from service users, for example from stakeholder groups, is a good way of identifying current and possible future problems, such as when new ways of working are being tried or planned. Not systematically identifying and responding to inefficiencies in processes can lead to service users experiencing unnecessary delays.

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Case example D.1.1

Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA): challenging assumptions about users' preferences to inform service design



Problem: Professional lorry and bus drivers are not legally allowed to drive their vehicles unless they have installed a tachograph card, which records driving time, speed and distance travelled. DVLA issues around 150,000 tachograph cards each year. The process was paper-based, and it typically took up to five working days for a driver to get their tachograph card after DVLA received their postal application. DVLA recognised that a digital application process could provide drivers with their cards more quickly and reduce its own costs, but did not know whether lorry drivers would use a digital system.



Approach: DVLA set out to test its assumptions about whether customers would use a digital service for tachographs and what the benefits might be. This included testing with independent professional drivers and those who work for haulage and bus companies. DVLA's initial customer research showed that, while a proportion of drivers would not use a digital system, most haulage companies would. Haulage companies liked the idea of a digital system as it would keep their drivers legal and 'on the road'. They were willing to show drivers how to complete a digital application when they came into the haulage yard to collect a vehicle.

The insight gave DVLA confidence to start building and testing a digital service. It went to lorry parks, hotels and service stations to get drivers to test the service, and visited hauliers. DVLA also invited in drivers to its in-house test lab where it observed how people used the service – including what device they used to access the service, the pages they visited, and whether they typed the expected content into the application right first time. The insight from testing was built into subsequent iterations of the service. For example, people frequently missed a notice about impending driving licence renewals, so the live version made this notice more prominent.



Benefit: Within three to four months of launching the service, 80% of applications were submitted online, and by early 2025 86% of drivers were using the digital service. The digital service had a 96% satisfaction rate in 2024-25, but DVLA still offers a paper-based service for those who wish to use it. DVLA's transition to a largely digital solution resulted in efficiency savings by reducing the time spent checking and resolving application issues and by lowering postal correspondence costs for the customer.

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Additional learning point: DVLA feels that gathering insight upfront, and in a very open way, meant that it did not close off its thinking or make assumptions about what was important to different people involved in the end-to-end process. Crucially, DVLA discovered that the end-to-end value for the process was part of ‘enabling transportation’ rather than simply ‘getting a tachograph’. This challenged the assumption that lorry driver reluctance was the main barrier to any benefits of a digital service when a key demand and service user need was actually to meet the haulage companies’ interests.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example D.1.2

Registers of Scotland (RoS): designing self-serve processes around customer needs



Problem: Providing copies of deeds is a crucial part of the conveyancing process in Scotland, but it was a labour-intensive and inefficient process. In 2016, RoS had a team of nine people doing this customer service, which involved a member of staff going on a bus every day to its sister organisation, National Records of Scotland, with a backpack to physically obtain the deeds it did not hold. As a result, RoS was often well outside its three-day service level agreement, which slowed down the conveyancing process and caused stress for customers. RoS wanted to reduce the cost of the process and make it better and more reliable for customers. Having already invested in digitising its records, RoS had an ambition that customers could self-serve deeds.



Approach: First, RoS worked to understand what its service was like from a customer perspective, to identify where it could be improved. This worked significantly by reducing the touchpoints in the internal process from 42 to just 18. RoS then worked on building the digital service. RoS worked with customers to ensure it made no assumptions about their needs and that the new self-serve process worked for them, identifying that it would still need a non-digital route for some types of demand. RoS launched a beta service for business customers, with the ambition of extending this to all citizens, and continued to make iterative improvements after the go-live date. It invested in customer awareness, including using a customer relationship manager to improve uptake of the service, and worked with universities so that people doing law degrees knew how to use the service as soon as they started work.

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Benefit: The staff numbers required to support this service on a daily basis have reduced from nine to three full-time equivalents. Customers received immediate service, so breaching service level agreements was no longer a concern, and customer satisfaction scores independently captured by the Institute of Customer Service reached 83.0 (out of 100) in July 2024, higher than the civil service average. Now, 82% of customers self-serve deeds and customer effort scores for all RoS's services have improved. Even the 5% of customers who needed extra support received a response within 24 hours. RoS says that orders and income increased by 59% and believes that this is because the self-serve process is so easy to use that customers are identifying and ordering extra deeds, which they would not have done before.



Additional learning point: RoS is self-funded, which it finds beneficial. It says that self-funding allows it to take a longer-term perspective; it has moved from a one- to three-year business plan to five years. It also has the freedom to reinvest the fees it generates into developing its services. RoS says that not having to manage year to year means it can commit to projects, like self-serve deeds, that have longer – three-, four- or five-year – payback periods.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

D.2 Improving services for users requires specific problem-solving and operational improvement capabilities. You need to give people the skills, tools and time to improve services.

- Why is this important? You will back up your ambition to improve how you provide services by giving people the knowledge and skills to do it. People will have the time, space and leadership support to enable them to get involved.
- Our work has shown the importance of clear approaches to improvement that everyone understands, such as via test and learn, or evaluation processes. It has also shown that improving services can be made more difficult when the existing systems and tools are not up to the task.

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Case example D.2.1

Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA): providing approaches and supporting people to continuously improve services



Problem: DVLA had tried adopting different top-down approaches to continuous improvement within its operational teams, but none had lasting success. Over time, people tended to only focus on their daily tasks, rather than problem-solving and improvement work that might identify process efficiencies or improve customer and staff experiences.



Approach: DVLA decided to build an approach to continuous improvement that provided structure and support for operational teams, but which encouraged them to take ownership for doing it. It changed its approach from one-off top-down projects to focusing on coaching people in how to develop ideas for continuous improvement. The intention was to create an environment that led to more organic idea generation.

DVLA created a role within each operational team to champion improvement work and idea generation. A central improvement team can help operational teams adapt the improvement approach. When people suggest ideas, they can get fully involved in implementing them – the central team can train staff in tools and techniques if they want to learn them. If the idea is not something the originator can do themselves, they are regularly updated on progress or why an idea is not taken forward. An overview group monitors progress on all ideas, and the DVLA Executive Team gets involved in those that have strategic implications.

DVLA encourages and makes the importance of continuous improvement visible in several ways. Continuous improvement is part of the 'recognising excellence' theme within DVLA's performance management system; there are financial rewards of £250 to £650 for ideas that result in savings; and DVLA promotes ideas raised on its intranet pages.



Benefit: DVLA says that over 2,000 ideas have been generated since it adopted its new approach to continuous improvement, which have generated £3.68 million in savings. The ideas range from small changes to major projects. Examples include extending the time customers have for providing input on webpages before they time out. An additional five seconds meant customers could complete forms right first time, were less frustrated, and reduced DVLA's effort dealing with follow-up calls and complaints. Large cost savings include £2.17 million from switching to more economical mail options.

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Additional learning point: DVLA says that, without senior and middle management support for its continuous improvement approach, there is still a risk that it dies off in those managers' areas and beyond. DVLA says that leadership support is still a challenge for sustaining continuous improvement and that their directors' support for the approach is making a big difference.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example D.2.2

HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) – building daily management behaviours that support continuous operational improvement



Problem: HMRC has had to deal with increasing customer demand for its services, budget pressures and disruption to its operating context such as COVID-19 and EU Exit. HMRC has addressed these challenges in several ways, including by offering new digital solutions and automation. However, the cumulative demands on people dealing with customers and with the amount of change have been significant. HMRC felt that it was not doing enough to support people in front-line leadership roles with the capabilities they needed to manage teams well in this new and evolving operating context.



Approach: HMRC implemented a capability building programme for team leaders. It created a programme of practical learning and development that covered capabilities such as coaching, time management, running team meetings, visual management of process performance, and root cause problem solving – things leaders use every day. The programme's focus is on team leaders who typically have 12 to 15 direct reports, and group leaders who manage those team leaders within HMRC's Customer Services Group (CSG). The initial part of the three-phase programme consisted of five workshops spread over 15 weeks, delivered in person, that were customised and jointly led by local leads in each team's location. This ensured that the content offered reflected the local context, like the language used for common activities such as daily meetings. After each workshop, team leaders were given a skill to practise, with coaches available for support. Following the 15-week training, sustainment leads observed and coached team leaders as they used their new skills. These observations were used alongside a survey to determine if teams could progress to the third phase, in which they broadly take on responsibility for maintaining the culture themselves, with support available from central coaches. The programme has now been rolled out to nearly 2,000 team leaders across CSG, and HMRC is tracking progress on embedding behaviour change via a dashboard. This is informed by surveys to understand how people rate and use the initial training, as well as observing practices in individual business areas.

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Benefit: HMRC is taking a qualitative approach to assessing benefits, and its evidence suggests that the programme could be contributing a 5% to 10% increase in customer satisfaction, alongside increases in colleague engagement. It also says that it is seeing more ideas for continuous improvement, and an accumulation of small gains, as people feel it is in their gift to make changes. In addition, HMRC is judging change in behaviours and the overall culture by gathering and sharing service excellence stories such as examples of people fixing problems and raising ideas for improvement.



Additional learning point: HMRC's experience is that achieving the desired change in behaviours is most tricky in its middle management grades. Its people in these roles are often used to managing team and individual performance by concentrating on counting outputs produced. If people in these roles do not practise the behaviour-based changes expected of the programme, then it is less likely to succeed overall. HMRC considers this is where its senior team can make a difference by reinforcing new behaviours in the questions that they ask of their teams.

Note

1 This case example also illustrates the management and leadership characteristics described in paragraph 1.22.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

D.3 Service improvements can come from people anywhere in the organisation. You need to make it possible for everyone to contribute.

- Why is this important? Your understanding of problems and ideas on improving are informed by a diversity of knowledge, experience and perspectives from people in different roles across the organisation. Everyone is invested in making things better – for the service user and the people providing the service.
- Our work has shown that getting feedback from staff (as well as service users) can help organisations prioritise changes and consider possible impacts on the efficiency and effectiveness of services. Unless you consult with staff in all potential parts of end-to-end services, a routine change in one part of the process can have negative consequences for you or a service user elsewhere.

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Case example D.3.1

Home Office: involving a wide range of perspectives and expertise in designing services, and establishing ownership of end-to-end ‘customer experience’, to identify and fix service issues



Problem: The Home Office had to design and implement the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme as the new mechanism for how non-visa nationals must apply to come to the UK. The project had several complexities, for example it had to integrate with airline carriers’ digital systems, and the service would be used by around 30 million people who have never had to go through such a process to enter the UK.



Approach: The Home Office formed a multi-disciplinary team with policy, operational, digital and project delivery expertise to ensure it considered all possible issues. It learned from its experience in implementing the new EU Settlement Scheme. It re-used the chip-checking technology and worked on creating a shared endeavour within the multi-disciplinary team. As the service went live, the Home Office adopted a ‘service management’ approach which gave a ‘product owner’ accountability for the end-to-end customer experience and for fixing problems that were identified in live operations.



Benefit: The Home Office designed a service that is fully automated for 97% of users that can be accessed through a digital app. Where decision making cannot be automated for the remaining 3% of applicants (such as due to the use of esoteric credit cards, or passports with a chip in an unusual location), the issues are picked up by customer insight data and feedback. The Home Office says that the service management approach is focusing product owners on the customer experience and giving operational teams the licence to fix problems. The Home Office says it is proud of launching such a big scheme smoothly and achieving such high levels of customer satisfaction.



Additional learning point: The Home Office recognises that there are common principles of good operational practice which apply regardless of the service it is delivering – for example, relating to how demand is managed. It has set up an internal caseworking community of practice and is now working on a set of operating principles for high-performing caseworking operations. When finalised, this is likely to be of interest to many other organisations across government.

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Case example D.3.2

Department for Work & Pensions (DWP): improving customer service performance by focusing on employee capability and engagement



Problem: DWP in Scotland faced significant challenges in employee engagement in its jobcentres, with scores notably poorer than the rest of Great Britain. The leadership team for the jobcentre service (the Service) wanted to understand and fix the root causes of the low scores and create a workplace that would help people who want to do front-line service to excel. A survey of the 3,000 people working in the Service identified issues with poor communication and people lacking confidence in their job roles, and an element of bullying and harassment.



Approach: The leadership team focused on two areas. It spent time understanding how confident people were in their roles, what the issues were, and their individual learning needs, and created custom training programmes for each employee. Middle management received specific training to change how they managed their teams through coaching and confidence building. This changed the management approach from holding people to account for individual task output to supporting them to achieve outcomes for customers and making the workplace a great place to work. Alongside the emphasis on training, the 30-strong leadership team spent time improving engagement across the Service. Each member of the leadership team shares visits to the 90 jobcentres and five service centres each quarter to gather feedback from employees. They spend time sitting with staff and talking with them informally to understand what is on their mind and what would make a difference. The staff in the jobcentre are encouraged to fix issues that are in their control, and those that are not are escalated on their behalf for help. Sometimes issues cannot be addressed directly – such as pay – but the leadership team will explain why, and what is or is not possible. To keep momentum on engagement with the whole Service, in addition to the bi-monthly all staff call, there are three informal hourly calls a month hosted by the Director or one of her two deputies where anyone can join and talk about whatever is on their mind, and the One Service Scotland Awards once a month recognise outstanding contributions by members of staff, culminating in an end-of-year awards ceremony and celebration.

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Benefit: DWP Scotland feels that it successfully improved employee engagement and created a more positive work environment by addressing long-standing issues and encouraging a culture of open communication and trust. It took time, as people were initially less open to raising issues, and improvement was not immediate. However, staff engagement scores increased by 5% in the second year of the new engagement approach and by a further 4% in the third year. Service performance also improved across the jobcentres. In the same two-year period, the number of customers not attending appointments decreased from 23.5% to 13.7%, and failure to attend work search reviews decreased from 18.6% to 11.8%. Overall customer satisfaction rates increased by 8% over the two-year period.



Additional learning point: Building engagement is not a 'once and done' programme, and it can take time to start seeing the changes have an effect. Consistent communication and physical visits to sites without a strict agenda can help develop trust and engagement over time. It is important that difficult issues such as behavioural issues are dealt with, and seen to be dealt with.

Note

1 This case example illustrates the management and leadership characteristics described in paragraph 1.22.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Case example D.3.3

Department for Work & Pensions (DWP): giving 'a voice and a choice' to operational leaders about changes impacting their areas of work



Problem: In any given week there can be a number of changes in DWP which have an impact on front-line operational staff. These changes can come from a number of sources – for example, from policy, data security or operations itself. These changes all take time to implement and take front-line staff away from providing services to customers, and the cumulative impact can be difficult to deal with. Consultation with directors in operational areas confirmed that there is too much change on a weekly basis and not enough time to absorb it.

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Approach: DWP implemented a more rigorous approach which involved operations staff more actively in approving changes. A new gateway was created which assessed the implications of each change, including the opportunity cost, earlier on in the process. The gateway requires change managers to answer questions against a set of change quality standards, which include assessing the impact on people and productivity (for example, what time commitment is needed from people, and how many calls will not be answered or tasks not cleared?). A senior decision-making forum of operational leaders is then used to test whether operations want the change, and when to schedule it. The approach provides operations with a ‘voice and a choice’, creating a realistic view of its ability to absorb the change.



Benefits: Operational teams feel that the gateway process means that they are now heard in a way that they were not previously, with discussions focusing on their capacity to absorb change and to do it well. DWP says that one proposed change, which would have required 15 minutes of effort from all operational staff, was initially delayed and then delivered to fewer people and in a different way, as it was identified as only relevant for some business areas, saving a total of 2,400 full-time equivalent days of time. The new approach to change also seems more liked by staff, with a four percentage point increase in the most recent people survey score for how change is managed.



Additional learning point: DWP now realises that the gateway process asks for too much information from change managers – for example, the gateway includes many questions as well as fraud and error impact and equality impact assessments. It also asks for some information too early. DWP is now streamlining the approach, including assessing what information is realistic for change managers to have, and by when.

Source: National Audit Office workshop and follow-up discussion

Lesson

D.4 Opportunities and learning about how to improve can come from other organisations, including those involved in your end-to-end service or similar services. You need to fix problems with others and share learning.

- Why is this important? You can address problems where multiple teams, including in multiple organisations, have a role in providing the end-to-end service. You learn from people in other organisations who can bring a different perspective, from how people provide similar services and from how people approach managing and improving different services – including adapting their innovations for your context.

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- Our work has found good examples of organisations learning from previous schemes in their own organisation, or in other parts of government, about what has and has not worked. We have also highlighted the benefits of using external expertise to bring greater diversity or perspectives. However, we have also seen where obvious opportunities have been missed to learn from other organisations about how to cater for the needs of a shared user group.

Case example D.4

Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC): using formal and informal groups to learn and implement improvements in end-to-end services



Problem: The Levelling Up Fund was a large fund that was jointly managed by DLUHC, HM Treasury and the Department for Transport. The first round of applications for funding was in 2021, with a total of £1.7 billion allocated. After the first round of funding, the departments recognised that there was an opportunity to learn and make improvements to how applicants submitted their bids for round two in 2022, and how officials processed them.



Approach: The lessons learned from an after-activity review were combined with lessons that had been shared from other application assessment processes within the departments. This helped the departments identify areas to focus on improving, including technical guidance for applicants, a digital portal for applications, financial due diligence, and joint ways of working across departments. Informal working groups reporting to a senior board were set up to progress these areas, with representatives from across the three departments.



Benefit: Representatives from DLUHC told us that this approach to improvement facilitated the sharing of learning. It enabled the departments to break down the work into manageable chunks and allocate responsibility for it. It allowed them to bring in appropriate expertise from outside, such as digital capability.

Note

- 1 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities was renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government in July 2024.

Source: National Audit Office, How to improve operational services, February 2023

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Part Two

Government's approach to improving operational capability

The Operational Delivery Profession's responsibilities

2.1 The civil service categorises its workforce into 31 'professions' which group people with similar expertise together. Professions focus on developing the capabilities of staff, with profession-specific skills, and providing them with career development opportunities. The Operational Delivery Profession (ODP) has this role but does not have the additional roles that come with being a government function. Functions have the authority to develop and mandate standards to use across government.

2.2 Later in this section we cover ODP's strategy for 2025–2028, which sets out an intention to move into some areas that are typically the role of functions.

The size and make-up of ODP

2.3 ODP is the largest of the government professions. It has over 290,000 members, making up more than half the civil service workforce. ODP professionals either work directly with the public, or support colleagues who do. ODP's members in public-facing roles work in prisons, issue passports, process benefits claims, work in jobcentres, deal with planning applications, and process people at the UK Border, as well as in many more varied roles.

2.4 ODP's members work in 37 organisations across government, or within arm's-length bodies within those organisations. Around 80% of ODP's members work in five government departments (Ministry of Justice, Department for Work & Pensions, Home Office, HM Revenue & Customs and Ministry of Defence). There are operational delivery roles in all regions, with 38% of the workforce based in the North West, London, and the South East. Nearly three-quarters of operational delivery staff are in the three most junior civil service roles. More than 40% of operational delivery staff are aged 50 or over, 58% are female, and 17% are from non-white ethnic backgrounds (where information on ethnicity is provided).

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ODP's evolution, governance and operating model

2.5 ODP was established in 2011, and a cross-government Operational Delivery Profession Team (ODPT) to support the profession was established in 2016. The current cross-government Head of Profession has been in place since 2020. Since then, ODP has established its senior development programme Operational Delivery Excel (OpDel Excel), created its Professional Skills Framework, and produced its second and third strategies (**Figure 2** on pages 52 to 53).

2.6 The current cross-government Head of Profession is the Department for Work & Pensions Permanent Secretary, and the current cross-government Deputy Head of Profession is HM Revenue & Customs Second Permanent Secretary. The direction of ODP is set by its strategy board (**Figure 3** on page 54).

2.7 ODP's expectation is that each government department has a Head of Profession to support implementing its strategy and that other government organisations have them "where deemed appropriate". There are currently 35 Heads of Profession for operational delivery in organisations across government. Some Heads of Profession work for an arm's-length body rather than a central department. This often reflects situations where the majority of operational delivery work happens in the arm's-length body. Examples include the Rural Payments Agency, for the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs group, and the Planning Inspectorate, for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government group.

2.8 ODPT has created a role profile for departmental Heads of Profession. It sets the expectation that they engage with, lead and deliver ODP's agenda in their organisation and attend relevant advisory groups and networks. It is, however, each organisation's decision about how to use the role description in forming Head of Profession objectives, and for giving them an appropriate amount of time and resources for the role.

2.9 It is also for each organisation to decide on their operating model to resource and support the Head of Profession, although a good practice support structure has recently been signed off by Heads of Professions. Some departments have capability leads that curate and promote ODP's learning and development offer in their organisation. The capability leads are part of ODP's advisory groups and networks.

Resourcing and workstreams

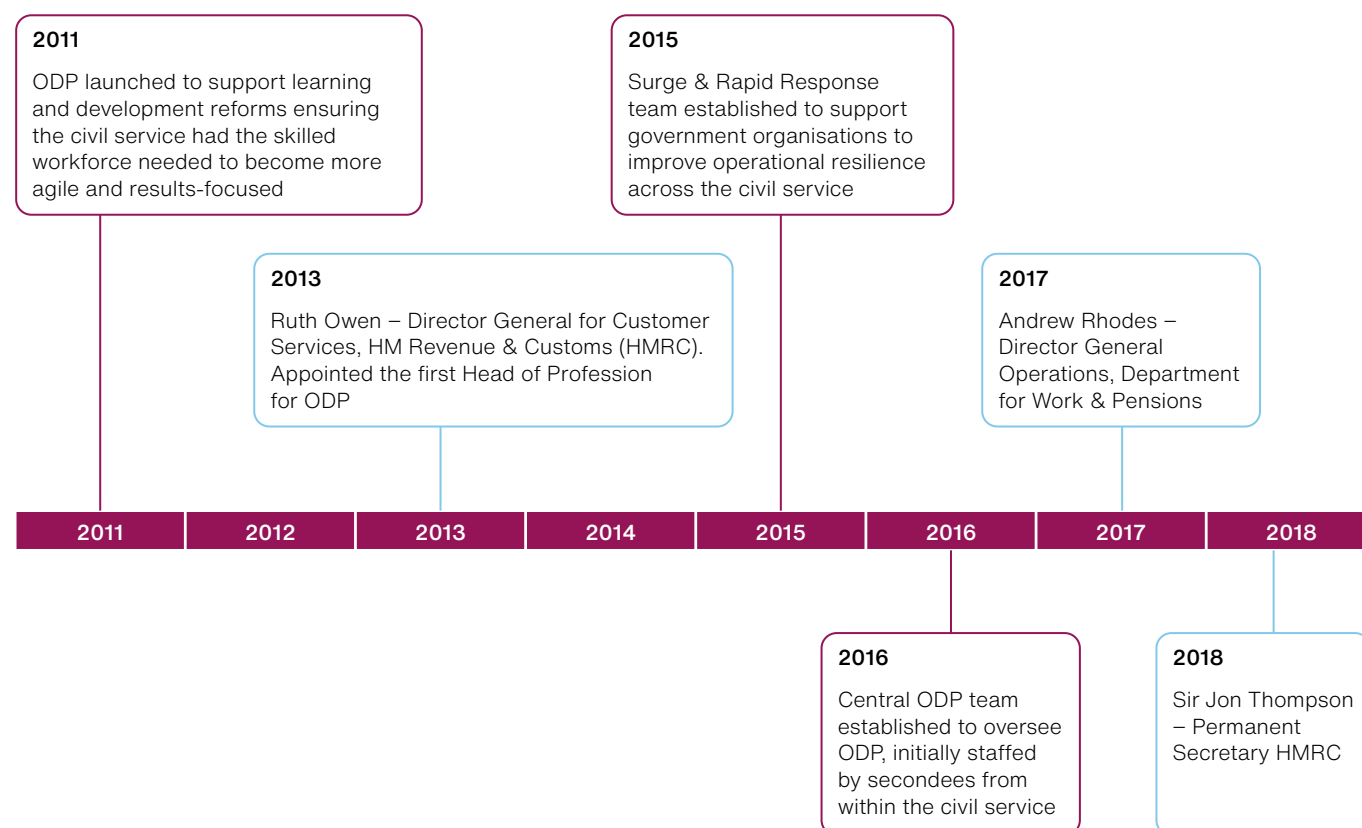
2.10 ODPT is funded by contributions from departments. Since 2021-22, the Team's annual budget has been around £3.7 million. Some 75% is spent on staff costs, and the remainder on external costs such as building and maintaining ODP's website and developing learning programmes. For 2025-26 the ODPT expects a budget of £4 million, funded by departmental fees based on their number of ODP members.

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Figure 2

Timeline of major Operational Delivery Profession (ODP) outputs and activity, and appointments to cross-government Head of Profession and Deputy Head of Profession, 2011 to 2025

Since 2020, ODP's output and activity has increased, coinciding with a period of more stable leadership



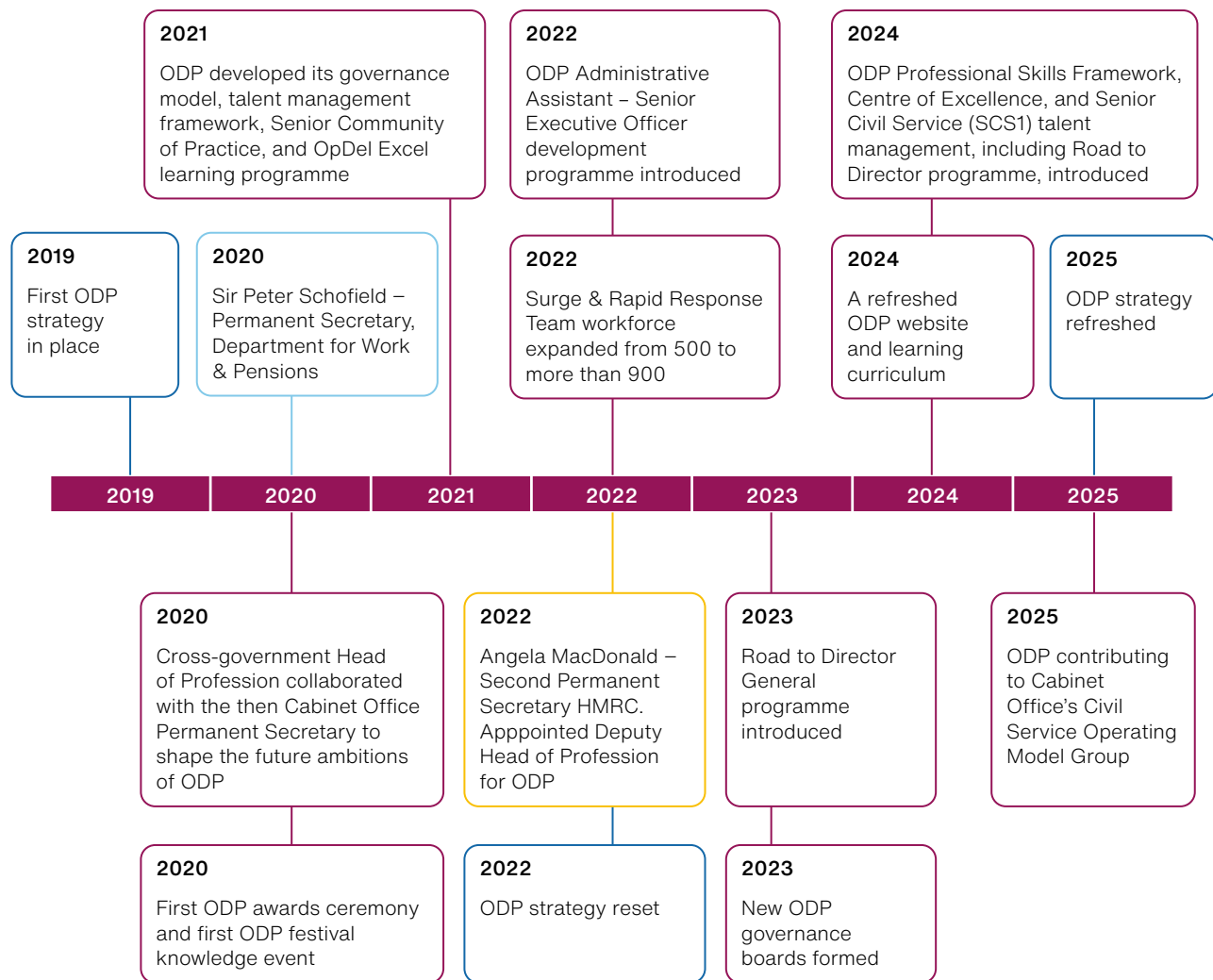
- ODP outputs and activity
- Appointment to cross-government Head of Profession
- ODP strategies
- Appointment to cross-government Deputy Head of Profession

Notes

- 1 The roles of cross-government Head of Profession and cross-government Deputy Head of Profession are responsibilities in addition to stated departmental roles.
- 2 The Operational Delivery Profession Team has permanent staff who are employed in HM Revenue & Customs and the Department for Work & Pensions.
- 3 OpDel Excel is a bespoke learning programme for operational delivery leaders in the civil service and wider public sector designed to improve their readiness to take on more senior roles

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Operational Delivery Profession Team information and publicly available information about Operational Delivery Profession

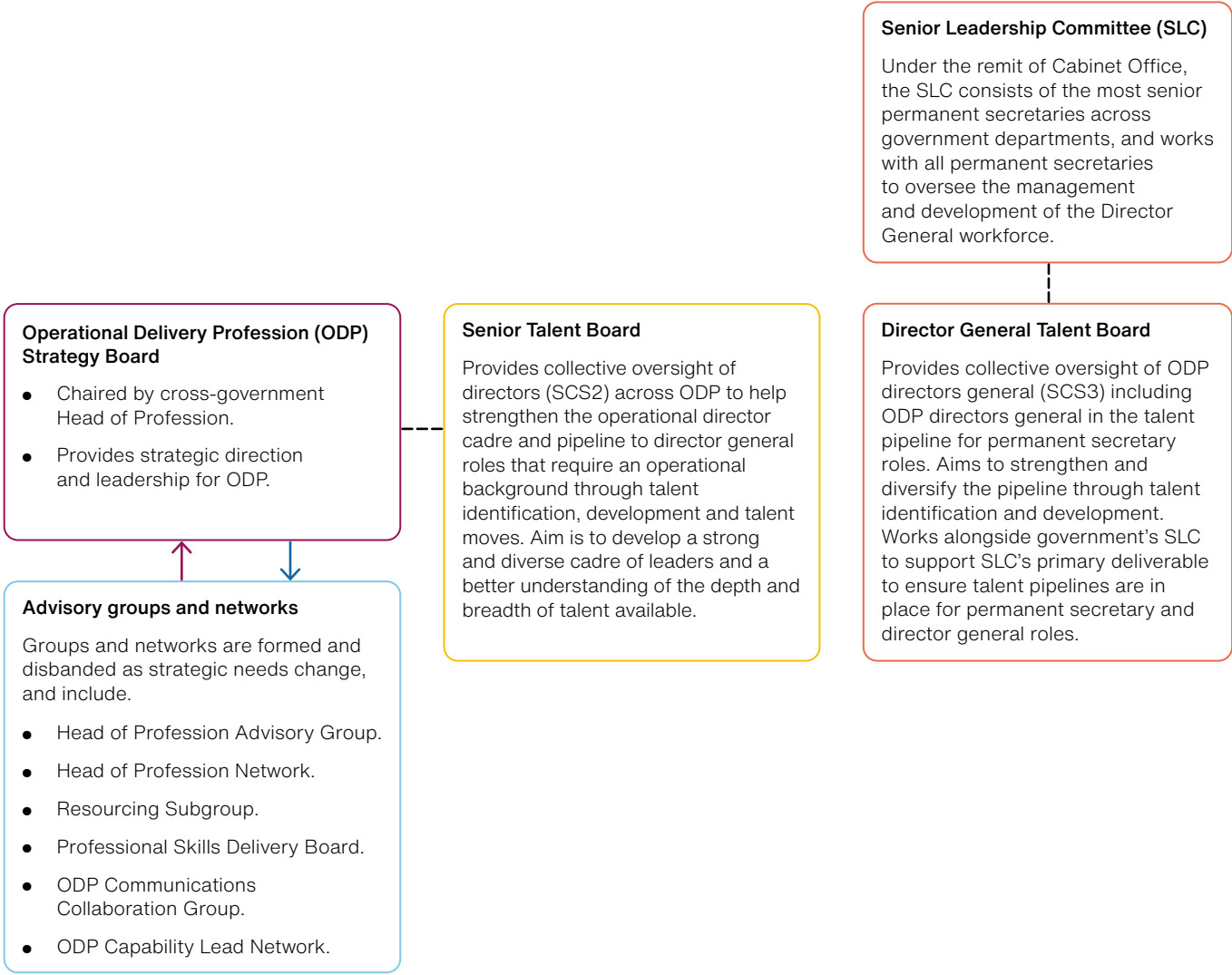
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Figure 3
The Operational Delivery Profession's (ODP's) governance model

ODP's strategy board sets directions for the work of ODP



- ODP strategic function
- ODP delivery function
- ODP oversight
- Not ODP's remit or oversight
- ➔ Informs
- ➡ Sets expectations
- Share updates and insights

Notes

- 1 SCS are grades in the Senior Civil Service progressing from SCS1 to SCS4.
- 2 Director General Talent Board has no formal accountability relationship with ODP Strategy Board. However, it is chaired by the cross-government Head of Profession for ODP.

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2.11 ODPT has 45 staff and is relatively small compared with the number of members of ODP. It is jointly led by two deputy directors. One deputy director is based in HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and is responsible for most of the ODPT workstreams. Each of these workstreams is led by a Grade 7 civil servant and includes professional skills; centres of excellence; Fast Stream and apprenticeships; insight and impact; learning; communications; data and analysis; and business support and management functions. The other deputy director is based in the Department for Work & Pensions and is Head of ODP Talent for the Senior Civil Service (SCS).

2.12 ODP is also responsible for a separate Surge and Rapid Response Team (SRRT), which organisations across government can use to help them deal with demand. People working in the surge team are based in 11 HMRC hubs and have specially designed contracts allowing them to be deployed nationally and internationally at short notice. The SRRT provides operational support for planned peaks in demand (for example, self-assessment tax returns), unplanned demand (for example, processing applications for a Certificate of Exemption to keep an XL Bully dog) and crisis response for unforeseen events (for example, providing on-the-ground customer support after an airline collapse). In 2024, the SRRT supported 75 deployments across government. The SRRT costs £40 million per year which is fully funded by the departments that use it. In May 2025, the SRRT employed 809 people, of which 690 are routinely deployable – some 80% of deployable staff are administrative officers and 20% are executive officers.

ODP's approach to improving capability

2.13 The Government Campus 'Professions Best Practice Framework' sets the expectation that, as senior lead for the profession, the cross-government Head of Profession is responsible for building leadership capability in the profession. In addition, the cross-government Head of Profession needs to demonstrate that certain leadership components are in place or must take action to implement and embed them (**Figure 4** on pages 56 to 57).

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Figure 4

The roles and responsibilities of a cross-government Head of Profession

The cross-government Head of Profession needs to demonstrate that eight leadership components are in place

Component	Specific responsibilities
Being visible and engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In-depth knowledge of the professional community and engaging departmental heads of profession to ensure a coordinated approach across the organisation. ● Acting as a champion of the profession, communicating its vision and values within and outside the profession. ● Role-modelling and actively encouraging inclusive leadership behaviour throughout the profession.
Directing business delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Setting the profession's objectives to support its business strategy. ● Setting clear standards for people operating within their profession, supported by a profession development plan. ● Collaborating with departmental heads of professions and human resource leads to deploy professionals according to business requirements. ● Driving performance management across the profession.
Building partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appointing departmental heads of profession. ● Chairing/attending networks and Boards. ● Building cross-departmental professional networks to face common challenges and share best practice. ● Being active and visible within the networks. ● Building links with the private, third sectors and professional bodies, while also being a voice for the civil service, in particular for the development of apprenticeships.
Building professional skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Defining the profession and its standards/competence requirements. ● Articulating a strategy to build professional skills and bridge any current and future capability gaps to meet business needs. ● Developing career routes inside and across profession.
Championing learning and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acting as a role model for learning and development (L&D) and continuing professional development (CPD). ● Identifying and promoting L&D priorities for professionals. ● Developing career pathways that deliver on three key outcomes: driving professionalism, facilitating career development and supporting selection and external attraction. ● Advising on the balance between core and professional skills requirements. ● Developing and/or implementing a curriculum of learning and CPD. ● Promoting specialist career routes including Fast Stream and apprenticeships. ● Developing links with the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit.

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Figure 4 *continued*

The roles and responsibilities of a cross-government Head of Profession

Component	Specific responsibilities
Cultivating talent management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Providing professional assurance at recruitment selection and performance discussions for key roles. ● Clearly articulating how people can develop to deliver the depth and breadth of capability needed in the future, through career pathways. ● Diversifying talent and progression pipelines within the profession. ● Identifying key professional posts across the organisation and developing appropriate strategies for succession planning. ● Developing campaigns to attract and retain talent within the profession.
Acting as a senior advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advising the organisation on key issues requiring professional input. ● Providing professional expertise to enhance and/or influence business decisions. ● Acting as a member on advisory boards of experts to peer review policy, research, analysis and advice.
Sponsorship outside the profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identifying the core skills and knowledge that specific staff outside your profession need to have in relation to the profession. ● Identifying who, from outside your profession, you need to engage with to sponsor this across government.

Note

- 1 ODP's expectation is that each government department has its own Head of Profession. This is a separate role to that of cross-government Head of Profession for operational delivery.

Source: National Audit Office adaptation of Government Campus 'Professions Best Practice Framework'

2.14 ODP has curated a learning and development offer for its members at various stages of their careers (**Figure 5** overleaf). The offer includes structured training, development programmes, apprenticeships and qualifications. There is also a range of wider community and networking opportunities to support member development.

- **Senior Community of Practice:** For SCS staff, these are 'thought leadership' events held three times a year drawing on both public and private sector insight about the challenges of leading, designing and delivering large-scale operational services.
- **Centre of Excellence:** Focused on a range of subjects such as managing demand, the Centre of Excellence aims to grow networks for promoting and sharing good practice.
- **ODP Fest:** An annual online learning festival with free-to-join webinars and discussions for members.

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Figure 5

The Operational Delivery Profession's (ODP's) approach to building member capability

ODP offers training and development opportunities to all grades

Grade	Sample training and development offer
Senior Civil Service grade 1 (SCS1) and Senior Civil Service grade 2 (SCS2)	<p>Road to Director General and Road to Director</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Events, blogposts and other interventions that people access to develop the skills and experience necessary for more senior leadership roles, and which help to build an internal pipeline of talent. <p>Operational Delivery Excel (OpDel Excel) programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A bespoke learning programme for operational delivery leaders in the civil service and wider public sector designed to improve their readiness to take on more senior roles. Originally focused at director level it has now been extended to deputy director level. <p>Career conversations for SCS2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A conversation with an operational director general that is offered to ODP directors identified as top performers in talent moderation. <p>Self-led learning groups for SCS1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offered to empower leaders to take control of their learning and development.
Administrative assistant (AA) to senior executive officer (SEO)	<p>AA to SEO Development Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A self-paced package of curated learning, created around the skills and capabilities that operational delivery professionals need. The programme has three learning levels segmented by grade. Opportunities to gain mentoring from senior colleagues. Certificate awarded on completion.
Available to all grades	<p>Professional Skills Framework</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An online framework that sets out the range of careers and roles available at all grades and defines the skills and experience needed, with links to the appropriate learning. <p>Qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational delivery qualifications at levels 3 to 7, covering the basic principles of operational delivery through to strategic management and leadership. <p>Apprenticeships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An entry route into ODP and to further develop an ODP career. A range of offers from GCSE through to degree level. <p>E-learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free e-learning resources for members including, webinars, products on Civil Service Learning and learning toolkits.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Operational Delivery Profession Team information

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2.15 The first cohort of the new Operational Delivery Fast Stream started in Autumn 2024. As of March 2025 there are 34 participants in the first cohort of the scheme. The scheme has been designed to give participants hands-on experience of working in and managing ever-larger operational teams during three 12-month placements in government departments. The goal is for participants to be ready for a Grade 7 operational delivery role on completion.

2.16 In November 2024, ODP launched its Professional Skills Framework. The objective was to create clear, measurable standards and specialist skills for operational delivery roles to support better career progression and skill development across all levels of ODP. The framework describes core operational delivery skills, job families and role profiles. It sets out the range of careers available and defines the skills and experience needed for operational delivery roles across all grades. The framework provides links to the appropriate learning that members can use to develop necessary skills. By March 2025, nine organisations had launched the Professional Skills Framework in their own organisations, reaching approximately 25,000 ODP members. ODP is aiming to reach the majority of its members by September 2025 and is working with capability leads in organisations to offer further guidance and support.

2.17 In addition to ODP's capability offer, there are several sources of operational delivery and leadership and management development that ODP members can access. ODP acknowledges that this can create a crowded and confusing learning and development landscape for its members. ODP is working, including with other professions and functions across government, to bring coherence to the crowded learning and development landscape to help members navigate it. Other sources of operational delivery learning and development include:

- Government People Group's line management standards;
- government organisations' own learning and development offers;
- relevant operational delivery and leadership and management content from other professions' and functions' learning programmes;
- Civil Service Learning courses for operational delivery and leadership and management; and
- the Government Campus learning offer for professions and core skills.

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ODP's strategy

2.18 ODP's strategy is clear that the capabilities and expertise that operational delivery professionals in government need are changing and will require the skills of other professions. For example, they include knowing how best to make use of digital approaches when dealing with different users' needs from the same service, how to get the best out of technologies such as using artificial intelligence and building apps, how to provide access to services online and in-person, and how to manage change projects. Operational management knowledge such as how to resource to meet supply and demand, and how to design and manage services for work to flow smoothly and achieve high throughput is still required, but people also need to know how to use that expertise in a digital service operating context.

2.19 **Figure 6** shows the main components of ODP's strategy for 2025–2028. This builds on its previous strategy for 2022–2025, which focused on professional skills, thought leadership, high support and high challenge, and talent management. ODP considers that, over the three years of the 2022–2025 strategy, it made progress in building professional identity, enhancing learning opportunities and improving governance structures. However, it sets out in its 2025–2028 strategy that, to continue achieving impact, it must adapt to digital advancements, respond to shifting public expectations, strengthen its professional identity and operate within a tighter fiscal climate.

2.20 The 2025–2028 strategy focuses on delivering four key outcomes by 2028.

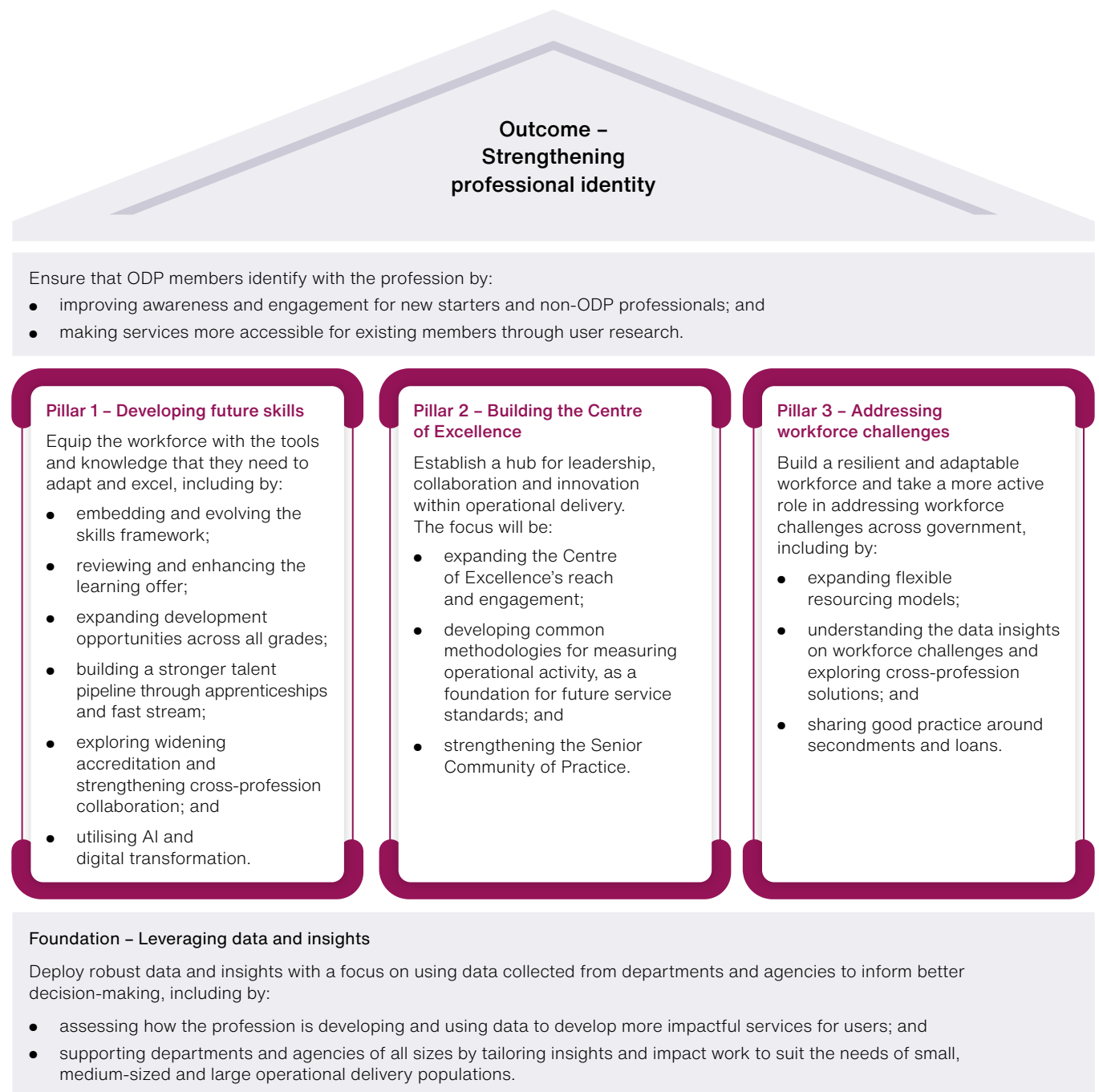
- Fostering a strong professional identity among members, such that they confidently identify with ODP, feeling a sense of pride and belonging.
- Enhancing visibility across the civil service, including other professions and leadership across government.
- Equipping members with the skills and resources they need to thrive in a rapidly changing landscape.
- Strengthening member engagement and participation in ODP initiatives such as training programmes and collaborative networks.

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Figure 6

The Operational Delivery Profession's (ODP's) 2025–2028 strategy

The strategy seeks to improve members' professional identity through developing future skills, creating a Centre of Excellence and addressing workforce challenges



Note

- 1 The Operational Delivery Profession created the Centre of Excellence in its 2022–2025 strategy with an aim to become a hub for best practice and knowledge sharing across government.

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2.21 The strategy aims to continue expanding formal and informal learning opportunities across all civil service grades. It has identified the need for interventions for senior leaders in grades 6 and 7 as it states that these members “play a critical role in engaging and supporting their team members”. It also plans to strengthen its development pathway for administrative assistant to senior executive officer grades and build a stronger talent pipeline through apprenticeships and the Civil Service Operational Delivery Fast Stream. The strategy intends to support departments and agencies of all sizes, including by offering more flexible support to better meet the needs of smaller organisations and those in different delivery scenarios.

2.22 The Cabinet Office’s work on a strategic plan for the Civil Service includes consideration of how to improve government’s operating model. This includes exploring the roles of, benefits and opportunities for functions and professions in government’s skills and delivery landscape. ODP’s 2025–2028 strategy does not set out any ambition to move to a functional model, but it does commit to focusing on two functional priorities:

- developing common methodologies for measuring operational activity; and
- expanding ODP’s role in supporting workforce challenges, starting with flexible resourcing and best practices in outsourcing.

How the new strategy may help to address capability challenges

2.23 Figure 7 shows that the strategy has the potential to address some of the capability challenges that we have identified across government.

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Figure 7

Example actions in the Operational Delivery Profession's (ODP's) strategies for 2022–2025 and 2025–2028 that relate to operational capability challenges across government

The 2025–2028 strategy has the potential to address further some of the operational capability challenges we have identified across government

Capability challenge	Actions in 2022–2025 strategy	Planned actions in 2025–2028 strategy
Taking a whole-system approach	Established Operational Delivery Excel (OpDel Excel) programme for directors. Learning includes system leadership and system thinking modules. Included system leadership within the Professional Skills Framework for ODP senior civil servants.	Continue OpDel Excel, including the system thinking and leadership content, and open it to deputy directors.
Understanding and managing demand	Established the Surge and Rapid Response Team, which provides resource across government to support both planned seasonal peaks and urgent crises.	Build a better understanding of seasonal and unexpected operational delivery resourcing demand across government.
Using information to improve service performance	Set a longer-term ambition to measure the impact that ODP's work has on service delivery, including improved customer outcomes.	Build measures of success that include tracking ODP initiatives from delivery through to outcomes, giving a fuller picture of how ODP's work contributes to improvements in public service delivery. Create a set of service standards that ensure clarity, consistency and operational excellence across departments and agencies.
Systematic innovation and improvement	Established the Centre of Excellence, a hub for best practice and knowledge sharing across government.	Develop and embed the Centre of Excellence, including by sharing good practice and creating scenario playbooks.
Management and leadership	Established the 'Road to' series development programme aimed at identifying and nurturing talent in the Senior Civil Service (SCS). Established the Senior Community of Practice for operational delivery leaders.	Continue to deliver the 'Road to' series programme for senior civil servants and develop 'A Road to Senior Civil Service' offer for Grades 6 and 7. Build on the Senior Community of Practice and expand its reach in the SCS community.

Note

- 1 The operational capability challenges are formed from our assessment and analysis of operational management capability in 41 organisations and 118 services across government.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of the Operational Delivery Profession strategies for 2022–2025 and 2025–2028 and the Operational Delivery Profession Team and Surge and Rapid Response Team Business Plan 2025–2028

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Concluding remarks

2.24 The large number, geographical distribution and range of roles of ODP members create a significant challenge to making continued and widespread progress on improving operational capability across government. However, the demand for services, need to improve productivity to meet fiscal challenges, changes in capabilities required for good operational delivery, and government's 'delivery agenda' mean that operational capability has an essential role in achieving successful outcomes. There are two areas where ODP requires continued focus if it is to contribute successfully to building operational capability across government.

- **Achieving the strategy's outcomes depends on contributions right across ODP:** ODP recognises this challenge, and the strategy emphasises the role that heads of profession in organisations will have as advocates for ODP within their departments and agencies. However, all Heads of Profession do that work in addition to their 'day job' and the time constraints of many of ODP's members limit their ability to engage with ODP initiatives and professional development. It is therefore important that ODP's initiatives are relevant, accessible and meet its members' needs and that such initiatives are promoted and adopted by organisations, Heads of Profession and members. ODP feels that, in particular, widespread engagement with and adoption of its new Professional Skills Framework will be critical to the success of ODP's strategy. ODP plans to undertake research to understand how members interact with its services, and the barriers to engaging with them. It has a baseline survey which provides insights into the community but acknowledges further work is needed to strengthen its understanding of its members and to track changes over time.
- **Measuring progress to understand the link between ODP's work and outcomes:** ODP recognises the importance of understanding and measuring the success of its strategy. Its performance measurement approach is still being developed, but it has data dashboards on members' progression and demographics and has plans to expand this across other areas. It has not yet set targets, as its initial focus is on gathering baseline data on its members, which it hopes will put it in a better position to introduce meaningful targets later. ODP intends to measure the link between initiatives and their outcomes so that it can demonstrate how particular interventions contribute to success, and how they might contribute to improvements in public service delivery. ODP's goal is to ensure that all interventions deliver measurable returns on investment.

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Appendix One

Our audit approach

Our scope

1 The purpose of this report is to share our insights on government's operational capability in order to help it learn lessons and improve the services it delivers. Operational delivery is a substantial part of what government does, and the benefits of getting it right, from the point of view of the quality of services received by users, and the potential financial savings on offer for government organisations, are significant. The report:

- sets out four capabilities that government needs, and the lessons can be learned relating to each of them, supported by case examples (Part One); and
- describes the role of the Operational Delivery Profession (ODP) and its strategy for improving government's operational capability (Part Two).

2 We have assessed government's operational capability over many years and produced several publications which showcase what we have learned. Our value-for-money and other reports that cover operational management show the importance of getting it right, and the consequences of getting it wrong. This report brings these past insights together and uses new fieldwork we have carried out with ODP.

3 We draw lessons from our work on operational delivery and incorporate additional insights from discussions with stakeholders, from documents stakeholders shared with us, and from observing ODP's management meetings and the networks and boards that it uses in undertaking its work.

4 Each case example in our report is used to illustrate a specific aspect of operational capability. They are self-identified by the people in government organisations that are responsible for the services that the examples are taken from. They are not a representative sample across government; we have not audited the examples; and we have not evaluated for the purposes of this report whether the overall service that each individual example is taken from is achieving value for money.

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5 We produce contextual information on ODP and its role in building operational capability, including its 2025–2028 strategy. We have not looked at what individual departments and other government organisations do themselves, separate to the work of ODP, to build operational capability.

6 This report is not an exhaustive ‘how to’ manual for good operational delivery. However, our intention is that the lessons and case examples it contains will provide learning that people can adapt for their own organisations and service context and use in their day-to-day work.

Our evidence base

7 We conducted our fieldwork between January and April 2025. We drew on a variety of evidence sources.

Review of previous National Audit Office reports

8 We drew on findings from our previous operational delivery insights publications *Managing business operations – what government needs to get right*, and *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*.³ These publications contain the evidence base from our assessments of government’s operational capability, as well as findings from our analysis of it. Further detail of that methodology can be found in the annexes of those reports.

9 We drew from these two insights publications, as well as the themes in our series of *How to improve operational services* good practice guides for people managing services day to day, to provide a structure for the capabilities, management and leadership insights and the lessons in this report.⁴

10 We systematically reviewed our value-for-money reports, investigations, and lesson learned reports published between 2019 and 2025, and used our back catalogue analyser tool to identify further relevant publications in previous years. We identified over 100 publications with relevant operational delivery insights. We extracted findings against the themes in our previous good practice and insight publications.

³ National Audit Office, *Managing business operations – what government needs to get right*, September 2022, and National Audit Office, *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*, March 2021.

⁴ National Audit Office, *How to improve operational services*, February 2023.

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Workshops

11 We held three online workshops at the start of our fieldwork phase with members of ODP's Senior Community of Practice. We invited all members of the Community of Practice, and 28 attended on a voluntary basis. We used these workshops to identify:

- the key operational capability challenges being faced by government;
- potential case examples relating to those challenges; and
- stakeholder perspectives on the role of ODP.

12 A limitation of our approach is that organisations self-selected to participate. A total of 58 people accepted invites to the workshops and 28 attended, representing 13 different organisations across central government departments and non-central government organisations such as agencies and other public bodies. As such the case examples generated in our workshops do not represent all organisations that employ members of ODP.

Fieldwork with ODP

13 We asked the Operational Delivery Profession Team (ODPT) to complete and share with us a list of documents for us to read, people to speak to, and activity to see to give us an informed view of the Team's role, activity and plans.⁵ Using the list as a guide, we:

- carried out a review of documents including ODP's business plans, strategies, its capability offer and supporting business management materials;
- carried out interviews with 19 representatives drawn from ODPT and departmental stakeholders; and
- attended as observers seven ODP meetings.

Analytical approach

14 We reviewed each document against our evaluative criteria based on the themes from our previous good practice guides. The review was used to refine the scope of the study, including defining our more detailed audit questions and methods, and to inform our findings on ODP. Our interviews and observations consolidated this approach.

⁵ The Operational Delivery Profession Team supports ODP and was established in 2016. It has permanent staff who are employed in HM Revenue & Customs and the Department for Work & Pensions.

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Wider government and external stakeholder consultation

15 We met with members of the Cabinet Office's Functional Strategy and Design team to understand their views on the current and future role of ODP in the context of their exploration of how the civil service operating model could be improved.

16 We also met with the Institute of Customer Service to get a broader perspective on the challenges faced in delivering customer services, and the capabilities required, both inside and outside the public sector.

Case examples

17 Our workshops with members of ODP's Senior Community of Practice generated 45 potential case examples. We contacted the relevant person for each example and secured 21 follow-up interviews. We held semi-structured interviews and wrote case examples that identified the problem, approach, benefit and any additional learning points. We checked the factual accuracy of each of our write-ups with the person or people we interviewed.

18 We grouped our case examples by theme and lesson, and, for each lesson, we chose the case example or examples which was or were most closely aligned with the learning point. Where we had no case example for a particular lesson, we identified and used an example from our analysis of our previous work.

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