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How cross-departmental collaboration drives a “citizen-centric” approach

Title: The Cabinet Office is correct when it regards the transformation of public sector service delivery as dependent on Data, Analytics and Artificial Intelligence but it is naïve to think that it can orchestrate this via existing Cabinet Office controls and a closer alignment to No. 10.

Executive Summary: This paper addresses the topics of cross-departmental collaboration, Cabinet Office reform and the use of data in UK Government decision making. It examines the pivotal role of data and argues in favour of “Decisioning”. Further presented is the idea of Secretaries of State commissioning outcomes from Ministries to drive a citizen-centric and action driven approach.

The Government has prioritised departmental and wider public sector reform with an aim to develop collaborative “project hubs”. To further this aim, the Prime Minister announced that the responsibility for data was moving into the Cabinet Office. This recently resulted in the establishment of the “Central Digital and Data Office for Government” - the new strategic centre for Digital, Data and Technology for the Government - in early February¹.

However, while the prioritisation of data and technology in central government is right to be embraced, it does not come without its challenges. In fact, we have already seen hurdles in the way of progress such as personnel changes at the heart of government and the reliance on legacy IT systems. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues and amplified the need for smooth operations at the Cabinet Office.

“Joining up” data across different government departments is welcome but it is neither new nor does this necessarily mean we get better or more effective public service delivery. It is only when data are combined with analysis and this informs policy decisions and triggers operational action that transformed public services will emerge. There is a growing argument for a more substantive approach - **Decisioning**.

Can the Government achieve meaningful Cabinet Office reform?

Cross-departmental collaboration has been a thorn in every government’s side. As Lord Maude of Horsham, who is leading the current review of efficiency in the UK Government puts it, reform “is a never-ending process.”² This process, compounded by the pandemic, looks to achieve a more “action driven” approach and encompasses people, process, technology and structure. Indeed, senior civil servants said they expected the Cabinet Office’s functions would be more closely integrated with Downing Street as part of Lord Maude’s review. The Cabinet Office, being the core driver of reform, has been tasked with oversight and management.

Lord Maude’s second review has three elements: to examine the operation of the Cabinet Office spend controls; to examine the condition and operation of the Cabinet Office headquartered cross-cutting horizontal functions; and to examine progress on Civil Service reform since the 2012 “Civil Service

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-strengthens-digital-leadership>

² Q626, Page 2, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1578/default/>

Reform” paper. The review will also, hopefully, answer the three questions put to it by the Institute for Government; “Does the Cabinet Office have the resources to give the right policy advice, how much do you want to run from the centre of government and how can the centre help departments to help themselves?”³

COVID-19 has undoubtedly changed the urgency and nature of reform but so have other events over the last year. It is evident that “getting implementation right also means being able to check how priorities are progressing and intervene rapidly when things go wrong”⁴. The departure of Dominic Cummings, the Prime Minister’s chief advisor and strong proponent of civil service/departmental reform, has left the government without the high-profile catalyst crucial to achieving results.

Decisioning can drive a “Citizen-Centric” approach

With these obvious hindrances aside, the review and focus of the government still misses a critical element - technology-enabled decision-making - also known as **Decisioning**.

Decisions in government generally fall into four categories:

- » **Strategic** such as Foreign Policy and SDR or elements of the Queen’s Speech.
- » **Policy** including most policy analysis, annual budget and Single Departmental Plans.
- » **Operational** decisions concerning human capital, estates, assets, supply chain etc.
- » **Transactional** which are near real-time granular transactional decisions such as benefits decisions, tax risk assessments, immigration visa decisions and citizen nudge activities.

Analytics can play a part in all four elements but **decisioning** focuses on the high volume, near real-time decisions where expectations are moving from a decision latency of months or weeks, to days, hours, minutes and seconds. It’s impossible to make consistent decisions at that scale manually.

The only way to make the right decisions at that scale - in the moment, for every moment - is through, automating and scaling decisions with powerful and trusted analytics. These combine data from transactional business processes with other real-time interactions to provide real time context data.

Decisioning improves decisions by leveraging augmented analytics, event stream processing, optimization, business rule management and is constantly refined using machine learning. Many decisions can be completely automated whilst others will require hybrid human-machine processes to be employed.

Naturally, using the same data for policy and operations results in closer alignment of government policy and operational delivery and ensures a consistent approach. As the delivery landscape changes then updates to policy can be triggered and informed. Freeing up the time of officials to focus on high-level policy enactment is surely what the government wants to achieve.

Ensuring delivery is at the heart of government

Even with this technology successfully deployed, the issue of cross-government working is far from solved. The core Cabinet system naturally leads to a departmental focus under each Secretary of State and it is therefore unsurprising to see senior civil servants mirroring this way of working. It is then hardly fair to level criticism in their direction for the silos that are then baked into the system.

Secretaries of State responsible for policy initiatives or even outcomes could prove successful in this regard, leaving a system of ministers to run departments. These Cabinet-level positions not aligned to any

³ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/three-questions-maude-review-cabinet-office>

⁴ Page 5, All in it together, 2015

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/All%20in%20it%20together.pdf>

one department, would commission delivery across several ministries and would benefit from a whole of government perspective. This would enable optimal choice of delivery mechanism and this would include devolved and local government delivery partners in the mix as well as private sector organisations. Outcomes would thus be championed and political leadership would be entirely action focussed and results oriented.

While it is perhaps unrealistic to expect the whole system of government to change, incremental changes are possible and any initiative that seeks to co-ordinate cross-departmental delivery will require such a structure and the relevant data resources to be in place if it is to succeed.

Reform is difficult but ultimately worthwhile

SAS are under no illusion regarding the barriers to reform. If Decisioning is to be successful, departments must trust the data from others which is a major issue. Legacy IT systems have previously been blamed for preventing even the simplest of changes. As Reform, the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform argue; "the Cabinet Office should focus on identifying solutions to key blockers which have prevented public sector organisations acting on existing guidance. It could consider the creation of a cross-government legacy IT fund, to support departments to move away from legacy systems."⁵ This would counter silos by ensuring departments are working on the same systems and datasets.

Dominic Cummings once reportedly vowed a "hard rain is coming" when discussing the shortcomings of an "incoherent" Cabinet Office.⁶ A light sprinkle may be all that followed, but employment of technology driven **Decisioning** and a new government perspective could be all that is really needed.

Whatever the outcome of the review, what is certain is that reform is an ongoing process. In the words of Lord Maude: "If you think you are staying the same, you are actually getting worse."⁷

⁵ Reform, Digital Public Services, what next? <https://reform.uk/research/digital-public-services-whats-next>

⁶ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hard-rain-is-going-to-fall-on-civil-service-says-dominic-cummings-gcq79vcl0>

⁷ Q626, Page 2, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1578/default/>

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