

Speech: Transforming public services through major projects

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

It's a pleasure to be here with you today for the first Transforming Together conference of the year, and the seventh in its history.

Communities and networks are essential to help us deliver world class projects, and Transforming Together is certainly the place to collaborate with colleagues who are delivering the government's transformation portfolio.

We know that transformation can't be learned from a textbook, so learning from each other is vital. And that's why we are here today.

In that vein, there are three main points I want to cover today:

- to outline the nature and scale of transformation in government;
- to share some of the lessons learned so far on this transformation journey, in particular the need to set realistic objectives, embrace uncertainty and focus on outcomes and people, and;
- to set out the future of transformation.

Scale of transformation

Firstly, the current transformation portfolio.

Collectively we are delivering a set of transformation projects that will realise almost £50 billion worth of long term benefits for government.

This equates to 53 programmes – 34 on the [Government Major Projects Portfolio \(GMPP\)](#) and 19 in early development – spanning 12 government departments and agencies, delivering well into the 2020s.

Not to mention more than 100 new digital services, 20 of which we consider to be 'major' transformations, which means that they are much more than a front-end digital service.

The sheer scope, scale and complexity of this portfolio is extraordinary.

As someone who is relatively new to the public sector, I am staggered at our ambition.

We recently commissioned an international study, which showed how ambitious the UK is compared to other countries like Germany.

These projects will have huge benefits for the general public.

Not only will they generate billions of pounds worth of efficiency savings in government – important as that is – they will transform people's lives for

the better.

They will improve people's experiences when interacting with the state and improve their access to vital public services.

Whether it's Courts Reform, which will create a straightforward online court to resolve disputes from divorces to debt enforcement, making justice swifter and more certain.

Or the Making Tax Digital programme which will enable people to report and calculate their taxes online, saving money and time as well as fundamentally changing the way people interact with HMRC.

The Digital Census programme provides vision for a fully digital Census by 2021. Its ability to enable other transformed services in government should not be underestimated.

Digital Services at the Border will transform the way we ensure safe and efficient movement of people and goods through our borders and the full rollout of e-gates at airports.

The National Crime Agency Transformation will bring together multiple systems across police forces, helping to identify, prevent and tackle organised crime even quicker.

And within the civil service, the cross-government Smarter Working Programmes are already seeing benefits from changing the way we work through better use of technology, improved estates, and flexible working.

It's not just an estates rationalisation programme. It has required big cultural and organisational change for the better.

But, people's lives will only be transformed if we get these projects right and are able to transform ourselves too.

If we deliver these projects as well as they can be delivered.

What is transformation?

One of the challenges we have tackled over the last two years is actually defining transformation and understanding what aspects of delivery we need to target in order to succeed.

Different people have a different understanding of what transformation is.

So we mapped our transformation programmes against a number of important characteristics such as organisational change, policy change and location change – just to name a few.

This has allowed us to understand common themes across what can initially look like very different programmes.

Transformation programmes generally contain a mix of these characteristics

and the most complex, such as Universal Credit or Courts Reform, contain them all.

But containing one doesn't always equal transformation.

It's easy to assume a new digital project is a transformation project. But actually a project can be completely transformative without requiring any new digital services at all. And a digital project may well not be transformational.

Likewise, cost reduction alone almost certainly doesn't equal transformation.

One of our most important pieces of work to date has been the creation of a framework to help initiate transformation projects in the best possible way.

We call it the Seven Lenses of Transformation.

Fundamentally they are seven tests or questions you should ask yourself right at the beginning, and continue to check throughout delivery:

- Vision – do you have a clear and aligned vision of the desired outcome?
- Design – how will the organisation be configured?
- Collaboration – are you collaborating with all affected stakeholders?
- Planning – do you have plans set out in realistic delivery phases?
- Accountability – is it clear who is accountable?
- People – are you supporting people to change the way they work?
- Leadership – have you got the right leadership skills in place?

Lessons learned

Both the [Infrastructure and Projects Authority \(IPA\)](#) and [Government Digital Service \(GDS\)](#) – through our joint Transformation Peer Group (TPG) – have put a lot of work into answering these questions over the last two years.

In doing so, we have learnt a lot of lessons along the way.

I won't go through them all today, but there are four for me that stand out.

The first is to set realistic objectives.

Because it is very difficult to benchmark transformation projects, it is very easy to set wholly unrealistic objectives.

To set up projects for success, it's vital that right from the start you know exactly what you must deliver and you are realistic about what you can deliver.

This might sound obvious, but in huge transformations this can often be the most difficult part to get right.

Many programmes are at risk of failure from having unrealistic expectations at the outset.

Of course be ambitious, but temper this ambition with a healthy dose of realism.

If you think you are falling foul of this already, try to reset your objectives and be clear on what you can realistically achieve.

Also, a 'test and learn' approach could be a useful way of rolling out a project in incremental stages, iterating the service as you go.

The second is to embrace the fact there will always be a level of uncertainty in your projects.

We must understand what that uncertainty is and then learn to manage it. We must consider new ways of managing uncertainty in a portfolio.

This is especially true for transformation projects as it's often very difficult to estimate cost and schedule, in particular for programmes with a long duration.

And accurately specifying benefits of transformation can be even more challenging.

How will the public or organization react to change? How can we account for a project running through multiple parliaments? Or being dependent on a wider set of transformational changes?

Rather than attempting to create false precision, we should try and understand the uncertainty and whether we can live with it.

In my previous sector, we had a systematic and quantitative way of dealing with uncertainty when exploring for oil and gas. I'm not saying their approach can be applied here, but we can, and should, learn lessons from elsewhere.

And if we think the level of uncertainty is large enough to jeopardize a project, we should consider undertaking pilot projects to reduce the uncertainty. Or break up a project into smaller, more manageable components.

All too often in government we are ruthlessly focussed on cost and schedule, while forgetting what exactly we are trying to achieve.

It brings to mind the old Danish proverb, "the operation was a success, but the patient died."

Whether it's transitioning to a new pension age, saving time through online GP appointments or completing new services in court, developing this outcomes view is crucial.

Transformation projects can take an indirect path as they change and evolve. So we need a North Star to guide us. And that is the outcome of what you are trying to achieve.

So, keep your eye on the prize. Adapt as necessary in order to reach your

objective.

And while cost and schedule are important, it's the outcome that really matters.

As I said before, transformation is not about just building new digital interfaces, writing code or shuffling real estate.

It's about improving people's lives. It's about changing the way we work together in government.

Too often we forget about the people who are affected by change – the end users.

Transformation often requires us to engage large teams of people who are impacted in some way by the transformation itself.

Here bringing in multi-disciplinary teams can help. Policy teams can help focus the design on intended outcomes. HR teams can help embed and communicate organisational change.

Dealing with this can sometimes be the hardest part of delivery. But it's the part that matters the most.

Real transformation can't be effected unless we take people along with us on the journey.

I urge you to keep this at the forefront of your mind – especially when times are difficult.

Future of transformation

Having identified these important lessons, the challenge now is to use this new understanding to boost future delivery.

Without a doubt, transformation is still a huge agenda for this government and it will continue to be for a very long time.

EU Exit is forcing us to change the way we work – in a way that will be helpful to the transformation agenda. It's part of the solution, not a problem.

As John Manzioni said just last week in his [speech on transformation](#) at the LSE, "Brexit is an accelerator, not a distraction."

EU Exit provides us with an opportunity to create whole new systems.

For example, it has already allowed us to crystallise our thinking about the Borders programme in a new way. We are thinking about the outcomes differently and it has brought different parts of government together.

The IPA and GDS will continue to help create the right enabling environment across government.

We will tackle processes that make transformation difficult.

We will share our learning more widely, publishing new tools and research.

Our new Major Projects Leadership Academy (MPLA) and Project Leadership Programme (PLP) transformation modules launch formally in April, and will continue to develop.

And we will continue to grow our pool of [Transformation Associates](#) so we have an ever-expanding group of experts on hand.

Conclusion

To conclude, the transformation of government is a huge and ambitious agenda.

We're making great progress in delivering it, but we still have a long way to go.

And we are learning a lot along the way.

Events such as these are crucial to help us share that learning and continue on this transformation journey.

But we must always remember that this is about improving people's lives and improving the way that government works.

So let's keep our eyes firmly on the prize.

Thank you.