

Research impact: making a difference

Improving the UK Government's delivery of online services

LSE research helped the UK Government deliver speedier, more effective digital services and increased the quality of online public services

What was the problem?

For more than two decades the UK Government favoured private sector-style competition as a way of managing its departments and fostering efficiency and innovation.

At first this approach drove quality improvements, but eventually it led to fragmentation and inefficiencies as systems duplicated across agencies.

The focus on departments' core duties also hastened the outsourcing of technical functions such as IT to the private sector. Agencies found themselves locked into long-term IT contracts that failed to keep pace with developing technology.

This considerably delayed the digital upgrading of government services and confused citizens, who faced a patchwork of government websites.

What did we do?

LSE proposed a new model for managing public services, 'digital era governance', which emphasised holistic services, reintegration and digitisation as a way of 'joining up' government services — in 'one-stop shops', for instance, that allowed citizens to address all their needs and queries at once.

The term was coined in a report co-authored by Professor Patrick Dunleavy, Director of LSE's Public Policy Group (PPG), and his frequent collaborator Professor Helen Margetts, now Director of the Oxford Internet Unit. Also credited were Dunleavy's PPG colleagues Dr Simon Bastow and Jane Tinkler.

Their report *Digital Era Governance: IT Corporations, the State and e-Government* (2006) drew on a study co-directed by Dunleavy and Margetts and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council which looked at e-government changes in seven industrialised nations: the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

Also feeding into the report were value-for-money studies conducted for the UK National Audit Office, including *Government on the Web* (1999), the first ever study of internet use by the UK Government, and *Government on the Web II* (2002). Both of these studies investigated whether the government was likely to achieve its targets for online public service delivery. They earned for Dunleavy and Margetts a 'Making a Difference Award' from the UK Political Studies Association.

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From 2007, Dunleavy and Margetts identified a second wave of changes in digital era governance provoked by developing technologies, the new social media, Web 2.0 and cloud computing. The ideas they explored influenced two further studies for the National Audit Office: Government on the Internet (2007) and Department of Work and Pensions: Communicating with Customers (2009).

What happened?

The LSE Public Policy Group (PPG) work with the UK Government has played a vital role in shaping the evolution of e-government policy.

In 2002, the House of Commons' Public Accounts Committee reviewed the government's progress in delivering web-based services, as measured by the two PPG reports investigating Government on the Web (1999 and 2002). The Committee endorsed all of the reports' recommendations. The Treasury then formally committed government bodies to monitoring their web traffic, encouraging citizens to use online services and paying attention to website design. Such apparently small changes contributed to a significant shift in government thinking about online public services.

The Public Accounts Committee later conducted a hearing at which it considered in detail the 2007 report on Government and the Internet. Professor Dunleavy briefed the National Audit Office's Comptroller and Auditor General at this hearing and the report's findings fed directly into the Committee's conclusions and recommendations, which the Government overwhelmingly accepted. These committed the Government to monitoring usage and website costs, which had previously tended to be buried within integrated service contracts.

Dunleavy was consulted on the detailed design of a new survey of annual web usage and costs. This survey resulted in a new database on Whitehall web costs run initially by the Central Office of Information. Government departments were also encouraged to develop strategies to help citizens switch to online interactions, ensuring parallel offline services for people without digital access. In 2011, the National Audit Office and the Treasury agreed that the savings arising from the 2007 report had reached £4.8 million.

“In some ways, therefore, the real value and influence of [LSE's report] Government on the Web (1999) was less in its specific findings (which inevitably became dated relatively quickly, if not as quickly as we all would have liked) and more in pointing to a different way of framing questions and designing an evidence-based approach to answering them.”

Cabinet Office official, who also described the report as “a powerful synergy of audit and research which reframed important aspects of the debate”.

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The effect of PPG's findings on the Department of Work and Pensions was particularly far-reaching, both stimulating debate in the wider policy community and acting as a catalyst for reform.

The report's conclusions were hard-hitting: the Department was conducting only 0.5 per cent of its transactions online, well below the level of other government departments, and the accuracy and accessibility of its online information gave cause for concern.

Dunleavy and PPG colleagues presented key policy lessons at several high-profile seminars for policy-makers and academics. Dunleavy also drew on the research at an event organised by the Treasury in 2012, comparing the Department of Work and Pension's productivity with that of other government departments.

In this context of heightened scrutiny, the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, launched a programme of large-scale reform with the introduction of a Universal Credit benefit and a wide-reaching austerity programme. In mid-2011, the Department also made a radical policy shift by committing to a 'digital by default' strategy, with the aim of effecting 80 per cent of its transactions online by 2015. A new £1 billion set of IT contracts for delivering universal credit online began in 2012.

The government's understanding of online services has changed dramatically since PPG began its research for the National Audit Office. The results can be seen in citizens' increased take-up of these services and in the greater efficiency, ease-of-access and transparency of government services. The reforms have also significantly reduced costs at a time of dwindling government budgets.

Professor Patrick Dunleavy studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, graduating in 1973. He moved to Nuffield College, Oxford to work on his D.Phil (published as *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945-75*) until 1978. He became a Junior Research Fellow at Nuffield in 1976. He moved briefly to the Open University as Lecturer in Urban Studies (1978-9) before joining LSE as a Lecturer. He was promoted successively to Reader in 1986 and Professor in 1989. Subsequently he founded LSE Public Policy Group in 1992. He became a (founding) member of the Academy of the Social Sciences in 1999.

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