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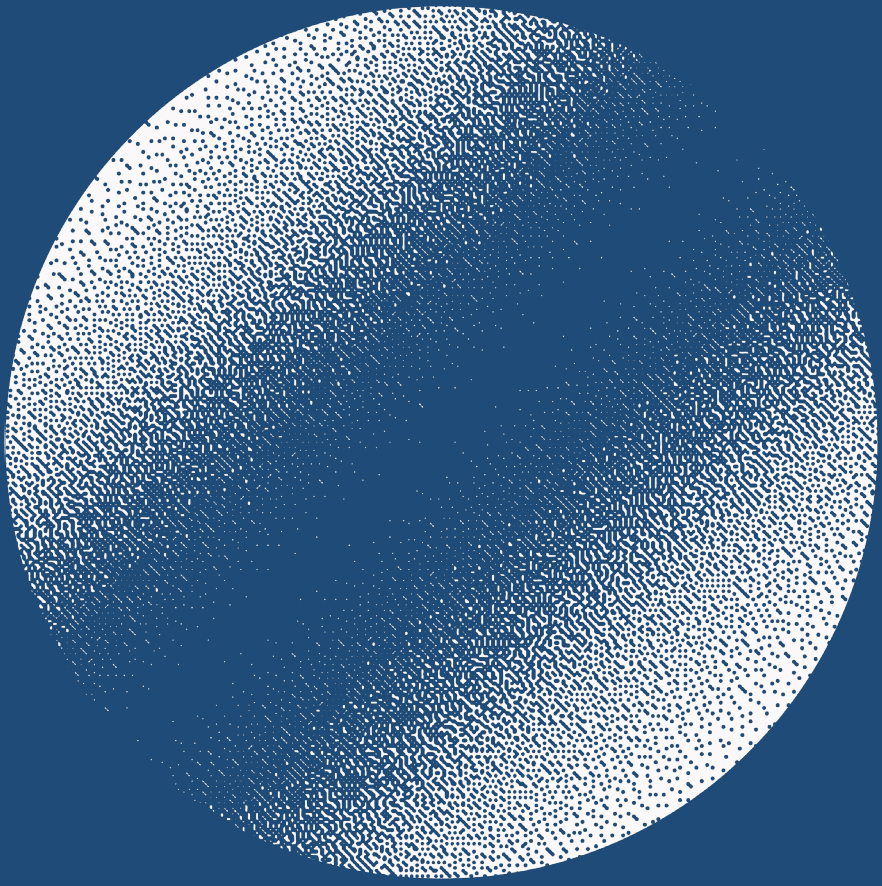
Adopting the practice of

test & learn

Achieving meaningful change
starts with changing how you think



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Foreword

Lara Sampson

At Public Digital, we see user-centred design, modern technology practices and a test and learn approach to change as the three key tenets of becoming a truly adaptive, internet-era business. By embracing these approaches, organisations can remain responsive to evolving customer needs in a fast-paced digital world.

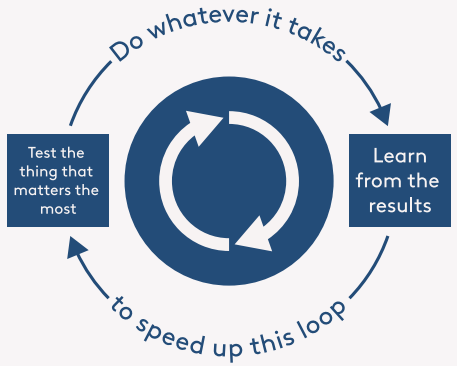
The phrase 'test and learn' in the UK public service sector is becoming commonplace. Some people are not fans: it's too vague, it sounds too small and hesitant, or too akin to pilots (which it isn't). I am a fan - two simple verbs and a conjunctive that mean what they say. That's pretty novel in the world of transformation.

Refreshingly, it's a phrase that does not come from any single profession. It does not belong to the world of technology (agile, SAFE, Kanban), project management (Prince, Lean), policy and strategy development (SWOT, Balanced Scorecard) or change management (Kotter's 8-Step, McKinseys 7-S). There are no manuals, rules or professional accreditations ... yet.

Test and learn does not belong to anyone, and that is important.

One of the biggest blockers to transformation is the brittle functional siloes of organisations, often reinforced by their favourite tools and methods. Test and learn, by contrast, is a way of thinking that can be widely understood, is relevant across whole organisations and even wider systems, and is inherently inclusive - if we take care to keep it so.

So there is a moment, a window of opportunity, when all the professions - the policy makers and the strategists, the technologists and the designers, the procurement specialists and the lawyers, the people professionals and the accountants, the operational delivery experts and the communicators - can corral around a simple, single concept: "We will succeed by testing and learning, changing and adapting, continuously improving in a never ending loop to reach our goal."



Before joining Public Digital, I was Product Director for Universal Credit (UC) at the Department of Work and Pensions. Following the reset of UC in 2013, we created an entirely new way of working and approach to deliver the biggest change to the welfare state since its inception. We were curious and humble about design, passionate about momentum and pace, and fiercely protective of the conditions we created to establish an environment that allowed us to continuously test our hypotheses and learn from feedback loops.

We called this way of working 'test and learn'. It applied to all aspects of the programme and it became the go-to phrase, part of a developing collective language, to explain how we were approaching this challenge. If you search for UC and 'test and learn' in Hansard, it produces over 200 results. We were unashamed that the task was hard, that we didn't have all the answers, and that we were going to invest in a way of working that recognised those facts. The resilience of UC through the pandemic, with the successful support of a 500% surge in demand, was possible due to that wholesale change to our ways of working.

Of course, it is not the only example of test and learn out there - organisations are increasingly striving to work like this. But my experience in UC gave me the confidence that a test and learn approach is not only necessary for the majority of service-based transformations, but that it is wholly possible to establish, embed and scale it even in large, complex environments hindered by decades of history.

I also learned that working in this way, where honesty is valued above false certainty, where learnings are celebrated, where the languages of different professions become familiar and start to mingle, is - dare I say it - actually fun and rewarding.

This collection of articles by my colleagues at Public Digital unpacks what we mean when we talk about test and learn. They offer guidance for how to adopt a test and learn mindset, they give language to the many practices that support this approach, and hopefully they convey some of its potential for creating momentum in transformation.

Whatever profession you are approaching this subject from, success is predicated on its cross-functional corralling power. Look sideways to your colleagues and please share.

What is **test & learn?**

The origins of test & learn, and practical guidance to applying it within your organisation.

> Test and learn is a way of thinking that makes the rewards of ‘agile’ approaches accessible to large organisations with vast estates of legacy systems and heritage ways of working.

Where does test & learn come from?

Lara Sampson

When organisations want to pursue major change or transformation, they have tended to take the same approach.

That is: They define the future state they want to get to, get a group of strategy or policy people to write it down, get a budget to cover the estimated cost of that future, hand over the description to another group of people (most often IT with some business change professionals), hand out the budget based on the production of promises made in business cases, and eventually hand some new IT and process products to operational people to roll them out into the real world.

That approach doesn't sound unwise on the face of it.
So why do most large change/transformation programmes go so wrong?

The answer is that this traditional approach to change is flawed from the very beginning: the point at which the organisation defines its future state, often known as a Target Operating Model.

Designing for human behaviour

If you are building a bridge or a motorway, this traditional approach works. You need a stable blueprint to follow, and you are unlikely to learn something halfway through its construction that means you should radically change your design.

But if you are building services to be used by people to achieve some sort of behaviour change - perhaps how they manage their money, or make buying choices, or engage with health providers - then any 'blueprint' is almost guaranteed to be wrong. This is because human behaviour, unlike the construction and use of a motorway, is inherently unpredictable.

Here's an example: Universal Credit - the UK's working age financial and work support service - is household based. That means couples need to apply as a unit, share their information with each other, and receive the money together to manage. No other country in the world operates a benefit system like this. Consider how many different ways couples in the UK might manage their money: who organises the admin, and how they use different pots for different purposes. You can try to nail a solution down and roll it out, but you will be orders of magnitude wrong.

Which is why the traditional 'waterfall' approach to change doesn't work: It's rooted in a deeply flawed assumption that you can define a solution upfront in the absence of any empirical evidence of how the humans using your services will behave in response.

This inherent unpredictability is compounded by the new reality of the internet era. The context in which your services will operate is changing exponentially faster year on year, making the behaviour of your users even harder to predict.

Instead, designing for human behaviour demands a hypothesis-based approach with a deep willingness to change the design as you go.

The birth of ‘agile’

Decades ago, software developers realised that taking this linear ‘waterfall’ approach was not only risk laden, it was also unnecessary. While you may not easily be able to change the design of a bridge halfway through, the beauty of software development is that you can change its design as often as you like - as long as you are set up for that. They called this new approach ‘agile’ and every internet-era successful business is built on its principles.

However, most large organisations with long heritages don’t have agile software development as part of their origin stories. While some may make the commitment to ‘be agile’, and put pressure on their teams to do so, the cultural and operational obstacles in their way make this a near impossible task.

In fact, it’s the unfeasibility of the sudden adoption of agile in pre-internet organisations that sparked the pointless war of waterfall versus agile - one which many organisations have spent hours in combat over.

The benefits of agile - the reduction of risk through rapid, early delivery and continuous improvement in response to user needs - are only really available when the whole organisation is walking to the same drumbeat. The attempts to put agile technology delivery into waterfall project and programme management (‘wagile’ briefly featured in the lexicon) is truly the worst of all worlds.

Rather than trying to force ‘agile’ on pre-agile organisations, developing a feasible approach to change depends on rethinking what it means to be a modern-day organisation. It means being ready to change your policy and strategy in response to what you learn, and replacing your static target operating model with one that is dynamic and curious as to how it should change and adapt. It means being ready to change the governance of your organisation to value empirical evidence of what works through delivery at pace, over plans which promise that delivery. It means starting small and iterating, avoiding big, one-off investments and ‘big bang’ delivery.

It is about much more than how you do technology, or digital. It is about who and how you are as an organisation. And it is enabled by the idea of test and learn.

The birth of ‘test & learn‘

Test and learn is a way of thinking that makes the rewards of agile approaches accessible to large organisations with vast estates of legacy systems and heritage ways of working, enabling them to pursue transformation at scale and with impact.

It is a complex idea that, when applied, rewires everything about how an organisation thinks and operates, but is broadly defined by three core features:

Starting with problems to solve and outcomes to achieve, not solutions to deliver.
This approach begins with a clear understanding of what you’re trying to achieve for users and the organisation, rather than jumping straight to how you’ll achieve it. It means developing hypotheses about what might work, then gathering empirical evidence by testing those hypotheses with real users in real operating environments as early as possible.

Being humble about hypotheses, plans and strategies, and being ready to change them when you learn new things. Test and learn assumes that your initial designs might not work, and creates space to continuously test and refine them. It understands that wherever you get to on day 1, you will make the design better on day 2, 10 and 50. In fact, that process of incremental change is endless, because test and learn is based around the reality that transformation is not a time-boxed process, and your services will need to be sustained.

Bringing professional experts together into teams with the autonomy to make choices and governance that supports them.
Testing and learning means bringing together people with the relevant skills, knowledge and experience in multidisciplinary teams. It is only with this expertise, gathered together at an early stage, that teams can create hypotheses about what might work and test those out in controlled ways. Crucially, these teams need the authority to act on what they learn.

All organisations can test & learn

Agile methodology isn't universally applicable. The conditions for its success are limited to organisations with software development in their DNA.

But while test and learn is informed by many of the principles of agile, its application is organisation-wide, and so it belongs to everyone. Rather than requiring pre-existing conditions to be successful, it recognises the need to adapt organisational conditions to begin with.

Most organisations aren't naturally set up for test and learn. Its practices may feel unfamiliar, even uncomfortable, and it can be hard to fully grasp until you've tried it yourself.

But in our work supporting countless clients to test and learn, we've seen that all organisations, whatever their context and challenges, are capable of making the changes to accommodate this approach and start transforming more effectively.

While test and learn is informed by many of the principles of agile, its application is organisation-wide, and so it belongs to *everyone*

A practical guide: how to test & learn

By Connie van Zanten

When an organisation is able to test and learn, it has a much better chance of designing and delivering products and services that truly meet the needs of its users. It's especially useful when you are delivering in a context where there is complexity and risk.

At its simplest, taking a test and learn approach involves articulating assumptions and hypotheses about what you think will work, and then testing them with real users in the smallest, fastest and cheapest way possible, in order to learn if those assumptions and hypotheses are correct.

Taking this approach creates 'feedback loops' between ideas and reality. The more feedback loops you have, the more confident you can be that whatever you're changing or attempting will work in practice and have the impact you intended.

Taking this approach will improve the quality of your products and services. It will see you deliver impact more quickly, and is the safest and surest way to scale effective change.

Read on for some practical guidance that will help you take a test and learn approach.

1 Be clear about the outcomes you're aiming for

Whatever transformation, change, or improvement you are attempting, it will be driven by some organisational purpose.

Rather than focusing on the thing you are trying to build, or the deadline you are trying to meet, ask: What are you trying to achieve? What difference are you expecting to make? And what indicators will tell you if you are succeeding? These are the cornerstones around which teams can convene and deliver.

- If your intended outcomes are not clear, clarify them.
- If they are not widely known, communicate them - over and over.
- If they are lengthy and complicated, simplify them to make them easy to remember.

The process of setting your intended outcomes can work best as a collaborative exercise, especially between leaders, key stakeholders and those that will be responsible for doing the work day-to-day.

When outcomes are clearly articulated, widely understood and oriented as the focus of your work, you will have much more freedom to work at pace in testing ideas and hypotheses that you think will achieve impact.

2 Build a multidisciplinary and cross-functional team

Taking a test and learn approach works best when your assumptions and hypotheses are formed collaboratively by a multidisciplinary and cross-functional team. Multidisciplinary means having a range of specialist skills in practices that enable user-centred design and delivery. Cross-functional means having people from different 'functions' of your organisation actively working together.

Gathering this range of experiences, perspectives and skills gives you the best chance of identifying feasible and impactful improvements, and testing them in safe and realistic ways.

Who you need will depend on the problem you're trying to solve, but at its core, the team needs to bring together expertise across operational service delivery, technology delivery, strategy, design and enabling functions like procurement, HR or legal. You are aiming to build a group of people that collectively:

- Have a deep understanding of the policies, strategies or laws governing the service and its users.
- Have hands-on and recent experience of frontline service delivery.
- Have design and delivery management skills, to complement deep subject matter expertise.
- Are empowered to make decisions about how to run the service based on what they learn about the user experience, without having to seek approval through multiple layers of governance.

Depending on the service and how it's delivered, this can also mean bringing together people that work in different organisations.

Once the team has built a shared understanding of how the service operates currently - end-to-end and front-and-back stage - it will be able to use its collective expertise and experience to decide what to try doing differently, and design feasible experiments which will help them understand the impact of that intervention.

Taking the time early on to build a shared understanding of how things work now will vastly accelerate the team's ability to make decisions and collaborate effectively.

3 Find a starting point for testing that sets you up for success

On the one hand, it doesn't really matter what you test first. What matters is that you start, because you'll always learn things you weren't expecting to.

On the other hand, there are certain criteria and enabling conditions which will make it easier to take a test and learn approach, particularly when this is a new way of working in your organisation and you need to demonstrate its value.

For example, it can help to look for an opportunity that:

- **Has clearly bounded scope and scale.**
  Perhaps you can identify one contained cohort of users for whom you will try doing things differently. Or you might start with one specific point or problem in the product or service. Often, it's helpful if your team is equipped to take on or support operational responsibility for delivering the service while you're experimenting.
- **Fits with the organisation's strategic priorities.**
  You won't be wasting your efforts on something that's not valuable for your organisation.
- **Has sponsorship and ownership.**
  You have strong leadership interest and 'cover', and the freedom and protection to work differently.
- **Is end-to-end**.
  You will be able to look at and affect change across the entire user experience. This matters because if you change something in one place, its impact is likely to be felt elsewhere too.
- **Will enable the team to have rapid impact.**
  In other words, you can reasonably expect to demonstrate tangible, measurable impact for users within 3-4 months.
- **Has short feedback loops.**
  You'll be able to set up and run short, small tests that enable you to learn directly and rapidly from users and those that deliver the service.

4 Work in the open

Taking a test and learn approach means accepting and embracing ambiguity, and the fact that we can't know all the answers upfront. That's uncomfortable, and often counter-cultural. To manage that discomfort, the team will benefit from adopting a position of radical transparency, or as we call it at Public Digital, they should commit to 'working in the open'.

This means the team puts conscious effort into making their work visible to people who are not on the team, including senior stakeholders and other colleagues who are interested in or whose work impacts the user experience.

It means continuously sharing information about the team's work and learnings, including not just the successes, but work in progress and efforts that didn't go as planned.

5 Face risks head-on

While experimenting may sound risky, it is actually an incredibly effective way of managing and mitigating risk in complex, ambiguous environments.

As with any experiment, a crucial part of designing your tests must be considering what might go wrong, how you will know, how you will mitigate against that, and how you will ensure you are able to act quickly to respond.

The following steps will help you to do that:

- Ensure the experiment is contained, for example by setting a defined testing period and a fixed number of users.
- Work out and agree in advance what to look out for as indicators the test isn't working. It might be that the experiment itself isn't working, it's not having the intended impact, or it's leading to outcomes you didn't anticipate.
- Undergo different kinds of tests - like comprehension and usability testing - to ensure the experiment is safe before running it in an operational context. It's also always a good idea to do a practice run first.
- Once the experiment is up and running, stay close to it. This is especially important at the start, so you can act quickly as soon as you notice anything amiss or unexpected. A fundamental aspect of taking a test and learn approach is that the team is hands-on and present - they don't set up an experiment and then walk away.

6 Turn governance into a service

Every moment spent preparing for, or reporting to, a governance body is time not spent learning from users, iterating on designs, or delivering value. To test and learn effectively, the team's time must be treated as gold, and they need an approach to governance which reflects that.

Imagine that your governance function is a service provided to delivery teams, designed to make it as easy as possible for them to learn and deliver value quickly and safely. How would you design it to be lightweight, responsive and helpful? What would it look like if governance worked as an enabler, helping delivery teams to be in control, and move at pace in learning and delivery?

For leaders, that means:

- Embedding governance principles into day-to-day delivery processes.
- Going to the team where the work is happening, rather than making them come to you.
- Streamlining approval processes and setting parameters in which the team can act to reduce the need for approvals.
- Focusing on coaching and unblocking over policing and reporting.
- Shifting from rigid stage gates to progressive, real-time guardrails that evolve as you learn more about what will and won't work.

For delivery teams, it means:

- Being open and transparent about what you are doing and why.
- Committing to sharing what you're learning.
- Investing consistent effort in making the work visible as you go, and inviting people in to see it.

Start small, prove the impact

Adjusting to this way of working isn't easy. Organisations are often used to managing change and risk in a very different way, and a new approach can be challenging and uncomfortable.

So, start small. Don't pick the hardest problem, or the biggest one. Focus on getting started, allowing yourselves to learn how to test and learn, and showing that it works.

Set your outcomes and share them far and wide. Work in a multidisciplinary, cross-functional team. Consider the criteria and conditions that will set you up for success. Show the rest of the organisation what you're doing, why, and what you're learning as you go. Name and tackle the risks head on. Work across teams and leaders to develop an approach to governance that is lightweight and responsive, to allow you to learn and deliver at pace.

And as we tell our clients, the main thing is to just get started.

Practices for test & learn

Breaking down the core practices which define a test & learn approach

> Real transformation isn't about forcing change through sheer will.
>
> It's about creating environments where testing and learning feels natural and inevitable.

Leading a service: creating the conditions for test & learn

By Lara Bird

Services are how most organisations achieve their goals, whether that's selling products, enforcing rules or enabling access to money, advice or support.

Given that services are typically the main way to deliver outcomes for users, it's surprising how often organisations focus more on their own functions (finance, strategy, marketing) than on understanding and improving those services.

A test and learn approach to service delivery helps to shift that focus, enabling organisations to prioritise users and the services designed for them. But this shift can't happen without the right conditions in place - around funding, culture and governance - to support a service-led approach.

It's the role of a 'service leader' to build and maintain that environment, taking accountability for the service and creating the space for their team to concentrate on user needs, making smaller, faster changes and adapting through iteration.

While it may not be their official job title, 'service leaders' prove results and build momentum.
And in transformation, momentum is everything.
Here are four steps to being an effective service leader, with some criteria to help measure success along the way.

1 Take accountability for the service

Many different areas of an organisation can influence service outcomes, but it's the service leader who should be wholly accountable for its performance. When a service is sliced into different functions such as operations and digital, each will tend to prioritise according to their unique perspective, without a view of the whole service, its users and its outcomes.

As a service leader, encourage your team to take the users' view of the end-to-end service journey and see how the work of different functions collectively determines the service outcomes.

The concept of having a single person accountable for the performance of a service is still emerging in many organisations, and so often your role will involve being a leader of organisational and cultural change. The service may not be fully mapped, and stakeholders may not agree on its boundaries.

It is only through sustained persuasion and influence that you can establish scope over what is included in the service, enabling you to set up the right teams working on it.

Signs it's going well:

- You know who should be involved in critical decisions about the service, and you have easy access to them.
- Everyone is aligned on a direction for the service, and how to get there.
- You directly interact with the users of your service.

Signs it's not going well:

- The direction of the service is dictated by decisions made outside of the core service team.
- You are seen as leading a process run by a disparate group of people.
- Changes to the service are made in response to complaints, rather than improved wherever possible.

2 Be strategic and clear about what you are prioritising (and what you aren't)

Services provide an excellent frame for the strategic decision-making which informs test and learn approaches. You'll need to define the outcomes the service is looking to achieve, and these will need to align with and contribute to long term corporate goals or broader public sector missions, depending on your context. The service strategy will explain how the service will continually improve its performance against those outcomes.

An effective service strategy needs to account for both the short and long term: you need to be responsive to priorities and events, while addressing systemic challenges. It also needs to incorporate both service priorities and broader goals, such as efforts to build shared capabilities, platforms and data sources. This will inevitably involve making difficult trade-offs; the best service strategies are coherent, energising and clear in describing the path through these trade-offs.

Signs it's going well:

- Your service strategy is communicated in one place.
- You are able to strike the balance between improvement, transformation, managing risk, maintaining delivery and operational effectiveness.

Signs it's not going well:

- If you asked key stakeholders and the service team what the top priorities of the service are, they would all have different answers.
- Your service strategy has not been reviewed for over a year, or since a major event.

3 Inspire and support the teams providing the service

For modern products and services, teams are the fundamental unit of delivery. People working in multidisciplinary teams bring together different perspectives and collaborate on ongoing improvements that make full use of their skills. Strong services do not come from isolated work done by separate functions like policy, operations, design or delivery. They are built by empowered teams working together toward shared goals.

As a leader, you will need to guide a team that looks after the overall performance of the service, alongside smaller teams focused on specific products.

This team must have the right knowledge and skills, but more importantly, it needs trust, open communication and a shared commitment to better outcomes. The team is not just there to deliver. It also shapes the strategy, helps set priorities and responds to changes. Supporting and strengthening this team is one of your most important responsibilities as a service leader.

Signs it's going well:

- There is a permanent, multidisciplinary team who see themselves as working for the service.
- The service team understands the vision and strategy for the service.
- You are actively removing blockers to your team's progress.

Signs it's not going well:

- People in the team see their primary role as being part of their function (e.g. operations) as opposed to being part of the service team.
- People are incentivised based on outputs rather than outcomes.

4 Foster transparency: **Get the information you need to run the service well**

In many large organisations, functions often operate independently and only share essential information to connect their work. However, testing and learning relies on regularly making informed decisions and acting on them quickly, using insights shared across the team. Successful service teams work much more closely together, making decisions as a group and delivering collectively.

To support this, leaders must create strong transparency within the team and across the organisation. Everyone should understand how the service is performing and what it costs. The strategy, roadmap and backlogs should be easy to find and clearly explained. Teams should openly share both successes and challenges so the service can keep adapting and improving.

Signs it's going well:

- There is a single source of truth for the data required to assess service performance.
- There is a direct link from the information you have to the outcomes the service is seeking to achieve.
- Your stakeholders and teams are clear about the priority outcomes.

Signs it's not going well:

- You don't have a clear picture of the cost of the service.
- No one knows or is responsible for monitoring the health of the service.
- Your team's backlogs do not reflect your priorities.

Service leadership starts with the team

When challenging organisational norms, trust matters.

For an organisation to feel confident enough to abandon traditional processes and approaches, your team must earn the trust of senior leaders by delivering results, communicating transparently and demonstrating value for money.

Perhaps the most important part of service leader's job, then, can be summed up as helping the team to do the work to earn that trust. That means finding and training the best people, supporting and protecting their work, providing clarity of vision, and creating a space in which they can make collective decisions and take collective risks.

1 **Take accountability for the service**

2 **Be strategic and clear about what you are prioritising** (and what you aren't)

3 **Inspire and support the teams providing the service**

4 **Foster transparency:** Get the information you need to run the service well

Working in the open:

Chris Fleming

why showing your working out matters for test & learn

Progress is as much about sharing knowledge as creating it.

In the world of academic research, a major turning point came with the invention of the printing press, which enabled researchers to share their work globally and build on one another's findings.

In a similar way, working in the open is how knowledge is shared when organisations use a test and learn approach.

An essential pillar in test and learn, working in the open drives and accelerates many of its advantages. It raises understanding of the issue being tackled, it allows people to see where they fit in the wider process, and - like academic peer review - it invites healthy scrutiny of the mistakes people make along the way.

What is working in the open?

Traditional methods of project communication typically follow these patterns:

- Broadcast: the communications are one-way.
- Hierarchical: only the most senior people are allowed to represent the project.
- Tightly controlled: everything has to be cleared by a separate comms team.
- PR-oriented: the objective is to spin what you're doing to show it in the best possible light.
- Big bang: one big press release happens when the work is 'finished'.

By contrast, working in the open means showing people the work you are doing, as you're doing it. At a minimum this should be people within your team and people across your organisation. Even better is sharing publicly, with interested stakeholders outside your organisation.

Unlike traditional methods of communication, working in the open is not just about demonstrating progress, but also talking openly about mistakes, changes and things you've learned.

How can I work in the open?

Typical examples of working in the open include:

Hosting 'show-and-tell' sessions.
A show-and-tell is a regular (perhaps every 2 weeks) open invite event. The team does a short presentation about recent progress, and allows time for questions at the end. Importantly, the team does not simply give a status update but "shows the thing". That could be prototypes, designs, research or other lightbulb moments.

Publishing regular updates on the team's progress.
For instance by writing and publishing weeknotes*, or writing regular posts about more specific things as they learn them. This could be a set of insights from user research sessions, or the logic behind making a particular choice about a technology.

Publishing code and documentation as open source. When a team is developing a digital service or piece of software they should code in the open wherever possible. Publishing code in public repositories helps teams focus on the quality of their code and documentation. It allows others to build or copy the work that has been done.

Using workplace messaging tools.
This is one of the simplest things you can do to help your teams work in the open more. Posting information in a 'chatroom' rather than sending an email switches the default visibility of a message from closed (only the people copied get it) to open (everyone in the channel or room gets it). This helps the whole team know what's going on, and allows them to discuss important topics together. It also allows discussion to happen asynchronously without the need for a meeting.

Why work in the open?

When your organisation is new to test and learn, working in the open is vital for building a movement for change. At later stages, it optimises and accelerates the rewards of test and learn, and brings added benefits to the way your organisation operates.

Here are some of its advantages:

It builds momentum
You can't practice test and learn when working in a silo. By working in the open, you develop your narrative and bring people with you. Rather than awaiting lengthy comms clearance processes, sharing what you're doing little and often allows you to communicate as the work happens, and increases the chances people will engage across wider audiences.

It improves the quality of your service
As a two-way form of comms, working in the open allows your audience to interact and converse with you, opening up a channel for you to receive feedback. More eyes and earlier eyes on the service, product or project means it will be improved more quickly and at lower cost/risk.

It builds trust
Working in the open provides a window onto your world. It keeps you on the radar of key stakeholders, like decision-makers and funders, who can gain a much clearer understanding of your progress from working in the open than they would from a status report on a slide. What's more, helping people understand why you've made the decisions you have builds trust.

It manages dependencies
Legacy organisations tend to try and manage dependencies in large spreadsheets. This may allow one person (the owner of the spreadsheet) to understand dependencies. But working in the open allows everyone to see what's in flight, and identify and manage dependencies for themselves.

It helps you manage and persist knowledge
Working openly enables you to build an open store of understanding and insight over time about how and why things have been done. This makes it easier for others to copy or pick up where you left off. It allows others to link to what you are doing and explain.

It helps staff feel good about their work
Working in the open empowers everyone on the team to showcase their expertise about what they're doing and why. It builds confidence in communications skills and helps everyone feel like they are contributing. Plus, digital professionals like to be able to work in the open: If your organisation can show that it works this way, you will attract more of the people you need.

Optimising test and learn

Just like experimentation in science, successful experimentation in test and learn relies on a forum in which results can be communicated and challenged.

By working openly, you not only provide stakeholders with a window onto the work, but you form a two-way channel with other experts across disciplines - and ideally across organisations and communities of practice - who can build on and learn from your findings.
As such, it is probably the lowest-cost, highest-impact way to optimise your test and learn approach, and to build trust, confidence and understanding across your organisation.

Progress is as much about sharing knowledge as creating it.

Designing for users:

Dr Saw Nwe

The role of user-centredness in test & learn

Every change in organisations, whether at the system level or the service level, impacts human behaviour, experiences and outcomes. All the groups involved - including the internal teams who deliver services and the external service users who use them - have their own goals, challenges and needs they're trying to meet when interacting with the service. These are user needs.

At its core, test and learn is a user-centred approach to change. It embeds user-centred methods at every stage and demands that teams make decisions based on what they learn about users, prioritising meeting those needs and driving the right outcomes for users.

When decisions are grounded in real evidence - rather than assumptions - about what users need, we can make changes that solve the right problems.

From ‘responding to demand’ to ‘meeting needs’

In my work as a doctor delivering health services in the NHS and a consultant working with public and private organisations, I have repeatedly observed how organisations respond to change. The innate response is to add more: more process, more layers of governance, more tools, more complexity.

Over time, the service swells. It becomes a beast of its own, becoming harder to navigate for both people working inside it and those trying to access it. Ultimately, it pushes the organisation further away from the human needs of the people it was designed to serve.

As a result, services become confusing or inaccessible. Staff feel overwhelmed, people feel underserved. This shifts the system into firefighting mode: reacting to problems rather than preventing them. We see failure demand rise, leading to poor outcomes at an individual level, organisational level and at a wider systemic level.

Organisations are meant to respond and react to change. But when rising demand is seen as a pressure to be managed, it can trigger a sterile, aseptic approach to change that prioritises process over people and control over curiosity.

Instead, a test and learn approach and the user-centredness it mandates forces organisations to shift their mindset to: “What are our users trying to achieve, why, and how might we help them achieve it?”.

Take a generic application service, in which users submit application forms with the goal of getting approval. If the service consistently receives a high volume of incomplete applications, the organisation might try to control the problem by imposing processing targets on the service teams. But a user-centred approach compels the organisation to understand why users aren’t completing forms correctly in the first place, and strives to fix that problem. It could be due to unclear instructions, inaccessible content or poorly designed user interfaces.

How test and learn helps organisations be user-centred

Test and learn involves teams starting with just enough insight from initial user research to take action by building early prototypes. Those prototypes are then tested with users in real contexts, enabling teams to gather insights from what they see, hear and measure. With each cycle of testing and learning, their understanding of users deepens, informing decisions and shaping interventions that lead to better outcomes.

As such, the process brings to light the real, lived experiences of people affected by change - experiences that often get buried under layers of process, governance and urgency. It makes the invisible visible. It rebuilds empathy which can fade as complexity grows. And it reconnects siloed teams to the core purpose of change: who it's for and why it matters.

When accompanied by fast feedback loops, the user-centred practices embedded throughout test and learn help organisations to:

- Learn if a theoretical idea leads to intended outcomes in practice.
- Understand user behaviour and responses to change.
- Surface unintended consequences early.
- Validate what works - and stop what doesn't.

Critically, this approach helps organisations test risky assumptions and de-risk high-stakes interventions on a small scale - before investing in a large scale roll out.

Case study: **Transforming post-referral processes in Nottinghamshire's Safeguarding Hub**

Public Digital used a test and learn approach in our work with Nottinghamshire's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to help the service identify and support children's needs earlier, before crisis or escalation of needs.

We brought together a multi-agency team with deep knowledge of the service, including those who deliver and access it day to day. Using a user-centred, test and learn approach, we helped the team understand the problems, test ideas and iterate them based on what they learned in real time - all within a high-risk environment.

One issue we prioritised was streamlining the team's process between receiving referrals and taking action. Previously, a single MASH officer recorded and passed referrals to a social worker, adding multiple back and forth processes between teams. Instead, we tested a system in which a multi-agency team - including a MASH officer, social worker, police officer, nurse and education adviser - triaged and assessed referrals together in real time.

This led to faster information sharing, holistic assessment of needs, and quicker support. In one case, the team assessed a referral about a pregnant woman and concerns for her unborn child. The new system enabled the team to immediately put safeguarding measures in place, including arranging a mental health check-in at her midwife appointment the next day. Previously, that level of coordination would have taken days.

This was just one example. The team continued testing and learning to scale their approach - and the more they did, the more they learnt about their users.

The cost of not being user-centred

Many leaders feel they don't have time or investment to be user-centred.

But in reality, they don't have time not to be. When change (policy, service, product) is implemented without understanding user needs and testing solutions in real-world context, it can lead to costly rework later down the line. Designing blindly in this way can result in duplicated effort, loss of trust and poor outcomes - for both users and for the organisation.

In healthcare for example, user-centredness has a direct impact on patient safety, experiences and health outcomes. An online patient portal might give users immediate access to their clinical letters or test results. While it is important for patients to have access to their health records, a lack of user-centred approaches in product design, or failing to test and learn with real users, can have unintended consequences. Patients might read distressing diagnoses without context, or receive blood results without clinical interpretation, leading to anxiety and confusion. This creates failure demand as patients call for clarification or submit complaints, straining already stretched resources and trust.

The cost of not being user-centred can be harmful at an organisational level too. One NHS Trust implemented a voice recognition software assuming it would replace administrative support. Staff were cut to make a case for investment, but the technology didn't deliver intended results in practice. Clinicians were left to face the direct consequences of duplicated work and increased workload, and an investment in an unusable solution that didn't meet users needs. Had the organisation taken a user-centred, test and learn approach - testing with one group, learning and then scaling or stopping - it could have avoided these human and organisational costs.

Everyone plays a role in user-centredness

A test and learn approach - and its process of continuously understanding and designing for user needs - enables organisations to adapt and respond to change before reaching a crisis point.

It's an approach that works because it recognises that considering user needs isn't a luxury or a tick box exercise, or just a problem for design teams. Instead, everyone has a role in positioning users at the centre of decision making and prioritisation, and in doing so, delivering better outcomes for the people they serve.

Understanding behaviour:

designing conditions where test & learn thrives

Millie Devereux

For many organisations attempting to implement test and learn, the biggest challenge they face isn't one of method or organisational intent. Most people understand why small iterations are better than big launches, and why testing with users beats guessing. Often, the problem isn't awareness – it's behaviour.

Whether it's asking civil servants to adopt new ways of working, customers to use unfamiliar digital services, or leaders to embrace uncertainty, introducing test and learn involves asking people to change how they behave.

When transformation efforts zero in on processes, tools and training, they overlook a crucial truth: humans don't behave the way traditional management theory assumes. Our actions are shaped by our unconscious biases, habits and social cues.

As behavioural science has shown for decades, we tend to stick with what's familiar, copy those around us and favour short-term wins over long-term gains. It's no wonder so many digital strategies look so shiny on paper but falter in reality – they're built around how we think people *ought* to act, not how they *actually behave*.

Working with human psychology, not against it

Test and learn is a powerful way to embed lasting change. But it also clashes with some deep behavioural and cultural biases. Most of us feel safer with plans, control and clear predictability.

The key isn't to fight these instincts but to design with them. By understanding how people actually behave, we can shape environments where better behaviours happen by default.

At Public Digital, we've seen this firsthand across dozens of transformation efforts. The organisations that succeed don't just mandate new processes – they create the conditions where test and learn behaviours emerge naturally. They make the right things easy and the wrong things hard.

Many of the approaches that work best in transformation align closely with behavioural science – even if they're not always labelled that way.

Here are five that make a consistent difference:

1. Celebrating small wins to overcome fear of uncertainty

Most of us instinctively avoid uncertainty. When faced with complex challenges, we typically either wait until we feel "ready" (which rarely happens) or create elaborate plans trying to predict every detail (which almost never works).

Test and learn works better when we break big changes into small, low-risk experiments. By creating early wins and showing visible progress, we tap into how confidence actually grows - through a series of small successes rather than one perfect leap.

When Universal Credit was reset in 2013, the team started with just 20 users in Sutton before gradually expanding. This wasn't just good delivery practice - it aligned with how people actually process change and build confidence.

Similarly, Netflix didn't try to disrupt the entertainment industry overnight. They began with DVDs in the post, testing and learning as they went.

In each case, these organisations avoided the trap of trying to launch perfect solutions all at once. Instead, they made it safe to test ideas early and build on what actually worked.

2. Making the invisible visible

You can't learn and respond effectively if you can't see the results of your tests. Our brains pay most attention to what's right in front of us, not abstract concepts or distant outcomes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK's testing programme used prominent displays showing tests processed and turnaround times. This simple change helped teams focus on test results reaching people in time to be useful (an outcome) rather than just raw testing capacity (an output).

Don't just talk about user needs and outcomes - make them impossible to ignore. Put quotes from your users in team spaces. Share real stories in meetings. Celebrate teams who improve real outcomes, not just those who hit delivery milestones.

When we can see immediate feedback from users and the impact of our changes, we naturally adjust to make things better.

3. Moving from blame to learning

For test and learn to work, people need to feel safe taking risks. But in most organisations, there's a powerful force blocking this: fear of being blamed when things go wrong.

Traditional ways of holding people accountable often punish perceived failure and reward following processes. This creates an environment where avoiding risk matters more than learning, which kills the very experimentation that test and learn requires.

The fix isn't complicated, but it requires intentional change. When things go wrong (as they inevitably will), focus on what was learned rather than who is at fault. Create team charters that explicitly prioritise learning over blame. Have leaders visibly celebrate valuable lessons, not just successes.

We've seen organisations dramatically increase experimentation by replacing audits focusing on failure with more positive learning reviews. This simple shift creates the conditions where teams feel safe to take the calculated risks that test and learn demands.

4. Overcoming our tendency to hide

Test and learn thrives on transparency and shared learning. But let's be honest - most of us feel more secure hiding our work until it feels finished. This tendency slows down learning and prevents others from contributing valuable insights early on.

When the Government Digital Service made all its code repositories public by default and ran weekly show-and-tells where teams shared work in progress, they weren't just following good practice - they were reshaping social norms.

The key is making sharing easier than hiding. Use tools that make working in the open the default. Have leaders share their messy first drafts. Create team rituals that make early sharing normal, not scary.

5. Funding teams to create space for learning

We consistently underestimate how long things will take, something behavioural scientists call the planning fallacy.

Project-based funding makes this worse by creating artificial deadlines that force teams to deliver predetermined outputs regardless of what they're learning. By funding stable teams rather than time-limited projects, we create the space for genuine testing and learning. Teams can pursue outcomes rather than outputs, adjust based on what they discover, and build on their knowledge rather than disbanding just as they're gaining momentum.

This approach recognises that digital services are never really "finished". More importantly, it creates space for teams to test approaches, learn from users, and continuously improve rather than rushing to deliver predetermined features before the money runs out.

Making test and learn inevitable

Test and learn might sound like common sense - of course you'd try things, see what works and adjust. But it represents a profound shift in how organisations approach uncertainty.

If there's one thing I've learnt from applying behavioural science, it's that real transformation isn't about forcing change through sheer will. Nor is it about finding perfect solutions or quick fixes.

Instead, it's about creating environments where testing and learning feels natural and inevitable.

Relational contracting:

test & learn across organisational boundaries

Liam Sloan

Since 2024, Public Digital and the Government Outcomes Lab at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government have been working with both UK public sector commissioners and service providers from the charitable and private sector to explore how a more relational approach to public sector contracting can better support iterative service delivery.

Over the last 25 years, continuous delivery with fast feedback loops and rapid iteration has become mainstream. Digital products as diverse as Duolingo to the NHS App change daily to better meet user needs.

Today, test and learn is also being used within deeply interpersonal human services. Public Digital supports multidisciplinary teams which use continuous experimentation and iteration to improve healthcare, social care and employment provision.

But the state also contracts out a large number of these types of public services to third party organisations to deliver. Here, the professional disciplines involved in procuring and contracting outside providers create particularly high barriers to adopting test and learn.

The perils of contracting out

At its best, contracting out important areas of public service provision to charities or businesses can improve quality and responsiveness, introduce innovation, and improve efficiency.

At its worst, high profile scandals and provider failures have brought many to question whether the state should rely on outsourcing to deliver public services at all.

Both stereotypes have some truth to them. In my experience working in this arena over the last 15 years, the difference between success and failure often comes down to the relationship between commissioners and providers. Are both organisations aligned to achieve the same outcomes? How openly are they working with each other? How are they learning together? How are they able to adapt service provision to respond to that learning?

In other words: does the contracting approach encourage test and learn across organisational boundaries, or is it the worst of 'waterfall', assuming that a detailed specification defined upfront will be right and that any deviation from it is a breach of what has been agreed?

The more you look at this problem, the more you see that the norms of buying in the public sector - procurement, legal and contract management processes - are stacked against adopting outcomes-focussed, relational, test and learn ways of working. And often this isn't about what the rules and regulations actually allow, but about the way they are interpreted and applied by corporate functions that remain stubbornly disconnected from actual service delivery.

What's *really* the biggest risk?

In its essence, a contract is a mutual agreement describing how a relationship will work, what happens if something changes, and how risks are managed.

Traditional transactional legal approaches to contracting involve trying to nail down exactly how a service will be delivered, replete with KPIs and a payment mechanism to enforce this, and attempting to name every potential risk upfront and what will happen if it occurs. The academic name for this is "presentiation": an attempt to bring possible future occurrences into the present through a legal document.

This approach assumes we know upfront what will work. In this world, the biggest risks are perceived to be providers trying to cheat the system or take advantage of public bodies, or proper processes not being followed.

But anyone with experience of working on frontline public service delivery knows that attempting to achieve perfect foresight is futile. Whether it's the economy, service user demographics, the context and environment for the service, or simple human behaviour - everything will change to frustrate the best laid plans.

That means that a well-run service should constantly test, learn and adapt to continue to achieve its outcome. You must optimise for learning and adaptation, not efficiency.

In reality, the biggest risk in contracting out is that a service simply fails to achieve the desired outcome because it has been set up wrong and can't adapt to change, resulting in wasted public money.

Collaborating in hushed tones

When contracting out service provision, the only way to unlock adaptive approaches is through a truly relational partnership between commissioners and providers based on learning and collaborating together to achieve shared outcomes. This requires working openly, putting in the effort to build trust, and expecting to adapt when assumptions are proven wrong or conditions change.

We know from our research that some commissioners try to work this way with their providers, but have to do so in "hushed tones," working informally outside of what the contract actually says or out of sight of procurement colleagues.

The irony is that the rules do allow you to work in this way intentionally. Dialogue and co-design are explicitly championed in the UK's new procurement regulations, and formal procedures have existed for years to collaboratively innovate and co-create new services together iteratively.

The barrier to this way of working is usually a lack of knowledge, ingrained professional practices, and aversion to the risk of doing things differently.

At the same time, simply asking public bodies and providers to "be more relational" feels reductive. There remain important considerations about fair procurement processes, safeguarding public money, and protecting against corruption which must be held onto.

How to work relationally, formally

Resolving these tensions requires a way of working which is both explicitly relational yet still formally codified in a contract; one which recognises the anthropological yin of contracts alongside their lawyerly yang.

A commitment to dialogue, openness and learning needs to run through the process: from shaping a service, through procurement and contract management. But at its heart should be a collaboratively co-designed charter, describing how the partners will work together, to sit within or alongside the formal legal contract.

Many multidisciplinary teams already have such a charter in place. It becomes even more important when a team stretches across multiple organisations.

This should be a formal (but not necessarily legally binding) document acting as a constitution for the work - less concerned with specifying precise deliverables, and more concerned with structuring how partners work together. It should be written to be accessible: short enough to be pinned up on the wall so that everyone can see it and memorise it. It should specify:

- What is the shared outcome we are all working towards?
- How are we going to work together? What shared principles will underpin this project?
- What governance processes will we put in place so that, as partners, we can hold each other to account for working like this?

The cultural acts of co-creating such a charter, of centring it in the service's day-to-day identity, and referring to it repeatedly to remind everyone of their obligations, are powerful social mechanisms to build and nurture relational working. They emphasise the importance of mutual agreement and shared accountability for success. Both principles (such as openness, sharing learning, expecting to pivot, and tolerating failure in the learning process) and processes (such as regular retrospectives, open book accounting, data-sharing and joint reporting) can be brought into the light and championed as the fundamental behaviours that underpin successful service delivery.

This will never replace the legal clauses needed in a broader public sector contract that provide strict performance levers and safeguards, such as defining liabilities if things go wrong, and specifying terms around Intellectual Property. But alongside these, the charter will not only hold partners accountable for outputs and outcomes, but also how they collaborate to pursue them.

An approach like this could be transformational in improving people's understanding of what good contracted service delivery should feel like. We are about to start working with commissioners across the public sector to test this approach and create online resources to help put this into practice.

You can follow
our progress here:

With thanks to Connie van Zanten and Cate McLaurin (Public Digital) and Dr Felix-Anselm van Lier and Michael Gibson (Government Outcomes Lab, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford).

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The potential of **test & learn**

Exploring the possibilities of a test & learn approach within the private and public sector

> Test & learn is more than a delivery method **- it's a mindset shift.**
>
> It makes your business more responsive, more agile, and more able to adapt to the evolving needs of customers and colleagues.

Why test & learn is the competitive advantage every business needs

Linda Essen-Möller

The rate of change businesses face today is no longer linear - it's exponential. AI is compressing timelines, disrupting operating models, and redrawing the expectations of customers and colleagues in real time. Success in a competitive and fast-evolving market depends not on having the best five-year plan or static target operating model, but on an organisation's ability to sense, test and adapt faster than the competition.

Yet many large businesses continue to struggle - not for lack of ambition, but because execution rarely matches intent.

Too often, transformation in commercial organisations is led top-down, anchored in rigid models and strategic roadmaps designed for control and stability, not for speed and adaptability. But what works on a spreadsheet rarely survives contact with the complexity of real teams, systems and customer demands. Without practical investment in team readiness, even the best strategy fails to land.

This is where a test and learn approach becomes a game-changer. While often associated with the public sector, this way of working is quietly delivering major benefits in commercial organisations too.

Working with commercial organisations to test and learn

The challenges above were familiar to one of our clients: a major UK telecoms provider. With new leadership in place, they had set out to overhaul the organisation's operating model - breaking down silos and shifting to agile, service-aligned teams.

Our work with them revealed four powerful ways that test and learn creates competitive advantage:

1 Test and learn mitigates risk, giving teams a safe environment to experiment, adapt and build practical capability where it matters most.

Organisations must constantly adapt and experiment to stay ahead of the curve. Test and learn enables teams to try new ways of working, trial emerging technologies, and adapt delivery methods in context - building real capability, not just buying it. Instead of betting big on untested assumptions, businesses can start small - in a low-risk area - and scale what works. This de-risks change and develops the capacity to flex and respond: generating real-time data and proving impact before investing more.

Working with our client, we used a test and learn approach to help transform a rigid target operating model by establishing 'beacon projects': focused teams testing new methods in real delivery contexts. The beacons not only provided a space where new ways of working could be trialled and refined, but they helped de-risk changes to the organisation's operating model, testing new structures and agile practices before wider adoption. This strengthened compliance and governance by embedding secure, adaptive ways of working into the delivery process.

More broadly, a test and learn approach also mitigates risk in digital delivery and strategic decision-making. By enabling teams to validate customer needs early, this approach reduces the risk of building features or services that miss the mark, and the risk of overcommitting to ideas that look good on paper but falter in practice. Strategic hypotheses - such as new market opportunities, pricing models or operating structures - can be tested in controlled environments before significant investment.

Crucially, test and learn provides a space in which emerging technologies or vendors can be trialled safely, surfacing integration issues, capability gaps or hidden cost. Those are particularly vital when exploring AI, where risks like user trust, bias, and team readiness are best addressed experimentally.

2 Test and learn allows businesses to reshape the way their teams operate, unlocking opportunities for cost-saving and productivity improvements.

Too often, the customer's end-to-end experience is overlooked and organisations forget to ask: What are the services we're delivering, and how should our teams be shaped to support that?

Test and learn exposes these blind spots. It allows you to reimagine team structures based on real service flows and outcomes, rather than internal needs.

We helped our client introduce multidisciplinary teams and apply a test and learn approach to shift the focus from outputs to outcomes. The empowered teams worked across an end-to-end journey, improving autonomy, planning and communication to increase efficiencies and reduce silos. As a result, one of the beacon teams saw a 23% increase in productivity and another an opportunity to cut product feature delivery cycles from 18 months to just 2–3 months, representing an 83% improvement. The result was millions in annual savings.

As well as productivity and cost-saving improvements like these, reimagining team structures around services - rather than standalone projects - creates a compounding return on every new initiative. Whereas funding projects or specific outputs demands the expense of onboarding consultants, building context, and resetting delivery rhythms for every new project, funding service-oriented teams helps retain institutional knowledge and reduce onboarding overheads, minimising costs and increasing impact.

3 Test and learn helps you to codify relevant approaches once proven successful.

Playbooks are often created as static PowerPoint slides: heavy on theory, light on impact and rarely used. Test and learn opens up possibilities for new approaches.

Faced with the challenge of supporting our client's newly formed delivery teams at pace, we used a test and learn approach to build an internal online manual, designed for practical, day-to-day use. Instead of locking knowledge into long documents, we set up a new service team that codified the approaches proven to be effective in the beacon projects.

From how-to guides on agile planning to quick-start templates for team ceremonies, every piece reflected real user feedback and field-tested practice, and took the form of short, accessible articles. Teams pasted feedback and comments directly onto the articles to stimulate debate and feedback loops as more staff tried out the new ways of working.

This iterative, user-led approach ensured that the online manual remained relevant as ways of working evolved. It became a living, accessible resource - codifying emerging practices, improving consistency, and reducing the time taken for new teams to get up to speed.

4 Test and learn shows that transformation is repeatable.

In large, complex organisations, change is often seen as a risk. But a test and learn approach flips that mindset. By proving value quickly - faster delivery, better margins, stronger outcomes - it shows that transformation isn't just possible, it's repeatable.

Test and learn provides the data to back up why a new model works better, and that data creates a ripple effect, making change across the organisation more likely to win sponsorship. While early wins fuel confidence in new ways of working, real data supports better forecasting and smarter investment.

The success of our client's beacon projects enabled us to expand our test and learn approach by introducing modern engineering practices. This helped teams remove 75% of unnecessary dependencies and reduce the cost per defect by 96.7%, significantly boosting both efficiency and quality.

In this way, one team's success became a model others want to follow. Change stopped being a top-down directive and became a shared ambition.

Test and learn as a mindset shift

At its best, test and learn is more than a delivery method - it's a mindset shift. It makes your business more responsive, more agile, and more able to adapt to the evolving needs of customers and colleagues.

It delivers results - and builds belief in your ability to keep evolving, and succeeding.

By proving value quickly — faster delivery, better margins, stronger outcomes — test and learn shows that transformation isn't just possible, it's repeatable.

Beyond programmes:

Audree Fletcher

changing how we change in the public sector

In the public sector internationally and in the UK, programmes have long been governments' go-to vehicle for making major changes to public services.

The UK's Government Functional Standard calls programmes "unique, temporary, flexible organisations created to coordinate and oversee the implementation of projects and related work". In brief, they are there to produce a set of pre-specified changes or outputs, and then vanish.

This mode of delivery holds a broad appeal for central government: As well as being codified and institutionalised, the size and flexibility of programmes enable useful opportunities for scope creep, while political figures benefit from their big numbers and strategic importance.

Programmes have their place in public service delivery. But where they are implemented in order to create a service or transform a service, this approach of discontinuous, one-off change carries a heavy cost.

There is an alternative approach for building, evolving and sustaining public services over their whole lifecycle. That approach, at its heart, is test and learn.

Programmes and the fantasy of one-off change

The change infrastructure of government operates under the assumption that transformation is a one-off: a significant and abrupt change to the status quo.

The expectation is that once the change is complete the programme can be wrapped up, making way for other projects in the government portfolio. At the point of programme closure, the programme director moves onto the next big thing, the delivery team is wound down, and responsibility for maintaining and running the service passes over to a service management team expected to "keep the lights on".

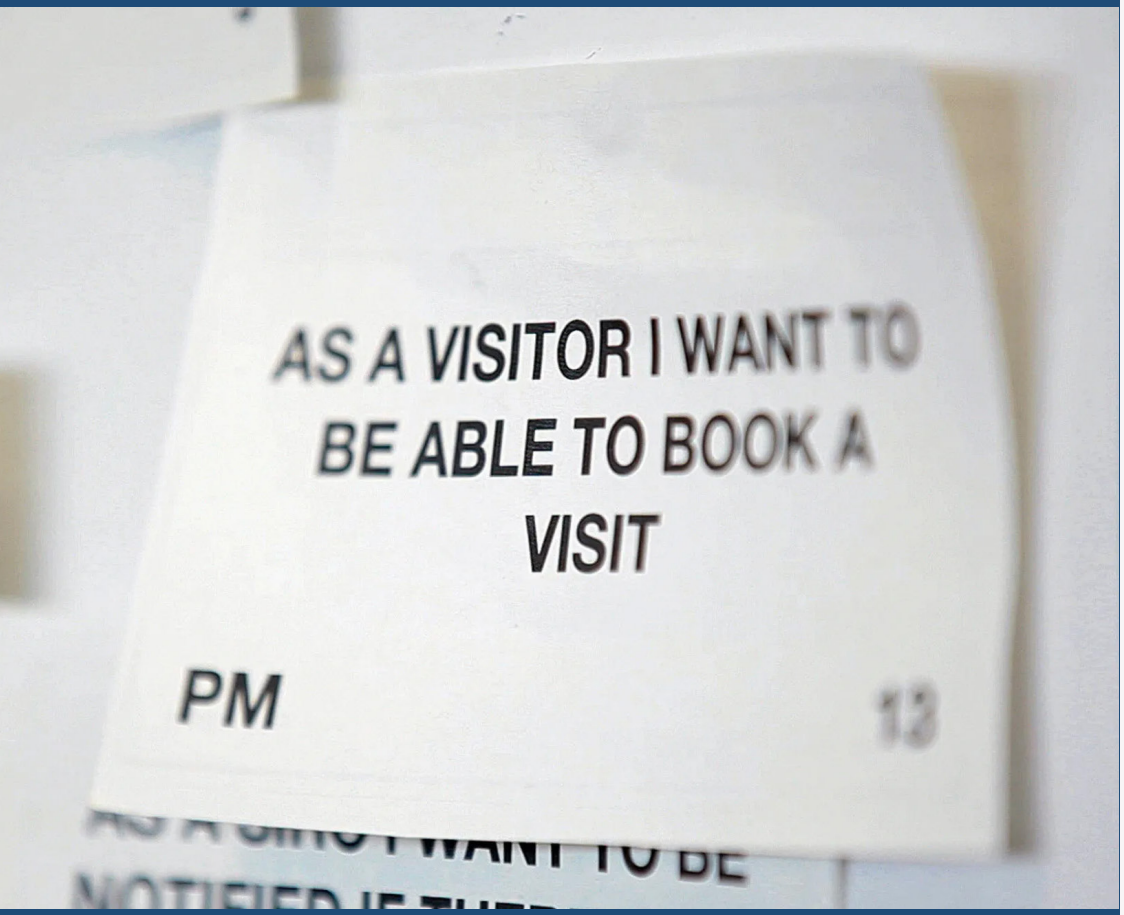
This logic is reinforced by government frameworks - across funding, governance and delivery - which are often split into two categories: "change" and "business-as-usual" (BAU). After change is finished, the logic follows, only the running of the service and occasional maintenance is required.

Even at a conceptual level this is deeply flawed, because - unlike programmes - services endure and must continue to meet evolving needs. They exist as long as the public needs them and must continuously improve with proactive lifecycle management, supported by appropriate stewardship, governance and funding.

The change infrastructure of government operates under the assumption that

transformation is a one-off:

a significant and abrupt change to the status quo



The cost of discontinuous change

The strategy of building services through ‘big bang’ programmes creates a landscape of services which consistently fail to deliver outcomes.

Some programmes become ‘Cinderella’ services which, funded at or below subsistence levels, steadily decline over time. A notable example is the Ministry of Justice prisons visits service, designed to help citizens book visits with people in prisons. The service was well researched, well-designed, given adequate BAU headcount and funding, and saw reassuring take-up after its launch in 2014, but a 2020 report revealed that once built, “the funding disappeared, the service atrophied, the tech stack atrophied, and take-up fell right away”.

Other programmes, despite their pre-set closure dates, fail to actually end. Instead, they get caught in an endless loop of programme resets and renewals, unable to escape their ‘unfeasible’ label. In these cases, scope creep becomes ever harder to resist.

A model for sustaining public services: test and learn

Our current approach is defined by high-scrutiny programme governance, project-centric business cases, and stage-gated project phases. It doesn't fit the risk profile, shape and pace of service transformation. It doesn't deliver continuous improvement or support service stewardship, because as an approach it's over-engineered upfront, and under-supportive over the longer term.

There certainly is a place for programmes in the public sector. But we also need an approach to delivery that works for building, evolving and sustaining public services over their whole lifecycle, and which acknowledges the reality that improving services is not a short-term deliverable, but a continuous process.

A test and learn approach meets those needs, but it requires major culture change in central government:

- We need to fix funding in traditional 'run and maintain' phases so that it covers significantly more than just software patches and licensing. If service funding disappears when a programme closes, this effectively sets an expiry date on the service - the start of its steady decline.
- We need long-term stewardship of services by an enduring service team. That means moving away from teams disbanded at the end of a programme, and moving towards funding and organisation design that allows leaders to build permanent, cross-functional, multidisciplinary teams.
- We need governance appropriate for sustaining services, supporting decision-making at the pace of delivery (rather than at pre-defined stage gates) with a focus on continuous improvement against outcomes over the long-term.
- We need to recognise spending on sustaining services as the strategic investment that it is: something that will build and retain asset value, and avoid service decline and obsolescence.

Much of this change is held back by current government accounting and spending control models: the Treasury focuses largely on projects with high net present value (NPV) and a calculated whole lifetime cost, concepts which aren't easily applied to services without an expiry date. What's more, funding in the form of capital expenditure is more readily available than the operational expenditure budgets required for building enduring service teams.

Despite these obstacles, the last few years have seen a slow but steady emergence of service-centric operating models across central government and agencies. HM Treasury has indicated intent to shift away from traditional, waterfall governance towards service-focused funding models, and the Test, Learn, Grow programme established by the Cabinet Office in 2025 aims to rewire central government to enable these approaches.

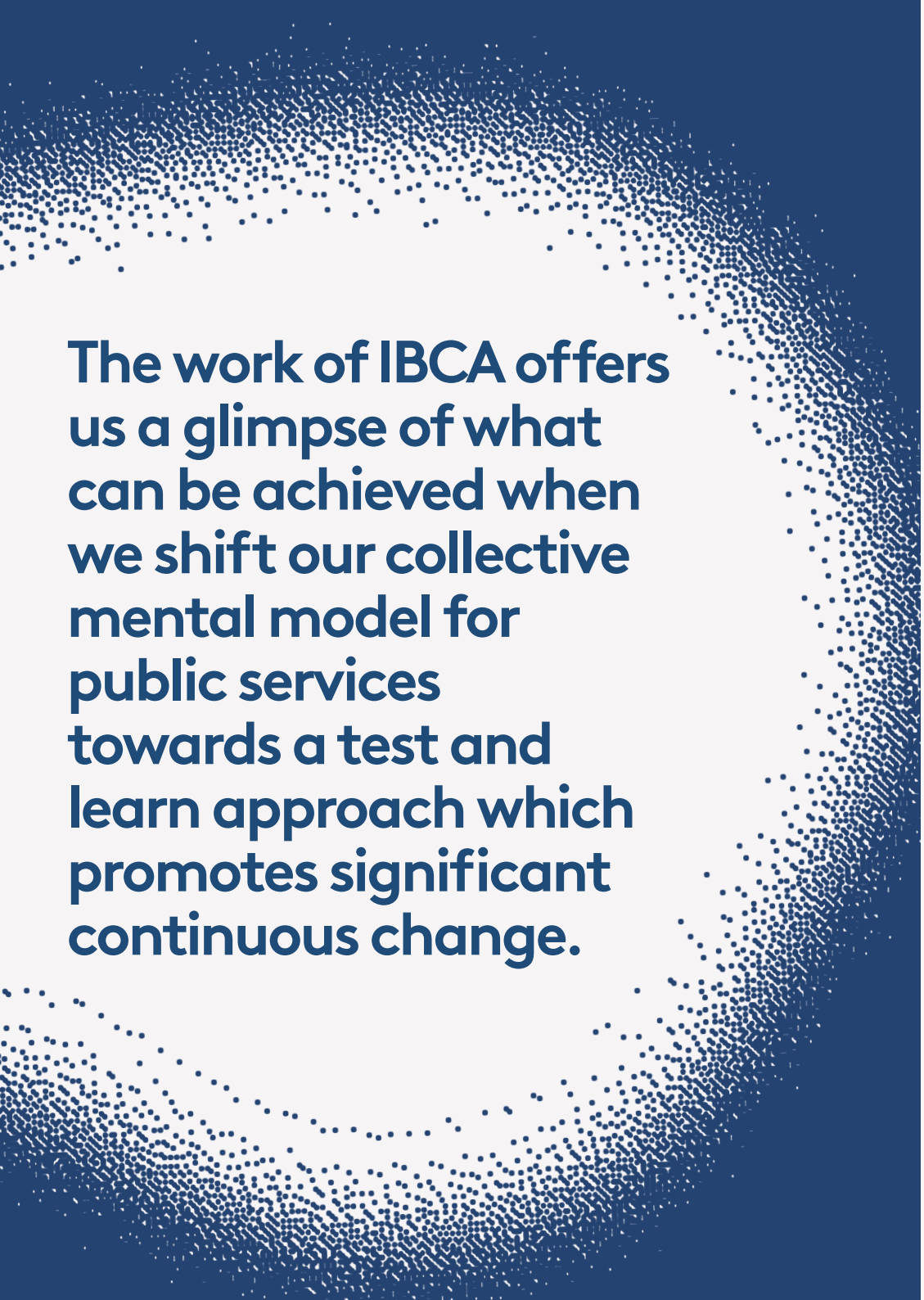
In fact, since the start of the Labour government in 2024, there have been stronger signals of intent - and occasional real examples - toward adopting continuous models of change. In 2024, Pat McFadden, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, called for the adoption of a test and learn approach within the civil service. At the same time, outliers such as the Infected Blood Compensation Authority (IBCA) have taken a new approach to delivery based on sustaining services.

Signs of culture change: the work of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority

In 2024, Public Digital began work with IBCA to design a compensation service for the thousands of people affected by the scandal in which men, women and children in the UK were given infected blood and blood products by the NHS.

The work of IBCA, as an arms length body set up to take a digitally enabled approach to delivery, is a striking example of a test and learn approach in government. As its CEO recently explained "by starting small, testing and learning, we can develop and improve the service quickly, meaning payments will be made sooner for everyone".

The impact of this continuous approach to change - in contrast to typical 'big bang' approaches to delivering public services - has increased the pace of delivery. It can typically take approximately 2-3 years to set up a compensation scheme after regulations are laid, but IBCA was able to make the first payments within 4 months.



Changing how we change

The work of IBCA offers us a glimpse of what can be achieved when we shift our collective mental model for public services from discontinuous ‘big bang’ change towards a test and learn approach which promotes significant continuous change.

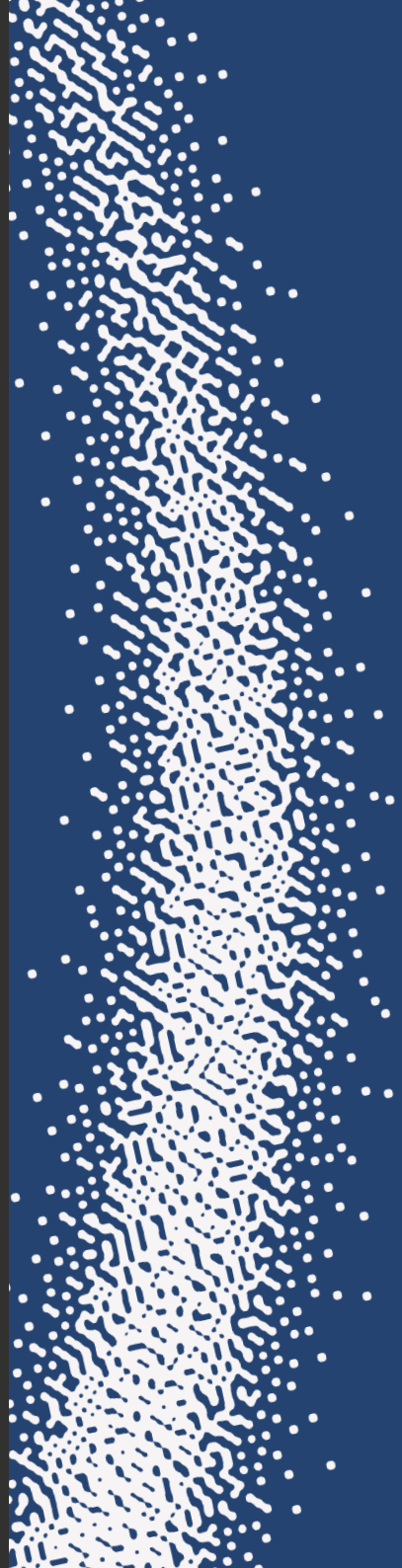
If we change the way we think about change in public services more broadly, we can shift the way we fund, govern and buy services in complex, uncertain and evolving contexts. We can grow the legitimacy of alternative, complementary delivery frameworks that can sit alongside programmes in public service transformation.

Service leaders in government can finally feel encouraged and empowered to adopt the last target operating model they should ever need, one that maximises adaptability and prevents atrophy. Programme leaders can plot a route to escaping their ‘unfeasible’ programme delivery labels.

And our public services will be all the better for it.

If you read nothing else

The essentials for a test & learn approach



> It's better to be pragmatic and make some progress rather than wait for perfect circumstances.

Ways of working for test & learn

Tom Loosemore

Public Digital defines digital as:
"Applying the culture, processes, business models and technologies of the internet-era to respond to people's raised expectations."

That definition is as relevant as ever, particularly for AI: a technology that is constantly evolving along with people's assumptions about what it can do for them.

To avoid being left behind, organisations must become adaptive, and that means embracing test and learn feedback loops at pace and at scale.

Public Digital's consultants come from a broad range of backgrounds in digital delivery. From our collective experience, and Public Digital's work in public and private organisations, we've seen just how challenging it can be to create the conditions for test and learn to happen.

1. Start by defining the outcome you want to achieve

- Make your outcome clear, so everyone can relate to it.
- Make your outcome bold, so it'll drive change.
- Make your outcome crunchy, so it'll foster accountability.
- Empower teams to work out how to reach this outcome. They may need a few sub-outcomes to help them steer a path.

2. Design for user needs, not organisational convenience

- Use insights from ongoing, embedded user research as your guide; make user research a team sport.
- Trust data over intuition. But trust insights from user research over both.
- Develop awareness about how emerging technology may alter or create behaviours by observing early adopters.

3. Learn by doing: Test your riskiest assumptions with actual users

- Identify and test assumptions about the operating model and the technology, as well as the business model or the service design.
- At the start, one of your riskiest assumptions is often whether your team can work well together at all. Make this explicit: another assumption to be tested.
- Create a culture where teams feel they can talk about assumptions and risks, not hide them away. False certainty is enticing, but dangerous.

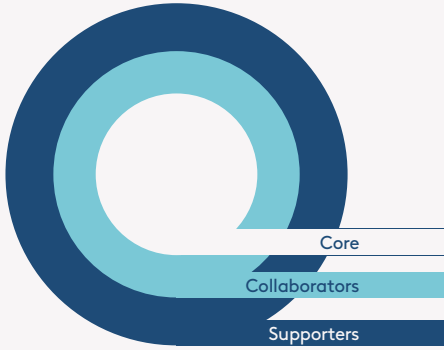
4. The unit of delivery is the empowered, multidisciplinary team

- Hire specialists for attitude as well as aptitude.
- Bring in people from operations from the start and make subject matter experts like legal and security part of the team.
- Build a small core team who are 100% dedicated, and use Emily Webber's Team Onion (teamonion.works) as a model of broader engagement with collaborators and supporters.

Overview of the onion

The Team Onion is a three-layer model that helps to visualise the wider team as core, collaborators and supporters.

The layers then create discussion, prioritisation and actions to set up collaboration and communication patterns.



- The team should own their process; don't let any process own them.
- Scale by adding teams, not by making a bigger team. Do this organically and incrementally, not by guessing upfront.
- Teams won't always map onto existing organisational structure and that's OK, in fact it's probably a good thing.
- Design for, practice and learn from failure.
- Ensure final say on prioritisation is the clear responsibility of a single product owner within each team.
- Give teams the tools and physical environment they need to do their job.

5. Test and learn. Then test and learn again. And again. And again.

- Changes need to be live in hours not months, so make changing software easy and safe. Continuous delivery of code is a non-negotiable essential. Continuous deployment is even better.
- Feedback loops are best informed by observing real users.
- If code doesn't have tests, it doesn't work.
- Don't fixate on one potential solution to a problem - explore the possibility space through research and prototyping.
- Iteration needs to apply to internal policies and practices as much as it does to software.

6. Transformation happens at the speed of trust

- Leaders must trust their teams to work out how to meet the outcomes you've set. This is hard, scary, and totally worth it.
- Foster the psychological safety essential for people in your teams to trust each other, to trust other teams, and to trust their leaders. This will usually require investment of significant time and emotional energy.
- Do the hard work to build trust across your organisational boundaries. The problems you're trying to solve won't respect them, so do all you can to lower them.

7. Do the hard work to make things simple

- Teams should obsess about making their services simple to use, simple to understand and simple to change.
- Sometimes that means starting again and redesigning everything from your desired outcome backwards.
- For existing services, go back to first principles and challenge every rule, custom and practice that creates complexity or confusion for users.
- Be suspicious of the latest technology "innovation". Fix all the broken things first. Measure, then reduce failure demand.

8. Staying secure means building for resilience

- You can no longer stay secure by standing still. Agility and threat awareness are your friends.
- Bake security awareness into the mindset of your teams, and the design of your service, operations and technology.
- Understand potential threats, notably how data might be misused, and then make life as hard as possible for those who seek to do damage to you or your users.
- Your obligations don't end at the edge of your network. Understand, assess and manage the risks in your software and data supply chain, not just the infrastructure you control.

9. Recognise the duty of care you have to users, and to the data you hold about them

- Minimise risk by minimising the data you hold about users. Practice privacy by design.
- Explain to users what data you hold about them, how it is being used and who is responsible.
- Put users in control of the data you hold about them. This helps to respect their rights against misuse and protect them from fraud.
- Design for minimum viable data access, not bulk data sharing.
- Give users easy ways to get their problems fixed.

10. Make things open; it makes things better

- Work in the open. Practice agile communication.
- Early on, use prototypes to tell a story, set a vision and build a shared understanding. Then throw the prototypes away.
- Use the tools of the open internet, and be open to open source.
- Adopting open standards helps avoid getting locked-in by proprietary software vendors.
- Value shipping products to real users over documentation, 'target operating models' or RAG statuses.
- Use openness, regular show-and-tells and assessment via peer-review to demonstrate progress, and to know how to change the direction of a product or shut it down all together.
- Effective governance means going and seeing the thing for yourself, regularly.

11. Fund product teams, not projects

- Projects and programmes are often the engine of legacy creation. So provide ongoing funding to product teams instead.
- Beware your business case, finance processes or contracts dictating how - or even what - you deliver. A "lean/agile friendly" business case process is vital in the medium-term.
- Budget for continuous improvement. The mix of skills you need and the size of the team will change over time. Help your finance team adapt to this.
- Don't be afraid to stop funding something if it isn't working (agile business cases should make it easier to call a halt earlier).

12. Redesign your governance to be an enabler

- Redesign your governance processes around gov.uk's 6 enduring principles for agile service delivery:

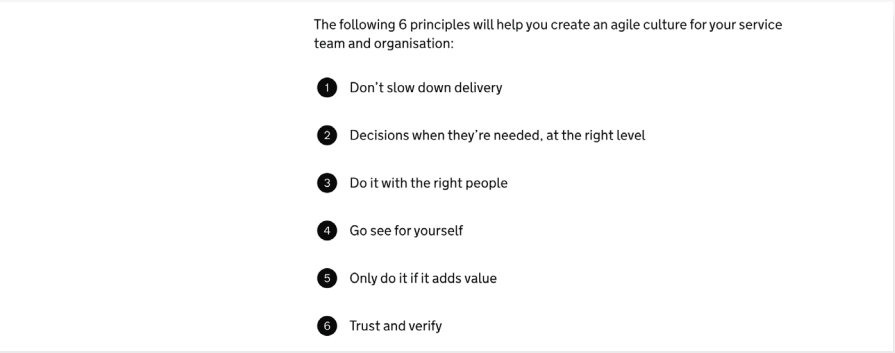


illustration: **gov.uk**

- This often requires radical change from your normal governance processes. That's OK. In fact, it's probably essential.
- You'll know your governance is working for you when:
  - You are all focusing on outcomes
  - You have the necessary skills and capabilities to deliver the work
  - Leaders and teams have confidence in the outcomes and the pace that they are trying to deliver
  - Teams are supported to deliver (leaders know how to help)
  - You understand and are comfortable with the risks you are taking
  - You have clarity of the impact
  - You are working across the system and breaking down silos

Finally: break any of these rules sooner than do anything barbaric. It's better to be pragmatic and make some progress rather than wait for perfect circumstances that will never come, and not make any progress at all.

This list isn't set in stone. It gives you plenty of starting points, but don't be tempted to try implementing all of them, everywhere, all at once. As always, start small, pick your first project carefully, and focus on the stuff that feels most relevant to your organisation. Iterate the bits that help your teams deliver, in your organisation.

Allow time and space to learn your own lessons, so you can make your own additions to the list in future.

To read the digital version of this article and learn more about ways of working for test and learn, go to:

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Audree is a Director at Public Digital, where she leads digital transformation and design programmes for major public sector organisations including the Home Office, UK Parliament, Arup and the NHS. Prior to joining Public Digital, Audree held roles as Chief Digital Officer at the Department for International Trade, and Service Director at NHS Test and Trace.

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Lara is a Partner at Public Digital, where she has supported clients including the Home Office, the Mayor's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC), Arts Council and Unicef UK. Previously, Lara led the product development of Universal Credit, taking it from its inception in 2013 through to 6 million customers in 2021. She has also held roles as a senior leader in the Department for Work and Pensions, and as a digital strategy and delivery expert in the private sector.

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Senior Director

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Principal Consultant

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Founder

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Public Digital is a consultancy that works with large businesses, governments and institutions that matter.

We help them change their ways of working to become more responsive, adaptable and impactful.

This publication is the second edition, in a three-part series.

We welcome comments and feedback about adopting the practice of test & learn, or anything else. Please get in touch by sending an email to **contact@public.digital**.

Edited and published by
Public Digital
www.public.digital

Printed by
Generation Press