

Accelerating discovery in public sector digital service delivery

A short guide to enabling accelerated discovery in digital service delivery, the benefits of this approach and the results it has generated across central government and local government.



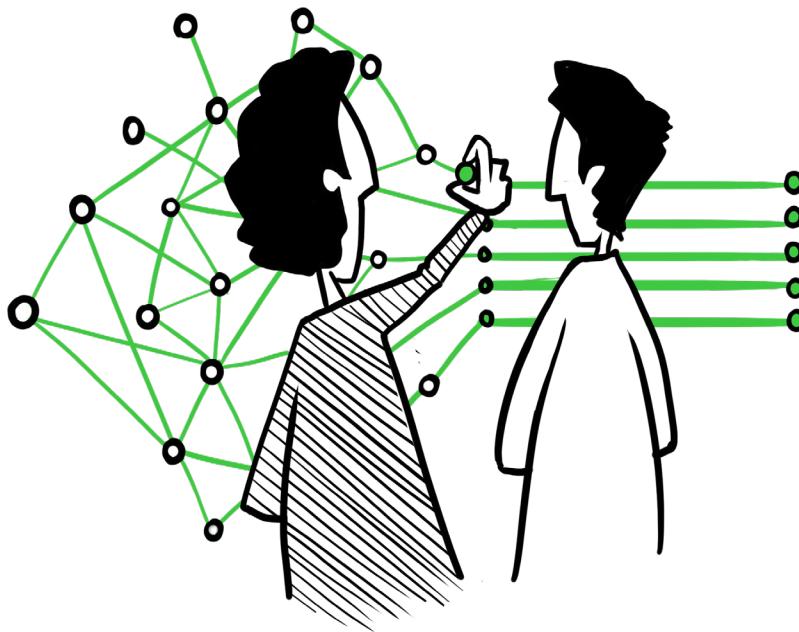
Contents

- 3** **Who is this guide for?**
- 4** **Introduction**
- 5** **Understanding accelerated discovery in digital service delivery**
- 6** **Why accelerate the discovery phase?**
- 7** **How to accelerate discovery in digital service delivery**
- 13** **How we can help accelerate discovery in your organisation**

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for you if you work in a public sector organisation and are responsible for digital service delivery. You will probably already know that your processes for delivering digital services could be improved and also understand that accelerating discovery is key to achieving change.

However, you may be unsure about the practical steps that will make this a reality for your organisation. If this sounds familiar, then read on to find out how accelerating discovery can improve digital service delivery in your organisation.



Introduction

There has never been a more exciting or more transformative time for the public sector. Ten years ago, we relied on our public services in bricks-and-mortar form. If we wanted employment, we might visit the job centre — and if we had an issue, we'd phone the local council. Now, we can interact with our local council on a laptop, book an appointment with our GP using an app, or even look for teaching opportunities across the whole country using a national database.

These digital changes have fundamentally altered the way we interact with public services — yet we've barely scratched the surface. In the next five years, we'll see even more change as technology and user expectations continue to shift.

One of the biggest challenges hindering the public sector's efforts to transform lies in its legacy technology, however. A [recent study](#) revealed that over half of central and local governments highlighted legacy infrastructure as one of the biggest challenges to their transformation efforts. In order to seize this opportunity, we need to modernise and replace.

One key way to address this challenge lies in running multidisciplinary discovery exercises that include technology reviews. When implemented effectively, these enable organisations to identify the legacy technology holding them back, and understand the highest value outcomes that result in building efficient, user-focused digital services, saving time, money, and resources.

And in the public sector, where budgets, resources, and deadlines are often tight, delivering new services that respond to the evolving needs of citizens and deliver value quickly is critical. So how can you deliver a digital service at a pace that delivers maximum value? The answer is by accelerating and enhancing your discovery phase.

In this guide, we're going to explain why accelerated discovery is critical to improving digital service delivery in your organisation. We're going to explain the key concepts that underpin the discovery phase, how an accelerated discovery can benefit your service delivery, and equip you with three practical ways to accelerate this phase in your organisation.

Understanding accelerated discovery in digital service delivery

The four phases of digital service delivery

There are four key phases in the Government Digital Services (GDS) lifecycle: discovery, alpha, beta, and live. Before building any new service, the first step is to clearly define the problem you're going to solve — this is the core goal of the discovery phase.

In discovery, teams aim to build a picture of the needs and requirements of their service users, identifying their experience of using the service as-is. This involves building a deeper understanding of what they're trying to achieve using the service, and how changes may improve or impact this experience. It also involves identifying any risks, constraints, issues, assumptions and dependencies, as well as understanding how a new digital service may fit alongside existing ones.

This information will help teams decide if the benefits of solving the problem outweigh the costs of building or improving the service, and enable them to move to proposing solutions for the problem and testing on real users.

What do we mean by 'accelerated discovery' in digital service delivery?

There's no doubt that a well-structured and well-executed discovery phase is critical when delivering digital services. Discovery enables you to validate project requirements based on evidence, understand the needs of different user groups, and avoids the need for reworking or costly changes later on.

But depending on the project, a normal discovery phase can take an average of eight to 12 weeks — sometimes longer.

And for organisations looking to solve a problem as quickly as possible, this can be too long.

Accelerated discovery takes a leaner approach to this critical initial phase of digital service delivery. In simple terms, accelerated discovery means that teams spend less time exhausting all angles of a problem, and instead validate hypotheses and solutions more quickly through testing. This means teams are able to work more efficiently, reduce waste, and deliver value and services with greater speed.

Why accelerate the discovery phase?

While the term ‘accelerated discovery’ may seem like the focus is on delivering at pace, there are other benefits to adopting this approach for your digital service delivery.

Narrow focus on the most important problem

No matter how effective your discovery phase may be, it’s not possible to solve every problem at the same time when you need to deliver at pace. Instead, it’s far more efficient and cost-effective to shift your focus from output to outcome, and focus on a narrower problem initially that you can later scale. This will allow you to focus on delivering the highest value outcomes first, avoiding any ‘analysis paralysis’.

When you accelerate discovery, you’re able to test your hypothesis with real users sooner, meaning you’re able to get valuable feedback on works and what doesn’t more quickly. However, when you spend a long time in discovery, finding out your solution doesn’t work down the line means your team has wasted their time and resources.

See results sooner

Spending less time in the discovery phase enables you to proceed to alpha more quickly, meaning you can test assumptions, validate your hypothesis and get your solution in the hands of real users incrementally.

Seeing the smaller wins on an incremental basis allows teams to know whether or not they’re solving the right problem in the right way — and allows them to pivot earlier if their solution doesn’t work.

Accelerate learning

It stands to reason that a quicker delivery overall makes for faster learning — and the faster our teams learn, the more confident and high-performing they will become. This in turn increases value, fosters innovation, and empowers team members to identify the next most impactful step they can make.

Reduce rework and waste

Narrowing the scope of discovery not only means teams prioritise the highest value outcome, but that they operate using a lean methodology. The sooner delivery teams test their solution in a real-world context, the sooner they are able to use feedback to validate their hypothesis. By accelerating discovery, any potential issues are identified more quickly, avoiding waste, rework, and poor solutions being delivered down the line that don't meet the needs of the users.

How to accelerate discovery in digital service delivery

Accelerating the discovery phase of your digital service delivery not only enables you to deliver value more quickly, but it also speeds up learning, reduces potential for rework, and allows you to get your solution in the hands of real users more quickly.

However, when accelerating the discovery phase of any project, it's important to draw a key distinction between optimising the process and rushing it. Accelerating discovery does not mean rushing into alpha. Instead, it's about working in a lean way, timeboxing efforts, and focusing on delivering small pieces of value incrementally.

As such, it's fundamentally important that teams leave time to analyse what they've learned, communicate their findings with stakeholders, and seek consensus with other team members in order to deliver a high value service that meets the needs of users in the shortest possible time.

So how can you accelerate discovery without compromising the quality and depth of the insights you gather? We've identified three key enablers that can help accelerate discovery in public sector digital service delivery:



Decide what to do first

As a key element of the Government Service Standard, solving a whole problem for users means considering where your service fits in with the user's journey, and collaborating across team, programme and organisational boundaries to create a service that meets their needs across all channels.

This is important because fragmented services are difficult to use, and they put the responsibility on the user to figure out what is expected of them when trying to complete a task. Moreover, public sector digital services are complex, and users should not have to understand how different organisations and services fit together in order to fulfil their needs.

However, having a complex problem to solve doesn't mean you have to solve everything at once. Nor does it mean building big, complicated services that become difficult to use. Instead, it means focusing on the small problems that can be solved, and delivering value to users frequently and incrementally that brings together a journey that makes sense to each user.

To do this, teams should focus on outcomes rather than output, and identify where they can make the most impact quickly while understanding the biggest problem faced by users each day.

Prioritising what to do first can accelerate discovery because it means that teams are able to make key decisions on problem identification and recommendations for next steps more quickly without blockers from other teams, existing structures, or business areas.

Having a senior sponsor to advocate for team decisions at this stage can help to avoid potential red tape, as well as frame expectations clearly around the solution. This in turn empowers them to release services to users, so they're able to deliver both value and services at pace.

CASE STUDY

Hackney Council

Hackney Council approached us with a challenge: to develop and deliver a digital service to help them better manage their process for collecting housing arrears from their constituents within 100 days.

We ran a two-week discovery, interviewing call centre staff and listening to calls from residents to understand their experiences when they fall behind on rent and service payments. This was a cost-effective and efficient way to identify pain points for both groups of service users. We also developed

a lightweight service blueprint, mapping out the pain points across the existing journey.

This insight allowed us to define a hypothesis that if we could automate reminders for residents with small amounts of arrears, this would free up time for case workers to support those with larger amounts of debt. Following this, we quickly moved into alpha to test our solution, before delivering a beta within 12 weeks, continuing research throughout the build.



Widen team diversity

Diversity is a critical part of our experience as humans. It exposes us to different types of experiences, perspectives, broadening the way we think and challenging our biases. But it's especially important in the public sector, because organisations must serve every member of society.

This is why we strongly believe that widening the diversity of teams is an often overlooked enabler for public sector digital service delivery, particularly in the discovery phase. In a general sense, diversity relates to ensuring representation across different identity groups, such as culture, age, gender, and race.

But when accelerating discovery, widening team diversity also requires project teams to think outside the box when it comes to selecting the right people to solve the problem quickly. For example, this may include recruiting people from the service user group, or including team members from a non-digital background. Building a team that uses these different experiences and frames of reference to its advantage can help to avoid conformity and groupthink, where group members can drift towards the same ways of thinking.

As a result, teams with higher levels of diversity are also more likely to be comfortable with uncertainty, meaning they are more likely to move more quickly through the discovery phase. This enables you to understand the context and constraints of your project much more quickly, enabling you to move to alpha and test your assumptions with greater speed.

Take a multidisciplinary approach

When aiming for an accelerated delivery, it's vital to understand and quantify the problem from a number of perspectives including user research, service design, business analysis and technical review.

During inception and kick off, this means working to define the problem, map users and capture existing assets, as well as confirming ways of working, roles and responsibilities. From here, organisations can move through the other stages of discovery in a manner that sets the tone from the start.

Research

Researching user needs is a critical component of any discovery phase. It helps teams begin to build a picture of service user needs, and may also unearth unexpected or unknown details. But this needs to be validated with direct research, and this process can take time.

Accelerating discovery in the research phase means that teams should research in sprints, and keep asking themselves whether or not they've learned enough to start designing. Research should be conducted as a team with everyone involved including non-researchers such as developers, and everyone should be working towards the same sprint goals. Teams should also share their findings little and often — rather than aiming for a 'big reveal' approach.

When we worked with Hackney Council, we accelerated the research phase of discovery by listening to calls between service users and caseworkers. This enabled us to understand both internal and service user needs and pain points more quickly, and removed the need for large numbers of interviews.

Mapping

Developing an as-is service blueprint enables teams to understand the user journey and their key pain points, as well as helping teams identify changes that are more cost-effective and better meet user needs.

Teams can accelerate this phase of discovery by engaging staff users in a short workshop, allowing them to map out the initial service and their experiences of

using it. This enables teams to gain an understanding of the as-is service and pain points more quickly through the eyes of the users.

Technology review

When considering building a new service, teams must conduct a full review of any potential technological constraints, including existing technical skill sets and capabilities at the organisation, skills gaps, how the as-is technical infrastructure fits these skills, and cost of change.

When we worked with UKRI to develop a deadline-driven migration and decommissioning strategy, we developed an as-is service blueprint. This enabled us to propose temporary solutions such as APIs and microservices to help them migrate and decommission legacy technology while still delivering value.

Accelerating this phase of discovery enables teams to scope out the feasibility of potential solutions that best fit the needs and skills of an organisation's employees, reducing the need for rework down the line.

CASE STUDY

Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice approached us to collaborate on a discovery phase for their Witness Service. They needed our help to explore how they could enable a seamless experience for witnesses, and increase the efficiency and sustainability of Witness Services technology and operations.

We accelerated this process by inviting a group of over 20 core stakeholders to a kick-off session at the outset, explaining what we were trying to achieve. We began working on the as-is service

blueprint right from the start, refining it on a weekly basis with the information we gathered as we carried out formal interviews in parallel. This enabled us to quickly validate assumptions and refine the blueprint.

We were able to further speed up user research by listening to anonymised witness recordings, enabling us to log pain points early on in the process. This in turn meant we could share early recommendations as to next steps and refine these as the process continued.

How we can help accelerate discovery in your organisation

We've helped organisations including the NHS, Ministry of Justice, DVLA and many more accelerate their digital service delivery at all phases to improve the lives of millions of citizens across the UK.

Want to know more?
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