DEMOS

DIGITAL DEVOLUTION

EXPLORING THE REFORM NARRATIVES TO DRIVE THE AI ROADMAP AND POWER DEVOLUTION

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party policy think tank. We work to upgrade democracy, to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen. Public services are where the wear and tear in that relationship is happening every day and our work on Public Service Reform focuses on how we can achieve more relational, preventative and effective public services to help build back trust that democracies can deliver with and for people.

This paper forms part of Demos's **Powering Public Service Reform** programme, which looks at how the centre of government, particularly Whitehall, needs to change to achieve that shift and improve the quality of public services at the front line. Previous reports in the programme have examined the cultural[1] and narrative[2] shifts needed and the most recent paper, Powering Prevention,[3] set out a suite of measures which, if taken together, help develop a funding architecture that shifts resources towards preventative measures.

This is a report of the full-day workshop hosted by Demos in partnership with the Government Digital Service (GDS).

- The workshop focused on how GDS can draw on a range of distinct reform narratives to help navigate the shift to a more devolved state.
- Attendees from across the civil service, the think tank community, and the digital and AI sectors took part and shared their thinking.
- The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule. As such, comments are not attributed.

This report also draws on a range of Demos papers, including The Liberated State,[4] The Respect Story[5] and Northcote-Trevelyan 2.0.[6] All content in this paper should be considered the sole work of Demos. It does not reflect the views of the Government Digital Service. We are grateful to the team at GDS for their partnership in this work.

1 Gandon, A and Garrod, A., The Human Handbrake: How Whitehall Culture Holds Back Public Service Reform. Demos. Available at https://demos.co.uk/research/the-human-handbrake-how-whitehall-culture-holds-back-public-service-reform/
2 Webb, T., The Respect Story: A political narrative for public service reform, Demos, April 2026, https://demos.co.uk/research/the-respect-story-a-political-narrative-for-public-service-reform/
3 Dodd, E and Martin, J., Powering Prevention: How to Reform the State's Financial Architecture to Enable Preventative People-Centred Public Service Reform. Demos. Available at https://demos.co.uk/research/powering-prevention-how-to-reform-the-states-financial-architecture-to-enable-preventative-people-centred-public-service-reform/
4 https://demos.co.uk/research/liberated-public-services-a-new-vision-for-citizens-professionals-and-policy-makers/
5 Webb, T., The Respect Story: A political narrative for public service reform, Demos, April 2026, https://demos.co.uk/research/the-respect-story-a-political-narrative-for-public-service-reform/
6 Garner, A. and Sargeant, J., Northcote-Trevelyan 2.0: Restoring the legitimacy of the state with a Burnham-Romeo plan, Demos, October 2026, https://demos.co.uk/research/northcote-trevelyan-2-0-restoring-the-legitimacy-of-the-state-with-a-burnham-romeo-plan/

A DIGITAL STATE, DEVOLVED

This paper reports on a full-day workshop hosted by Demos in partnership with the Government Digital Service (GDS). Participants from across the civil service, the think tank community and the digital and AI sectors considered how GDS, and the wider government digital and data function, can draw on distinct reform narratives to navigate the shift to a more devolved state.

The UK state is undergoing a significant period of transformation. On 31st July 2026, the government published "Rewiring the State", a commitment to a "fundamental rewiring of the way our country works", devolving power away from Westminster and Whitehall. This political shift is being carried out against the backdrop of rapid development and adoption of artificial intelligence across the public sector and society at large. For the civil service, devolution and AI are the two strategic challenges of this parliament, changing the way the state operates and how public services are delivered and where accountability lies.

This is a reimagination of where authority and accountabilities sit and is more than a simple administrative adjustment; it will change the role that all central institutions, including GDS, play in the broader system.

GDS's own historical narrative provided a backdrop to the day. Established in 2011, it played a disruptive role in modernising government's digital services, and that expertise has since dispersed across departments. Greater devolution, technological change and the recent machinery of government changes require GDS to reflect on how it operates with other parts of the system moving forward. The Government Digital Service (GDS) is actively working with Mayoral Strategic Authorities and local government to support places with some of the key digital and data foundations and the products and services needed to deliver their priorities, whilst helping central and local government work together more effectively.

The workshop had two aims: to understand the opportunities and challenges GDS faces within a more devolved settlement, and to consider how a reform narrative can align effort across a less centralised system, giving teams a common direction where they no longer share a single chain of command. By a reform narrative, we mean a shared account of what the state is trying to achieve and how it should treat the people it serves. It offers a common diagnosis, a theory of change, and the permission for institutions to act on these in ways suited to their own services and places. In a devolution context, a reform narrative lets organisations that do not report to one another align their decisions without relying on instruction from the centre. This workshop did not intend to seek to resolve the practical and operational questions posed by devolution, although we recognise that these important questions deserve due attention.

This report draws together the day's conclusions. It sets out the risks and opportunities of a digital, devolved state; examines three narratives that could guide reform, and how they relate; considers how the centre can shift from directing to enabling; and closes with what this means for GDS and the rest of Whitehall.

BUILDING A DIGITAL AND DEVOLVED STATE
THE OPPORTUNITIES

The first discussion of the day focused on the impact of the 'Rewiring the State' Cabinet Statement, and the consequences that further devolution of powers within England could have on public services and different parts of Whitehall. The discussion explored the risks and opportunities that devolution creates for the adoption of AI and digital in public services, and what this implies for the role of Whitehall in a more devolved state:

OPPORTUNITY 1

Ensuring devolution fosters a stronger learning culture across the state, in which innovation is encouraged, good practice is shared and adopted, and less effective approaches are quickly identified and corrected

Meaningful devolution necessarily entails that different places will take different approaches to one another. We are already seeing encouraging examples of innovation underway locally. Authorities are developing regional data platforms, investing in digital capability, experimenting with AI and creating new partnerships across public services.[7] As places will now have the agency to explore what works for them, the value of a system that can quickly identify and apply best practice increases. The current Whitehall system has not historically functioned as a strong learning system: it has too often treated variation as a deviation to be corrected rather than a source of insight, and a defensive caution about failure (and what it could mean to their career) discourages officials from talking openly about what has and has not worked. Devolution can only deliver on its promise if this changes, and public servants become comfortable sharing the lessons of both their successes and their failures.

This requires the centre to begin treating risk and failure differently, distinguishing failure that arises from a sensible attempt to innovate from failure caused by poor judgement or execution, and responding to each in different ways and with a different risk appetite. It requires institutions to actively secure the conditions needed for local learning to be captured and shared easily to other institutions. And by moving decisions closer to where services are delivered, room is created to experiment quickly and with less risk but in ways rooted in local context. The risk is that this freedom produces duplication and uneven service quality depending on the geography, to some extent meaningful devolution will require the centre to hold this risk.

However, there are three system elements which could mitigate, to some degree, a post code lottery of service provision - though true devolution will mean some degree is inevitable. First, strong local evaluation, built on shared standards which can produce results that can be compared with performance in other places, whilst still reflecting local conditions. Second, ensuring there is capable civic infrastructure in all places which can ensure communities are able to provide feedback regarding failing services and hold their local institutions to account.

7 Middleton, E and Bellamy, C., Supporting Devolution Through Digital, Data and AI. GDS Blog. Available at https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2026/09/01/supporting-devolution-through-digital-data-and-ai/

Third, Whitehall and local authorities have separate digital and data functions. This lack of join-up across the workforce adds friction that could be reduced by developing a shared career framework, allowing people to quickly map their skills and capabilities when moving from central to local government (or vice versa). Modelled on the existing framework for central government, this could extend to common training, recruitment mechanisms and accelerators, building the capability MSAs and local authorities need to take on devolved functions. It would also support the career pathways between central and local government set out in Rewiring the State. It should stop short of full standardisation, leaving room for local variation.

OPPORTUNITY 2

Ensuring AI is used to build local capacity for redesigned, citizen-centric services, rather than to mask the shortcomings of poorly designed systems and processes

Even now, before the shift to devolution has really taken effect we see different authorities managing varied technology estates in different ways, and range in the levels of digital maturity.[8] AI has the potential to rapidly and radically transform capacity and capability of public sector institutions - particularly those in local government which has traditionally struggled to build digital capabilities. Automating the bureaucratic, low-complexity tasks that tie up local authority capacity should free officials to take on the more complex functions that devolution asks of them, and, in doing so, makes a more ambitious devolutionary settlement viable.

However, it would be a mistake to simply transplant systems and services currently delivered by Whitehall and then use AI tools to free up officials to focus on other priorities. Many of these systems and services, such as children's social care or mental health provision, aren't working for citizens - and wouldn't be improved by using AI to make them more efficient. AI is not a solution in itself, and it shouldn't be used to paper over poorly designed systems rather than to take on the challenge of reforming. Devolution provides a rare opportunity to redesign services and platforms around citizen needs - putting the onus on developing services convenient to the user not the administrator. Instead, as part of the process of relocating service provision, receiving authorities should focus on learning the lessons from today's public service failures and ensuring good practices, like multi-agency working and user centred design, are baked into how their services operate moving forward.

Equally, there is a risk of departments (DWP, DfE and others) devolving their services and digital components one by one, each unilaterally, without reference to an intentional, holistic and shared technological architecture. The result would be MSAs and LAs building siloed capabilities across overly complex and brittle systems without a thought to how the broader ecosystem should be designed and function. Mitigating this requires the transmitting and receiving institutions to work together to design and articulate a broader architecture that can accommodate devolved services in a way that is sustainable and manageable.

OPPORTUNITY 3

Ensuring the centre (Whitehall) supports and enables local authorities, and holds them to account, without overstepping into a directive role

Devolution creates a genuine risk of a fragmented and incompatible digital landscape. An obvious model would be for each area to own and run its own assets. However this approach does not translate to the digital space: systems, data and the infrastructure beneath them do not divide cleanly along administrative boundaries, and a settlement in which every area builds

8 Middleton, E and Bellamy, C., Supporting Devolution Through Digital, Data and AI. GDS Blog. Available at https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2026/09/01/supporting-devolution-through-digital-data-and-ai/

its own technology stack risks duplication and incompatibility at scale. Too often organisations working with the same residents cannot easily share information, making it harder to deliver joined-up services and target support effectively.[9]

Retaining central control is not the answer, nor is leaving each area to itself. A better approach would be to develop a shared sense of stewardship across the system, akin to an open-source community, in which common components and approaches are agreed and maintained together and adapted locally. GDS is well placed to bring together expertise, ensure learning is shared and help to address common barriers that no single organisation can tackle alone. By strengthening the digital and data foundations that underpin effective public services, GDS can help local and regional government use technology to deliver better services to the communities they serve.

Maintaining, convening and coordinating this community is a role well suited to the centre. It is best placed to maintain architectural vision, clear data and interoperability standards and act as a strategic enabler rather than a bureaucratic constraint.[10]

Local actors themselves welcomed a more muscular centre on data standards and infrastructure, provided it enables their efforts rather than restricts their agency. If the centre plays this role successfully it would also help ease longstanding problems such as supplier lock-in, and would provide the shared evaluation methods on which local learning depends, by giving places the confidence to apply lessons garnered in other communities.

Clear standards also give the centre a legitimate basis on which to hold local delivery to account without prescribing how it is done. The distinction it must maintain is to set the framework within which local areas operate freely, without extending this to directing how they operate.

9 Middleton, E and Bellamy, C., Supporting Devolution Through Digital, Data and AI. GDS Blog. Available at https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2026/09/01/supporting-devolution-through-digital-data-and-ai/

10 Middleton, E and Bellamy, C., Supporting Devolution Through Digital, Data and AI. GDS Blog. Available at https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2026/09/01/supporting-devolution-through-digital-data-and-ai/

WHAT SHOULD GUIDE THE DIGITAL STATE?
THREE NARRATIVES FOR REFORM

As devolution shifts responsibilities from the centre to other parts of the state (MSAs, LAs and others) Whitehall institutions, such as GDS, will no longer have the default ability to direct behaviour through mandation and standardisation. This does not mean these institutions lose the capability for good. Rather, the mandate for it must now be secured from the institutions and partners GDS works with, rather than flowing automatically by virtue of the historic Westminster/local government dynamic.

Engagement between GDS and Strategic authorities has emphasised the importance of working together to build the necessary conditions to support public service provision that operates across organisational boundaries.[11]

In a more devolved settlement, GDS will increasingly deliver its objectives through and in partnership with other institutions, rather than by acting directly or by directing others. Its precise role in the resulting system remains to be confirmed, and part of the task is to reconcile political intent with operational reality: to translate a devolutionary ambition set at the centre into arrangements that function on the ground. One of GDS key priorities will be to help support organisations across the state without taking a directive or hierarchical approach that is often taken by central institutions in Whitehall. The use of narratives is designed to help central institutions build cohesion and alignment across institutional boundaries in a way that empowers rather than restricts public servants.

A shared story about what the state is trying to do, and how it should treat the people it serves, is the means by which organisations that do not report to one another can align their approaches without relying on instructions 'from the top'. This section examines what a good narrative would look like.

THE LESSON OF THE RESPECT STORY

In "The Respect Story", Demos has set out the case for narrative as a governing tool, arguing that a broad consensus on public service reform has stalled for want of a political story. A political narrative is more than a set of slogans. At its most useful it offers a shared diagnosis, a theory of change, and the permission that those running the system require to apply reform in different ways across different services and places. It provides a language that travels beyond the people who already believe it or actively authored it, connecting the message with how the state is actually experienced by citizens.

GDS too can employ narratives as a practical instrument that shapes activity, rather than a communications tool that merely describes it after the fact. In a devolved system of many actors, each of whom will be moving at different speeds, a common narrative does the coordinating work that a centralised bureaucracy once did, and does so whilst leaving room for local judgement and insight.

11 Middleton, E and Bellamy, C., Supporting Devolution Through Digital, Data and AI. GDS Blog. Available at https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2026/09/01/supporting-devolution-through-digital-data-and-ai/

THREE NARRATIVES TO DRIVE DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

As part of the workshop, the GDS team set out how it currently uses narratives to inform its work, and how it engages with the rest of the public sector and with citizens. GDS's current narrative is organised around its "Blueprint for modern digital government".[12] This document is addressed principally to the wider public sector rather than directly to citizens, and describes the transformation of government largely in terms of its digital and technological components.

To structure the discussion, participants worked from three value sets set out in the pre-reading, each a candidate narrative to shape how institutions think about and shape digital and AI public services. An effort was made to 'steel man' each definition and render it in its strongest formulation, to ensure that any argument made for or against each was sound and could be taken with confidence into different conversations.

VALUE SETS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE OF HOW NARRATIVES INFORM KEY DECISIONS
Efficiency	*Efficiency is the duty to use finite public resources well: money, capacity, and skilled professional attention held in trust on the public's behalf. It means resolving a need fully, so problems are sorted once rather than recurring, and effort is spent where it changes outcomes. Efficiency is not cheapness or speed; a service that cuts its own costs by pushing demand into a costlier crisis downstream has only moved the cost somewhere less visible.* *Technology, data and automation should take on routine burden so scarce expertise is freed for the judgement only people can provide. A service is efficient when it does the job right the first time using the least amount of resources required.*	**Likely priorities:** High-volume transactional services, such as: • casework triage; • back-office automation or • contact centre productivity. It would naturally start where there is scale: large backlogs, high administrative load, repeatable processes and measurable benefits. **Relevant technology:** The bias would be towards technologies that are scalable, measurable and reusable. The technical architecture would be judged by whether it improves operational flow. Examples include document summarisation, classification and extraction, predictable demand and backlog analytics. **Investment implications:** This is the easiest scenario to turn into a conventional investment case, because benefits can often be expressed in time saved, backlog reduced, cost avoided or capacity released.

12 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, A Blueprint for Modern Digital Government. GOV.UK. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-blueprint-for-modern-digital-government

VALUE SETS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE OF HOW NARRATIVES INFORM KEY DECISIONS
Citizen Respect	*Respect means designing from the assumption that a citizen's time, judgement and input are valuable, not obstacles to be managed. Technology should be used to deepen respect, by removing friction, joining services up around the person, and making it easy to reach a human when it matters, rather than building rigid systems people are forced to fit into.* *A service is not acceptable merely for processing a transaction efficiently; it is effective when the person feels listened to, in control, and treated as someone whose life the state is genuinely trying to help. 'Respect' is a claim about the state's posture towards the citizen: that government works for people, is answerable to them, and acts on their behalf. It carries with it the machinery of accountability, the ability to question a decision, to hold a service to account, and ultimately to remove those responsible.* *[Based on the Demos Paper, 'The Respect Story']*[13]	**Likely priorities:** A respect-led approach would prioritise reducing the burden on citizens by prioritising the following: • helping people understand what is happening; • explaining decisions clearly; • reducing repeated requests for the same information; • joined-up journeys around life events; • support for vulnerable users; • assisted digital and accessibility; • human handoff where stakes are high or needs are complex; • challenge, review and redress. This is not anti-productivity. It is a different route to productivity: reduce failure demand by making services easier, clearer and more successful first time. **Relevant technology:** The bias would be towards technologies that make government more legible and navigable. The Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard already provides a standardised way for public sector organisations to publish information about how and why they are using algorithmic tools. A respect-led approach would build on this, but go further: transparency would not just be a published record; it would be part of the live service experience. **Investment implications:** The investment case may be less immediately cashable than pure automation, but it is central to legitimacy. It may also reduce cost indirectly by reducing avoidable contact, complaints, repeat applications, errors and escalation.

13 Webb, T., The Respect Story: A Political Narrative for Public Service Reform. Demos. Available at https://demos.co.uk/research/the-respect-story-a-political-narrative-for-public-service-reform/

VALUE SETS	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE OF HOW NARRATIVES INFORM KEY DECISIONS
Citizen Agency	*Agency means organising around people's own priorities, presenting choices and enabling individuals to make decisions about how they engage with government and services.* *Take an older citizen without an email address, anxious about a digital-by-default future, for whom agency means being able to choose the way that works for them rather than having one imposed.* *Agency also extends beyond choosing between options to shaping the service itself, through involving citizens in service design.* *[Based on the Demos Paper, 'The Social State']*[14]	**Likely priorities:** An agency-led approach would prioritise those approaches and tools which provide the citizen with agency over the nature and type of interaction they have with the state. This could include: • ensuring genuine choice of channel, including non-digital routes; • services organised around life events rather than departmental structures (e.g. Tell Me Once); • product/platform co-design with users, particularly those least well served by existing services; • routine feedback loops that change how the service operates, not only how it is reported on; • support for intermediaries, such as advice services and carers, acting on a person's behalf. This will require the state to accommodate user preferences even where it results in public services which are less efficient for the state to run. **Relevant technology:** Prioritisation for technologies that widen the range of viable routes into a service and provide the user with optionality as to how they engage with public servants and services. **Investment implications:** Given the onus on providing optionality for the user, the main implication is for what the state counts in its value for money assessments. For example, maintaining multiple engagement channels costs more than consolidating onto one, and the benefits, in citizen satisfaction and in people being able to deal with the state on their own terms, do not currently appear in the appraisal. Making the case for agency therefore depends on finding a way of valuing those benefits, in monetary terms where possible and through other robust measures where not.

14 Mackenzie, P., The Social State: From Transactional to Relational Public Services. Demos. Available at https://demos.co.uk/research/the-social-state-from-transactional-to-relational-public-services/

THE PROBLEM WITH EFFICIENCY AS THE DEFAULT NARRATIVE

The efficiency narrative has long been the key driver shaping decision-making in Whitehall. This defaulting to efficiency over other values was, in part, due to the comparative ease with which efficiency can be identified, understood and compared across different elements of a complex system.

Equally, unlike the 'Agency' and 'Respect' values, efficiency metrics are relatively easy to develop and can be specified in advance, measured during delivery and verified afterwards. And unlike agency and respect, efficiency can be compared across very different services relatively easily, using existing evaluative approaches and tools. Efficiency is far easier to measure than whether a person felt listened to, or left an encounter better able to manage their life, and so, absent a deliberate effort to measure the others, the system defaults to the value it can count. As one participant put it, what you measure becomes the story you tell.

Efficiency also carries the weight of recent history. After successive years of austerity across public services, the word now lands loaded with meaning to the average citizen. To the general public, efficiency often reads as retrenchment: fewer staff, less time, no one to speak to, and, ultimately, a service being pared back and rushed rather than improved. Instead of signalling sound value for money, it evokes scarcity, at a moment when trust in public services is already falling sharply. It also points to a gap between political ambition and institutional reality: just as the prime minister unveils plans to remodel our state, citizens encounter services on the ground preoccupied with cutting the cost of delivery.

THE NEED FOR A NEW CITIZEN FOCUSED NARRATIVE

A sustained focus on productive efficiency has produced public services designed around the needs of the administrator rather than the citizen. Processes are organised to suit departmental structures, case management systems and spending controls, with the preferences of those they are supposed to serve too often playing second fiddle. For citizens, the result is a persistent sense that public services intended to help those in need, do not work for them.

The consequences go beyond specific service failures. These experiences feed a broader mistrust of, and dissatisfaction with, the state. In a democratic system, citizens' preferences should have some bearing on how the services they rely on are designed and delivered. For many, this link now feels broken. A narrative grounded in citizen agency or respect could repair this relationship and address the dissatisfaction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MATCHING THE RIGHT NARRATIVE TO THE RELEVANT SERVICE

Each of these narratives entails services prioritising different elements of the citizen experience of the service, depending on what is considered most important to the citizen at the time. Which element of the service should be emphasised will vary depending on the service. Hence, in line with arguments made in Demos' paper, Mode Shifting Government, the focus needs to be on deploying the right narrative for the context in question.[15]

Broadly, this means that where services are transactional and high-volume, and rely on minimal meaningful relationships between public servants and citizens, the narrative of efficiency may itself convey respect to the citizen, insofar as it ensures that their time is not wasted and that the state operates in ways that best suit the recipient of the service. Take the process of renewing

15 Martin, J and Garner, A., Mode Shifting: Whitehall Reform that Liberates Public Services to Shift Between Transactional and Relational Delivery Modes. Demos. Available at https://demos.co.uk/research/mode-shifting-whitehall-reform-that-liberates-public-services-to-shift-between-transactional-and-relational-delivery-modes/

a passport. This interaction is a transaction, and there is nothing disrespectful in making it fast, predictable and light on the citizen's time; there, efficiency and respect point in the same direction.

In contrast, supporting a family through a complex set of needs, such as housing or social care, is not a transaction. In this context, designing services driven primarily or exclusively by the efficiency narrative would signal disrespect to the citizen, and would be unlikely to secure the long-term outcomes the state is trying to achieve. The three narratives are therefore better understood as complementary across the range of what the state does than as competitors within any single service.

For organisations such as GDS, where the focus is on digital services and products, the same principles apply. Whilst many digital services will be fairly transactional, this is not always the case. Officials designing these systems must engage with the communities they serve to gauge which narrative will best secure trust and buy-in, while still delivering the services people are looking for.

HOW NARRATIVES CAN BE USED TO SHAPE SERVICES AND REFORM EFFORTS

For narratives to be a useful governing tool they must move beyond a strategy document or communication campaigns to become embedded in practice and planning. Only where narratives actively shape the make up of, and ways of working in, the institutions themselves can they be considered a genuine governance tool. In general, for narratives to shape institutional behaviour they need to:

1. Be co-created with, and generate buy in from, the organisations they are shaping

Narratives are not a top down management tool, they're a means of building consensus and a shared operating logic across the relevant organisations. Their success relies on buy in from the front line official as much as it does from the Minister accountable for the policy area. It is these individuals who will act as the citizens' litmus test of what matters to the public service that they are trying to access. Whilst a minister can signal Respect and Agency through strategic decisions and delegating authority, it is the individuals on the front line which will make the most impression. This broader buy-in and championing of the narrative becomes increasingly important as officials work out their role in a more devolved state, where much of the delivery happens through partners rather than directly.

2. Narratives must actively inform tradeoffs - and help the organisation own them

One of the key values of a narrative is helping inform leaders and officials what the organisation shouldn't do. For example, where used appropriately, a narrative - be it efficiency, respect or agency provides officials with a justification for certain decisions that are legible to the service user. Hence, even where citizens feel a service or platform is flawed, the narrative helps surface the rationale behind design principles and allows the officials to own the trade-offs. To further strengthen the adoption of narratives, officials should consider testing narratives via participatory methods which allow the citizen to be brought into the decision making process. These types of citizen-centric mechanisms can test whether a narrative holds up in lived experience, and turn those involved into credible advocates for it.

3. Narratives should be designed to give clarity to disparate teams - but they should not replace agency and autonomy; teams closest to the citizen should continue to make decisions

There is already promising work underway. Across local government there are numerous examples of innovation being driven locally. Authorities are developing regional data platforms, investing in digital capability, experimenting with AI and creating new partnerships across public services.[16] A consistent message from these innovators on the front line is the desire for a clear route for working with central government on shared challenges. Narratives can act as one of these routes for collaboration.

Narratives should be designed to give clarity and insight to those working on related areas across disparate institutions, not to reduce the agency of the front line. So whilst narratives can help inform activities such as procurement and commercial rules and criteria, and provide the relevant official with values they should be prioritising, they do not strip the actor of agency to make a decision that they feel best serves their citizenry.

As such, efforts must be taken to ensure narratives don't extend into operating procedures that are set by an external group and which replace the insight and experience of those at the front line who best understand those they serve. Approaches such as the Test, Learn and Grow programme indicate potential ways forward. Evaluation and appraisals in these contexts are used to rapidly assess the impact of innovations, without restricting the agency of those at the front line.

4. Narratives must inform specific, tangible and measurable metrics

Finally, whilst the values that underpin narratives are conceptual values, the narratives themselves must inform specific and tangible metrics. Without robust evaluative criteria, there is a risk that services and the officials who animate them become unaccountable and less responsive to citizen experience.

The challenge will be to develop metrics that effectively track the extent to which citizens feel respected and given agency over their own experience of the state. This will require substantial development and likely involve identifying alternative evaluative approaches not yet built out and developed in core institutional infrastructure like the Magenta Book. Equally, the evaluative approaches themselves must be co-created between citizens, front line practitioners and those parts of the institution or broader system which in turn holds the delivery organisations accountable for performance. History tells us that imposing centrally designed evaluative criteria, designed by officials in Westminster, to inform the priorities of front line delivery professionals just doesn't work.

16 Middleton, E and Bellamy, C., Supporting Devolution Through Digital, Data and AI. GDS Blog. Available at https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2026/09/01/supporting-devolution-through-digital-data-and-ai



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR GDS AND THE BROADER DIGITAL AND DATA COMMUNITY

For GDS, the challenge is two fold. First, it must navigate the systemic shift towards a more devolved system. Regardless of the exact formulation the state takes, the role of institutions like GDS, which have traditionally operated from the centre of Whitehall to inform and assure the activity of other central departments, is likely to change substantially. As devolved bodies take on additional responsibilities for digital services and platforms, GDS' web of stakeholders becomes increasingly distant and disparate. Nor will these stakeholders necessarily be required to adhere to GDS standards and approaches, making it difficult to maintain a sense of cohesiveness between services owned by different places and parts of the system.

For the broader digital and data community, the challenge will also be threefold. First, developing the capacity and capability in local institutions to effectively take on the additional responsibilities will require sustained effort, significant investment and long term planning. Second, whilst individual digital leaders will be responsible for optimising their own digital estate, they must also be cognisant of the additional handoffs and boundaries (both institutional and geographic) across which there will need to be substantial coordination to ensure the citizen and user experience feels cohesive and satisfactory. Third, the transition itself must be managed as a system. If individual departments devolve services and their digital components one by one, without reference to a shared architecture, the complexity of reconciling them falls to MSAs and local authorities, who will be absorbing several such handovers at once and out of sequence with each other.

Adopting narratives that operate across institutional boundaries is one way of meeting this challenge. We recognise the many other challenges associated with this transition; ensuring the appropriate governance, how to ensure interoperability, shared data and common components which did not form part of the discussion. This report has set out both the role central institutions can play in a more devolved state and how narratives can and should be used to inform how they work with others moving forward. For GDS, adopting narratives to inform the work means adopting the following in practice:

1. **Co-create the narrative with departments, delivery partners and frontline officials, so it carries buy-in across a system GDS no longer directs rather than being issued from the centre**

   GDS's current narrative, the "Blueprint for modern digital government", was authored internally and is addressed principally to the wider public sector.

   As delivery increasingly happens in partnership with other institutions, GDS should actively build its future narratives in partnership with departments, combined authorities and frontline teams rather than develop their own in isolation. This co-creation can form one element of front line institutions' relationships back to the centre.

2. **Embed the chosen values in GDS's own instruments, its service standards and its commercial and skills frameworks, so the narrative shape activities and priorities in other organisations**

   GDS already shapes digital transformation and reform through the standards, platforms and frameworks it maintains, from the service standard to shared infrastructure. Embedding respect and agency into these instruments (or other values and narratives), rather than into communications, is what turns a narrative into something that shapes the behaviour of others. This is a continuation of GDS's current operating approach, since its influence has always run through the rules and platforms it sets rather than the services it runs directly.

3. **Use the narrative to make design trade-offs explicit and defensible, while leaving the decisions themselves with the teams closest to the citizen**

   Much of what GDS touches is transactional, where a fast and predictable service is itself respectful of the citizen's time, but many other public services are more relational. It is vital that the narrative matches the context. A suitable narrative helps officials make and defend these trade-offs openly, giving a legible rationale for design choices even where a service feels flawed to citizens. Equally, whilst narratives can inform decision - it should not strip agency from the teams closest to the citizen. A narrative should inform rather than direct.

4. **Develop measures of respect and agency alongside efficiency, so the system counts what the narrative asks it to value rather than defaulting to what is easiest to measure**

   The prioritisation of productive efficiency has dominated focus because it is the easiest thing to measure. GDS is well placed to develop measures of respect and agency to sit alongside it, ensuring more relational teams have the necessary evaluative frameworks to showcase the value and impact of their work. These types of evaluative approaches likely mean looking beyond those currently embedded in core infrastructure like the Magenta Book, co-created with citizens and frontline practitioners.

5. **Hold the enabling role: maintain the shared standards, data and infrastructure that make local autonomy possible, and hold delivery to account against them without directing how the work is done**

   In a devolved system GDS delivers its objectives through others, which makes its enabling role, maintaining shared data and interoperability standards and the infrastructure beneath them, more important rather than less. Local actors themselves welcomed a more muscular centre on standards and infrastructure, provided it enables their efforts rather than restricting them. Clear standards also give GDS a legitimate basis on which to hold delivery to account without prescribing how the work is done.

6. **Build the capability of the receiving layer so that MSAs and local authorities have the skills to take on the functions that will be devolved to them**

   Devolution will only succeed if the institutions receiving new responsibilities have the capability to carry them out. Due to chronic funding pressures, local authorities have not developed the capabilities necessary to take on the functions that Whitehall is being asked to devolve.

   GDS, and other parts of the DDaT community, will have a key role to play in helping local and regional authorities recruit the necessary workforce, build institutional capacity and develop the required capabilities.

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