OECD Good Practice Principles for Public Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age

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The OECD Good Practice Principles for Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age have been developed by the OECD Working Party of Senior Digital Government Officials (E-Leaders) and reflect the combined insights of service design and delivery principles gathered from across OECD member countries. These nine Good Practice Principles are arranged under the three pillars of "Build accessible, ethical and equitable public services that prioritise user needs, rather than government needs"; "Deliver with impact, at scale and with pace"; and "Be accountable and transparent in the design and delivery of public services to reinforce and strengthen public trust".

This document replaces a previous version that was missing two sub-principles from Principle 6.

Introduction – A framework for public service design and delivery

This paper builds on work carried out since 2017 by the OECD under the auspices of the Public Governance Committee and its Working Party of Senior Digital Government Officials (E-Leaders). Using the experience of OECD member countries, research from other international organisations, and several OECD Digital Government Reviews[1], in 2020 the OECD proposed a Framework for Service Design and Delivery that was released as part of a dedicated report assessing the service design and delivery experience of Chile (see Figure 1) (OECD, 2020[1]).

Figure 1. A conceptual framework for analysing the design and delivery of services
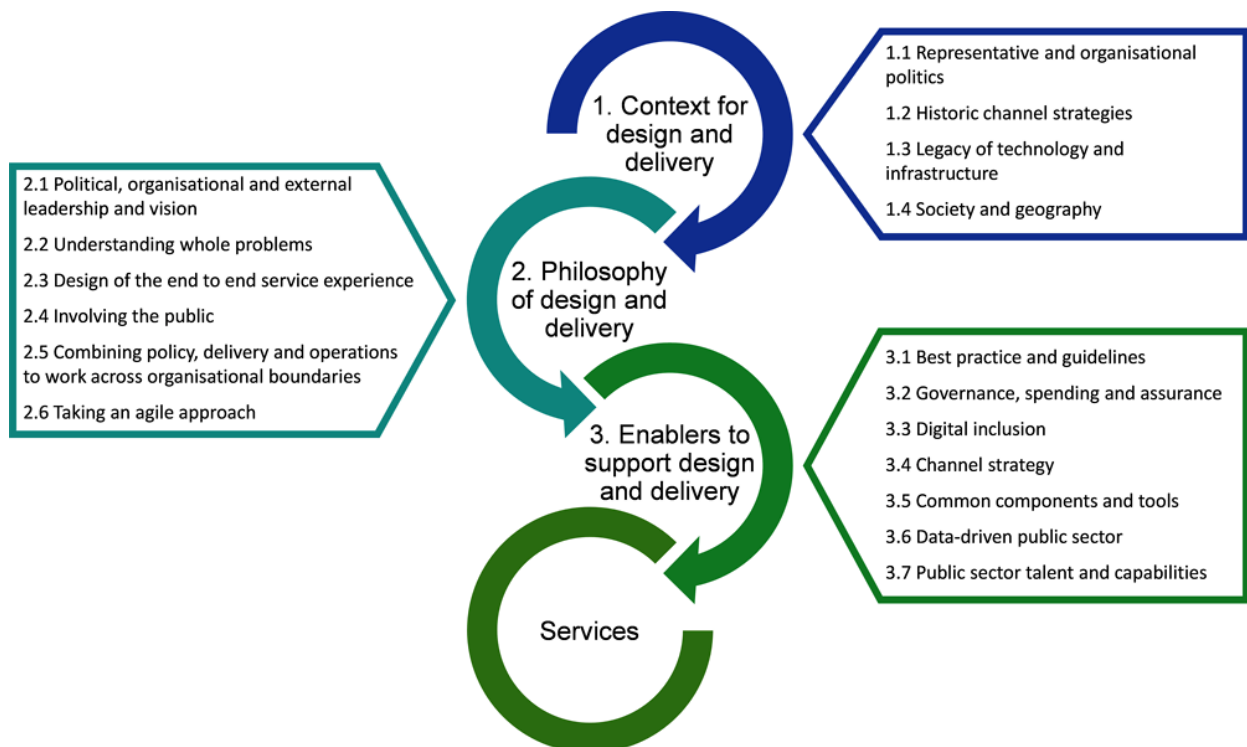
Source: (OECD, 2020[1]), *Digital Government in Chile – Improving Public Service Design and Delivery*

The framework consists of three elements that are essential to analyse the opportunities for designing and delivering high quality and reliable services in a given country:

1. The *context for design and delivery of services*: the way in which services are designed and delivered is informed by the history of delivering services (channel strategy) in a country, political support for the agenda, and the role of legacy technology amongst other factors.

2. The *philosophy for the design and delivery of services*: the activities and practices that contribute to decision-making about the design and delivery of public services. This focuses on leadership and vision as well as approaches to service design and delivery itself.

3. The *enablers to support the design and delivery of services*: the resources that have been developed by countries in order to facilitate teams in the design and delivery of services. This includes sharing best practice and guidelines (including guiding principles, style guides and

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[1] specifically those of Estonia and Finland, Norway, Brazil, African Portuguese-Speaking Countries and Timor-Leste, Panama and Slovenia

reference manuals); governance, spending and assurance (including the use of a common business case methodology, budget thresholds, procurement, service standards and assurance processes); digital inclusion (including digital literacy, connectivity and accessibility); common components and tools (such as digital identity, notifications, payments and design systems); data governance and its application for public value and trust; and public sector talent and capabilities (including recruitment, communities of practice, training and consultancy) (OECD, 2020[1]).

Developing some of these ideas, and under the auspices of the OECD's horizontal Going Digital project, the Secretariat prepared a Policy Note "Designing and delivering public services in the digital age" to form part of the Going Digital Toolkit (Welby and Hui Yan Tan, 2022[2]).

Working toward standards for public service design and delivery in the digital age

In 2020, the benchmarking efforts of the inaugural Digital Government Index (DGI) sought to understand the comparative experience of service design and delivery and its role in transforming government capacity to respond to the needs of society (OECD, 2020[3]; OECD, 2021[4]). Results showed that only half of the responding countries have formal requirements to engage users in service design and one in four in service delivery. Similarly, around half have specific policies or concrete activities to involve end-users in testing and evaluating digital projects/initiatives. Finally, less than half use indicators to monitor user satisfaction with digital government services. These figures show that there is an opportunity to support OECD members in determining how to create the practical frameworks that can support improved outcomes for service design and delivery.

The E-Leaders' Thematic Group on Service Design and Delivery has been essential in gathering evidence on national experiences to identify best practices and values underpinning high-quality service design and delivery. As public services are the essential point of contact between governments and citizens , efficient, proactive and user-driven services contribute to improving outcomes while strengthening trust and promoting the reliability of governments through increased satisfaction (Welby, 2019[5]; OECD, 2020[1]).

Multiple OECD member countries have now developed a 'Service Standard' that defines the expectations for those involved in public service design and delivery. The Thematic Group, led by the United Kingdom and benefitting from the participation of Australia, Brazil, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, Morocco, Norway, Portugal, Qatar, Singapore and Slovenia, has been comparing practices in order to develop a "Standard of Standards". This "Standard of Standards" was presented during the E-Leaders meeting in October 2021 and this paper provides the basis for the development of the Good Practice Principles (GPPs) for Public Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age in light of these country discussions concerning how OECD member countries have been developing their national standards for service design and delivery.

The intent of the GPPs is to support and guide public officials in promoting the transformation of public services in the digital age in ways that complement existing national and international laws and recommendations.

Demand for good practice principles in the public sector

The priority of maximising the potential of digital technologies and data to deliver public value has been growing for many years. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, these trends were accelerated, as there was no choice but to deliver public services digitally. In a context of increased demand for digital public services, governments needed to ensure the quality of public services, capitalising on the opportunity

offered by digital tools and data to transform service design and delivery while preventing the emergence of new forms of digital divides and exclusion.

The gap between those who benefit from the digital age and those who are excluded results from factors such as the lack of digital skills, digital literacy, or access to digital devices and the Internet. Therefore, it is critical for civil servants to understand the offline and online context of users and their needs when accessing public services. Civil servants also need to be strategic about how different services and channels are integrated from a user and organisational perspective to deliver a coherent and successful experience. The 'life events' model can be a helpful basis for identifying the wider circumstances and multiple providers involved in responding to particularly high-profile stages in life. However, the more ambitious approach of applying an 'end-to-end user journey' methodology for all public services helps better meet user needs by focusing on whole problems and joining up interactions and public sector processes accordingly. In this way, digitally transformed public service design and delivery uses an in-depth understanding of user backgrounds, skills and preferred service channels to reshape any and all government interactions to improve responsiveness and reduce digital exclusion.

Designing services that respond to the evolving needs of society is complex. This is why guidelines become essential, as they describe what "good" looks like and help define an ambitious agenda based on what works and avoid what does not. They help simplify complex internal procedures in the public sector and provide a replicable, trusted framework to reduce the overhead of devising local solutions. Good practice principles are guidelines, rather than strict rules, and are intended to empower civil servants by providing boundaries to make decisions for the benefit of the users without having to seek approval every time from the leadership. If followed consistently, they help to build a positive reputation, make governments more accountable and strengthen trust from citizens.

The purpose and value of good practice principles

Starting in October 2021, the OECD developed a set of Good Practice Principles for Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age. This work drew on the combined insights from previous work in this area, which highlighted the emergence of similar activities in multiple governments where shared values were being embodied into sets of principle that inform and shape service design and delivery activities. Establishing good practice principles reflects a growing consensus around the priorities for governments in approaching public services in the digital age. For those countries that have already developed their own principles, such a reference document can complement existing approaches while they can act as inspiration for those countries who do not have their own.

The goal of these Good Practice Principles is, therefore, to set standards for the quality of public service design and delivery in the digital age across the membership of the OECD.

In order to do this, the Good Practice Principles must be practical and able to guide countries in their decision making and implementation. It is important, therefore, that they are clear, actionable and as comprehensive as possible. However, they are advisory rather than prescriptive, allowing for local interpretation and implementation of some overarching truths. Although finding the balance between these tensions is critical, the Principles are ambitious, while remaining achievable.

These Principles bring additional benefit beyond the direct impact on the design and delivery of services and improvements to the quality of outcomes. For example, they can enhance the capabilities of civil servants and their engagement in the service design and delivery process. As seen in the OECD Framework for Digital Talent and Skills in the public sector (OECD, 2021[6]), empowering the workforce and reducing layers of hierarchy can increase civil servants' confidence in their approach to services, which can lead to higher job satisfaction and commitment at work.

The OECD Good Practice Principles for Public Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age

The following principles were drawn from studying the standards and principles guiding digital government in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. In total, approximately 300 distinct ideas were contained within these standards of which, unsurprisingly, there is quite a significant amount of overlap.

A clustering exercise made it possible to group these 300 ideas under different thematic areas. The final version of the Good Practice Principles for Service Design and Delivery in the Digital Age benefitted from a one-month public consultation process, internal reviews and comments from the E-leaders Thematic Group. Today, the Principles consist of three pillars and nine principles, set out below.

Build accessible, ethical and equitable public services that prioritise user needs, rather than government needs

1. Understand users and their needs

- Explore, understand and solve a whole problem for users from an initial need through to its resolution.
- Involve users on an ongoing basis, using innovative methods for conducting regular user research, to identify insights for iterating the design of services, simplifying underlying procedures and increasing access for all user groups.
- Document the user journeys, data flows and organisational responsibilities to map the whole problem
- In line with the once-only principle, identify opportunities to pre-populate public services by reusing existing sources of data held by government and reducing the data submission overheads for users wherever possible
- Ensure users' ability to manage their personal data

2. Make the design and delivery of public services a participatory and inclusive process

- Empower users to take an active role in co-creating and co-designing public services (e.g. implementing mechanisms to involve users in testing, iterating and improving the service)
- Use clear language that can be understood by all user groups
- Learn from research, feedback and performance indicators to iterate public services on an ongoing basis with the goal of becoming intuitive enough that users succeed in using them first time
- Keep users informed proactively and through trusted, official sources, rather than requiring them to initiate contact or seek out unverified third parties
- Address barriers that prevent people from accessing public services across all channels
- Recognise the value of non-digital channels to ease access and use them to engage users and equip them with new skills as needed
- Acknowledge that a minority of users will always be unable or unwilling to adopt digital public services and consider alternative mechanisms, where appropriate
- Provide the possibility to contact human support throughout the digital service cycle

3. Ensure consistent, seamless and high-quality public services

- Design an omni-channel experience that means user journeys provide the same outcomes across all channels
- Understand the channel access needs and preferences of different user groups to optimise the design, location and model of the omni-channel experience
- Design a visual identity that ensures a common look, feel and brand for public services
- Consolidate the channels of separate organisations to break down silos and help achieve coherent, integrated and interoperable public services
- Simplify the design of public services, and their underlying processes, ensuring users do not need to understand the internal structure of the public sector
- Respond to the needs of public servants when designing internal processes and systems
- Take a trustworthy and ethical approach to the use of data and technology to automate and personalise public services as a means of improving their proactive responsiveness to users' needs
- Design digital identity solutions as a seamless and user-friendly service with the ambition of ensuring all members of society can prove their identity online
- Explore the use of administrative data for better design, development, management and assessment of public services
- Ensure support to users is available no matter the chosen channel for accessing public services

Deliver with impact, at scale and with pace

4. Create conditions that help teams to design and deliver high quality public services

- Understand the history of a service and its operational landscape, including suppliers, systems or other legacy considerations
- Encourage a service culture that is open to being adaptive, collaborative and focused on the needs of their users
- Fund teams so they can design, build, operate and iterate the service under their responsibility
- Build teams with a diverse set of skills and experiences that are representative of the users they serve
- Empower teams with the autonomy to make decisions throughout the service lifecycle, including prototyping, experimenting and testing different ways of solving user needs
- Ensure teams have access to the tools, training and technologies they need, especially those that require improvement in their working practices
- Consider cross-agency funding mechanisms to encourage multi-agency collaboration on public service design and delivery
- Ensure that teams have the flexibility and agility to adapt digital delivery to unexpected and exceptional use cases

5. Develop a consistent delivery methodology for public services

- Adopt delivery methodologies that favour continuous exploration, experimentation, learning and iterative improvement
- Control the scope of work and prioritise delivery to add the most value to users

- Use performance data to give teams actionable insights to inform decisions on channel strategy, identify underperforming services (e.g., in terms of cost-effectiveness and quality) and ensure value for money
- Frequently iterate the service in response to quantitative and qualitative data
- Understand the legacy technologies that services depend on and define the conditions under which systems and services will be retired or their contracts exited
- Agree on a common approach to selecting technology, digital architecture and tools
- Consider whether cloud-based software or infrastructure can meet your needs before committing to build or host solutions in-house
- Use scalable, cloud-based infrastructure to mitigate the risk of disruption

6. Curate an ecosystem of enabling tools, practices and resources

- Implement clear and transparent governance mechanisms to cover accountability, quality, security and coherence of public services
- Use a common value proposition model (e.g., business cases) to help teams estimate multidimensional benefits and costs of a service
- Implement and use public procurement processes that are agile, open, fair and effective in line with agreed key performance indicators.
- Create shared tools, components, platforms databases, guides, manuals and standards to avoid duplication of effort
- Establish a standardised process for service teams to present their research and showcase their delivery
- Connect service teams and build professional networks to share experience and resources
- Stimulate the private sector and civil society sectors by exploring ways to meet user needs through non-public services they operate and involving suitable partners as suppliers or participants in the design and delivery of public services
- Ensure you have the appropriate data governance to share information and data across government to reduce the burden on citizens and other public sector organisations
- Make all non-sensitive data, information, code and software systematically available for sharing and reuse under an open licence by using open standards, practices, frameworks and reusable components

Be accountable and transparent in the design and delivery of public services to reinforce and strengthen public trust

7. Be open and transparent in the design and delivery of public services

- Work in the open by publishing research and sharing journey maps of the end-to-end service when appropriate (user-facing and back-office)
- Publish the quality standards and performance indicators for each service
- Be transparent in the use and explicability of algorithms within public services and address the biases built into them
- Collaborate at all levels of government, between all disciplines and with all sectors
- Provide clear information about the service (e.g., expected length for completion and cost) and its expected users to set clear expectations and avoid frustrations

8. Ensure the trustworthy and ethical use of digital tools and data

- Recognise security and privacy as foundational to the design of a service and not something overlaid at the end
- Anticipate the unintended consequences of redesigning services and deploying different technologies, and work to address possible concerns of users
- Take a balanced approach to mitigate risks and limit burden on users.
- Evaluate the data a service will gather, store or use and address the resulting security considerations, legal responsibilities, data retention practices, privacy issues and risks
- Equip all public servants with the knowledge of their responsibilities in terms of protecting personal data
- Consider the environmental and climate implications of technology choices and proactively explore ways to reduce waste and energy consumption
- Practice service unavailability (e.g. reliability, incident management response) and ensure there are alternative solutions
- Take actions to avoid biases in service design and ensure public services are universal and built for all users

9. Establish an enabling environment for a culture and practice of public service design and delivery

- Identify a political leader to champion the vision and promote it among their peers
- Encourage leaders within public sector organisations to enhance their own digital government user skills and actively create organisational environments that support public service design and delivery in the digital age
- Establish a monitoring system to measure performance in terms of whole services and whole outcomes, not just by focusing on discrete transactions or interactions with an individual agency
- Assess how the organisation will be affected in its work processes, structure, culture, stakeholders' relations; and define actions to manage possible implications
- Build a shared vision of change for public servants directly involved in designing and providing services, as well as the multi-disciplinary nature of related supporting roles (e.g., procurement, legal and operational colleagues)
- Equip public servants with the digital user skills to support digital government maturity
- Nurture relations with legislators and regulators to design new legislations and regulations with digital in mind and ensure rule-making accounts for the needs of service users

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