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## **The Right People, Building Things They Understand, and Striving to Deliver Directly for Citizens**

Jamie Proctor, Digital transformation specialist focused on the public sector

In my first tech job, at a start-up in London, I was asked to review the processes for managing clients. Fresh faced and excitable, I unwittingly made three mistakes:

- Focusing on things that sounded exciting but didn't directly solve problems for clients;
- Saying I had 'designed' something, when I hadn't comprehended the complexity of the problems I was trying to solve; and
- Trying to push through a 'vision', without the experience or expertise to back it up.

The CEO politely told me it was the wrong thing to do, and over the years I realised that he was right. I was lucky that I was working at a cash-strapped start-up, because had it been in the public sector, the answer may well have been very different.

Public sector blind faith in buying big ideas has led to notable failures, such as The Post Office's Horizon initiative (Dinneson, 2024), or the £10 billion Future NHS failure (Baumann, 2021), both in the UK.

However, in the early 2010s, the UK built on success from the private and public sectors to develop the Government Digital Service (GDS) driven by a mantra of *'multidisciplinary teams, delivering iteratively, with a focus on citizens'* (Lane Fox, 2010; Williams, 2012). The key change was to ensure that successful interactions with citizens (or users) should be the measure of success, rather than the amount of money spent on a product, or a manager's confidence in how things are going. The result was the best public sector website in the world (<https://gov.uk>).

There have been many attempts to transition the UK's experiences to LMICs, notably through the Principles for Digital Development (DIAL, 2025; see p.\*\*\*), which were based in part on the UK Service Design Principles (GDS and GDDO, 2012). However, creating *multidisciplinary teams, delivering iteratively, with a focus on citizens* in these contexts is even more challenging because:

- donor funding forces implementers to buy fixed outputs, thus preventing agile software development (see also p.\*\*);
- entrenched civil service hierarchies limit interactions with citizens, in preference for the latest management priority; and
- it is difficult to recruit small multidisciplinary teams, despite expertise being available.

To serve the needs of the world's poorest and most marginalised it is essential to systematise these changes towards *multidisciplinary teams, delivering iteratively, with a focus on citizens*. Otherwise, the potential benefits of digital technology in the public sector will never be realised.

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