



System Error: fixing the flaws in government IT

On the 2nd March 2011 the Institute for Government launched its report [System Error: fixing the flaws in government IT](#), setting out the case for a new approach to IT in the public sector. The evening's speakers included:

- **Sir Ian Magee** (Chair of the Improving Government IT Taskforce)
- **Ian Watmore** (Government Chief Operating Officer and Head of the Efficiency and Reform Group, Cabinet Office)
- **Mark O'Neill** (Founder of Skunkworks and Chief Information Officer, DCLG and DCMS)

The meeting was chaired by Andrew Adonis, Director of the Institute for Government.

The event was kindly supported by [Research in Motion](#)

An edited version of the transcript for the evening follows

System Error: Fixing the flaws in IT Government Report Launch

Edited Transcript of Event

See: <http://www.youtube.com/user/instituteforgov?feature=mhum#p/c/3AF0795703410F7F/15/O4IDVCGyP8>

Andrew Adonis

I'm Andrew Adonis and I'm the Director of the Institute for Government. I'm glad to welcome you all here this evening and I'm particularly glad to say a big thank you to all of our taskforce members who have helped us in the preparation of this report and also to Research in Motion who kindly acted as sponsor for it.

This report has had the largest number of downloads of any report we've issued since the election, which may tell you something about perceptions of government IT and we're glad that it's stimulating a wide debate. This is also one of the few occasions where I don't need to say at the beginning please turn off your mobile phones – in fact we're very happy for you to keep your phones on, provided all you do is tweet! [#ukgovit](#) is the link that you need and we're also taking contributions to the discussion later on by email as well. I'm going to invite Sir Ian Magee who is our senior fellow to introduce the report in a moment, but then Ian Watmore who is Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office and who has overall responsibility for IT will respond, followed by Mark O'Neill who is CIO at DCLG and DCMS. After that we will be glad to take questions and have a wider discussion.

Ian Magee

Thanks Andrew and good evening everybody. I'm particularly pleased to be followed by Ian Watmore because ten years ago Ian used to consult to me when I ran my IT organisation, so this feels a little bit like role reversal. I'm not going to spend too long outlining the report, mainly because I expect that many of you will have downloaded it and gone through its contents. You've also got the executive summary in front of you. We want to get Ian on to listen to what the government's response is as soon as possible. However, some headlines: complex multi years programmes, take years out to draw up in advance are inflexible, changes that cost money...government can't stay

locked in a time warp forever. That said we still need and will probably always need other big organisations to deliver database systems. However, not so long ago, there was no broadband or social networking, and email was primitive by today's standards, access to the net was much less - that accelerated the pace of technological change plus the imperative from government ministers to do things faster and better I think leads us to a situation where we realise we have to move on. Government has said its own things about driving efficiency and supporting innovation. The reports that we've had about government IT in this report look to the future rather than relies on what may have gone wrong in the past and we don't pretend the solution will be created in a year but we do hope this is a feature others can subscribe to.

What about our research? Lots of people have got their views about IT and what's gone wrong. Andrew's mentioned the taskforce, members of the government and members from the private sector. We did a very close observation on supporting an agile project involving the Met and Home Office. If you look at our website you'll see some feedback from the police officers who were involved in that. This was the best development they have been involved in, in many years of policing and IT and that was because of the importation of the agile principle. We've had a lot of workshops, 70 interviews and 4 site visits. The good news is that many places including several departments in government are actually using agile methods. Our recommendation is that all government departments should try out agile methods, although it won't necessarily be the right way forward in all circumstances. We want slicker development and the move to functionality quicker. We want short iterations, room for experimentation, for improvisation and reprioritisation and critically we make the point the point that many of you will know, that agile is more than about software development. We want to ensure that the users and indeed the customers get fully in bed with the process.

Some challenges for government: some very strong departmental accountability. Are you all in this together? How are you going to enforce this? There hasn't always been reuse in the past. The mindsets required in an agile approach; there's plenty of room for big suppliers, the Treasury's prediction is \$16bn expenditure per year. But there's much more scope for SME's as well to get involved in the process. IT hasn't always been flavour of the month for permanent secretaries with the prospect of overrun and expenditure sadly too often in the past. Now is the time to learn for the future. Finally I'm just the front man for this report, the real credit has to go to all those whose names

are on the front of it, who have put a lot of work into what I hope will be a really thought provoking document for you all to consider.

Ian Watmore

Thank you Ian. We worked together in the 1990s and it's been a pleasure to work with Ian again on this. He always is objective, fair and very analytical in his conclusions and I think that sums up my feelings about this report. It's also good to see David Sainsbury here. In fact, when David first had the idea for this Institute, he and I talked about it, and it's precisely this sort of event that I think we had in mind when the Institute was launched and it's fantastic that so many people are here today, caring about a subject like this.

I think my short summary is to very much support the direction of this report going forward. And I'll come back to that. But one thing I did want to say is that (and I don't claim this report does it) but commentators generally do, is the general trashing of government IT that goes on, which I don't share at all. The reason that I don't share it is because actually large numbers of systems work everyday and very well up and down the country in all aspects of our project life and we would notice if they didn't, believe me. We are talking therefore about a minority of issues that go wrong. In fact there was a very good report done by the National Audit Office a few years ago, which had more examples of significant success in it than its failings but of course it got no column inches because it was the story of the playground safety variety. One has to put that into context.

Secondly, often government IT represents only a reflection of other decisions that have been made. I notice that people refer to the ID cards as a government IT scheme. ID cards was a policy, launched by a prime minister, supported by another prime minister and four home secretaries along the way and then when the elected government changed it was a policy that was reversed. That is a political and a policy issue and not an IT issue and in fact the people underneath who did the work on that did an excellent job on both sides of that divide. I think that one has to be clear about what one's talking about. And my final comment in context is really to say that IT in government means so many different things to so many different people. If you're a policy person sitting in Whitehall it's probably your laptop or desktop/mobile phone that enables you to

communicate with others and write documents and do the policy analysis. But of course that's only a fraction of it. If you are a citizen you may well rely on government websites to transact public services. If you're in one of the big transactional departments it could be the huge systems that churn away to collect taxes and pay benefits. I am reminded by the government CIO Joe Harley that everyday government IT systems pay out £500 million alone. These are massively complicated IT systems. If you're accessing IT at GCHQ in Cheltenham, which of course one can't talk about too openly, there they are using technology for a completely different purpose to intercept terrorist messages and to protect the nation. If you're in the armed forces or the emergency services you use technology to be able to protect life and save lives. So it's a very rich tapestry when we talk about government IT. Therefore any comments are by definition going to be a bit generalist because you have to apply it to the context that you're in. So if I deal with that point as bringing us to the present day, then this report I think is very good at being future focused.

This report focuses on two broad things. One, the agile approach to building the system and therefore the need for implementing the policies and the programmes and secondly it talks about creating a platform that effectively connects these new systems with a huge legacy estate that we are bound to have in any era. I think that approach is absolutely right in both regards. It's right in terms of the second regard, the legacy is there. We can wish it wasn't but it is. And to replace it would be a colossal waste of money and a colossal risk. And therefore when you've got something that works, stick with it, build around it. It's what banks, airlines, and governments round the world do. The real key is how to link to that legacy in a quick, easy and interoperable way and I think the report sets out a very clear direction of travel for that. Going back to the former, the cycle of delivery and development are critical. Many of the criticisms of the past come from that, but the scale of the project undertaken was so huge and so lengthy that by the time the project was completed it was already out of date and that it is the challenge that we collectively need to tackle.

Therefore it is important that, regularly every six months when there's new stuff coming on screen we make sure it's tested and worked. As far as you can, get it out there, get it working and get it built upon. As the world changes around us so you adapt and that's clear. Secondly, I think the world is changing in the way the systems are developed. I think the world of the cold war programmer has ended, largely. In the new systems development we can develop more iteratively more quickly in shorter cycle time and we

need to change the methods to adapt to that. And thirdly, we are directly implementing IT for the end citizen or end business customer now, not just for the intermediary, or the call centre worker. Therefore we need to involve them in the design and development of the solutions that we make.

Fourthly there is a world out there of people who can provide solutions for us if only we open up our data. There are many good examples out there. I think the one that often gets quoted is the mumsnet environment, which takes a lot of public information and provides it in a usable and accessible way for its members who can then review and change it according to what they want. So I think if we just stick to the future and concentrate on building on where we are, this report is a first class way of weighing up that future that we are keen to adopt...in all aspects.

My final comments are to say that this morning as many of you will know that there is the infamous meeting between the permanent secretary and the home secretary and the government, known as the Wednesday meeting. At this morning's meeting we happened to have a presentation from DWP and HMRC about how they are going to implement universal credit and tax changes. I'm pleased to say that the method they've proposed to use is precisely the one advocated in this report which is to lock down the legacy, build the interface platform to it and to use agile methods as a way of developing that policy on a repeated cycle, so that this government flagship policy can be introduced according to these new methods and that is what is ultimately important: it's not the technology, it's not the process, it's not the enabling method, it's actually what you do with it.

If one believes that universal credit is the transformation of the welfare state, which ministers believe today, then our job as technologists and officials in the wider sense is to bring that about in the quickest, cheapest and easiest way and I'm pleased to say that the programme plan this morning could have been a perfect case study for the report's recommendations and therefore I think it's a great example of not only what we say we're going to do but actually doing it as well. I think that's probably the best quote for me to close. Thank you to the Institute, a great organisation to work with and thank you to all of you for showing such interest in what we're about. Most of all we found the report very useful way of pointing to the future that we're keen to adopt. Thank you and I will take questions now.

Questions to Ian Watmore

David Walker - The Guardian

A chronic problem with occasions like this is the absence, save the presence of David Sainsbury and Andrew Adonis, of really existing politicians. And you've mentioned implicitly two problems. One the political cycle doesn't necessarily match the procurement cycle and how does one deal with that and second, this question of commitment. You intervened last week to try and persuade people that public servants are worthwhile. You used the phrase trashing. Some of this trashing of this enterprise has come from the very politicians you've served.

Ian Watmore

I do make the point that the political cycle is crucial. We can wish it wasn't, but it is. If you're in the business of implementing technology to business problems then in government you have to lock into the political cycle. I think what this report is doing very well is saying the political cycle and indeed by implication the cycle that already people value moves much faster than we have been able to in the past. Therefore using this agile method we should be able to move with greater frequency than the political cycle and also that of the general public. I don't tend to get involved in the public debates because...actually when it comes to it all five main political parties tend to be on the same page wanting to achieve quickly safely and cheaply. This report gives us a rare opportunity to move forward on that basis.

Questioner

You mentioned that some people label IT projects as changes of policy. I think certainly when you're trying to use technology some of the problems we have encountered...do seem like failures of intention. I wonder if there's more that can be done to help policymakers understand what's possible so that we don't have these failures of intention – as they are the most expensive.

Ian Watmore

I think that what has changed, possibly in the last ten years is that technology has moved from being a means of implementing certain grand policies to actually enabling

different policies to start with. What things are now possible on the web actually enable policymakers to think differently about policy and we have been moving through that journey and that I think is one we have not yet finished. So for instance Martha Lane Fox made an excellent report just before Christmas – which we’re currently considering – that says public services in the future should be digital by default.

We have a whole cadre of politicians and advisers from right across the political spectrum that are seeing technology as a new way of having a political discourse with their electorate. So I think that’s one of the key shifts. One of the things we need to do is not just educate ourselves in how to do this sort of technology differently, but actually to continue to educate policymakers, politicians and their advisers and increasingly enable us to listen to the general public and the community of developers and entrepreneurs that are out there, to be able to influence the very policy itself.

Roger Taylor – Dr Foster

My question would be at what stage do you think the interaction with public services from members of the public will be similar to or regarded as equivalent to, say interacting with airlines or other retailers in terms of technology.

Ian Watmore

I would argue that there are many examples of government transactions that are as good as any out there. [Car tax online](#) is brilliant not just because it’s easy to use but actually when you understand what goes on behind it, you realise that they’re pulling together three bits of data held in different places. There are a lot of good examples out there. Equally, there are a number of examples where we’ve automated a complicated process and we’ve just put online something that may have been once useful in the past. I think one of the things that Martha would claim in her report and a whole lot of people are telling us is that we have to change the way which we build these services. Either we have to do it ourselves with the user in mind or increasingly not build it ourselves but enable other people to do it for us, either be giving them access to our data or opening up our policy intention to allow other people to come in and offer alternatives and I think when you’re moving to that sort of world I think we’ll have a more fast moving world.

Mark Anfilogoff – Business Link

I think the sentiment expressed by the report is excellent and I know that it will find favour with a great many people across all departments working in IT who will support this but one of the real challenges here is in culture and the excessive amounts of governance that goes on at the moment in the relationships between departments and their current suppliers and the processes by which they do things which result in very high costs, very inflexible approaches. Therefore, one of the big issues is for the people who ultimately sign the cheques – the SROs – having the confidence to approach something differently because in my view there is a misunderstanding a misperception of risk. How would you address those things to build that confidence and change those cultures so as to enable what you've clearly set out to happen so that we can get the benefits from it?

Ian Watmore

Very briefly, I went to a very interesting breakfast speech this morning run by Booz and Co where the key speaker was saying don't try and change your culture – work with the one you've got, and try and make the best out of it. And I think there's a lot in that. The reason we do appear to be cost driven at times is that we have to account for every last penny of the public penny that's spent, and if you've got to sit in front of the PAC that will drive risk aversion. I think however, one of the advantages of the way this report is talking is that it enables us to make smaller decisions. And if you're faced with a decision which is a billion pound something it's going to be a big decision and you're going to have to swallow hard before you make it. But if you're actually going to make a relatively smaller decision then you take the level of personal risk to a much smaller level and you enable people to make swift and fast decisions.

The second thing is that you need as a public official political aircover to make decisions. This government has made very recently a number of announcements to the procurement arrangements which it knows in theory are potentially adding a bit of risk to it but in practice are actually enabling people to make a large number of decisions – to procure from smaller companies etc and enable more of a flotilla of ships to be sailing rather than one or two huge ones. I think if we go to that model, which I think is implicit in this report, we ought to be able to derisk it and cut out a number of advisers on each side.

Roger James – University of Southampton

One of the great things about agile is the learning process that allows you to build momentum. One of the characteristics of government IT in the past has been that it's jumped into groundbreaking IT projects. So I'm both encouraged and worried about your comment on universal benefit because you're going from zero to very, very big. So how are you going to learn and incorporate that into your culture?

Ian Watmore

There is an inherent scale with the British government, which is unusual around the world. We do things on a national level which in many other countries are devolved to much smaller groups. So the US do lots of things at state level and not federal level, and the Germans do it at the länder level, which is why we tend on average to have bigger things to deal with. DWP is a very unusual organisation for that reason. We also create financial products and have got complexity that banks and capital organisations just wouldn't do. We do that for political reasons as we're trying to cover every eventuality. So we have both scale and complexity. Which is why I was so pleased to see the quote attributed to me in this report as government IT is as difficult as it gets – which it is. We can wish it wasn't but I'm afraid that's where we start from.

I think this report is a great example of how you can break down that complexity into more manageable, bitesize pieces, learn the lessons as we go and move forward from a new base, rather than sit there and try and design the whole thing in advance and then set out on a monumental programme to deliver the whole thing. Usually people say that surely you're going to fail on these very big ones. What I'm saying is that actually we're trying to learn the lessons now by chopping up the programme now, into smaller pieces, and building off a secure place rather than completely replacing it. I'm hoping that not only will we do the universal credit programme well but we'll learn the lessons through the CIO council we can apply across government. And that's very much part of our intention.

Andrew Adonis

Can I say a very big thank you to Ian for coming this evening. We're extremely grateful for the very positive response you've given to this report and to the very great support you've given to the project all the way through. We look forward to this being a dynamic relationship as we seek to implement the findings and we hope that it will be useful to government. Mark O'Neill will now respond on the part of the CIO community.

Mark O'Neill

I feel I should apologise for not being Joe Harley. Joe did really want to be here and sends his apologies. I'm here wearing a number of hats. One of the hats is as a CIO for two government departments where I will be talking about what this report means for me and how I propose to respond. But secondly I'm also wearing a hat as the founder of the UK Government skunkworks, which is intended to be a fast, agile, disruptive component to how we do IT in government. Before I talk about skunkworks, let me talk about what it's like being a CIO and what this report actually means in that space. One of the things that I found interesting is that agile is something that we've been doing on and off for a while now. We call it different names: some people call it RAD, some people call it DSDN. We've done a number of experiments if you like. But what we've never done is actually embed agile into our cultural DNA. We've never turned round and said "you know what this is a sensible way of doing things."

Agile is not the solution to all problems, but it's a really useful toolkit. Let me give you an example of where we use agile to make a difference. We were asked by the incoming administration to provide a platform to cope with ministerial correspondence electronically. So we sat down and worked with our partner and most importantly we worked with the users, and we went from the vague idea of "wouldn't it be nice if I could do my correspondence by blackberry" to actually having it live, running, operating, in 2 weeks. Now that's the kind of delivery cycle which you would normally expect to come from SMEs, entrepreneurs, dot comers. It's the kind of delivery cycle which we would hope to be expecting to deliver to our user base. Not always, but it's a mindset about involving the user and community and about challenging everyone in the process.

To use an analogy: a lot of government projects are like getting across a river. Normally what we do is say "I must get across this river" and therefore I shall commission

someone to build a bridge. The bridge will take a long time to deliver, it will cost a lot of money, and until it's delivered it will deliver no value whatsoever. But it will be a wonderful bridge. And we go away and time passes and eventually if we're lucky we get a bridge. Here's another approach: why not encourage people to build a boat or all kinds of boats? So it's that mindset change, which is to focus on what we are actually trying to achieve, and not the machinery we would normally reach for.

But what we're looking at is moving the approach that we take to IT in the public sector to one that we might characterise as being much more like the one that we would take in the private sector which is seeing IT as a source of business opportunity. How can we drive innovation? How can we drive business opportunity? How can we drive being faster, cheaper and better? And agile for me is the key mechanism for doing that. So I really welcome this report and I would just like to say that I think I'm going to take the recommendations of this report which apply to the departments and I'm going to implement them. So that's recommendations 5,6,7 and 8. I'm going to take those and see if we can implement them and try and make them stick.

Going back to the point that universal credit is a big programme to start with. Well, what I'm going to do is work with colleagues – Steve Dover and other DWP colleagues – to actually share that learning, because the whole point about agile is that it's continuous learning. What I said to colleagues at the CIO council, is that the fundamental difference between waterfall and agile is this: waterfall projects, when they go wrong, go wrong after 5 years, by which time you've moved on or retired; the problem with agile projects is that you know they go wrong within 6 weeks, by which time you'll get fired. So there's a fundamental mindset shift which takes me onto the question of risk.

If we are going to take IT as a source of transformational service delivery and engagement then we need to have a different approach to risk. It needs to be an approach much more geared toward real risk. One of the things we do in government, and any bureaucracy, the only tool we have to control risk is process, so we seek to manage and mitigate everything through process. That's not always a bad thing, but the problem is that if the only tool you have is process then the only solution is to simply throw more process at it. So agile is not just about IT; it's also about business process, but about market engagement as well.

At skunkworks we're trying to see how we can drive that kind of change. We spoke to a number of people who have worked with this process. And we've learnt that if you have a group of people working on agile delivery who are disconnected from the business, then you get little benefit, because it's seen as a foreign module and business will react against it. So you lose the opportunity because agile is about embedding into a business organisation. So the challenge for us is how to embed agile into government space.

The second challenge is about business processes: how do we embed agile into our business processes? When we start off, how do we decide when to use agile? What's the mechanism that actually embeds that in our thinking? And the last part is about agility and community and Ian spoke about community and for me that's the most important thing. If we're going to make agile work it's something which has to grow out of an organic community which can support and sustain that. It's part of the process and mechanism. We need the ability to engage with the wider world and community to make these things happen. That's not to say SI's can't do agile but we do need a variety of mechanisms and means to do that.

The skunkworks is about how we tackle these issues. We don't have solutions at the moment and this report is a very useful and helpful adjunct to that. We will be sharing it with colleagues within the UK but also more widely, because it's a very useful discussion document. As I said, as a CIO I'm taking the findings of this report and I'm actually going to put them to the test. We will take recommendations 5 through 8 and implement them and see if it makes a difference in delivering business value. I will have to report back on that. And in the skunkworks we're actually taking agile and seeing how we can actually embed this in our cultural DNA. Thank you very much.

Andrew Adonis

Thank you all for coming. We do see this as work in progress we should stress. On the part of the Institute we intend to work closely with Whitehall and our colleagues in Whitehall on how they take forward our recommendations and seek to be more agile in their future development.

Ian Magee takes questions

Glyn Moody – IT Journalist

Having read the report I was very impressed by the rigour of it. I was very struck by the way things were formulated – with commoditisation, iteration and modularity. This is a perfect description of open source software, which is becoming more and more important in computing. And it's also striking that governments like Germany, France, Spain, which spend far less money on IT than the UK, use far more open source. Why therefore in the whole report are there only 2 paragraphs talking about open source given the fit seems to be so good in terms of realising the aims that you've articulated so well?

Ian Magee

I suppose there could have been, but equally we could have written reams on procurement for example. We have actually drawn attention to open source as you noticed in the report, and you've drawn your own conclusions from the report, so I wouldn't make any apologies from our perspective. You could also say that there's not much in the report in terms of comparison abroad, and we're conscious of that. I think perhaps there are a number of areas where we could have done more. Open source is one way forward but there is also the issue of legacy systems, as Ian explained earlier.

Questioner

I share the sentiments that have been highlighted by various people in the room. Having read the report, I find it far-reaching, insightful and I'm glad it's been well received. I have a question about the platform based approach to driving efficiencies through rationalisation of common standards and setting common standards and common elements. There seems to be an attitude amongst many similar like-minded organisations. For instance within local government, within police organisations and health trusts, there seems to be an endemic belief that they are unique, individual and they need to build exclusive solutions to solve their unique problems. So it's really a question about how we're going to take best heed of the recommendation by tackling that cultural problem.

Mark O Neill

There has been a great deal of support for looking at how we coalesce particularly around open standards in an open platform because at a time when budgets are under intense pressure we don't have the luxury for everyone to put their hand up and say "I'm different". A high proportion of what we do is the same – so let's find a platform, based around open standards, which allows us to cooperate and collaborate around that, which then provides a springboard for SMEs or entrepreneurs to actually build and deliver solutions around that.

Bill Mcluggage – Deputy Government CIO

I just wanted to respond to the point about government and the platform layer about what's currently going on. There's a lot of working activity going on behind the scenes in terms of getting spending controls correct, getting the project aligned in terms of common platform activity. So in terms of taking forward the recommendations – and I was privileged to be involved in some of the work about this – is that we have taken this seriously and there is quite a lot in terms of whether you would start a project when you know that there's a huge number of parallel platforms out there which can do the job just as easily and cheaply? So that's the comparison we have to build in right at the front. And with Mark's side with the skunkworks, introducing a much more agile view of that, right up front where it's applicable. So it's almost an architectural approach being taken in terms of procurement, project management and then ICT design activities. Last week we opened up the debate on open standards just because we wish to push this interoperability issue.

Ian Magee

I would just add that there is a big challenge here for government, as government hasn't necessary shown itself to be very adept at this before. Let's hope you don't waste a good crisis this time!

Graham Walker – RaceOnline

A couple of people have mentioned end users, but I haven't heard a lot about learners, patients, job seekers, business people etc. Is the government IT community too inward looking and obsessed with process and management speak?

Mark O Neill

I think it's a really good point. There's a fundamental challenge here for us. For too long we've just created systems and rolled them out, and said there you go, but we can't do that anymore. Also, increasingly we are going to be working through intermediaries and with partners to deliver services. So we've got to build professional level open standards and platforms. But we've also got to build into that rules of engagement, which are around user experience, because often when you use government service you have no choice because you have to use it and it's often at times of pressure and stress. So we need to make sure that use of government services is as seamless as possible.

John Newton – Fujitsu

I would like to know how do we stop people pouring concrete into the agile approach? Over the years we've had eBritain – putting everything online – which did well very initially but then got stopped because there was too much risk. I loved the report, but how do we stop this becoming one of those really brilliant ideas that gets locked into the Whitehall machine.

Mark O Neill

I think there are two key things that need to be in place to make this happen. One of them is the engagement from us in the IT community. We have to take an approach that is open to trying agile and making it work. We also need our colleagues in the wider public sector being willing to go for this “because we understand this gives us opportunities that otherwise we would not be able to take.” To take Ian's crisis point – this is a fundamental inflection point in how we do IT. What I'd also say is there's the onus on you, the market, not to go back to the traditional cultural ways and simply revert to say “yes we'll deliver waterfall in five years.” I think we need to deliver that maturity in our relationship.

Questioner

It's really a question for you Ian on some of the logic of this report. If you're going to be designing digital by default services around the user, you are going to need to try and make the boundaries of Whitehall departments invisible. And having a platform model with shared services across government is an excellent way of achieving that. In your report you then go straight on into saying that the responsibility for developing those layers of platform – those shared services of identification – should reside in a government department, despite the fact that the department is going to have to build another service across lots of other departments. Have you got any evidence of any other countries or that model actually working?

Ian Magee

One point to make: I did say a few minutes ago that government hasn't been terribly good at working across the piece and it does need more than an act of faith to make this happen. One of the ways we conceive this might best happen is by lodging what people are good at with different parts of the community and getting some sort of critical mass of movement there. We do also see that there's a need for some strong government flying around to make this happen. One other point is that this isn't just about the IT community working together; there has been plenty of evidence of government working together and permanent secretaries working together.

Mark Taylor – Sirius Corporation

We're a small, innovative agile SME (one of the SME's mentioned tonight) and also we're an open source system integrator. My question is how are organisations like mine going to be brought into this? We very much welcome the general direction of the report and also the PASC enquiry and the reports making the same points. But the fact remains that we have been trying to bring open agile methods and open source to the public sector for years but we have to work through some of the existing large system integrators. The elephant in the room is the procurement rules which already exist so how are these recommendations going to occur with the system that exists at the moment.

Adrian Brown – Institute for Government

It was certainly something that came up a lot with people involved in this report. I think there is no doubt that there is a culture around procurement which has to change as much as the technical requirements of procurement. One of the interesting things from one of the seminars we had last year, was that a lawyer said that agile doesn't restrict your ability to operate in an agile way if you think about that differently. And she cited Sweden as a country which manages to go through due process but can operate in a far more flexible way than we can. Now we see procurement as an issue – a cultural issue as well as a technical one. But we think some of the technical barriers that people throw up automatically are red herrings and can be corrected.

Questioner

I think everyone recognises the complexity of the design we have in some of these large delivery mechanisms, which have been built over 20 – 30 years. Therefore we're not going to change this overnight but we have started and there have been some really fundamental moves. A few months ago we started developing the open standards activity. Also we've introduced, along with our procurement colleagues, a procurement policy notice, where we've defined the fact that really we should be using – and that may not be strong enough language at the moment – open standards in all things we specify in terms of our government requirements and we've then listed down our definition of government open standards, which is then included in our survey. I would beg a bit of time to try and change the direction of travel here! But we should get a direction of change over the next few months as we move forward in terms of opening standards and the introduction of much more open source activity, where we can see it.

Questioner – Project Manager, Home Office

I understand the platform side of things. But, given modularity and an iterative approach exist in a number of methodologies out there, why did you choose agile in particular?

Ian Magee

We used agile as a figure of speech rather than the software development implicit in agile. We used it to exemplify a way of approaching things that is intuitive and involves the users in the process. We're not particularly advocating one method. We know that there are plenty of methodologies out there. Your point isn't lost on us. But we're trying to use this as a metaphor really.

Stephen Freeman – MJP Ltd

The UK in particular, has one of the strongest agile communities in the world. Do you have any thoughts on how to tap into that?

Mark O'Neill

We're looking at ways we can engage with the community but also support them. One of the things we're very keen to do is to ensure that the community does have the opportunities to access what it needs to grow and develop: be that capital, mentoring or opportunities in the market space. We don't have all the answers by any means, but we're already starting to work with people in this space and start to think about how to build these relationships. Through skunkworks what we want to do is run a whole raft of different types of engagements, where we look at how we can actually tackle these types of question – be they around the procurement process or working with SMEs. I'm very conscious that the one thing that can kill a company faster than failure is success. So how do we support companies through this space and work with them? It's in our best interest to do this as well. Also it's an opportunity to encourage the SI community to think about how they can work with SME's which is not an adversarial approach but delivers value across the piece.

Ian Magee

Please do join us for a drink now to continue the debate. May I just finish by thanking you all and saying it's great to see a room so full for a subject like this. Thank you for your interest and support.