We need a Minister for Digital Government

The new government that is formed after 8 June should include a Minister for Digital Government, whose job is to drive changes in the way government works, to save money and provide better public services.

As Minister for the Cabinet Office from 2010-2015, Lord (Francis) Maude provided visible political leadership for digital government. After his departure, and for the past two years, there has been a lack of political leadership for digital government from the centre of Whitehall.

Big decisions, such as about which system to use for verifying citizens’ identity across government, have been ducked. Unlike their predecessors, Theresa May and Chancellor Philip Hammond have not spoken about digital government. Together with comments by Amber Rudd about “necessary hashtags,” it seems that senior ministers are not taking a keen interest in digital government.

The consequences of the lack of leadership are clear. For several days in May, patients were turned away and appointments and operations were cancelled across the NHS, because computers using out of date Windows software were infected with the WannaCry ransomware.

The security standards that are set in the Cabinet Office were poorly applied across the public sector. As state-sponsored cyberattacks become more common, the Cabinet Office needs to insist that its standards are applied – and this requires political leadership.

In February the Government published a Transformation Strategy, which set out how government could embrace the digital age. But except in a few cases, it did not explain what would be done by when. Nor did it set priorities, even though the prospect of Brexit means that immigration and customs urgently need focus. Prioritisation requires leadership from the centre of Whitehall so that key services get the resources they need.

There has been some progress in online services like paying car tax and registering to vote, and government has started to open data, so, for example, anyone worried about flooding can get alerts about local rivers. In 2016 the UK came top of a United Nations survey on digital government.

However, much remains to be done.

People are used to steady improvements in how they search for information, shop and bank online. These improvements are provided by companies that have embraced digital technology and new ways of working. Government needs to do the same.

Further information

We will explore the changes that are needed in a new report on Improving the management of digital government on 21 June.

Links