

TOWARD AN **AGILE** PUBLIC SECTOR.

There is an unmistakable public demand for greater agility in government. This book is about how to meet that demand. It offers three animating principles and 14 vital signs of agility in the public sector.

It's based on research carried out by the Future Foundation for the Public Policy Forum—a 'do-tank' for Government modernisers sponsored by BT. Written by *James Woudhuysen*, Professor of Forecasting and Innovation at De Montfort University and *Melanie Howard*, Co-founder, the Future Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

Eighty-five per cent of British adults believe that the Government's main priority should be better delivery of public services.

Perhaps that isn't new. But when the Future Foundation conducted a nationally representative survey of 1000 people, it found that 79 per cent of British adults believe that 'to get anything from the government, you have to be forceful'.

In 2003, citizens paying taxes for public services do not notice too much agility from the public sector. But they feel they have to be pretty agile themselves to deal with it.

By the 'public sector', we mean:

- central government services—for example, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency and the UK Passport Service
- regional and local government services—for example, local authority rubbish collection, social services and libraries
- mixtures of the two—for example, NHS hospitals and GPs' surgeries, the education system, the police.

Whatever the service, however, **88 per cent** of British adults think that government should respond more quickly to the way that people's lives are changing. There is an unmistakable public demand for greater agility in government. This booklet is about how to meet that demand.

AGILITY IS BOTH A POSTURE AND AN ATTITUDE OF MIND

On top of our national survey of citizen opinion, we interviewed a dozen top managers in the public sector, and held structured discussions on public sector with small groups of British adults. Here's how one senior manager defined agility—*'the talent of an organisation as a whole to respond rapidly and effectively to changed demands and opportunities.'*

An agile organisation, therefore, must always be able quickly to:

1. *reconfigure* its 'physical' side—its operations and assets
2. *reconceive* its 'mental' side—its intellectual framework for 'the job we have to do'.

The word 'agility' comes from *agere*, the Latin for 'to do'. It means nimbleness, activity, dexterity, readiness. Dr Samuel Johnson defined 'agile' as *having the quality of being speedily put in motion*. However, *agility isn't just about joints and limbs, but also mental quickness and acuteness*.

IT aids that kind of agility. For when people use IT, they reveal facts that a mentally alert, agile organisation can put to good use. How soon will this person need a new passport? How do these residents like to pay their council tax? IT can uncover some surprising preferences—even before it is applied to help meet those preferences.

AGILITY MEANS ORIENTATING TO CITIZENS

In our discussions with citizens, *'Playing the game'* emerged as a popular metaphor for accessing public services. Citizens believed that the public sector has:

- staff who offer service with an odd mix of bureaucratic regulation and personal rule-bending
- little institutional memory of previous encounters
- a long way to go in terms of basic usability.

In the extra agility that they demand, a citizen's interactions with the public sector differ from those of a consumer dealing with the private sector. Yet if being slavishly 'consumer-driven' will not make the public sector agile, it is still vital to orientate to the needs of British citizens—and to their willingness to cooperate with the public sector.

WHAT CITIZENS SAID

'So much depends on the person you're dealing with. You can't phone up a public service and ask what the answer is. You get a different answer every time, depending on who you talk to.'

'If they dealt with me with one person from start to finish, instead of passing me on, things would run a lot smoother.'

'Some of dealing with the public sector is down to us to learn. But then we need to be educated in how to use the system properly.'

THREE PRINCIPLES AND 14 VITAL SIGNS

Since the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2002, Whitehall has demanded improvements in all areas of public service delivery. If agility is well thought through and acted upon, however, the public sector should be able to:

- lose some more of its old baggage
- achieve genuine service improvements
- avoid the trap of introducing more cumbersome targets and benchmarks.

How then should Britain move toward an agile public sector? *Three animating principles* came out of our research. To be agile, each public sector unit must:

1. Make best use of *networks* to anticipate events, sense changes in demand, and reconfigure services accordingly
2. Display a *confidence* that it can learn how to perform and answer challenges better
3. Marshall its resources with an *efficiency and effectiveness* that speak of alert, decisive leadership.

Under these three headings, we now go on to outline *14 vital signs* of agility in the public sector. These are not key performance indicators, but discussions of how best to move toward different aspects of agility.

PRINCIPLE 1 USE OF NETWORKS TO ANTICIPATE, SENSE AND RECONFIGURE

Information about the outside world, the US management guru Peter Drucker says, is the most important information managers need to do their work. So mental and physical agility in an organisation begins as intelligence about that world.

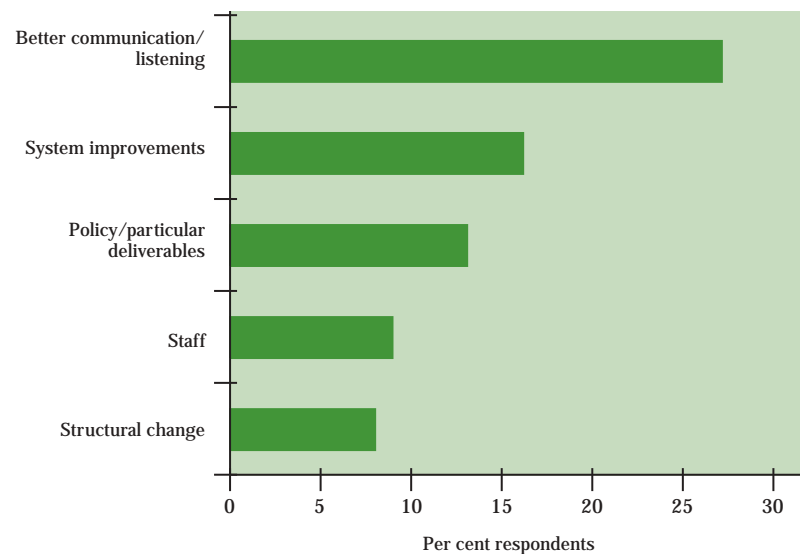
One often gets that kind of intelligence from a variety of sources, in a number of different ways. One must also interpret intelligence from an all-round point of view. Thus, an agile organisation will draw together information from a number of different nodal points. Whether its networks are of individuals, organisations or documents, the agile government unit will show signs of using such networks to inform its actions.

At IBM's Advanced Business Institute in the USA, Stephan Haeckel, the director strategic studies, calls for anticipation and the inferring of user requests. For him, the first task of an agile organisation is to gain and process information so that it can '*translate apparent noise into meaning*'.

Our survey tends to vindicate Haeckel's argument. More than a quarter of British citizens spontaneously say that the one thing government should do to improve services is to listen harder (see chart on Page 6).

AREAS THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD CHANGE TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

‘Apart from investing more money, what is the *one* thing the government should do to improve how it delivers services to citizens?’



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VITAL SIGN 1 YOUR UNIT ANTICIPATES AND SENSES CITIZENS' CHANGING DEMANDS

The public sector is often wrong-footed when citizens find that services are not available at the time, place or level they want. As one senior public sector manager put it—*‘the great failing of local government—and to some extent central government—is lack of intelligence about what the service user wants or expects.’*

An agile public sector unit will therefore use data on patterns of demand, channel usage and complaints to:

- distinguish those Whitehall initiatives and citizen trends that seem to be vital from those that really are vital
- plan extended service hours, or ‘one-stop shop’ working.

To invest in anticipation is to become less of a football to be kicked around, and more of an active subject controlling one’s own destiny.

With anticipation, public sector bodies can:

- predict and meet citizen expectations
- improve the regard in which they are held
- influence future patterns of citizen demand
- affect future laws and government spending
- speed the political, budgetary and contractual approval for local initiatives.

Many central government bodies have recently set up futures units to formalise the process of anticipation. In this sense, agility has already begun to gain ground.

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AGILITY IN PRACTICE [A] SHARING INFORMATION ABOUT CRIME IN SOUTHWARK—ONE OF THE UK'S MOST EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS AGAINST CRIME AND DISORDER

The networking of data across the London Borough of Southwark, the local police, the probation service, the NHS and the emergency services has:

- delivered more effective policing
- allowed the development of a new, preventive approach to youth crime, and of more realistic neighbourhood renewal strategies
- shown the practical, analytical and planning benefits of creating a 'joined up' picture of the area with better all-round information

- provided central government with good evidence about the need for further investment to cut crime in Southwark.

The £5 million exercise used a common information-sharing protocol within a standard geographical information system, and included images from local authority CCTV systems. Specific actions included better management of crime 'hot spots' and the targeting of active criminals.

VITAL SIGN 2 YOUR UNIT CAN EASILY RECONFIGURE OPERATIONS IN LINE WITH CHANGING DEMANDS AND LEGISLATION

Citizens want the typical public sector organisation to be supple enough to act upon the information it gets. The chart on Page 6 reveals that nearly a quarter of citizens spontaneously cite either improved systems, or structural change, as the one thing government must do to improve services.

Agile public sector units use many of the old, basic processes of the past, but deploy IT to make these processes more flexible and transparent. One way of doing this is to establish new, often very 'joined-up' services so as to sidestep bureaucracy. For such new operations to be a popular success, however, they must make sure that they do not sidestep democracy (see section on '*Agility doesn't mean*', page 11).

The chief benefit of the ability to reconfigure comes through when reorganisation is required. The strength to reconfigure means that:

- reorganisations become less disruptive
- the real work of the public sector can be resumed
- the taxes that are paid to support operations can bring value for money.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [B] HUDDERSFIELD WHITEHOUSE CENTRE—PERSONAL MEDICAL SERVICES

This pilot health care scheme, set up for £210,000 over three years, allows GPs to be free from their normal terms and conditions. That way, they can more easily spend up to 30 minutes with each of their patients.

Together, GPs, nurses and, where necessary, foreign language interpreters discover the real needs of local patients and serve them in a rounded manner. A health worker specialises in the needs of the homeless; social services find housing and offer benefits advice; a nurse writes prescriptions. As a result, the centre now offers continuity of care and rapid rehabilitation. It has reduced repeat appointments and hospital visits.

AGILITY DOESN'T MEAN...

UNSEEMLY HASTE Agility is not just about starting up new initiatives tomorrow, but also about building on the rational parts of yesterday's political and legal framework, with the protections that framework affords. Agility must allow for due process.

UNACCOUNTABLE LOCAL AUTONOMY Agility must balance increased responsiveness to individual and local needs with the maintenance of democracy—including representative democracy. Failure to do this will make government less legitimate.

Downsizing Staff in the public sector have their doubts about new IT systems, and suspect that 'agility' could be a cipher for cost savings and a short-term, slash-and-burn outlook. So beware: not just of creating the wrong impression of agility, but of implementing it in a primitive manner.

MANAGEMENT JARGON A word alone cannot exorcise all the ills of the public sector overnight. Advocates of agility must argue for it concisely and in lucid style. Anything else would demand yet more agility of citizens—and of staff.

YET MORE TARGETS The public sector already has enough output targets. Agility, however, is about overall outcomes, in the sense of the real difference government can make. Agility is a meaningful and durable concept. It does not need measuring to death.

VITAL SIGN 3 YOUR UNIT HANDLES CITIZENS AND STAFF AS MOBILE CHAMELEONS, AND JOINS UP GOVERNMENT ACCORDINGLY

To reconfigure is to:

- accommodate the speed with which citizens and staff change their addresses, jobs, habits, family arrangements, personal location... and their plans
- accommodate the frequency with which they encounter transport mishaps
- use mobile IT to help staff meet requests at those times when they themselves are on the move.

Joining up government over the different jurisdictions through which citizens move is an essential part of agility. As a senior civil servant told us: *'We are very bad at talking to one another. There is still a suspicion that if you tell people what you are doing in government that somehow they will steal the credit or it will all go wrong'*.

The agile public sector unit will therefore:

- anticipate citizens confronting anomalies of place and of relevant service provider
- recognise and act upon the impact that events or initiatives in one jurisdiction will have on another
- incentivise other public sector units to collaborate with it by **supplying funds, information and staff time.**

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The agile public sector unit coordinates data and IT with other public service providers, and with third parties, in ways that make these 'outsiders' want to work with it.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [C] FREEDOM OF INFORMATION [FOI] WILL MAKE JOINING INFORMATION UP ESSENTIAL

The FoI Act entitles all citizens and others to request access to all types of recorded information from all public authorities and representative bodies in the UK. Its full execution, in January 2005, makes an agile approach to the handling of personal data essential.

All organisational units within the public sector have begun to review the impact of the *Act* on their operations and planning. They must create systems that will enable citizens easily and cost-effectively to request a wide variety of information.

In our national survey we found that only 22 per cent of British citizens are currently aware of the *Freedom of Information Act*. Once its terms are explained, however, 67 per cent think that they will want information on health, 52 per cent on policing, and 66 on educational matters. Even if these levels of interest are somewhat overstated, they add up to a huge new demand and pressure on public service providers to maintain accurate, up-to-date records of all transactions—and to make these records available on demand.

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VITAL SIGN 4 YOUR UNIT MINIMISES THE NUMBER OF STEPS CITIZENS HAVE TO GO THROUGH

When operations are reconfigured, one of the motives is often a desire to speed up:

- the booking of services
- receiving them
- where appropriate, paying for them.

For one public sector manager, agility is about—*‘rethinking “the patient journey”, getting rid of steps that add little value, and making sure that patients no longer move from queue to queue.’*

Agility means giving each member of front-line staff the stable central back-up and the local tools to use the information that the public sector already has about citizens. That way, citizens need not repeat their details unnecessarily. Equally, an agile organisation allows citizens to perform bookings in real time and, again in real time, tries to resolve citizens’ issues directly, at the point of contact with the citizen.

Among citizens, we found, the one-stop shop proved popular as an option for the future—doubtless because it contains a promise that everything can be achieved in one go and with one person.

The planning of service processes around the citizen must precede, rather than succeed, the procurement of the IT to support such processes. Processes and forms need to be considered from the following perspectives:

- generic, across lots of different services, rather than in terms of the peculiarities of each particular service
- what’s right for the citizen today and in the future, not just what’s been done historically by different departments
- how to give front-line staff the authority and facility to resolve issues
- how to minimise staff re-keying data.

For citizens and others, the benefits of ‘fewer steps’ are:

- shorter, clearer and fewer forms to fill out
- the chance to talk to the right person right away, reliably and repeatedly
- the chance to get what they want—regardless of their level of education or skill at navigating a path through public services.

For the public sector unit that successfully cuts out steps, fewer errors will be made, fewer complaints will be lodged—and, accordingly, staff motivation should improve.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [D] NORWICH CONNECT—CUTTING OUT STEPS, MULTI- PLYING CHANNELS

Norwich City Council, in collaboration with KPMG, Integris and BT, invested £85 million to ‘create better access for the public and improve efficiency and quality of services’. A target of dealing with 80 per cent of citizens’ requests through a single contact has resulted in the effective integration of many of the city’s old IT systems.

Whatever channel for contact the 120,000 citizens of Norwich choose, the Council can deal with their requests by drawing information from a common IT platform. A contact management system allows progress to be tracked without the citizen needing to repeat important details.

VITAL SIGN 5 YOUR UNIT GIVES CITIZENS MORE, AND MORE RELEVANT, CHANNELS

Cutting out steps for the citizen goes hand in hand with making routes to government services more accessible. And the well-publicised example of Liverpool Direct confirms this. As David McElhinney, Executive Director, puts it—*“Better reach” really means greater accessibility. People must be able to get through to get what they want—so we have 24-hour call centres, plus one-stop shops that open from 8 until 6 and at weekends. And we now get 40,000 calls a week because we make it easy for people to get through.*

It’s up to citizens to choose which channels they are in the mood to use—it’s no longer down to government to dictate. What government can usefully do is make prominent the right channel for the right audience. Even here, though, agile government must present channels without confining audience behaviour to what are only its current patterns.

The challenge with channels is to apply new organisational models to the new technologies. As one respondent put it—*‘If they are getting it wrong on the phone, how on earth will they get it right on the Internet?’*

Poignantly, our research showed that it is Internet users who experience the highest levels of frustration with the public sector. E-government will not succeed until the technologies involved are thought through.

IT systems should only be presented to the right audiences at the right time, and should provide a direct route to the person who can help. IT needs to be a soft, porous, transparent 'skin' that sits lightly on the surface of the organisation.

Through effective networking and integrated channels, the citizen can choose to self-serve where appropriate, or, if necessary, can get through directly to a human being. As one citizen said—*'The problem today is that they don't have people contact...they put you through to phones and it's press this number or that'*.

Another averred, about the public sector—*'If I have contact with real people, it works'*.

The immediate benefit of agility in channels is that citizens can gain more information, receive services and pay bills in ways that suit them.

With better IT interfaces and the spread of personalised interactive technologies, the frequency of contact between customer and company increases, so strengthening the relationship between the two. Of course, the public sector might view the prospect of increased volumes of citizen contact with alarm. But the more citizens have contact, the more certain they are to be able to do things more quickly—both for them and for the public sector.

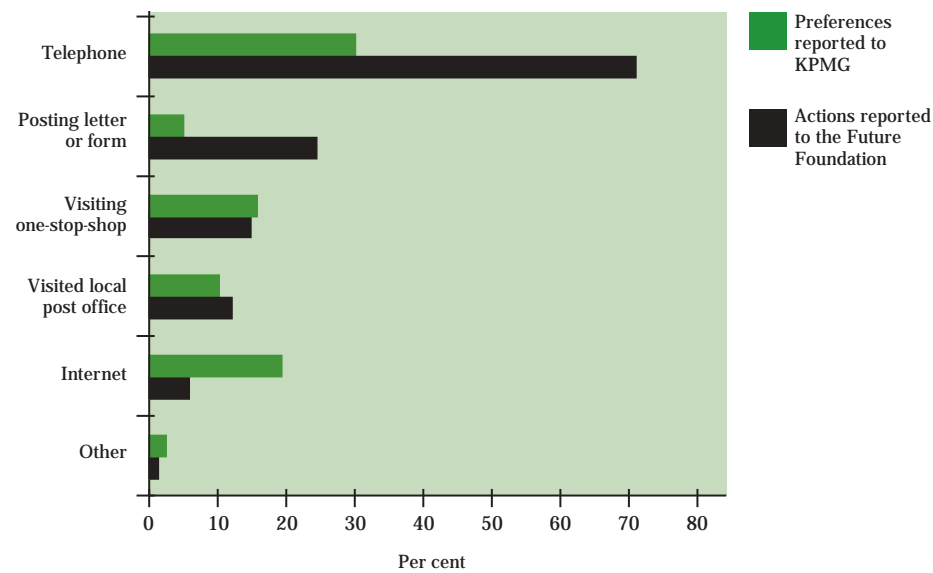
FROM CURRENT TO FUTURE PATTERNS OF CHANNEL USE

Most citizens—71 per cent—use the telephone to access public sector services. In our national survey, only six per cent of citizens had used the Internet for their last transaction with the public sector. It is worth noting the difference between expressed preference and actual use of channels (see chart on Page 20). Respondents were positive about their likely use of the Internet in the future, and about the benefits it will create in terms of improved speed and responsiveness.

Internet transactions with government will grow as more people gain confidence with the medium. It is therefore essential to:

- anticipate the sophistication that users will bring to the Internet, and to new channels generally (mobile phones, electronic kiosks, etc)
- ensure that early users experience the full benefits of the Internet, so that they go on to talk about them to other people and so encourage rapid take-up.

DEALING WITH PUBLIC SERVICES THE CHANNELS CITIZENS SAY THEY PREFER VS WHAT THEY ACTUALLY DO



VITAL SIGN 6 YOUR UNIT IS RESILIENT FOR CITIZENS IN A PERSONAL, LOCAL OR NATIONAL CRISIS

There is, as the saying goes, no need to make a drama out of a crisis—though often the public sector can seem pretty good at doing just that.

To be agile in a crisis means above all that attention must be paid, before it happens, to maintaining the overall continuity of the organisation. Yet this work must be done without it detracting from everyday operations.

The benefit of agility to citizens in a crisis is that their natural pessimism about the public sector will be undone, rather than confirmed. And from a more political perspective, the public sector will be seen to fulfill one of its central, but often ill-defined roles: protecting the well-being of citizens, and ensuring national security.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [E] THE NHS AND THE MET OFFICE—WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE TREATMENT OF WEATHER-RELATED ILLNESSES

Over the winter of 1999-2000, an influenza epidemic generated an epidemic of bad publicity for the NHS, complete with images of refrigerated lorries in use as temporary morgues. There is a 30 per cent increase in mortality in London alone in winter. As winter is usually relatively mild, we do not take it seriously and so are not very good at wrapping up warmly.

Now, funded by Invest to Save, a collaborative programme entitled 'Forecasting the nation's health, has established an early warning system so that cold snaps and bad air pollution can be anticipated, and alerts sent out to the appropriate services within the NHS. Similarly, forecasts for benign weather conditions are used to enable the NHS to bring forward elective surgery and so reduce the number of empty beds.

PRINCIPLE 2 THE CONFIDENCE TO LEARN HOW TO PERFORM AND ANSWER CHALLENGES BETTER

In agile style, the public sector can certainly respond to one policy trend. Whitehall is more and more interested in what Charles Leadbeater, one of New Labour's favourite theorists, describes as user participation in public service delivery. Leadbeater writes—'*Public goods, like health and a clean environment, are increasingly created in society. They are not delivered to waiting citizens from a state-run production line. These public goods are created by complex, mutually adaptive systems.*'

He goes on to suggest that—'*public services are more likely to thrive where they promote an ethic of mutual self-help*'.

After best use of networks, our second principle of government agility—the confidence to learn how to do better—is very relevant here. Without that confidence, there can be none of the mutual cooperation that Leadbeater invokes: government will be in no mood to invite citizens to play their part in improving service delivery. With confidence, by contrast, networks can be used to maximise benefits to citizens and public servants alike.

When it surveyed different tiers of government about agility, the IT research house Gartner Group found that all saw its benefits primarily in terms of customer satisfaction, business processes and financial health. However, if the confidence to move ahead is a premise of citizen participation in improving service delivery, *organisational learning* is one of its chief consequences and visible aspects.

There is still a long way go in convincing citizens of the efficacy of increased spending and public sector reforms. The confidence to perform better, to answer questions better and to meet service challenges, whatever the conditions and wherever staff are—this is not a narrowly psychological question. Confidence, poise and control, as well as a sense of the desirability and necessity of progress over time, comprise much of the substance of the ‘mental’ side of an organisation’s agility. Without these essentially human resources, physical and IT resources cannot be mobilised in an agile manner.

In the discussions we held with them, citizens highlighted the way in which public service delivery needs to learn from the past—*It’s not like any of the problems are new, they are all problems that are part of being a human being and trying to live in a modern society... It seems amazing that there aren’t systems in place to say this is what you do in this case, this is what you do in that case... It all seems so complicated.*

This failure to systematise learning is also experienced as a lack of confidence in the part of front-line staff—*‘People clam up, rather than saying tell me where there is a problem and we’ll fix it.’*

Throughout our research, we found that a single factor made all the difference to the citizen in dealing with public services: the ability to converse with one public servant who is technically equipped and managerially supported enough to take decisive action. The equipment and the support themselves form very tangible signs of confidence.

Confidence also relates to a willingness to tell the truth whenever possible. There is no need for grand discourses about ‘trust’, ‘openness’ or ‘transparency’ to observe that, particularly given the *FoI Act*, public services need a well-balanced attitude to data security.

For all these reasons, a confident, agile approach by the public sector should lead citizens to appreciate it more—and should lead them, too, to be more willing to participate in improving its services.

VITAL SIGN 7 YOUR UNIT ENABLES CITIZENS AND OTHERS—AND STAFF— TO SEARCH AND FIND ALL THE INFORMATION THEY WANT AND THAT LEGISLATION ALLOWS

No organisation can hope to be agile without its overall integrity, and especially the *security of its data*, being intact. According to Gartner, 62 per cent of central government respondents believe that an agile approach can make a substantial contribution to security, and more than half believe that it can contribute strongly to the better management of risks. By contrast, none of Gartner's local government respondents thought that agility could aid security, and fewer than 10 per cent thought it could improve risk management.

There is work to be done here. Especially given *FoI*, there is a need for:

- a *discriminating, flexible* approach to the security of data
- investment of resources in powerful '*Search*' facilities for your website and for your staff.

MAINTAIN SECURITY, INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY

Agile government means not having a crippling obsession with data security. If endless security impediments to agility are not to build up, the agile government unit will attend to security but also put security measures in perspective.

To be agile is to discriminate between real data security risks and perceived ones. It depends on quickly being able to move between different levels of security—as the occasion, the individual request and the task require.

For citizens and others, the public sector must be able to use new technologies to give them the information they need. While personal data should be secure, much of that held by government can and should be made available to anyone, on demand, in a thoroughly accessible way. This is where IT networks can make a difference.

On the Web, Search is one of the key functions that inspires user confidence and repeated use—and it is repeated use that inspires people to go all the way through to making e-transactions. Failure to find something, by contrast, is one of the chief reasons Web users abandon a site.

In addition, a professional and always updated attitude to Frequently Asked Questions is a central aspect of accessibility. To migrate citizens over to less expensive, more agile electronic channels of service delivery, it is essential to help them navigate toward precisely the information they want in a matter of seconds.

No part of the public sector can hope to be agile or responsive if it does not have the confidence satisfactorily to answer questions hurled at it. Aside from transactional capabilities, therefore, perhaps the most important part of the public sector's presence on the Internet is its range of Search facilities.

In our national survey, we found that more than 30 per cent of citizens believe that the Web is the best way to find out about government services—*'Whereas if you've got a computer screen, it's so much quicker, you've got loads of options, you can see straight away...'*, and—*'With the Internet, forms will become less like forms and more like a quick way of getting the information that people need and just speed it all up a little bit'*.

However, reality often falls short of these hopes. Those using the Internet to access public services easily get exasperated—*'They have computer "Job points" in Job centres, but they're always down and they haven't got boards anymore, so when they're down, the centre doesn't operate at all!'*

To promise the citizen the assistance of IT in the delivery of service is to raise expectations of that service. Those expectations cannot then be dashed.

PUBLIC SERVANTS NEED BETTER SYSTEMS TOO

Staff need to think positively about e-government, and so must be able to get hold of information within their unit or in other state bodies. One senior manager insisted that knowledge about things in the public sector is not so much primitive, as extensive—but, frustratingly, lost—*'if you go through all the organisations in the public sector, there's nothing they don't know or couldn't know'*.

In part, then, agility consists of speeding up the process, for staff, of going through all the organisations in the public sector that could help them solve their enquiry.

Many staff enquiries are about human resources matters that, though minor, are important enough for the individual staff member. Confidence can be gained on all sides if information in this area is made available in agile style.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [F] PROMOTING E-GOVERNMENT THROUGH THE OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

The ODPM developed a self-assessment toolkit—Promoting electronic government—with which local authorities can assess their progress in moving to full electronic service delivery by 2005.

The toolkit was produced in May 2002 and made available electronically to local authorities through a website. Eighty per cent of the target audience has registered with the website and more than half have accessed the most sophisticated set of tools available.

VITAL SIGN 8 YOUR UNIT THINKS AHEAD, GENERALISES FROM EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTIONALISES ITS FORESIGHT

To anticipate changes in citizen needs, every public sector unit must have enough confidence about its longevity to spend money institutionalising its foresight.

Some of the steps toward this are to:

1. *Conduct serious research, beyond the current or next financial year, on demand trends among service users.* Forecast for periods of two to five years ahead. Cover all the influences likely to shape demand. Use a 'bottom up' approach to understanding not just citizens' current concerns, but also the likely future pattern of their demand for public sector services. Example: the ageing of Britain's population
2. *Document and learn* from successes and failures in practice—in a way that is itself agile and will not weigh down processes with unnecessary bureaucracy.
3. *Transfer insights* about successes and failures around the organisation—securely and with ease, to the right people, in a way that allows them to be used in a simple, pragmatic manner
4. *Enable staff to search and find* not just the piece of information required, but the expert employee who can help, both inside and outside their unit.

There are certain imperatives of learning:

1. *Infrastructural*: staff share full, fast, secure and common data, applications, knowledge and e-learning—across both local and national networks, and with partners
2. *Informational*: data is classified in ways that are independent of it, to speed its transfer
3. *Legal*: staff are trained in security policies, to comply with data regulations... and in how to apply information routines that speed things up rather than slow things down
4. *“Keep it Real”*: to act on or generate new insights does not require yet another ‘initiative’. To innovate is not always to make incremental change through a cluster of small projects, nor always to go for the disruptive sort of change with a ‘flagship’ one.

Last, organisational learning means grown-up intellectual and practical leadership, not behaviourist programmes of ‘change management’. Agility is about discrimination—about getting the right balance in innovation, project size, and expenditure on acquiring knowledge.

The benefit to citizens of a systematic approach to organisational learning is, simply, that the performance of the public sector improves over time.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [G] ENVIRONMENT AGENCY—EXTENDING FLOODLINE

During floods in Easter 1998 and Autumn 2000, the Environment Agency learned that its 24-hour telephone information service, Floodline, needed to integrate and accessibly present news that was more comprehensive. It therefore worked with 29 local authorities to create a one-stop shop for news about flood situations—bringing together in one place information from local authorities, water companies and the Highways Agency.

Floodline now collects and presents details of emergency aid, local road closures and sandbag supplies, as well as flooding data from sources not currently monitored by the Environment Agency. No serious flooding has occurred in Britain since the pilot services have been put in place.

VITAL SIGN 9 YOUR UNIT DELIVERS GOOD SERVICE, NO MATTER WHAT THE CONDITIONS ARE—OR WHERE ITS STAFF ARE

The UK experience in transport shows that we live in an era in which volatility and disruption, if socially created, are more a way of life than before. Citizens registered this—*‘It’s always difficult... The smoothness of the process isn’t tested.’*

Agile government is smooth, robust government. It is about having the confidence to handle the effect of accidents, and the impact of wild swings in citizen demand. Today’s powerful IT systems can aid the public sector in this task. An agile public sector unit will equip staff with the kind of IT that allows them to supply the widest possible range of services—whatever the peaks and troughs in citizen take-up of those services. This is ‘come-rain-or-shine’ agility. Once established, it makes for operational confidence.

Along with a move to smooth, robust systems, public sector management needs a new confidence in staff. Staff need to be equipped with the kind of IT that allows them to make the best of today’s changing workspaces—whether those workspaces are centralised, distributed, mobile or located at home. They need to be given the managerial support to make informed, sensible decisions at the point of contact with the citizen/customer.

‘Telework’ is a noble enterprise that speaks of agility. By itself, however, the term does not quite capture what is now becoming possible in terms of workspaces. In Japan, consumer electronics manufacturers such as Sony have created a situation where it is possible to get the same data coming to you whether you move from a desktop PC and broadband line to a laptop, personal digital appliance or mobile phone hooked up to GSM or WiFi networks.

Not every public service, of course, really needs such ‘seamless roaming’. But given Britain’s transport hassles, staff need the kind of IT that can let them do their jobs regardless of location—from their home, on the move, while they are waiting around on a visit or a site. That way, they can have the confidence in managers—

- not to let them down with inadequate resources when the going gets tough
- instead, let them work in the places that make them most effective.

Staff should also benefit by knowing who’s doing what, how much, when and where. Morale should improve; staff turnover should decline.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [H] HOW MOBILE CAN MEAN AGILE—AIRWAVE, A VOICE-AND-DATA MOBILE RADIO NETWORK COVERING ALL EMERGENCY SERVICES

A **previous, analogue** generation of police radio systems was procured separately by each local force, and suffered from many problems. By 2005, however, mmO2 will supply encrypted digital voice and data communications to all 53 police forces in the UK, under Airwave, a £2.9 billion, 19-year contract that represents one of the largest Public Finance Initiative (PFI) deals ever. Handsets will take data, and will allow crime reports to be filled out in real time at the scene of each crime.

They will also be:

- capable of both radio calls and mobile phone calls
- linked to data from the Police National Computer
- linked to Automatic Person Location Systems (APLS), which allow control rooms to know where handsets and the officers carrying them have got to.

APLS, in particular, make for a much more agile use of capacity and resources.

PRINCIPLE 3 MARSHALLING RESOURCES WITH EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

How does agility in the public sector differ from plain old efficiency and effectiveness there? After all, efficiency—*doing things right*—must be part of any agile government unit's approach to its operations and its assets. Yet the selection of which task to perform out of the many that present themselves in the form of noise—such doing the right things, or effectiveness, must also be part of agility.

The answer is that the demand for agility today has more to do with politics than with economics. The popular suspicion remains that an awful lot of his cash could be wasted on bureaucracy, as well as on ill-conceived examples of 'initiavitis'. As a result, the danger is that the lumbering giant of government, far from being agile, may be caught, bizarrely, doing not nearly enough with a whole lot more. And this could compound problems of political legitimacy, not just for New Labour, but also for the business of government itself.

In our research, we found that both citizens and public servants gave force to the new, political imperatives behind agility. As one citizen described the public sector—*'It's not customer-driven and yet you're paying for it'*.

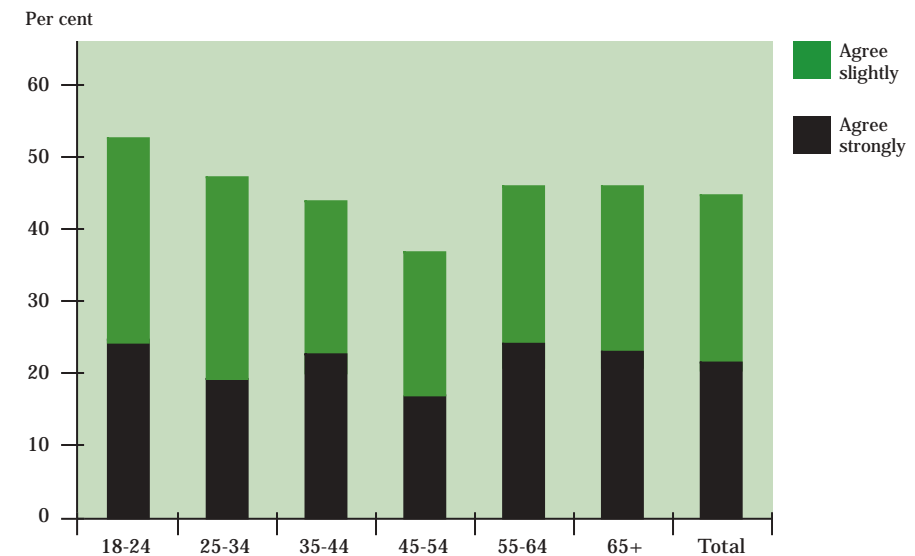
The choice of 'customers' as the metaphor, and the Harvard phrase 'customer-driven', are revealing. The past two decades' experiences of the relative efficiency and effectiveness of services delivered by the UK private sector were always bound to mould expectations of the public one. But today, those experiences also call into question whether government should be doing what it is doing at all. That is why, in our national survey, no fewer than 46 per cent of respondents agreed that Richard Branson would make a better job of running public services than the government. It is also why a similar overall proportion gave its backing to broader partnerships between the public and the private sector.

Of course, public opinion on public private partnerships is polarised: the chart on next page) can also be read as a glass half empty. But whatever form is eventually given to any public-private partnership, it is a central plank of government policy and needs to be properly articulated and promoted to the public as such.

Political legitimisation now demands a step-change in agility from government, or it may not be able to survive. That leads us to the vital signs of greater efficiency and effectiveness in service provision.

VARYING SUPPORT FOR PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVEMENT

'It would be better if more public services were run in partnership with the private sector'



VITAL SIGN 10 YOUR UNIT TRACKS THE STATUS AND VALUE OF ALL RESOURCES, AND MAKES THE MOST OF ITS INFORMATION ASSETS

A precondition for agility is continuously to *keep track of all resources, and especially ones that are hidden from conventional view.*

Tracking itself must be efficient and effective. But there is a need to grasp the full extent of the public sector 'estate'—whether it takes the form of property, intellectual property, equipment, human resources or data assets. In political terms, after all, the nation's wealth is at stake.

Once a unit knows what it has physically and knows what it knows intellectually, its staff should be in a better position to deploy its assets efficiently and effectively whenever occasion demands. That is the essence of agility.

Sometimes assets can be converted into electronic data, or are already embedded in what IT people call 'legacy systems'. Such digital assets deserve the agile touch. They are too often hidden. The task with them is to add editorial value to them and, within the bounds of the law, go on to exploit the results in the most efficient and effective ways possible. One could argue that this is indeed a public duty.

The example of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport is relevant here. The DCMS often finds itself buffeted by boundary changes between different government departments. It can easily acquire or lose a building each year. At any time, 30 per cent of its employees are on loan to other departments and 20 per cent are lost each year through staff turnover.

Altogether, the DCMS has no choice but to track, continuously, what and who it has on its books. At the same time, perhaps 98 per cent of those national cultural assets over which it presides are inaccessible, unmediated or disaggregated. Still, the DCMS plans to work up those assets into annotated digital images so that, over broadband communications, they can be useful to external audiences—in education, tourism and elsewhere. The hope is also to sell these images in the international marketplace.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [I] SUSSEX INTEGRATION OF JUSTICE—MAKING THE MOST OF INFORMATION ASSETS

The Police, the Courts and the Crown Prosecution Service each need some or all of the information collected on offenders by the other two. There is a need to eliminate much of the inefficiency of postal and fax communications, as well as to end a culture in which the CPS would physically return up to half the files it received from the police for further information—to be entered by hand.

The Police Information Technology Organisation has developed a pilot network of efficient and secure electronic links, integrating the existing email system of the Sussex Police with those planned by the Sussex CPS and Magistrates Courts. Other bodies will be able to join, including the prison and probation services, teams that handle youth offenders and—with more restricted access—forensic services and solicitors.

VITAL SIGN 11 WITH OTHER UNITS, YOURS PROCURES AND OUTSOURCES GOODS AND SERVICES FOR MAXIMUM READINESS AND ECONOMIES OF SCALE, BUT MINIMUM DEPENDENCE ON 'SINGLE SOURCE' SUPPLIER MONOPOLIES

Once a government unit knows what resources has, it can hope to be more agile still by deciding exactly what competence it can boast in putting each of those resources to good use.

Like most companies, government units are relatively inexpert in their 'non-core' activities. Most can claim little distinctive competence in, say, office cleaning, or even IT. Therefore, to be agile, government units might best outsource these activities. That way, they will be less physically encumbered and mentally distracted. All that then remains is to establish agile forms of what some term *partner relationship management*.

In all the controversies that surround Public-Private Partnerships and the Private Finance Initiative, people forget that the relationship between private partners and public partners is more symbiotic than adversarial. But mostly it is the state as client, not private sector suppliers, that has the last say in the general convergence between the two.

That isn't always a good thing. As one citizen told us—*'Firms that sub-contract from the council have Council Syndrome.'*

If problems are just outsourced, rather than ended, there is little agility for the citizen to appreciate.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE CENTRAL BUT NOT NECESSARILY AGILE IN THEMSELVES

'Partnership' is not just an economic cipher for privatisation and market forces. It can all too easily be a far-from-agile arrangement that locks private sector suppliers into dependence on some of the more sclerotic forms of public sector culture. One of our senior public sector managers reported—*'Faced with public partners that feel somewhat impotent, private firms find themselves at the controls of partnerships. Only the controls are all wrong—in their language, and in their obsession with outputs and targets. Partnerships don't look agile to the private sector. Local Strategic Partnerships are far from agile. Without indulging in initiativitis, the public sector needs to be super-agile when it deals with the private one.'*

In contractual matters, agility means quickly defining relationships, specifications, responsibilities, processes and mechanisms for quality control. It is vital that the public sector moves to gain real insight into partner motivations, perspectives and operations—and moves to integrate partner data with its own.

CREATING AGILE PARTNERSHIPS IS A KEY COMPETENCE

Cambridge University, working with other institutions, now offers a diploma in public sector partnership management. Clearly there is much to be learnt in this area.

For a project to be agile, partnerships around it must:

- cater for but not be impeded by *changes in the brief*
- move fast enough for *consensus*, once achieved, not to dissolve
- conduct *procurement and outsourcing* in an agile manner.

At a moment when 'consumer choice' has become to arrive in the public sector, nothing could be less agile than to mortgage the long-term future of a government unit to a single unelected company or group of private suppliers.

One positive side of agile outsourcing and procurement is that moving to new infrastructure in buildings or IT, as well as drawing benefit from that infrastructure, should be smooth and fast.

From the point of view of citizens and others, the benefit of agile partnership relationship management should be that all those dealing with government units and outsourced functions or project partners find a consistent message between agencies. That will signal efficiency.

'Partnership' cannot be a new religion if it is to connote agility in the public mind. It requires an alert, discerning approach. Government-to-business services, for example, do not need new partnerships. As a senior public sector manager said to us—*'As far as SMEs are concerned, there are far too many support organisations. Government units should be introducing SMEs more clearly to the private and public networks that exist.'*

Partnerships need to be managed in an agile manner—otherwise they can turn out to be displacement activities. More often than not, too, there are key partnerships to be made between different parts of the public sector.

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [J] LONDON MARKETPLACE—E-PROCUREMENT ACROSS BARNET, TOWER HAMLETS, LEWISHAM, REDBRIDGE AND NEWHAM COUNCILS, PLUS THE GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

By buying catalogued items in concert, and according to agreed templates and procedures, local authorities have developed a service that allows them to share best practice, reduce workload and improve effectiveness. London Marketplace routes suppliers, buyers and local SMEs through a single secure hub based on Oracle Exchange, hosted by LloydsTSB and itself implemented by Best Value Procurement.

The aim is to make London Marketplace to be accessible to all local authorities and related agencies in London and the South East.

London Marketplace at
<http://www.lgolpathfinder.gov.uk>

VITAL SIGN 12 YOUR UNIT RETAINS CORE COMPETENCES AND ALLOCATES EXPERTISE SO THAT ONLY THE RIGHT SKILLS ARE DEPLOYED IN EACH SERVICE SITUATION

To cut down the steps citizens need to make, it is vital to field the right public sector skills—no more, no less—at the right time. The need is therefore to hold on to key competences, use them to meet citizen expectations, and do so in an agile manner.

It is easy to squander competences. One senior public sector manager told us that the NHS must not just get nurses or pharmacists to dispense prescriptions instead of GPs. It is must also know when to save money... by fielding an 'expensive' medic—*'If you have a suspected cataract, for example, your GP refers you to outpatients who then refers you to inpatients or a day case procedure. But why not cut out the outpatients step altogether? A specialist GP can see a cataract at 50 paces.'*

For one-stop shops to appeal beyond the older people who mainly patronise them, they need to focus on the agile deployment of skills. Then the benefits of agility will be clear enough. As one citizen told us—*'They sent me to a walk-in NHS centre... very efficient, there was no queue.'*

VITAL SIGN 13 AIDED BY IT, YOUR UNIT MAKES GOOD, COLLECTIVE DECISIONS WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE, IMPLEMENTS THEM FULLY, AND SPREADS THE NEWS THROUGH THE RIGHT CHANNELS

Britain's planning system, not to speak of the procurement of major IT projects, attests to management by elephantine committee more than it does agility. Yet with the aid of good IT networks, public sector managers can confer and make decisions instantly and regardless of the location of individuals. Importantly, too, they can arrange swift upward and downward communication between themselves, staff, citizens and others. That way, they can make those mid-course adjustments to implementation that typify agility.

Agility needs to be brought to the decision-making process itself. Without it, effective leadership is impossible.

Decisions that are taken in a proactive and professional style need also to be signaled to others early and well. IT networks can help in this. An agile approach to decision-making in government must make sure that there is greater, not less, democratic control over public spending priorities. The benefits of such an approach to decision-making are not just to do with saving time. They are to do with increasing professional confidence and citizen clarity about government actions.

VITAL SIGN 14 YOUR UNIT INITIATES NEW, COOPERATIVE EFFICIENCIES WITH CITIZENS

Part of achieving agile government is to help citizens themselves help government become agile. One way to do this is to *give citizens incentives to move their dealings over to channels that are more efficient than those of the past.*

Cash discounts can encourage payment over the Internet. Better still, each government unit should provide one point of contact for all payments, regardless of which department of the unit is being paid. Perhaps, one day, the whole of government will arrange for citizens to pay all government bills, of whatever description, through one phone number and one website.

Far-fetched? In Canada, when pensioners and farmers want state benefits, they can make a single electronic request crawl across many different sources of public sector funds. The result of agile gambits like these, according to Accenture, is that half the Canadian population uses e-government—compared with a tenth in Britain.

The benefits of citizens' increased use of efficient channels are clear enough. They are lower costs to government, and the hope, at least, of restrained taxes. And as one citizen put it to us—*'With the Internet, forms will become less like forms and more like a quick way of getting the information that people need.'*

AGILITY IN PRACTICE [K] TOWARD A SMART CARD FOR TRANSACTIONS IN LONDON

London's 33 local authorities need to bring down the cost of administering school dinners, parking, libraries, benefits and elections. They also want to reduce fraud. Meanwhile, the Greater London Authority's London Connects and Transport for London (TfL) want to cut the queues for travel tickets during rush hours. All parties would like more data on what services people use and how they use them—and only in London does a ten-journey ticket for public transport take the form of ten pieces of card rather than a single Carnet.

In November 2002, after a four-year public-private partnership had invested £1.2bn, a red plastic card pilot, Oyster, started trials with 80,000 transport staff. In mid 2003, public trials started. Commuters can load their Oyster card with money at any station. Yellow sensors on tube ticket barriers will detect the card; similar sensors on buses will beep to tell the driver if the card is valid.

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The 21st century citizen is a channel-hopping, time-pressured mobile chameleon. The 21st century event is typically rather disruptive.

The public sector can, however, use networks to accommodate both the new kinds of the citizens and the new kinds of events.

It can be confident enough to learn how to perform better and answer challenges better. It can be efficient and effective.

The Public Policy Forum is a network of modernisers, in and around the public sector, who are interested in these goals. It commissioned this book and has a large stock of market research, case studies and white papers on innovation in public services.

To access the Forum and accelerate your move toward agility, go to **www.publicpolicyforum.org.uk**

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