



Leading from the front

Using data and digital integration to cut costs and improve public services

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Foreword



At esynergy, we are deeply committed to driving forward the digital transformation and data integration that are essential for a modern, agile, and efficient public sector. In our latest research report, we interviewed 100 C-suite executives from the Government Digital and Data profession, extracting crucial insights into how data and digital services are being utilised across the public sector, the progress made, and the challenges that remain.

The integration of data and digital services is a key focus for public sector organisations, with 63% of civil servants ranking their department's integration efforts at seven out of ten or higher. There is an undeniable optimism about the potential for data-driven insights to shape public service delivery—50% of critical public service decisions are now based on data insights. Yet, despite this positive outlook, significant barriers remain. Our report reveals that a staggering **79% of respondents believe the perceived or actual burden of data sharing reduces the willingness of their organisation to collaborate with other departments.** This reluctance is compounded by a lack of resources, with 74% reporting insufficient capacity for effective data sharing.

Neil McIvor, Head of Data for Public Services at esynergy and former Chief Data Officer at the Department for Education,

states: *“Data is at its highest quality and usefulness when used as a by-product of operational delivery.”* This perspective encapsulates the core challenge facing the public sector today. While civil servants increasingly recognise the value of data, they often struggle to establish the foundational infrastructure necessary to fully harness its potential. Too frequently, data remains siloed within departments, disconnected and under-utilised.

Our research makes it clear – if we are to accelerate digital transformation, we must stop duplicating and recreating efforts across departments and, as McIvor highlights, build on *“a common bedrock of data foundations.”* This approach will not only enhance efficiency but also foster a culture where data can be seamlessly shared and used to its full potential across the public sector.

Achieving this vision requires more than optimism, as our findings indicate that data governance and management are not receiving the attention they deserve. Only 13% of respondents said that a Chief Data Officer was responsible for the data and digital functions at the executive level.

As McIvor notes, *“The dial needs to shift to technologies and processes that connect, rather than collect, data.”* This sentiment speaks to the heart of the challenge.

We must embrace technologies that enable integration and interoperability, ensuring data is shared across organisational boundaries to drive better decision-making and more efficient public service delivery.

We believe in the transformative power of data. The optimism among civil servants is encouraging, but there is much work to be done. As McIvor puts it, *“Government still has a lot to do to resource and reduce actual and perceived burdens to data*

sharing across and within organisational boundaries.” By focusing on collaboration, resourcing, and building robust data foundations, we can overcome these challenges and create a truly integrated digital government.

We hope this report serves as a valuable resource for leaders across the public sector, helping to guide the next phase of digital transformation and data integration.



Neil McIvor

Head of Data, Public Services,
esynergy



Thanks to our contributors

esynergy and Government Transformation Magazine extend our sincere appreciation to the 100 public sector executives who generously dedicated their time to complete our survey. Their insights have significantly contributed to a comprehensive understanding of data usage and digital service adoption throughout the public sector. Their input allows us all to recognise the accomplishments achieved so far and identify the obstacles that must be addressed, ultimately fostering a more informed discussion on the future of public service delivery.

In particular, we would like to record our gratitude to the individuals below who agreed to speak openly about their perspectives on the themes of our research, whose detailed insights greatly enhanced the depth of our study.



Jeremy Gould

Director of Digital and Chief Digital Officer, Homes England



Craig Suckling

Chief Data Officer, UK Government



Fiona James

Chief Data Officer and Director, Data Growth and Operations, ONS



Sarah Ormerod

Programme Director, Passports Transformation Programme, Home Office



Ming Tang

Chief Data and Analytics Officer, NHS England



Sue Bateman

Chief Data Officer, Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs



Key findings

We asked civil servants across all government organisations how they ranked their data and digital capabilities, as well as major sticking points on how data is gathered and used. We also asked key executives across six government organisations for their views. Our research found:

There is widespread optimism among civil servants about the integration and use of data.

63%

of civil servants give a ranking of seven out of ten for how well data and digital services are integrated in their department, while 50% say that critical public service decisions were based on data driven insights.

But there is not enough recognition within government of the value of data, leading to a lack of resources.

34%

say there was a lack of recognition about the value of data externally, and 74% said there were insufficient resources for data sharing. 79% say that the perceived or actual burden of data sharing reduced the willingness of their organisation to share data with other departments.

Neither hiring nor budgetary concerns are front of mind for civil servants when it comes to data.

6%

of respondents say these failures are as a result of a lack of trained staff. Far more important for respondents was the difficulty of accessing shared data, insufficient data available due to privacy concerns, and a lack of standardised data formats.

Chief Data Officers remain few and far between, and those that are in position do not have enough authority to enact genuine change.

13%

of respondents said that a CDO was responsible for the data and digital functions at the executive level. 47% said that the data function rested instead with the chief operating officer (COO) and 34% for the digital function. Only 14% of respondents said that a CDO had responsibility for AI policy, in 34% it is the COO and in 32% the CDIO.

Introduction

In 2021, the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) was set up and £8bn committed to digital, data and technology transformation until 2025.

But in May 2024, a year before the end of that commitment, the UK's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee warned that even amid a massive rise in the quantity and variety of data available, Britain's government had failed to harness the opportunity posed.

“Data remains locked in departmental silos and there are also concerns over significant data gaps,” warned PACAC Chair Dame Jackie Doyle-Price.

Data is essential for government decision-making, policy evaluation, and maintaining core infrastructure and yet data silos across departments hinder effective collaboration and prevent efficient, data-driven decisions. These silos lead to duplicated efforts, inconsistencies, and missed opportunities for better policymaking. A fundamental shift in how data is viewed and managed within government is necessary to overcome these barriers.

The data shows that while government organisations have moderate levels of digital maturity, they have low data maturity. Progress has undoubtedly been made in digital transformation — including investment in new technologies



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Dame Jackie Doyle-Price, *PACAC Chair*

and platforms — but the governance and management of data remain insufficient. Today, too many crucial decisions are based on poor-quality, unmanaged data. This is not only risky, but it is undermining the allocation of resources and the delivery of public services.

A key problem, says Jeremy Gould, Director of Digital and Chief Data Officer at Homes England, is infrastructure: “We’re trying to deliver transformative services [but] we’ve still got mainframe services that are 30 years old. No one wants to invest money in those things. And this is the case right across the public sector.” A significant challenge lies in the opportunity cost of government data management. The burden of maintaining data governance frameworks often falls on individual departments, while the benefits are realised by other governmental bodies and the public. This imbalance in incentives leads departments to prioritise their own needs over broader data management responsibilities.

To illustrate – in real terms – how government departments struggle to work together when it comes to sharing data and digital resources outside departmental silos, Gould gives the scenario of customs: “A haulage truck that is coming across the border deals with a bunch of different agencies, and if you want to streamline that process you need to make a financial case to the Treasury,” he says.

“How do you do that when you’ve got five different departments with skin in the game? Who’s your prime? Who’s the secondary? How do you construct your governance around it? Who submits the bid? Right there, you have all the problems around siloed government.”

In a public sector that is already fighting serious budget constraints and changing demands from government and the executive, making a case for digital transformation and data integration is difficult, not least because the impact on



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Jeremy Gould, *Director of Digital and Chief Data Officer, Homes England*

the bottom line – in terms of money saved – could be years in the future.

“Everyone’s struggling with all the activity that’s going on in hospitals, with just doing the day job,” says Ming Tang, Chief Data and Analytics Officer for NHS England. “Taking time out to do digital transformation is hard.”



Optimism or despair?

On the ground, civil servants are broadly optimistic about how well data and digital services are integrated in their departments, with 63% of respondents ranking the quality of the integration at seven out of ten or higher.

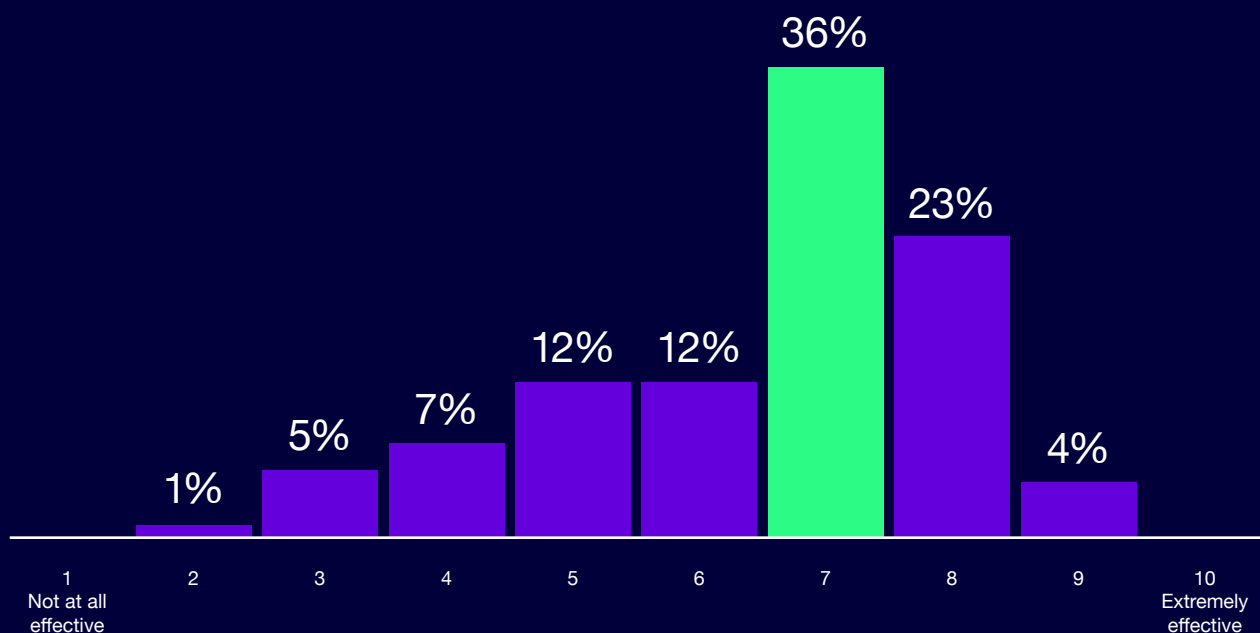
“We’re constantly looking at the pipeline of activity and reallocating our capabilities and our teams onto whatever the priority of the day is,” said Gould. “I’m pretty confident we’re probably about a seven or an eight on that.”

But Craig Suckling, the UK Government’s Chief Data Officer at the UK Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO), only gives the

government as a whole five-out of ten. “I think there are some excellent things happening. There is some foundational transformation happening.”

Suckling cites reforms such as the ‘Tell Us Once’ initiative for reporting a death, which has allowed the sharing of across departments to fundamentally change the way that citizens engage with the government in the case of a bereavement. Or the significant progress bringing all government services onto the cloud (35% already he estimates) by 2030. Or indeed, the Gov.uk One Login system, now used by as many as four million people in the UK.

Fig 1. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all effective and 10 is extremely effective, how effective do you find the integration of data and digital services in improving service delivery in your department, if at all?



“We’re starting to see some really meaningful use cases surface in citizen and business experience. But the biggest impediment to delivering cross-government collaboration and increasing productivity is the sharing of data. It’s still a barrier to unlocking real change,” he said.

The Office of National Statistics’ October Labour Market Review, fused data between the NHS and the Department for Work and Pensions, which Fiona James, Chief Data Officer and Director, Data Growth and Operations at the ONS, says will help government drive better interventions in the services that the NHS provides.

The ONS also has a number of data sharing arrangements with the private sector, including with phone provider O2 and with Airbnb and other short-term letting agents that are interested in data about tourist hotspots in the UK. Despite these initiatives, voices in government that are using and advocating for better data in government have often failed to shout about it.

“I think that, historically, story-telling has not been our strength,” says James, although she hopes that the NHS/ labour market data link up is an opportunity to change this.

That lack of narrative over the benefits of data may be why 34% said there was a lack of recognition about the value of data externally, and 74% said there were insufficient resources for data sharing. This is something that is central to Suckling’s work going forward.

“We really need to have strong understanding and acknowledgement of the value of data as it applies to the business of government and the mission of government, not only from the technology streams of leadership, but from the chief operating officers, the permanent secretaries, so that they really understand the value of it,” Suckling said.



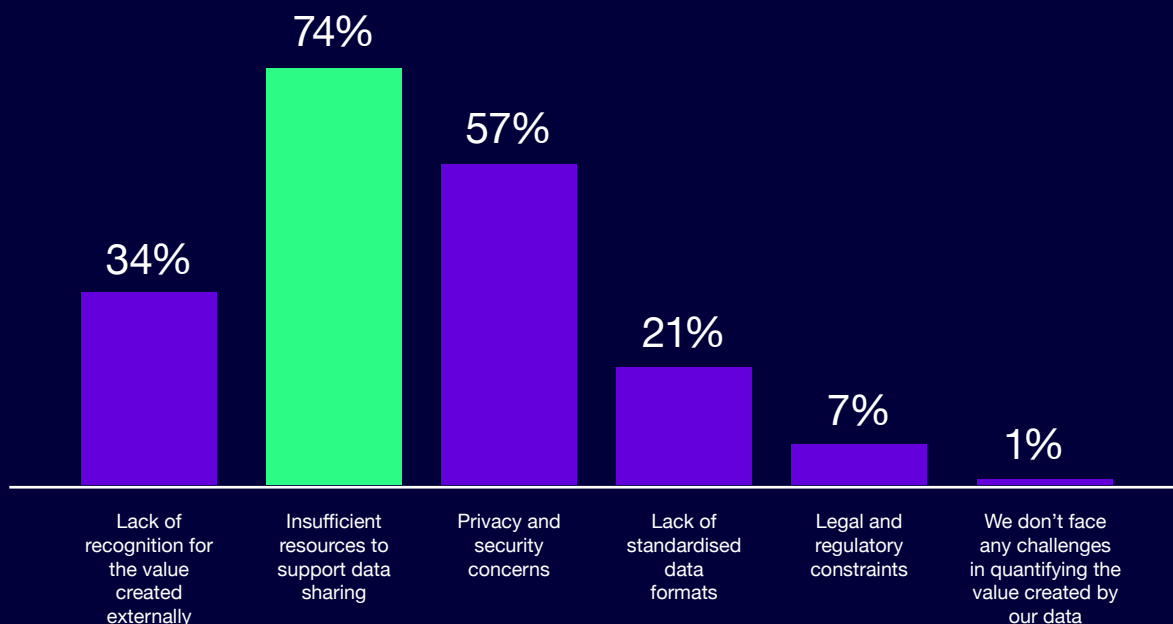
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Craig Suckling, *Chief Data Officer, UK Government*

“Data and digital is meaningless unless you’re actually matching it to an actual business or user priority. The people that are setting policy and creating services and thinking about strategies to deliver on missions need to understand the role that data and digital plays so they give it fair prioritisation.”

At the NHS, Tang said that the aim is to move from data that is collected monthly or weekly for specific purposes for publication – which requires manual import and processing – to more timely data for operational uses that

Fig 2. What are the challenges, if any, your organisation faces in quantifying the value created by its data, either within your organisation or when used by other organisations or departments?



can be integrated with digital services and directly abstracted without the need for manual processing.

“We’re moving more towards making operational data available, which is more timely, to support decision making,” she said. “How do we frame data in a way that allows people to do their jobs and bring different bits of data together so they can make a decision?”

By design, the NHS accumulates vast amounts of data. Data on every procedure that is carried out in every hospital in the country is received by the department on a weekly and even daily basis. At the GP surgery level, the challenges have been greater as accurate data is so valuable but also so variable depending on the individual GP’s records.



This variability is also an issue across the country, with some hospitals incredibly advanced in both digitalisation and data and some still relying on paper records. “It’s a real variation, and it’s that variation which makes it really hard to integrate and harmonise.”

Ming Tang, Chief Data Officer, UK Chief Data and Analytics Officer, NHS England

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it really hard to integrate and harmonise,” said Tang.

Meanwhile, 79% said that the perceived or actual burden of data sharing reduced the willingness of their organisation to share data with other departments. Part of the problem, say interviewees, is not only persuading the government to stump up the money needed for genuine digital transformation, but the fact that many of the positive changes that data can bring do not immediately save money. But not only does data undoubtedly save money over longer periods of time, too much focus on the economics can be a mistake.

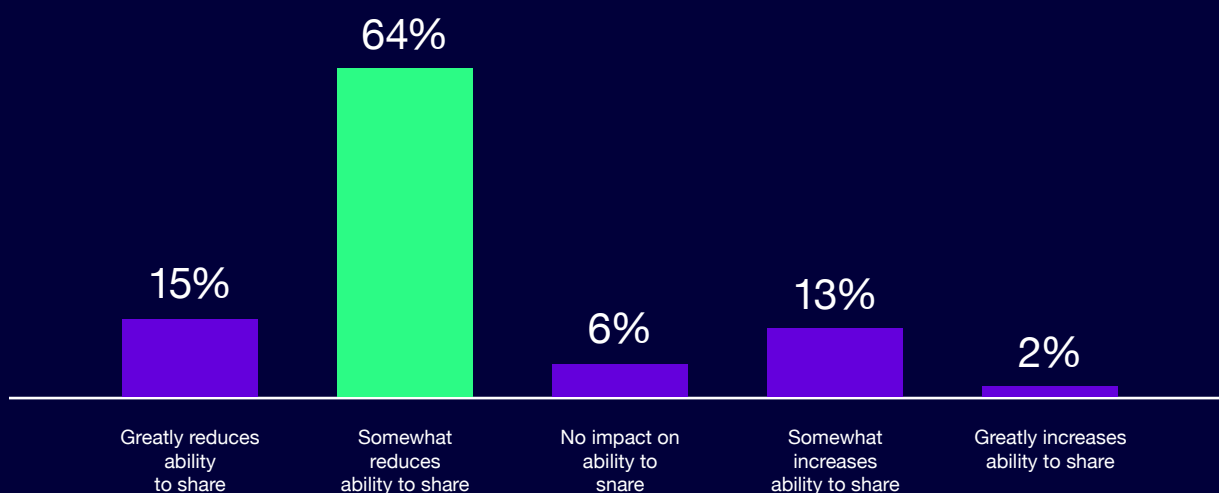
One of the projects that Gould was involved in was the transformation plan that spearheaded online passport applications. Prior to changes – which were part of the Government Data Strategy, he said, some 50% of paper passport applications used to fail.

“There was a cost to business in dealing with all those failed applications. There was a cost to the user when they had to cancel their holiday because they missed one letter from their postcode,” he said. As such, value doesn’t have to be about lower operational costs alone, it could be the impact on people and their lives. This enabled them to demonstrate a return on investment that was valuable to the department reputationally.

“I don’t know anybody that has had a bad experience renewing their passport in the last five years,” he said.

While undoubtedly a success story, the digitisation of the passport application does highlight how siloed the government still is when it comes to data, said Sarah Ormerod, Deputy Director of PCCR Projects and Transformation at the Home Office. Despite the strides made in the application process, it still requires first-time applicants to provide information like birth or marriage certificates

Fig 3. How does the perceived, or actual, burden of supplying data affect your organisation’s willingness to share data with other departments or organisations?



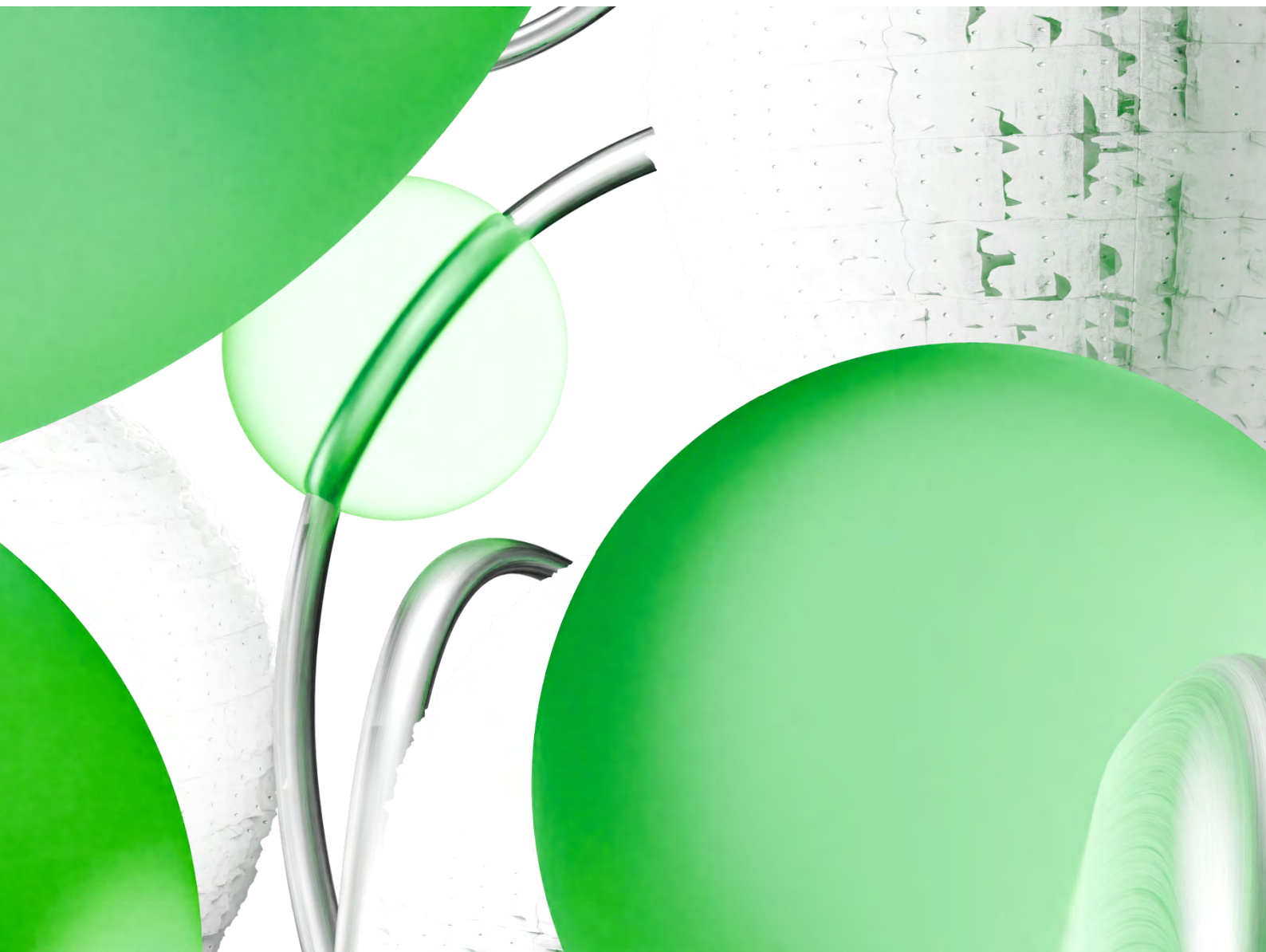
that are already held by the department but on a different database.

“We have people in the Home Office probably sitting a few metres away that can access that data and look it up but that system doesn’t talk to the passport system, so we still ask the customer to post pieces of paper around the country to prove their identity. So it isn’t a truly paperless system. That’s one of my biggest personal frustrations.”

While only 6% of respondents said project

failures were as a result of a lack of trained staff, the government has emphasised the importance of hiring highly-skilled data and digital professionals to help join the dots across Whitehall.

As Homes England’s Gould says, hiring remains an issue. And as a result the government is dependent on expensive contractors to fill key functions “We’ve got a problem around our ability to attract the right talent. There are some skills we need in the market that are just really, really hard to recruit,” he said.



Public trust

Privacy is also a concern, especially in the NHS, said Tang. It holds a great deal of data, and the public perception when it comes to sharing that data between departments. While patients tend not to object to their data being shared between clinicians, they feel quite different about it being shared with, say, their local council, which could theoretically determine whether they get care based on that data.

“Public trust is really important. If we were to go out without providing a clear use case that is beneficial to the public, they would just opt out. We’ve seen it,” said Tang. “Over the past years, there’s been projects where the opt-out rates just peaked significantly to millions. So, we’re cautious.”

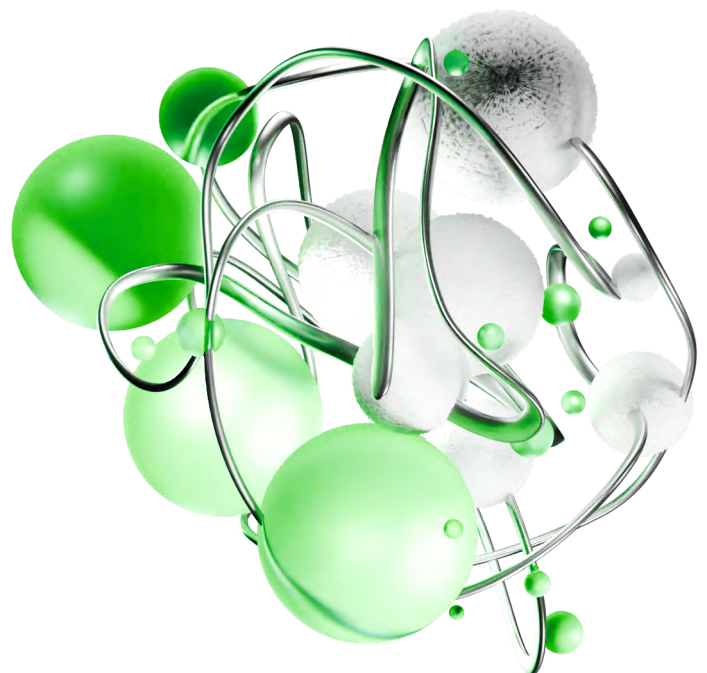
Even more sensitive is the extent to which the NHS can share data with external providers, such as pharmaceutical or insurance companies. “We’re doing quite a lot of public deliberation to understand public sentiment, and how we can really make a better case for data sharing. We want to share more, we think it’s important, but it has to also pass the Daily Mail test, doesn’t it?” she said.

At the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs, Sue Bateman, Chief Data Officer, discusses one area where the public and private sectors have aligned to break down silos and blockages in the use and processing of data.

These include the Marine Environmental Data and Information Network (MEDIN) where DEFRA has partnered with 50 organisations and is sponsored by 15 in order to make marine data easily accessible and usable. Not only has MEDIN been a success, but it is a reminder that genuinely useful data sets need careful management and, above all, investment.

“I think it is a nice medium: the data is open source, a collection of really valuable assets to be able to understand our marine environment. But it’s funded by collaboration with external partners, in a way that that means that everybody’s benefiting,” she said.

“There’s a recognition that sustained investment is needed into both the platform, but also into maintaining and improving the quality of the data and information that sits within it.”



Chief Data Officers don't have enough influence

While ideally the CDO serves as a centre of gravity in the data landscape, with both the authority and levers to make a difference, in reality, it is just one of a host of executive roles within departments and often entirely separate from the digital function. In many government organisations, digital transformation and data governance are managed by different commands and report to different executives. As such, siloes exist at both the top and bottom.

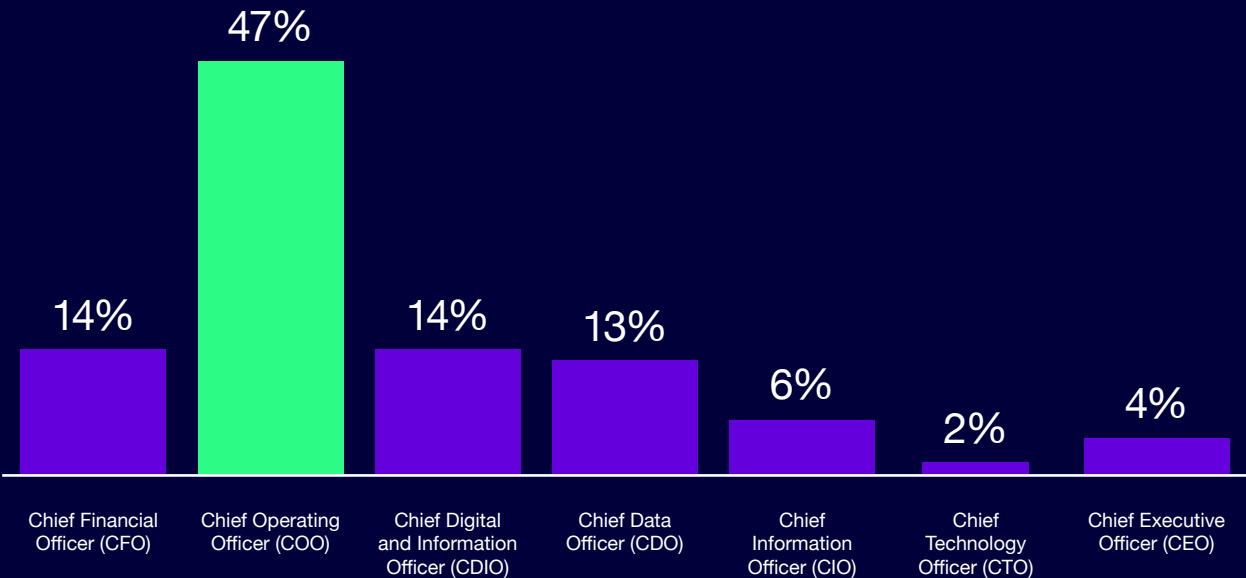
A total of 47% said that the data function reported into the Chief Operating Officer (COO) and 34% said that the digital function did so. Similarly, only 14% of respondents

said that a CDO had responsibility for AI policy, in 34% it is the COO and in 32% the Chief Digital and Information Officer (CDIO).

And while a great deal of focus has been put on the emergence of the Chief Data Officer role in government departments in recent years, only 13% of respondents said that a CDO was responsible for the data and digital functions at the executive level.

“The concept of having a Chief Data Officer that looks at the lifecycle of data and the more efficient and effective deployment of data across the ecosystem is a fairly new one,” said Bateman.

Fig 4. Who is responsible for your data function at the Executive level?



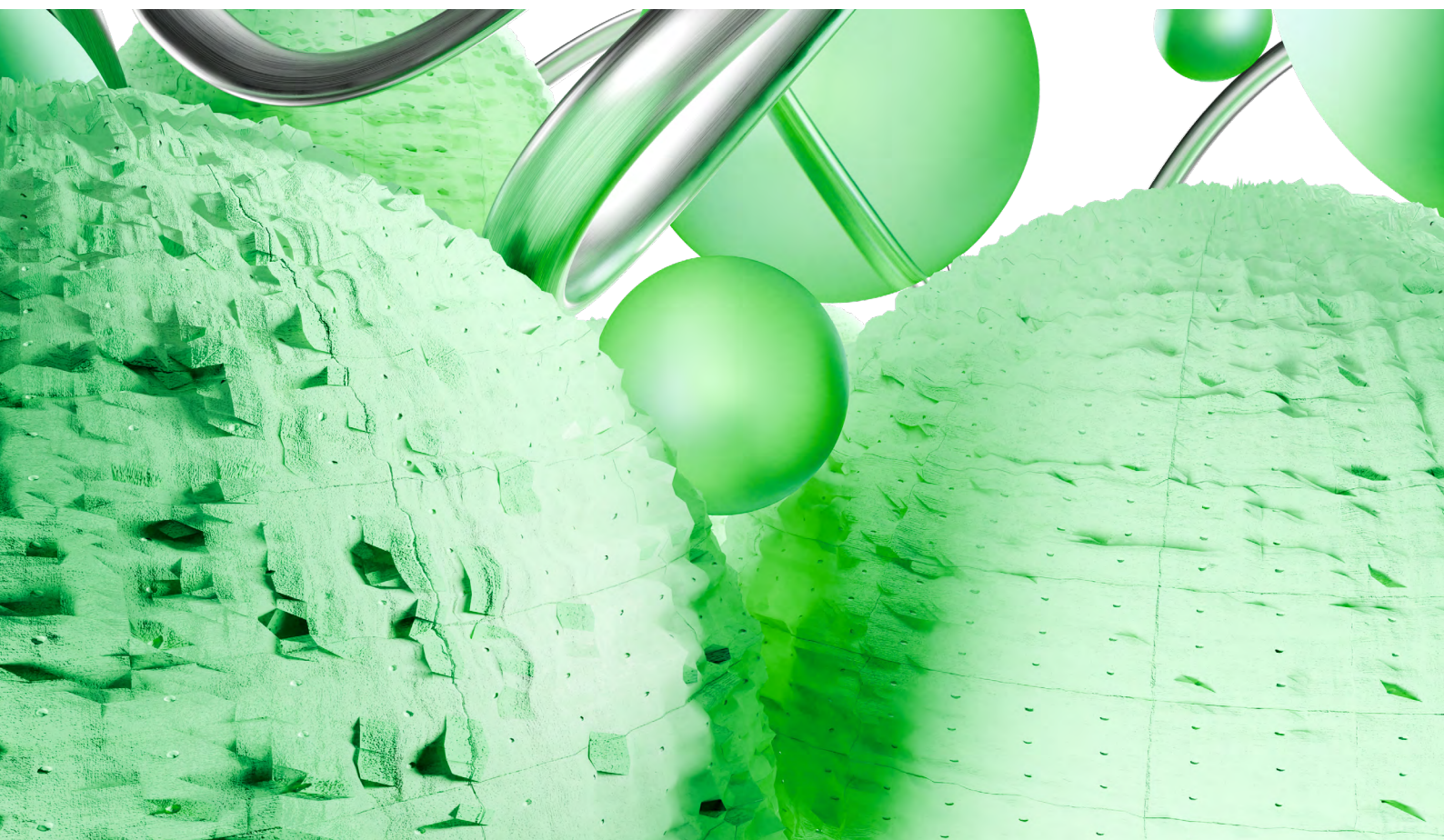
When asked how easy it is to refocus critical digital and data capabilities on departmental priorities on a scale of one to ten, DEFRA's Bateman said: "I would say probably five." When asked how closely the department's data and digital functions work together, however, she estimated seven out of ten.

But frequently data and digital teams do not report to the same director general: data reports into the government's chief scientific advisor while the digital function reports into the COO: AI strategy, meanwhile, reports into the director general for strategy. Does that make it difficult?

"Yes and no," Bateman says. "The trick is making sure that the people who need to be involved are involved."

When it comes to making the case for funding and focus to be put into data and digital, it is all about results – and making sure those results have visibility. DEFRA is currently wrapping up its first Data and Information Festival, says Bateman, which has sought to celebrate the successes of some of the existing data resources, such as MEDIN.

"The age old challenge that we always have around data is being able to draw a line between *that* data and *that* impact: cost avoidance, efficiencies. It is often the case that without the data we would not have been able to have that impact," says Bateman.



Conclusion

Driving genuine change within government organisations that will see data and digital receive the attention and the investment that it needs will require a change of mindset both at the bottom – within departments and among the rank and file that work there – as well as at the top, among those that allocate resources and make policy.

Equally important is that there is a single leader in every department that is responsible for data, digital and AI, and that those people are brought together in an executive body that can share insights and improve collaboration across government, a function currently executed by the DDaT Functional Leaders Group, chaired by the CDDO.

Government Departments must be clearer on who has delegated authority for setting the policies on how data is managed, stored and utilised within their organisation, as well as setting clear risk appetite statements for sharing data across organisational boundaries. This will be key to reducing the duplication of costs, time and effort and ultimately, serve to drive more value from Cross Government Data.

Lastly, a new understanding is required of what a return on investment really means – and the timescale that is needed to achieve it. Change may not reap immediate returns, but over time the correct prioritisation of data and digital and the right kind of partnerships between government departments and the private sector will undoubtedly pay dividends.





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