Mind the GaaP!
Should Government provide a digital platform or should it be the platform?

Event report

GaaP is the buzzword in digital Government circles, Government as a Platform is the view that Government should be the platform for digital service providers – from the private sector – to deliver the services citizens need from social care to turning on your lamppost. But some argue that Government is more than ‘just’ a platform for services, that the public sector has a unique role and that whilst we need a common platform for application sharing across central and local Government, Government has a role to play beyond being an operating system.

The panel:

- **Professor Helen Margetts**, Director, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford
- **Eileen Burbidge**, Partner, Passion Capital
- **Tom Baker**, Former CIO Sunderland City Council and Norfolk County Council, currently Development Director, Smarter and Healthier Cities, BT Global Services
- **Professor Mariana Mazzucato**, RM Phillips Professorship in the Economics of Innovation at the Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex
- **Mike Bracken**, Executive Director of Digital in the Cabinet Office, and head of the Government Digital Service (GDS)

Chair: **Chi Onwurah MP**, Shadow Cabinet Minister & PICTFOR co-chair

Are these questions of ideology or technology? What does it mean for public sector IT architecture or even for democracy? How do we architect an ecosystem of organisations that will build and use a Government platform? And whether Government is or needs a platform should it take Apple, Android or Amazon for its model or something else entirely? These were some of the key questions posed by Shadow Cabinet Office minister Chi Onwurah MP at this PICTFOR/COADEC co-hosted debate. Five leading experts from economics, industry, academia and Government gave their view.

**Professor Helen Margetts**, an e-Government and digital era governance specialist, began with an acknowledgement of the importance of a platform and welcomed progress thus far in the form of GOV.UK. The Director of the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) stressed the need to establish first principles before making decisions about the technical specifications of the platform. Margetts referred to the need for both design and ethical principles and argued that one of the default positions of GaaP should be openness with Government seeking to ‘draw in’ information from as wide an evidence base as possible. Margetts used the example of public complaints to highlight the current inefficiencies of having multiple systems in place to deal with complaints in each department. She concluded that GaaP would allow users to interact with the state and help to ensure the UK had “more of a listening Government and not just a watching Government.”

“We need to think beyond what is the technological platform, but the principles as well”
**Professor Helen Margetts**, Director, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

**Eileen Burbidge**, partner at early-stage technology and internet VC firm Passion Capital, and advisory board member at TechCity UK, responded to questions about what GaaP should look like by suggesting that operating systems such as iOs or MS Windows were a more appropriate model for GaaP than businesses like Apple or Amazon. Chi Onwurah MP agreed that GaaP could borrow from an operating system model but
clarified that iOS would not be suitable owing to its tight controls and the requirement for GaaP to be based on a more open digital architecture. Burbidge underlined the need for all citizens to be able to access digital identity and security services and added that GaaP was something that the public and private sectors could work together on. Burbidge praised GOV.UK and described working for the Government Digital Service (GDS) as a ‘calling’, revealing that when it came to attracting talented web developers and computer technologists, “we lose more people to the GDS than we do to Google.”

"If the Government is the underlying party to deliver services, you’re opening up routes to more efficient services and delivery"

Eileen Burbidge, Partner, Passion Capital

Renowned former local authority CIO Tom Baker joined the debate with a plea to put citizens at the heart of the debate and to ensure that platforms are tailored to local needs. On GaaP principles, Baker spoke of the need for Government to act as a facilitator rather than an ‘owner’. He added that digital platforms provided the opportunity to address digital silos at local and national Government level but caveated that platforms were only as effective as the communities that used them. Baker stressed that digital services must be co-created on the basis of local need.

“GaaP should not just be seen as a way to deliver cost-cutting but as the very way we offer Government”

Tom Baker, Former CIO Sunderland City Council and Norfolk County Council, currently Development Director, Smarter and Healthier Cities, BT Global Services

Professor Mariana Mazzucato focused her remarks on the role of Government and suggested that opposing conceptions of this role would affect the type of platform created. Mazzucato questioned whether Government should have a facilitating or enabling role and whether it should be active or passive. Further examining the role of Government, Mazzucato considered whether the private sector would be capable of providing and managing the platform or whether it was up incumbent upon Government to provide something that the private sector could not.

"Is Government as a creator of the platform going to get accused of getting too involved, crowding out other actors?"

Professor Mariana Mazzucato, RM Phillips Professorship in the Economics of Innovation at the Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex

Mike Bracken, executive director of the GDS said that moves towards GaaP were accelerating and that the work of the GDS should and would be assured whoever forms the next Government. Bracken suggested that recent progress towards GaaP had already proven the model that Government can get better for less. The GDS is best known for GOV.UK, Digital Marketplace and the Verify identity assurance system (currently in beta) but Bracken said that GDS was and was looking at the likes of payments, appointment bookings, staff records, accounting and location services. He stressed that the key word in ‘Government as a platform’ was ‘a’; emphasising that it is one platform. Bracken spoke about the importance of values in relation to tech in Government and highlighted that people were “fed up with bad IT” and that help could be given through the setting of controls and standards.

"Government had been so ill-served by its use of technology for so long that it lost the art of the possible."

Mike Bracken, Executive Director of Digital in the Cabinet Office and Head of GDS

An extensive Q&A session followed and the panellists agreed that there were many more questions to be answered and that a debate about architecture, federation and openness was needed.