



Building a Human-Centred Digital Government for New South Wales

A Digital.NSW
Showcase Spotlight



Executive Summary

Fires, floods, and a pandemic closed our offices, shops and social lives; these wild events – in quick succession – collectively plunged life as we knew it into uncharted territory.

Businesses and communities struggled to adjust. As we watched our economy shaken and tested, we knew that the road to economic recovery and our ability to stimulate industry to support future growth hinged on our State's ability to deliver smart, simple, and seamless personalised experiences through digital channels.

To achieve this, we must digitise all government services, invest in technological breakthroughs, and create an extensive partner ecosystem. Collaboration and innovation remain at the core of all our endeavours.

Through stories shared first hand from NSW government change makers we delve into how NSW departments and agencies are working to build a human centred digital government by:

- Adapting to a harsher world and building resiliency
- Prioritising human-centric digital service design
- Preparing for the next wave of inclusive services
- Driving digital innovation through cross-department collaboration



A Harsher World

Building Government Service Resiliency

The last few years have been some of the most difficult that most of us have ever faced. In Australia, the pandemic has been compounded by floods, fires and other natural disasters, whilst in early 2022, when the pandemic began to subside and there was a glimmer of hope, a war in Europe changed the global and economic landscape yet again. For many in the emergency or medical services in particular, since late 2019 at least, the crises have been never-ending. Though for others too, the changes that the world has experienced have affected the way people live, work, travel, play and communicate.

In NSW alone, **Shane Fitzsimmons**, the (Former) Commissioner of Resilience NSW, says that the last few years have seen “extraordinary disasters and displacement, the likes of which we have never experienced before.” In NSW there are “130 local government area equivalents,” and since late 2019, “every single one of them has been declared a natural disaster area at least once.” Half have seen natural disasters “more than five times,” whilst “half a dozen or so have been declared more than ten times.” These are sobering statistics and show how heavily the state has been impacted since the bushfires of late 2019. Of course the pandemic only made things worse.

And it was during the pandemic that whilst most people suffered in some way, a small number of so-called bad actors leveraged the suffering for their own advantage. **The Hon Victor Dominello MP**, the NSW Minister for Digital and Customer Service, as well as Minister for Small Business and for Fair Trading, says, “imagine a world where organised crime syndicates hack into a company where your personal information is stored, including your health records and a copy of your driver’s license which you provided them years ago. They also have the records of your loved ones. They then put that information on the dark web and hold the company to ransom. This sounds dystopian and pretty bad, but it’s not the future. This is our world now.” It might not be life

threatening in the same way that a flood or fire is, but such a scenario definitely “causes great trauma to all involved.”

On top of all that, **Greg Wells**, the Government Chief Digital and Information Officer at the Department of Customer Service, says that as a result of the war in Ukraine, “there are now some 4,000 extra refugees in Australia,” with a significant number in Sydney and across NSW. Just getting to Australia was a big challenge for many of them, but once they arrived, they assumed that Australia would look after them. And while most of them now have a roof over their heads and relative safety, obtaining services that most citizens take for granted “has been a bit of a nightmare.” For instance, “you can’t access a lot of services without ID documents, obviously, but most of them don’t have the right documents.” Even when they do apply for documents, “the process of proofs and checks takes a long time,” or their certificates and IDs from home aren’t recognised. In some cases, they had to start application processes multiple times “and had to fill in more forms” to get the right credentials, and they had to do it all on “Whatsapp or public WiFi because they had no other option.”

It became clear in 2020, and certainly in 2022, that things needed to change and that there had to be better ways of dealing with crises, processing people and looking after their personal information.



Digital Connectivity

Keeping the Human in Digital

The pandemic and the other crises of late have proven yet again why digital connectivity and collaboration are so important.



The collaboration across government and non-government agencies to deliver an unprecedented range of services and supports as well as digital platforms to improve accessibility since the start of the pandemic, has been unparalleled.”

Shane Fitzsimmons, *(Former) Commissioner, Resilience NSW*

To ensure the continued success of that, **Kylie De Courteney**, the Chief Executive Officer of the NSW Telco Authority, says that they are “the lead agency developing the NSW connectivity strategy, which is looking at connectivity across the whole-of-government and for all the citizens of the state.” This includes “rural areas as well, and looking after the most vulnerable.” In a simple sense, the strategy is about “ensuring that first responders, for instance, have great coverage.” It is also about “partnering with the private sector to come up with innovative solutions to drive better citizen outcomes.” To ensure that everyone has the connectivity they need, the agency is working “with small and really large players to find solutions that are better, cheaper, faster.”

The truth is – as has become very obvious – that digital connectivity has become the bedrock of almost every industry and every organisation. Almost no matter what an agency is involved in, without being digitally connected, they can’t succeed. For instance, Rob Sharp, the Secretary of Transport for NSW, says that there are 33,000 people employed by their agency. Although transport is clearly the focus, “we see it as a people business and these days we know that we can’t do anything without digital.” Transport for NSW is essentially about “getting people from A to B, and we carry millions of people a day. But so much of that is underpinned by digital technology. We’re building leading

edge infrastructure, and it’s heavily digitally driven.” The challenge for an agency that is so deeply focused on people “is to keep the humanity.”

That is a challenge at the NSW Department of Education too. **Georgina Harrison**, the Secretary of the Department, says that that although educating students is their primary goal, working digitally is their *modus operandi*. “We run one of the biggest digital networks in government. We have 2,200 sites, 120,000 online users every day in our staff, and around 870,000 students who all have an account. So our digital footprint is huge.” Keeping the details of the students safe, and keeping them engaged in this digital arena “is very much what keeps me awake at night.”

Fiona Alford, the Manager of Regional Digital Connectivity at the Department of Regional NSW, says that digital connectivity is important for everyone no matter where they live, and thus focusing on regional areas as much as on metro areas is important for “the social and economic inclusion of all.” The Department of Regional NSW is therefore committed to “ensuring that all of our regional consumers are afforded metro- equivalent services and pricing when it comes to their connectivity.” To get there, they “have been brave in our program design, we’ve worked a lot with other organisations, and we’re continuing to evaluate the lessons learned from the market.” The goal is to deliver connectivity to customers “regardless of the choice of mobile provider,” like in metro areas. In the past that wasn’t possible because priority was given to the first provider that came into town, and it was essentially a captive market. Now there are more options for customers in regional NSW. “A huge driver of success for us is competition in the market,” and though telco authorities don’t always like to work together, “mobile black spots during recent emergencies” was a main motivator for the new approach.

Case Study Snapshot - 24/7 Government Transactions in Your Pocket with the Service NSW Mobile App

Insights from: Damon Rees, Chief Executive Officer, Service NSW

Looking to digitise transactions and offer the citizens of NSW a better way to do business with government, Service NSW rolled out a mobile app. The first app iteration however was a 'garden variety' with very little take up until 2017-18. Service NSW quickly realised that a world leading, easy to use and solution oriented app was crucial to driving uptake.

Service NSW rolled out a new world-leading app, and in collaboration with the newly formed Department of Customer Service began focusing more on customers and their experiences with government services. Starting with the integration of digital driver's licenses the new app saw massive escalation with an adoption rate of 24%.

However, once the pandemic hit and life became a lot more digital for many people, and the department started rolling out things like QR codes, Dine & Discover vouchers, border passes and other such things, the take up rate grew and now sits at a phenomenal 77%, for a completely opt-in application. Damon Rees says; "the take up rate has been so high because people see that we do everything with a customer focus on care and empathy."

Looking to the future the goal is to make the app less transactional and to move to more complex digital stuff enabled by simple, accessible services. Ultimately, Service NSW is looking to become a super service agency with genuine collaboration across many different parts of government.



Digital in the Next Decade

World-Leading, Digital Ideas on the Horizon

Connectivity is important because we live in a modern world that is digitally interconnected in so many ways. And whilst sorting out the connectivity of people in regional areas is one of the duties of one department, overall the NSW public service is continuing to be more and more digitally engaged. Every department is now working digitally, so **Kathrina Lo**, the Commissioner of the NSW Public Service Commission (PSC), says that across all the departments across the state, the public service in NSW, with “433,000 staff is the largest employer in the country.” The goal of the sector as a whole is to be “a world-class public service,” and to ensure that, “we need to have great digital capability and we need to be customer focused.” For the employees of the sector, this means “having a lifelong learning mind-set.” Given the diversity of the sector, “from teachers to paramedics, from project staff to infrastructure developers,” there are few “common capabilities,” but one of them is the need to “develop skills for specific contexts, and to collaborate. Our problems are big and complex, and none of us can solve them in silos.” The last few years have also shown the need to be “really agile and to bring ideas to impact very quickly.”

Georgina Harrisson says that the irony of kids these days is that almost all of them “are digital natives.” This means they can use technology in ways that “none of their teachers can,” but it also means there is a great need “for balance and to have serious conversations about appropriate use of screen time.” The last few years have shown how important “critical thinking and problem solving have become.”



We now need to think differently and develop new curricula to fit in with the world 20 years from now. This means focusing more on maths and science skills in order to build up the digital capabilities of our students.”

Georgina Harrisson, *Secretary*, NSW Department of Education

In the transport sector, Rob Sharp says “we have a 40 year vision.” The means the Department is “not only at the leading edge, but at the bleeding edge. For instance, we’ve announced a quantum technology centre, but there’s only a few experts in Australia in that field.” The Department now needs to find the local experts, but also bring in some experts from abroad, and they are also working in fields such as “AI and machine learning. Already we have a lot of AI in traffic lights and cameras for congestion management,” but that is just the beginning.



To be at the bleeding edge and beyond, for our workforce, it means upskilling them, constantly improving our skill sets and recruiting the best people.”

Rob Sharp, *Secretary*, Transport for NSW

For Minister Dominello, one of the ideas for the future involves personal credentials. He says that in the digital world that most of us currently operate in, having “trusted digital credentials” will be of paramount importance. As such, the NSW government is creating a method for all personal information to be stored on individual mobile devices, rather than “centrally held by government.” Dubbed the NSW Digital ID,¹ it will be a “world-leading, truly decentralised way of storing personal data.” This is important, because it will not only stop bad actors from accessing personal information, but it will also make it easier for new arrivals to apply for services. More importantly, “why is this important, because it

¹ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/nsw-digital-id-a-step-closer>



comes down to one word: trust. In the digital world we all live in now, if we can't explain what we're doing, why and for whom, then we can't gain your trust. Trust is not just important as a function of good government, it is a fundamental function of democracy."

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If we can get this digital ID right, it will frame not just NSW, but our nation for success. We are already setting the national agenda. This will further enhance our standing across all industries, from health to transport, from infrastructure and planning to education."

The Hon. Victor Dominello MP, *Minister for Digital and Customer Service, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Fair Trading*

Greg Wells says that the digital ID "is one of the biggest opportunities for us in the next decade." It will change the way government operates and the way people interact with government. If it results in the success that everyone is anticipating, then it will be part of the "beyond digital thinking" that the government is already considering. In other words, the digital nature of a solution is so embedded in the development process, that "we think of an outcome and then we think how digital and our customers get us there." For instance, "hybrid services and telehealth in hospitals" have become the norm now, but in most cases they were an afterthought or a solution that was retrofitted. These things "should be planned together and thought about as an outcome from the outset." The digital thinking should extend to every industry, and will assist in things as diverse as "building standards, keeping the community safe, and getting towards net zero."

A Collaborative Public Service

Driving Digital Innovation in Partnership

The main department that is the driver of many of these changes and is pushing for digital to be embedded into the planning of any project, is the Department of Customer Service (DCS). However, that was only formally created in 2019. What preceded that was Service NSW, which is now incorporated into the department. Minister Dominello says that Service NSW “started as an idea in 2011, with the first service centre rolled out in 2013.” Since then, “the way we deliver services to customers has reframed the idea of customer service.” This was in part because from the outset, the agency was willing to listen to the people it was serving, and was willing to adapt.

Damon Rees, the Chief Executive Officer of Service NSW, says that; “ultimately, Service NSW should become “a super service agency with genuine collaboration across many different parts of government.” He adds; that that collaboration means that there are now “114 service centres across NSW, including mobile service centres that reach evermore remote communities. There are a couple of thousand employees, and we usually take 40,000 calls a day.” On top of that, although “we were very much focused on transactional needs, there have still been a couple of billion transactions since 2019.” In many ways, Service NSW and the whole department is unique because it “enables people to access the services and supports they need in the way that they choose from the NSW government.”

Greg Wells says that to be the ‘super service’ that the Minister envisages, the agency needs to “have more partnerships and more services.” But more importantly, there is a great “opportunity here to innovate.” For new immigrants, as we saw earlier, it is very hard to access information without the appropriate documents. “The digital ID will make a big difference, especially for refugees but also for others. They would have access to Medicare and so many other services.”



Service NSW is looking to set the benchmark to really become a super service agency or a one-stop-shop for all services.”

Greg Wells, *Government Chief Digital and Information Officer, Department of Customer Service*

Currently there are discrepancies between federal, state and local governments, and generally no-one is quite sure “about the data sharing arrangements between Justice, Education and other departments.” If one agency (ie: Service NSW) takes the lead and creates “the playbook and the process arrangements in real-time,” then the options for scaling across jurisdictions and engaging with such a service are almost immeasurable.

Connectivity though remains the key. Kylie De Courteney says that although the NSW Telco Authority is in some way leading the trend and providing a strategy for connectivity, “we want to resolve issues in the most collaborative of ways,” so the agency is looking for ideas. Connectivity – especially during disasters – is what will save communities, so “we need to be as robust as possible.”



We are very open to suggestions from within government and from the private sector so that we don’t miss out on anything.”

Kylie De Courteney, *Chief Executive Officer, NSW Telco Authority*

Shane Fitzsimmons says that already across the NSW government sector there is a remarkable amount of collaboration. “The critical infrastructure that ties communities together, that supports first responders, and that supports public information and warnings, is extraordinary.” It is very clear that “we have remarkable collaboration with segments of industry and the private sector, particularly in things like energy and utility supplies. But partly that is because we’ve had years of resistance around data sharing.” The

key challenge now is to “meaningfully embark on collaboration and partnerships because we know the benefits are mutual.”

Kathrina Lo says that from the perspective of the entire public service, “there are really wicked problems that we are now facing,” and to overcome them, working alone or in specific fields is no longer acceptable. “We need to face up to the fact that we have work across portfolios, and we have to do it collaboratively.” That is the only way NSW or any other jurisdiction will live up to the standards of teamwork and cooperation that has got us through some of the greatest crises of our time, and will continue to innovate for whatever comes next.



Featured Speakers



The Hon. Victor Dominello MP

Minister for Digital and Customer Service, Minister for Small Business, Minister for Fair Trading



Greg Wells

Government Chief Digital and Information Officer

Digital.NSW, NSW Department of Customer Service



Damon Rees

Chief Executive Officer

Service NSW



Rob Sharp

Secretary
Transport for NSW



Kathrina Lo

Commissioner
Public Service Commission



Georgina Harrisson

Secretary
Department of Education



Kylie de Courteney

Chief Executive Officer

NSW Telco Authority



Shane Fitzsimmons

(Former) Commissioner

Resilience NSW



Fiona Alford

*Manager Digital Connectivity
Regional Digital Connectivity*

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About Public Sector Network

Public Sector Network is a social learning platform that exists to help government around the globe break down silos, collaborate, and work together for better outcomes for citizens.

PSN's growing community spans across federal, state, and local government departments, healthcare, and education, allowing members to share information, access the latest in government innovation, and engage with other like-minded individuals on a secure and closed-door network.

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