

User-Centricity

What It Means, How It Works, Why It's Needed

Interactive
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How Relentless Focus on End-Users Raises Adoption and Delivers Better Services to Citizens



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The message was clear enough.¹ On 19 September 2007, 31 ministers from European Union and European Free Trade Association countries committed to “deliver eGovernment services that are easier to use and of benefit to all citizens by increasing user-centricity” at a summit in Lisbon, Portugal.² Subsequent generations of ministers and officials met, deliberated and signed similar declarations – often accompanied by action plans and detailed annexes – culminating in *The 2020 Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government*, the sixth declaration of this type and the most recent iteration of this peculiar brand of literature.”³

Yet the lip service paid to focusing on citizens has not always resulted in improvements in the actual services provided. That can be seen in the limited use and relatively slow adoption of digital government services by citizens themselves (see Chart 1 on page 3 for a comparison of public- and private-sector adoption rates).⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown showed that digital public services can quickly adapt when necessary and that effective digital services are a fundamental part of any resilient society. Now, in the aftermath of that crisis as the European Commission embarks on the 2030 digital compass: the European way for the digital decade programme, and as European Union member states prepare to invest €144 billion in digital transition initiatives as part of the recovery and resilience programme, the time for allowing “user-centricity” to languish as an empty slogan is over. It is time to deliver on what has been promised and pledged for nearly two decades.⁵

¹ This policy brief builds on the early research co-created for the UserCentriCities project, a 16-partner consortium co-financed by the European Union. The consortium includes the Lisbon Council, VTT Technical Research Centre (Finland), Eurocities and 13 leading cities and regions (the founding partners – Espoo, Milan, Murcia, Rotterdam, Tallinn and Emilia Romagna – and seven participating cities: Barcelona, Glasgow, Gothenburg, Helsinki, Lisbon, Ljubljana and Porto). The three-year project will provide metrics, support toolkit and policy debates for driving digital government at the local level. For more information, visit <https://www.usercentricities.eu/>. The authors would like to thank Murat Altunbas, Mike Bracken, Mart Brauer, Karl-Filip Coenegrachts, Jochem Cooiman, Bjorn Dirkse, Stefano Gatti, Manon Ghislain, Paul Hofheinz, Kasper Van Hout, Alice Iordache, Maarja Kõue, Tom Loosemore, Paola Russillo, Paolo Francesco Sabatini, Corrado Salemi, Barbara Santi, Dimitri Tartari, Francesca Taverna, Veera Vihula and Valia Wistuba. Any errors of fact or judgment are the authors’ sole responsibility.

² [Council of the European Union, Ministerial Declaration Approved Unanimously in Lisbon, Portugal, 19 September 2007.](#)

The opinions expressed in this interactive policy brief are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lisbon Council, the European Commission, the partner cities and think tanks in the UserCentriCities consortium or any of their associates.

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'It is time to deliver what has been promised and pledged for nearly two decades.'

But why does it matter? Making a few clicks more or having to learn how an interface works might take a few more minutes out of a person's day or perhaps send one or two away in frustration. Is it really necessary to reform the whole public sector, representing 46% of the EU's €13.4 trillion gross domestic product and 18% of the entire EU workforce, just to save a few seconds here or there?⁶

It turns out that yes, user-centricity does matter – a lot. Services that are not built around user needs are typically not used, hence they represent a bad way to spend public money. And a bad public face for government, an image which can itself reinforce a growing democratic gap and rising lack of trust in official institutions. Just as importantly, bad service design can lead to negative social outcomes, including impaired public health, reduced growth, more deeply entrenched poverty and exacerbated inequality. The author, Cass R. Sunstein, puts it well in *Sludge: What Stops Us from Getting Things Done and What to Do About It*, his recent book, which chronicles the effects of bad administration on human health and social wellbeing: "Confronted by sludge, people just give up – and lose a promised outcome: a visa, a job, a permit, an educational opportunity, necessary medical help."⁷

But if friendly online government services are so important, why is progress so slow? And how can we accelerate it? One reason is obvious: there is a lack of adequate incentives. As opposed to private-sector ventures, such as a startup striving to find a niche against well-established competitors, public administrations have little competition, hence little incentive to ensure full satisfaction of user needs. This is why it is important to identify where incentives to deliver better services and reform public administration might lie. A year of in-depth study has given us a clear answer to that question. Success in delivering better services to citizens is found in two readily identifiable places and driven by two very clear imperatives: 1) at the level of local government where citizens have the most direct contact with the service provider; and, 2) in the public demos where the power of metrics, transparency and openness can also drive change and accountability.

This interactive policy brief will look at the progress of six key cities on delivering "user-centricity" to citizens. Progress has been by no means universal. And success in one area has not always been followed by advancement in others. But still, the experience and plans of these six cities do provide a crucial space for learning – and a living lab where good ideas are being tested and the best of them taken to scale. We end, on pages 11-12, with a five-point roadmap.

³ To date, there have been six eGovernment manifestos negotiated and agreed at ministerial level, including Como (2003), Manchester (2005), Lisbon (2007), Malmö (2009), Tallinn (2017) and most recently Berlin (2020). In keeping with recent digital-government rhetoric, the Berlin Declaration added the additional goal of delivering services that were "human-centric." For the latest iteration, see [Federal Government of Germany et al., *The Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government* \(Berlin: Federal Government of Germany, 2020\).](#)

⁴ Eurostat, [Individuals Using the Internet for Interaction with Public Authorities by Type of Interaction.](#)

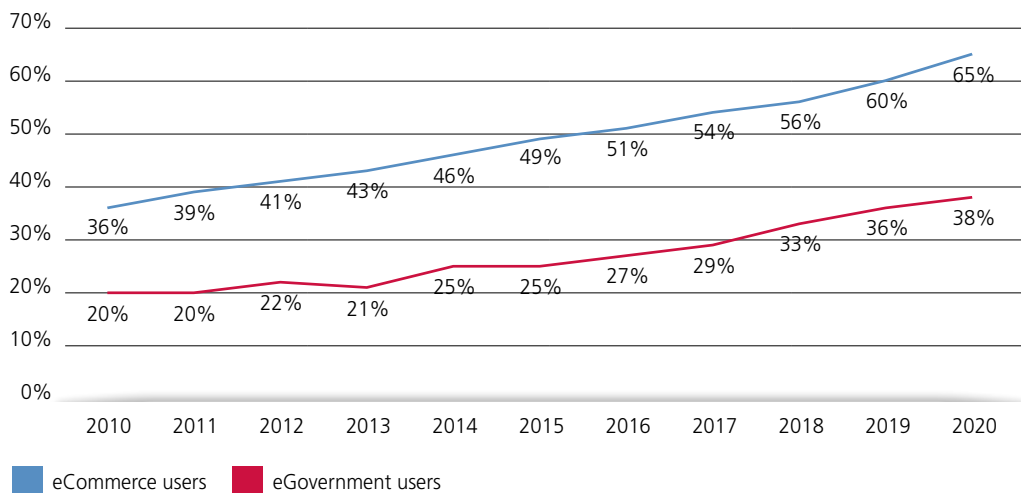
⁵ The €144 billion calculation is 20% of the €724 billion recovery and resiliency programme – i.e., the amount of the recovery and resilience programme that EU member states have pledged to earmark for "digital transformation." See also, [European Commission, *2030 Digital Compass: the European Way for the Digital Decade* \(Brussels: European Commission, 2021\).](#)

⁶ See [Eurostat, *The European Economy Since the Start of the Millennium: a Statistical Portrait* \(Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2021\).](#)

⁷ Cass R. Sunstein, *Sludge: What Stops Us from Getting Things Done and What to Do About It*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

'Bad service design can lead to negative social outcomes.'

Chart 1. Growth in Usage of eCommerce and eGovernment



8 For eGovernment, the data refers to the percentage of adults using transactional public services, i.e., submitting forms online. See [Eurostat, Individuals Using the Internet for Interaction with Public Authorities by Type of Interaction](#), accessed 22 October 2021.

9 See [Eurobarometer, "Public Opinion in the European Union," Standard Eurobarometer 94 2021](#).

I. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

The pandemic made it clear that the point of improving digital public services was not simply to deliver more convenience but to shore up crucial support to those most in need. In reality, this was always the case. The citizens most in need are also the ones who rely the most on public services. During the pandemic, that meant all of us. In normal times, it is the elderly, the poor, the sick and the unemployed who rely most on public services for key sustenance and support.

So the question of whether a service is readily accessible and designed with the needs of the citizens in mind is far from academic. And available data do not paint a particularly positive picture. Even during the pandemic, adoption of online public services remained very distant from the surge we have seen in private-sector online services and did not experience a similar bump. Only 38% of European citizens used online public services in 2020, against 65% who say they went online to make a purchase.⁸ A majority of citizens are voting with their feet and continuing to visit public buildings in person to access key government services. This is reflected also in the reported assessment from citizens. According to Eurobarometer, a minority of Europeans (44%) in February 2021 defined the provision of public services as "good," down by 8% in the six months since the summer of 2020.⁹

There are many reasons for this, but a major one is the limited way in which local governments usually define "user-centricity." Too often, user-centricity is wrongly conceived as an effort to make a webpage more appealing or an interface slicker. In fact, it is about ensuring the end-to-end satisfaction of user needs. If a service is ill conceived, no amount of sophisticated design will make it right. One of the most prominent examples of user-centric service delivery, for example, is [the social tariff for energy in Portugal](#), which proactively registers people for the monetary benefits based on a wide range of data gathered through a government interoperability



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The data can be found on the [Social Energy Tariff website](#).

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According to a 2018 study for the European Commission, more than 60% of European companies in the machinery sector offers a combination of product and service. See [Technopolis, Dialogic and University of Cambridge, Study on the Potential of Servitisation and Other Forms of Product-Service Provision for European Union Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises](#) (Brussels: European Commission, 2018)

¹²
See, inter alia, [Sandra Vandermerwe and Juan Rada, “Servitisation of Business: Adding Value by Adding Services,” European Management Journal Volume 6, Issue 4, Winter 1988](#); and Tony Chen, Ken Fenyo, Sylvia Yang and Jessica Zhang, [Trends and Opportunities in the Subscription E-Commerce Market](#) (San Francisco: McKinsey, 2018).

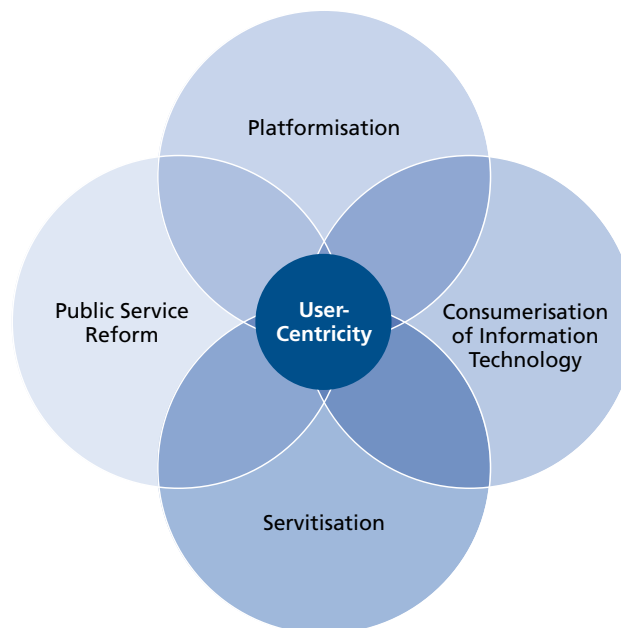
platform. The webpage is not particularly user-friendly or appealing, but it does not matter as the service is invisible to users. As a result of proactive service delivery and automatic registration, 100% of the beneficiaries enjoy the benefits. In September 2021, that accounted for 763,319 households, or about 20% of the total households, in Portugal.¹⁰

II. Trends Converge and Consumers Grow More Demanding

The focus on users is not just part of public-service reform. It draws on – and could draw more – on a wider set of converging socio-economic trends that have revolutionised the commercial sector:

- 1) **Servitisation**, first identified in 1988, is the move from product to service-based business model across many industries. The classic example is the transition in the music business from manufacturing and selling CDs to providing music online as a subscription service. But it is also important in manufacturing.¹¹ Companies such as Rolls Royce Holdings plc moved from selling engines to offering “flight hours” based on the use of engines offered through service-based agreements. Signify N.V., formerly known as Philips Lighting N.V., now provides “light-as-a-service” to Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. By definition, services entail a stronger relation with users than products; they involve a continuous relationship, rather than a one-off transaction. As such, service-based business models not only increase the pressure to meet user needs, but they also provide rich data-driven insight about the behaviour of users that can help to improve the service.¹²

Chart 2. User-Centricity as the Convergence of Multiple Trends



'Service-based business models not only increase the pressure to meet user needs; they also provide rich data-driven insight.'

- 2) The **consumerisation of technology**, emerged in the 21st century (the first paper describing it is from 2004), reflects a change in the orientation of technology from organisations to end-users. Traditionally technology was first developed for business users and then moved to consumers, but more recently the reverse has happened, for instance with the widespread adoption of videoconferencing systems and smartphones. Workers, equipped with state-of-the-art technology at home, were no longer willing to accept poorly designed software solutions and expected similar levels of design in the work context. These expectations have extended to interaction with government websites.¹³
- 3) Users are also at the centre of the emergent **platform-based business model**, where value is generated by bringing together multiple sides of markets and value chains, such as matching consumers and developers in the case of Apple's App Store, or sellers and buyers in the case of Amazon.com Inc. Today, seven of the 10 biggest companies in the world are platforms (against none 20 years ago) and traditional companies are increasingly adopting platform-based business models. By nature, platforms can succeed only if they manage to attract sufficient numbers of users from different sides of the value chain. As such, user-centric design is a fundamental requirement of the competitiveness of the platform, as attracting users on one side is necessary to attracting and keeping the other side.¹⁴

Consumerisation: Empatica's Wearable Healthcare

Healthcare technologies have traditionally paid little attention to design and acceptance by patients, who are more or less obliged to use whatever is available. As a result, patients are less keen to use such devices. This is the challenge that Empatica, a Boston- and Milan-based startup, set out to address. Empatica's stated mission is to "create ground-breaking technology that is friendly, caring and more human." In order to improve the life of people with conditions like epilepsy, the company designs wearable sensors that are comfortable and elegant to wear, putting patients' needs at the centre of product design. According to CEO Matteo Lai, "Empatica wants to design the world's first medical device that could win a design award, while being used as a lifesaving product." Its customers are open to using wearable technology, especially if it keeps them engaged, for example through an app displaying their data or the connection status of the sensors. Good design encourages usage, usage provides more data, data helps patients to monitor their condition. Through the deployment of artificial intelligence solutions, the company helps patients detect seizures and get insights and alerts that help reduce seizure frequency and the risk of sudden and unexpected death. In 2018, Empatica's "Embrace" device became the first smartwatch to receive approval from the United States Food and Drug Administration.

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[Jeane Harris, Blake Ives and Iris Junglas, "IT consumerization: When Gadgets Turn into Enterprise IT Tools," *MIS Quarterly Executive* 11.3 \(2012\).](#)

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Katarzyna Śledziwska and Renata Włoch, *The Economics of Digital Transformation: The Disruption of Markets, Production, Consumption and Work* (London: Routledge, 2021).

'User-centricity is part of a long-term structural change and not just an 11th hour explosion of new buzzwords.'

¹⁵ The Italian electronic identification system *Sistema Pubblico di identità Digitale (SPID)* showed dramatic growth in uptake during the pandemic and is now widely appreciated by users. See [Charlotte van Ooijen and David Osimo, "Unlocking the Hidden Data Pearls in Digital Government Monitoring: Measuring Uptake at the Source," Co-VAL blog, 07 May 2021.](#)

¹⁶ [Council of the European Union and European Economic Area, The 2017 Tallinn Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment, 06 October 2017.](#)

¹⁷ See Andrew Greenway, Ben Terrett, Mike Bracken and Tom Loosemore, *Digital Transformation at Scale: Why the Strategy is Delivery* (London: London Publishing Partnership, 2018). See also [Council of the European Union and European Economic Area, The 2017 Tallinn Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment, 06 October 2017.](#)

¹⁸ See especially, [Design Systém Gov.cz](#) in Czech Republic; [Designers Italy](#) in Italy; and the [Ethical Digital Standards Beta](#) in Barcelona.

The importance of attracting users on multiple sides of the market has also become visible in flagship government platforms, such as electronic identification (eID). Countries such as Denmark succeeded in creating a virtuous cycle of eID adoption by attracting both citizens and private service providers such as banks, hence motivating citizens to use eID. On the other hand, Italy has struggled for many years with convincing users and service providers to adopt the national electronic identity system, but the basic approach changed recently. During the Italian lockdown, the government made the digital channel the easiest for users to quickly access the financial support they needed. The result is a surge in uptake.¹⁵

The convergence of these trends shows that user-centricity is part of a long-term structural change and not just an 11th hour explosion of new buzzwords. Keeping track of product-use data and user experience – and using that knowledge to iterate more and better services – is becoming the key factor in driving competitiveness and creating jobs. Companies ignore it at their peril – and governments, too.

III. A Tale of Six Cities

The path to user-centricity is no longer a secret. It relies on the adoption of well-described and heavily researched tools and methods. Extensive work has been done in recent years – in the UserCentriCities project and elsewhere – to codify a set of principles and guidelines on delivering user-centricity at scale in government. *The 2017 Tallinn Declaration on e-Government*, for one, included a dedicated annex that provides a clear, granular outline of what it means to build user-centric digital services: services should be available online, accessible, simple, clear, secure, and fair.¹⁶ The United Kingdom's Government Digital Services also weighed in with a handy 14-point guide (see Table 1 below for more).¹⁷ Many countries and cities adopted similar standards and principles, including Czech Republic, Italy and the city of Barcelona.¹⁸

Government Digital Service (United Kingdom) 14-Point Service Standard

1. Understand users and their needs
2. Solve a whole problem for users
3. Provide a joined-up experience across all channels
4. Make the service simple to use
5. Make sure everyone can use the service
6. Have a multidisciplinary team
7. Use agile ways of working
8. Iterate and improve frequently
9. Create a secure service which protects users' privacy
10. Define what success looks like and publish performance data
11. Choose the right tools and technology
12. Make new source code open
13. Use and contribute to open standards, common components and patterns
14. Operate a reliable service

Source: Government Digital Service, United Kingdom

'User experience is becoming key in driving competitiveness and creating jobs.'

Today, innovation often lies not in the definition of principles but in effective delivery at scale. Many existing guidelines and standards remain on paper (or perhaps in HTML), and they aren't thoroughly implemented because of a lack of on-the-ground commitment or sharp-toothed enforcement mechanisms.¹⁹ But several European cities are taking the lead in translating these principles into reality, as you will see in the six case studies below.

And not a moment too soon. Ministers might still debate policy at the national level, but, as we have seen already in this interactive policy brief, the local level is where much of the action is. For starters, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that the sub-national level accounts for 40% of all public spending and up to 72% for the economic functions most related to direct service provision to citizens, such as housing and community.²⁰ And cities are particularly well placed to deliver value to users: their proximity to citizens facilitates the immediate understanding of user needs and creates a direct incentive for public administrations to meet them.²¹

What these leading cities have in common is that they focus on users both before designing the service (through interviews and user research) and after it is implemented (by looking at metrics such as adoption and completion rates). They bring service designers in house, and they empower them within the administration. And based on the feedback and behaviour of users, they iterate continuously, so much so that in most of these cases the majority of the changes made to a service were introduced after the launch.²²

Rotterdam: *De Digitale Balie*, a Digital Service Desk for Citizens

In March 2020, driven by the need to deliver services “face-to-face” and get in direct contact with citizens during the painful COVID-19 lockdown, the city of Rotterdam developed an online service desk for citizens called *De Digitale Balie* or “the digital counter” in English. *De Digitale Balie* started off as an off-the-shelf video conferencing service introduced immediately after the first lockdown. Later, it evolved to become a flagship project that will continue serving citizens in the foreseeable future. Based on the positive feedback from citizens and employees on the early video-conferencing version, the city started developing *De Digitale Balie* to become a permanent online service desk where citizens can apply for and conclude services within the video conference session. Administrators can ask for online valid identification authentication from citizens during the session, share documents safely and in the future enable online payments. Rotterdam engaged citizens in the development process by offering and analysing feedback forms and testing. The city also conducted system usability scale (SUS) surveys, where the project reached an 88% score. The SUS survey is constantly monitored and scores remain on a stable high 85-89% with about 70 respondents monthly. As one local resident, who applied for a birth certificate for her child through the digital desk, said: “I experience a more personal connection than a real live visit to apply the birth certificate of my child.”²³

19 For an outline of methods and their deployment, see [Charlotte van Ooijen and Francesco Mureddu, “Co-Creation at Scale,” *Lisbon Council Interactive Policy Brief*, 2021.](#)

20 See [Dorothee Allain-Dupré, Isabelle Chatry and Antti Moisio, *Making Decentralisation Work: A Handbook for Policymakers* \(Paris: OECD, 2019\).](#)

21 Ibid.

22 For a more detailed illustration of the mechanisms, see [Jill Dixon, Erica Melloni, Leire Echevarria, David Osimo, Lise Hellebø Rykkja, Keith Shaw, Line Marie Sørdsdal, Anna Triantafillou and Cristina Vasilescu, “The Co-Creation Compass: Creating Public Value Together: from Research to Action,” *Lisbon Council Interactive Policy Brief*, 2021.](#)

23 Based on a presentation by Bjorn Dirkse of Rotterdam municipality at the first progress meeting of UserCentriCities, 26-27 May 2021.

'The path to user-centricity is no longer a secret. It relies on the adoption of well-described tools and methods.'

24

Based on the presentation by Paolo Francesco Sabatini of Milan municipality at the first progress meeting of UserCentriCities, 26-27 May 2021.

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Based on the presentation by Veera Vihula of Espoo municipality at the UserCentriCafé meeting, 21 September 2021.

Milan: The Digital Citizen Folder App

In May 2020, the municipality of Milan launched a mobile application to serve as the personal repository of citizens' documents. The [Digital Citizen Folder App](#) allows for a fast, direct, and customised one-to-one communication between citizens and the local administration, taking advantage of the ubiquity and accessibility of mobile devices. In addition to consulting their personal documents, citizens can schedule in-person appointments, download certificates and perform digital transactions. Offices remain physically accessible, especially for non-tech-savvy people and for managing more complex procedures. Users' needs have been the main driver in designing the app. The municipality convened a first internal workshop with professionals to identify citizens' requirements starting from in-house data analysis and building the app prioritising the most requested services. A second workshop was organised directly with citizens in order to exchange ideas, learn from each other and ensure the best user experience. The last phase included a closed beta-testing campaign with 100 volunteers (including the mayor) participating to assess the app's usability before its launch. The implementation of a secure digital citizen identification system allows the municipality to enable more services on the digital folder by seamlessly connecting its customer relationship management (CRM) on the backend. The possibility to provide feedback systematically collected by the CRM and evaluated periodically by a dedicated team offers an app tailored to citizens' needs. Some of the latest plugged-in functionalities include the payment of waste taxes, traffic fines and parking tickets. The tool represents a cornerstone of the mobile-first approach of Milan's digital agenda.²⁴

Espoo: A User-Centric Single Platform for Digital Services

Under the slogan "services of your life in one place," the city of Espoo in Finland is developing MyEspoo, a user-centric platform for accessing government services that will launch in 2023. The goal is a user-friendly portal that will collect the city's digital services in one single platform, creating a virtual service centre that is easily accessible by all. In this respect, user-centricity will be a fundamental element in the portal's design. City officials have conducted user research through surveys and taken an iterative approach that relies on testing ideas with service users. Citizens are involved in two phases: the procurement phase, where they share their input by answering surveys; and a design phase, where their comments and experience are analysed in workshops and interviews. In the forthcoming testing phase, citizens will be able to share their feedback in a second round. The city hopes to encourage its citizens to be more independent with the user-centric services on offer. Nevertheless, all services will still remain accessible in person, providing citizens the possibility to reach out to the city in whichever manner they feel the most comfortable with. The platform will launch in different stages in 2023 and 2024. The city plans to continue developing the site and adding services based on feedback from the citizens.²⁵

'Today, innovation lies not in the definition of principles but in effective delivery at scale.'

Tallinn: A User-Centric City Planning Service

The [Tallinn Planning Register](#) was outdated and not very user-friendly. In 2020, the city set out to digitally transform this complex service by entirely re-designing it according to user needs. The project is still ongoing. The city has just completed open beta testing and is working on implementing new changes in the final version. The service has three main components: 1) sharing the right resident-focused planning information; 2) collecting and analysing resident feedback data; and 3) using that feedback data to improve decision-making regarding future developments. The project aims to engage citizens more in ongoing planning decisions and to change the way residents interact with the city when it comes to planning. During the service-design process, the city conducted thorough research to map out the residents' needs and engaged with them from the very beginning of the process starting with low-fidelity prototypes and moving to more interactive ones. The city also organised co-creation design sessions with city architects and other stakeholders to better understand how the digitalisation of the service can be most effective. To measure the short-, medium- and long-term impact of the service, administrators are assessing whether residents understand what is happening around their neighbourhood, whether they are able to effectively give feedback and whether they are meaningfully engaged in every step of the planning process. Already, all the services concerning city planning have moved online and planning data is accessible digitally. However, residents still have the option to go to the city office, look into the physical materials and give feedback face-to-face.²⁶

Emilia Romagna: Building a Digital Civic Network in Bologna

Administrators in Bologna – the largest city in Italy's prosperous Emilia Romagna Region – are working on a digital services platform that is responsive to citizens' needs. Begun in 2012, the *nuova rete civica Iperbole*, – or new civic network Iperbole – is being constantly updated in alignment with the municipality's changing digital agenda. The project, which closely follows the guidelines in *The 2017 Tallinn Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment*, was initiated because of shifts in public demand: the number of digital services on offer was increasing and more and more citizens requested easy access to online services. The municipality switched from a "catalogue of services" to a "responsive tool for interactions" approach. In the first stage, the municipality distributed an open questionnaire to citizens collecting more than 1,000 answers to analyse needs and expectations. Sessions on service co-design followed, aiming at specific use-case analysis and the development of prototypes for different services. The project is currently in the final testing phase with the municipality focusing these days on accessibility. Some of the initial features had to be re-designed after the municipality received feedback from citizens with disabilities, acknowledging the importance of engaging with them from the beginning of the project.²⁷

26

Based on the presentation by Maarja Kõue of Tallinn municipality at the first progress meeting of UserCentriCities, 26-27 May 2021.

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Presentation by Giovanni Grazia of Emilia-Romagna Region at the first progress meeting of UserCentriCities, 26-27 May 2021.



'Leading cities focus on users both before designing a service and after it is implemented, and iterate continuously.'

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Presentation of Kasper van Hout of Murcia municipality at the first progress meeting of UserCentriCities, 26-27 May 2021.

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[David Osimo, "How Local Government Reform is Key to Europe's Digital Success: A Six-Point Programme for eGovernment Renewal," Lisbon Council Interactive Policy Brief, 2018.](#)

Murcia: Preserving Local Culture with OCULTO.TV

The COVID-19 crisis sent shock waves through all sectors of the economy and social life. The cultural and creative sectors were particularly hit as some considered them as non-primary necessities. Against this background, and in order to support the production, consumption and promotion of locally produced cultural offerings, Murcia municipality developed [OCULTO.TV](#), a user-friendly, streaming, audio-visual digital platform. The platform, which was created and launched within six months, aims at showcasing heritage and visual arts from local productions, ranging from exhibitions to musical concerts. The main contribution is reserved for artists and professional performers, but citizens are encouraged to upload content too. The tool was designed based on interviews with artists and users, often through dedicated service-design and co-creation sessions. In the three months since its launch, the platform has registered more than 15,000 users, 20 dedicated channels and 700 items have been uploaded on the platform.²⁸

If what needs to be done is so clearly known, the reason for the limited progress – which we discussed at the onset of this interactive policy brief – must lie in the lack of systemic incentives and adequate support. Civil servants still have more to gain from avoiding visible mistakes and defending silos than from providing excellent services to citizens. And cities themselves – so clearly the epicentre of government-to-citizen service delivery – are still not sufficiently involved in co-creating national and European strategies.²⁹

We present at a five-point roadmap in the next section.

IV. Policy Recommendations

European digital strategy is at a crossroads. Over the next year, the new strategy for a digital decade will be deployed. But most importantly, European, national and local administrations will start an epochal investment in digital initiatives by dedicating 20% of the massive €724 billion recovery and resilience fund to digital projects. With great budget comes great responsibility. How can we make sure that such massive investment leads to palpable benefits for all European citizens?

The case studies above are all promising. And they all provide key insight into the principles and practices that will determine success. Much of that will come, as always, from local initiative and vision. But the European context – in which we all live and operate – can also provide crucial support. Here's a five-point roadmap for making the local global and creating an environment where user-centricity in public service can grow to scale and eventually become the norm and not the exception.



'How can we make sure that the massive recovery investment leads to palpable benefits for all European citizens?'

1) **Involve the local level from the early stages of policy development.**

Local is the front end of public services. There can't be user-centric digital government if local authorities are involved only at the end of the process to deliver it. Local authorities play a fundamental role in all European digital government initiatives, such as the single digital gateway.³⁰ Existing consultation mechanisms, such as through the [European Committee of the Regions](#), are important but very institutionalised and not always focussed on hands-on collaboration and technical interoperability. Concretely, a minimum standard of co-creation with local authorities should be established for every European, national and regional initiative on digital government funded with European funding. Such initiatives should also include an *ex ante* impact assessment on the implications of the new initiatives for local authorities, similarly to the "think small first" principle for small business. In return, local authorities should ensure faster adoption of solutions and compliance with standards developed in such initiatives.³¹

2) **Use political clout not only to acquire adequate funding but also to enforce guidelines and standards.**

Today, much effort is expended to line up funding for digitally-based government projects, but the hard part comes with the implementation. What is most difficult is to break the silos and make sure that standards and guidelines are adopted by all government agencies, by different departments, across different institutional levels. To be clear, this does not refer to technical standards by the [International Organisation for Standardisation \(ISO\)](#) but to standardised approaches and processes: standards on interfaces, so that users do not have to learn a new process every time they use a different service. Standards on data governance, so that it is actually possible to deliver [the once-only principle](#), and to have reliable data, and to build innovative services based on machine learning. Standards on interoperability, service standards and open standards for technology. Concretely, this entails the adoption of mandatory measures or conditionality mechanisms for public funding at all levels linked to the fulfilment of standards, such as the [European Interoperability Framework \(EIF\)](#), and the development of more accurate and granular compliance monitoring.

3) **Extend the European Interoperability Framework to include service standards.**

The EIF is the common architectural model for the back-office of European digital public services. It serves as inspiration for the national interoperability frameworks. It should be extended to include service standards aligned with the principles of *The 2017 Tallinn Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment* in order to accelerate the implementation of such standards.

4) **Make the publication of metrics on the adoption of digital services compulsory.**

Any digital initiatives funded by European funding should regularly publish machine-readable metrics on adoption, which should become a conditionality requirement. This transparency will create a virtuous mechanism of accountability that acts as an incentive to focus on user needs. This is why many countries have introduced dashboards.³²

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See [Regulation 2018/1724 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 02 October 2018 establishing a Single Digital Gateway to Provide Access to Information, to Procedures and to Assistance and Problem-Solving Services and amending Regulation \(EU\) No 1024/2012](#).

31

For more insight on how to drive effective national-local collaboration, see [Dorothee Allain-Dupré, Isabelle Chatry and Antti Mojsio, Making Decentralisation Work: A Handbook for Policymakers \(Paris: OECD, 2019\)](#).

32

See [David Osimo, "Open Adoption Data: How to Make the Digital Compass a Success," The Forum: A Lisbon Council Initiative, 05 July 2021](#).

'The lip service paid to focusing on citizens has not always resulted in improvements in the actual services provided.'

33
The Digital Innovation in Governance and Public Service Provision (DIGISER) survey was launched early in 2021 to deliver actionable data on digital adoption from hundreds of local authorities across Europe. The programme is led by the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON), a 32-country research consortium co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund. The EPSON project was created "with the aim of facilitating economic, social and territorial cohesion" through evidence gathering and policy support. The EPSON DIGISER survey is expected to produce its first results at the end of 2021. For more, visit <https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/DIGISurvey2021>.

- 5) **Monitor, monitor, monitor.** User-centricity can only be deployed at scale with careful monitoring that reaches the local level. Local governments are actually longing to be measured in order to improve their services and learn from their peers, and have come together in the UserCentriCities project to self-organise and deliver this service. Current measurement frameworks such as the eGovernment benchmarking only marginally covers local websites, and is hence inadequate to the needs for large scale, granular deployment of digital services. What is needed is a permanent system that monitors a sufficient sample of local and regional authorities. Initiatives such as the [EPSON DIGISER Survey 2021](#), which will gather digital-adoption metrics from hundreds of local authorities in Europe, is a step in the right direction.³³ But to achieve granular monitoring, new data collection models should be explored, such as usage of administrative data and direct survey of government websites.

But most of all, there has to be responsibility and commitment across all levels of government and in the digital government community. Building user-centric services is not just about delivering innovation or increasing convenience. In fact – given the prevalence of government services and the need to get them reliably to the most needy in these challenging times – digital government has become a fundamental question of security, democracy, wellbeing and human rights. The time when we could speak big and change little has passed. It's time to deliver.

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'The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown showed that digital public services can quickly adapt when necessary.'

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