Business challenge

To deliver the new "Basic DBS Check", a criminal record checking service, in a matter of months, DBS needed to do more than just develop software—it needed to transform its entire approach to project delivery.

Transformation

DBS worked with IBM to restructure its delivery methodology and adopt agile principles, integrating feedback from stakeholders and end-users to deliver and continuously enhance its new online Basic Check service.

Business benefits:

93%
customer satisfaction with the Basic Check service, a rise of 25 percentage points.

3x
increase in customers applying online due to the speed and ease-of-use of the service.

40%
reduction in operational and hosting costs, providing greater value for public money.

Disclosure & Barring Service

Transforming customer experience with agile, cloud-based delivery of public services

The Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) helps employers in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man make safer recruiting decisions by checking and certifying whether individuals are considered suitable to work with vulnerable groups, including children. DBS is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the UK's Home Office.

"This is much more than just a successful technology project for DBS. With IBM's help we've gone from nothing to a complete delivery capability that enabled us to launch a new digital service in less than 12 months."

Barry Topham
Director for Technology and Innovation
DBS

Share this

Taking the ambitious approach

The first duty of government is to protect its citizens, and the Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) plays a key role in safeguarding citizens by providing comprehensive checks of police records and maintaining lists of individuals who are barred from working with children or other vulnerable groups.

Many employers in the UK now require or expect job applicants to undergo one or more DBS checks to ensure that they are suitable for a given position. As a result, demand for the Basic DBS Check—the simplest of the checks that DBS offers—is rising steadily, and the DBS team needs to be able to deliver it as quickly, cost-effectively and efficiently as possible.

Until 2018, the day-to-day administration of the Basic Check process was outsourced to Disclosure Scotland, the sister organization of DBS. However, a reorganization of responsibilities within the government meant DBS needed to start providing the Basic Check itself, and only had a short timeline to spin up a new online service to support its customers.

Barry Topham, Director for Technology and Innovation at DBS, explains: "In the past, the typical strategy would have been to outsource the development and delivery of the new service to a third party, but this didn't always deliver the best results. We decided to take a much more ambitious approach by building up an agile digital capability to develop the service in-house. If we succeeded, it would establish a pattern for delivering future services the same way."

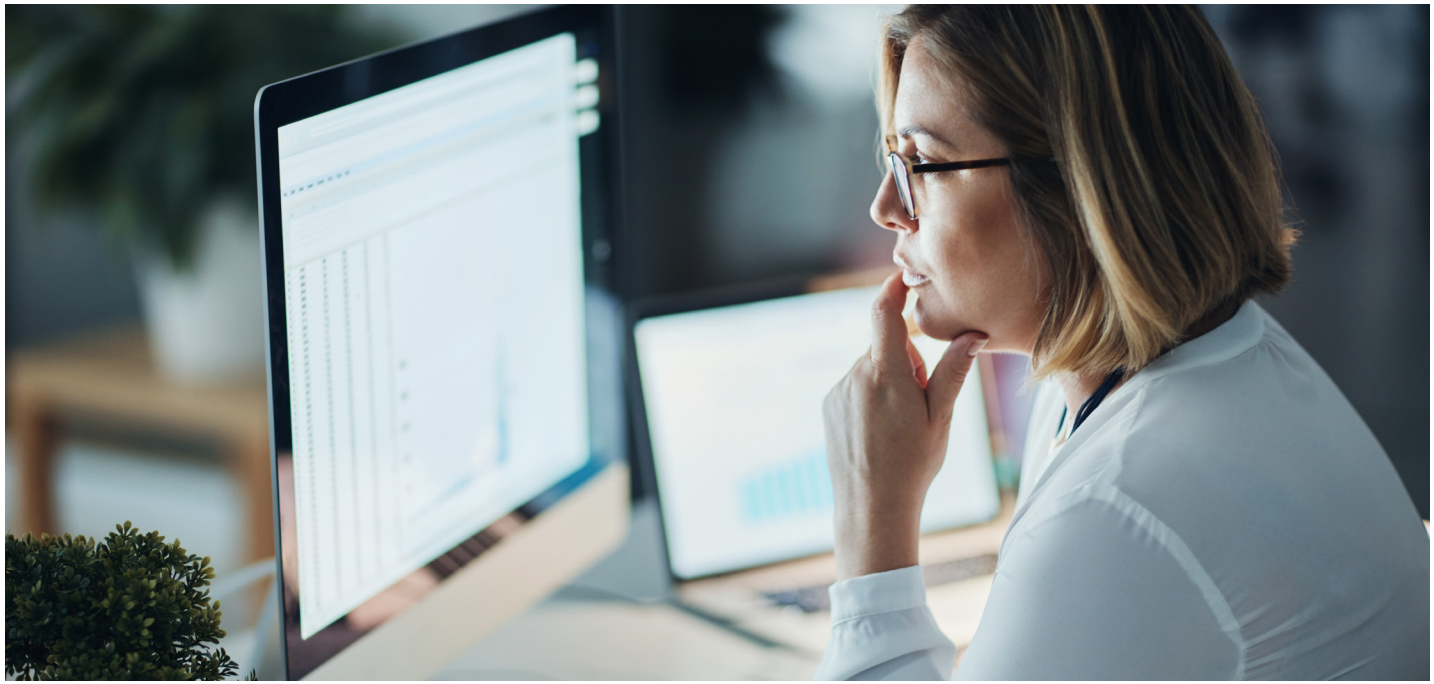
A key objective was to move away from the traditional waterfall-style delivery methodology, where DBS would draw up a detailed specification and set of requirements and await the delivery of the final system months later. Instead, DBS wanted to adopt a modern, agile approach, with frequent, incremental releases of new functionality guided by continuous feedback from both internal stakeholders and end-users.

Mark Favager, Digital Service Owner at DBS, comments: "We knew that the challenge wasn't just to build the new digital service itself, but to change the whole culture around how digital projects are delivered at DBS. To make it happen, we needed help from a partner that really understands agile transformation. That's why we chose IBM."

"We knew that the challenge wasn't just to build the new digital service itself, but to change the whole culture around how digital projects are delivered at DBS. To make it happen, we needed help from a partner that really understands agile transformation. That's why we chose IBM."

Mark Favager, Digital Service Owner, DBS

Driving agile transformation



DBS began by assembling a project team that included an agile lead and developers from IBM, as well as dedicated staff from within DBS. The IBM team began by coaching the DBS team members on agile methodologies, and over time, DBS staff have taken on more responsibilities as their skills have grown. Today, there is approximately a 50-50 split, with IBM providing the majority of the technical resources while DBS takes the lead on user research, content design, analytics and agile development.

"What's really notable is that nobody on the project thinks about whether they are IBM or DBS," says Mark Favager. "We have a true one-team mindset—there's no quibbling over the details of the contract or who is responsible for what. Everyone just focuses on what they can contribute to get us to the next milestone."

Barry Topham adds: "When we started the project, we were impressed by the caliber of the team that IBM put forward. On our side, we selected team members who had the right attitude—people who were excited about the potential of agile delivery, and who would really run with the project. As a result, we were able to establish the right culture very quickly."

The team decided on a delivery model based around two-week sprints, with new functionality released at the end of each sprint. By maintaining a continuous dialog with end-users of the Basic Check service and internal stakeholders within DBS, the team gets immediate feedback on each release and can start working on refinements and enhancements in the next sprint.

Mark Favager comments: "There's a night-and-day difference between the agile approach and the projects we've worked on in the past. We were used to waiting three or four months between releases, even for basic security patches and bug-fixes. Now we're releasing significant new features every two weeks."

To make this possible, DBS and IBM have implemented a set of DevOps tools that provide continuous integration testing and automate 90 percent of the deployment process. As a result, new versions of the Basic Check application can be tested, pushed to the Amazon Web Services cloud and released into production within minutes.

The project has also made good use of existing digital government resources, saving the cost of building key components from scratch, and enabling the team to launch the new Basic Check faster. In fact, the team broke new ground as the first project to integrate with all three of the UK government's digital services: GOV.UK Verify, GOV.UK Notify, and GOV.UK Pay.

"Taking advantage of the GOV.UK services helped us avoid having to reinvent the wheel, and kept us aligned with the government's digital standards," says Barry Topham. "By relying on tried and tested services for verification, notification and payment processing, our developers were able to focus on the unique requirements of our project, ensuring that the Basic Check offers the best possible user experience for our customers."

Since DBS handles sensitive information about individuals, security was also a key concern. IBM ensured that each member of the team had the appropriate security clearance, and also integrated the Basic Check solution with IBM QRadar® on Cloud—a network security intelligence and analytics service that enables DBS to be proactive in defending itself against cybersecurity risks.

Delivering value to the public

By adopting an agile approach, DBS was able to design, develop and launch the first version of the new Basic Check service in less than 12 months, and the DBS and IBM team has been continuously enhancing it ever since, based on customer feedback. As a result, customer satisfaction with the Basic Check has increased from 68 percent to 93 percent—an increase of 25 percentage points.

The decision to host the service on a cloud architecture has also paid dividends: in the first month after launch, DBS saw the number of customers applying for a Basic Check rise to more than 1,000 per day due to the speed and ease-of-use of the service. Although this level of traffic was three times higher than the team had predicted, the service had no trouble scaling to handle with the demand. Overall, the service has experienced almost zero unplanned downtime, and the front-end web service offers an availability rate of better than 99.9 percent.

Moreover, in the months since the launch, the IBM and DBS team has been able to optimize the cloud infrastructure to use fewer resources by automatically scaling down during periods when demand is low. In consequence, the team has succeeded in reducing hosting and operational costs by 40 percent, delivering even better value for public money.

Best of all, the new service makes it simpler and faster for citizens to apply for a Basic Check. By making it easier for users to supply their information, and enabling automatic validation and verification of the data, the service reduces the need for DBS staff to provide support and process applications manually.

As a result, the project has been recognized both internally and externally, winning the Pride of DBS Award in 2017 and the Institute of Customer Service Award for Best Use of Customer Insight in 2020. However, for the DBS team, the project is not just an example of successful delivery—it has a broader significance.

"This is much more than just a successful technology project for DBS," concludes Barry Topham. "When we started, we had no experience of agile processes or modern DevOps—everything was new to us. With IBM's help we've gone from nothing to a complete delivery capability that enabled us to launch a new digital service in less than 12 months. Moreover, we've sparked a cultural change that sets a pattern for how we want to deliver new services in the future."

Solution components

- IBM® Services™
- IBM QRadar® on Cloud

Take the next step

To learn more about IBM Services, please contact your IBM representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit: ibm.com/services

Connect with us

89033589USEN-00