

The partnership imperative:
How an ecosystem approach accelerates digital evolution in UK Government

Insights from CGI research with 500 senior decision-makers on the role of strategic partnerships in digital transformation



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Foreword

“By collaborating closely, SMEs and ecosystem partners can help build the digital government of the future.”

Antony Collard

Senior Vice President of Central Government for CGI UK and Australia



The mantra “do more for less” has never been more apt than for public sector leaders in the current climate.

In central government, leaders face a perfect storm of budget constraints, shifting policies and priorities, and significant talent shortages, all while facing the urgent need to modernise at scale. And perhaps more importantly, to modernise and deliver at speed.

Citizen expectations for secure, digital-first services continue to rise and there is increasing pressure for leaders to mature their data and AI strategies, alongside a necessity for water-tight cyber security across the entirety of the Government IT estate.

In this ever-shifting digital landscape, technology partners are vital to helping public sector organisations to navigate and transform. Alongside the tech giants well familiar in this space, there is a growing network of small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), driving digital evolution across the UK. They provide a rich network of technology, skills and expertise that can help organisations to deliver on their public promises - accessibility, experience and cost optimisation.

In my time in Government, I very much appreciated the value that SME organisations could bring to the work that I was trying to get done. In 2013 my team and I awarded a contract to undertake scanning work to an SME, who brought innovation and flexibility and who could embrace the concepts we were trying to achieve with that procurement. In 2017 we decided to break down national contracts across the Digital Centres that I ran into smaller opportunities focussing on specialised areas and localised to those centres, specifically opening the door to SMEs who, largely, won all of the work.

Those SMEs brought good people and good ideas and many of them are still working with my former employers. While this approach unlocked innovation and specialist capability, it also increased the coordination and governance demands on my teams. Managing multiple contracts, reporting structures and delivery models required additional oversight at a time when government priorities were rapidly evolving.

I have always said that no one company, small or large, can do everything. And that in complex, dynamic spaces like Government, bringing the very best of the larger organisations and the smaller together in a way that works for everyone is a better outcome than either one big contract with no SME commitments, or multiple SME contracts.

At a recent government supplier forum I attended, commercial leads committed to spending with SMEs but were open in saying that they were increasingly looking to engage SMEs through trusted lead partners who can coordinate delivery, governance and risk, enabling government teams to focus on outcomes rather than supplier management.

CGI's research with 500 senior leaders from across the UK, including almost 200 respondents in central government, reinforces this position, highlighting complexity and shifting the emphasis onto a prime partner-led ecosystem delivery model. It reveals a clear picture: the role of an effective ecosystem has never made more sense.

I know there are brilliant SMEs out there who will dislike that notion. And without doubt there should always be the opportunity for SMEs to win contracts in their own right and we try to support many of our partners to do so. But, on larger, more complex engagements, coordinated partnerships often provide the scale, resilience and breadth of expertise required to deliver sustained outcomes that benefit both larger enterprises and specialist providers. I know that I could not have delivered what I have since joining CGI without those excellent partners we work with. By collaborating closely and forging a partnership that works in the right way, SMEs and ecosystem partners can help build the digital government of the future.

Antony Collard is a Senior Vice President in CGI's UK and Australia Central Government business unit, overseeing the delivery of high-quality IT services for major Government Departments and leads the growth of two of the business unit's largest accounts. He joined CGI in 2021 following 30 years of service in the public sector, having worked at HMRC, DWP and the Inland Revenue.

Executive Summary

The UK Government recognises change is needed to deliver more value to the public purse. In the [Digital, Data and Technology \(DDAT\) Playbook](#), the government suggests it needs to get “better at setting up commercial relationships that enable [it] to take full advantage of the products and services that exist in the market”. It sets out how this will enable the digital transformation of public services and contribute to “delivering skilled and better paid jobs,” strengthening the UK economy.

The demand for fast, scalable, secure and cost-efficient digitisation is pushing central government deeper into a partnership approach and accelerating its engagement with external specialists from large to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The UK Government is committed to leveraging UK-based SMEs for its transformation, with targets of 33% of all spending to be SME investment. However, as departments increase the number and diversity of suppliers involved in transformation programmes, coordination, governance and integration naturally become more demanding. Managing multiple contracts, delivery teams and reporting structures requires significant oversight.

This is where an ecosystem model, led by a trusted prime partner, can add value. Rather than managing dozens of suppliers, leaders are increasingly turning to trusted prime partners who can orchestrate delivery and give government departments access to a wide network of SMEs while coordinating delivery, governance and risk across multiple specialist providers.

To understand the growing necessity for ecosystem lead partners in more detail, including the nuances and criteria behind partnership necessity, selection and success, CGI conducted research with 500 senior decision makers across the UK, comprising almost 200 from central government.

The results reveal a clear shift towards trusted prime partners and highlight the evolving requirement for strategic collaboration that unifies experts across the tech and business consultancy landscape.

The findings show a strong shift to prime partners supported by a broader ecosystem to address skills shortages, reduce complexity and explore new and emerging technologies through the guidance of a **trusted advisor who can provide structured governance and integrated delivery** across the technology lifecycle.

Headline findings from the public sector:

- **Complexity is driving the demand for simplification**, as almost all respondents (97%) say the difficulty of managing multiple suppliers influences their decision to work with a prime partner as an alternative.
- **Reliance on partnerships is set to grow**, with 85% of respondents planning to deepen their reliance on technology partnerships over the next two to three years.
- **Access to new and emerging technology is a key reason to work with an expert partner**, and 94% of respondents believe external partnerships are now “essential” to keep pace with tech innovation.
- **Stability, track record and experience** define the partnership selection process, while **trust and communication** are key indicators of partnership health.

The benefits of getting it right

With ambitious targets for digital acceleration, an effective ecosystem approach can help to accelerate:

- Greater access to scarce skills
- Faster mobilisation and delivery
- Accelerated adoption of innovation
- Shorter procurement-to-outcome cycles
- Scaling and interoperability across departments
- Greater risk resolution and governance

This research explores the perceived benefits and selection criteria associated with ecosystem-led partnership models in the public sector.

Methodology

The research, carried out by CGI in September 2025, consisted of 15 detailed questions posted to 500 senior leaders responsible for managing technology and business investment strategies. The questions focused on how partnerships can solve the pressing issues facing public leaders amid rapid technological change. Through this research, CGI also seeks to explore what the perceived benefits are for those leveraging the prime partner ecosystem approach.

Participants included 250 respondents from the private sector and 250 from the public sector. Of these public sector respondents, **192 were affiliated with central government** (119 worked directly in central government and 73 were central government stakeholders), and 59 were from non-central government.

The findings presented in this report are further complemented by expert opinions from leaders across CGI and our valued alliance partners.



The shift to strategic partnerships:

Coordinating ecosystems in a complex delivery landscape

External partnerships are now a strategic imperative for large-scale digital transformation. The UK Government has recognised the importance of structured partnerships in delivering its digital strategy. In the policy paper '[A blueprint for modern digital government](#)' published in January 2025, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology sets out a long-term vision for transforming digital public services, acknowledging that “we’re still a long way from building a truly digital state”. Its vision for a modern digital government places collaboration at the heart of the approach: **“The public sector cannot deliver next-generation public services alone: we need to work in partnership with industry and civil society to drive digital change in the public sector but also to support growth in the UK tech sector.”**

Emerging technology and delivery complexity reshape partnership models

Our research reflects this growing emphasis on structured collaboration. Nearly all public sector organisations (94%) prioritise external partnerships to **keep up with technology innovation**, broadly matched by 92% in the private sector. Only 7% overall and 5% in the public sector report that partnerships are not prioritised for technology innovation. This indicates broad agreement across sectors on the value that partnerships bring to technology adoption and innovation. In addition, 85% of public sector respondents recognise that the complexity of modern technology environments makes collaborative delivery models essential.

When asked about the extent to which the **complexity and time requirement of managing multiple suppliers** affects their decision to work with a prime partner, public sector leaders were almost unanimous in their response. Some **97% revealed supplier sprawl increases the appeal of working with a lead partner to coordinate delivery**. By contrast, 90% of private sector leaders cited supplier complexity as a key factor, which reflects the additional coordination demands often present in large-scale public sector programmes.

97%

Revealed supplier sprawl has made them more likely to work with a prime partner

94%

Prioritise external partnerships to keep up with technology innovation

Only

5%

Rarely prioritise working with a prime partner to manage complex technology

Managing complexity in multi-supplier environments

As supplier landscapes become more diverse, the demands of governance, reporting and contract management increase for all parties. Larger organisations may have dedicated teams to manage frameworks and compliance at scale, whereas smaller firms often need to allocate proportionally greater effort relative to their size. Most public sector contracts are awarded through official **government procurement frameworks**. The latest figures from the [National Audit Office](#) reveal that of the £14 billion estimated minimum UK public sector spend on digital programmes and technology, £9 billion of annual digital procurement was channelled through Crown Commercial Service frameworks in 2022-23 (the most recent public data). These frameworks provide transparency, quality assurance and accountability. At the same time, they require robust governance, detailed submissions and structured contract management. For example, while open to all suppliers, qualification and approval processes are necessarily detailed, reflecting the scale and scrutiny of public expenditure. Suppliers of all sizes must invest in governance, bid capability and contract management to operate effectively within this environment. Bid cycles can span many months, requiring sustained investment before delivery begins. The government's [Digital, Data and Technology \(DDAT\) Playbook](#) highlights that contract management and reporting can be “resource intensive, and excessive reporting requirements may be burdensome, potentially disincentivising SMEs from bidding for further contracts with the government”. Our research shows **35% of public sector leaders cited slow procurement processes as being a top barrier to innovation and digital transformation**.

Antony Collard, Senior Vice President of Central Government for CGI UK and Australia, highlights the financial and operational realities associated with large public sector projects. He explains: “The public sector needs suppliers to be agile and to mobilise quickly – flexing resources up and down, absorbing costs, taking on risks and some overheads. This can create financial risk and challenges for some SMEs who may not have the ability to take on the upfront cost and resource.”

In this context, a lead partner can coordinate governance, commercial structures and risk management across multiple specialist providers.

This model enables specialist providers to contribute within larger transformation programmes while maintaining cohesive oversight. An effective lead partner fosters collaboration across government, SMEs and technology providers, ensuring integration, transparency and shared accountability.

Marc Churchouse, CEO and Founder at Mercator Digital, an award-winning digital consultancy providing digital services for organisations globally and a key partner to CGI, confirms that the prime supplier approach can provide a greater level of assurance for public sector clients. He comments: “The prime partner model enables the buying organisation to access the stability and scale of resources of the integrator while also injecting the innovation and fresh thinking that working with an SME can bring. The model also assumes a level of collaboration and trust between the prime partner and the SME. While that can be challenging, our experience at Mercator Digital is that if the relationship model is set out clearly at an early stage, these can create value for all three stakeholders – the buyer, the prime partner and the SME.”

Public sector leaders recognise the value of structured collaboration. Our research shows that 83% of respondents agree that a supplier partnership, in which a large organisation works alongside smaller, niche organisations, provides a significant advantage.

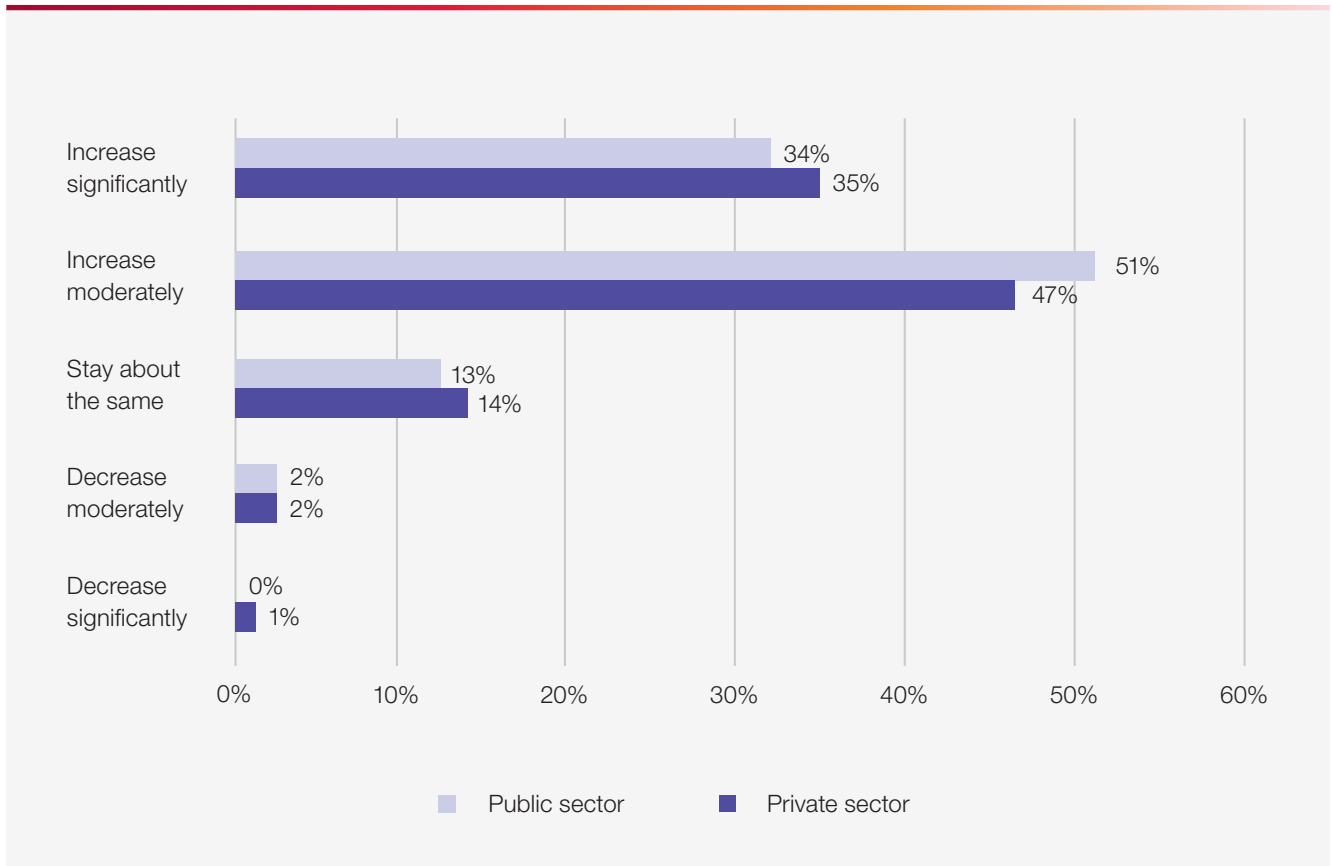
“The prime partner model enables the buying organisation to access the stability and scale of resources of the integrator while also injecting the innovation and fresh thinking that working with an SME can bring.”

Marc Churchouse
CEO and Founder of Mercator Digital

Demand for prime partners is expected to rise

Some 85% of public sector leaders expect **reliance on external partnerships to increase in the next two to three years**. Only 14% expect no change, and just 2% forecast a decrease, indicating continued momentum towards collaborative delivery models.

How, if at all, do you expect your organisation's reliance on external technology partnerships to change over the next 2–3 years?



Trust, agility and communication:

The building blocks for a strong partnership

“In a world full of overlapping ecosystems, the real value isn't in how many suppliers you have. It's in how well they work together.”

Dan Hayward

Vice President of Strategic Alliances for CGI UK and Australia

Trust, speed, communication and alignment are central to both partner selection and long-term partnership health. Strong strategic partnerships are built on mutual respect, shared ambition, and the ability to build lasting capability together. Trust is no longer a secondary consideration. It can be the deciding factor on whether a partner is selected for a major contract. Trust is paramount for 84% of public sector leaders in partner selection, and 44% describe it as a 'critical factor'. Almost half (45%) also identify 'the ability to build trust through open and honest communication' as a key quality required from a strategic partner.

Dan Hayward, Vice President of Strategic Alliances for CGI UK and Australia, comments:

“Clients want innovation without the hassle. Cloud flexibility without confusion. And partners who simplify things, not make them more complicated. In the public sector, trust and accountability aren't just nice to have - they're essential. Departments aren't short on tech options; they're short on time and the capacity to manage them all. In a world full of overlapping ecosystems, the real value isn't in how many suppliers you have. It's in how well they work together.”

The top qualities defining partnership selection:

1. Commitment to shared goals and vision, and partnership values (50%)
2. Ability to build trust through open and honest communication (45%)
3. Alignment on long-term strategy and roadmap planning (43%)
4. Ability to build internal capability and upskill civil service teams (45%)
5. Experience of fostering collaboration in a multi-supplier environment (41%)
6. Strong governance, accountability and outcome-focused delivery (42%)

Trust and communication are key for all parties, not just those holding the budget. Chris Huggett, Chief Commercial Officer at Aker Systems, a data solutions specialist partnering with CGI on a range of data modernisation projects, explains: “At Aker Systems, we believe that strategic partnerships are driven by a combination of trust, collaboration over a significant period, and shared vision. In our experience, lead suppliers benefit from our record of solving complex data challenges, while we benefit from the lead supplier scale and reach to deliver impact.”

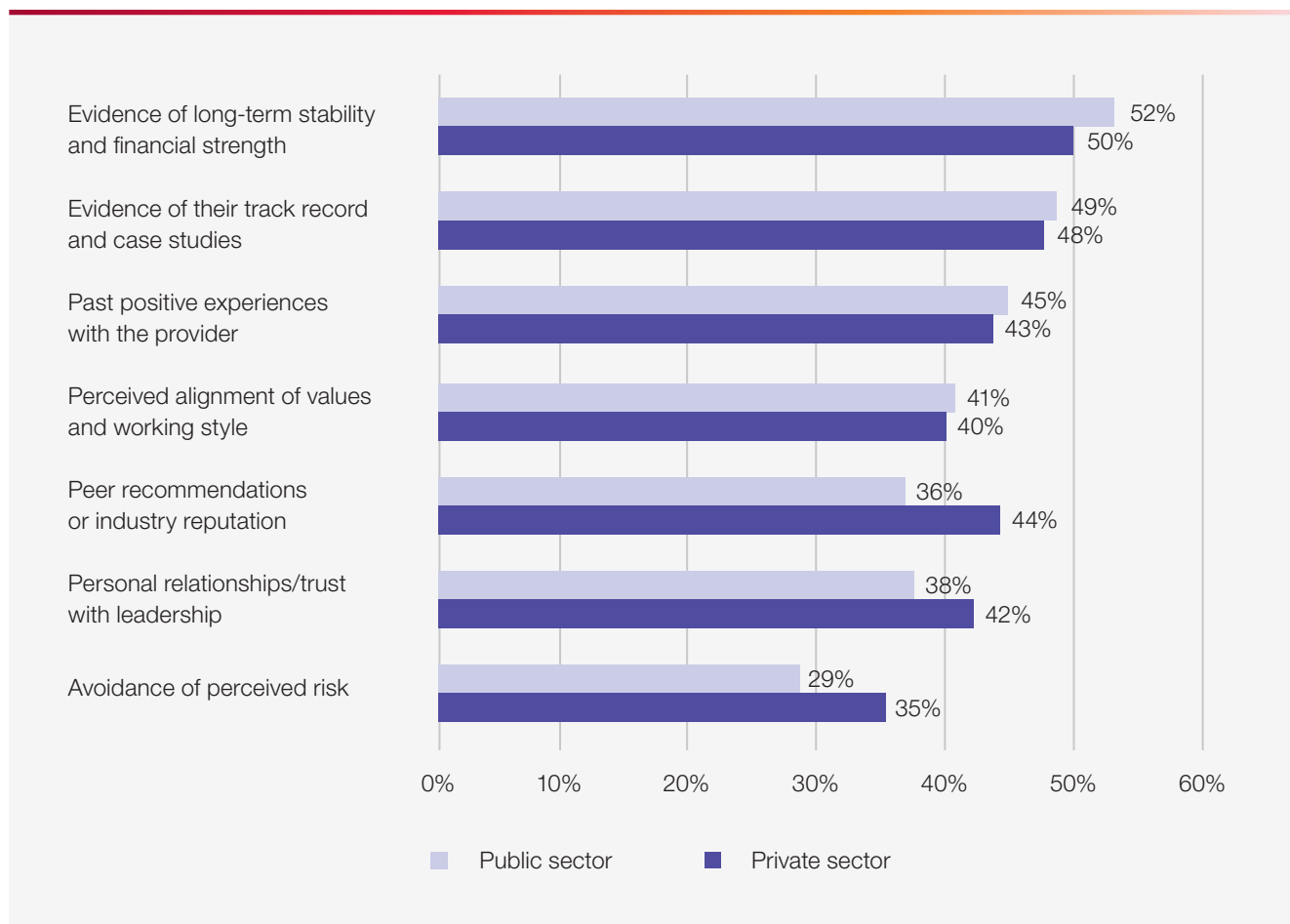
He reveals that Aker Systems is seeing an upsurge in interest in how real-time event-driven data architectures can change the operation of an organisation. He added: “Simply put, being able to respond immediately to the data that’s flowing into and through a business creates new use cases, enables AI innovation and adds new capabilities as a vital element of digital transformation. It is also vital for Aker to work with the right lead partner.”

For specialist providers such as Aker, maintaining a strong working relationship with the end client remains essential. A well-structured ecosystem supports this by enabling transparent communication between the lead partner, the SME and the customer. This triangulated model fosters joint problem solving, co-creation and shared accountability for outcomes.

Other factors influencing partner selection

While trust is paramount, with multi-million-pound contracts at stake, partners are not selected on values and behaviours alone. They need to provide substantial **credibility and proven capability** in their field of expertise. Evidence of ‘long-term stability and financial strength’, alongside ‘evidence of track record and case studies’ are critical for 52% and 49% of public sector leaders, respectively.

What factors, if any, play a role in your organisation’s decision to enter a partnership with a technology provider?



Partnership health:

Balancing speed and agility with trust and ROI

Trust, communication and a shared understanding of organisational goals are widely recognised as indicators of a healthy and collaborative partnership. Public sector leaders value partners who operate as an extension of their teams, demonstrating accountability, responsiveness, and a clear grasp of strategic objectives. The ability to anticipate emerging needs and respond proactively is also seen as a marker of partnership maturity. In our research, 34% of public sector leaders identify a partner's ability to anticipate requirements before they are formally expressed as a sign of strength.

49%

Want to trust the partner to represent their interests when dealing with third parties

42%

Seek consistency in communication and transparency during challenges

41%

Want to feel the partner truly understands their organisational goals and constraints

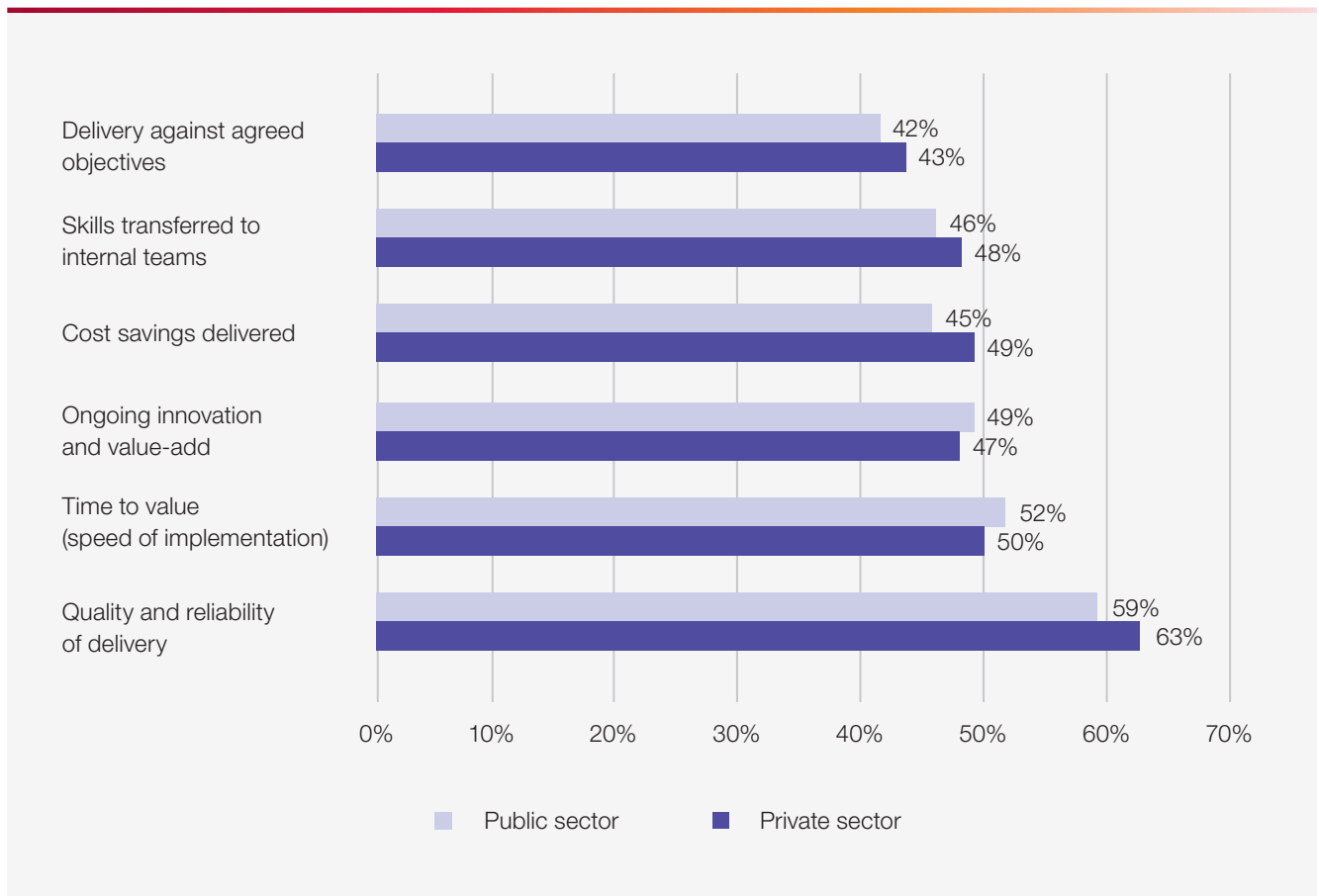


Tangible success and return on investment

Organisations are under sustained pressure to deliver transformation efficiently and at pace. **Speed of delivery is a strategic priority** for most public sector organisations. 86% of respondents state speed is more important than ever and half say that time to value and speed of implementation are used as key metrics to determine the success of a partnership. However, while haste is key, quality and reliability of delivery remain the single most important measure of success (63%), highlighting the need for partners to **balance agility with robust execution.**

Return on investment is also closely scrutinised. Public sector leaders assess cost efficiency, sustained value creation and the long-term contribution a partner makes across the technology lifecycle. In addressing skills gaps, 46% evaluate the transfer of knowledge and the extent to which internal capability has been strengthened.

What criteria, if any, do you use to evaluate the business performance and outcomes of a partnership over time?



Striving for better outcomes:

How structured partnerships can help deliver government efficiency and public value

Public sector leaders see strategic partnerships as a lever for driving innovation and performance, including technology and operational efficiency, employee literacy and improved public outcomes. Around half of respondents expect a technology partner to provide: access to new technologies (49%), increased operational efficiency (49%), staff upskilling and training (48%) and faster delivery of products and services (47%).

What outcomes, if any, are you/would you be looking to achieve through a partnership with a technology provider?



Enhancing the citizen experience, as part of improved public service, remains a strategic priority for government leaders, as the UK seeks to lead with a citizen-centric approach to its digital evolution.

Top expectations from partners relating to public service delivery and citizen engagement include:

1. Improving integration across agencies and departments (53%)
2. Strengthening digital services for a stronger user experience (52%)
3. Increasing accessibility (47%)
4. Raising citizen satisfaction (42%)
5. Enabling services based on demand from constituents (41%)

The power of collaboration to break down barriers

Public sector organisations continue to navigate legacy infrastructure, budget constraints and skills shortages. In this context, partnerships can provide complementary expertise and additional capacity, supporting service improvement and the responsible adoption of emerging technologies. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology's [blueprint for modern digital government](#) reinforces this collaborative approach, emphasising the need for joined-up delivery and clearer alignment between policy intent and implementation.

Having a lead partner manage the ecosystem can be mutually beneficial for all partners in that ecosystem, as Marc Churchouse, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Mercator Digital, explains. He commented: "From the SME perspective, the prime partner's sales and marketing reach provides us with early sight of potential projects where an SME may not be able to bid directly. From the prime partner's perspective, an SME like Mercator Digital can bring a speed and agility that can be key in starting and scaling a project quickly."

Stuart Houghton, Chief Executive Officer of BrightBox Group, who provide technology resourcing and consulting observes:

"As digital transformation programmes grow in scale and complexity, particularly within government, the real differentiator is how effectively delivery ecosystems are orchestrated. Government departments increasingly rely on partnerships not only to access scarce skills, but to combine the scale and governance of prime partners with the specialist expertise and agility that SMEs bring. When those relationships are built on trust and shared objectives, ecosystems become far more than supply chains; they become the collaborative model through which the future of digital government will be delivered. Organisations such as CGI illustrate how effective ecosystem leadership can bring together the right partners, skills and governance to deliver meaningful outcomes for clients and citizens alike."



CGI's partnership philosophy:

Trusted integration in action

“No partner can do everything. CGI's strength lies in our breadth of ecosystem partners, giving clients access to the best skills across the market.”

Antony Collard

Senior Vice President of Central Government for CGI UK and Australia

CGI's Government business operates through a structured ecosystem model designed to combine scale, governance and specialist capability.

In certain programmes, a significant proportion of work is delivered in collaboration with specialist SMEs, ensuring access to focused expertise alongside integrated oversight.

Through our [Central Government Partner Ecosystem](#) CGI coordinates complex supplier environments, integrating delivery across multiple organisations while maintaining clear governance and accountability structures.

Antony Collard explains: “No partner can do everything. CGI's strength lies in our breadth of ecosystem partners, giving clients access to the best skills across the market. CGI manages a range of ecosystems supporting major private and public organisations, carefully identifying and assessing SMEs that reflect our values of exemplary delivery, integrity and care.”

CGI operates an alliance-agnostic model, working across a broad network of technology partners and specialist SMEs to assemble the capabilities required for each programme. This approach supports flexibility, scale and adaptability as client priorities evolve.

Marc Churchouse, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Mercator Digital, relates to the positive experiences Mercator has had working alongside CGI as a prime partner. He comments: “On a very fundamental level, CGI is committed to creating relationships that work for all parties, so doesn't enter a relationship with the attitude that the SME are somehow eating their lunch. By accessing the expertise and business development skills within CGI, Mercator Digital has been able to access projects that it would not have had access to as a direct bidder. Once the projects are live, both CGI and Mercator Digital put the work in to ensure that frequent and transparent communication takes place to make sure all our teams are aligned, both to each other and to the customer.”

Our unique ecosystem approach



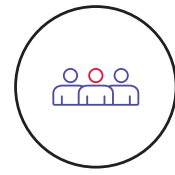
Wide breadth of capability, controlled number of partners

Allowing ecosystem partners to grow and ensuring our clients receive a repeatedly high quality, consistent service.



Reciprocal benefits

Suppliers are treated like equal partners. Our formal processes enable two-way feedback between all stakeholders, at all levels.



Supporting SME growth

Facilitating opportunities for our partners to grow with showcases, educational sessions and valuable client airtime.

Contact us to explore how an ecosystem approach can support your transformation objectives.

As technology landscapes evolve and delivery environments grow more complex, collaboration between government and industry will remain central to sustainable transformation. Ecosystem models provide a structured way to combine specialist expertise with integrated governance and accountability.

For Government

If you would like to discuss how ecosystem-led delivery models operate in practice and how they may support your department's objectives, our team would welcome a conversation.

For SMEs

If you are exploring how to engage more effectively in public sector programmes through structured ecosystem models, we would be pleased to discuss potential collaboration opportunities.





About CGI

Insights you can act on

Founded in 1976, CGI is among the largest IT and business consulting services firms in the world.

We are insights-driven and outcomes-focused to help accelerate returns on your investments. Across hundreds of locations worldwide, we provide comprehensive, scalable and sustainable IT and business consulting services that are informed globally and delivered locally.

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