

Transforming the American digital experience

What's next for the U.S. Web Design System

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U.S. Web Design System 

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We conducted research across dozens of federal agencies to...

-  Understand how teams are using the U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) to build websites and digital services
-  Develop insights into improving federal digital services with and for the public
-  Identify strategies for advancing the design system through collaboration with agencies and other government customer experience initiatives

What's in this report?

Key findings

We synthesized our research into five key findings that summarize what agency teams need to successfully adopt, use, and maintain the design system, as well as considerations for the USWDS team as they start to solve these challenges.

-  Understand the value and benefits
-  Know how to get started
-  Find the right team and resources
-  Feel engaged with the community
-  Be able to iteratively improve digital services

Opportunity areas

Our **Near Star vision** (short-term) is that all agency teams have what they need to more easily adopt and effectively use the design system. To do that, we'll focus on the following opportunity areas to address all five agency needs outlined in this report.

1. Improve strategic communications and engagement with key audiences
2. Provide more robust guidance and support to get started with the design system
3. Better leverage related efforts within the Technology Transformation Services (TTS) and broader government digital services community

Accomplishing our Near Star vision will move us closer to the future state we're aiming for — our **North Star vision** (long-term). In this future, empowered digital agency teams share solutions and use effective human-centered design practices to create greater continuity, improved usability, and increased access for key digital services.

Conversation starters

Here are some ideas to explore with colleagues at all levels of government as we look beyond the design system to improve and unify government digital services for all.

- **What if** the federal government provided even more robust technology shared services to reduce the burden on individual agencies?
- **What if** key content and functionality of government websites was consolidated into fewer public services websites, like [usa.gov](https://www.usa.gov) and [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov)?

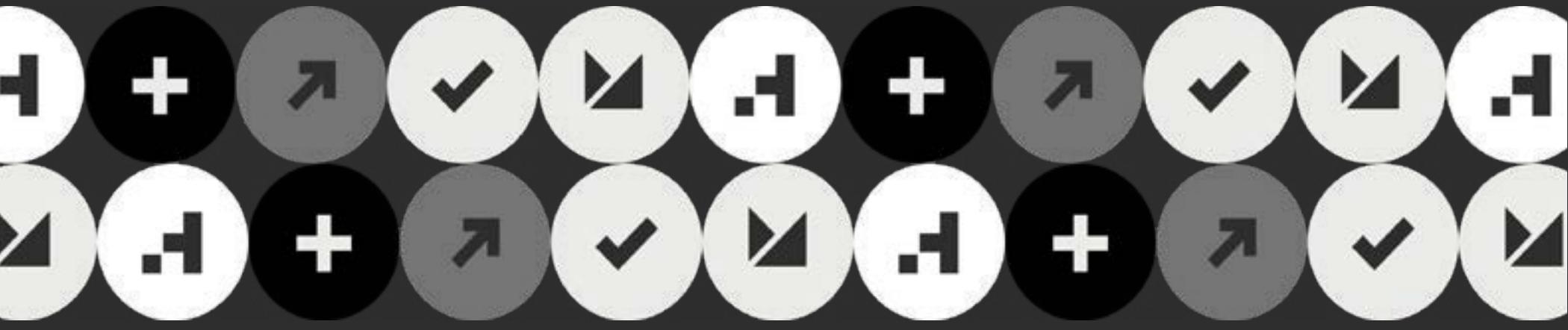
Use these conversation starters and others throughout this report to discuss how you and your colleagues can take action.

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Introduction



Let's transform the way we design and deliver digital government with and for the people.

For millions, access to digital services isn't a luxury — it's critical. And their experiences using government websites to find unemployment support, file taxes, apply for student loans, or get assistance with housing, childcare, or food can dramatically affect how they feel about the government.

Every moment an individual interacts with a government service is an opportunity to build their trust, as the Federal Customer Experience Initiative team's 2020 strategy work has summarized [1]. Only 20 percent of U.S. adults report that they trust government "most of the time" or "just about always" [2]. Trust in government increases when the digital services people access are reliable, user-friendly, and consistently meet their needs. Customers are on average nine times more likely to trust a government agency if they're satisfied with its service [3].

How we deliver these services is just as important as what services we provide.

People are accustomed to intuitive, easy-to-use digital experiences in their day-to-day lives, and they increasingly expect the same from federal digital services. But we're coming up short on digital services that meet the needs of the public.

For example, only six percent of federal websites are rated "good" for mobile performance [4]. To help put the issue in perspective, there were approximately 2.5 billion visits to federal websites from mobile phones in 2020 over a 90-day period [5].

The current global pandemic has shown us that access to digital services is more important than ever. Site visits to federal websites increased from 14 billion in 2019 to over 21 billion in 2020 [6] as the public flocked online for information, assistance, and guidance.

To improve, we have to take a more holistic look at the fragmented ecosystem of the thousands of federal websites that currently exist, all of which offer different experiences for the public to navigate.

We're already making important strides forward. The growth of GSA shared tools and services like the U.S. Web Design System, Federalist, and login.gov have baked-in priorities like accessibility, continuity of experience, and designing for user needs.

Teams like 18F, Centers of Excellence, Lab at OPM, and U.S. Digital Service (USDS) have helped numerous agencies deliver better digital services. Dozens of agencies, including those designated as High Impact Service Providers and coordinated by the OMB Federal Customer Experience Initiative team, have also worked to think more strategically about how they design services with their customers. Together we can rebuild public trust by scaling what works and continuing to invest in the design and technology capabilities of our federal workforce.

“ The more we use the design system to standardize how we build digital experiences, the more we will improve how the federal web functions.

- Civic tech leader

Shared during user interview

Designing our way forward, together

Purpose

The U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) is just one piece of widespread federal efforts to improve the public's experience of government digital services. Created in 2015, USWDS provides principles, guidance, and code to help federal agencies deliver great digital experiences by making it easier to build accessible, mobile-friendly government websites — which gives the public a more trusted, seamless way to access government digital services.

In order to get there, we need to make good-for-government products (like the design system) an integrated part of agency service delivery. Even given all the benefits the design system provides, only a minority of federal executive branch domains (approximately one out of four) are currently using any design system code in their websites [4].

So how can we succeed in supporting agencies to improve their digital services amid the diverse challenges they all face?

“ I think the design system is probably the strongest place to spread best practices across government.

- Manager

Research

In September 2020, the USWDS team brought together researchers, designers, engineers, and policymakers to conduct research across dozens of federal agencies to help support emergency response efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

🔍 Our primary focus was to learn:

- How are teams **dealing with emergency response** situations (specifically COVID-19) in terms of their digital communications?
- What challenges are agencies facing when **trying to adopt the design system**?
- How can USWDS continue to grow and help agencies **maintain a high level of design maturity** across the federal government?
- How can the design system support other federal efforts to **improve customer experience** across government?

The research resulted in the release of 11 new and updated components and page templates for emergency response and surfaced a number of ways the design system can continue to support agencies now and into the future, as summarized in this report.

Over 60 individuals across 33 teams shared their stories and first-hand accounts of website implementation and their unique experiences with the design system.

👤 To ensure diverse perspectives were heard, we interviewed:

- Content managers
- Designers
- Engineers
- Managers
- Policy analysts
- Thought-leaders (industry experts, civic tech leaders)

Their experiences, needs, pain points, and bright spots led directly to the development of a future vision for USWDS and helped identify opportunities for its role in supporting improved digital services across government as a whole.

Findings



CURRENT STATE

10,000-foot view: systemic challenges to improving digital services

We heard from agencies that it can be difficult to separate the specific challenges they face in adopting the U.S. Web Design System from the broader challenges they face in building or modernizing their web presence, since it's usually just one integrated piece of the work agencies are doing to improve their digital services.

Several common themes surfaced regarding system-level challenges they encounter when trying to improve digital experience, which complicate the efforts of USWDS and other shared services to scale more widely. Improving the design system and its adoption is just one part of creating better digital services across the government.

Having the right talent

Building websites is not a mission-oriented skill for most agency teams. It requires people with domain-specific skill sets like design and engineering, which many agencies don't have in-house and aren't used to hiring. It takes time to establish strong teams to do this work. The agencies that have seen notable success have taken years to develop a well-resourced team.

Designing for good experiences across services

The public wants to quickly complete their tasks on a site that's easy to use. However, because each agency is responsible for designing and delivering its own digital services, it creates a diverse landscape of website implementations that discourage efficient scalable solutions, resulting in redundant work, unnecessary differentiation, and a fractured user experience. The public has to know what services belong to which agency to find what they need, while navigating a wide variety of agency-specific site structures, forms, and

terminology. While promising progress has been made through sites like usa.gov and recreation.gov, decentralized implementation continues to make it difficult to prioritize good user experiences across government sites.

Scaling support of shared services

The current decentralized landscape also means that agencies are often piecing together support and tools from a combination of places, including digital services teams, and assorted tools and product offerings from government and vendors — which is less-efficient in terms of time and budget. And while many of the available technology tools are useful for larger teams with in-house capacity, they don't always meet the needs of smaller agency teams who don't have the specialized engineering and design skills necessary to implement and use them.

“ We keep telling agencies to do all this stuff and fix your websites. But there's never any money for it. Particularly in the digital age of COVID-19, how can anything be more important than the presence of your website? ”

- Civic tech leader

What we learned

Agencies are the primary users of design system principles, guidance, and code, so we've framed our findings as ways to better meet their needs as users — so that they, in turn, can continue to focus on their users' needs, those of the public.

What's working

Agencies across government shared that using the design system benefits them by:

- **Making hard things easy** by providing a starting point and solid foundation for building websites
- Providing useful components and **clear, well-written guidance** that's backed by user research and user experience (UX) best practices
- Helping them **make more data-informed decisions** using standardized, consistent, and accessible best practices, instead of relying on personal judgment
- Saving time and energy so they can **focus on their mission** and more of what their customers need
- Helping build trust with the public by **providing continuity across federal websites**, reducing existing fragmented and inconsistent experiences

Where agencies need more support

Though agencies start with different goals and capabilities, we discovered they follow a common journey with similar needs when it comes to successfully adopting, using, and maintaining the design system.

Agency teams want to...



Understand the value and benefits

Agencies need to be able to quickly discern the design system's benefits and how it aligns with their goals for delivering better digital services.



Know how to get started

No matter where an agency starts from, it needs to be clear and easy for them to figure out their first steps and how to create a sustainable path forward in the long-run.



Find the right team and resources

Agencies have several options to assemble a cross-functional team to implement the design system and they're looking for more support in identifying needed skills and assembling the right people.



Feel engaged with the community

It's a collaborative process to build a design system, so it's essential for agencies to feel like they have access to a support network and a sense of ownership to contribute back to it.



Be able to iteratively improve their digital services

Adopting a design system is an ongoing process of design, development, and making iterative improvements and upgrades over time, which requires continued resources and support.

Understand the value and benefits

While the benefits of using the design system become more clear to agency teams as they use it, they often start with some concerns and misconceptions about how it works and the value it provides.

Leverage the benefits of USWDS

Building a website or adding to an existing one can be a significant undertaking. While there's an initial investment, agencies save time and energy in the end, allowing them to focus on their mission instead.

In addition, when agency teams commit to using the design system, they don't have to worry about explaining every design decision to stakeholders, allowing teams to align on priorities and move forward quickly and confidently. Some teams are also looking for support and documentation to help them advocate with their leadership to use design system components and principles.

“ This has already been developed and blessed by an interagency community so you don't have to just go on my opinion.
- Manager

“ By using these standard components, our design is less likely to be hijacked by some external stakeholder who has some new idea. We can say 'oh we're using the web design system.' While it gives us flexibility, it also gives us protection to do something testable and usable. Less likely for our designs to go off the rails.
- Designer

Adhere to their brand

Some agency teams fear that adopting the design system means their website will look like every other government website. Many agencies have pride in their brand and want their digital services to be recognizably their own. However, these efforts may not have the impact they're hoping for, as most members of the public value easy-to-use experiences over beautifully branded ones.

The design system team needs to do more to show agency teams that they can still customize the look and feel of their sites using the design system, while keeping the accessibility and UX best practices it provides. This involves balancing just the right amount of guidance without being overly prescriptive.

“ The largest roadblock is that there is a very strong current of agencies wanting to have their own identity.
- Manager

“ Very few people would be ok with a site that looks like other government sites. They all want their brand, a way to look different.
- Content manager



Learn how designers fit into the process

Another common misunderstanding is that USWDS is only for teams without a designer. Though the design system supports design and engineering processes, it's not a replacement for a designer or any of the other cross-functional skills necessary to bring it all together. Instead, using the design system allows designers and engineers to focus more on problem-solving for specific user needs (such as adding multilingual content) and less time establishing the basics.

“ My general opinion is that it's a great set of principles and tools for agencies that don't have designers. I've always had excellent designers and UX experts on staff so we didn't need the design system, per se.

- Civic tech leader

“ I have a UX person on my team so I'm very lucky.

- Manager

Know what compliance means

We also heard significant confusion around the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, otherwise known as 21st Century IDEA. Though the Act was signed into law over two years ago, agency teams are still trying to figure out what compliance looks like. It's unclear if using USWDS is required for all sites, or only new or redesigned ones.

There are also questions of customization: can components or colors be customized, or do they have to be the default styles? Though the Act mentions eight specific standards for websites, including that they be accessible, mobile-friendly, and user-centered, agencies are having trouble determining what “good enough” looks like [7].

“ So where it says ‘the standards as issued by TTS’, is that USWDS? And no one knew. ‘Standards’ has budgetary and workload prioritization meaning.

- Civic tech leader

“ We weren't sure if it was a requirement by law or optional tool.

- Designer

🗨️ Conversation starters

We should explore a few different avenues to help agencies **understand the value of using USWDS** and support them in gaining executive buy-in.

- **How might we** communicate the value of the design system more effectively to new customers?
- **How might we** help agency champions advocate for the design system?
- **How might we** clarify common misperceptions or confusion around the design system?
- **How might we** better explain what 21st Century IDEA means for agencies and help them understand how they are performing?

Know how to get started

Once an agency team is ready to adopt the design system — whether they're working on a large-scale redesign or simply making incremental updates over time — they want to quickly understand how it works, what capabilities it provides, what their first steps should be, and how to create a sustainable, long-term path forward.

Deploy the design system regardless of their starting point

Each team has unique needs and is at a different starting point, and the tactical aspects of deploying the design system need to be approachable from many different angles and skill sets. Many people found the USWDS website relevant but overwhelming, and they expressed a wish for more “step-by-step” breakdowns of what they needed to do.

While much of the content on the USWDS website is easy to understand for engineers and designers, it may be intimidating to non-technical team members or limiting for those who are trying to build support at a leadership level.

“ USWDS could help people wrap their heads around what the different models are and how to use USWDS based on what paradigm they are using (agencies with a central location vs subsites, etc.).

- Manager

“ Coming on to the home page of the USWDS site is a little bit overwhelming. But it depends on the audience. If you're showing it to devs and designers it's okay.

- Designer

“ Even 8 or 12 hours of support would be helpful for teams. Being able to troubleshoot or onboard new teams to discuss how to re-architect their website to your design system is critical.

- Designer

See it in action

In order to fully understand the design system's capabilities, agency teams want to see it in action and be able to compare it to other commonly used open-source frameworks. They want to see how other government websites use the design system so they can begin to visualize the full breadth of options it provides.

While many agency teams are used to how things look in the frameworks they're currently using, getting started with USWDS requires a bit of learning. Helping ease this transition by demonstrating how things work and what's actually different from other frameworks, instead of just describing them, will shorten the learning curve and make agencies feel more confident about using something new.

“ Have examples of how components are being used, like a gallery. Not just a list of what sites are using it.

- Designer

“ A lot of people are just familiar with tools like Bootstrap and they've mastered it. Maybe USWDS could show 'Here's what x looks like in Bootstrap; here's what ours looks like.' Stuff like that can really put people's minds at ease.

- Industry expert

Overcome compatibility and integration hurdles

Sometimes USWDS isn't compatible with an organization's existing site framework, or teams may have committed to other systems preferred by their vendors. In these instances, developers must do significant work to retrofit and adopt USWDS for other content management systems or user interface libraries, which requires even more engineering time and expertise to work through.

Agency teams are finding workarounds and solutions to make their tech stacks and platforms compatible, but many indicated that it often requires routine or manual overrides and fixes. Agencies are willing to transition to something new, but given how widely-used content management systems are across the federal government, it will remain a key bottleneck for new customers.

“ We don't know if your code will work inside our system.
- Content manager

“ Getting Drupal and USWDS to work together can be pretty energy intensive.
- Manager

“ Some things - out of the box Bootstrap, sizes, colors, etc. - couldn't use anything that came with it. So we had to figure out all the values and override them and any time something changes we have to find out how to override it.
- Engineer

Learn how to scale over time

Agency teams are also looking for a way to benchmark their current status and receive more support on how to scale with USWDS over time. It's hard for agencies to map implementation of USWDS against their own web modernization priorities: What's most important? What can be done in the near-term with limited resources?

Though USWDS has a maturity model, it doesn't currently provide the level of detail or direction agencies are looking for. While the design principles and maturity model provide a good vision for where agencies should be headed, that change can't happen all at once, and agencies want more support on how to balance trade-offs and priorities at different stages of adoption.

“ We've been talking about the three levels of adoption of USWDS, but I don't really have a great understanding of the design system in general, figuring out how we get started.
- Manager

“ Doing some prioritization would be helpful — what would have the greatest impact — for agencies to start thinking about. For a smaller team to have some sense of prioritization would be really good.
- Civic tech leader

“ It's important for agencies to have a free baseline.
- Manager

Conversation starters

We should look for innovative ways to **give agencies extra support** as they get started with the design system and continue to grow its adoption.

- **How might we** tailor the website to be more approachable for different audiences, including non-technical skill sets?
- **How might we** better support agencies in transitioning from other design systems or to support diverse web technologies?
- **How might we** better support agencies to understand where they are today and where they need to get to?

Find the right team and resources

Agencies are looking for more support from USWDS to identify and staff for the cross-functional design and engineering skills needed to successfully implement and maintain the design system.

Identify the right talent

Finding the necessary talent can be difficult, especially when agencies aren't sure what they should be looking for. Many of the required skills are in specialized and constantly evolving fields such as service design, customer experience, DevOps engineering, and translation services.

Agencies face a number of obstacles trying to hire for these kinds of roles, which typically fall outside their typical position descriptions and can take months or longer to fill. Even when agencies contract with a vendor, they may lack the in-house expertise to effectively evaluate proposals and manage the work.

“It would be cool if it was like “Here are companies that offer services to government and are USWDS-savvy.” Saying we know these people know USWDS — maybe a certification program, that would be amazing.

- Manager

“A content syndication component is more important in Spanish than English because of resource constraints. Spanish language content writers are few and far between.

- Manager

Build skills at all levels

Delivering a quality digital service requires a cross-functional set of skills, and many agencies are taking it into their own hands to build these in-house capabilities where they can. For example, some agencies might host weekly lunch-and-learns about using USWDS or attend events hosted by industry leaders, local meetup groups, and communities of practice. Willingness to learn provides an opportunity for the design system to encourage and support this kind of skill-building.

“Contractors are diving in deep, but on the other side it's less ownership. How do we empower our team to become owners of USWDS?

- Manager

Prioritize the right resources

The workforce capacity gap is compounded by limited resources. While there are many dedicated public servants trying to make it work with what they have, their efforts can unintentionally perpetuate the unreasonable expectation that this work be done well without the proper skills and investment.

“ A lot of web teams aren't properly resourced. This stuff is hard. It's not easy and it takes a lot of work to build something that works well and is accessible.

- Civic tech leader

“ In some places you have one poor person who is trying to do it all.

- Civic tech leader

🗨️ Conversation starters

We should find ways to help agencies **plan for or connect with the right people** to effectively implement the design system.

- **How might we** help agencies anticipate and plan for the costs and staffing needs associated with design system adoption?
- **How might we** better connect specialized skill sets like security engineers or Spanish language content writers to agencies who need them?
- **How might we** coordinate with other parts of TTS and digital services teams throughout government to provide support for design system adoption?

Feel engaged with the community

It's essential for agencies to feel like they have access to a support network and a sense of ownership to learn from one another and contribute back to USWDS.

Give back to the design system

Agencies developing their own solutions, sharing them back to the community, and adding to the codebase is one of the most essential ways that USWDS continues to thrive. This extends to identifying common challenges and needs that could lead to the development of new components.

Agency teams are already creating custom solutions to adapt or add on to the design system, but they're sometimes unsure how to contribute those ideas back to USWDS.

“ I think some teams want to contribute back, help with testing, etc. That would be a cool call for action — for people who want to work with USWDS on a component that agencies need.

- Manager

Collaborate with others

Agency teams enjoy the USWDS monthly calls and Slack channel and are looking for more ways to hear from and collaborate with others using the design system. Given the relatively small size of the USWDS team, there are also opportunities to leverage the related work and reach of other partners and groups, including other digital.gov communities, Federal Web Council, and many more.

“ It would be interesting to host breakout sessions where USWDS provides a space to have cross-agency conversations.

- Designer

Conversation starters

We should increase our efforts to **better engage the community** in the continued development and improvement of the design system.

- **How might we** shift the culture around the design system to be more inclusive?
- **How might we** better communicate a “by the people, for the people, with the people” mindset?
- **How might we** encourage and support more cross-agency collaboration?
- **How might we** keep up momentum with the current enthusiasm? Where can USWDS lean on others for additional support?

AGENCY TEAMS WANT TO...

Be able to iteratively improve their digital services

Agency teams want reassurance that the design system and related support will continue long into the future so they can get continued agency-level organizational support for iterative design, development, improvements, and upgrades over time.

Cultivate internal support

Government planning and budgeting processes tend to be oriented toward initial support to “launch” a new or updated website or service, rather than planning for long-term iterative delivery. But even if teams are able to get an initial deployment off the ground, they need to continue to corral organizational support and resources to make ongoing improvements, keep up with design system upgrades, and respond to changing user needs.

We heard that decisions related to implementing USWDS are often spread across different roles and levels of authority, instead of sitting with one team. These bureaucratic challenges can create ongoing obstacles for teams wanting to follow the design principles and mature their digital delivery over time.

““ We want to do things that are right, but have to wait until they say “thou shalt,” so to speak.

- Content manager

““ There’s often a large separation between the IT org (with the contractors who own website updates) and the people who are thinking about the information their website should have (contact centers, county offices, etc.) We should be able to put websites in the hands of the actual agencies that own them.

- Civic tech leader

Continue to improve

The design system plays an important role in supporting agency website maintenance and governance, but it's still finding the right balance between centralized management and individual agency responsibility.

Because design system implementation is decentralized, ongoing development and updates to the core product happen agency by agency, project by project. Early adopters of the design system reported significant challenges in updating from version 1 to version 2, given the major changes to its underlying architecture and framework. And as the design system continues to evolve by adding new components, better enabling multilingual sites, and publishing additional usability and accessibility guidance, agencies need easier ways to stay up-to-date.

The cost of making updates to the design system (especially new major versions) needs to be balanced by the relative cost for each agency to make those changes. On the other side, agency teams need to have the right processes and work streams to stay current as the design system continues to evolve and improve.

“ When you're maintaining a design system at a platform level with other teams and vendors in this space, how do you be a good custodian of that without it tipping over?

- Designer

“ Treat the system like a product and like a service. Look at continuity and investment. How responsive are we to our customers? Support, training, communication.

- Industry expert

Conversation starters

We need to explore how we can better **help agencies scale and maintain the design system** within their sites in order for them to be successful in the long term.

- **How might we** support a shared understanding of governance and maintenance?
- **How might we** provide more extensive customer-support to USWDS users?
- **How might we** support stronger collaboration and processes between roles involved in website maintenance?

Conclusion



Looking ahead

Though we started out with the question, “How might we increase adoption of USWDS across the government?,” our interviews with agency teams and thought-leaders raised other thought-provoking questions, such as: “Should agencies even be responsible for building and maintaining all of their own websites?” “Is scaling the design system across about 1,200 domains and 9,000 federal websites [8] the right goal, or could we provide an improved public experience with fewer, better websites overall?”

These questions prompted us to start thinking about a blue-sky vision for how USWDS continues to evolve over time as part of a changing digital services landscape, which we’ve captured in our North Star vision.

In the meantime, there are also clear opportunities for TTS to continue investing in being a good partner to agencies and providing USWDS and other shared services that support an accessible, useful, and continuous digital experience for the public. This is our Near Star vision, which we’ve broken down into clear, achievable goals with some initial ideas for how to achieve them.

Near Star vision & next steps

Vision statement

Agency teams have what they need to more easily adopt and effectively use the design system.

In this Near Star vision, all agencies...

- Rely on and have confidence in the design system as the go-to trusted resource for helping them create exceptional digital experiences
- Can quickly and easily start using the design system and understand how its capabilities and features integrate into their unique contexts
- Can identify and access the right team, skill sets, and resources to successfully increase their design maturity
- Are active participants in building and growing the design system as contributors, not bystanders
- Are well-equipped to iteratively develop and sustain ongoing design and development of their digital services over time

How do we get there?

We’ve identified specific opportunity areas that will move us closer to a design system that meets the needs of teams across every agency. Working toward this vision is our way of ensuring the design system continues to change over time and stays connected to the teams that are using it.

1. Improve strategic communications and engagement with key audiences
2. Provide more robust guidance and support to get started with the design system
3. Better leverage related efforts within the Technology Transformation Services (TTS) and broader government digital services community

We’ll provide regular updates on our progress in monthly calls, the public Slack channel, and the product roadmap on designsystem.digital.gov.

Strategic communications and engagement with key audiences

USWDS is a product with significant customer service and community aspects. To meet agency teams where they are, the design system needs to be easily understood by a variety of audiences. There are opportunities to develop outreach initiatives and website content that more effectively communicate the value of the design system, while continuing to invest in the community that's essential for the design system's growth as a good-for-government resource.

Reach new customers and leadership

To accomplish this, we recommend increasing outreach and targeted communications to new customers and agency leadership with these opportunities.

Opportunity	Description	Agency need
Produce marketing materials	Create specific resources and marketing materials to help teams get buy-in and communicate the value to their agency leadership and other stakeholders	+ Understand the value
Develop FAQs	Develop new content and communications materials that proactively address the common questions and misconceptions of potential customers	+ Understand the value ➤ Know how to get started
Create robust documentation	Provide even more detail on the research behind each component to encourage data-driven design and help agency teams understand and explain why decisions were made	+ Understand the value ➤ Know how to get started

Building momentum

In November 2020, the USWDS team presented a webinar hosted by the CIO Council's 508 subcommittee to share the purpose, value, and how-to's of the design system. After the webinar, the 326 attendees (from both in and outside of the federal government) were asked if they would seek additional information about the design system after having attended the event — 69 percent of them reported they strongly agreed or agreed. Hosting more webinars or events in connection with others working in digital fields across government will help to bolster engagement around the design system. (2020 Evaluation Summary, Section 508 Best Practices Webinar)

Engage existing customers

We also recommend expanding engagement with existing customers and empowering them to grow with the design system over time with these opportunities.

Opportunity	Description	Agency need
Increase modes for community engagement	Create opportunities beyond individual consults, monthly calls, and the USWDS public Slack channel with things like design critiques, ideating in small groups, meet-ups, or lunch-and-learns, etc.	 Feel engaged
Evolve design system based on agency needs	Conduct research to understand agency needs and inform the development of new components, similar to the recent emergency response research that led to the release of 11 new components (e.g., a component to support syndicated content, more flexible components to accommodate multilingual content, etc.)	 Iteratively improve
Work across communities of practice	Adopt more robust processes from across Digital.gov communities of practice such as focusing events on certain topics or questions (how to assemble the right team, ensuring a smooth design system upgrade, etc.)	 Feel engaged
Encourage community contribution	Provide better guidance about how to contribute customizations back in to the community and explore ways to get agency-created components approved by USWDS	 Feel engaged  Iteratively improve
Cultivate network of experts	Cultivate a more robust network of design system experts to help guide agency teams through adoption	 Find the right team
Share maturity rubric	Provide shared benchmarks to help agencies identify strengths and areas of improvement	 Know how to get started

Provide more robust guidance and support around getting started

Getting started is a key sticking point for agencies since it creates so much friction right out of the gate. There's an opportunity to make it easier for agencies to find the right information and guidance to start implementing the design system regardless of where they're starting from or their skill level. This guidance should also include better explanations of how to customize the look and feel of agency sites, as well as provide a clearer path for scaling over time.

It's particularly difficult for agencies using existing content management systems or user interface frameworks to incorporate the design system into their sites. The design system could do more to help ease the transition by demonstrating how it's different from other frameworks and sharing additional tips for integrating it into commonly used systems.

It's also critical to help equip agencies to build the right teams as they implement the design system, whether that's through hiring individuals, partnering with other agencies, or acquiring through vendors.

Improve guidance

To help agencies begin using the design system, we can reduce barriers to getting started with these opportunities.

Opportunity	Description	Agency need
Provide demos	Provide more guidance and examples around how to customize the design system, perhaps through a series of feature stories about how agencies are using USWDS to meet their unique needs or a gallery of examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Understand the value
Create onboarding guides and feature comparison	Provide targeted guidance for agencies transitioning from another open-source framework to USWDS, including providing a side-by-side comparison to other frameworks and outlining the unique value the design system provides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Understand the value ➔ Know how to get started
Promote community-built resources	Explore ways to support and share component variations created by the community that are specific to different content management systems or frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📁 Feel engaged ➔ Iteratively improve
Outline the necessary resources	Share general information around recommended team composition and expected resources to help agency teams plan for staffing and budgeting needs, which could include guidance on what skills to look for or sample performance profiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Know how to get started ✓ Find the right team
Tie to existing strategic planning	Work with agencies to integrate high-priority investment opportunities into their annual CX action plans and 21st Century IDEA progress reports to inform their budget requests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Know how to get started ✓ Find the right team
Create sandbox	Create tools that let agency teams who are brand new to the design system try it out in a sandbox environment with quick themeable templates for easy testing, experimentation, and exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Understand the value ➔ Know how to get started
Advocate for design principles	Continue being intentional and transparent about the design principles, USWDS product values, and the research and processes that go into USWDS components and guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📁 Feel engaged

Better leverage related efforts within TTS and the broader government digital services community

The design system is part of an ecosystem of collective efforts to steward good design practices, transformation, and resilience across government. There's opportunity for more collaboration and coordination to help agencies navigate and benefit from the multitude of shared services and collective knowledge available to them.

Further support TTS collaboration

We see opportunities for USWDS to work with other government transformation efforts with the following opportunities.

Opportunity	Description	Agency need
Build a referral system	<p>Connect agencies to the various services and products that might be useful for them within and beyond TTS by building a more formalized referral system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with partners like GSA's 18F, Centers of Excellence, and Presidential Innovation Fellows, as well as the U.S. Digital Service (USDS), who help agencies fix technical problems, build products, and improve how government serves the public through technology • Educate agencies on the specific benefits and different services that partner programs (like those in GSA and USDS) provide • Promote training and events with partners like Digital.gov, Lab at OPM, Federal Acquisition Institute • Help leverage OPM's Open Opportunities and agency microtasking and detail programs • Promote technology purchasing programs, including GSA's Multiple Award Schedules for Information Technology and Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts to buy technology products and services 	<p>✓ Find the right team</p>
Support sustainable digital services	<p>Map existing federal digital services offerings to needed areas of support or create new joint offerings as agencies need them</p>	<p>✓ Find the right team</p>
Utilize acquisition expertise	<p>Leverage GSA's acquisition expertise, such as focusing on outreach efforts to connect with non-traditional vendors</p>	<p>✓ Find the right team</p>
Educate contracting officers	<p>Compile assorted agile contracting guides, including sample contract language for 21st Century IDEA and the De-Risking Government Technology field guide, and make them easily findable by agencies</p>	<p>✓ Find the right team</p>
Expand framework support	<p>Continue to expand the design system's usage to more enterprise-level applications or other government systems, such as apps for common, high-impact federal services like benefits</p>	<p>✚ Understand the value ➡ Know how to get started</p>

North Star vision: thinking beyond agency adoption

Vision statement

Empowered agency digital teams share solutions and use effective human-centered design practices to create greater continuity, improved usability, and increased access for key digital services.

The federal government should be a leader in user-centered, service-focused digital tools, capabilities, and delivery. Achieving and maintaining a high level of design system maturity across the federal government will help us consistently provide trusted, exceptional digital experiences for the public. While making it easier for agencies to adopt the design system will create value in the near-term, there are some larger strategic decisions to be made about the most effective operating model for federal websites and the design system that supports them. Even with improved guidance and support, the design system and the agencies using it will continue to run up against challenges of getting the necessary talent and resources in place. Decentralized implementation will continue to make it difficult to scale design capabilities and create continuity for good customer experiences across the federal government.

Building on the ideas of the individuals we spoke with, we wanted to put forth a couple of “what if” questions for further exploration and discussion with colleagues across government.

What if the federal government provided even more robust technology shared services to reduce the burden on individual agencies?

Most teams don’t have a mission that requires designers and engineers, in the same way that most teams shouldn’t require their own payroll and real estate specialists. So instead of every agency trying to build and manage all aspects of their own sites, the federal government could provide an option of a true turnkey service, building on existing offerings.

By transferring the specific technology burden to a specialized team, agency resources would be freed up to focus on the mission-related activities that are part of website management, such as communicating their mission and domain, understanding their audience, developing appropriate content, and stewarding the service over time.

Using shared services could be less expensive and more effective, while also enabling smaller sites to launch and maintain their content more efficiently using the common online public services site.

What if key content and functionality of government websites was consolidated into fewer public services websites, like usa.gov and recreation.gov?

Scaling a consistently exceptional experience for the public may mean thinking beyond improving the individual services and sites of each agency. Members of the public are navigating among over 9,000 federal websites (including subdomains and microsites), which places more burden on the public to know where to look as they seek to accomplish specific tasks.

Having more consolidated online public services websites (a true “federal front door”) could provide a better, more reliable user experience, while promoting more efficient efforts, research, and content. Even some intermediate level of consolidation, with high-impact services remaining more independent, could go a long way toward improving public experience.

Building independent sites with tight coupling to GSA’s common government products and services (cloud, search, analytics, design, and implementation) would also promote improved continuity, security, trust, and long-term maintainability for their sites, and address some of the persistent infrastructure challenges of decentralized implementation.

“ When thinking about the design system, it should be, ‘These are the glasses you can see the world with, rather than the blinders you have to use.’

- Industry expert

Take action

Many of the ideas in this report are big-picture thinking, requiring time, collaboration, and strategies to come to fruition. But, right now, you can begin by understanding the value and benefits of using the design system to deliver better digital services.

Here are just a few ideas to get started.

Everyone can:

- Use the conversation starters throughout this report to prompt discussions with your managers and team members
- Join the USWDS community and get involved

Thought-leaders can:

- Be vocal advocates of USWDS and the benefits it provides
- Share critical, candid feedback with us to help make the design system better

Policy analysts can:

- Better define what 21st Century IDEA compliance is
- Think about how shared digital services can be better used throughout government and how policy could support that effort
- Identify key performance indicators and include digital services in strategic plans

Content managers can:

- Use the design system's principles to bring human-centered design into your work and make data-informed decisions
- Review the design system's UX guidelines around content and its organization
- Become familiar with the components and proactively think about how you can use them to highlight and present content on your site
- Reach out to your Federal Web Council representative to learn more about your agency's digital strategy and modernization plans

Engineers can:

- Review design system documentation to learn about the design system's architecture and available components
- Learn about customization, theming, utilities, and tokens to adapt the design system to your agency's brand
- Review existing websites that use USWDS (such as those on the [designsystem.digital.gov Showcase](#)) to see how you could better integrate USWDS principles and components

Designers can:

- Download the design assets and work to incorporate them into your regular design process
- Investigate how the design system can be customized to meet your agency's brand needs
- Review existing websites that use USWDS (such as the [design system Showcase](#)) to see how you could better integrate the design system principles and components

Leadership can:

- Talk with other agency leadership to learn how they've implemented the design system
- Develop a plan for how your agency could adopt it, including aligning with modernization plan priorities, developing timelines, and budgeting
- Make sure websites have ongoing funding and resource support
- Connect CIOs, web/digital managers, evaluation officers, chief data officers, and other federal program leaders to align on how customer experience priorities are being integrated across all areas of work

Improving how the public interacts with government digital services will be a collective effort and won't happen overnight.

To improve USWDS as a product, we'll begin refining and implementing the next steps outlined in this report, incorporating additional research and input from the USWDS community as we go. Agencies interested in participating in this process — or simply in learning more about the design system — can join us in our public Slack channel ([#uswds-public](#)), for our monthly calls, and in the [digital.gov](#) communities of practice.

We also look forward to collaborating with our digital services colleagues in TTS and beyond to explore new ways of providing shared value for government and articulate a more defined path toward our North Star vision of empowered digital teams and trusted experiences.

We thank everyone who shared their time, feedback, and ideas throughout this research effort and invite you — our collaborators and colleagues — to join us in further exploring these big-picture questions by joining our community and attending our events.

What comes next?



Attend a workshop

The first workshop for federal employees will be in Spring 2021, and we hope to hold ad hoc workshops in the future as well.



Join a monthly call

We also hold regular monthly calls that are open to everyone on the third Thursday at 2:30 p.m. ET. Register at [digital.gov/events/](#).



Become part of the community

[Stay up-to-date](#) with the latest updates and events.

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