



Legibility, Classification and Access in Digital-First Welfare

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Funded by EU Commission Recovery and Resilience
Facility under the *Science Foundation Ireland* Future
Digital Challenge
Grant No 22/NCF/FD/11033



Policy Visions // Practice Alignment

Digital identity increasingly mediates access to public services.



How are these ambitions enacted in practice?

There were
2.7 million verified MyGovID accounts, representing 65% of adults in Ireland by the end of 2024.



Through a trusted, user-driven, intuitive, inclusive and efficient world-leading digital government service, 90% of applicable services will be consumed online by 2030

80% of eligible citizens using MyGovID by 2030

20% of employees in the public sector, colleges, and other public bodies home and remote working (post-pandemic)

Digital by default does **not mean digital only.**

...we will **use digital to improve the off-line** experience for those **who are unable to consume services digitally.**

By enabling those who can use digital services to so do, **we can redirect resources in a range of ways to provide a much better service** to those who may need assistance... through our **public offices and libraries.**

Competing Understandings of Digital Government

Academic framing

Digital transformation as bureaucratic reorganisation

Policy perspective

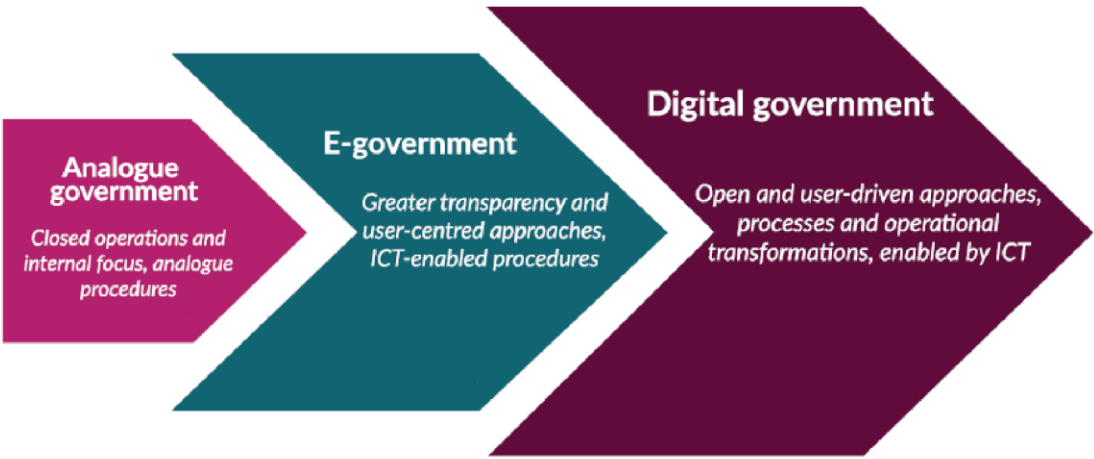
Digital transformation as modernisation

Compared with the street-level and the screen-level bureaucracies, the characteristics of the system-level bureaucracy are summarized in the table.

	Street-level bureaucracy	Screen-level bureaucracy	System-level bureaucracy
Role of ICT	Supportive	Leading	Decisive
Functions of ICT	Data registration	Case assessment and virtual assembly line	Execution, control, and external communication
Human interference with individual cases	Full	Partial	Zero
Organizational backbone	Case managers	Production managers	Systems designers
Organizational boundaries	Strict, with regard to other organizations	Strict, both within and between organizations	Fluid, both within and between organizations
Legal regime	Open, ample discretion, single legal framework	Detailed, little discretion, single legal framework	Detailed, no executive discretion, exchange between legal domains

(Bovens and Zouirids, 2002)

This OECD diagram summarises the progression from Analogue Government through eGovernment to Digital Government:



Progression towards the digital transformation of governments³

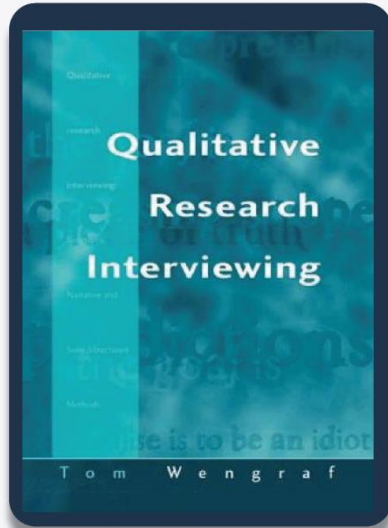
(Dept Public Expenditure & Reform (2022) adapted from Strengthening Digital Government, OECD 2019)



How do digital-first systems reorganise the conditions under which welfare access becomes possible?

Method: Adapting to Field Conditions

Initial Method: Problematising absence

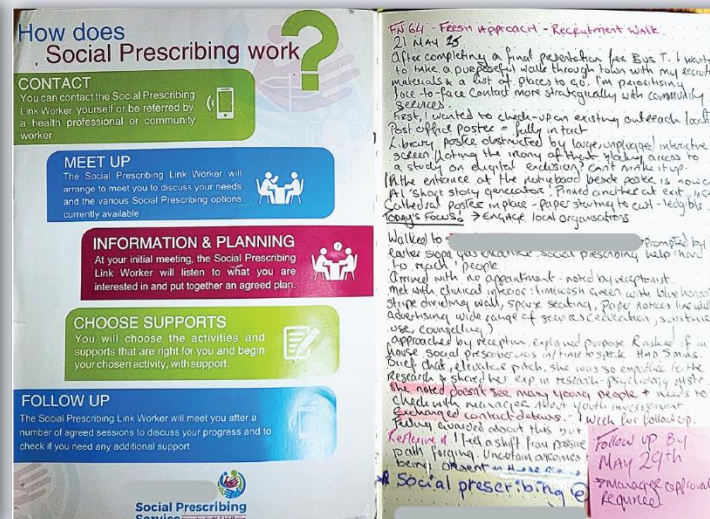
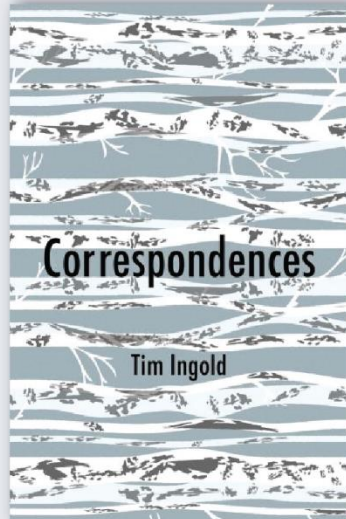


 62 Posters hand delivered
 52 Organisations contacted (youth NGOs, sports clubs)
 105 Instagram followers
 Time Spent Travelling: 9 hours
 12.GB of mobile data.
 10.46 GB of memory
 1,346 Files, 90 Folders

 10- Coffees/drinks bought
Total: €55.45
 22 Follow-up emails sent
 60,000+ Steps walked
 Transport cost: €128.40
 18 ignored emails
7 Unfulfilled exposure offers
 80.4 km Travelled

Actual youth participants recruited: 

Adaptive Method: Tracing with Ethnographic Sensibilities



Site visits: Shifting Tech in Welfare Spaces



Data Processing: Field Material to Themes

1. Data Collection



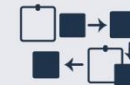
Fieldnotes, interviews, focus groups, observations, documents.

2. Data Organisation



Transcribing & manual coding line-by-line, initial codes created.

3. Affinity Mapping



Codes grouped into clusters to identify patterns and relationships.

4. Thematic Analysis



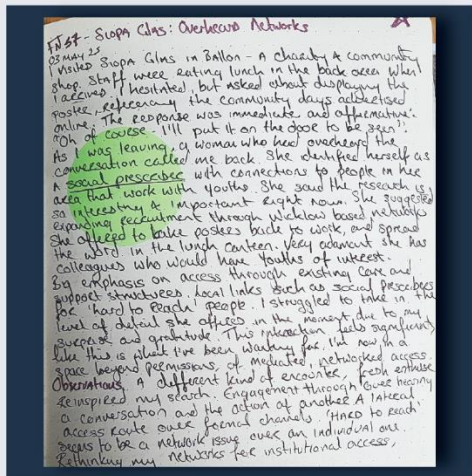
Clusters refined into candidate themes. Themes reviewed, defined & named.

Output

Themes informing analysis:
Pre-emptive Legibility / Distributed discretion
Repair work / Relational Infrastructure

Fieldwork: Tracing Digital Access Pathways

Paths to Participation



Initial Outreach

Initial points of contact into the ecosystem



INTERMEDIARIES

Trusted intermediaries who facilitated access



Self-Recruit

Word of mouth



19 PARTICIPANTS

Tracing Access Pathways



'Getting categorised into some sort of government thing.'

Voices from young adults and frontline practitioners



Youthreach NEET

Experience

"I need someone to kind of explain things to me to understand... I need someone to tell me this is what this means"

— Sophie



Self recruited NEET

Friction

"I couldn't explain it to my laptop."

— Alex



Citizen Info Staff

Mediation

"We would help them set up maybe a MyGov ID, verify it and then help them with the online application."

— Information Officer



LAES Practitioner

System assumptions

"We're leaving people behind that don't have the skills there, and we are presuming that everybody has these skills."

— Guidance Practitioner

Frictions and Supports Across Navigation



Interpretive burden and reliance on relational support

Recognition



Digital systems narrow opportunities for contextual explanation

Interpretation



Human mediation bridges digital barriers and sustains access

Mediation



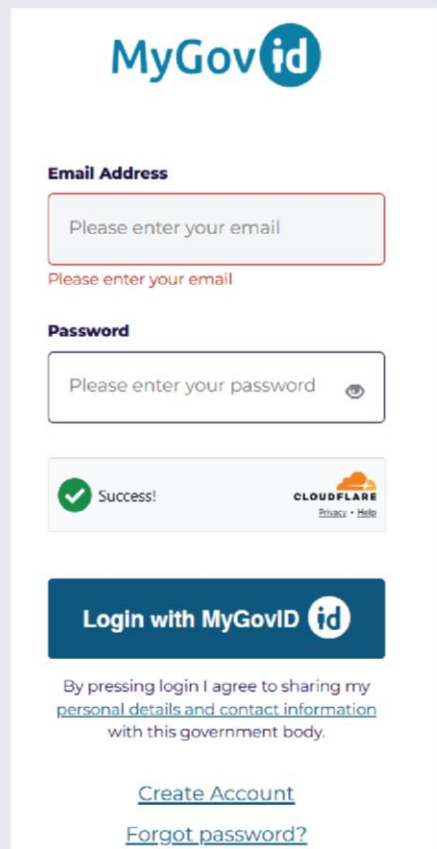
Digital systems presume capacities that are unevenly distributed across

Access

Pre-Emptive Legibility in Conditional Systems

Users must become legible to the system to proceed

Be recognised



MyGov id

Email Address

Please enter your email

Please enter your email

Password

Please enter your password

Success!

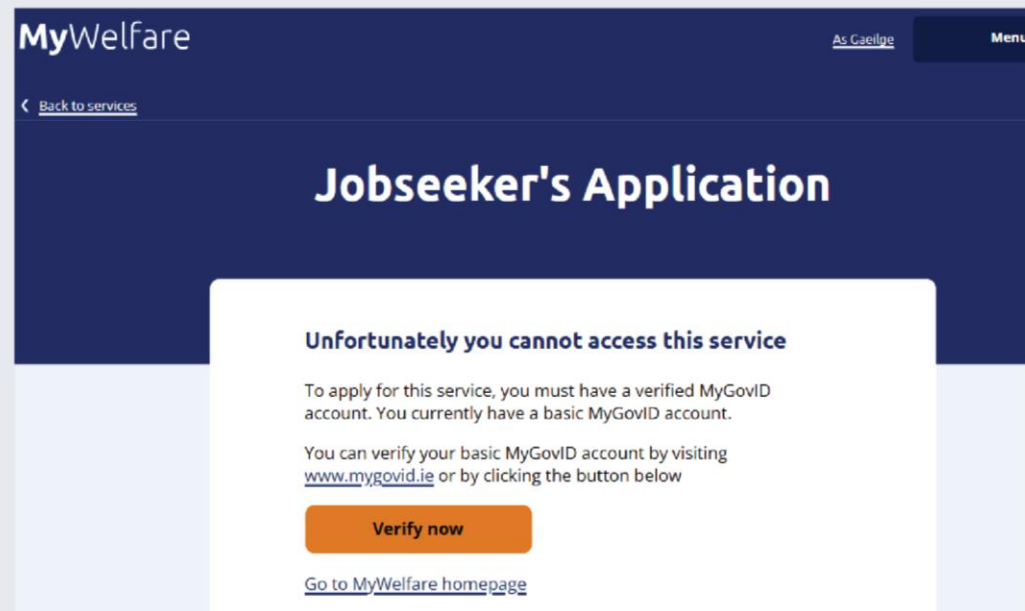
Login with MyGovID

By pressing login I agree to sharing my [personal details and contact information](#) with this government body.

[Create Account](#)

[Forgot password?](#)

Be classified



MyWelfare [As Gaelige](#) [Menu](#)

[Back to services](#)

Jobseeker's Application

Unfortunately you cannot access this service

To apply for this service, you must have a verified MyGovID account. You currently have a basic MyGovID account.

You can verify your basic MyGovID account by visiting www.mygovid.ie or by clicking the button below

Verify now

[Go to MyWelfare homepage](#)

You need to verify your identity

You can verify your identity with the MyGovID mobile app or in-person at your local Intreo Centre.

When you have verified your identity, you will receive a Public Services Card (PSC).

Option 1: Verify your identity with the MyGovID app

Before downloading the MyGovID app, you will need to:

- Be 16 years of age or older
- Have a valid Irish Passport
- Have proof of your address on the island of Ireland

Download the MyGovID app now

Option 2: Verify your identity in-person at your local Intreo Centre

If you are missing any requirements to use the MyGovID app or would prefer to verify your identity in-person, you can do so at your [local Intreo Centre](#).

Be routed



Jobseeker's Benefit

[EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING](#) | [INCREASE FOR DEPENDANTS](#) | [RELATIONSHIP](#) | [DOCUMENTS](#) | [ADDITIONAL INFORMATION](#) | [PAYMENT](#)

Employment and training: status

Please select your employment status

☐ I have started working part-time

☐ My hours have been reduced to part-time

☐ I am unpaid during school or college holidays

☐ I am a seasonal worker and temporarily laid off

Is the Department of Education your direct employer?

☐ Yes ☐ No

What break period are you applying for?

☐ Easter break

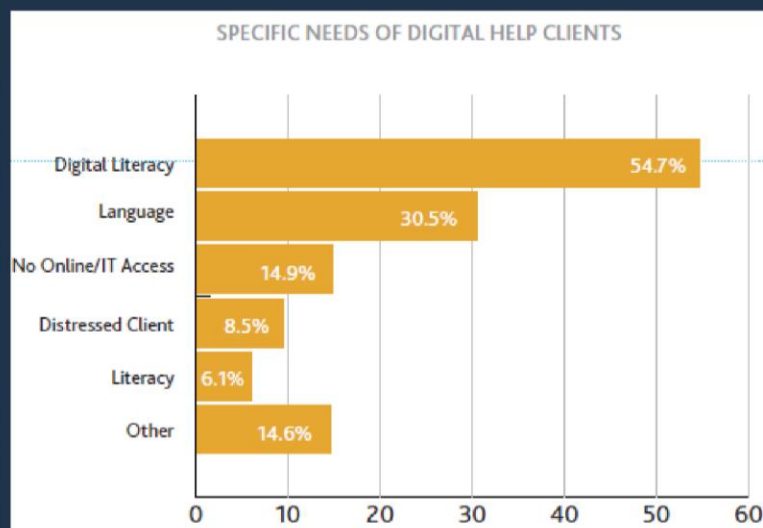
☐ Spring mid-term

Save and continue

[Back](#)

Mediation and Infrastructural Repair (CI Example)

Citizen Information: Digital Help Service



Acknowledging the Gap



Tithe an
Oireachtais
Houses of the
Oireachtas

Joint Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community
Development debate -
Wednesday, 18 Feb 2026

Citizens Information Service National Strategy 2025-2027: Discussion



Mr. Diarmaid
O'Sullivan

“Despite the efficient use of resources currently available, there is still significant unmet demand for CIS. Our annual national surveys show **an unmet demand level of approximately 20%.**”



Mr. Diarmaid
O'Sullivan

Citizen Information Service
Regional manager, North Dublin

“Our digital help service is a very important innovation on our part to meet that need.”

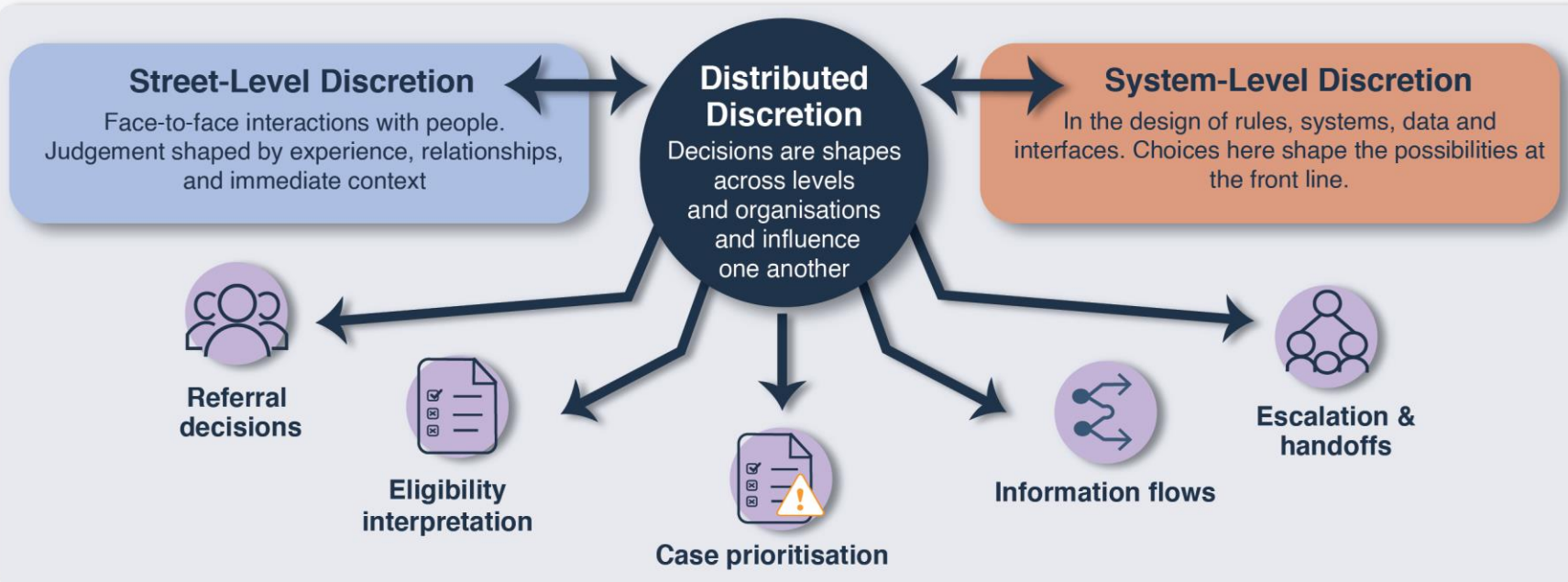
Currently, about 70% of our clients are seen face to face, and that is the result of a very deliberate decision on the part of the service to prioritise face-to-face service delivery over phone or email engagement... **we remain one of the few places where people can speak to an individual and talk through their problems.**

I referred earlier to people on social welfare payments considering taking up part-time employment. That can have real implications for retaining some or all of that entitlement, so these are important decisions in people's lives. **It can impact on their eligibility** for medical cards, social housing supports, etc...

Distributed Discretion Across Bureaucratic Levels

Building on Bovens and Zouridis (2002)

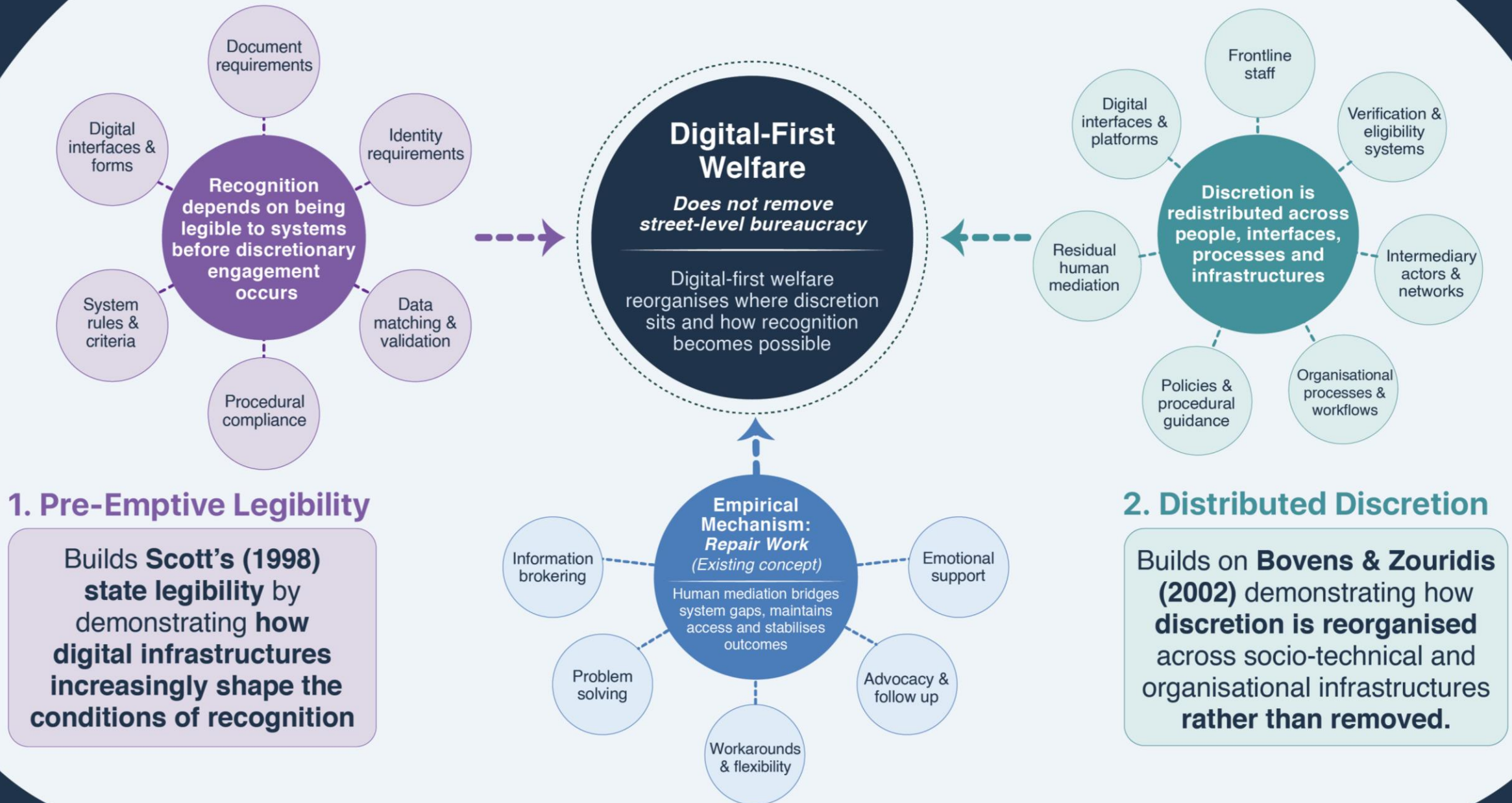
Level of Bureaucracy	 1. Street-Level Bureaucracy (Frontline delivery)	 2. Screen-Level Bureaucracy (Behind-the-scenes case processing)	 3. System-Level Bureaucracy (Design and Coordination)
Focus	Direct interaction and immediate support	Processing, assessment and prioritisation	Designing systems, rules and infrastructure
Who makes decisions?	Frontline workers / caseworkers	Case processors, team leaders, assessment staff	Policy makers, system managers, IT designers, leaders across organisations
Discretion style	High discretion in individual interactions within organisational rules	Moderate discretion within detailed rules and procedures	Low discretion in execution, high discretion in design and coordination
Example	Deciding how to respond to a client in crisis, explain options	Interpreting information, assessing eligibility, deciding next steps	Designing digital systems, setting rules, deciding data flows



Key Points

- Digital welfare does not remove discretion. **It redistributes it.**
- Outcomes depend on how discretion is **exercised, connected and constrained across** bureaucracy levels
- **No single actor** has full control.
- **Discretion is distributed** across people, organisations, and technologies.
- **Outcomes depend** on how these **discretions align (or clash).**

Contributions to Street-Level Bureaucracy



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Thank You



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