
The Digital Sovereignty Decision Framework

A practical matrix and self-assessment for governments, because sovereignty is not a binary choice, but a continuum of deliberate decisions.

Digital sovereignty was debated across almost every track of the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress 2026: in the AI sessions, the digital identity panel, the Beyond Legacy discussion, and the dedicated session on sovereign digital workplaces. What emerged was not a definition but a reframing.

Sovereignty does not mean owning the entire technology stack. For most governments, full-stack sovereignty is unrealistic given the capital demands of frontier infrastructure. What sovereignty means, in practice, is preserving the ability to protect your systems, adapt your services, and act in the public interest, regardless of where the underlying technology was developed or is hosted.

This framework turns that idea into something usable. It maps the layers where sovereignty decisions are actually made, offers a spectrum for each, and provides a self-assessment you can complete with your team.

The Core Reframing

"Sovereignty is a continuum: a set of deliberate, strategic choices across governance, infrastructure, model selection, and procurement that together preserve a government's ability to protect its systems, adapt its services, and act in the public interest".

- Reflecting Kelly Ommundsen, World Economic Forum, and Leanne Cummings, UK Government Digital Service

"Governments that lock themselves into vendor-specific architectures, however powerful, lose the strategic flexibility they need to adapt".

- Leanne Cummings, Director, Government Digital Service, United Kingdom

"Sovereignty also means people's sovereignty over their own data — a model of stewardship, authorisation, and legitimate reuse rather than state ownership for its own sake".

- Reflecting Carlos Santiso, OECD

Three consequences follow. First, sovereignty is not achieved once; it is maintained through repeated decisions. Second, it is not uniform; it matters more in some layers than others, and each government must decide where. Third, it is not purely technical; the barriers are usually cultural, contractual, and organizational.

The Six Layers of Sovereignty

Sovereignty decisions are made at six distinct layers. A government may be highly sovereign at one layer and heavily dependent at another, and that may be entirely rational. The purpose of this framework is to make those positions visible and deliberate rather than accidental.

LAYER	THE CORE QUESTION	WHAT TO EXAMINE
Governance	Who decides, who is accountable, and who can change course?	Clear public-interest mandate, internal decision rights, published accountability.
Data	Where does data live, who can access it, and who controls reuse?	Data residency, access transparency, citizen consent mechanisms.
Infrastructure	Who owns and operates the compute, storage, and networks?	Hosting model, portability, exit feasibility.
Models & Software	What models and software do services depend on?	Open-source use, local inference capability, model substitutability.
Procurement	How are contracts written, and what do they lock you into?	Outcome-based tenders, exit clauses, multi-vendor strategy.
Capability	Do you have the internal skills to specify, evaluate, and adapt?	In-house expertise, auditability, ability to learn from delivery.

The Sovereignty Spectrum

For each layer, position yourself honestly on a spectrum. Neither extreme is automatically correct. Full dependence surrenders control; full autarky is often unaffordable and can isolate you from innovation. The aim is to know where you stand, and to have chosen it.

	POSITION	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
1	Dependent	No practical control. Switching is infeasible. Decisions made by others.
2	Constrained	Some influence, but locked into a vendor, platform, or contract.
3	Deliberate	A conscious trade-off, with a documented exit path and known risks.
4	Resilient	Modular, interoperable, multi-vendor. Substitution is realistic.
5	Sovereign	Full control of this layer, operated with internal capability.

A note on interpretation: a score of 3 (Deliberate) is often a perfectly good answer. A government that consciously accepts dependence on an external cloud provider, with a costed exit path and clear governance, is in a far stronger position than one that has drifted into the same dependence without noticing.

The Self-Assessment

Score each statement from 1 to 5 using the spectrum above. Complete it with a mixed team: technical, legal, procurement, and policy, since each will see a different part of the picture. Total your score at the end.

1. Governance

STATEMENT	SCORE (1–5)
We have a clear, documented public-interest mandate governing our technology decisions.	
Decision rights over major technology choices sit inside our institution, not with a supplier.	
We can change direction on a major system without a supplier's agreement.	

2. Data

STATEMENT	SCORE (1–5)
We know where all citizen data is stored and under which legal jurisdiction.	
Citizens can see who accessed their data, when, and for what purpose.	
We control the terms under which our data may be reused, including model training.	

3. Infrastructure

STATEMENT	SCORE (1–5)
We understand our hosting dependencies and could migrate if we needed to.	
A costed, tested exit and migration path exists for our critical systems.	
Critical services would continue to operate if a single supplier failed or withdrew.	

4. Models and Software

STATEMENT	SCORE (1–5)
We can run inference locally for routine, high-volume tasks where it matters.	
Our services do not depend on a single proprietary model that cannot be substituted.	
We use open standards and open-source components wherever they are viable.	

5. Procurement

STATEMENT	SCORE (1–5)
Our tenders specify outcomes and measures rather than fixed feature lists.	
Our contracts include realistic exit, portability, and data-return clauses.	
We have avoided free or low-cost entry points that quietly embed themselves in workflows.	

6. Capability

STATEMENT	SCORE (1–5)
We have internal expertise to specify, evaluate, and oversee what we buy.	
We can audit the behavior of the systems we deploy, including AI systems.	
We retain knowledge from each procurement and apply it to the next.	

Interpreting Your Score

Total the eighteen scores for a result between 18 and 90. The number matters less than the pattern — look for the layers where you scored lowest and ask whether that position was chosen or inherited.

SCORE	POSITION	WHAT TO DO NEXT
18–36	Exposed	Sovereignty is largely accidental. Dependencies are unmapped and exit paths do not exist. Start with Governance and Procurement, they unlock everything else.
37–54	Constrained	Some awareness, but real lock-in in several layers. Priorities costed exit paths and contract renegotiation before the next major procurement.
55–72	Deliberate	Dependence is understood and largely chosen. Focus on Capability and Models, and on where substitution is still unrealistic.
73–90	Resilient	Strong sovereignty by design. Maintain it: sovereignty is not achieved once, and every new procurement can erode it.

Sovereignty by Design: Seven Practical Moves

Whatever your score, these seven actions strengthen sovereignty at every layer. They were the most consistently recommended interventions across the Congress.

1	Build modular architecture so components can be replaced without wholesale system replacement.
2	Adopt open standards and interoperable interfaces as a default requirement, not an aspiration.
3	Write exit, portability, and data-return clauses into every contract before you sign it.
4	Pursue a multi-vendor or hybrid build-and-buy strategy in the layers where sovereignty matters most.
5	Develop local inference capability for routine, high-volume tasks such as anonymisation and translation.
6	Invest in internal capability — outsourcing delivery is reasonable; outsourcing judgment is not.
7	Give citizens visibility and control over their own data, through trackers and consent services.

Full-stack sovereignty is unrealistic for most governments. Sovereignty by design (modular, interoperable, well-governed, and deliberately chosen) is both achievable and necessary.

With Thanks

This framework was shaped by the ideas, warnings, and hard-won lessons shared by the following speakers at the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress 2026. Our thanks to each of them for the thinking that made this resource possible:

- **Kelly Ommundsen**, Head of Digital Public Goods, World Economic Forum ("AI in Public Services: Pilots, Scale, and Digital Sovereignty")
- **Leanne Cummings**, Director, Products and Services, Government Digital Service, United Kingdom ("Beyond Legacy: Building Governments That Work")
- **Carlos Santiso**, Senior Advisor on Digital Government and Artificial Intelligence, OECD ("Beyond Legacy: Building Governments That Work; AI in Action: From Policy to Implementation")
- **Jaume Miralles**, Director General of Digital Innovation, Government of Catalonia ("AI in Public Services: Pilots, Scale, and Digital Sovereignty")
- **Jana Krimpe**, Founder and CEO, B.EST Solutions ("Digital Identity and Public Infrastructure")
- **Adolfo Sanz de Diego**, EducaMadrid, Community of Madrid ("Industry session on digital workplace sovereignty")

Their contributions, gathered across four sessions of the Congress, shaped both the reframing of sovereignty as a continuum and the practical structure of this framework.

The fourth edition of the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress will be announced in the coming months. To stay connected and be the first to hear about G4I 2027, visit g4i-congress.com and follow us on social media.

