

John Whittingdale's Speech at Open Data Institute Summit 2020

I'd like to start by thanking the Open Data Institute for organising today's virtual summit and to all those who are going to take part in what I'm sure is going to be a really fascinating discussion.

I think all of us recognise that there is a vast potential for increasing the use of data in order to make things better, and to make society function better.

We're all familiar with the opportunities which the greater use of data brings for helping businesses to grow, and fuelling innovation.

But obviously it has been particularly in the course of the last six months that we have seen the benefits that data brings in tackling what is a global pandemic.

It is global – I was talking at a virtual conference in India just a few weeks ago, and one of the speakers raised the question then of how we would have coped with the Covid crisis if it had taken place just 5 or 6 years ago, when we didn't have the benefits that the internet has brought and digital technology.

So today we are familiar with how we can use those methods to communicate, as we are doing today; all of us have had to get used to Zoom calls and Teams meetings, and the rest.

But also how we've been able to survive with our schools closed, so our children have been able to be educated online, we've used it to communicate the vital messages we need to get across and also to provide entertainment to people just to get them through what has obviously been a very difficult few months.

There is absolutely no question that digital technology and data use has been at the heart of our response to the pandemic.

But even before that, the government saw that there was an enormous potential from the greater use of data, the power that data and technology can bring – that was something we were thinking about quite carefully even before the present crisis arose. And the first challenge was to try to increase the use of data across government.

It's important that we set an example and demonstrate what can be achieved and there are lots of different examples I could give of how that has taken place.

But just to pick out one – law enforcement, for instance, might not have sufficient data in order to provide a context to understand both the national and local picture of domestic abuse, which is obviously something that is a

huge challenge, particularly at the moment.

But what we've managed to do is use the data from the Office for National Statistics to draw together sources from a number of different data pictures, which have allowed us to understand much better how we can provide support to victims of abuse, and also a better understanding of the criminal justice system's response and what brings it about.

And in so many different areas of government activity, if we draw upon data sets which are already there but which perhaps have not been properly exploited, we can use those to increase understanding and ultimately to deliver better public services.

But it's not just about the use of data across government, it's about the use of data right across the economy in order to create a pro-innovation, pro-growth environment.

And that really is the purpose of our recently published National Data Strategy – to set out that ambitious agenda as to how we can better use data in order to fuel our economy, drive the recovery and rebuild after the crisis is behind us.

In talking about creating a pro-growth, pro-innovation environment, some people have suggested that that may be in conflict with the other priority, which is to build trust and ensure there are proper safeguards for people's privacy.

But actually I think the two are not in conflict at all – I think they are absolutely essential dual components.

Because one of the most important things, if we are to drive the greater use of data across the economy, people have to have confidence that their data is not going to be improperly used, it's not going to be stolen or exploited, and that they can be confident in the safeguards around privacy and data protection.

So what we want to do is create an environment where data is appropriately usable and accessible across the economy, and to develop a policy framework to identify where data availability can support growth and innovation, and what the role of government in that should be.

We're already quite far advanced – the first tranche of research that we've been conducting into this has nearly been completed and that considers what the government should be doing to address market failures, which have meant that it has been harder to use data across the economy to promote growth.

And we'll now be tackling those market failures and conducting further research focused on data foundations to make sure that the data is findable, accessible, interoperable and can be used again.

And so the research that we are commissioning shortly will look at the importance of data foundations for the adoption of data-driven technologies like artificial intelligence in the private and third sectors, and it will

consider what the role of government should be in supporting those better data foundations.

That work is going to be vital if we are to succeed in harnessing the power of data to boost productivity, to create new jobs and to improve public services.

Since we published the National Data Strategy, which is really an invitation to all the people who are taking part in our discussion today to contribute to the drawing up of the more detailed strategy, we've already been undertaking a number of discussions with individual stakeholders.

I suspect quite a few of the ones I've been talking to may be listening in to our discussion this afternoon.

But what we want to do is make this a truly cross-sector endeavour and already we've been encouraged by the enthusiasm and commitment that we've found from those that we've been talking to.

So it is by engaging on those issues that I think we can start to understand what we need to do to meet our ambition that data and data use are seen as opportunities to be embraced rather than threats against which to be guarded.

And one of the things that has concerned me in the past is that if you look at the reporting about data in the popular press, in the national media, previously it was always about cyber hacking, phishing attacks, people wanting to steal data.

I mean that brings across the fact that data is very valuable, that's why there are people out there who want to steal it.

But the negative side has had too much attention – that's beginning to change I think, particularly in the last few months, where we've begun to see the benefits that data has brought in helping us to meet the pandemic.

But obviously we need to continue to get the message across that we need to have proper protections in place, that privacy is important but also we want to begin to highlight the huge benefits that better data use can bring to the economic wellbeing of the country.

So the discussions we've been having in the last few weeks have already given us invaluable feedback and helped us to refine the focus on the opportunities which data presents to us.

And that is something which obviously I'm keen to encourage in the coming months and I want to try to promote further the recognition that data use, if done properly, can bring real benefits.

We've seen one or two specific examples – open banking, for instance, has been an important first step in providing small businesses with access to markets that were once closed off and we need to continue to look at how we can do more in that area.

We've also begun a wider engagement campaign, which will reach out to a range of organisations, from small businesses to charities, with events from London to Newcastle, and we want to hear from all those who have a stake in this, from every part of the country.

And while those conversations have centred on our future growth and areas of opportunity, we've also heard questions around our plans to maintain a data regime that is future-proof and fit for purpose.

So we will not just want to realise the value of data through domestic action – we recognise very much that the flow of information across borders fuels global business operations, supply chains and trade, and powers growth right across the world.

So as we approach the end of the Transition Period in just a few weeks time and are no longer bound by European law, we want to champion the benefits that data can deliver and we will promote best practice and work with all our international partners to ensure that data is not inappropriately constrained by national borders and fragmented regulatory regimes.

That includes ensuring that cross-border flows of personal data can continue lawfully and uninterrupted.

Obviously the immediate issue here is whether or not we can continue to maintain the recognition of data adequacy with the European Union.

It is very much our ambition to achieve agreement with the EU that the UK remains data adequate, so that there is no impediment to the flow of data, both from this country to the EU, but also back from the EU to the UK.

We don't see any reason why we shouldn't get adequacy because our rules were originally framed by the EU and we don't intend to radically depart from that but that is something which obviously is controlled by the European Union Commission and the time for achieving an adequacy agreement is beginning to run short.

So whilst we still remain very hopeful, it is only sensible that we begin to put in place measures so that we're ready, should it not be possible to achieve an agreement by the end of the year.

So we've been talking to businesses right across the UK, to encourage them to put in place the alternative transfer mechanisms which are necessary if adequacy is not achieved and which will ensure that data transfers continue.

Our work with international partners is also continuing, not just in this regard but across a range of policy areas, and we are going to continue to engage in bilateral fora, in multilateral fora and looking for opportunities for cooperation, where the UK can be a force for good in the world.

And we already are taking a lead through our chair of the Digital Nations group, through our forthcoming presidency of the G7 and we want to make sure that digital and the opportunities for data are very much part of the agenda for these groups where we will be taking a lead.

So I think we are about to start a new chapter and the National Data Strategy begins to set out the ambition for that.

But it's very important that we receive responses to it and I know that the Open Data Institute and others are doing a lot of work in terms of research, in terms of bringing together evidence and pilots, and we look forward very much to continuing to have that conversation with all of you.

Because the National Data Strategy at this stage is a broad framework of the kind of ambitions but we still have a lot of work to do on the detail.

So the consultation on it is going to be open until 2 December 2020 and we are very keen to hear from right across the data community.

We will then be considering the feedback we get and in due course we will be producing a further iteration of the strategy.

Obviously these are very challenging times but it is becoming increasingly clear that the better use of data and digital technology lies absolutely at the heart of meeting those challenges, so now is exactly the right time to be focusing on that and the National Data Strategy is an excellent beginning for that.

So thank you for your invitation this afternoon and please, to all those on the call, we look forward to you responding, and we'll read with great interest what you have to say. Thank you.