

Julia Lopez speech at techUK's 'Building the Smarter State' Conference

Introduction

It's a pleasure to join you all today – just like almost every conference and event since March, we are meeting virtually – and it feels like a fitting way for me to deliver my first speech as a Minister.

Nearly a year ago, I went on maternity leave. And when I returned to work in June, I did not just come back to a new role. I came back to a different world. A world in which nearly every new professional relationship I have built has been through a computer screen. Where a physical remoteness from colleagues has been replaced by a what's become a strange intimacy as the office has entered the home. It's a world that has introduced vast new challenges at the same time as injecting urgency into solving old ones.

The pandemic demands that each of us thinks differently about how we do things, and strives to do them better. It is in this spirit that the government wishes to transform how we serve citizens. Improving our digital systems to deliver public services, and using data more intelligently to tailor them, is going to be critical in that task.

Some of you will have seen my Cabinet Office colleague, Lord Agnew, speak at the virtual public services board meeting back in June and Alison Pritchard of the Government Digital Service (GDS) has also held a couple of sessions to highlight GDS's role during the pandemic.

I know these have been very much welcomed as ways to hear directly about how the Government has been taking the enormous challenges of Covid as the spur to improve the way government services are delivered online.

Some have said that the demands of the Covid pandemic mean that now is not the time for reform.

For me and my ministerial colleagues, the opposite is true.

It has underlined how vital reform is, particularly in how we can use the momentum provided by Covid to reduce the friction – and frankly the frustration – that people can experience when accessing and interacting with government services online.

As Michael Gove said in his recent speech on public service:

“we surely know the machinery of government is no longer equal to the challenges of today. We owe change to the people we serve.”

So today, I hope to build on what you've heard over the summer and to give you a sense of our direction of travel in terms of reform, as well as a flavour of my own areas of focus and interest as the Cabinet Office's new Parliamentary Secretary with responsibility for GDS.

Reflections from Covid – what we got right

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the power and potential of digital and data to inform, empower and serve our citizens.

It's also put the government's digital infrastructure to the test like never before.

Some things have worked really well. Some things haven't.

What has been striking is the unprecedented explosion in the demand for digital and online services, and how fast we've scaled up existing services and built new digital products.

I'm thinking about the hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people who were able to access essential support via the Vulnerable Persons Service, which was built in just four days.

I'm thinking too of the over nine million workers who, to their huge relief, were paid wages through the furlough payment scheme launched by HMRC. This project was built largely on civil servants' kitchen tables and in their spare rooms; it went live with virtually no technical or scaling issues – imagine the outcry had it crashed in its first hour! – and enjoyed overwhelmingly positive feedback from both workers and employers.

And existing platforms and services have also risen to the challenge of extra demand:

Take GOV.UK – it would normally expect to have around 19 million page views a week. In a single week during the pandemic, that increased to a record 132 million page views. This is testament to its role as the single authoritative online source of government information and services.

Nearly one million new GOV.UK Verify accounts were created in the three months from March 2020, enabling people to access critical government services online like Universal Credit.

And GOV.UK Notify, has kept millions of people updated and informed throughout the pandemic through text messages, emails or letters and has also seen a large increase in volume, with a peak of 8.6 million daily messages.

This is down to the hard work of our colleagues in GDS and the digital foundations that have been built over the past nine years since its inception.

Together with teams across government – and the private sector – they have helped ensure the resilience of our digital infrastructure and the delivery

of new digital services at a time of huge national need.

Reflections from Covid – what we can do better

But the last seven months have also underlined the need for reform to ensure government services are digital by default, more personalised and more efficient.

Now more than ever, the public expect the same kind of seamless service from the government's online systems as they receive from the best commercial sites, such as from supermarkets or banks.

To do that, we need to do three main things:

First, we need to do more to put citizens at the centre of services.

Systems are still far too fragmented, making it difficult to work in a joined-up way across government and deliver seamless services.

Second, we need to get better at using data.

Covid has shown the huge benefits and potential that come when we collect and interrogate data for analysis and insight and for informing policy making and providing services to the public.

But too often data isn't shared effectively across departments – and this can make it harder to provide services that are centred around the user. I think we all know this has been a systemic issue across government for years.

And third, we need to make sure the right leadership, organisational and system changes are in place to make reform happen.

Putting citizens at the centre – vision for single sign-on

As things stand, the customer experience of online government services can fall short of expectations – and unlike in the private sector, our customers can't simply opt to go somewhere else.

That's why people now expect – and demand – that the government acts more like a modern, fully digitally-enabled service provider.

We've made good strides in the last few years in the way we publish government information and signpost services.

Moving from over 2000 separate disconnected websites to a single GOV.UK website has been a very important and valuable achievement, as we've seen during the pandemic.

But at the moment, there are many ways to sign on to different government services. Too often, users have to enter the same data again and again. And we know how frustrating that is.

Our vision is for members of the public to be able to access any online central government service simply, safely and securely using a single sign-on. When necessary to prove your identity, it should be as easy as possible, without re-entering information.

Over time, we want to create new and innovative services, as well as improve the quality and efficiency of the services we deliver. It may also open the door to personalisation, where those users who want it can be alerted to changes which might affect them.

I recognise that creating a single sign-on is a really complex task. And I'm alive to concerns about privacy. So that's why I want to engage early in this area as we go on this journey so we can make sure there is a robust consent-based approach.

But the key point and core principle is user control. We want to work towards a state where data use in government is set up to ensure that people, when they choose to, don't need to restate their data on repeat occasions to different parts of government.

Instead, data can be accessed, verified and stored when appropriate, in order to provide a proactive and low-friction service to the user.

Better use of data and making the system changes

To help deliver on our vision, we need to work across departments to improve data sharing.

The future of digital government is joined-up government.

So we need a framework and infrastructure that allows the more effective sharing of trusted data...

...a genuinely joined-up, cross-government approach, is going to be a fundamental shift.

Departments' traditional responsibilities and accountabilities have often resulted in service-centred rather than user-centred solutions. That's meant pretty good experiences for users making single, specific transactions online.

But the disconnect between these different services has led to disjointed decision making, inefficiencies and lost opportunities for a greater user experience.

That's why we are putting in place the right organisational structures and levers, and addressing legacy IT issues, that will enable us to deliver the improvements we want to see.

For example, we have decided to divide and conquer by making a machinery of government change.

Responsibility for government data now sits with GDS and the Cabinet Office.

This will help it to be used more effectively to inform policy makers and help design and deliver better services to the public.

DDCMS will focus on how data can help boost the digital economy more widely and look at how the government and the private sector might work together for the benefit of our citizens....

...such as the work we are doing through our current Document Checking Service pilot to improve the way people can safely and easily confirm specific information online, such as for a passport or mortgage application.

Much of what we want to do now – and in the future – is held back by current structures and systems. That clearly includes moving beyond Legacy IT and getting government departments and agencies into the cloud.

We hope a new procurement strategy and different thinking on what services UK tech firms might provide could open up exciting new opportunities to smaller, bespoke operators.

Getting under the car bonnet of government is never the most glamorous job – but if you want a smooth-running, well-oiled machine that can help you to change gear and accelerate towards the destination you want, it is absolutely vital.

Leadership to drive and deliver change

That means we really need the right leadership. We need the right driver.

You'll know that recruitment is underway for a Government Chief Digital Officer. With the deadline for applications fast approaching, so I wanted, finally, to highlight the importance that I and other Ministers attach to this Permanent Secretary level role.

This new and unique role comes at a critical time for our country. Since a similar post was advertised last autumn, we are in a very very different place. As a government, we have a new mandate following the Election.

That gives us the means as well as the ambition to deliver real reform – and give the new Government Chief Digital Officer the teeth, tools and total commitment to do the job.

And also the pandemic has also been a game-changer. They say necessity is the mother of invention. Well the pandemic has shown us that in spades. It has put rocket boosters under our ambitions.

It has not only continued to shift the public's attitude about online services, it has blown away barriers that have held us back in the past and created the will among departments and the most senior leaders to sort this area of government out.

There is now an exciting window of opportunity for the right person to help us seize this once-in-a-generation moment for radical reform.

This is one of the largest IT roles in the world, but it's not just a technocratic position – it's about fundamentally helping improve the daily lives of millions of people.

The last few months have brought home just how important digital is as an empowering and liberating force for good. This role is an opportunity to embed that force for good across government and to improve the accessibility of services that millions of people rely on.

My message to those of you in the tech world who think you might fit the bill is: Your government – and your country – needs you!

Conclusion

So far from being cowed by the crisis we are fired up...

...even more determined to deliver ambitious changes that will strengthen the efficiency, effectiveness and resilience of online government services.

Thank you to techUK for the expert analysis and recommendations you provide to help inform the direction and debate.

We look forward to continuing to work closely with you as we build the digital capabilities, skills and infrastructure we need across government.

By doing so, we can ensure the UK harnesses the full power of digital, data and technology and we realise our vision to put people more in control and at the centre of the government services they use.

Thank you.