

# Speech: Changing technology, changing government, changing lives

Thank you Dan, and thank you all for joining us today.

It's always good to be here in the West Midlands.

Yesterday one of my kids saw that I was speaking at The Custard Factory and I think she thought it would be some kind of Willy Wonka wonderland.

She wanted to bunk off school, stow away in the car..

I think she'd be the only person here today who was disappointed with what she saw and heard!

This is a great event with some great people, and it's a really timely event too.

Because we're living through a period of enormous change.

The most obvious sphere in which that's happening is technology.

Now, before I go any further, I know that a politician talking about the digital world can all too easily find themselves wading into dangerous waters!

I remember when I ran the DCMS, one person told me that every time an MP says "coding", a programmer dies a little inside..

So I'm not going to stand here today and read a script that lets me pretend I'm some kind of digital guru.

I won't be talking about the finer points of conversion rate optimisation or hybrid cloud brokerage!

But even to the layman it's obvious that the technology we use day to day, hardware and software, has transformed beyond all recognition in the past 10 or 20 years.

And that has had a massive impact on the way we live our lives, in all kinds of different ways.

To take one, very small, example: when I was growing up in Bristol, if I was a naughty boy and my parents wanted to punish me, they'd take my cricket bat away.

Say I couldn't go outside and play.

Today, I've got 4 children of my own.

And if one of them misbehaves, the most effective punishment I have is to

change the password on the wifi!

Some say that's excessively cruel.

I say it gets results.

It's just one example of how the way we live our lives is being shaped and changed by the tools that are available to us.

So technology is changing.

The way we live is changing.

And our expectations about all kinds of things, from shopping to public services, they're changing too.

Anyone who's older than about 35 will feel a twinge of nostalgia about the phrase "allow 28 days for delivery".

But today, in 2017, it comes as a bit of a shock when you reach the point where you have to print something off, put it in an envelope, stick it in the post and then sit back and wait for a response.

We expect services to be online, to be accessible, to be instant.

Technology has changed, lifestyles have changed, expectations have changed.

But that alone is not news, certainly not to people like you.

What gives this event its importance, its topicality, is that we're also in the midst of exciting times for local democracy.

Just look at one of our hosts here today, the West Midlands Combined Authority.

The government is absolutely committed to localism, to putting power back in the hands of towns, cities and communities.

And one of the ways we're doing that is through the creation of combined authorities with elected mayors like Andy Street

I know you'll have the chance to hear from Andy in an hour or so.

That's an opportunity not to be missed, because he really is doing incredible work here in the West Midlands, serving as a real champion for the region and showing just what combined authority is capable of.

Combined authorities are all about bringing communities together, breaking down bureaucratic barriers, joining up people and areas that have common interests – much as the internet does, in fact.

They're a great step forward for localism, for devolution and for local government itself.

And their arrival is not the only change.

We're also seeing increasing interest in the use of unitary status.

We're seeing smaller councils at parish and town level taking on greater responsibility for local services.

We've got Local Enterprise Partnerships, police and crime commissioners, the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine...

It's an unprecedented growth in local democracy.

And that nexus of change – in technology, in lifestyle, in government – is where we find ourselves meeting today.

It's home to incredible range of opportunities for the public and private sector, for councils of all shapes and sizes, for SMEs and big-name companies.

## **The good, the bad and the ugly**

As you'll see today there are some examples of councils doing great work in this area.

Later on Andy will be setting out his ambitions for the West Midlands.

I know Camden has also been blazing a trail and that you'll be hearing from Theo Blackwell about that a little later.

It's certainly no surprise that he has been poached by the Mayor of London!

Manchester and Essex are both taking serious action to get data-led change.

Networks like [LocalGovDigital](#) are helping people come together to share ideas, insights and innovations.

And adoption of the local digital service standard is providing common expectations around transformation.

Up and down the country there are examples of small but effective digital innovations that really meet local needs.

In fact, on the surface, things are pretty impressive.

Most councils now take online payments.

I saw a stat the other day that said most contact between residents and councils now takes place online.

That's great.

But peek behind the curtain and the situation starts to look a little less rosy.

Because once all that data has been received thanks to online contact, half of all councils are manually re-keying more than 50% of it.

Think about what that means.

Residents are dutifully providing councils with the data they ask for in the format they request it, and the councils are then employing an army of bureaucrats to type it in all over again.

Much of that data is then stored in siloed server stacks tucked away in the basement, with no sharing or joined-up analysis to improve the way councils work.

Want to study the way services interact, or understand how and why different people access multiple services?

Tough, you can't!

Even simple transactional services like applications for school places or residents' parking permits leave a lot to be desired.

Councils are too often trying to run modern services on outdated legacy systems, with results that are painful enough for public servants, never mind citizens

There are more than 350 full councils in England, and literally thousands more at the parish and town level.

And although they're all delivering the same services within the same rules, when it comes to digital they're all too often working to their own standards and doing their own thing.

All planning authorities have to handle planning applications, yet there's almost no standardization of how these are handled and presented online.

Finding details of a specific development without knowing which local authority is responsible is all but impossible.

It's not uncommon for one household to receive services from 3 different authorities – parish, district and county.

In such cases the public don't care and often don't know which tier of local government, is responsible, as far as they're concerned it's just "the council".

Yet if they want to engage, enquire or even just read up on what's happening, they'll be faced with 3 different websites, often poorly linked and poorly signposted.

A couple of years ago we introduced new transparency rules for the smallest councils, ensuring that information about how and what they spent money on was available online.

And we quickly found that some bottom-tier authorities had sites that – if they existed at all – looked like they'd been produced in GeoCities.

I know there's more to digital services than the cosmetic.

But if your technology still looks like it did a decade or more ago, the chances are your underlying systems aren't up to speed and the way you use technology is stuck in the past.

There's a similar transparency code for larger councils, asking them to make data available online in an easily accessible format.

To say compliance is patchy would be something of an understatement.

This is not all the result of willful neglect.

Rather, it's symptomatic of a system that, instead of being planned, has grown up organically over time.

If you were starting with a blank sheet of paper you certainly wouldn't design it this way.

But it's what we have, and incentives to do anything about it are sorely lacking.

The lack of consumer power certainly doesn't help here.

If you don't like the service levels provided by one online retailer, you can always take your money elsewhere. But you can't choose to pay council tax to a different local authority.

You have to take what they give you.

And of course your council doesn't face competition from other providers of local democracy, so there's little incentive for them to invest time and money in doing things better.

The opportunities on offer

But do better we must, because the opportunities are enormous.

Nesta says £15 billion could be saved by councils every year if they make better use of technology.

That's a huge amount of money, more than 4 times the revenue support grant.

But the benefits go much further than that.

Just think about the potential if we really designed services around user needs, if we personalised services to reduce avoidable contact.

A consistent approach to gathering data means better analysis of services right across the country, good news for everyone who receives them.

A more open approach to sharing the data government already holds could do so much to speed up the planning, construction and sale of the homes this country so badly needs.

Working with local SMEs rather than vast multinationals can provide a welcome boost to the local economy.

And so on. I talk about these as opportunities.

But embracing digital is no longer optional.

It's not a nice to have, something you can decide not to do.

Part of that is down to customer expectations.

As I've said, in 2017 people rightly demand digital services, they assume that they will be able to access them online.

But we also have to recognise that carrying on as we've always done is simply unsustainable.

Demand for council services is growing, the standards we expect are rising.

You can't just keep patching up existing models and hoping for the best.

We need efficient, responsive, joined-up services, and that's not something you can deliver in an analogue world.

And we need the right leadership, with the right attitude.

An understanding and embrace of digital is no longer something that can be safely left to a local authority's IT department.

It doesn't belong in the basement, it belongs in the boardroom.

## **What we're doing about it**

Now, as you can imagine, in this job I give a lot of speeches about the future of local government.

And what usually happens is that I stand here and set out the problems and talk about how to fix them.

And the audience nods along and agrees and smiles politely and then we get to the questions and they say:

"That's great Saj, but what are you going to do about it?"

Well, for one thing I've appointed a chief digital officer who I've asked to focus on ensuring local government makes the most of the digital opportunities on offer.

My department is working with councils and the Government Digital Service to create a new vision and a call to arms on local government digital.

That should be ready to share in the spring.

In the meantime my department will be working with councils and companies alike to help everyone involved in the sector connect and share common components, skills, design patterns and – yes – code.

But that's not all.

Because the people in this room also have a huge role to play in meeting my number 1 priority as Secretary of State – getting more homes built.

When Harold Macmillan was overseeing house building back in the 1950s, his biggest challenge was getting his hands on sufficient raw materials – wood, brick, steel and so on.

Today, it can be equally hard to get hold of the raw material of the digital age: data.

It's something that comes up again and again when I speak to builders, councils, housing campaigners and others.

And it's an issue I'm determined to get to grips with.

So, following our manifesto commitment on Digital Land, my department will be leading work to develop a new digital platform on which we can publish the kind of raw data and interactive maps that are useful to builders, innovators and entrepreneurs.

This government has long embraced the principle of open data, and I want to bring that to the housing sector.

Releasing data locked away in arms-length bodies like the Homes and Community Agency, and making it easier to access difficult foundational data like geospatial identifiers.

And, although I can't make any promises right now, I'll be working with the Land Registry and Ordnance Survey to see what further datasets they can release.

## **The role of the digital sector**

So I'm very much on local government's side in this.

I'm not just lecturing from on high, I'm getting down in the trenches and doing everything I can to help.

But it's not just local government that can and must do better.

The tech industry also has to challenge the way it traditionally works.

Above all, you have to recognise that the public sector, and local government in particular, are not typical clients.

A business is accountable to its owners, its directors, its shareholders.

But a council has to answer to every single person it serves.

Appetite for risk is, quite rightly, lower.

The “Fail again, fail better” mantra works better with Venture Capital cash than it does with council taxes.

Councils provide universal services that have to be accessed by literally everyone.

Moving fast and breaking things is all well and good, but you can't use social care, education and child protection as some kind of sandbox to try out new ideas.

I absolutely want to see you disrupt public services – but you can't disrupt the provision of services to the public.

To put it bluntly, people notice if their bins don't get collected!

Just ask anyone who lives in Birmingham!

It's also worth noting that the average age of a local councillor in England is just over 60.

Many are absolutely passionate about the opportunities that the technological revolution can bring – after all, Tim Berners-Lee is a spritely 62!

But it's important to remember that most councillors are not exactly digital natives.

And that inevitably shapes their views, attitudes and decision-making.

I want to see more of you supplying services to local authorities.

But if you're going to wean them off the safety-first approach that sees them default to 15-year contracts with the same old vendors, it's so important that you speak the language of local government.

That you think in terms of outcomes for residents rather than exciting digital inputs.

That you show them technology as a means, not an end in itself.

What can you do for the hard-pressed single mum juggling work and childcare while trying to get her kids into a good school?

What can you do for the elderly resident who lives alone and is about to be discharged from hospital?

What can you do to get the right homes built in the right place, supported by the right infrastructure?

What can you do to cut tax bills, to speed up responses, to support lower-tier authorities taking on new responsibilities?

That's what councilors are trying to do and that's what you can help them achieve.

And let me just thank Dan and everyone at Public for all the work they're doing to bring councils and SMEs together to make that happen.

The in-depth report you've published today is excellent.

## **Conclusion: riding the wave**

It's almost 23 years since Clifford Stoll confidently – and infamously – used a Newsweek editorial to mock the idea of people reading newspapers online, or shopping at a website rather than on the high street.

Less noticed in his list of “things that will never happen” was the prediction that “no computer network will change the way government works”.

Well, the internet came for newspapers.

It came for retail.

And now it's coming for local government.

We can't ignore the wave.

We have to ride it.

That's why events like this are so important.

That's why I'm making sure my department offers the support and expertise that digital local government needs.

And that's why I'll continue to do all I can to bring together the best partners in both local government and the tech industry.

There's a lot of work to do.

I know it won't be easy.

But I also know there is no lack of ambition, passion and potential in the world of digital local government.

And I'm looking forward to working with you as we turn that potential into results.

Thank you.