

Speech: Oliver Dowden CBE MP – speech at the government ICT conference 2019

Well good morning.

I was also at the conference in Paris [GovTech Summit 2018]. It was a great occasion bringing together representatives from GovTech from across Europe. And it's a sharp reminder that whilst I think we can pat ourselves on the back for being leaders in the UK, there is an awful lot of competition out there, and the fact that President Macron himself lent his support to the event, demonstrates the commitment across other countries to ensure that they get up to speed in the race.

So it really is a pleasure for me to join you at the government ICT conference.

The internet has made the age we live in, one of options. If Google Maps doesn't suit your needs, you might download CityMapper or TraveLine instead. When it comes to social media, you might (as I do) prefer Instagram to Twitter. I can assure you there is no product placement going on there.

Companies strive to give us the very best user experience so that we choose their product. With every tweak and iteration, we benefit from that competition and, in turn, our expectations are raised.

People don't have that option when it comes to interacting with government. From appointing a lasting power of attorney to checking your state pension, government provides services which cannot be found elsewhere.

So, when you don't have options (and you're used to choice in pretty much every aspect of your online day-to-day life) you really do expect the best.

It is crucial therefore that we do all we can to deliver an excellent service to citizens. I believe that we do this by exploring new technologies and sensibly implementing them, by supporting those who undertake this work and by encouraging the partnerships between the private and public sectors. And it's this last component, I believe, which is the accelerant.

It's the right thing to do and it's the only thing to do. In business, we've seen all too often that when it comes to embracing innovation and digital practices, it's a case of adapt or close. Government clearly can't close. We have people to serve. Government can't deliver a second-rate online experience either. Our citizens deserve the best.

That is why I have made this one of my top Ministerial priorities. This is for a number of reasons. First of all, I really want to make sure innovation that is standard practice in the private sector, becomes standard practice in the public sector. I also want to ensure there is benchmarking within government, and the best performing departments can share that best practice.

I also want the government to think differently about how it can do things. If you think about the consumer experience, it's been revolutionised in the past decade. The way we live has changed. But this change has not yet been reflected in government. So I want to put the building blocks in place to ensure this can happen.

Finally, I'm also committed to ensuring that in doing this, we support the wider tech sector in the UK. Government can lead the way if it's an intelligent and coordinated buyer of emerging technologies, and in so doing, help those small and innovative businesses to thrive, and address some of the challenges highlighted today about ensuring we create a level playing field so that SMEs are able to get their fair share of government contracts.

We have the willing – the large audience I see before me attests to that. We certainly have the expertise – our tech sector attracts bright minds and billions of pounds of investment every year and, thankfully, we're not starting from scratch. The Government Digital Service, for example, has changed the way people interact with government. From creating a single online home for government – GOV.UK – to creating the Digital Marketplace to make it easier for companies of all sizes to do business with government – the Digital Marketplace recently went Global – we've made great progress already.

A strong tradition of public and private sector collaboration is part of the reason why the UK is a world leader in digital government.

I firmly believe that in order to serve people efficiently, we need to partner with, and learn from our private sector. There is some incredible work being done – British companies working in Big Data, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Blockchain have seen record levels of funding in 2018 and more investment than other European hubs. While the UK continues to attract more venture capital investment and tech IPOs than any other European hub in 2018, investment was down on 2017. That's why I'm doing all I can to champion the UK's govtech sector and our SMEs.

Improving the process of procuring private sector expertise was one of my early priorities as a Minister. Helping level the playing field for small businesses – who are often the most innovative and flexible – has been a main priority in this work. I was pleased to introduce measures to exclude government suppliers from being awarded new contracts if they do not pay their subcontractors on time. This should provoke a behaviour change among our suppliers and provide a real boost to small businesses.

It has been, and continues to be, a priority for me to identify and encourage relationships between the public and private sectors. To that end, I'd like to share exactly some of what has been achieved and give you some examples.

One brilliant way we've been able to do this is through the GovTech Catalyst programme. Through it, we're tackling terrorist images online, helping to solve the problem of rural isolation and loneliness and improving firefighter safety with tracking technology.

The GovTech Catalyst is part of the push to bring innovation in government – but it has to be innovation that is appropriate, viable and strategic.

The GovTech Catalyst fund encourages private sector companies to help solve public sector problems. Through the programme, public sector organisations are able to submit challenges. Successful challenges will become competitions that are open to private sector innovators to solve.

It really does allow the public sector to trial innovative technology in a quick and cost-effective way, with a view to it being deployed at scale.

The private sector is given a new route to work with government, government benefits from that expertise, and the public, who we are ultimately all here to serve, feels the benefit.

That's why I'm very pleased today to announce the five latest challenges today. So, let's begin.

Last month, an ex-Google engineer undertook what he claimed was the first US coast-to-coast drive completed entirely by self-driving technology. If that engineer was looking closely, he will have seen Oxford County Council gaining speed in his rear-view mirror. Oxfordshire County Council wants to investigate how it too can manage autonomous vehicles in local traffic management control systems.

It is an ambitious aim, designed to make Britain's roads safer, enabling a smoother passage from conventional to autonomous vehicles when that time comes. They are working closely with a number of partners, including Department for Transport and the Centre for Autonomous Vehicles.

The next challenge comes from Leeds City Council. It wants to investigate how sensors can be used to monitor the condition of social housing. By using data and taking proactive steps to intervene and help vulnerable residents, we will save money and improve the quality of people's lives.

Leeds City Council will ensure that privacy concerns are addressed. This is about monitoring the property, not the person. Between 2016 and 2017, there were 330,000 new social housing lettings in the UK – the solution to this problem has the potential to improve housing conditions significantly and at scale.

The third challenge comes from Scottish National Heritage. It seeks a digital tool to clarify the planning permission system. Scottish National Heritage, land managers and developers will be able to use the solution to better understand requirements and regulation, in doing so saving time and money. The solution could have a much wider application beyond Scotland, and indeed perhaps internationally as well.

In Wales, Torfaen County Council wants to look at how, by better using data, it can better predict, sequence and modernise its social care offering. The result of this work will mean that resources can be better delivered to vulnerable users and lessen the so called 'bed-blocking' burden on the NHS.

Finally, Waltham Forest Council in north east London, wants to use data to tackle housing issues in the capital using geospatial intelligence.

An innovative approach using geospatial technology could accelerate house building. For decades this country has failed to build enough homes. It's a problem successive governments have struggled with. And certainly it's something that I'm very much engaged with in my wider portfolio brief as Minister for Implementation. In March, the Prime Minister announced that the planning process would be streamlined, so that building the homes we need isn't held up by bureaucracy.

So do search for GovTech Catalyst on GOV.UK for more information on how to apply to solve a GovTech Catalyst challenge.

I hope you agree those are very interesting and exciting innovations that we're embarking upon.

And linked to that last challenge, the UK is a geospatial world leader and this government is committed to supporting the growth of this sector. Research estimates that by better using public and private sector geospatial data up to £11 billion of extra value could be generated for the economy every single year.

In November, the newly created Geospatial Commission partnered with Innovate UK to launch a new government competition, in which organisations can apply for a share of £1.5 million to fund projects which use crowdsourced data linked to a location. Between £50,000 to £750,000 could be granted to eligible organisations. The deadline for applications is fast approaching (30th January).

It's open to businesses of any size, academic organisations, research and technology organisations and public sector organisations – this list isn't exclusive, so do please check the website for more details.

And we are soon to start a geospatial technology review and the Commission will publish its first Annual Plan in March, with the UK government's first ever Geospatial Strategy by the end of this year.

It does, I'm afraid seem to be the year of strategies, because the Innovation Strategy, which I announced last year, will also be published in spring this year.

It will share our vision of how GDS and wider Cabinet Office can lay the foundations for government to use emerging technologies.

The idea of this is to encourage collaboration between the public and private sectors to experiment together to find innovative solutions to public sector challenges.

The strategy will guard against the risks, and there are risks that come with new technologies and digital developments. But it will also highlight the opportunities, and how departments can benefit from them to produce improved public services and better value for money.

The strategy will cover issues that public sector teams face when developing, procuring and scaling emerging technologies. It will address the requirements on skills, leadership and governance that these technologies bring, including the need to ensure they are used ethically.

This will also support the wider aims and ambitions of the government's industrial strategy, which is designed to create an economy that boosts productivity and builds a Britain fit for the future.

I want this innovation strategy to be developed in collaboration with experts inside and outside of government. For that reason, I've met with as many experts as my diary will allow. On Thursday, in fact, I'm heading up to Scotland to continue these conversations.

This strategy will set the direction of travel and I hope that as Minister, I will be able to attract the attention, resource and funding to deliver the best public services. And certainly my conversations with the Treasury and Chief Secretary to the Treasury – this is all part of ensuring that as we approach the next spending round we're thinking about all these challenges and how we can use these emerging technologies to drive greater efficiencies and better public services. And I know it's something that the whole government is committed to.

So, to end, it is by working together that we will drive our prosperity. Working together means learning from the successes and frustrations of others and forging new partnerships. I hope you will use this conference as an opportunity to do that.

I'd like to end by thanking you all for the contribution you have made and will make to the delivery of first-class public services in this country.

Enjoy the day. And thank you all for your time.