

Speech: The Local Digital Declaration

Let me start, by painting 2 pictures for you; a day in the lives of 2 different council employees.

Before Janet goes to work she remembers that it's bin day, but isn't sure which one. She logs onto the council website, finds the waste page, the check collection page, enters her postcode and then selects her address. Today is black bags.

Janet's daughter attends athletics club, but the school only accepts cheques. So she needs to find a chequebook buried in the drawer.

When she gets into work, rings her father to make sure that he is OK. She hopes her brother remembered to go round to let the carer in.

Today Janet's working on a performance report. Her system has no way to access all the data it needs, so Janet has to email multiple colleagues and agencies asking for the information.

Jane works for another council. Just before she leaves for work she gets a text to remind her that today is black bag bin day.

She pays for her son's school club through on her phone.

Another app lets her know there is someone ringing her mum's doorbell, and she can see that it's the carer. Jane remotely unlocks the door and lets them in.

When it comes to doing her performance report, Jane's computer gets the data she needs from multiple other systems and automatically updates partner agencies when she's done.

So it's clear that technology is already transforming public services, offering real benefits to local government employees, the general public and the council's bottom line.

If you take away one thing from my speech today let it be this: an understanding of digital is no longer something we can leave solely to the IT department.

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

So today, I want to speak about 3 things:

Firstly, about how we should focus on the needs of our citizens.

Next, I'll talk about fixing our digital plumbing, and how that opens up a world of possibilities.

And lastly, I'll outline what I am going to do to help make this happen.

Part 1: services for citizens

Today, we now think nothing of checking the location of trains in real time, or looking round a hotel room halfway across the world before booking it.

And doing all of this from something that fits in our pocket.

This revolution has affected public services too.

If any of you have recently renewed a passport online you'll know the process is a delight to use. No more hanging around in the post office waiting for the photo booth.

Now you do a selfie straight into the system.

There are some great local examples too:

Adur & Worthing is piloting the Going Local service. Here GPs directly refer patients to the council's social prescribing team, helping thousands of them become fitter or stop smoking.

Hackney's Pay My Rent platform, has now been used almost 70,000 times by 15,000 people.

The thing that marks out these top class digital services in both public and private sector is a relentless focus on meeting the needs of their users.

There's no point putting a form online if it's so confusing someone needs to ring up to find out how to fill it in. We've all been there: you just want to pay your taxes, apply for a service, perhaps to get your residents parking sorted.

But after you've worked out what the site is trying to get you to do, sometimes you still have to print the form and email it back – or not so long ago – take 2 forms of ID to the town hall.

A few years ago, Camden council found that every time someone came into a council building, it cost them nearly £14.

When they rang up it was £4 and if they did it online it cost just 30p.

By moving transactions online, they saved £3 million in 3 years.

Similarly, think of your staff.

A recent study showed that up to 60% of a social worker's time is spent typing data into a system. That can't really be a good use of such a precious resource.

So getting this right has a huge impact – both in saving people's time but also saving your council money.

So as we continue to innovate and redesign services, the question you as

leaders should be asking is this:

are we thinking about how our citizens and employees live their lives?

And is what we do making life easier for them, or is it forcing them to do things that suit us and actually end up costing money?

Relentlessly focusing on what our users need is the way forward.

Part 2: fixing the plumbing

Next, we need to fix our digital plumbing.

And by this I want you think about the idea of we need to embrace the idea of "Government as Lego".

Lego bricks come in different shapes and sizes, but they all fit together and allow you to build almost anything.

This is how we should think about our IT.

Today, too much of local government IT is a black box. Too often councils are using huge, proprietary systems for each different thing they do, and they are locked into long-term, inflexible contracts, with opaque cost structures.

But those at the forefront of this digital services revolution, Essex for example, are thinking about the components of our IT that are like a utility and shared across different services.

There are lots of bits of IT that are essentially like electricity. Electricity works to a common standard and there is no point in creating your own version.

Adult Social Care and Revs and Bens are very different services, but each has common elements – workflow, case management, payment systems.

It seems daft to have services in the same organisation paying the suppliers twice to have 2 things doing the same thing.

Multiply this across the hundreds of services a council offers you can see how the costs rack up.

Worse, because all these different systems might come from different providers and each be a proprietary closed system, they can't talk to each other and it becomes hard for a council to share the information it needs across different areas.

Instead we need to separate out those bits of IT that are used a lot across different services, the utility or electricity-like bits.

And for those boring, standard components, we can use modules, or Lego blocks, that we can slot in, swap out and upgrade as we see fit.

Crucially, these Lego blocks are built on common standards which means they are much cheaper and enable information to be shared much more easily.

And as more and more councils use the same common standards for bits of their IT, this catalyses developers to innovate and provide new services and products based on those widely used standards.

A simple example of this fixing the plumbing is moving services to the cloud.

Many local authorities still have services hosted on machines kept in a council warehouse – or even at times – behind the stationary cupboard or under the stairs.

As Glasgow found out a couple of years ago that can mean problems if there's a fire in your data centre.

But increasing numbers of councils are finding out for themselves that digital services can be hosted for a fraction of the price in the cloud. It's a commodity.

For example, thanks to their new cloud strategy, Aylesbury Vale has incredibly saved several millions pounds.

So, for local government, fixing the digital plumbing has the potential to be truly transformative.

Part 3: what I will do

Lastly, I did say what I would talk a little bit of what I am doing to help make all this happen.

Well, I believe that we are stronger together than alone.

The whole point of local services is that they need to differ in how they respond to local need.

But it makes sense for us to learn from each other, and share the common technical features that means councils don't all have to start from scratch if they want to implement a more user friendly and cost-effective digital services

So today a group of us are launching the [Digital Declaration](#).

It's not my Declaration, or the government's – this is a joint endeavour with over 30 organisations in the sector, including Greater Manchester, West Midlands and Greater London combined authorities, SOLACE, CIPFA, Government Digital Service and a cross section of councils of all sizes and colours from across England.

The Declaration sets out our shared vision for world class public services, and invites everyone else to join the movement.

It commits all of us to work together to make sure that the vision is made a

reality.

Words are important. But better when they are backed up with deeds.

That's why I am delighted to announce today that Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) will invest up to £7.5 million over the next 2 years through a new Digital Innovation Fund to support and strengthen local authorities' digital capacity.

What will the money be available for?

A report from the MJ and BT last year found that more than 80% of public sector chief executives see digital transformation as one of their key priorities.

But many feel that their organisations lack the skills and capability to take full advantage.

So we will fund key leaders from the sector to go through a new world class digital leadership programme that we are creating.

You might be a Leader, Portfolio Holder, Chief Executive or CFO, but you will be passionate developing your own digital skills and capabilities.

But beyond this, I recognise that everyone is in different places. Some are at the cutting edge, others are nearer the beginning of their journey.

So this won't be a one size fits all Fund. Before we open the Fund, I want to hear from you about what would be most useful for you?

Where will a small amount of extra resource make the most difference?

And lastly, in addition to the funding, we at MHCLG are creating a delivery team to support everyone who signs up to this ambitious Digital Declaration.

We've worked with 50 to get this far. We now want to work with many more to turn this into a national movement.

We want 50 to turn into 80.

And 80 to turn into hundreds.

Together, I know we can achieve more than we can alone. By supporting each other, and building on each other's work we can build better services for our residents.

Services that are efficient, modern, responsive and simple and delightful to use.

Services that are built around citizens' needs, not ours.

And services that save us money, allowing more of our precious resource to be where it should be: not in the basement cupboard of our IT department, but on the front line where it belongs.

I believe this is the exciting first step of a journey.

And I cannot wait to see where we get to and what we can achieve together.

Thank you.