

Speech: The UK's leadership in smart cities

Welcome to this session on smart cities.

Before we turn to the panel, I'd like to speak briefly about why what we're discussing today is so important to us all.

There's a saying you may have heard that 'demography is destiny'. In the long run, big demographic trends dwarf most of the day-to-day issues governments spend their time thinking about.

Well there's no bigger trend in the world today than the move to urbanisation. By 2050, it's expected three-quarters of the world's people will live in cities.

It's easy to forget how new this is, but for hundreds of thousands of years we humans have been rural. It is no longer true, and we haven't even begun to get used to it.

This change is especially significant in China – Shenzhen, across the bay, had 30,000 people 40 years ago. Now its daytime population is 18 million.

Even in long-urbanised countries like the UK, city living is back. From the 1930s to the '80s London, like many cities, experienced a long, slow population decline as people moved out and commuted in.

Most commentators thought this was permanent, that it was inevitable. The so-called 'hollowing out' of major cities in this period is where the negative stereotype of inner cities took hold.

But now London's population is bigger than ever, and those who do live in London are more likely to live towards the centre. The inner city is now wealthier than ever before. This is a pattern repeated right across the world.

It's very clear city living presents unique opportunities and unique challenges. People who live in them are healthier and wealthier than those who don't. And smart cities – the melding we have now of that digital technology and data science to improve our urban environment – is what we will need to harness those opportunities.

We in Britain are genuine believers in the power of smart cities. We're early adopters: Manchester's MediaCityUK is, as I would call it, a 40-acre sandbox, testing in miniature what the smart cities of the future might look like.

We've supported our belief with significant funding – we recently created a £1.7 billion [Transforming Cities Fund](#).

Importantly, we understand that smart cities don't just need funding – they

need data. London now releases 700 separate types of datasets to help developers and entrepreneurs create solutions to London's problems.

And for those of you who were here for Professor Dame Wendy Hall's speech earlier you will have heard that that access to information is fundamental to city development.

We've already seen tangible benefits from this: the CityMapper App, which helps users navigate with real-time data, began when London's transport authority published datasets they already held for internal planning. It's now available in 33 cities around the world, including here in Hong Kong.

They're continuing to innovate: quite a few transport companies have launched their own apps, but CityMapper must be the only app to launch its own bus service.

But we're not just here today to talk about smart cities. I am sure all of us here agree on the benefits. We're specifically here to discuss how we make sure the smart cities of the future are based on the individual and improving the lives of individual citizens.

Earlier, I talked about how predictions of London's population decline had been wrong. We should be humble about our power to predict the future and foresee every consequence: because we cannot relive the mistakes of the urban planners of the 1950s and '60s.

That means starting with the individual citizen and what they actually want and need. That's easier said than done, and I'm sure the fantastic panel will offer insight and suggestions.

But let me give you 2 thoughts, to kick off the discussion.

One: technology is not the solution, it really is only part of the solution.

Improved technology only works if it's part of an improved process.

In Britain we've been lucky, because citizen-centred technology has come exactly at the right time for us.

Since 2010 we've had a big drive to make every public service 'digital by default'.

But because there'd already been a strong desire to redesign public services around users, since at least the early '90s, digitalisation came as a natural, organic outgrowth of something we were already doing, not something we just bolted-on.

Two: as the saying goes, when you have a hammer, every problem is a nail. But technology should always be a solution to a problem, it should not be a solution looking for a problem to retrofit.

In the UK we look at the practical, day-to-day problems people face – is their bin collected on time; is their train overcrowded at rush hour – and we

see how technology can help.

For example, every city lacks space. But Ordnance Survey, and I know the team is here today, is releasing its geospatial data, so we can make better use of the space we have.

Every city suffers from congestion. But Northern Ireland's Seesense has developed a bike light that flashes more brightly at junctions. That makes cycling safer, so more people cycle – so we can make better use of the infrastructure we already have and lead healthier lives.

And every city is more polluted than the countryside around it. That's why in Bristol and Milton Keynes we're using sensors to monitor air pollution, and why Glasgow is pioneering smart grid technologies.

Urbanisation is one of the most important trends in the world today. We need to see this trend as an opportunity, not a threat. But it's only by making our cities smart, understanding how we can apply that technology that we can take full advantage.

In Britain we're already taking advantage – and our technology companies, consultancies, architects and planners can help you take advantage too.

But we should always remember: smart cities are not about making our cities 'fit for the future' – they're about making the future fit, for the future of our citizens.