

Speech: 'To govern is to serve': Chris Skidmore on countering fraud in government

First of all I would like to thank Lesley for her kind words and for the invitation to speak here today. This is, I believe, an important opportunity for experts from right across the UK public sector and beyond to share best practice and the latest thinking on strategies to address fraud.

To govern is to serve. Government at its basic principle is at the service of the public. I am committed to making government work better for the public we serve. We are public servants. But there are also public servants – namely civil servants – who quietly serve the public through service to the government. You provide a service to the public. In particular, the service you provide is one which protects their, or more befittingly our, resources from threats.

'To govern is to serve' is a principle which my colleague Ben Gummer, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, [spoke about during his recent speech to Reform](#). In his remarks he talked about efficiencies. Efficiencies in the way that we work and the way resources that we use. And above all how taxpayers' money is spent.

We must ensure that we do everything in our power that we protect every penny of taxpayers' hard-earned money. And ensure that it delivers the services that we all rely on.

We will do this with a spirit of openness and transparency. We will be open about the challenges: where they lie and how government can help.

It is unjust that public money is lost to fraud. It is unjust that many people who work day in, day out to meet commitments to their families, their employers and their communities – the honest majority – are unfairly affected by a dishonest minority who seek to abuse the money set aside for critical public services.

That is why we have a duty to do all we can to protect this government against anyone looking to abuse public services.

As you will already be aware, fraud is constantly evolving in new and sophisticated ways.

And it has the potential to touch millions of lives. Fraud is now the most prevalent crime across the UK and reaches far beyond those email scams that we've all come across. It is evolving in different ways and now encompasses systematic, digital, and automated fraud affecting businesses and industries right up and down the country.

In today's digital age, the perpetrators may never even know the personal and

financial loss they inflict on their victims.

And it is for this reason that we, like other governments and industries across the world, need to redouble our efforts to stay ahead of those looking to abuse our services and resources. This involves ensuring we have the right standards, the right skills and the right culture to detect, report and prevent fraud.

We have made great strides over the last couple years. We have built up our evidence base and increased our understanding of the problem. We now know more than we ever have done about the fraud landscape in the UK.

We have increased fraud awareness across the public sector and found more fraud through centrally coordinated activities like the Random Sampling Programme and deep-dive analytics projects with organisations such as the Student Loans Company.

We have brought people working in a diverse range of roles across government together into the Counter Fraud Champions network. This has allowed individuals in counter fraud across more than 40 public sector bodies to come together to share best practice and solve common challenges for the first time.

Our increased focus on combating fraud across the public sector, most notably in welfare, last year led to realised benefits alone worth £805 million last year. Outside of welfare and tax, in the last few years we have introduced new processes and controls that have led to fraud prevention savings rising from £9 million in 2013 to 14 to £27.5 million in 2014 to 2015.

Departments, and many of you, have led the way on introducing these changes through embracing the fraud agenda and striving to make a difference. The Cabinet Office, through Lesley, has been here to support you, providing ground breaking new programmes such as the Debt Market Integrator and maintaining long running services, such as the [National Fraud Initiative](#).

Finally, we have tested and trialled new technologies and forms of data sharing and analytics, to find and prevent fraud and have taken legislation through Parliament to make data sharing easier across the public sector to find and fight and prevent fraud.

Let me be clear, we are better informed and better equipped to meet the challenges in front of us than we have ever been. But fraud in its various forms does not stand still, and nor can we.

You have already shown that you are capable of responding to the challenge and I commend you for your work to develop innovations which are leading to increased prevention and detection of fraud.

We now need to build on our successes and increase capability and skills so we can go even further still. This means ensuring that people on the ground are properly equipped to tackle the problems that we face.

The Chief Executive of the Civil Service, John Manzoni, has prepared the

ground on this important agenda. Through his backing and commitment, the Cabinet Office will launch the Counter Fraud Profession later this year.

Building on the work by John, his team, and the many experts across central government and in other sectors who are working on it, the Counter Fraud Profession will ensure that we continue to have talented and highly skilled professionals working to protect public funds. People who are properly recognised, properly trained and properly accredited. People who are dedicated to protecting taxpayers' money; and who can support colleagues who are not specialists to fulfil their roles.

Establishing the Counter Fraud Profession will demonstrate our commitment to countering fraud across and within government and I know that many of you here today will be right at the heart of making this happen.

In addition to investing in skilled people I am today launching a new set of Counter Fraud Functional Standards. These standards will outline the minimum measures that organisations should have in place for dealing with fraud.

These standards will empower managers across the Civil Service and the wider public sector to call out fraudsters, cut down on waste and make sure that every penny is accounted for. These standards will help boost our effectiveness at tackling fraud.

Alongside organisation-wide standards we are also launching new professional competencies for those working in counter fraud within government.

These professional competencies, created and endorsed by experts in the public sector and academia, will set out a common set of skills and experience that those working in counter fraud should have, and cover the whole of central government. Public servants working in counter fraud across government will be able to use these competencies to develop their skills and have their capability in counter fraud work recognised. Please do speak to the Fraud team here from the Cabinet Office today to learn more about the standards and competencies that have been launched today.

Thanks to the work completed in creating these, we have now brought together a great wealth of information, for the first time, to understand how counter fraud work should be done. This work is not glamorous and is not likely to grab headlines. But it is crucial.

These standards and professional competencies are the new foundation on which the government will build a robust counter fraud response. They demonstrate our commitment to building, step by step, a government that is increasingly able to find and fight fraud, protect the public services we need and to make government work better for everyone.

As I've just outlined, there is a great deal that we are doing to combat fraud on all fronts. However I also want to emphasise that the fight against fraud needs all public servants to play their part in its detection and its prevention. To stand up for public services. We need to work together, across government, and with agencies, to ensure that we succeed.

Importantly we also need to initiate a culture shift which recognises that finding fraud is not an organisational failing or a weakness. It is part of a strong public service duty. Finding, reporting and preventing more fraud is a good thing: it means that more money is being invested where it matters. And by calling it out, we are sending a strong message to fraudsters that we will not tolerate abuse.

We need to build the structures that will allow your excellent work protecting the public purse to be seen, understood and adopted. We have to foster and nurture an appetite for change and a spirit of openness and collaboration to new approaches that will allow the best ideas to spread.

That is why today's conference, which brings you all together to share ideas and approaches, is so important and a real opportunity for all of us.

Fighting the injustice of those who abuse public finances is everyone's business. We are on a mission to build a country that works for everyone and your work is invaluable to achieving this.

Already the government has been recognised as the most transparent in the world by the UN. We want to continue our drive to ensure that transparency is at the heart of everything we do and it is only through creating that culture of openness and honesty that we will be able to effectively recognise the fraud of the future.

I am committed to ensuring that we, as a government, take a zero tolerance approach to fraud – to defraud the government is to defraud the public; we must root out fraud wherever it lies, if we are to protect taxpayers' money.

I want us to be the best in the world at detecting and preventing fraud and I think with better collaboration, skills and capability that I've talked about, we can be. We have built the foundation for a potential revolution around how the public sector protects public services through dealing with fraud, and I encourage you to seize the opportunity and be part of this.