

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.

[Press release: Foreign Secretary travels to Washington for talks with Secretary of State Pompeo](#)

While in Washington the Foreign Secretary will meet Vice-President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

A Foreign Office spokesperson said:

The US remains the UK's closest partner and ally. When it comes to challenges such as tackling Russia's malign influence, bringing an

end to humanitarian crises such as that in Yemen and stopping the use of chemical weapons there is no international relationship more important to us.

The Foreign Secretary's visit this week is an opportunity to discuss the full breadth of our foreign policy cooperation. It is also a chance to look ahead to the future of the UK-US relationship – a future underpinned by an ambitious post-Brexit trade deal and driven by our shared values and vision for a more secure, stable and prosperous world.

Press release: North London drug dealers have sentences increased

Two men guilty of dealing class A drugs have today had their sentences increased after the Solicitor General, Robert Buckland QC MP, referred them for being too low.

Rowan Lopez, 31, and Marc Lawrence, 38, were under surveillance by police in early 2018. During this time, police saw them exchanging items with people, including known drug-users, outside of the block of Bounds Green flats they were based in.

When searched in February 2018, Lawrence was found to be in possession of heroin and crack cocaine. Lopez was arrested in March and found to be carrying £2,630 in cash, as well as a phone linked to previous drug deals. The flat was also searched, and police found more drugs.

Lopez and Lawrence were both originally sentenced to 3 years and 9 months in prison at Wood Green Crown Court in October 2018. Today, both of their sentences have been increased to 6 years in prison.

Speaking after the hearing, the Solicitor General said:

“I hope that the Court of Appeal's decision today helps to deter others from dealing in drugs. Illegal substances destroy our local communities and those caught selling them will be dealt with severely.”

Press release: New Northern Powerhouse Partners unite for 'Cumbria Day'

- Energus, Cumbria Tourism and University of Cumbria have become the latest members of the government's Northern Powerhouse Partners Programme
- The 3 new members join 10 other innovative, Cumbrian businesses and organisations from Carlisle Lake District Airport to New Balance

The Northern Powerhouse Partners Programme has welcomed 3 new members from Cumbria, as the region marks 'Cumbria Day'.

Energus, based at Lillyhall, is a world-class training provider based in West Cumbria. The company manages programmes of training and education ensuring a talent pipeline of graduates and apprentices into a range of organisations.

Cumbria Tourism is the official destination management organisation for the Lake District. Its mission is to create a world-beating visitor experience. With their ambition and enthusiasm to share their knowledge about the county with visitors they are helping to boost the tourism sector in the region.

The University of Cumbria was formed in 2007 by the merger of St Martin's College, Cumbria Institute of the Arts and University of Central Lancashire's Cumbria sites. As a significant and sought after institution for Cumbria and North Lancashire, the University works in partnerships to develop the region's talent and capabilities and attract new talent into the region to study and work and live.

Northern Powerhouse Minister, Jake Berry MP, said:

I'm delighted to welcome these 3 trailblazing organisations to our rapidly growing Northern Powerhouse Partners Programme. In Energus, Cumbria Tourism and the University of Cumbria, we have 3 innovative and dynamic partners who I am proud to work hand-in-hand with to promote the economic strengths of our region and Cumbria's integral contribution to the Northern Powerhouse.

Energus General Manager, Adrienne Easterbrook, said:

Energus are delighted to have been accepted as a member of the Northern Powerhouse. It is a fantastic initiative that will bring together organisations who are passionate about the North and want to work collaboratively to make it even better.

Energus are proud to celebrate our achievements, which are possible because of the work we do with other businesses. We are committed to facilitating opportunities of learning and development for all.

By offering a range of diverse apprenticeship and graduate programmes we ensure an enthusiastic workforce of young professionals entering industry. We will promote the Northern Powerhouse to our employees and stakeholders and celebrate the achievements across the North.’’

Managing Director of Cumbria Tourism, Gill Haigh, said:

As an organisation, we are immensely proud to be part of the Northern Powerhouse Partners Programme and to promote some thriving Cumbrian businesses to decision-makers at the heart of government. Cumbria is a unique and diverse county with a £2.9 billion tourism sector and is a vital part of the wider Northern economy. Cumbria Day is our chance to showcase the very best of what we have to offer to businesses, visitors and residents alike.

Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Cumbria, Jackie Arnold MBE, said:

The University of Cumbria is an integral part of the Northern Powerhouse and are pleased to be an official partner. Operating across 5 locations in Cumbria as well as an additional campus in Lancaster, we are passionate about positioning the University as an anchor institution within Cumbria and feeding into the Northern Powerhouse’s skills agenda.

Particularly, we are focussed on addressing educational cold spots, skills gaps and “brain drain” in the North by working across sectors and collaborating with industry to provide a robust offer to students and employers and continuing to play a significant and recognised role in the region and making a strategic contribution to the local economy.

The Northern Powerhouse Partners Programme is a key part of creating the Northern Powerhouse. The government is building a network of partners who all believe strongly in the economic potential of the North and support the need for a combined effort by government and business to realise that potential.

There are nearly 200 businesses and organisations signed up to the Partners Programme.

Prospective partners can email NorthernPowerhouse@communities.gov.uk for more information about the Partners Programme and how to apply.

All Cumbria Partners

- Appleby Creameries/Cows and Co.
- Britain’s Energy Coast Business Cluster (BECBC)
- Carlisle Lake District Airport

- Cumbria LEP
 - Cumbria Tourism
 - DNV GL
 - Energus
 - New Balance
 - Orsted
 - Playdale
 - Sellafield
 - Total Post
 - University of Cumbria
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[News story: Parliament passes accelerated degree proposals](#)

Parliament has approved legislation to support the expansion of two-year and other accelerated degrees, giving students starting university from September 2019 more choice than ever before.

Legislation has been passed in the House of Lords, following approval from the Commons last week, which means students studying shorter university courses – such as three-year courses condensed into two – would save 20 per cent on tuition fees compared to traditional courses. For example, students who opt for a two-year degree will save at least £5,500 in total tuition costs compared to a standard three-year course. The regulations will now go to the House of Lords for approval.

In addition to a saving on tuition fees, students will also benefit from a year without paying any maintenance costs through an accelerated course, which would allow them to access the workforce quicker.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

The passing of this legislation is one of the great modern-day milestones for students and breaks the mould of a one-size-fits all system for people wanting to study in higher education.

For thousands of future students wanting a faster pace of learning and a faster route into the workplace at a lower overall cost, two-year degrees will transform their choices.

Accelerated degrees have been a key part of the Government's ambition to maximise choice and flexibility for people wanting to study in higher education, and are expected to remove barriers for a number of underrepresented groups, including mature students.

Accelerated degrees offer the same qualifications and are quality-assured in the same way as a standard degree, but delivered over a shorter, more intensive timespan. For example, a two-year accelerated degree will condense 3-year degrees with 30 weeks' teaching into 2 years with 45 weeks' teaching.

Proposals allow institutions to charge up to 20 per cent more per year for accelerated degrees (in recognition of the increased teaching time required), but the overall tuition fee cost to the student is at least 20 per cent less than the same degree over three years.

The 20 per cent increase per year will allow providers to support higher in-year costs for accelerated provision, such as tuition weeks over the summer and administrative staff pay and capital overheads.

For the taxpayer, it means significantly lower tuition loan outlay, higher rates of repayment and therefore a lower cost to the public purse of higher education. A higher proportion of students on accelerated degrees will also repay their loans in full.