

Minister's speech at Sprint 19 Conference

Good morning, it's a pleasure to be back at Sprint.

They say that a week is a long time in politics, which makes a year (or 14 months to be precise) a supereon.

Since we last met, I was appointed as Minister for the Cabinet Office. This means I am in overall charge of the department, with a much broader brief. But I made it clear, from the moment I took up the job, that the digital transformation of government genuinely remains one of my top priorities.

Like any public servant, when you see good, exciting work that truly improves citizens' lives and makes government work better, and when you know that ultimately it will benefit productivity and the wealth of our country, it's hard to stop being interested.

I'm delighted to have additional support. My colleague, Simon Hart has taken over my old role as the new Minister for Implementation and will have day-to-day oversight of GDS. I know that Simon will do a fantastic job in helping me to ensure that the digital agenda continues to move forward at pace.

While preparing for today, I thought about what has happened in digital government since I spoke to you at the last Sprint. As the truly agile among you would say, I conducted a retro.

And, as any retro aficionado knows, the first question to ask is 'what went well?'

Last time I was here, I announced the first round of challenges in the Govtech Catalyst – a programme which incentivises private sector companies to help solve some of our most challenging public sector problems.

We've now launched 15 challenges: from helping to solve rural isolation with smarter local transport to developing systems to track firefighters inside buildings – and we're already considering the next phase of the programme.

Last September, I also talked about developing a new Technology Innovation Strategy.

This summer we delivered it, it sets the direction for government on the use of emerging technologies as we look to the next spending review and beyond. Alongside the Technology Innovation in Government Strategy, we published a guide to using AI in the public sector, to help decision makers in government identify the most appropriate uses for the technology.

The publication of these two documents was met with a very strong and positive response.

And these developments complement the existing, excellent work happening both at GDS and across government:

- 1,370 services in more than 370 public sector organisations using common platforms including GOV.UK Pay and GOV.UK Notify
- Over £2bn worth of savings to government to date
- 10,000 people benefitting from GDS Academy courses and the number increasing all the time

These things contribute to the delivery of outstanding digital services. These things are admired and have inspired governments the world over.

But an important question in any retro is 'what's not going so well?' or to put it another way, 'what are our challenges?'

As a world-leading digital government, people expect a great deal from us. Scrutiny is high and no one expects more from us than we expect from ourselves.

Our continued success depends on how we do things. Working in an agile way means we have to be comfortable learning from mistakes and rapidly evolving our approach to delivery. We do this by being bold, innovative and ambitious.

I remember when GDS was created. I remember the excitement, the pace, the 'revolutionary' spirit centred around making things better for users. I still see that now in the excellent work going on today, some of which I'll talk about later.

But as innovators, we must always challenge ourselves to keep on breaking new ground.

I want to know that in five years' time, my successors and yours will still be invited around the world to talk about the work you're doing now.

So the challenge is to keep moving forward.

And this morning I want to set out both the vision and how we make it a reality.

Our aim for the next stage of transformation should be a seamless, integrated digital experience.

Our offer should be tailored to all users – whether that's citizens, businesses or charities – anyone who needs to interact with government.

So that public services online are as always easy to use and as intuitive as anything in the private sector.

It should serve them in a proactive and responsive way.

The prize of achieving this vision is enormous.

We can create a better experience for users. But we can also make a profound shift in outcomes for the public, especially the most vulnerable.

We can secure huge savings for the taxpayer, allowing us to invest in the schools, hospitals and police that they want us to prioritise.

And we can free up time and develop skills across Whitehall, so that the brilliant people in GDS and other departments can get on with tackling the really big problems.

So, how do we get there?

Well, over the past few months, GDS has been speaking to colleagues in order to get a much deeper sense of what's blocking transformation and what needs to change.

They've identified five pillars which should underpin our approach to this next stage of transformation: data, digital identity, security, legacy technology and user experience.

But I want to focus on how these pillars can work together to produce smarter, integrated services for users and take forward the next stage of digital transformation.

In 2012, GOV.UK was launched and since then it has replaced nearly 2,000 domains and subdomains with a single platform so that users would not need to understand government structures in order to interact with it. This represented a watershed moment in how the government interacts with citizens and the GOV.UK model, and codebase, has been copied by Australia and Canada amongst others.

Users deserve to have a seamless, tailored experience and joining-up the random datasets we have is the next step in this transformative journey.

To most people GOV.UK is one government website and they should only need to tell government once; not multiple times, in different places. It's frustrating for users, it wastes their time, and it wastes government resources. In Estonia there is 99% automation of self-assessment returns – so we know this can be done.

Over the next year, we want to bring together the different parts of government involved in delivering services – embedding a digital culture within policy teams across government to bring services, data and information into one seamless user journey – starting with key life events like having a baby, setting up a business, and what to do when a loved one passes away.

This doesn't just make things better for our users, it enables government to deliver smarter public services by getting things right from the start.

Doing this requires us to bring together data that already exists – into one place, so that trends can be properly analysed to improve things for users. But up until now, analytics for GOV.UK been fragmented, which has made this impossible.

We're now fixing this siloed approach to data once and for all so that we can get better insights into how people are interacting with government online.

But let's be clear. It is absolutely not about gathering people's personal data for political purposes.

And though the demands of EU Exit has been a catalyst for this work, because we need to ensure people and businesses can use GOV.UK to prepare for life outside of the EU as effectively as possible, this is something we've been planning to do for some time.

This is simply about having a consistent view of anonymous performance data, so that we can understand the big picture.

Bringing together a consolidated view of anonymised user activity on GOV.UK will help us to identify problems, spot correlations and come up with solutions that make it quicker, easier and more intuitive for our users to interact with government.

This continual feedback to allow improvement is how the best websites operate, and how a modern government should operate too.

If we are more joined up, if we better understand how the population interacts with the government online, we can improve the service we offer.

Take the travel app Citymapper. You give it information about where you are and where you want to go and it can remember your daily commute to the extent that every morning it will anticipate your needs by giving you train times without you even needing to ask.

Applied in government, this might mean that people who search GOV.UK for childcare support are also pointed towards information on early years designed to help parents.

My job is to make the case for that, to ensure we get that seamless transformation and we learn from that data and innovate.

If we want people to have an online experience that is at once secure and frictionless – then getting digital identity right is also crucial.

For those that choose to engage with it – which will always be their choice – digital identity allows us to take digital transformation of public services even further.

With a single digital identity, which can be created, used and reused across the public and private sectors, users won't have to constantly prove who they are. They won't have to continually re-assert information, or share any more information than they absolutely have to.

There are huge advantages.

You could, in theory – and subject to regulation – use the same digital identity to access your bank account or find out about your pension contributions.

You could use your digital identity to travel, to easily prove your eligibility to access services, perhaps share your records from one part of government with another, like using your council tax payments to prove your place of residence.

We're already familiar with how authentication works with private sector services. When you login to your Netflix account, each of you will be offered different content to me because we all have different tastes.

For those that choose to create one, a digital identity, built on a consent based model, would allow the government to offer people even greater personalisation, based on a secure understanding of their interests. So, in future, this means we could prompt people claiming certain benefits with a digital identity to access support services which they might not otherwise have been aware of, or remind parents of the school term dates in their local area.

A single digital identity means a smooth user experience for citizens.

As a user of services, you benefit from the feeling that the government is supporting you, not standing in your way. You also have greater control over how your data is used. You also get the benefit of course, of opting out if you choose.

A successful digital identity ecosystem relies on robust standards. These need to be interoperable and sufficient to protect and assist citizens.

GDS, the Cabinet Office and DCMS have been busy over the summer, engaging with citizens, the private sector, civil society and local authorities to understand the future model of digital identity in the UK.

We invited people to put their views on digital identity and the market. The call for evidence closed on Sunday and we will publish the government's response to that later this autumn.

I announced the creation of a Digital Identity Unit, which we intend to launch formally later this year.

Its job is to help deliver interoperable standards, specifications and schemes for digital identity. The building blocks of a thriving digital identity market. If we can get them right, then we unleash the huge potential this has for both the public and private sector.

So, what's next?

Well I have two bits of news to both challenge and support you:

Firstly, to add some extra impetus to your work, I can announce that the OECD has asked us to host the E-Leaders event in 2020. This is a huge honour and a great chance to demonstrate our excellence on the world stage.

The event will take place in Autumn 2020 and will create a fantastic opportunity for experts in the UK Government to meet with international experts, academics and senior digital leaders from across the world.

So I want you to think about where we can be in a year's time. When we host our friends from around the world – some of whom I understand are in the audience today. What we can show off to them and how we can demonstrate to them that the UK is still a world leader in digital government?

Secondly, to help you achieve this, I also want to bolster the leadership of GDS and ensure you have the support you need to go and make great things happen across government.

So, for those of you who haven't seen the job advert – I've decided to create a powerful new role: a Government Chief Digital Information Officer (GCDIO).

This will be a role at permanent secretary level – the first time, I believe, someone at permanent secretary level has been appointed to lead a function. That's a signal of how important we think effective, integrated online government is.

Their job will be to ensure that we deliver cross-government strategies for transformation, data, cyber security, and innovation. They will design and implement standards which improve delivery outcomes, reduce risk and enable value for money in departments. Crucially, they will ensure that we are equipping Government departments with the skills needed to reform, develop and thrive.

We're looking for someone world class, with the skills and experience to up the pace of transformation and be your champion within Whitehall.

The job is live, the hunt is underway and I look forward to updating you on the successful candidate very soon.

So what have we learnt from this year to take with us into the next one?

Innovation is the way forward: in mindset and in implementation of emerging technologies. I want everyone in this room, everyone in government to be more open to risk, to experimentation. These things are fundamental to successful innovation. I encourage you to find out more from the GovTech team this afternoon.

The vision I've set out is ambitious but achievable.

If we get it right over the next few years, we will achieve great things. For users both inside and out of government, and those in the private and public sector, which will in turn, help our wider economy.

The challenges I've outlined are big, tough and fundamental. They're the challenges that I believe everyone in this room came into government to tackle.

I'm looking forward to hearing about the work that is happening right now to deliver this government of the future.

So I'd like to end by recognising the great progress you've already made, thank you for your commitment to making things better, and most of all, to urge you to be bold and ambitious in the months and years ahead.