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Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP
Chair
Science and Technology Select Committee

10 January 2019

Norman Lamb

RE: Science and Technology Select Committee Digital Government Inquiry

Thank you for your letter regarding the Science and Technology Select Committee's inquiry into Digital Government. I am pleased to respond to your questions. I have kept my responses brief but will be happy to provide more detail if requested or answer any further questions you may have.

Question 1: How you would respond to Mr Loosemore's points set out above and the steps you are taking to ensure that collaborative work is taking place between departments and the Government Digital Service.

The Government Digital Service (GDS) remains committed to collaborating with departments to deliver digital transformation, in three important ways.

First, GDS continues to set rigorous standards and best practice against which departmentally led transformation projects can be assured, for example through the Digital Service Standard and the Technology Code of Practice. The Spend Control and Service Assessments processes implement these standards and will continue to ensure that digital services are accessible, intuitive and secure.

Second, GDS facilitates digital transformation by solving shared challenges once for government. For example, the Government as a Platform programme is building common components which are used by over 400 digital service teams. This avoids

replication and frees departments to focus on the specific user needs they are addressing. The Digital Marketplace has also given departments access to digital and technology suppliers of all sizes, driving competition. Together, GDS and the Crown Commercial Service have delivered commercial benefits through the Digital Marketplace of £121 million in financial year 2017/18 and £102 million to the end of October 2018 in financial year 2018/19.

Third, GDS has an important role in coordination across departments and public bodies. Most recently, GDS has worked with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and local authorities to agree the Local Digital Declaration, which will include giving local authorities access to a wider range of suppliers through the Digital Marketplace. In addition, GDS is leading a review of the use of Artificial Intelligence and other emerging technologies across government, working particularly closely with the department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Similarly, the cross-government Transforming Together programme is a joint undertaking with GDS and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority to build cross-government communities which collaborate on issues crossing departmental boundaries. This includes the '7 Lenses of Transformation', which is a practical framework for helping teams talk about transformation.

Mr Loosemore stated that the culture of Whitehall departments had proved a major challenge for the success of the Government Digital Service and stated that "there has been a wilful, deliberate misdirection of the centre in supporting and challenging departments".

As Chief Executive of the Civil Service, my role is to ensure that the Civil Service works together on its shared mission to deliver the Government's manifesto commitments, putting the needs of the citizen at the forefront of service design and delivery.

I have introduced a significant and far-reaching change to how the Civil Service operates, with the introduction of a cross-cutting functional structure into Government. The functions (which includes the evolved GDS) are the only cross-cutting axis in Whitehall on common operational issues. Their role is to build skills and delivery expertise, to set standards, to provide expert advice, and overall to professionalise the execution of Government activity. In so doing, they have a direct input on how things are done across Government.

Equally, it is right that each Permanent Secretary is responsible as Accounting Officer for the expenditure of their respective department. It is important to maintain that crucial accountability to Parliament.

Government is clearly a highly complex organisational structure, balancing multiple objectives in both policy development and delivery. The Civil Service also faces greater external pressures than ever before, operating in an increasingly dynamic and unpredictable world. As such, balance between departmental sovereignty and central coordination, standards, and control, is a subtle and complex issue. The functional model, including aspects such as the Digital Service Standard and the Technology Code of Practice, works well in conjunction with departmental responsibilities and Permanent Secretaries' accountabilities to Parliament.

Mr Loosemore also stated that Digital Government has lost momentum in the UK, in comparison to other countries: "My worry is that our progress and momentum are not as fast as those of other Governments. Other Governments, such as Denmark, are overtaking us and being much bolder".

As to our progress and momentum internationally on digital government, there is little or no evidence to support this assertion. The UK consistently ranks internationally in the top five countries globally for digital government and open data. For example, the UK currently ranks fourth in the UN E-Government Development Index, and first in the World Wide Web Foundation's Global Open Data Barometer.

Furthermore, transforming digital government often relies on building on the work of others; GDS hosted 69 international delegations in 2018 from countries wanting to learn from the UK's experience. Similarly, GDS's programming code is open source so that it can be replicated elsewhere. In that spirit, we should continue to discuss shared challenges with international partners so that we can absorb best practice and make progress together.

That said, our primary aim is not to follow others but to focus relentlessly on meeting the needs of the UK's citizens and businesses. For example, while Denmark has been bold in compelling businesses to use its Digital Post service, we remain committed to ensuring all citizens - including those with accessibility or assisted digital needs - are able to access government services.

Question 2: Whether there is a sufficient central operation driving Digital Government forward in the UK.

The Government Digital Service has been extremely successful in leading from the centre to transform government services, and this success has continued since 2015 in the latest Spending Review period.

The Government as a Platform programme has been successful in providing reusable tools such as GOV.UK Pay, Notify and Verify to solve common challenges once across government, thereby avoiding costly and confusing duplication. This means digital service teams across government can focus on the particular user

needs they are aiming to address. For example, from April to December 2018, it delivered £17 million of benefits to government, including local government and other public bodies that use the tools.

GDS also seeks to build digital and technology capability in departments, and it has been successful with GDS Academy courses, the Data Science Accelerator, and the Digital, Data and Technology Fast Stream and Fast Track Apprenticeship programmes.

Its achievements in building GOV.UK and common platforms, developing and assuring against common standards, leading the Digital, Data and Technology Function, and establishing itself as a centre of innovation are substantial and remain copied around the world.

Question 3: What steps the Data Advisory Board is taking to improve cross-Government data work to deliver more joined-up and efficient policy delivery.

In the last round of Tom Smith from ONS said "The cross-collaboration part of Government is astonishing—the level of working on technical aspects, which again is one area that I think GDS really pushed and developed that capability. That skillset has, I think, successfully been taken up across many of the Departments, which are working, iterating, starting small, having cross-functional multidisciplinary teams and working very close to their users, whether in policy, citizens or indeed delivery organisations. All that working has certainly been taken up and is much stronger across Government over the last few years. The collaboration aspects and the communities, the networks and the senior leadership from the Data Advisory Board and so on can help work through the silos."

Building from that point, the Committee may wish first to know a little more about the Data Advisory Board (DAB). The DAB was established in 2017 as a senior forum to advance the UK government's data agenda. It is the senior public sector board responsible for driving the better use of data in government and addressing any gaps and barriers preventing it. The Board's goals are to agree a set of strategic priorities for government's use of data, oversee and drive the delivery of these priorities and to tackle the key cross-cutting issues that continue to be a barrier to the effective use of data.

The DAB has four strands of work to improve cross-government data use.

The first is collaborative cross-government governance. By agreeing on the governance of data, from standards for interoperability to data sharing through the Digital Economy Act, the DAB ensures that ongoing improvements will outlast any

push from a single source. To this end, the DAB has taken responsibility for strategic oversight of the public sector elements of the National Data Strategy.

The Board supports four strategic priorities for government, for the National Data Strategy and for any cross-cutting bids for the 2019 Spending Review:

- Improve data quality
- Improve data accessibility
- Increase data use
- Increase data capability and innovation, and improve public trust

The Board also acts as a senior escalation point for blockers to data sharing across government. The operational group that sits underneath the DAB is the Data Leaders Network (DLN). The DLN is focussed more on delivery and sharing good practice, but it can also manage low-level data-sharing issues, with an option to escalate to the DAB if more senior intervention is required.

The DAB works with other public sector bodies, including the Open Standards Board, the Geospatial Commission and the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation.

The second strand is to encourage and drive the use and uptake of the information sharing powers under Part 5 of the Digital Economy Act 2017. Tom Smith referred to sharing information for statistical purposes, but there are also powers to share information for Public Service Delivery, Debt and Fraud, Civil Registration and Research to support the improvement of public services, whilst at the same time ensuring that individuals' data is handled appropriately and proportionately.


The third strand is to support the development of cross-government data inventories to support understanding of what data is held across government as a step to improving access, quality and use.

The final strand is to oversee a small portfolio of projects to showcase data-enabled change and continue to learn and work through solutions to ongoing barriers. The DAB has been steadily championing projects and data-sharing initiatives since its creation. Examples to date include Churchill, a service to help target skills provision for local industry needs and drive economic growth, HMRC's insolvency analytics project and the HSE's regulatory intelligence work.

In all, the Data Advisory Board is taking many steps to improve cross-government data sharing and use to support better policy development and delivery. Ultimately, it recognises that whilst a particular data set may be maintained in a single organisation, much of the benefit from insights and derived understanding can only come if those data are shared. That needs to be balanced against the rights of

individuals and other legal and ethical considerations, if the government is to maintain the trust of citizens. Finding the right balance is not always quick or easy.

I hope my response has been of help to the inquiry and please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information on the digital transformation of government.

For Summary

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