



To: Jeremy Wright, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (via email)

cc: Louis Holt, Private Secretary to Jeremy Wright  
Erika Lewis, Deputy Director, Data Strategy, Policy and Ethics  
Gaia Marcus, Head of National Data Strategy

15 July 2019

**Re: National Data Strategy**

Dear Secretary of State,

Better use of better data is key to better government and a better society.

Although parts of government have worked hard to improve how they collect, analyse, share and use data for the benefit of the public, problems remain. As the National Audit Office said recently:

*“Without accurate, timely and proportionate data, government will not be able to get the best use out of public money or take the next step towards more sophisticated approaches to using data that can reap real rewards... [D]espite years of effort and many well-documented failures, government has lacked clear and sustained strategic leadership on data.”*

Better use of data across the public, private and third sectors will help people across the country hold government to account, give them confidence that they are using trustworthy services, and allow them to make decisions that improve their local communities. Moreover, it will create new organisations and increase productivity and innovation in existing ones.

We believe the National Data Strategy, allied with the forthcoming Spending Review, provides an opportunity for the government to set out a long-term ambition for how it will transform the UK's use of data.

Without major and sustained effort, the UK risks falling behind other countries over the next decade and never being able to catch up.

It is vital that the National Data Strategy addresses the following issues:

- Government needs **leadership from the very top** if it is to get a grip on data in government, the wider economy and society. The Prime Minister, Cabinet Secretary and Chief Executive of the civil service must be at the forefront of delivering the National Data Strategy, and need the levers to deliver it and ensure compliance. It must also be a government strategy – too often, at present, different departments have conflicting values and incentives which prevent data being used for the public benefit. Looking beyond central government, it should also empower local government structures in their use of data.

- The National Data Strategy must **deliver transformative, not incremental change**. It will need to be a long-term project, with a vision for at least the next ten years and practical steps for turning that ambition into a reality. This will require engagement across society, across the UK, and, crucially, across party political boundaries. The UK risks falling behind for decades to come if it does not take this opportunity.
- Government must **stop choosing ignorance** by failing to invest in the data that would help it better understand its own operations, the effectiveness of its policies, the quality of public services and key facts about its population and the economy. A National Data Strategy should create an expectation of evidence by default and data-designed government, building into all processes the need to have the right data at the right time to inform the right decisions.
- We need to **invest in skills** to convert the growing amount of data into real information that can be acted upon, and which allows policymakers to understand uncertainty in the data. Resources for data literacy should be made available for other sectors and the wider public.
- There must be a **mechanism for decision-makers, data users and the public to be involved** in the National Data Strategy and on an ongoing basis (including, but not limited to, proper processes for requesting data that doesn't currently exist).
- Government needs to **'fix the plumbing'** and sort out its data infrastructure, including the use of unique open identifiers to help those inside government and, through safely increased access to shared and open data, so that those outside government can make the most of government data.
- Government needs to **earn the public's trust**. Debate and discussion about the appropriate extent of using citizens' data within government needs to be had in public, with the public. Great public benefit can come from more joined-up use of data in government and between government and other sectors. But this will only be possible, sustainable, secure and ethical with appropriate safeguards, transparency, mitigation of risks and public support.

The National Data Strategy must go beyond public services. Government's role is broader than the delivery of public services; it can help shape how data is used across the whole of society through interventions such as research funding, procurement rules, regulatory activities and legislation. The strategy must recognise this and describe how government will make data work for everyone in the UK.

Yours sincerely,

Gavin Freeguard – Programme Director, Head of Data and Transparency, Institute for Government

Rachel Rank – CEO, 360Giving

Will Moy – Chief Executive, Full Fact

Professor Bobby Duffy – Director, Policy Institute, King's College London

Mark Cridge – Chief Executive, mySociety

Geoff Mulgan – Chief Executive, Nesta

Gavin Hayman – Executive Director, Open Contracting Partnership

Jeni Tennison – CEO, Open Data Institute

Catherine Stihler – CEO, Open Knowledge Foundation

Thom Townsend – Executive Director OpenOwnership

Hetan Shah – Executive Director, Royal Statistical Society