

**Speech by Gillian Merron,
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to the fourth European Ministerial e-Government
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In the UK we are seeing the rise of a new type of politics, as citizens equip themselves using new technologies. In their millions, people are using e-petitions, blogs and Facebook to lobby governments and companies – forming campaigns rapidly, easily and on an unprecedented scale. At a time of concern about democratic engagement, this is a good thing, but we need to reflect on what this means for the way in which governments engage with the public. I am glad to see this featured in the Declaration. And I would like to thank the Portuguese Presidency and the commission for taking this forward.

I'm delighted that the Declaration emphasises the importance of technology and the environment. In the UK the government is the biggest purchaser of IT. The

Department of Work and Pensions has one of the biggest IT estates in Europe. We know that the manufacture and running of IT consumes huge amounts of energy. As Governments, we should set the example. In the UK I have asked the Chief Information Officers Council to work in partnership with the UK technology industry to look at how we can make our IT more sustainable. We'll report publicly early next year.

I entered politics for the same reason as many of you – because I wanted to make a positive difference to people's lives. And maybe even, in the case of real hardship, transform their lives. Our system back in the UK of constituency MPs means that day in, day out, Members of Parliament, like myself, work with and for, the people who elected us. And, like you, I have seen people in the most unhappy of circumstances.

Constituents that seek my help may have complex needs – problems with housing, immigration, social security, tax and health care. They are in contact with the many government services upon whom they are dependent for

support and their day to day existence. Theirs are challenging lives.

But whilst each service has improved thanks to our massive government investment and reform, they still exist as separate services whereas the challenges that individuals face, do not.

So people have to go from one service to the other and back again, often repeating the same information time after time.

People find this painful and distressing. When government has determined that people should receive help and assistance in their lives, we shouldn't make it a painful, frustrating process.

We know that the UK is not alone in having to overcome these challenges – I have been fascinated by the excellent work of the Dutch Government that shows the hoops people have to go through to help themselves and those they care for.

Governments across nations, and across generations have assumed that people's time is free. And, if something is free, you consume too much of it. Government should examine who is working for who – if the state values a citizen's time, it should invest in reducing the amount of time it takes up in delivering services.

Online public services are one way of doing this. Convenient and easy to use, they are very popular in the UK – nine million people, including myself, have taxed their car online. Governments across Europe should be proud of what we have achieved in putting government information and transactions online. The UK is honoured that Directgov has been selected as a finalist in the eEurope Awards and can exhibit here at this conference.

But the people with the most complex needs are the least likely to use the internet. The challenge is to bring the benefits of technology to those who can't get on line. As we show in this film.

As the older person in that film showed, joining up public services using technology can bring the benefits of IT to

people who don't or can't use a computer. I was inspired by my visit yesterday, in Lisbon, to a government one stop shop - the Loja do Cidadao. I saw the direct impact of government services joined up in the front office, always with the various needs of the customers coming first and foremost. In one well designed, friendly and professional place, Portuguese citizens enjoy easily accessing a whole host of government services.

I met a social security worker who told me how they can deliver all services under one roof and "help people grow". One customer said it was all very easy – he just had to come to one place. Everything focussed on the needs of the customer. And as the Portuguese Prime Minister highlighted in his speech this morning putting the citizen at the heart of public services is a sure route to success.

In the UK we're taking this one step further and developing a service where people only have to tell us once when major things change in their life, such as a bereavement or moving house. This robustly challenges government to work together at local and national levels, to join up and put the citizen first.

As the single market in labour grows, the need for joining up systems between member states becomes more pressing. Increasing the need to know who people are in order to support them. That is why there is a commitment to work together in the Declaration. As part of this I welcome the work by Austria and Belgium on identity.

As a politician I want to transform the lives of my constituents for the better. That's what I was elected to do. I believe we are only beginning to understand the potential of technology to transform lives for all members of society. The UK welcomes EU conferences such as this where nations can share ideas and inspire each other to deepen that understanding.

Across the EU, our job is to put our people first. Our ambition should be to ensure the Declaration is our means to that end.