



GovX Digital's Connected Cities: Panel Discussion Takeaways

Liz St. Louis, Assistant Director of Smart Cities at Sunderland City Council, recently featured as a panellist at the GovX Digital event 'Connected Cities'.

Featuring digital leaders from across the UK, Liz St Louis joined Tracey Crews of Cheltenham Borough Council, Jenny Nelson of Newcastle City Council and Daniel Bloodworth of Everbridge, to discuss the need to provide greater social, economic and security resilience in our 'future cities'.

Led by David Wilde of GovX Digital, the session explored the experiences of each panellist's city or organisation to define what connectivity means now, and in the future, with a particular focus on the use of data to connect people and make better, more informed and inclusive decisions.

Liz St. Louis has played a key role in driving transformation programmes, digital and data initiatives throughout her career, and has been leading Sunderland's award-winning Smart City Programme, encouraging investment for next generation digital infrastructure and equipping individuals and businesses alike with the skills and confidence they need to succeed.

Together with the wider panel of experts, Liz tackled topics such as COVID-19 recovery, sustainability and community, as well as discussing the focused priorities of each smart city.

Identifying priorities for smart cities across the UK

The enlightening discussion highlighted that all panellists were working to establishing more digitally connected cities with their teams – to establish more digitally connected cities – though understandably the priorities varied across the board.

Liz provided detail on the top priorities for Sunderland, which continue to focus on aiding recovery from COVID-19 to deliver on their smart city ambitions, by finding new ways of working and ensuring connectivity is augmented to make people's lives better.

Following, what was described as 'the year of data' in 2020, for Newcastle City Council there was a heavy focus on encouraging people to use data to feel 'more connected' and make better decisions.

For Cheltenham, the priorities were inclusivity and how to create opportunities, and transfer these, into areas of deprivation.

Meanwhile, the responsibilities of Everbridge were to evolve IoT solutions, to work on creating more impactful solutions and make best possible use of the accelerating technologies available.

The panel shared some fantastic insights that provided a glimpse into what our future smart cities will look like, and highlighted the hard work of the communities and organisations contributing to digital transformation across the UK.

Key takeaways

Resilience and recovery – Working collaboratively to overcome challenges

Among the key takeaways of the talk, was a heavy focus on highlighting the importance of connecting people and places, and how digital has enabled 'a rapid response' to COVID-19.

Liz outlined the importance of 'a whole city approach' when it came to Sunderland. From supporting COVID-19 safe working practices and helping businesses to digitally (and physically) connect to help work through the crisis, to acknowledging the initiatives that ensured laptops could be delivered to children learning from home, outlining how Sunderland Our Smart City had taken a collaborative stance.

Liz said: "It's been about a whole city approach – the public and private sector coming together, working alongside the third sector, as well as working with our communities and individuals within them... We couldn't respond and touch the number of people we've been able to touch without our volunteers – they've been a hugely important part of [our] COVID-19 response and recovery. We are hugely grateful for our community and the roles they've played.

"What it's taught us across the city and our workforce, is how resilient people have been across this period. It's been very difficult for some. [It's shown] people's

resilience, people's flexibility and actually people's ability and willingness to change. Our lives have been flipped over this last period and we've seen a willingness to embrace that change, as well as work collaboratively."

She added: "Whether we have supported people in need, such as getting laptops to children and young people, as well as responding to our businesses with COVID-19 safe working practices etc. local government needs to be many different things to different people. It has been a whole city approach with organisations coming together; digitally connecting but also physically connecting to get through the crisis.

"[We've all been] really grasping and embracing opportunities as they've arisen, [so that we're] in a period of strength to face the next phase."

Multi-modal collaboration and sustainability – Transport of the future

The public sector and collaboration were a key part of the discussion, but the multi-modal element with regards to the environment was also a hot topic, as the conversation shifted focus to how smart cities could be more sustainable, particularly when it comes to travel.

Panellists discussed how their cities were adapting to accommodate improved public transport and cycle lanes as part of an effort to switch to greener solutions within cities.

Liz commented: "Many of our plans now are focused on transport and ways of getting around the city. We are quite fortunate in Sunderland that our inner city is quite compact in many ways. We are now looking at many ways through our urban planning, through design, and through our partnerships with others to really start and make a difference – to build an imagined reality around how we can connect and travel across the city in future.

"One of the initiatives that we are launching later this year is an e-mobility hub, which will be very much around sponsoring electric motor transportation across the city and connecting key sites. That will initially be for our local authority but we will be quickly looking to expand that pilot across to other organisations and consumers in the city."

She added: "We of course need the digital infrastructure to underpin this, then engage our citizens and communities to embrace a new future and change behaviours about how people travel, connect and move around a city."

Unlocking the future with data – 'Data rich, but intelligence poor'

The panel also explored how much data contributed to the future of smart cities, with some debate about the volume and quality of data that was influencing developments. Liz shared her views that we are living in a world where 'the ability to connect everything and anything is a possibility', but that this only came to life when combined with engagement and innovation, taking care to address the issues that mattered most to people rather than focusing too much on data itself.

"For me it's not tech for tech's sake. It can't be data for data's sake," said Liz.

“It’s really got to be focused on the challenges that matter and the opportunities we’re trying to leverage. The use cases have got to be borne from that – it’s about outcomes.

“We are data rich, but intelligence poor. Our data is in so many silos and many different organisations, but much of that isn’t the data that is going to help drive the intelligence, to solve the challenges, to really drive things forward for local people.”

Liz went on to say that it would take a co-creation piece to make a big difference. Looking at the original definitions of a ‘smart city’, she noted that these were mainly driven from a tech perspective – a ‘rule the world’ perspective, in her words – which in her view, is a notion that had been completely turned on its head. Liz exclaimed that unless we solve the issues that really do matter to people, then time is simply being wasted.

Sunderland Smart City’s focus is on the priorities that matter – rather than trying to approach everything in one go, more impact will be derived alongside a greater understanding and increased ownership of our future, if we prioritise and communicate, making a more notable difference to the people of Sunderland.

Education, diversity, inclusion and environment

While Liz was keen to stress that her objectives are to build Sunderland as a smart city, she added that the most important part of the transformation to build places of the future, is to ensure that conditions are created so that people, communities and business can thrive.

“That is absolutely what it is all about,” Liz added, “It’s a holistic approach and we’ve got to look at it through every lens.”

She described how Sunderland Our Smart City is heavily focused on improving and supporting digital skills all the way through from young children to working with adults and retraining them, as well as additional support for tech start-ups and enterprises.

This will ensure that opportunities are created, particularly in light of the ‘digital divide’ which has been further highlighted, and grown, due to COVID-19.

“We need to ensure inclusiveness and accessibility for all our communities, and that’s a real challenge,” said Liz. “We need to ensure people have got not only equipment, but the skills to live, play and work.”

Liz regularly appears at talks and conferences to discuss the exciting plans for Sunderland Our Smart City and the key elements which she believes will continue to drive transformation across the city. The GovX webinar illustrated that many like-minded cities are working towards the same goals, to create a better more connected world for their communities, whilst showcasing Sunderland’s leading role in digital leadership and transformation for a more sustainable, competitive and investable urban centre of the future.