Government Response to the House of Lords COVID-19 Committee report 'Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World' (October 2021)

Introduction

The Government welcomes this thoughtful and comprehensive report. Digital technologies, data and the infrastructure that underpin them, are transforming all sectors of the economy, from health to education, defence, retail and agriculture at an unprecedented pace. They have also proven to be of crucial importance during the Covid-19 pandemic, as digital technologies became the means for maintaining contact with family and friends, working from home and accessing essential public services.

The digital economy presents significant economic opportunities: investment in digital technologies is forecast to add £232 billion to the UK economy by 2040. Equally, they will be vital to levelling up the UK and building back better as world class digital infrastructure creates opportunities for rural, isolated, and left-behind communities to innovate, grow and create jobs.

The Committee rightly points out the potential drawbacks and imbalances that a highly digitalised society and economy can entail. We agree with the Committee that it is vital we assess the long-term impacts of the pandemic on our society's health and wellbeing. The Government is committed to making sure that no one is left behind by the digital revolution. We therefore welcome the committee's recommendations and input on these pertinent issues, as outlined in their report.

Overarching Themes

1. **Recommendation: While we welcome the UK Government's commitment to developing a new Digital Strategy, we believe that it must go far beyond the traditional silo of 'digital' and recognise that all aspects of our lives are, and will increasingly be, a hybrid blend of online and offline interactions. In common with other critical issues that affect all Government departments, and that are embedded into all aspects of government policy, responsibility for a new hybrid strategy, and developing a wider hybrid approach, should sit with the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister. This central oversight of the hybrid approach should ensure the consideration of its impact on inequality and the evaluation of what services should be delivered remotely or face-to-face. (Paragraph 15)**

   a. The Government agrees with the Committee that digital technology has an impact on all parts of public policy and that the Government should consider the impact of this on inequality and in evaluating the design and delivery of public services. Government also agrees that the pervasive nature of digital means that it is important for Government policy to be cross-cutting and coordinated. Government believes that the current Government structures enable this to happen.

   b. DCMS is the overall lead department for digital, and works closely with the rest of Government to ensure that all departments consider digital issues when making policy.

c. Responsibility for Government's Digital Transformation sits with the Cabinet Office through the newly created Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO). It is a priority for the CDDO to make high quality digital services available and accessible for all. We do this by:

  i. Setting the standard for government digital services and technology through the Service Standard and Technology Code of Practice, which help teams create and run high quality and accessible public services.

  ii. Assuring digital services against those standards through our digital and technology spend controls, to ensure government technology spend aligns with best practice and delivers value for money.

  iii. Measuring and tracking the success of government's digital services and identifying opportunities for improvement to user experience.

  iv. Government agrees that digital technologies will continue to impact all aspects of our lives in an ever greater manner. However, the Government also believes that there is a pressing need to focus on the rapid digitalisation of the economy, and the crucial sectors of the economy which rely on digital technologies and are growing much faster than others. The UK's digital economy is a significant source of economic growth and employment. In 2019 alone it contributed £151 billion to the UK economy.

d. DCMS's Ten Tech Priorities outline the government's vision for how we will embrace these trends to become the most pro-tech government ever. Government will get our digital foundations right, support innovation, adoption and trade in digital technology, and use digital technologies to build back better. DCMS's digital responsibilities are, by their nature, cross-cutting, encompassing sectors and policies (e.g. health, the economy, innovation, finance, security) and relevant to a variety of departments. DCMS works across government and more widely to ensure that we deliver on agreed priorities. As part of these efforts, DCMS will be working with other departments to consider how to minimise inequality and build a more inclusive, competitive and innovative digital economy for the future.

e. Further detail on a few of the Ten Tech Priorities which are relevant to the recommendation:

  i. Roll out world-class digital infrastructure nationwide: Infrastructure is vital for levelling up and transforming the economic geography of this country. We're spending £5 billion to connect at least 85% of homes and businesses to gigabit by 2025, including those in hard-to-reach areas.

  ii. Build a tech-savvy nation: We're upskilling our workforce through our apprenticeships, digital bootcamps and the Digital Entitlement, while the Help to Grow scheme, unveiled in the Budget, will help up to 100,000 businesses adopt technology.

iii. Keep the UK safe and secure online: The Online Safety Bill aims to hold online platforms responsible for the safety of their users, while protecting free speech and expression, and the freedom of the press.

iv. Level up digital prosperity across the UK: We will support every Nation and region to build upon their digital strengths and mitigate barriers to growth, so that more people can partake in the digital economy. We're sponsoring Tech Nation to support founders across the UK.

v. The Government also recognises the transformative power of digital delivery. That is why we are investing in a new digital identity platform, GOV.UK Sign In, developed and delivered by the Government Digital Service. GOV.UK Sign In will provide the UK public with a single, ubiquitous way to prove their identity, log in to any government service and see their GOV.UK Account. It will support transactions that span both online and offline channels, allowing users to prove their identity in a way that is simple and fast, as part of a longer service journey. A support route for those that can't directly access digital services (either through lack of internet access or digital skills) will be developed as part of service design and development, ensuring that everyone can prove their identity when using government services.

2. **Recommendation: The Government should ensure that using digital technology to tackle existing inequalities is a key strand running through its new hybrid strategy. It should also publish a detailed equality impact assessment alongside its strategy, explaining the effect of its plans on different communities and how it will mitigate any negative consequences identified (paragraph 30).**

a. The Government agrees with the Committee that digital technology has the potential to help tackle inequalities as well as contribute to levelling-up. We have recently set up a new Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) within the Cabinet Office, with responsibility for putting the right conditions in place for the effective digital transformation of government. The work of the CDDO, whilst centred on digital transformation, includes collaboration with wider, 'non-digital' parts of government, both to drive change and adoption of new technologies, but also to break down silos of 'digital' and 'non-digital' activity, to ensure government works in a more joined up and cohesive way.

b. Critically, one of CDDOs main priorities is to increase DDaT (Digital, Data and Technology Profession) talent and capability in all parts of Government, so that these skills are available and involved in work across the board, supporting the digital needs of citizens in all aspects of their lives. The CDDO also has responsibility for ensuring compliance with accessibility standards across government and will work to ensure that all citizens are able to access the services they need, with appropriate remote and face-to-face routes available as appropriate.

c. The National Data Strategy, published in September 2020, outlines how

companies and organisations - including government - can use data to drive digital transformation, innovate and boost growth across the economy.
The Data Standards Authority (DSA) is a part of the Central Digital & Data Office (CDDO), and is responsible for cross-government work to improve the quality and interoperability of data across government. The DSA is currently driving initiatives to achieve this:

i. Setting common data standards: DSA is working on potential common standards such as Beneficial Ownership, a single Legal Entity Identifier and Digital Identity work.

ii. Application Programming Interfaces (APIs): Currently it is difficult for data to flow across departmental boundaries. APIs are an efficient and practical means to address this. An API catalogue with 230 APIs from 27 departments, and a community of expert practitioners have been established. The DSA is developing an API assessment process over the remainder of this financial year.

iii. *Data Sharing Governance:* a shared framework will be published and rollout commenced by the end of FY 21/22

iv. *Adoption of data standards*: The first iteration of changes to Point 10 of the Technology Code of Practice (TCoP) were made in December 2020 and further changes are planned as well as potential updates to the Service Standards by Q1 2022.

v. The DSA promotes the data sharing provisions of the Digital Economy Act 2017 to improve public services to citizens. A number of Information Sharing Agreements (ISAs) have recently been finalised, including three ISAs to assist individuals living in water poverty, six ISAs to assist individuals living in fuel poverty, and two ISAs to assist individuals and households which face multiple disadvantages. This brings the total number of ISAs on the public register to 146.

3. **Recommendation: We urge the Government to consider introducing a legal right to internet access and digital infrastructure, which is regulated in a way that gives individuals a suitable right to redress. We note that the Digital Economy Act 2017 included the creation of a broadband Universal Service Order, giving all premises in the UK a legal right to request a minimum standard of broadband connectivity. (Paragraph 39)**

   a. Covid-19 has clearly demonstrated the fundamental nature of digital connectivity to people's lives - for work, school, access to vital services and to stay in touch with family and friends. The Government is committed to delivering nationwide gigabit connectivity as soon as possible. Today, over two in five premises can access gigabit-capable networks, up from just one in ten in November 2019. By the end of the year, 60% will have access, and by 2025 the Government is targeting a minimum of 85% gigabit-capable coverage, working with industry to reach as close to 100% as possible. The Government is investing £5bn to ensure the hardest-to-reach

areas in the UK receive coverage.

b. It is the Government's view that the best way to achieve nationwide gigabit coverage is to create a competition-friendly environment in areas where deployment is commercially viable while focussing Government funds on the 20% of the country where commercial deployment is unlikely. As a result of this approach, there is now a thriving market of over 80 providers rolling out gigabit broadband all over the UK.

c. The Government has already introduced a legal right to request a minimum standard of broadband connectivity through the broadband Universal Service Obligation. This was introduced in March 2020 and allows for every premise in the UK to request a decent broadband connection that provides speeds of at least 10Mbps download and 1Mbps upload. The broadband Universal Service Obligation is regulated by Ofcom and allows for consumers to take their complaints to either their broadband Universal Service Provider or, if they are unable to resolve their complaint, the independent Ombudsman Service free of charge.

d. Government analysis has shown that approximately 100,000 premises are unable to access a decent broadband connection of at least 10Mbps download and 1Mbps upload via either a fixed line or fixed wireless access connection. This totals approximately 0.3% of premises in the UK and offers greater coverage than that provided by mains water suppliers who cover 99.3% of all UK premises.

e. However, the Government is determined to find ways to deliver even better connectivity. As the Committee has noted in their report, the Government launched a call for evidence focused on Improving Broadband for Very Hard to Reach Premises, which closed on 25 June 2021. The call for evidence focussed on the most rural and remote premises which are often located in areas where the cost of delivering broadband rises exponentially. In addition, last year, the Government introduced the right for the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to order a mobile Universal Service Obligation in the future should they deem it necessary to ensure the full social and economic participation in society for consumers.

f. At the present time, given the availability of coverage, products and prices in the mobile market, the Government believes that a mobile Universal Service is not necessary.

4. **Recommendation: The Government should work with internet providers to develop a scheme to provide affordable internet and suitable, safe devices (not necessarily just a smartphone), on which to use it, to those in poverty and low incomes (paragraph 40).**

a. In response to Covid-19, the Government and Ofcom agreed a set of commitments with the UK's major broadband and mobile network operators to support vulnerable consumers. Providers committed to working with customers who found themselves in financial difficulty as a result of Covid-19; to ensure that they were treated fairly and supported and, where

appropriate, given new landline and mobile offers, such as free or low-cost mobile data boosts.

b. Ofcom has recently published a [Vulnerability Guide](#) for providers, setting out expectations and good practice on how vulnerable telecoms consumers should be supported. This includes treating those in financial difficulties fairly, offering payment support options, such as payment holidays, and holding disconnection as a last resort.

c. In relation to affordability more generally, there are already low-cost, social tariffs on the broadband market for households in receipt of Universal Credit. For example, BT and Hyperoptic provide fibre social tariff products for households in receipt of Universal Credit and other means-tested benefits offering download speeds ranging from 40Mbps, up to 150Mbps for as low as £15 per month. Virgin, Community Fibre and KCOM also offer similar social tariffs. The voluntary market-led approach has proven to be effective, and we do not consider a regulated tariff necessary at this time. However, the Government would like to see more providers introduce affordable tariffs for those on low-incomes.

d. It is also worth noting that public libraries provide access to free wifi and public computers, enabling many people who might otherwise not have access to the internet or devices, such as smartphones, on which to do so, to access essential online services. Following the first lockdown, this vital role was recognised with the introduction of exemptions from the National Regulations to enable continued provision, we know this was much appreciated. In addition, some library services offer the loan of devices as a way to help individuals and organisations overcome the barrier of access to devices and connectivity. Libraries also play a vital role in supporting people develop their digital skills, both at a basic foundation level but also at higher levels with activities such as coding clubs, silver surfer groups, and other activities. Although these may have paused or moved online for much of the past year, libraries will be working towards reestablishment of many of the services they offer in this space.

5. **Recommendation: The Government must make a commitment (and an ambitious target) to improve digital literacy central to its new hybrid strategy, and work with charities, skills providers and local authorities to deliver a comprehensive digital skills programme (paragraph 42).**

a. Government is committed to improving digital skills for all and agree with the Committee that to deliver this we need to support close working between skills and education providers, local authorities and charities, amongst others. The Government is supporting the establishment of Local Digital Skills Partnerships (LDSPs) in LEP or Combined Authority areas. These Partnerships bring together local cross-sector stakeholders (including local government, skills providers, employers, and the voluntary sector) around the design, development, and delivery of digital skills programmes to upskill the current workforce, tackle digital inclusion and raise awareness of the importance of digital skills.

b. Government is also directly supporting training for adults to provide the essential digital skills needed for life, work and further study. Our digital skills reforms, alongside the introduction of the digital entitlement in August 2020, underpinned by primary legislation, mean that adults with low digital skills can study for improved essential digital skills qualifications for free. Government is committed to making essential digital skills training more accessible and flexible by building on the innovation in online learning implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring that adults can gain these skills at a time and place that suits them. In this year's Skills for Jobs White Paper (January 2021) we committed to reform and update the digital entitlement accordingly to ensure it is meeting the needs of learners and supports the Government's ongoing commitment to improving essential digital skills.

c. Following devolution of the Adult Education Budget in 2019-20, nine Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Mayor of London (working where appropriate through the Greater London Authority) need to ensure that learners aged 19 and over in their area, who are eligible for funding, have access to appropriate education and training.

d. Digital literacy is also a key priority in the computing national curriculum in England; it ensures that all pupils can express themselves and develop their ideas through information and communication technology, through all of the key stages. The computing curriculum covers the principles of e-safety from key stages one to four, with progression in content to reflect the different and escalating risks that young people face. E-safety is embedded into the curriculum up to key stage 4. From age 5, children are taught how to use technology safely, respectfully and responsibly, recognise acceptable and unacceptable content and identify a range of ways to report concerns. This goes through all the way to age 16 when they are taught how changes in technology affect their safety, and new ways to protect their online privacy and identity.

6. **Recommendation: The Government should put investment in digital skills at the heart of its new hybrid strategy and ensure that both the school curriculum and adult skills provision adequately meets the needs of the hybrid world. One element of this should be the development of a new Digital Skills for Work Framework for England (and ideally in agreement with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), to tackle the radically altered employment landscape resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Framework must consider the different requirements of different communities and include specific action to tackle the low levels of digital skills amongst disabled people (paragraph 50).**

a. The Government agrees with the Committee on the importance of both the school curriculum and adult skills provision in addressing the need for digital skills, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and affects different communities in different ways.

b. The Government also agrees with the committee on the importance of an overarching framework to understand and respond to the changing nature

of digital skills in the workplace resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government introduced a new Essential Digital Skills (EDS) framework in 2018 that sets out the essential digital skills for the workplace. This was developed following extensive consultation and input from a wide range of skills and education providers, local authorities, and industry and digital inclusion stakeholders. The Government will review the EDS Framework to ensure these skills remain relevant to the ever-changing digital landscape following the Covid-19 pandemic. The EDS framework informs our new national standards for EDS qualifications and any changes will be taken into account when the national standards are next updated. The framework is also used by major employers and industry groups, and forms the basis of the annual Lloyds Bank/Ipsos MORI Essential Digital Skills Survey as part of the Consumer Digital Index which provides a measure of the level of digital skills nationally.

c. In response to the pandemic, the Government created The Skills Toolkit to help give workers who have been furloughed, or those at risk of redundancy, an opportunity to retrain. The Toolkit includes training on how to use email and social media more effectively at work, as well as more advanced training in coding, data analysis and digital marketing. The Skills Toolkit continues to give people access to free, high quality digital courses and resources to help enhance skills, progression in work and career prospects.

d. Given the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on disabled people, the Government launched a £2.5m Digital Lifeline Fund which has provided tablets preloaded with data and free tech support to over 5000 people with learning disabilities for whom cost would otherwise be a barrier. The fund enables beneficiaries to use the internet to connect with friends, family and community online, as well as access services and information.

e. The Government is aware that digital skills are in demand across the country and that different areas and communities will have varying needs. As well as supporting the establishment of Local Digital Skills Partnerships (see Government's response to Recommendation 5, paragraph a)

f. We are also supporting the provision of digital skills training for adults in community settings through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). Community Learning plays a vital role within this AEB provision; supporting those furthest from the workplace, and improving the health and well-being of learners, particularly disadvantaged learners, learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, low basic skills, mental health issues, or learners facing financial hardship. Community Learning is often run in accessible, informal venues, such as libraries, children's centres and community centres to best meet the needs of local people.

g. The Government is also providing £2.5 billion through the National Skills Fund to help people learn new skills and prepare for the economy of the future. This includes new Skills Bootcamps which have been providing flexible training for in-demand areas since September 2020. Employers select or co-design Skills Bootcamps with providers, the Bootcamps can

last for up to 16 weeks. They are intended to train participants in skills that will enable them to secure employment in a digital or technical role. In addition to Skills Bootcamps, which focus on the digital built environment, networking and cybersecurity, technical Skills Bootcamps are also underway, which offer courses such as fibre optics installation, and digital healthcare.

h. In addition, the first of three Digital T Levels (Digital Production, Design and Development) was introduced in September 2020, with two further Digital T Levels (Digital Support and Services, and Digital Business Services) becoming available this month. Government has also developed Digital apprenticeships at levels 3-7, which provide work-based training in technical occupations, including cyber security, data science, artificial intelligence, software development and communication networks.

i. The AI and Data Science Conversion Courses are a £13.5m investment by the Government to address demand for professionals with AI and data science skills and the lack of diversity in the workforce. They will address the skills gap by providing new courses hosted by universities to quickly upskill graduates and attracting at least 2,500 graduates by 2023. They will also seek to address the lack of diversity in the workforce by providing 1,000 scholarships to graduates from underrepresented demographics in the workforce (particularly female, black and disabled students). Courses will be inclusive by design, providing students with flexible access to study (e.g. evenings, remote options) and course content suitable for non-STEM graduates.

j. The English computing curriculum, introduced to state maintained schools in September 2014, ensures that all pupils become digitally literate. In addition to being taught the principles of computer science and programming and e-safety, they are taught to use, express themselves, and develop their ideas through information and communication technology, at a level suitable for the future workplace and as active participants in a digital world. To support the new computing curriculum, the Government has created the National Centre for Computing Education (NCCE), backed by £84m of government funding, to improve computing teachers' subject knowledge, expertise and confidence in teaching this new subject. At the end of July 2021, nearly 12,000 primary schools, and almost over 4,200 secondary schools (including post-16), had engaged with the NCCE offer.

7. **Recommendation: The Government should work with training providers and professional bodies to ensure that both the initial training of workers such as teachers and medical professionals and their Continuing Professional Development reflects how digital technology will be an integral part of their working lives (paragraph 52).**

a. From September 2020, all new trainees are benefiting from the mandatory ambitious minimum entitlement set out in the ITT (Initial Teacher Training) Core Content Framework (2019), describing the fundamental knowledge and skills that all new entrants to the profession need to effectively teach

and support all children.

b. While the framework is not subject specific and does not set out the full ITT curriculum for trainee teachers, there is a strong emphasis on the need for training to be subject and phase specific throughout the framework. We expect providers and their partnerships to use the revised ITT Core Content Framework to craft a coherent and well-sequenced curriculum that meets the particular needs of their trainees and the context in which they are training to teach, which may include digital technology.

c. The Government's Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) statutory safeguarding guidance is clear that children should have a safe environment in which they can learn, both online and offline. Amongst other things it advises that all staff should receive safeguarding and child portion training, including online safety. All staff should receive Part 1 of KCSIE as part of their induction. This sets out what abuse and harassment look like, including online abuse and what staff should do if they have concerns about a child. The department updates KCSIE annually.

d. The Government's response to Recommendation 14 (paragraph 98) addresses the Committee's view that medical professionals should be trained in digital skills.

8. **Recommendation: The Government should work with UK Research Councils and Higher Education funding bodies to identify and address gaps in the evidence base for both how our increasingly hybrid world is impacting on different communities, and on the effectiveness of policies and interventions developed in response to the digital future. The lack of data on Black and Asian communities' experiences, alongside those of other minority ethnic communities, should be a particular priority (paragraph 61).**

a. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) already funds a number of projects that look at how the pandemic has affected different communities in light of hybrid working and living, and interventions needed to respond to changes. Within UKRI, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), is funding several projects looking at how workplaces, of all sizes, respond to increased home-working, with some of these looking ahead at how management practices can respond to hybrid models of work. Some investments have focussed on groups such as women workers, workers from varying socio-economic backgrounds and workers of varying ethnicity. Key ESRC investments include:

   i. *Where does work belong anymore? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on working in the UK:* This research is looking at how hybrid working impacts future relationships between labour processes and the domestic sphere. The findings are particularly useful for looking at disproportional socio-economic and gender impacts of hybrid working.

   ii. *Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) digital footprints and its ethical implications during COVID-19 outbreak and beyond:* is

looking at how SMEs deal with the management of digital footprints that increased usage of digital tools is creating, especially after the Covid-19 outbreak.

iii.   The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is also funding research in this space including:

1.   *Downloading a new normal:* which explores how compelled use of digital services in lockdown and beyond is impacting UK libraries. The project addresses privacy and ethical issues, and issues of digital exclusion and ensuring equity of access.

2. The *'Stay home'* project, works with migrants, diaspora communities, and people of different faiths in London and Liverpool, to examine the meaning of home during the pandemic.

b. The Government does collect data that identifies disparities, including through ONS (Official National Statistics) survey data, DCMS Sector Economic Estimates, and commissioned research, but we agree that additional evidence on the experiences of Black and Asian and other minority ethnic communities would be helpful.

9.   **Recommendation: The Government should ensure that the processes in place to develop, test and evaluate digital health interventions are as robust as those used for physical health interventions** (paragraph 63).

a. The [NHS Long Term Plan](#) sets out a vision of a health and care service designed around the individual, enabled by the right technology. NHSX's vision is for digital services to improve services for the widest range of people, based on their needs and preferences. Digital tools in health and care should be part of a multi-channel offering with appropriate support, including a face to face offering, available to those who need it.

b. Centrally built services, such as the NHS App, are built to meet stringent accessibility standards. To support products that are built by local organisations or third party developers, NHS Digital have published the [Digital Service Manual.](#) NHS Digital have also published a [guide](#) to help healthcare providers, commissioners, and designers ensure that services delivered digitally are as inclusive as possible, meeting the needs of all sections of the population.

c. NHSX (a joint unit of the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England and Improvement), NHS England and Improvement Accelerated Access Collaborative (AAC), the Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) are working closely on a number of interrelated projects, building on Government's work to date, to put in place a robust and coordinated framework for the assessment, reimbursement and adoption of digital health interventions.

d. The Government's vision is for the UK to be a world leader in the development and adoption of well-evidenced digital health technologies (DHTs) that empower patients to manage their health; access peer support and clinical advice rapidly; and support frontline staff to assess risk and act in line with best practice. Government wants the UK to continue to influence the emerging global regulatory environment for DHTs by setting the 'gold standard' for rigorous yet proportionate approvals and regulatory standards. Our approach is driven by outcomes for patients and ease of use for clinicians. In order to achieve this Government will:

    i.   Create a clear pathway for digital health technologies to be adopted in the NHS with a single point of entry for innovators, and clear and proportionate evidence and economic standards.

    ii. Clarify who pays for what, create clear processes for agreeing prices and making payments and, if appropriate, put arrangements in place for contingent funding on a time-limited basis while evidence is being gathered.

    iii. Encourage and facilitate Integrated Care Systems to adopt approved products by ensuring clinicians understand the benefits and risks, and offer or recommend them to patients where appropriate. Patients will be supported to use approved products and tools that will be accessible to all.

    iv. Ensure data flows enable joined up care by integrating into the electronic health record systems across primary and secondary care - with safeguards around privacy and any further use of data.

    v.   The remainder of this response outlines the specific work underway to address the assessment and evaluation of digital health technologies.

e. The MHRA is responsible for the regulation of medical devices in the UK, developing and applying the regulatory framework to ensure that medical devices, including digital health interventions (where they qualify as medical devices), are acceptably safe and meet their intended purpose. It also has a central lead on the development of new regulations for medical devices in the UK using the powers in the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021.

f. The MHRA is currently working with NICE and NHSX to ensure medical device regulation is fit for purpose for software and AI. For example, the regulatory framework will set clear requirements and supplementary guidance, and take friction out of the market by aligning this work with other requirements such as NICE's Evidence Standards Framework and NHSX's Digital Technology Assessment Criteria. Additionally, MHRA is also working with key partners such as NICE, NHSX, the Health Research Authority (HRA), and Care Quality Commission (CQC) to deliver a single front door for regulatory assistance for data-driven devices through the Multi Agency Advisory Service.

g. In February 2021, NHSX introduced the Digital Technology Assessment

Criteria for Health and Social Care (DTAC), the launch followed a beta launch period with over 800 innovators, buyers and commissioners of digital health technologies and stakeholders from across the health and care system.

h. The DTAC brings together legislation and good practice into a baseline question set that is applicable for all Digital Health Technologies (DHT). It focuses on ensuring compliance with clinical safety by reviewing compliance with the DCB:0129 Clinical Safety Standards and medical device legislation by requiring validation of medical device classification, as well as compliance with standards for data protection, security, interoperability, accessibility and usability. The question set is designed to be used by all NHS organisations piloting, procuring or using DHTs to ensure that products that support patients meet the standards that we would expect. Adoption of DTAC has been high and is driving an increase in compliance with clinical safety legislation.

i. DTAC intentionally does not measure the efficacy or request evidence of effectiveness as part of the assessment process; this is the role of NICE. However, work is underway to provide additional support and resources to buyers and commissioners in this area with a product akin to DTAC to better support NHS organisations in taking a holistic view of a product prior to some of the more strategic work set out within this response.

j. Currently NICE assesses DHTs via its technology appraisal and diagnostics guidance programmes. In these cases positive guidance means that a technology is clinically and cost-effective compared to standard care. Alternatively, DHTs can be assessed via NICE's medical technologies guidance programme, where the 'case for adoption' recommendations are based on claimed advantages of a technology compared with current management of the condition.

k. NICE is currently working closely with NHSX, MHRA and the AAC to ensure that the frameworks and evidence standards in place for DHTs are robust, proportionate, and support the needs and priorities of the NHS. This includes making better use of real world evidence to inform assessment of DHTs, working closely with partner organisations including the Office for Life Sciences (OLS) to improve the infrastructure for real world evidence generation and collection.

l. In addition to ensuring that the regulation and assessment of digital health technologies is fit for purpose, we want to ensure that we support innovators to develop the right level of evidence, to make a supportive environment for investment. To enable this, early access to the NHS could be allowed for certain products pending a full assessment, to support evidence generation and evaluation. NHSX, NICE and the AAC are developing a proposal for what such a scheme could look like.

m. NHSX, NICE, the MHRA and the AAC are in the process of engaging with stakeholders from across the NHS, relevant public bodies, patient groups and industry on the issues and options for addressing these, which will inform our emerging policy proposals. We propose to initially pilot the approach with some selected product groups in defined therapeutic areas, which will enable

us to expedite patient access to DHTs in these areas. In considering broader implementation, we need to account for the fact that some of the proposed regulatory changes will occur over the next 2-3 years, and so we will need to implement changes to policy in a coordinated way and following a phased approach.

10. **Recommendation: In its hybrid strategy, the Government must commit to listening to the views and experiences of communities and working with them to discuss, develop and implement solutions that meet their needs (paragraph 68**).

   a. As set out in the Government's response to the Committee's first recommendations, we agree that digital technology affects all parts of public policy and that this should be reflected in the Government's approach to availability and accessibility of relevant services for all citizens.

   b. The Government will continue to ensure that consultation of affected communities and stakeholders remains a key element of developing cross-cutting strategies.

11. **Recommendation: As part of its new hybrid strategy, the Government should commit to reviewing the resilience of the UK's digital infrastructure every two years and to report to Parliament on this review and the action being taken to ensure it is adequately robust for the hybrid world (paragraph 78).**

   a. The security and resilience of the UK's public telecoms networks and services is paramount. That is why the Government is legislating for better security practices across our public telecoms networks, through the Telecommunications (Security) Bill. This will place new duties and requirements on providers to protect the availability of these networks. It will also require regular reporting by Ofcom on the extent to which the sector has implemented improvements. This will build on Ofcom's existing reporting requirements, fulfilled by their annual Connected Nations reports which outlines the general security and resilience of the telecoms sector.

   b. On telecommunications networks, resilience is continuously monitored through the work of the Electronic Communications Resilience & Response Group (EC-RRG), which is led by industry, facilitated by DCMS with participation from a range of Government partners. It ensures the sector is prepared for a range of risks and threats and is able to respond appropriately, including through the National Emergency Plan for Telecommunications (NEAT), and it publishes its Resilience Guidelines for the sector online.

   c. Considering the UK's resilience more broadly, the Government published 'Global Britain in the Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy' in March 2021. This set out the Prime Minister's vision for 2030, in which we will build back better from Covid-19 with a strong economic recovery and greater national resilience to threats and hazards in the physical and digital worlds. In addition, the review set out that the Government will start developing a comprehensive national resilience strategy in 2021, in partnership with the devolved administrations and English

regions, local government, the private sector and the public.

12. **Recommendation: We do not underestimate the complexity of digital regulation and digital rights, but believe that these issues, including digital rights, must be considered by the Government in developing its hybrid strategy (paragraph 83**).

   a. The Government agrees with the Committee that good regulation of digital and data-based technologies is essential for our future prosperity. The Government is committed to regulation that is pro-innovation; that encourages the development of innovative digital technologies and businesses, and is designed and implemented in a proportionate way that minimises burdens.

   b. As set out in its 10 Tech Priorities, the Government is entering the next chapter in its relationship with technology, and the UK is helping to write the rulebook for the new era. In doing so the Government will focus on driving growth while promoting competition and innovation, safety and security, and a flourishing, democratic society. The Government agrees with the Committee that this will be complex, as digital technologies have unique features that create cross-cutting issues for different areas of the economy and public policy. The extent to which digital companies should be treated as essential utilities is contested - however it is uncontroversial that digital technologies are systemically important to our everyday lives.

   c. The Government agrees with the Committee that the UK can play a leading international role in digital regulation - and the government is committed to doing so, as set out in the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. The Government will work with partners at home and abroad, bilaterally and multilaterally, in order to promote pro-innovation regulation that delivers benefits to people around the world.

   d. On competition specifically, the Government is establishing a new, pro-competition regime for digital markets to provide more proactive oversight, and swift action to address competition concerns in fast-moving digital markets. At the heart of the new regime will be a mandatory code of conduct to govern the relationships between dominant firms and different groups of users which rely on their services, to promote fair trading, open choices and trust and transparency.

13. **Recommendation: We welcome the Government's commitment to publishing an Online Harms Bill and urge it to bring this legislation forward in the next session of Parliament. It will need to reflect the central role that the internet plays in our education, work and social lives, and ensure that provisions are put in place to protect children and vulnerable people online which are at least as robust as those in place offline. (paragraph 91)**

   a. The publication of the draft Online Safety Bill is a major milestone in the development of a new regulatory framework which will hold platforms to account on tackling harmful content and behaviours online. The Government has presented the legislation to Parliament and look forward to hearing views from Parliamentarians and external stakeholders through the next steps on

the legislation. The Online Safety Bill will be subject to pre-legislative scrutiny in this session, and we will prioritise readying it for introduction as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

b. Protecting children and vulnerable people is at the heart of our plans to transform the online experience for people in the UK. The strongest protections in this framework will be for children. These new laws will mean that all in-scope companies must assess risks and take action to tackle illegal activity that threatens the safety of children. In addition, platforms likely to be accessed by children will need to:

    i. Prevent access to material that is harmful for children, such as pornography.

    ii. Ensure there are strong protections from activity which is harmful to children, which we expect will include harms such as bullying.

c. If a child does encounter harmful content or activity, parents and children will be able to report it easily. Platforms will be required to take appropriate action in response. The framework takes an approach which benefits and protects all users. It will empower adults, including vulnerable users, to keep themselves safe online, and to enjoy their right to freedom of expression, reducing the risk of bullying or being attacked on the basis of their identity. Those disproportionately abused online will benefit most from this legislation.

d. All companies in scope of the duty of care will need to have robust systems and processes in place to tackle illegal online abuse on their services. Services with the largest audiences and a range of high risk features, including the largest social media companies, will also be required to undertake regular risk assessments to identify legal but harmful material on their services. These risk assessments should consider the risk of harm to adult users, including vulnerable users. Services with the largest audiences and a range of high risk features (Category 1 companies) will have to make clear in their terms and conditions what is and is not acceptable on their services, and enforce these terms and conditions transparently and consistently. This will help ensure users' safety whilst socialising online.

e. Ofcom will also have a duty to consider the vulnerability of users whose circumstances appear to put them in need of special protection when performing its duties. As well as ensuring companies take action to keep users safe, we are taking steps to educate and empower users to make more informed and safer choices online.

f. The Media Literacy Strategy will be a complementary tool to the new regulatory regime, helping to support users with the skills and knowledge they need to make safer choices online whilst making the most of what the internet has to offer. This covers key issues such as critical thinking, data and privacy, and online abuse. The Strategy will be published later this year.

g. In addition, the Online Safety Bill will build on and strengthen Ofcom's existing statutory duty to promote media literacy, giving them additional

responsibilities. The Government's plans for legislation will help build trust in digital platforms and drive economic growth by making companies more responsible for their users' safety online. Clear and effective regulation will build user trust and provide clarity for companies about what society expects of them.

14. Recommendation: The Government must commit to ensuring health professionals have the training and equipment needed to deliver digitally effective services in the most appropriate way. (paragraph 98)

a. Employers in the health system are responsible for ensuring that their staff are trained to the required standards to deliver effective services, including digital services. Health Education England (HEE) are involved in a number of workstreams to boost the digital capability of the health workforce:

   i. To support the development of digital skills, knowledge, understanding and awareness across the health workforce, NHSX has commissioned and funded Health Education England's Digital Readiness programme. The programme focuses on supporting a digital culture and environment, professionalising and boosting the NHS digital workforce and establishing learning and development opportunities for NHS staff to increase their digital capabilities throughout their careers.

   ii. For example, HEE are working with NHSX to develop and expand the NHS Digital Academy by opening up access to professionals across different specialist areas, as well as by rolling out products and tools for the entire NHS workforce, for example a digital literacy assessment tool. Under the programme, HEE and NHSX will integrate digital skills learning into existing professional and academic curricula, to ensure those in the health workforce are digitally capable throughout their careers.

   iii. HEE have also launched the Blended Learning Programme (BLP) as an additional route into nursing and midwifery. The programme aims not only to develop more flexible degree routes for a more diverse student population, but also to develop digitally capable professionals suited to the demands of 21st century care.

   iv. The use of blended learning for the future training of doctors and critical care nurses is also currently being commissioned. This will further support development of digital skills and use of technology in the delivery of healthcare by individuals in these professional groups.

   v. On 18 February 2021, the Nursing Midwifery Council announced that they have approved a new recovery standard which allows up to 300 of the 2,300 clinical practice 12 hours to be completed in simulate environments. This is a major step forward in managing current COVID-19 disruption and putting down foundations for longer-term reform of clinical education. However, the Government still acknowledges the importance of in-person clinical placement teaching.

vi. HEE also works closely with professional regulators to promote the use of digital and innovative technologies for healthcare professionals' education. This work includes exploring how flexibility in regulatory standards will release additional opportunities to use technologies in training, to ensure that health professionals are not only capable of using digital throughout their careers, but also that their training takes full opportunity of innovative methods and technologies.

15. **Recommendation: As part of its new hybrid strategy, the Government should work to develop a genuinely hybrid healthcare service. In implementing a hybrid healthcare service the Government should work with the NHS to evaluate what treatments are suitable to be offered digitally, and provide further funding to research new digital interventions for those specialisms that currently cannot be provided remotely. The Government should also work with the NHS to ensure that current, and future, healthcare systems and processes reflect the new hybrid reality, including the importance of face-to-face provision, and enable patients to move seamlessly between online and offline service provision. (paragraph 115).**

a. The government agrees that a blended model with a mixture of face-to-face and digital services is needed to ensure that individuals receive the best treatment for them and their circumstances. The NHS Long Term Plan sets out the direction of travel for the NHS to 2023/24, including ambitions for digital services and infrastructure. The plan states that digital technology will provide convenient ways for patients to access advice and care. Our publication "The future of healthcare: our vision for digital, data and technology in health and care" sets out our ambitions for greater digitisation, and states that digital services will be able to support and empower people to stay healthy and independent for longer. The report includes a variety of recommendations and suggestions for how digital technology could assist people in managing their own health.

b. For mental health services, it is our intention to ensure that patients are offered the choice of face to face or digital treatment options, and guidance has been provided to services to support the re-introduction of face to face care, whilst maintaining digital delivery where this is in accordance with patient choice. The NHS Mental Health Implementation plan (pp 47-48) sets out specific objectives for digitisation of mental health services. Local strategies must include their approach to ensuring all mental health providers are fully digitised by 2024.

c. Some examples of mental health digital provision might include digital options for accessing care including online referrals, an offer of a range of self-management apps, digital consultations and digitally-enabled models of therapy to support access to psychological therapies in Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). On digital therapies, the Government has been working with NHSX to build on their assessment criteria for digital tools to develop criteria which are specific for digital IAPT services. The Government has undertaken an engagement exercise on these criteria and are now testing these with the service and developers. Throughout the

pandemic, mental health services have remained open by adapting the way in which support has been delivered, including remote and digital support where appropriate. NHS England and NHS Improvement are committed to ensuring that insights gained during the pandemic are used to inform service transformation plans in the coming years. To support this, a rapid realist review into the effectiveness of telemedicine has been commissioned to help inform future approaches.

16. **Recommendation: The digitally hybrid healthcare service in England should be underpinned by a code of practice giving patients the right to receive services online or offline, as well as guaranteeing a minimum service standard for both online and offline healthcare services, including a right to contact their doctor digitally. In developing this code of practice, the Government should undertake a review of patients' rights in hybrid healthcare provision, including its impact on accessibility, privacy and the triage between face-to-face and digital provision (paragraph 116).**

    a. The NHS Constitution sets out the rights of the public and patients to access NHS Services as well as the right to privacy and confidentiality that ensures information is safe and secure.

    b. NHSX has published guidance to ensure that digital tools for mental health are safe and effective: The Government is currently looking at how national digital and technology service standards could apply and adapt to the digital and technology work of local NHS services.

17. **Recommendation: The Government must prioritise mitigating the long-term impact of the prolonged period of disrupted learning on children's life-chances and wellbeing. This should include undertaking research to understand the very different experiences of children from different communities, ensuring that specific funding and support is available to address the growing attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, and establishing a support programme focused on the wellbeing of children and young people post-pandemic. The Government must also recognise the impact that a lack of space to work from home has had on children's learning, and ensure that this is recognised in their 'catch-up' plans for pupils (paragraph 132).**

    a. The Government recognises that extended school and college restrictions have had a substantial impact on children and young people's learning. We are committed to doing what we can to ensure no child is left behind as a result of the learning and extracurricular activities lost over the past year.

    b. The Government is providing more than £1.5 billion for a national tutoring revolution, £400m for training and professional development, £200m for summer schools this summer, a £650m universal catch up premium for schools in the 2020/21 academic year, a recovery premium focussed on disadvantaged pupils that is worth over £300m for the current academic year, and a £22m accelerator fund to scale up proven approaches.

    c. Pupil premium funding is also increasing to £2.5bn to ensure schools have

resources and tools to tackle the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. School leaders will use this extra funding to tailor their support, based on the needs of their disadvantaged pupils, and invest in proven practice to improve outcomes.

d. The Government has commissioned an independent research and assessment agency (Renaissance Learning) to provide a baseline assessment of catch-up needs for pupils in schools in England and monitor progress over the course of the year to help us target support across the system. This research also helps us understand the extent to which catch-up needs vary by area and disadvantage, and other pupil characteristics.

e. On 4 June 2021, the Government published interim findings which showed that on their return to the classroom in the Autumn, Year 3-9 pupils were on average around 2 months behind similar pupils in 2019/20 in reading, and Year 3-7 pupils were on average around 3.5 months behind in maths. Primary pupils on average made some progress to catch-up in reading and maths during the Autumn term when spending time in the classroom, although they were still behind similar pupils in 2019/20 in December 2020.

f. On their return to the classroom in the Spring 2021, primary pupils were about as far behind similar pupils in 2019/20 as they were at the start of Autumn term (around 2-3.5 months). Disadvantaged pupils have been worse affected than their peers by time out of the classroom – falling 0.5-1 month further behind than other pupils. Pupils in Yorkshire and the Humber and the North East were further behind than the average pupil on their return to school in Autumn, whilst pupils with English as an additional language appear to have been worse affected in terms of reading. The report Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year: Initial findings from the spring term is available here. The full report will be published once the study is completed in October 2021.

g. The Government knows that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on mental health and wellbeing right across society, but it has had a particular impact on children and young people. Departments across government continue to work closely to understand the data and evidence as it emerges. A summary of published sources in the Public Health England Mental health and Wellbeing Surveillance report children and young people chapter is available here.

h. Mental health and wellbeing is at the heart of the Government's long term recovery plans and we have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) on their COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan, backed by £50m funding.

i. Support for wellbeing needs to go hand-in-hand with academic recovery and work to close attainment gaps. Mental wellbeing is now a statutory part of the health education curriculum in all state-funded schools and to further support this the Department has recently announced more than £17m to build on

mental health support already available in education settings. This will provide new funding to train thousands of senior mental health leads in schools and colleges, and further funding to local authorities so they can continue to offer training and advice from mental health experts to schools and colleges, building on the Wellbeing for Education Return programme launched last September, which has been used by more than 90% of councils.

j. This is in addition to the £79m to boost children and young people's mental health support we announced in March, which will include increasing the number of Mental Health Support Teams in schools and colleges to around 400, covering an estimated 3 million children and young people by 2023.

k. From the outset of the pandemic, and throughout national restrictions, education settings have remained open for vulnerable children and young people. The Government has also provided support to schools to deliver remote education including delivering 1,352,559 laptops and tablets to schools, colleges and FE institutions (as of 13 July 2021). The Department also made funding available for Oak National Academy to provide video lessons in a broad range of subjects for Reception up to Year 11. Specialist content for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is also available. Oak has remained a free optional resource for the academic year 2020-21, including delivering a Summer Learning Support offer in the summer holidays. The Government is all too aware that a lack of space at home can impact on learning, and schools remaining open for vulnerable children and the Summer Learning Support offer are examples of how we are tackling that.

l. We are carefully considering the role that remote approaches could play in the education system longer-term, recognising the opportunities and challenges that remote education has presented.

18. **Recommendation: The Government should work with local authorities and schools to fund a specific support programme to ensure that all children have an adequate internet connection and suitable digital devices to work effectively online from home. It must also provide funding to ensure that teachers and schools can make the most of the benefits that an increasing role for online learning offers. The Government should ensure that the curriculum reflects the increasing need for digital skills and provides all children and young people with the skills needed for our hybrid world (paragraph 139).**

a. The Government has distributed over 1.35 million laptops and tablets to schools, trusts, local authorities and further education providers as part of a £400 million government investment to support access to remote education and online social care services. The initiative targeted disadvantaged children and young people without adequate internet connection or digital devices to work effectively from home. The Government has recently announced new funding to support schools and colleges in providing internet access for disadvantaged pupils whose face-to-face education is disrupted during the Autumn term and is continuing to enable ordering of 4G routers for schools and colleges.

b. To ensure that teachers and schools can make the most of the benefits that digital technology can have in the classroom, the Government has invested £30m in the Connect the Classroom pilot programme, which supports schools in upgrading their Wi-Fi networking to ensure that outdated systems do not prevent them from realising the benefits of technology and the use of cloud-based services. There will be around 1000 schools included in this programme.

c. In April 2020, the Government launched the EdTech Demonstrator programme, a network of schools and colleges who were initially funded to provide peer-to-peer support on making the best use of technology to support remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. This met the individual training needs of over 4,000, schools and colleges, with over 11,000 accessing live weekly webinars and tutorials. The EdTech Demonstrator network has since been expanded to ensure that schools and colleges are able to access targeted support, including support on how to develop a sustainable digital strategy that supports wider school / college improvement drives. The next stage for the Demonstrator network is to bridge the gap between crisis response and long-term implementation of technology, focusing on upskilling the profession to realise the wider benefits of technology.

d. This Government wants every child in England to receive a world-class computing education. The outdated ICT curriculum has been replaced with a new computing curriculum in 2014 which is highly adaptable and designed to reduce the risk of content becoming outdated (given the speed of innovation in the field of digital skills and technology). Programming, algorithms, and the use of information technology are taught to pupils in key stage 3 to provide the foundation for pupils to acquire further knowledge about artificial intelligence (AI), cyber security and data science.

e. The Government has also created the National Centre for Computing Education (NCCE), backed by £84m of Government funding, to improve computing teachers' subject knowledge. Nearly 30,000 teachers have engaged with the programme, across both primary and secondary schools and over 4,100 teachers have taken, or are currently taking, CPD which will provide them with the subject expertise to teach the computer science GCSE. The complete set of teacher resources went live in July 2020 and have been downloaded over 230,000 times by teachers in English schools.

f. The statutory relationships, sex and health education curriculum ensures pupils are given the knowledge to understand internet safety and harms, online relationships, and online media. The Government wants our children to grow up to become discerning consumers of information and able to navigate their lives both on and offline. To support teachers, pastoral staff and designated safeguarding leads deliver these topics safely and deal with sensitive discussions and potential disclosures, the Government has produced curriculum planning guidance and Teacher Training Modules that are available to download from GOV.UK.

g. The Internet Safety and Harms primary module includes information on internet use, rationing and risk, online relationships, privacy, and understanding online information, the secondary module covers social media and reality, gambling, influencers, targeted advertising, and accessing support. The primary Online Relationships module includes information on understanding how people behave online, cyberbullying and keeping safe online and the secondary Online and Media module covers using appropriate language online, online behaviour and risks, sharing material online, harmful online content and pornography.

h. In addition to this, to support teachers to deliver more sensitive content around sexual abuse, the Government intends to work with school leaders and other agencies to help teachers and school staff to deliver the RSHE curriculum as effectively as possible and plans to achieve this through a combination of non-statutory guidance to support teachers to know when and how to deliver these lessons to pupils in schools and webinars and regional training events. The Government is encouraging all schools to take an inset day and dedicate time to this to develop a whole-school approach to safeguarding.

i. Reflecting the increased role of online learning during the pandemic KCSIE (Keeping Children Safe in Education) was updated in September 2020 to provide schools with additional guidance on keeping children safe online, including links to specialist external resources and support.

19. **Recommendation: In common with the other areas of life considered in this report, it will be important that those who have benefitted from the rapid shift to online—in this case, young disabled people in particular—do not find the option for more flexible, digital study withdrawn once schools are able to fully reopen (paragraph 140).**

a. The Government has also made £4.84 million available for Oak National Academy both for the summer term of the academic year 2019-20, and then for the 2020-21 academic year, to provide video lessons in a broad range of subjects for Reception up to Year 11. The Government has committed a further £2.1 million to Oak, enabling it to operate from the start of the next academic year through to Easter 2022. Specialist content for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is also available: [Specialist lessons - Oak](#) [National Academy (thenational.academy)](#). This covers Communication and Language, Numeracy, Creative Arts, Independent Living, Physical Development and Early Development Learning. Additionally, Oak offers therapy-based lessons and resources across occupational, physical, sensory integration, and speech and language therapy. All of Oak's video lessons are captioned. Oak's videos lessons for Years 1 to 3 English and Maths are interpreted in British Sign Language.

b. To also ensure pupils with SEND were supported effectively during the pandemic, the Government funded National Star College to launch their SEND Hub providing advice and guidance on ways to ensure the curriculum is accessible and inclusive for all. This included training on ways assistive

tech could be used by teachers, leaders and SENCos to support all pupils, including those with SEND. The National Star provision ended on March 31st, and informed the development of a pilot training for teachers in using assistive technology which went out to tender on 3rd September 2021.

c. In addition, the Government provided £40.8 million to the Family Fund in 2020-21, which supported over 90,000 families on low incomes raising children with disabilities or serious illnesses. £13.5 million of this funding was to specifically address needs arising from the pandemic, which included assistive technology to aid remote learning.

d. The Government is carefully considering the role that remote approaches could play in the education system longer-term, recognising the opportunities that remote education has presented - alongside the challenges.

Work

20. **Recommendation: There will clearly need to be significant action from the Government to tackle future increases in unemployment. We fully endorse the recommendations of the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee's report Employment and COVID-19: Time for a New Deal (paragraph 158).**

a. The Government recognises that, for some people, interacting with DWP using digital technology brings challenges. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we've adapted the way we've delivered our services to doing more online, but we have ensured other types of interaction are still available. Therefore, jobcentres have remained open to help those customers who benefit most from face-to-face support, alongside our continued delivery of support to customers online and via the phone. This will continue to be reviewed in line with Government advice.

b. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen workers displaced across the labour market and longer-term trends such as automation, the transition to net-zero and digitalisation of jobs will also change the shape of the labour market and the skills employers require. The government is committed to supporting everyone who has been affected by the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 on the economy and the labour market. We want everyone to be able to find a job, progress in work and thrive in the labour market, whoever they are and wherever they live.

c. Through Plan for Jobs, the government announced over £33bn in measures to create, support and protect jobs, which included £2.9bn funding for Restart and £3bn investment in the Kickstart programme alongside other measures focussed on boosting work search, skills and apprenticeships. The expansion of Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs) to offer training, work experience and a guaranteed job interview. The Government also continues to shape skills provision to address longstanding skills gaps and link directly to employment opportunities, including through provision such as SWAPs and Skills Bootcamps which link training with real job opportunities.

d. DWP are supporting people to obtain the skills needed to find secure employment in in-demand sectors, whether they have been impacted by the pandemic or by broader labour market trends. Two websites, Job Help and Employer Help, were launched last year by DWP in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, recognising both a radically different labour market as some sectors contract and others expand. Jobhelp offers job search advice, showcases recruiting sectors and signposts to job vacancies to help people successfully find work.

e. DWP are working closely with DCMS & DfE to assess workforce demands across the economy, and the digital economy in particular. We have established a Digital & Tech Jobs and Skills cross-departmental working group to enable better DWP, DCMS, BEIS & DfE collaboration to improve customers' skills and help provide people with critical digital skills and support them into jobs in the sector.

f. The Government will continue to work with employers via The Leadership Council and Disability Confident to promote toolkits available on The Mental Health at Work website and Every Mind Matters on protecting mental health when working from home, which includes best practice tips on staying connected to colleagues and ensuring regular breaks are taken from workstations.

g. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) continues to promote health and safety guidance to employers in terms of home workers. Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, all employers are under a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees. This duty extends to those working from home, either temporarily or permanently.

h. The HSE is continuing to work with the Government to provide practical advice and guidance to help employers to support employees working from home. The HSE has published guidance that includes information on lone working without supervision, working with display screen equipment (DSE) and stress and mental health (https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.html). This also includes practical guidance on setting up workstations, DSE and how to prevent musculoskeletal disorders. It is intended to provide a flexible, proportionate and pragmatic approach for employers and employees on managing this low-risk activity during this time. As this period extends, the HSE guidance on working with DSE emphasises the need for employers to have regular discussions with employees and keep health and safety arrangements for home working under review.

i. In relation to mental health and preventing work-related stress the HSE's primary focus is in encouraging conversations to identify issues and concerns that may impact on the mental health and wellbeing of employees and to jointly agree steps to mitigate these issues. The HSE has produced a free to use practical Talking Toolkit to facilitate such engagement, the HSE has also recently published guidance for Lone Workers which helps give advice to employers and workers on the issues lone workers face.

    j.   The Government has developed good practice across the board, ensuring that a cultural shift towards further online living does not lead to a long-term increase in loneliness, isolation and mental health issues and is reflected in our service delivery to customers.

21. Recommendation: The Government should work with employers and trade unions to ensure that decisions about job locations are equality impact assessed, so that people are not excluded from employment opportunities because of their living situation (paragraph 167)

    a.   The Government recognises the need for employers to treat employees equally regardless of their working location. Work is underway with the Flexible Working Taskforce – a partnership across business groups, trade unions, charities, and government departments – to provide advice and guidance to support employers who are considering adopting more remote or semi-remote (hybrid) working practices going forwards.

    b.   In the short-term, the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) – in consultation with the Flexible Working Taskforce – has produced advice on hybrid working to help employers consider whether this could be an option for their workplace and how to introduce it fairly. The advice covers the existing legal and practical issues associated with hybrid working – and includes a section on supporting and managing staff. In the slightly longer-term, the Flexible Working Taskforce is working on developing best practice guidance for employers, which will include advice on inclusion and fairness when making decisions about who can and cannot work at home.

22. Recommendation: The Government should work with disabled people's organisations to develop a campaign to increase awareness of the Access to Work scheme amongst both employers and disabled people, and ensure that Access to Work assessors have the skills and knowledge required to offer the most appropriate solutions for increasingly digitalised workplaces. (paragraph 179)

    a.   Access to Work (AtW) provides vital support to help disabled people enter and stay in work. The Government has been actively working to raise the visibility of the scheme and in 2019/20 official statistics stated a record 43,000 people, with a disability or a health condition receive tailored Access to Work funding to do their job. AtW expenditure increased to £141.7 million in 2019/20, a new record amount, equating to an 8% increase in real terms expenditure on 18/19.

    b.   The Government recognises the need to raise the visibility of the AtW programme and is working to expand its reach through raising awareness with both disabled people and employers. Earlier in the year, the Government delivered a paid communication campaign to widen the reach and increase the take-up of grants. This proactive communication campaign included a combination of Google search and social media activity, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Pinterest which research indicates are among the highest platforms visited by disabled people.

c. To support the campaign, Government has also taken forward active press engagement activities to showcase positive case studies of people who have received AtW, which has resulted in articles in mainstream papers. The Government is also working with stakeholders, partners and employer associations to raise awareness through communications to their customers and ensuring advisers who work with potential customers, including Jobcentre Plus, health professionals and advisory groups, have the information and tools to act as advocates.

d. AtW works closely with the Access to Work Stakeholder Forums in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure stakeholders' views, including those of charities and DPOs, are captured. The forums represent several disability charities, including RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People), MIND, Leonard Cheshire and meet quarterly to share experiences of using AtW and actively support policy development.

e. AtW is piloting an Adjustments Passport which has been developed with the Stakeholder Forums. The passport aims to raise awareness of AtW and sign post disabled people to helpful information. The passport will be particularly useful in supporting disabled people with transitions into work by providing:

   i. Clear gateway of adjustment support, by raising the visibility of support available for each stage of the transitions journey.

   ii. Transferable record of adjustments that can be used to support the adjustments journey, reducing the need for assessments.

   iii. Communication tools to support discussions with employers iv. Visibility of in-work support if an employer employs a disabled person.

   iv. Assurance and support to progress in work.

f. Piloting began in May 2021 for freelancers and contractors moving between job roles. The next phase will commence in September 2021, for young people transitioning between education and work, and then in October 2021 for veterans leaving the armed forces. For those already in employment or starting a new job, the passport will provide a living document of workplace adjustments and empower disabled people to have the confidence to discuss their in-work support needs when moving between job roles.

23. Recommendation: The Government should introduce new legislation to provide platform workers with defined and enhanced employment rights. (paragraph 187)

a. The gig, or the so-called platform economy, offers individuals flexibility and can provide opportunities for those who may not be able to work in more conventional ways. Indeed, the Government research that the report refers to has indicated that people mostly value the flexibility it offers (56% of respondents).

b. Employment law is clear that an individual's employment rights are determined by their Employment Status, which in turn is determined by the

detail of their working arrangement with their employer. The Government is immensely proud of our flexible and dynamic labour market which allows businesses in every region of the UK to create jobs and promote participation amongst historically under-represented groups.

c. In particular, Government believes our three-tiered Employment Status structure (employee, limb (b) worker and self-employed) provides the right balance for the UK labour market. The Government agrees with the report that the Uber Supreme Court judgment upheld the law that those who qualify as workers in the gig economy are entitled to the same employment rights and protections as workers in other parts of the economy.

d. The Government does not agree that now is the right time to introduce new legislation to limit the flexibility of our labour market for all types of working models including for the gig economy. This would not be a straightforward change; with a system based on case law, any changes to employment status law can potentially have wide reaching effects and unintended consequences.

e. However, the Government does agree and recognise concerns around Employment Status clarity, and we want to make it easier for individuals and businesses to understand which rights apply to them. The Government is currently considering options to improve clarity around Employment Status, engaging externally and across Government on how best to address these issues in a post-COVID scenario and will consider this report as part of that work.

f. More broadly, while the Government is keen to ensure that everyone can enjoy the benefits of flexible working, we are determined to tackle unfair working practices. Government actively encourages businesses to ensure they are adhering to their legal obligations, ensuring individuals are treated fairly and in accordance with the law.

g. The Government is absolutely clear that employers must take their responsibilities seriously and cannot simply opt out. The Government believes strong action should be taken against employers who repeatedly ignore both their responsibilities and the decision of Employment Tribunals. The Government will legislate in due course to introduce a tougher enforcement regime where employment rights are breached repeatedly, on the same issue, by the same employer.

24. **Recommendation: We believe that, alongside its new hybrid strategy, the Government should consult on strengthening the current legislative framework for employment rights, to ensure it is suitable for the digital age (including consideration of a right to switch off, responsibilities for meeting the costs of remote working, rights for platform workers, the use of workplace monitoring and surveillance, and giving workers a right to access data about their performance) (paragraph 198).**

a. The Government is aware that the increase in remote working during the pandemic has raised issues relating to employee wellbeing. It is in the interest of both employers and employees to support wellbeing at work, prevent

burnout and set the right conditions for employees to perform at their best.

b. The Government is considering the business practices, opportunities and risks associated with remote and semi-remote (hybrid) working, as some employers choose to embed these new ways of working into organisational business models more permanently.

c. The Flexible Working Taskforce (see response to recommendation 21) will provide advice to employers so that they are better able to support remote working. The Government's intention here is not to prescribe any particular way of working – it is for employers and workers to determine the ways of working that best suit their organisational and personal needs – but to act responsibly by ensuring employers have access to relevant information to support their decisions on future ways of working.

d. As part of this work, the Taskforce will consider the issues associated with an employee's ability to disconnect from work when working remotely and the key role of (line) management in creating a supportive culture in the context of remote and semi-remote (hybrid) working.

e. The ICO (Information Commissioner's Office) has existing guidance on how employees should approach the monitoring of staff compliance with Covid19 health and safety measures. They advise that any surveillance of an employee needs to be necessary, justified and proportionate. Depending on the specific context of the workplace, there may be a justifiable case for an employer to use overt surveillance systems to monitor staff to ensure essential health and safety measures are followed during the pandemic. As with any use of surveillance, employers need to make an assessment of its necessity and proportionality in the circumstances.

f. The ICO is clear that, if employers do use surveillance systems, they should be explicit with staff as to why and what they are implementing. Employers must ensure that there are notices, or other means, to clearly inform employees about the nature and extent of surveillance and its purpose(s). The Surveillance Camera Commissioner (SCC) and ICO have worked together to update the SCC DPIA (Data Protection Impact Assessment) template which is specific to surveillance systems. This will support employers' thinking before considering the use of thermal cameras or other surveillance.

25. **Recommendation: As part of its post-pandemic recovery plans, the UK Government should bring together elements of the Future High Streets Fund, Towns Fund, and additional funding, to specifically protect the future of physical and communal spaces, such as libraries and neighbourhood centres, in villages, towns and cities in England. Local authorities should also be encouraged to use this funding to trial new types of community infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, such as the remote working 'hubs' mentioned in Chapter 5. Such remote working hubs could also be used to provide space for the community, for local clubs and societies, regular community events and adult learning classes. (paragraph 220)**

a. Both elements of the £3.6 billion Towns Fund, comprising the Town Deals and Future High Streets programs, have now been committed and funding therefore cannot be reallocated to support other priorities. However, the Towns Fund will be investing a significant amount in projects designed to deliver communal physical space for business, education or community use purposes. This type of investment has always been possible as part of the Towns Fund investment framework and towns were encouraged to propose projects of this nature where they felt it would help unlock future growth and prosperity.

b. The £150m Community Ownership Fund which was launched in July 2021 provides additional investment by the government to support communities across the UK to protect physical and communal spaces by bringing them under local control through community ownership.

c. The fund, which is UK wide and will run for 4-years until 2025, will provide communities with access to the direct funding and support that we recognise is necessary to protect amenities such as communal spaces, neighbourhood centres and village halls.

d. The first bidding round for the fund ended on 13 August and we expect to inform successful applicants in the Autumn. The second round of the fund will launch in December and the third in May 2022. There will be 8 bidding rounds in total.

e. The Government has introduced a variety of measures to bolster physical community infrastructure. The reform of the Use Classes Order to create a new Commercial, Business and Service use class (Class E, from 1 September 2021) will encourage more vibrant, mixed-use town centre areas which will, in turn, attract people to shop, work and spend their leisure time. The new Class E includes a diverse range of uses which are suitable for town centres and high streets, such as offices, shops, banks, cafes, children's nurseries and gyms. The use class allows for a mix of such uses, including at different times of the day, to reflect changing retail and business models. Movement between uses within the use class does not require planning permission.

f. Separately, a national permitted development right provides for the change of use from this Commercial, Business and Service use class to residential use, subject to prior approval by the local planning authority in respect of particular planning matters. This will further support diverse high streets and town centres and avoid premises being left empty.

g. Libraries are in the F1 Learning and non-residential institution use class and therefore a planning application is required for the change of use to other high street uses or to residential. Halls or meeting places for the principal use of the local community fall within the F2 Local Community use class, and a planning application is similarly required for the change of use to high street uses in the Commercial, Business or Service use class or to residential.

26. Recommendation: In developing its new digital strategy, the UK Government should ensure that it interacts with, and complements, its existing Loneliness Strategy for England (paragraph 227)

    a. The DCMS Digital Strategy Team will continue to work with the DCMS Tackling Loneliness Team to ensure alignment with the Tackling Loneliness Strategy objectives. Digital Inclusion has been a specific area of focus for the Tackling Loneliness Network, a group of over 70 high-profile charities, businesses, organisations and public figures working to explore ways to bring people together to build strong community spirit.

    b. The Tackling Loneliness Network action plan, published in May 2021, included commitments from network members on digital inclusion, such as the following planned and live initiatives:

        i. JCDecaux operates a growing network of 100+ free, fast wifi spots on high streets across the UK. It has committed to look at how relevant content to help signpost young people to support and services could be included on these wifi spots.

        ii. The Government will ensure that hard-to-reach areas don't miss out on lightning-fast next generation broadband through its new £5 billion programme, Project Gigabit. This will help people to access support online and to stay in touch with friends and families.

        iii. WhatsApp has developed a chatbot messaging service in partnership with a select number of UK charities and NGOs. Launched on 17 June, the free to use service offers anyone impacted by loneliness a simple and secure way to find information and support services.

        iv. The Government is exploring a range of opportunities to tackle digital exclusion, including how the Inclusive Economy Partnership can facilitate high impact partnerships between government, business and civil society to support digital inclusion. A workshop, facilitated by Red Badger (digital transformation consultancy), to identify a pathway to scaling a third sector and business collaboration pilot model to improve access to devices, data and help desk support. Led by Social Mobility Business Partnership (SMBP), Meggitt and Vodafone the pilot model involved Meggitt using its existing relationship with Vodafone to provide 4G enabled tablets (protected by MobileIron) and first line help desk support to students from low income backgrounds attending the SMBP 2020 virtual work experience programme

    c. The Tackling Loneliness Hub, an online resource, supports organisations interested in tackling loneliness to share evidence, insights and ideas. It helps organisations to expand their networks and identify new opportunities for partnership working.

The Government thanks the committee for the expertise and work it has provided on these important issues. As demonstrated by the breadth of the committee's report and the

response we have provided, it is clear that digital technologies have a significant impact on all aspects of our daily and working lives, from mental and physical wellbeing to education, work and inclusion. As such, we agree with the committee that it is vital this pervasiveness is considered and addressed when designing public policy. We strongly believe that our current structure, drawing on the expertise and responsibilities of different Departments across a wide range of policy areas, facilitates this and we hope our response has given the committee fulsome information about the progress we are making so far. We thank the committee again for their thoughtful report and we welcome an ongoing dialogue on these crucial matters.