



HOUSE OF LORDS

COVID-19 Committee

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1st Report of Session 2021–22

*Beyond Digital:*  
**the Government  
response**

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### *Select Committee on COVID-19*

The Select Committee on COVID-19 was appointed on 11 June 2020 to consider the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social wellbeing of the United Kingdom.

### *Membership*

The Members of the Select Committee on COVID-19 are:

[Lord Alderdice](#)

[Baroness Benjamin](#)

[Lord Elder](#)

[Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie](#)

[Lord Hain](#)

[Lord Harris of Haringey](#)

[Baroness Jay of Paddington](#)

[Lord Kamall](#)

[Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho](#) (Chair)

[Baroness Morgan of Cotes](#)

[Lord Pickles](#)

[Baroness Young of Hornsey](#)

### *Declarations of interests*

See Appendix 1.

A full list of Members' interests can be found in the Register of Lords' Interests:

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### *Committee staff*

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### *Contact details*

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### *Twitter*

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## CONTENTS

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	<i>Page</i>
<i>Beyond Digital: the Government response</i>	3
<b>Appendix 1: List of Members and declarations of interest</b>	5
<b>Appendix 2: Government Response to the Lords Select Committee on COVID 19 Report “Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World”</b>	7
<b>Appendix 3: List of recommendations from the Committee’s <i>Beyond Digital</i> report</b>	22



# *Beyond Digital: the Government response*

1. On 21 April, the Committee published its report *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World*,<sup>1</sup> which considered how the pandemic had rapidly accelerated digital trends such as e-commerce, the online provision of public services, remote working, and automation by businesses, and what the long-term implications of this might be for our social and economic wellbeing.
2. On 5 July, the Committee received the Government's response, which is published as an appendix to this report.
3. We are extremely disappointed with what we have received. Eight of our 24 recommendations are not even acknowledged in the response, including very substantial ones in relation to the current legislative framework for employment rights, for example, and the lessons that need to be learned from the disruption to pupil's education that has taken place over the past 16 months. A list of all the report's recommendations are included in an appendix to this report; those that were not acknowledged have been highlighted for ease of reference.
4. Considerable thought and effort goes into the production of Committee reports: by members, staff and, perhaps most importantly, by the witnesses who give of their time and expertise. We do so because we are given a remit by the House to investigate a particular subject or subjects, as part of the House's vital work in investigating public policy and holding the Government to account. We strive to gather together and analyse the best possible evidence, to make considered and useful recommendations to Government. When the Government then fails to engage adequately with this process, we (and the House) cannot fully discharge our functions.
5. We suspect that part of the problem with this particular response was that our report cut across the remits of a number of Government departments. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) therefore needed to seek input from a number of other departments, who may have felt that (as a report 'about digital') this was not really their responsibility. This highlights the importance of the central recommendation of our report: that as our world becomes an increasingly hybrid one, with a blend of on- and offline interactions affecting all aspects of our daily lives, responsibility for how to respond to the challenges and opportunities this poses should sit with the Cabinet Office rather than siloed in DCMS.
6. We also appreciate that Ministers and the Civil Service have been tirelessly engaged for well over a year now in the immediate day to day pandemic challenges. However, the response that was provided seems to indicate that the whole of Government has not yet fully caught up with the transformational nature, in terms of digital acceleration and the hybrid world everyone is now operating in, of the pandemic and the implications that therefore this will have on the development of public policy across Government.

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1 COVID-19 Committee, *Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World* (1st Report, Session 2019-21, HL Paper 263)

7. **We are extremely disappointed with the quality of the response we have received to our *Beyond Digital* report. While Governments may decide not to support recommendations made by committees of the House, they should at least give them due consideration and respond accordingly.**
8. *We urge the Government to provide a further, more considered response to our recommendations and, in particular, to the eight recommendations that they failed to acknowledge at all in their initial response.*

## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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### Members

Lord Alderdice  
 Baroness Benjamin  
 Lord Elder  
 Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie (appointed 10 June 2021)  
 Lord Hain  
 Lord Harris of Haringey  
 Baroness Jay of Paddington  
 Lord Kamall (appointed 10 June 2021)  
 Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (Chair)  
 Baroness Morgan of Cotes  
 Lord Pickles  
 Baroness Young of Hornsey

### Declarations of interest

Lord Alderdice  
*Retired NHS Medical Practitioner*  
*President and Director, ARTIS (Europe) Ltd*

Baroness Benjamin  
*Chair, Internet of Toy-Children and Parents Panel*

Lord Elder  
*No relevant interests declared*

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie  
*CEO, Cerebral Palsy Scotland*  
*Chair, Scottish Government National Advisory Committee for Neurological Conditions*  
*Trustee, The Neurological Alliance of Scotland*  
*Board Member, Creative Scotland*  
*Board Member, The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)*

Lord Hain  
*No relevant interests declared*

Lord Harris of Haringey  
*Chair, National Preparedness Commission*  
*President, Institute for Strategic Risk Management*  
*Member of Board, Cyber Security Challenge Ltd*  
*Chair, National Trading Standards*  
*Chair, Fundraising Regulator*  
*Co-President, London Councils*

Baroness Jay of Paddington  
*No relevant interests declared*

Lord Kamall  
*Professor of Politics and International Relations, St Mary's University*  
*Academic & Research Consultant, Institute of Economic Affairs*  
*Member, Steering Board, Coalition for a Digital Economy (COADEC)*

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (Chair)  
*Chair, wetransfer*  
*Board Member, Twitter*

Baroness Morgan of Cotes

*No relevant interests declared*

Lord Pickles

*No relevant interests declared*

Baroness Young of Hornsey

*Co-chair, Foundation for Future London*

*Chancellor, University of Nottingham*

A full list of Member's interests can be found in the Register of Lords Interests:

<https://members.parliament.uk/members/lords/interests/register-of-lords-interests/>

## APPENDIX 2: GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE LORDS SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID 19 REPORT “BEYOND DIGITAL: PLANNING FOR A HYBRID WORLD”

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### Introduction

The Government welcomes this report. Since the start of the pandemic, mental health providers were looking at how they could maximise the use of digital and virtual channels such as helplines and video consultations, to keep delivering support and manage the impact of self-isolation on staff and patients.

It is important that we assess the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we welcome the recommendations in this report following the inquiry into the use of digital technology and how it can have a long-term impact on our wellbeing and mental health.

The NHS has worked hard to keep mental health services going during the pandemic, using technology where needed but also face-to-face appointments where appropriate. Talking therapies continue to be made available remotely so people can access help safely from home and the NHS will work to ensure the option of face-to-face support is available. The digitisation of services enables people to have more control over their own appointments, have greater choice over their treatment as well as manage their own mental health in between appointments. Although some services will see the benefit of continuing to use remote consultations in the future, we recognise that many people will still prefer face-to-face appointments for their therapy sessions.

**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.**

We agree 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. We also agree that the pervasive nature of digital means that it is important for Government policy to be cross-cutting and coordinated. We believe that the current Government structures enable this to happen. DCMS is the overall lead department for digital, and we work closely with the rest of government to ensure that all departments consider digital issues when making policy.

Responsibility for Government’s Digital Transformation sits with the Cabinet Office through the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO). It is a priority for the CDDO to make services available and accessible for all so that citizens are able to access services and carry out tasks regardless of their digital capability.

We agree that digital technologies will continue to impact all aspects of our lives in an ever greater manner. However, we believe 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 all others. The UK's digital economy is a source of immense strength and contributed £151 billion to the economy in 2019.

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

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

- (1) **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.
- (2) **Build a tech-savvy nation:** We're upskilling our workforce through our apprenticeships, digital bootcamps and the Digital Entitlement, meanwhile the Help to Grow schemes unveiled in the Budget will help up to 100,000 businesses adopt the latest technology.
- (3) **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.
- (4) **Level up digital prosperity across the UK:** We will continue to support hubs by building on regional innovation, regional strengths and regional specialisms, so that businesses in every UK postcode can seize the opportunities of the digital economy.

**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)**

We agree with the Committee that digital technology has the potential to help tackle inequalities as well as contribute to levelling-up.

The Government will give due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty.

**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)**

**However, to tackle the immediate lack of digital access we believe that just as those in receipt of income related benefits can access social tariffs and additional payments to help cover water and electric bills, as part of its new hybrid strategy, the Government should work with internet providers to develop a scheme to provide affordable internet and suitable, safe devices (not necessarily just a smart phone), on which to use it, to those in poverty and low incomes. (Paragraph 40)**

Covid-19 has clearly demonstrated the importance of connectivity to people's lives - for work, school and the wider economy, as well as to access vital services and stay in touch with family and friends.

### **Infrastructure:**

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.

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.

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 premises in the UK to request a decent broadband connection that provides speeds of at least 10Mbps download and 1Mbps.

With regards to regulation, the broadband Universal Service Obligation is already 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.

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.

However, the government is determined to find ways to address these remaining premises and deliver better connectivity. In order to do this, the government has launched a call for evidence focused on Improving Broadband for Very Hard to Reach Premises, as the Committee has noted in their report. The call for evidence is 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 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.

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.

### **Affordability/Access to devices:**

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

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.

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.

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 on which to do so, to access essential online services. Except for the first lockdown, this vital role was recognised with exemptions from the National Regulations to enable this provision and we know that this provision 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.

**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, informed by the knowledge these organisations have about how to meet effectively the varied needs of different communities.(paragraph 42)**

As was recently stated in the Skills for Jobs White Paper, most occupations require competence in English, maths and digital. However, 52% of the workforce do not have essential digital skills for work. We need to address this so that employers get the competent staff they need and people without these skills can develop them to find a good job, or progress in their careers.

That is why we are continuing to support participation in digital training to meet employers' needs and support people to progress in employment and further study.

As well as enabling learning in other areas, securing good standards of basic skills increases individual productivity, improves earnings and employment opportunities, supports economic growth, and breaks cycles of intergenerational economic and social disadvantage. It is also important to help people stay safe online and to allow parents and carers to keep their children safe online.

In April 2019, we published the new national standards for essential digital skills. The national standards, based upon the Essential Digital Skills Framework, were subject to extensive consultation and input from a wide range of education, industry, and digital inclusion stakeholders. Examples of new topics include using different devices, navigating the internet, and protecting privacy online.

From August 2020, alongside the existing legal entitlements to English and maths, the Department for Education introduced a new digital entitlement for adults with no or low digital skills to undertake specified digital qualifications, up to Level 1, free of charge. The new essential digital skills qualifications (EDSQs) at entry level and level 1 are funded under the digital entitlement. EDSQs are based on the employer-supported national standards for essential digital skills and are designed to meet the diverse needs of adults with no or low digital skills, reflecting different learning needs, motivations and starting points. We also support the provision of essential digital skills training for adults in community settings through the Adult Education Budget.

We are committed to making essential digital skills provision more accessible and flexible by building on the innovation in online learning implemented during the coronavirus pandemic, ensuring that adults can gain essential digital skills at a time and place that suits them.

We will 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.

We are also reforming basic digital skills qualifications, providing students with high quality qualifications that equip them with the full range of essential digital skills for life, work and further study.

The Adult Education Budget has been devolved to 7 Mayoral Combined Authorities and delegated to the Mayor of London (working where appropriate through the Greater London Authority). Following devolution in AY 2019/20, devolved authorities need to ensure that learners aged 19 and over in their area, who are eligible for funding, have access to appropriate education and training.

**Recommendations: We welcome the UK Government's introduction of a legal entitlement to digital skills training in England, and agree that such skills are now as essential as basic literacy and numeracy. Undertaking formal qualifications, however, will not be the right solution for everyone.**

**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, informed by the knowledge these organisations have about how to meet effectively the varied needs of different communities (paragraph 42).**

**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).**

The Government is aware that digital skills are in demand across the country and that there will be different priorities and needs in different areas. To help communities address their specific needs, 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 and education providers, employers and charities) 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.

DCMS has been working under the National Cyber Security Programme to develop a suite of programmes aimed at building skills in cyber security. These have included Cyber Discovery, a programme aimed at schools and building enthusiasm and skills in cyber security. This has worked alongside the Cyber First initiative; a programme of opportunities to help young people aged 11–17 years explore their passion for tech by introducing them to the world of cyber security. DCMS has also been focused on building the cyber security profession and supported the development and launch of the Cyber Skills Council in April 2021.

Given the impact of Covid-19 on disabled people, DCMS 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. This enables beneficiaries to use the internet to connect with friends, family and community online, as well as access services and information.

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.

**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)**

From September 2020, all new trainees are benefiting from the mandatory ambitious minimum entitlement set out in the ITT 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.

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 meet the particular needs of their trainees and the context in which they are training to teach, which may include digital technology.

The department'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 sets out that all staff should receive safeguarding and child protection training, including online safety. All staff should receive Part 1 of KCSIE as part of their induction. Amongst other things, Part 1 of KCSIE 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.

**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).**

The Government does collect data that identifies disparities, including through ONS 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.

**Recommendation: In the hybrid world, a safe and reliable internet will become increasingly important for everyone—individuals, businesses, Government—and any threat to digital infrastructure will threaten our ability to work, access essential services, buy groceries online, and access our money through online banking. As such, it is vital that the Government takes action to protect our digital infrastructure from threats, such as cyber-attacks, in the same way that other aspects of Critical National Infrastructure are monitored and protected.**

**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 77)**

The security and resilience of our 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 that outlines the general security and resilience of the telecoms sector.

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 whose Emergency Plan for Telecommunications (NEAT), and it publishes its REsilience Guidelines for the sector online.

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 that we will have built 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, it 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.

**Recommendation: We have not received much evidence on regulation and digital rights and these issues have not been considered in detail throughout our inquiry. 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).**

**Treating the internet as an essential utility will include regulating it in the same way as other utilities. This will involve challenging the international private sector internet corporations and their supply and pricing policies. Until now, European and North American governments have achieved very little in this area, but the United Kingdom should use its 'soft power' strengths to take the lead in developing a new strategy**

We agree with the Committee that good regulation of digital and data-based technologies is essential for our future prosperity. We are committed to regulation that is pro-innovation to encourage the development of innovative digital technologies and businesses, and designed and implemented in a proportionate way that minimises burdens. As set out in its 10 Tech Priorities, the Government is entering the next chapter in its relationship with tech, and the UK is helping to write the rulebook for the new era.

In doing so we will focus on driving growth while promoting competition and innovation, safety and security, and a flourishing, democratic society. We agree 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 hugely systemically important to our everyday lives.

We agree 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. We 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.

On competition specifically, we are 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.

**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)**

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.

We have 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.

### Protecting children and vulnerable people

Protecting children 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:

- Prevent access to material that is harmful for children, such as pornography.
- Ensure there are strong protections from activity which is harmful to children, which we expect will include harms such as bullying.

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.

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.

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.

### **Reflecting central role internet plays in education, work and social lives**

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.

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

Our 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.

### **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)**

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. These include:

- 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 focusses 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.
- For example, HEE are working with NHSX to develop and expand the NHS Digital Academy to serve and open 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- On the 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 hours to be completed in simulated 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.
- HEE also work 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.

**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)**

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 vision 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.

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 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. Some examples that mental health providers must include are digital options for accessing care, including online referrals, offer a range of self-management apps, digital consultations and digitally-enabled models of therapy to support access to psychological therapies in IAPT. On digital therapies, we have been working with NHSX to build on their assessment criteria for digital tools to develop criteria which are specific for digital Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services.

We have 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 is 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 approaches moving forward.

**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)**

NHSX has published guidance to ensure that digital tools for mental health are safe and effective: <https://www.nhsx.nhs.uk/key-tools-and-info/designing-and-building-products-and-services/>

We are currently looking at how national digital and technology service standards could apply and adapt to the digital and technology work of local NHS services.

**Recommendation: The combination of the pandemic and increases in automation and other digital trends is radically changing the number and types of jobs available in different sectors. It is too soon to know how many people will lose their jobs and be unable to quickly gain new ones but it is clear that a very great number of people will need both financial support whilst unemployed and access to training to enable them to obtain new skills fit for the digital/AI era and employment.**

**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)**

We recognise 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 also aimed to mitigate any negative impacts of this on the most vulnerable. Therefore, Jobcentres have remained open to help customers benefit it most from face-to-face support, alongside our continued to delivery of support to customers online and via the phone. This will continue to be reviewed in line with Government advice.

We 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.

The Health and Safety Executive 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.

HSE is continuing to work with the Government to provide practical advice and guidance to help employers to support employees working from home. 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.htm>). 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.

In relation to mental health and preventing work-related stress 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. HSE has produced a free to use practical Talking Toolkit to facilitate such engagement <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/stress-talking-toolkit.pdf>.

HSE also recently published guidance for Lone Workers <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg73.pdf> which helps give advice to employers and workers on the issues lone workers face.

The Department for Work and Pensions 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.

**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)**

Access to Work (AtW) provides vital support to help disabled people enter and stay in work. The Department for Work and Pensions has been actively working to raise the visibility of Access to Work and in 2019/20 the official statistics saw 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.

### **Raising awareness:**

DWP recognises the need to raise the visibility of the Access to Work programme and is working to expand its reach through raising awareness with both disabled people and employers. Earlier in the year DWP 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.

To support the campaign, DWP has also taken forward active press engagement activities to showcase positive case studies of people who have received Access to Work, which has resulted in articles in mainstream papers.

DWP are 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.

Access to Work works closely with the Access to Work Stakeholder Forums in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure stakeholders views, including those of charities and DPO's, are captured. The forums represent several Disability Charities, including RNIB, MIND, Leonard Cheshire and meet quarterly to share experiences of using Access to Work and actively support policy development. The forums have met very recently with England convening on the 21st June, Wales on the 17th June and Scotland on the 11th May.

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

- a clear gateway of adjustment support, by raising the visibility of support available for each stage of the transitions journey,
- a transferable record of adjustments that can be used to support the adjustments journey, reduce the need for assessments,
- a communication tool to support discussions with employers,
- visibility of in-work support if an employer employs a disabled person, and
- assurance and support to progress in work.

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.

### **Skills and Knowledge:**

To ensure Access to Work assessors have the skills and knowledge they require to offer the most appropriate solutions including digital solutions, Access to Work Holistic Assessment suppliers ensure all staff who carry out a Needs Assessment are suitably qualified, have appropriate impairment expertise and can assess customers' varying needs.

All Access to Work Holistic Assessment suppliers have Continuous Professional Development (CPD) embedded within the contract and the specification. Access to Work does not specify the type of training and relies on the suppliers to identify any training needs assessors have, to ensure they have the relevant level of expertise in their particular area.

**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)**

The DCMS Digital Strategy Team will continue to work with the DCMS Tackling Loneliness Team to ensure alignment.

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. The Tackling Loneliness Network action plan, published in May 2021, included commitments from network members on digital inclusion, such as:

- How government's Inclusive Economy Partnership can facilitate high-impact partnerships between government, business and civil society to support digital inclusion; and
- Hosting a workshop, facilitated by Red Badger, 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.

### APPENDIX 3: LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE'S BEYOND DIGITAL REPORT

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- (1) Responsibility for a new hybrid strategy, and developing a wider hybrid approach, should sit with the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister.
- (2) 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.
- (3) 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.
- (4) 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 on low incomes.
- (5) 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.
- (6) 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.
- (7) 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.
- (8) 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.
- (9) 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. *No response received*

- (10) 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. *No response received*
- (11) 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.
- (12) 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.
- (13) 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.
- (14) The Government must commit to ensuring health professionals have the training and equipment needed to deliver digitally effective services in the most appropriate way.
- (15) 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.
- (16) 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.
- (17) 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. *No response received*

- (18) 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. *No response received*
- (19) 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. *No response received*
- (20) 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.
- (21) The Government should introduce new legislation to provide platform workers with defined and enhanced employment rights. *No response received*
- (22) 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 switchoff, 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). *No response received*
- (23) 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. *No response received*
- (24) In developing its new hybrid strategy, the UK Government should ensure that it interacts with, and complements, its existing Loneliness Strategy for England.