Written evidence – Professor Helen Margetts OBE (LBC0304)

Re: Long-term consequences of Covid-19
Building digital resilience

As with every existential crisis, the pandemic has brought **rising inequality**, wiping out ten years of progress in reducing economic inequality. Poor workers have become poorer, extreme poverty has risen, inequality between countries has increased. Meanwhile, the rich have become richer; the 10 richest billionaires in the world increased their wealth by $319 billion in 2020 alone (*Financial Times*, 31 Dec 2020). Social inequality is also rising. Pandemic-related policy measures affected differentially the educational opportunities of children from different socio-economic groups; men and women; young and old. Health and social care and health outcomes vary across demographic groups.

Digital, data-intensive technologies have saved us from the worst effects of pandemic-related policy measures. They made it possible for us to work, socialise, educate and entertain ourselves, shop and manage all aspects of our daily lives online. Digital services have been, literally, the lifeline of society. The pandemic has been a generator of innovation, in public as well as private services.

But as the Committee has reported extensively, digital inequality has been an important intermediary variable in rising economic and social inequality during the pandemic. It exacerbated differences in the extent to which poorer groups accessed vital services such as education and healthcare during lock-downs and other social distancing measures. Inequalities in digital literacy appear to have shaped people's knowledge and understanding of the pandemic and their vulnerability to online harm through misinformation (eg Vidgen et al, 2021; Roozenbeek, 2020). Digital exclusion has reinforced social exclusion and loneliness. Lack of internet access had limited some people's ability to travel or access even the most basic legal services. The shift to home or hybrid working has injected new impetus to inequality – between those who have the kind of jobs where they can work remotely – and the homes and technological needed to do that - and those who do not. Because most low-paid jobs can't be done at home, low paid workers have experienced the greatest risks from the virus, the greatest labour market insecurity and the least wage inflation.

To mitigate these deepening inequalities, digital data-intensive technologies should be centre stage in reform. Digital inequality requires **digital resilience**, in order to recover from the effects of the pandemic and to build the foundations of readiness for the next existential crisis. Key policy areas to address are:

- **Digital rights.** The pandemic has shown how certain social and economic rights are conditional on digital rights. The 'right to an education', for example is reliant on having reliable internet access, including an appropriate device. Policymakers should be turning their attention now to ensure that all children have such access. Access to these basic digital rights would mean that future shocks would not have the same effect, or

the same necessity to scramble around providing (inadequate, too little too late) provision.

- **Data-centric policy making.** Data intensive technologies should have been invaluable to policymaking in the pandemic, helping to build resilience into decision-making and aiding processes of resource allocation. But the UK, like many countries, found that policymakers lacked the right real time data flows to make agile policies and lacked fine-grained data to make economic policy that could distinguish between (for example) firms that had been positively or negatively by the pandemic. Modelling of data took place in siloes, relating to sectors such as health or the economy but not both. In contrast, models need to take account of the fact that sectors – such as prevalence of the virus and economic prosperity - are inextricably intertwined. At The Alan Turing Institute, a programme of work on Shocks and Resilience is developing these kinds of integrated, causal models. We need to ensure that policymakers have access to these kind of real-time data flows of fine-grained data and appropriate modelling expertise that could build resilience into policy interventions.

- **Resilient digital services.** Research is needed to understand the results of massive natural 'experiment' that took place in digital services during periods of lock-down and other pandemic-related policy measures, when services could be accessed only online and consultations with doctors and other healthcare professionals took place virtually. Data science methodologies as well as qualitative research can help to understand where virtual provision has had beneficial effects and where it deepened existing inequalities in healthcare provision. We need to understand where services can be online only (with targeted provision for excluded groups) and where they need to be multi-channel. Rather than 'snapping back' to previous ways of working, we need to assess where services have actually improved through online access.

- **Platform innovation for a hybrid world.** Finally, digital resilience will also require platform innovation that tackles the question of how we are going to manage mixed working going forward. Perhaps surprisingly, having responded well to the sudden surge in use at the beginning, the main platforms seem ill equipped to deal with a mixture of physical and virtual presence. Online teaching, for example, seems to work badly in a mixed setting, with unequal treatment of one or other groups (online, in person) of participants. We should be working with tech companies to develop mixed methods of working, which could also lessen the stark difference between those that can live wherever they like, and those that have no choice. Meanwhile, a guide to digital and data driven innovation in healthcare technology has not been updated since January 2021.

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