



The Government's response to the House of Lords Select Committee Report on Digital Skills

Presented to Parliament
by the Minister of State for Culture and the Digital Economy
by Command of Her Majesty

July 2015

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Recommendation 1: The Government should develop an ambitious ‘Digital Agenda’ for the UK: at its heart should be the Government’s vision for the UK to keep up with the best leading digital economies across the board in five years’ time.

The Government is committed to ensuring that the UK remains a leading digital economy. Putting the UK at the forefront of digital transformation is a key priority for this Government, and at its core is the belief that the UK has the knowledge and expertise to thrive and compete internationally. The Government is leading from the front: the Government Digital Service has been leading the digital transformation of public service provision, emerging, in the words of The Washington Post, as “the gold-standard in the global world of digital government”.

However, the Government recognises the scale and importance of the challenges that must be addressed, and the need for far-reaching ambitions that will have sustainable impact. To achieve a truly digital economy, we need to work in partnership with industry to create the right conditions for every individual and business to be able to profit from the benefits of technology.

Training and education must keep pace with the ever-changing technological landscape, with the right skills and infrastructure to underpin digital transformation. These are challenges faced by all developed nations, but this Government will focus on capitalising upon the UK’s strengths to seize the opportunities that technology provides.

The UK has six of the top sixty universities in the world for science and engineering, developing the highest levels of tech talent. There are also hotbeds of capability throughout the UK, and in 2014 the Tech Nation report identified over 20 clusters of technology expertise across the country. In terms of infrastructure, the coverage and take-up of superfast broadband is the highest of the 5 largest EU economies. The UK also leads the world on open data, with over 20,000 government datasets now openly available for use by industry.

The Government is committed to not only ‘keeping up’ with the best leading digital economies, but being a thought leader in this space. The UK is a founding member of the D5, a network of some of the most digitally advanced governments in the world. The UK hosted the first summit in December 2014, providing a platform to share best practice; for instance England’s lead in becoming the first country in the world to mandate coding in the primary and secondary school curriculum from September 2014.

As we go through this autumn’s Spending Review and the development of departmental plans the Government is committed to ensuring that the UK continues to be one of the world’s leading digital economies.

Recommendation 2: The Digital Agenda should be the responsibility of a Cabinet Minister in the Cabinet Office, who would assume ultimate responsibility for driving the Digital Agenda across all Government departments.

Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy, as a joint BIS and DCMS Minister, reports to both Secretaries of State, which ensures that at a Cabinet-level there will be a strong focus on Digital, both from an economic and a social perspective. This reflects that to truly reap the benefits, digital must be embraced in all aspects of UK citizens' lives.

Ensuring the UK's position as a leading digital economy is by its nature a cross-government effort that requires cross-government Ministerial sponsorship. Ed Vaizey chairs the Prime Minister's implementation taskforce on Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion whose membership includes a number of Cabinet Ministers including Matthew Hancock, the minister responsible for the Digital Transformation of Government. Consequently the Taskforce is well-placed to coordinate activity across government to develop a comprehensive digital agenda.

At an official level, in May 2015 the Digital Economy Unit (which was initially established in July 2014 as a joint BIS and DCMS Unit) was fully moved into DCMS under Ed Vaizey's portfolio. This means that policy for the key underpinning drivers for the digital economy, including skills and infrastructure, is developed within one Department to drive collaborative activity across Whitehall to meet the UK's ambitions. This will ensure greater alignment in the way that policy is developed and delivered; embedding digital throughout government policy and bringing together the full expertise of government and its stakeholders to drive the digital agenda forward at pace.

It also provides opportunities to further reinforce the synergies with the Creative Industries, which form a key part of the digital landscape and sit within the DCMS portfolio.

Recommendation 3: The responsible Cabinet Minister should evaluate the UK's Digital Agenda on a regular basis, seeking to drive the UK's digital competitiveness. The Minister should report to Parliament annually against the measures within the Digital Agenda. We recommend an initial progress report to Parliament by summer 2016. We note that a similar practice is already undertaken by the Scottish Government.

The Government agrees that it is important to regularly review and evaluate the UK's progress in achieving its digital objectives. A report will be provided to Parliament via a Written Ministerial Statement in summer 2016, which will give an update on progress in meeting the Government's digital commitments.

Processes have also been put in place to ensure that the Government frequently reviews and evaluates digital activity. In May 2015, the Government announced the formation of the Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Implementation Taskforce which will meet frequently, ensuring that the Government's key digital objectives are regularly reviewed, with a clear focus on expediting delivery. The Taskforce will provide quarterly reports to Cabinet, ensuring there is a sustained high-level focus on the UK's digital competitiveness at the highest levels of government.

Recommendation 4: Our Committee has completed its work with the production of this report, but has highlighted an issue of critical importance that will need continuing oversight; we urge the Liaison Committee to consider how best to integrate such a commitment into the future work of select committees in the House of Lords.

Whilst this recommendation is for the Liaison Committee, the Government is supportive of ensuring that digital issues continue to be discussed and considered by Parliament.

Recommendation 5: In its response to this report we invite the incoming Government to comment on the focus of our illustrative Digital Agenda and to commit to designing its own, with specific detail on how it intends to meet its objectives.

The synergies between the Committee's draft Digital Agenda and government activity already under way are notable. This is a positive reflection on the shared understanding of the scale and nature of the challenge the UK faces. Both are focused on highlighting the underpinning role that infrastructure and skills play in maximising opportunities - not just for economic growth but for social benefit too. The centrality of these strands is echoed by the decision to establish the Digital Inclusion and Infrastructure Implementation Taskforce to drive progress and ensure the right foundations are in place.

However, the Government goes further than the Committee on infrastructure, with activity in place to make sure it is secure from natural and man-made threats and that we are considering how new technologies can best be exploited. We are also considering how best the UK can drive the development of digital technologies to realise the full benefits. On regional ecosystems and clustering, the Government is keen to make sure that digital is being embedded at an even more local level, and that all businesses and individuals, regardless of locale are able to capitalise on their area's strengths and access the support they need.

This Government is committed to meeting ambitious objectives to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of digital transformation. In addition to work already in train, attached at Annex A is a list of the publicly announced digital manifesto commitments, which will be delivered over the course of this Parliament. These set out a number of stretching objectives, which will ensure the UK has the right infrastructure and basic digital skills for the UK to adopt and be at the forefront of maximising the benefits of new technology.

The creation of a Digital Inclusion and Infrastructure Implementation Taskforce, as one of only ten Implementation Taskforces, shows the high priority that Government gives to digital. It also highlights the desire to act quickly to ensure these ambitions are met at pace.

The manifesto commitments and the Implementation Taskforce are focused on ensuring the UK has the right building blocks in place to secure the UK's place as a leading digital nation. However, this government's ambitions go further and are reflected in the wide ranging programmes of work already in train to make sure that the UK is at the forefront of adopting and profiting from new technologies. This includes activity to ensure that schools, Further Education and Higher Education routes are providing the digital skills needed at all levels of the economy. This Government is also undertaking work to support the development and uptake of new technologies, and activity to ensure that individuals and businesses are secure online.

The Government agrees with the Committee's focus and commits to providing an update this autumn, which provides more substantive details on the Government's digital agenda and how we intend to meet our commitments through a cross-government Digital Transformation Plan (announced following Budget 2015 within the Productivity Plan). The update report will provide a full account of activity and aspiration across government and reflect the outcomes of the upcoming Spending Review.

What is clear, is that these challenges cannot be underestimated, and it is essential that activity continues at pace. The Government is now, and will continue, working in partnership with the private, public and third sectors to reach its ambitions.

This Government is committed to delivering an ambitious programme of activity to ensure that the UK 'makes' its Digital Future.

Annex A: Key digital manifesto commitments

- Roll out universal broadband and better mobile phone connections to ensure everyone is part of the digital economy;
- Ultrafast broadband should be available to nearly all UK premises as soon as practicable;
- Invest in infrastructure to give the most comprehensive and cheapest superfast broadband coverage of any major European country;
- Delivering superfast broadband in urban and rural areas to provide coverage to 95% of the UK by the end of 2017;
- Subsidising the cost of installing high speed-capable satellite services in the very hardest to reach areas;
- Release more spectrum from public sector use to allow greater private access;
- Holding mobile operators to their legally-binding commitment to ensure that 90 per cent of the UK landmass will have voice and SMS coverage by 2017;

- Continue to invest in mobile infrastructure to deliver coverage for voice calls and text messages for the final 0.3-0.4% of premises that do not currently have it;
- Ensure the UK is a world leader in the development of 5G and plays a leading role in defining industry standards;
- Fit out trains with new wifi equipment in England and Wales;
- Provide free wifi in libraries and ensure remote access to e-books without charge and with appropriate compensation for authors that enhances the Public Lending Right scheme;
- Roll out cross-government technology platforms such as GOV.UK to cut costs and improve productivity while actively tackling digital exclusion and ensuring digital assistance is always available for those not online.

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