



# Our Digital Future Consultation

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# Our Digital Future

## A Labour Party Consultation



Labour believes that technology can change lives for the better – and it already has. Families separated by oceans are now a video call away. Small businesses sell to customers across the globe. World-class art, cinema and music are live in our living rooms. Personal Protective Equipment is designed professionally and ‘3D printed’ at home. And much of the world’s information is now freely accessible to learners of all ages. Digital technology contributes £149 billion to our economy, directly employing nearly three million people and many more indirectly – but its benefits are more than economic.

The events of the last few months have moved technology even closer to the heart of our working and domestic lives. The average UK adult now spends around a quarter of their waking life on the internet. The pandemic has highlighted the positive power of digital technology, but it has also brought some of its downsides into focus.

Too often those on the wrong side of the “digital divide” have been left without the benefits of technological progress that many take for granted. And there are growing signs that digital technology may be concentrating too much power in the hands of unaccountable bodies – not just government agencies, but large corporations whose decisions increasingly affect our rights, freedoms, and the political system itself.

During the pandemic the digital divide has left some children with no access to schooling, directly impacting the life chances of the next generation. We also see employees struggling or unable to adapt to new working practices because they don’t have the digital skills.

As Sir Tim Berners-Lee famously said of the World Wide Web: “this is for everyone”. Digital is now at the heart of almost every single policy area in one way or another, but it is not really ‘for everyone’. Labour believes that we can demand more from our digital technologies – and build a digital future that is safer, fairer and more inclusive.

This consultation aims to produce a set of principles to guide Labour digital policy, not just for the next election cycle but for the long-term. We want to create a credible and detailed vision of how our digital future should work. We have set out some initial thoughts with important but deliberately broad questions, under five themes, but to make this a reality we need your help. Thank you for taking part and we look forward to hearing your ideas.

Jo Stevens,  
Shadow Secretary of State for  
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Chi Onwurah,  
Shadow Minister for Digital,  
Science and Technology



Protecting young and vulnerable people from online harms is vital; this really is a matter of life and death.

A stocktake of our digital world is long overdue. The internet has changed our connected world in a generation and brought with it many advantages. It is hard for us to remember how we lived our lives just a couple of decades ago. Then, mobile communication by phone was still a novelty for many and social media platforms had yet to be invented. Today's current big tech platforms were born at about the same time as my youngest daughter, Molly. The powerful tech corporations live on, sadly Molly ended her own life in 2017 and I am convinced what she found online helped kill her.

There are far too many people whose lives are detrimentally affected by what they experience online. It is for them, our next generation, that we urgently need to investigate why being mentally healthy seems to have become more elusive and we also need to find better ways to support those who need help.

The introduction of the ICO's Age Appropriate Design Code and the proposed Online Harms legislation are just the beginning, a continuing process of review is needed if we are to create a safer online world. A digital consultation to thoroughly investigate all the effects new technology brings is essential if digital tech is to fulfil its intended benefits without the harmful content that is increasingly dominating the platforms.

This Labour Party consultation has the scope and ambition to inform our understanding of our new digital world and guide our future decision making about how to make it a better place. The consultation will help the UK become a world leader for the effective regulation required to make the internet a safer place. Only when we have identified, understood and tamed online harms will modern connected technology fully flourish and bring us all the widespread benefits it promises.

Ian Russell, Founder Molly Rose Foundation  
August 2020

**Thank you for taking part in this Labour Party National Policy Forum Consultation. Through this consultation, and the wider policy making process, we want to work with our members, supporters and stakeholders to discuss issues which impact on people's everyday lives to help shape our policy platform.**

This document sets out five themes which will determine our digital future with key questions to stimulate discussion and ideas. You do not need to answer every question, nor is there a specific way to answer them, they are intended to help you develop your thoughts on what you think are the main issues in the consultation's policy area.

Once you have written up your response, you can submit it to us through Labour Policy Forum: <https://labour.org.uk/page/our-digital-future-consultation/>

For more information on how to make a submission, see <https://www.policyforum.labour.org.uk/consultation-submission-guide>.

The deadline for sending submissions to this consultation is Friday October 2nd 2020.

On the website you will also find guides on other ways to get involved in the consultation, as well as information on the programme of online events we will be running.

If you have an idea or issue you would like to talk about that is not covered in this year's consultation, you can submit these to us too. Whether you are a Labour Party member, supporter or stakeholder, we want to hear your views on the issues which impact on people's everyday lives

## Questions

### Digital Innovation

The UK boasts world-leading tech firms, but they are concentrated in our large cities and London in particular. We want every region of the country to have the tools to start, scale and invest in the world-leading digital firms of tomorrow. The lack of a serious industrial strategy over the last decade has hampered our ability to compete with other countries. Many UK companies are still unable to access the finance or skills they need and are often bought up by foreign companies before they can reach their full potential.

The UK led the First Industrial Revolution, and we can still lead the Fourth Industrial Revolution that is now beginning. But this will require a strategy to promote innovation across the country, while ensuring that it creates good jobs and benefits local communities.

*1. How can we promote digital innovation across all of the UK's regions and nations? How can we ensure it generates good, fulfilling jobs for everyone as we build back, better?*

### Harmful online content

Online platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter are now a central part of our social lives. Increasingly, they play a vital role in how we access news and information, how and what we spend our money on, how we contribute to public debate and how we utilise our spare time. But we have little control over how content is curated by the tech platforms and delivered to us. There is barely any regulation of online content, fuelling the spread of disinformation and other harmful content. Social media particularly can be a deeply inhospitable and sometimes dangerous place for both adults and children. Self-regulation by the platforms has failed. We need a common understanding of the principles which platforms and digital technology should abide by, which can form the basis for a robust regulatory framework to protect our lives online in the same way that protection against harm exists offline.

*2. What principles should govern our lives online and protect us all against harm? How should they be enforced?*



### Personal data and our online lives

Personal data is central to the information economy. Almost all web services and digital products – from search engines and social networks to online stores and ride-hailing apps – gather personal data and use it for commercial purposes, particularly through advertising.

In recent years privacy concerns have been raised about the extent to which online platforms monitor, control and profit from personal data. With algorithms increasingly using our personal data to make important decisions about how we live and work, we need to protect people from algorithmic bias. We need greater transparency about how algorithms control and curate the content we see online. And the use of algorithms by employers to control and discipline workers should be examined. High-profile data leaks have also led to pressing questions about the security risks of so much data being gathered by large organisations.

Recent data protection regulation – the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR, which is now part of UK law too – is a sign of progress but it is also proving to be insufficient in various ways. .

*3. How can we put people in charge of their online lives? Do we need stricter – or different – rules for how large corporations and public bodies use our personal data?*

### Technology and our public services

*Digital technology can be used to make public services better and more available to everyone – from cutting congestion through smart mobility services, to giving citizens more of a say in decision-making.*

*This has started to happen in the UK, but progress has been slow and uneven, both locally and nationally. And we still tend to put existing services online, rather than use technology for exciting new services.*

*We need to think about how digital technology – from data flows to digital infrastructure – can be used for the public good, both at a local and a national level.*

*4. How can the government better use tech to work for the public?*

### Digital inclusion

While the vast majority of us use the internet every day, a significant minority of the public – up to ten per cent – are not internet users. Increasingly, this inhibits their ability to participate fully in the social and economic life of our nation.

Access to the internet should be a right, not a privilege. This means providing people with the skills and confidence to use the internet, as well as the necessary infrastructure, and ensuring that no-one is priced out of important digital products and services.

*5. How can we ensure that no-one is excluded from the digital revolution. What are the main barriers to digital inclusion and how can we remove them?*

