Press release: Expert Group launched with £4.6 million investment in EdTech

Paralympic swimmer Baron Chris Holmes chairs group to improve use of education technology, including accessibility and inclusion in the classroom

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One of Britain's most successful Paralympians led a discussion on the use of technology in the classroom, and its potential to boost accessibility and inclusion, at the first meeting of a new group of experts set up to look at how to help schools use it effectively.

Today's first meeting of the EdTech Leadership Group builds on the announcement from the innovation foundation Nesta, which has also launched a call-out to EdTech companies today as part of the EdTech Innovation Fund. This is the first step of their £4.6 million funding programme to stimulate industry innovation and support the development of EdTech products.

The programme, part-funded from the Government's £10 million investment in the EdTech Strategy, will build the evidence base to ensure that technology meets the needs of teachers, lecturers, pupils and students. The partnership aims to test and scale EdTech products, both new and existing, that could have a substantial impact to help save teachers time and improve pupil outcomes.

Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation Chris Skidmore, said:

> Technology can be one of the single most important elements in any school, college or university and act as a catalyst for those who learn and those who teach.
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> Today's first meeting of the EdTech Leadership Group has brought together experts in education, technology and research. Baron Holmes is an outstanding person to lead the group and I am sure that his passion, experience and ability will help us maintain the momentum of the EdTech Strategy.
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> In partnership with Nesta, we are investing £4.6million in helping the sector make the most of those opportunities and I would like

> EdTech companies to step forward with bold, innovative proposals that will make a real difference to the lives of students and teachers.

Baron Holmes, Chair of the EdTech Leadership Group, said:

> I am passionate about the potential of technology; how it can potentially significantly help our educators, improve learning and foster accessibility and inclusion.
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> I am truly proud to be chairing this EdTech Leadership Group. It represents a great opportunity to work together to ensure every student and our entire education system can access the benefits that technology can bring.

The EdTech Leadership Group, chaired by Baron Chris Holmes MBE, co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Assistive Technology, met today (3 June) to consider how it can get industry, government and the education sector to work together more effectively. It aims to set this out in a formal pact by the end of 2019.

The group has been established to help deliver the Department for Education's EdTech Strategy, which aims to boost the use of technology in education, providing expert advice and support on initiatives such as 'demonstrator schools and colleges' to showcase best practice and provide training for teachers, lecturers and school leaders.

As part of a day of progress on the EdTech Strategy, Nesta also announced the first phase of their work to help deliver the "EdTech Challenges".

Up to 20 Edtech organisations will receive up to £100,000 to improve, evaluate and grow the reach of digital tools across four of the ten challenge areas announced in the EdTech Strategy:

- Formative assessment
- Essay marking
- Parental engagement
- Timetabling

Joysy John, Director of Education, Nesta said:

> Nesta has a long history of supporting technology in education through investments, research and policy.
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> By working in partnership with the Department for Education we hope to have a greater impact on the education system and the EdTech sector. We aim to improve teaching and learning, bring more efficiencies to schools and colleges, save teacher time, and ultimately improve student outcomes.

The EdTech Strategy – backed by £10 million – aims to transform the use of technology in education to support innovation and raise the bar in schools, colleges and universities across England.

EdTech exports are worth an estimated £170 million to the UK economy, and the strategy will deliver on the Government's ambition for tech firms to work with the education sector and create innovative solutions to 10 key education challenges, including:

- Reduce teachers' marking workload – using technology to cut the time teachers spend preparing and marking homework.
- Boost training opportunities for teachers – looking at how technology can make training more accessible and tailored to individual needs of teachers.
- Identify how anti-cheating software can be improved – setting out more detail on how the Government can help to tackle the problem of essay mills, particularly in universities.
- Promote the use of innovative tech to level the playing field for people with special educational needs and disabilities – identifying the technology that best suits individual needs.

News story: Minister visits Bristol business incubator to discuss immigration

Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes today (Monday 3 June) visited a business hub in Bristol to hear from tech companies, social innovators and academics on plans for the new skills-based immigration system.

The minister visited Engine Shed – which plays host to SETsquared Partnership, a globally-recognised business incubator – before sitting down with local industry leaders and entrepreneurs to discuss how the new immigration system will benefit companies based across the South West.

The visit was part of a year-long engagement programme across the UK on the future immigration system. The Home Office has already held more than 90 events and met with over 1,300 stakeholders this year.

Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes said:

> We are committed to designing a new immigration system that is streamlined, digital and prioritises the skills people can bring to the UK, rather than where they come from.

> I’m determined to ensure that the new system supports small businesses and entrepreneurs – like those I met in Bristol – which is why we are engaging with groups across the UK.
>
> The new system will allow us to take control of our borders while ensuring that the UK has access to the talent we need to remain a global business leader.

The government’s proposals will:

- remove the annual cap on the number of visas issued for skilled workers. This will ensure that businesses who need overseas talent will not face unnecessary barriers

- abolish outdated schemes such as the resident labour market test for high-skilled workers and widen the skills threshold to include people with qualifications equivalent of A levels

- extend the time that international students, who come to the UK to study, can stay post-study to find employment. The time period for undergraduates and postgraduates will be extended to six months, while those who have completed a PhD will be able to stay for a year

There will also be a new route for workers from low-risk countries at any skill level for a temporary period. This 12-month visa will provide access to the labour market, but no access to benefits. It is designed to support businesses in adjusting to the new immigration system but ensure they have the incentive to train young people in the future.

The new immigration and borders system will be implemented in a phased approach from 2021 and full details are available in the government’s White Paper.

The government recently announced new Start-up and Innovator visas to enhance the UK’s visa offer to leading international talent.

The Start-up visa route is open to those starting a business for the first time in the UK, while the Innovator visa route is for more experienced business people who have funds to invest in their business.

Speech: The importance of soil in a

changing climate

Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency, speech to Devon and Cornwall Soils Alliance, Lakeside, Roadford Reservoir, Devon

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Speech: The importance of soil in a changing climate

Thank you

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“In winter’s chill or summer’s heat, farmers work so the world can eat.”

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They’ve got their work cut out for them.

As the planet’s population hurtles towards eight billion people, we are relying on farmers to mass produce cheap food like never before.

At the same time, farmers manage 70 percent of the land – which they must protect and enhance for the next generation.

Farming isn’t rocket science.

It’s much, much harder than that.

The soil delivers 95 percent of global food supplies, but it is a limited resource under pressure from climate change, population growth, urban development, waste, pollution…

…and a lack of understanding.

Leonardo Da Vinci said “we know more about the movement of celestial bodies than about the soil underfoot” and 500 years later, there is less information about soil than any other part of the environment.

That’s a big problem.

Which is why the Environment Agency hugely welcomes the Government’s work to move this up the political agenda.

The 25 Year Environment Plan says “by 2030 we want all of England’s soils to be managed sustainably, and we will use natural capital thinking to develop

appropriate soil metrics and management approaches.”

Earlier this month, the Natural Capital Committee released its advice on soil management, which – among other things – explained what those metrics might look like.

Today, we add our voice to this chorus by releasing a report about the state of soils.

I want to thank the Devon and Cornwall Soils Alliance for inviting me here to launch it.

Your members know how serious the problems facing soil health are, and will also have useful expertise about how to reverse the degradation.

But, we will all struggle to drive effective change, if the will for action is not supported by knowledge beyond the echo chamber.

The Secretary of State, Michael Gove, said: “Countries can withstand coups d’état, wars and conflict, even leaving the EU, but no country can withstand the loss of its soil and fertility”.

Soil degradation in England and Wales is calculated to cost £1.2 billion every year.

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Soil is also essential to managing the world’s climate emergency.

Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said we have 12 years to limit global temperature rise to 1.5ºC above pre-industrial levels.

But, a key point they made was that even if we manage that, the physical threats – like floods, droughts, heatwaves, and more extreme storms – are still multiplying.

The world is currently on course for at least a 3 degree rise, so we have a lot to do in terms of reducing emissions and preparing for escalating risks.

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UK soil contains about 10 billion tonnes of carbon, roughly equal to 80 years of annual greenhouse gas emissions.

Globally, intensive agriculture has caused arable soils to lose 40 to 60% of their organic carbon.

If we are serious about the Committee on Climate Change’s target of net zero by 2050, then the earth itself will have a big role to play.

And, we will need to see better management of our bogs and peatlands – (which is another ambition of the Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan).

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The impacts of climate change also pose risks to the soil itself.

Challenging weather conditions, where farming has to continue in less than ideal situations, are a major threat to farmers' income.

Very heavy rainfall and thunderstorms cause soil erosion which make flood risks worse – particularly on sandy soils and on peaty moorland soils, as you know all too well in the South West.

In this part of the country, most areas have over 200 days where soils are wet.

This is high when compared to soils in – for example – Cambridgeshire, where the soil is wet for only about 80 days.

High moisture in the soil means that it can be compacted by field work which then causes runoff, pollution, and flooding.

Over fifty years ago the US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower said:

"Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you're a thousand miles from the corn field."

And, I know that for many that still rings true.

Farmers need help, but every field is different and it is not in farmers' interests to damage the soil.

So, how should we regulate farming in England to make sure we are tough on the problems while supporting farmers, who we see as our natural allies?

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Well first of all, we need to recognise that looking after the soil isn't the sole preserve of one industry.

Many of the problems come from urban areas, where soil health is often neglected by development schemes.

Soil compaction and expansive bonded surfaces increase the risk of runoff in towns and cities.

Subsoils are at risk of deep compaction in new housing development and this affects the health and resilience of trees in parkland and the built environment.

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Urban environments are also where most people live.

So, we must acknowledge that a lot of the pressure on rural and farming communities originates in cities – and this is certainly true in terms of waste and water resources.

But, of course, farmers are key.

To help them, we provide advice, guidance and practical support.

We do not take a “top-down” approach, we are supporting peer groups all over the country to learn about best practice.

“Upstream Thinking”, funded by South West Water, is a good example of collaborative working to improve drinking water quality.

The new Farming Rules for Water, which include dealing with soil erosion and runoff, will also help.

There are practices that cause compaction, runoff and erosion. Such as:

- harvesting of maize and vegetable crops late in the year during wet conditions;
- crops that are drilled late in the year with poor soil structure;
- out-wintering of stock where this causes compaction and runoff;
- continuous growing of vegetables (and daffodils in South West) on soils with low organic matter which are prone to erosion.
- And, spreading of slurry and manures during winter where this causes compaction.

It is vital that farmers take reasonable precaution to prevent soil loss from their land.

But, while enforcement underpins the new rules, some of the problems can be subtle and remain undiagnosed, particularly where the problem lies in the subsoil.

We will take action in serious cases, but we will need to consider each situation case by case.

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The success of the new Farming Rules for Water will also depend on us taking an advisory approach, and we have published guidance with practical steps to help farmers protect their land.

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We are also working on farm assurance schemes with WRAP, the NFU, and the Renewable Energy Association, to address both the plastic waste produced by agriculture, and to reduce plastic contamination in bio-waste spread on

farmland.

If badly managed, landspreading can damage soil health, contaminate crops and livestock, and it can affect the aquatic environment and bathing waters.

We need to do more work with water companies and the waste sector to manage this.

As with all environmental issues, collaboration is essential.

And, I fully support the work of Rebecca Pow MP and the Sustainable Soils Alliance to bring together farming organisations, businesses, and NGOs, to reverse the current crisis in soil health and restore our soils to health within one generation.

There is no doubt that risks to soil threaten not only farmers' livelihoods, but also humanity's ability to:

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Overcoming these threats is a job that goes far beyond our borders, and we're pleased to work, and learn with, the Department for International Development as they help farmers around the world deal with these problems.

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The world's growing population puts more and more pressure on the soil.

It is our responsibility to ensure we are doing everything we can to help farmers manage the challenges to come.

I am grateful to the Devon and Cornwall Soils Alliance for this event to build capacity and capability in soils advice.

And, I am grateful to you for listening to me today.

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Thank you very much.