

Digital Secretary's closing speech to the UK Tech Cluster Group

Good afternoon, and thanks for giving me the opportunity to close this Roadmap to Recovery summit.

One of the best things about the Cluster Group is that its members truly reflect the full length and breadth of the United Kingdom's sprawling tech sector – covering the Highlands and Islands all the way down to Cornwall.

As you're keenly aware, it's not all about London, so it's great to see all of our regions represented here today.

I also know that you're doing some great work to help tech communities across the country bounce back from COVID, and to use tech more broadly to help your own regional economies recover from the pandemic.

Coronavirus has fundamentally altered our lives and the role that tech plays within it.

Of course it's turbocharged the digital transformation of almost every part of our days – of our workplaces, our businesses, the way we shop and stay in touch with family, and the way we use public services.

To take a couple of examples, almost half of the UK's workforce now works from home, and I know many many businesses up and down the country intend to keep it that way.

Remote doctor's appointments, virtually unheard of before COVID, now it's become the norm.

At the same time, coronavirus has delivered a sucker punch to our economy – and we really need tech to get us back on our feet. We're already dusting ourselves off, you've seen the announcements from the Prime Minister today, we are getting back into action by slowly reopening parts of the economy.

But to truly get back up and running, we really need tech to power us out of what inevitably and sadly will be a recession and into recovery.

To get us that V-shaped recovery we so desperately want and need to quickly bounce out of this recession, this needs to be done both through the industry's own growth, but also by helping more traditional industries in order to adapt, survive and indeed thrive.

This is particularly true in a time of social distancing, when many businesses will be forced to change their ways of working.

So we're living in a different world, and one that requires a different focus. Tech must play a leading part in our recovery, and my department has been working hard over the past few weeks and indeed months to put it in the

best possible position to do so.

Of course one of the great things about the UK is that we are a nation of innovators, a nation of entrepreneurs and a nation of inventors, and our tech industry is already very strong.

Many of you already know that we are third globally, only behind the U.S. and China, and consistently outperforming the rest of Europe. But I want us not to be complacent but build on that strength.

With that in mind and during this 'Rebuilding the UK' event, I can announce that the government will be publishing a new digital strategy in the Autumn – one that reflects the new post-COVID reality.

Now I know we've had previous digital strategies before and they've addressed all kinds of important questions and challenges for the tech industry. Such as how to build 21st century digital infrastructure or how to make the UK the safest place to go online

These are all still important questions, and must continue to form a central part of all Government thinking on digital.

Right now, our clear priority must be growth. Using tech to power us out of the recession, to drive productivity and create jobs in all parts of the industry, region by region, and indeed all parts of our economy.

With offices closed and shops shuttered during the crisis, tech has kept our economy ticking over. But now, as we enter recovery, tech will put a fresh load of fuel in the tank, driving a new era of growth.

So what are some of the key areas we'll need to consider? What might spark a digital drive for growth?

First It means securing adequacy and creating the best data regime possible. One that allows businesses and public services of all shapes and sizes to use and share vital information quickly, efficiently and ethically, as they have during the pandemic.

We've seen during this pandemic huge improvements in how data has been used and I want that spirit of innovation and the urgency of change to be one of the positive legacies that we now take forward. And our forthcoming National Data Strategy will reflect that desire.

It also means looking at ways to build a highly-skilled digital workforce across every region of the UK, so that people can shift into the digital or tech sectors or indeed digitise their own businesses.

We know the GI bill gave American veterans the skills and qualifications to move into new areas of work after World War Two, helping them to readjust to civilian life. Likewise, we similarly need a strategy that will help workers here adjust to a digital-led economy after coronavirus.

It means providing world-class, next generation infrastructure in, so that

everyone can take those advantages and those opportunities wherever they live – for example using their 5G network to launch the next killer app.

It means ensuring our regulatory regime for digital is pro-competitive, pro-innovation, agile, and proportionate. We must avoid unnecessary layers of regulations and ensure we have a coherent and consistent approach to drive growth.

It means getting the UK's best small and medium-sized shops and businesses – stretching from Lands End to John O'Groats – making better use of tech and trading online, expanding their customer base from the local high street or retail park to a national or indeed even international marketplace.

Turnover for small and medium sized businesses has risen by a third on eBay during lockdown. It won't surprise you that three-quarters of those who trade on eBay are from outside London and the South East and that once you adjust the figures for population, several regions rank higher than London and the South East for 'digital density'.

But I want to see even more of them online. I want a wave of new micro-multinationals across the UK.

I know Amazon is today launching its Small Business Accelerator, which will help more than 250,000 businesses digitise their services, and through an intensive boot camp will get at least 1000 offline firms trading online within a week. Now that's exactly the kind of approach I want to see.

And all of this means pushing for ambitious trade deals that will expand digital exports and drive inward investment for all our tech communities.

Now, these are clearly lots of different aims, but they all contribute to the same thing, that same goal: driving growth and creating jobs.

I'll be seeking ideas from civil society, charities and the wider public, so that they can fully benefit from this digitally-led recovery.

Maybe a charity will have an innovative idea about how they'd like to use data to target support exactly where it's needed.

Or maybe a small business in Southend or Hexham will lay out exactly what barriers they face to get trading online, and how we can help remove them.

But most importantly, I need all of your help – the guidance of the tech industry itself – to shape our new approach, so that the strategy reflects your needs and the changes you most want to see in the coming years.

You might be a health-tech company in Oxford who knows how much can be achieved by sharing real-time, high-quality medical information.

Or you might be dreaming of becoming the next Wordnerds – Gateshead's AI start-up sensation but you are struggling to find people in your area with the right skills you need.

I particularly want to talk to the people here today, the grassroots tech communities in all of our regions – in Edinburgh and Cardiff and Brighton and Birmingham – so that we can power growth and productivity across the whole of our United Kingdom.

I know that when a lot of people speak about driving growth in tech, they're thinking only of London and the South-East. I'm determined to change that.

When it's published, our new digital strategy will form one of the building blocks of our recovery. A recovery that will be tech-led, but will benefit all.

Thank you very much for your time.