# [Speech: Margot James' speech at techUK's Digital Ethics Summit](#)

Good morning everyone.

Thank you Antony for your opening remarks, and Kate for your insights.

I'd like to start by saying how delighted I am to be able to be here today, and to see so many of you gathered together to discuss the hugely important questions of 'digital ethics'.

Digital ethics has surely never been more pressing or more prominently in our minds than it is today. How data is used to target service and products; the way inferences are drawn about our preferences and characteristics; the role which algorithms play in making decisions and how they do this — these are the questions we which are encountering again, and again, in different contexts and sectors.

We only have to look at the resources that are being invested by both industry and governments, or at the news stories ever present in the media, to realise how mainstream these issues have become. 'Digital ethics' is no longer a niche interest, but part of our daily conversations and debates. It is becoming as important as medical ethics.

This is, of course, exactly as it should be. Digital and data-driven technologies present incredible opportunities to improve and transform our lives, delivering benefits across society and driving prosperity and growth. But they can only do this if they are designed and deployed ethically and responsibly, in ways that build and retain the trust of citizens and consumers.

Working out how to do this is challenging. The pace of innovation in the technologies is fast, their impacts not always easily anticipated, and their reach cross-jurisdictional. Governance and regulation in this context also needs to be innovative, agile and forward-thinking. But, at the heart of it all, lies the need to embed responsibility and ethics into the culture and fabric of our companies and public institutions alike.

Government, of course, has a vital role to play in making sure this happens, by providing a regulatory framework and guidelines, but also by supporting and facilitating the development of best practice, principles and standards.

The last twelve months in particular has seen us take hugely ambitious and important steps in this direction. At the start of the year we launched the Digital Charter, a programme of work through which we want to make sure the internet works for everyone — for people, businesses, and society as a whole.

As part of this programme:

- We have successfully passed the Data Protection Act, incorporating GDPR into UK law,creating a new data protection framework fit for the digital age and giving people greater control over their data;

- We have strengthened the UK's data regulator, the ICO, to ensure she has the resources and powers she needs to fulfil her remit. Making the Information Commissioner the largest and most powerful regulator in the EU.

- We have published the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, setting out the principles that underpin our approach to internet safety, and will launch our Online Harms White Paper early next year.

- We have revised and updated our Data Ethics Framework, setting out clear principles for how data should be used in the public sector.

Each of these initiatives will play a key role in ensuring that the digital and data-driven technologies are used securely, responsibly and in the interests of society.

Innovation, and innovative businesses, can only thrive when the people trust that technology is working for them and that they will be protected from harm. Public confidence and trust in data management has taken a hit this year and we need to rebuild that trust.

So the one initiative I'd particularly like to highlight today is the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation – the new expert body that will advise the Government on the challenges and opportunities posed by data-driven technologies, and the governance measures that are needed to address these.

The Government took the pioneering step to create this major new advisory body shortly before techUK's last Digital Summit, at the 2017 Autumn Budget. In June this year we set out a detailed vision setting out how we proposed the Centre should work and what it will do; and in November we published our finalised proposals following an extensive twelve week consultation.

I am pleased to say that the Centre is now very much up and running.

- We have a fantastic chair in place, Roger Taylor, current chair of Ofqual, founder of the healthcare data firm Dr Foster and passionate advocate for the transformative potential of data.

- We have assembled a board that brings together some of our best and brightest minds from different sectors and disciplines – business leaders and ethicists; philosophers and lawyers; regulators, researchers and parliamentarians.

- And we commissioned the Centre's first two projects, — one examining how data shapes people's online experiences, the other looking at the potential for bias in decisions made using algorithms.

It is no surprise, I think, that since we announced the Centre a host of similar initiatives have been announced across the globe. There is a clear recognition on the part of governments world wide that addressing the ethical challenges posed digital technologies will be the key to unlocking and enabling innovation, and that the countries who lead that debate are the ones that will retain a competitive edge in an ever competitive world.

But, of course, the responsibility for ensuring that digital technologies are used ethically and responsibly does not fall on government alone. Industry too must play — if anything — an even bigger part, and of course has a vested interest in doing so; the companies that earn their customers' trust are the ones that will thrive. In this regard it is hugely gratifying to see how seriously some companies have been thinking about these issues in the last twelve months. The best solutions, by far, will be the ones that are developed voluntarily and that recognise ethics as the key — not the obstacle — to success.

Of course, with much of this we are at a comparatively early stage. Going forwards we will need to scrutinise our collective efforts to work out what is working and what is not; what has been addressed and what has been missed. That is one reason why we are creating the Centre, but it is not for the Centre alone. All of us will need to monitor these questions, to work out how we can embed ethical thinking ever more firmly into our practices and products — and, as I alluded to earlier, to ensure that public trust is placed at the heart of this work.

To conclude, I am clear that if we are to succeed in unlocking the benefits available to the UK from these amazing technologies, we must begin with ethics, and that this must go hand-in-hand with real efforts to engage citizens and consumers, and to prove the trustworthiness of these technologies.

Whilst the Government has taken significant steps in this direction, clearly there is still much progress to be made. Industry, civil society, and Government will all need to work collaboratively to achieve these aims.

I hope that discussions today will allow you to explore these issues in more detail, and look forward to hearing the conclusions you reach.

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