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**THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND INTERNATIONAL INTERNET-RELATED PUBLIC POLICY IN MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
AND POSSIBLE FUTURE PANDEMICS**

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges to the social, economic and physical wellbeing of societies across the globe. During this time of crisis, the Internet has played an undeniably crucial role in mitigating these effects. It has enabled citizens to continue to work, trade, shop, communicate and learn, kept families and friends connected, and accelerated public health responses through online technologies such as contact tracing apps, Covid-19 testing and vaccine booking systems. However, despite extraordinary progress, the pandemic has simultaneously exposed the impact of unequal Internet access across the globe and the realities of digital exclusion. In order to protect society against possible future pandemics, it is vital that we connect the unconnected, build digital skills and learn from this experience to fortify our public health and pandemic response systems for the years to come.

1. The United Kingdom welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this open consultation on the role of the Internet and international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of Covid-19 and possible future pandemics. We believe this discussion is of crucial importance since the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the extraordinary value the Internet can bring. From keeping families connected to accelerating public health responses, the Internet has played an undeniably crucial role during this time of crisis. However, with half of the world's population still unconnected, there is still a lot more we must do to better harness the potential of the Internet to protect society against possible future pandemics. We therefore greatly look forward to discussing the topic in both the open meeting with stakeholders and at the CWG Meeting itself, where perhaps we may also benefit from the knowledge and contribution of invited experts.
2. According to the ITU's Measuring Digital Development report, international bandwidth usage is estimated to have grown globally by 38 per cent during the pandemic. Amid

unprecedented social distancing restrictions, the Internet has enabled citizens to continue to work, trade, shop, communicate and learn. It has been an invaluable tool for governments to issue public health information and guidance, engage citizens, and administer vital services such as online medical consultations and job support programs. It has also been fundamental to pandemic responses: contact-tracing, testing, vaccine development, and vaccination scheduling have relied heavily on online systems. Without the Internet, the impacts of the crisis are hard to imagine. As of April 1 2020, nearly 1.5 billion children in 173 countries were affected by school closures and, as of January 2021, 55% of the UK workforce were working from home. In these circumstances, the Internet has provided a crucial alternative to in-person interactions.

3. The impacts of Covid-19 have affected countries all across the world, in all aspects of society. A diverse range of stakeholders, spanning government, industry and academia, have contributed to tackling these impacts using online technologies. In the UK for instance, the government has invested in the Digital Lifeline fund, which has provided tablets, data and digital support to approximately 5000 people with learning disabilities in order to reduce loneliness and improve access to online services and information. Around the world, businesses, charities and industry are doing excellent work on the issue. Google, for instance, launched Google Classroom, a free service to support online learning. Here in the UK, the industry-led coalition, FutureDotNow, provided devices, data and training to people who were offline and vulnerable. Meanwhile, the fibre network provider CityFibre, pledged to hire for 10,000 new jobs by 2025, boosting employment and supporting the rollout of gigabit-capable networks.
4. However, despite extraordinary progress, the pandemic has shown that we still have a lot more to do to ensure that everyone can benefit from the vital, and in some cases life-saving, support that the Internet offers. Covid has starkly exposed the impact of unequal Internet access across the globe and the realities of digital exclusion, as well as the risks posed by Internet shutdowns. With education, work, public health information and medical services going online, access to affordable Internet is more essential than ever. Yet over half of the world's population is still unconnected. It is therefore becoming increasingly urgent that we accelerate the provision of affordable Internet access and build digital skills in order to ensure no one is left behind. Without this, we will not be able to utilise the full potential of the Internet to protect society against future crises.
5. To this end, the United Kingdom is investing in programmes that foster digital inclusion and boost Internet access in some of the most marginalised communities. Our Digital Access Programme, for instance, uses scalable and sustainable models for inclusive connectivity and locally-relevant digital content in local languages. Working hand in hand with governments, regulators and industry, we are promoting digital literacy, cybersecurity and digital innovation for social impact in partner countries. We have also launched The Skills Toolkit, which offers free online training in collaboration with industry partners, and are

supporting Digital Boost, a platform providing much-needed digital support for small businesses and charities in the UK that have been impacted by the Covid-19 crisis.

6. The Internet has not only been fundamental for weathering the social, economic and physical effects of the pandemic, but has also played a crucial role in our public health responses themselves. Online applications have been an invaluable medium for contact-tracing, testing and vaccine scheduling systems. Collecting public health data and disseminating information on Covid-19 symptoms and other pandemic-related issues has been made easier and quicker via the Internet. Governments around the world have used online campaigns to increase compliance with social distancing and other restrictions. Meanwhile, scientists have relied on the Internet to accelerate the process of vaccine development.
7. Nevertheless, there are still ways we can better harness the potential of the Internet to improve our responses to similar crises in the future. In order to ensure society is prepared for possible future pandemics, it is important that we take this opportunity to learn from the successes and challenges we have experienced; for example, by significantly increasing access to information and communications technology and striving to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in every country.
8. However, in order to fully reach this potential, international cooperation is essential. There is a lot to be learned from the diverse experiences of governments and stakeholders around the world. We welcome the excellent work of the ITU in launching the Global Network Resiliency Platform which — with contributors from governments, industry and beyond — provides an excellent means of information sharing, idea exchange and collaboration. It is only by sharing these experiences and working together to develop solutions, that we can channel these learnings into action that prevents and mitigates potential crises in the future. The self-evident benefits of such multi-stakeholder working has clear lessons for all of us with respect to such public policy developments.
9. The UK looks forward to the contributions and discussion in this open consultation and to learning about the experience of other stakeholders around the world.