



Name of Constituency	Epsom & Ewell			
Name of CPF Group	Epsom & Ewell CPF			
Name of CPF Coordinator	Frances Clarke			
Email address for response	office@epsomconservatives.org.uk			
Number of attendees	<25	25-39	40-64	>65
Holding elected office:				
Party members:		1	5	
Non-members:				
Date of meeting	8th October 2018 - first meeting			
<p><i>If you have a Conservative MP, please tick this box to confirm that you have sent a copy of this response to your MP:</i></p>				X
<p><i>Please indicate whether you used the accompanying powerpoint presentation and, if so, how useful you found it or in what ways you might suggest it could have been improved:</i></p> <p>We used it <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback: Whilst we did not use the powerpoint, the group thought the papers were well structured, with useful and appropriate references to the 2017 Manifesto. The links to the references were also excellent, as they provided relevant, useful and concise information to enrich one's understanding of the debate.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">x</p>				

1. To what extent do you view the digital age as a force for good?

Whilst recognising the challenges of the 'Digital Age (DA)', the group felt that, on balance, it was a force for good. It also felt it was as a development that could not be avoided, so was best embraced, planned for and shaped rather than waiting, passively to be shaped by it.

It was seen as an 'accelerator' that could hasten and accentuate the strengths and weaknesses of the economy and society. Any weaknesses exposed, the problems caused and the inevitable frustrations brought about by the DA will need to be mitigated through planning ahead.

Some of the benefits given to 'evidence' our belief that it is a force for good were less travelling to work/working from home, which could increase home life time, reduce carbon emissions, increase access to a work environment that had not been open to some eg people with disabilities. 'Online learning' was another example, where information is now accessible to all through the Internet not just to those who have access to libraries or academics. The DA has offered practical help to many through maps or translation functions. The DA has meant greater connectivity globally, improving the economies in countries, not just our own.

A query raised was has there been any real evaluation of the oft quoted phrase 'DA will improve productivity'? Should DA changes that reduce productivity be resisted?

2. Finding the balance between encouraging tech innovation and mitigating tech's harms is crucial to the tech revolution. What are the most important areas you think Government should be focusing on in order to achieve this?

Skills learning and Education was seen as key focus for Government. This starts with children but also throughout the age groups. The move away from pure ICT training at school to Computing, including an understanding of coding as well was seen as a good thing.

Universities should support business need, not just what they can or want to offer. Reference was made to Lord Browne Review - 'Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance'

A suggestion was for Universities to publish what their graduates are earning after 1/3/5/10 years not just the % in employment. The graduate earnings are then linked to amounts universities can charge for relevant courses.

Another focus was on redressing the balance between online and traditional retailers; where traditional retailers face greater rates and tax burdens than their online rivals. Traditional retailers bring benefits to local communities that online retailers can't and they therefore offer a key opportunity for making communities stronger eg High Streets can offer a community focus and identity, employ local people, offer a place for people to gather and connect with each other. These businesses also under pin the local tax base; High Streets need subsidies and incentives to maintain their viability and the 'soft' benefits they provide local communities. Large online businesses (often global organisations) have real tax advantages and do less to support local communities.

A suggestion was to tax online purchases and use these to support local retailers, redevelopment of high streets to meet the DA and needs of local communities.

A question raised was 'what is the Government doing with the 'Mary Portas Study' on the High Street?

In considering this question, we discussed our understanding of 'Tech Harms' and in summary took it to mean the use of social media as a vehicle for 'fake news' and intimidation; that this was driving, through the involvement of bots and other state actors, an undermining of trust in government and institutions; the loss of traditional jobs; the challenge of taxation in the DA; the challenge of creating level playing fields for online and offline retailers; the concentration of power in a few hands.

3. How active should the Government be in tackling online harms? To what extent do you view legislation necessary in tackling this?

The group felt the online arena has been very much like the 'Wild West' and that companies were now beginning to self regulate following public/customer pressure, legal actions and Governments were regulating eg GDPR.

A question was raised as to whether online social media sites should be treated as publishers in the same way as the traditional media is?

The group felt that Government should use it's power to support 'people power' as the fear of reputational damage is a key driver of change in businesses. People should be able to control their own information and identities online.

The group recognised that in this Country our legislative framework is based on centuries old institutions and processes and that legislation develops as a slower pace than technology. Where legislation is developed it needs to be 'future proofed' but we understood that this is problematic as you could build in unintended consequences and don't know, what you don't know.

The group felt Government should develop regulation and standards rather than legislation and be the leader in setting industry standards, in a similar way that the City Of London is seen as having the best regulation and standards in financial services.

A suggestion was to have a regulator, such as the Office for National Statistics or the FCA's 'Warnings' site and one function could be to provide the details of fake accounts or sites for checks by online users. Or conversely seek the support of the existing 'Open Data Institute' to build in this function.

In a social media context, a suggestion was to shift liability from just the user to the user and social media platform.

Following on from this, Education was seen as an important means of tackling online harms. Users can be educated to be aware that online content can be fake or harmful; that users can be further helped to take responsibility for their own online profiles in a similar way to the 'public service announcements' in the past.

4. To what extent has your broadband improved recently?

The group felt their broadband was good, with only one reporting problems with an inconsistent service (Ewell area).

Mobile broadband was considered to be worse than other countries, for example one of the group could have a business video conference in Kiev but couldn't when they are in the UK.

A request was made for the Government (if not done already) to make a business justification for 5G mobile broadband and to accelerate its roll out.

The group recognised that the service was less good in other parts of the Country eg rural areas. The danger in improving service provision was that people with a good 4G service now could just get a better service rather than improving provision elsewhere

The Group welcomed the changes to how companies can advertise broadband speeds, from 'up to' to a more accurate reflection based on real customer experiences.

The Group welcomed the work being done on the infrastructure for broadband but noted that cabled broadband could become obsolete with the more to wireless broadband and the Government's focus should be on mobile broadband.

5. British tech start-ups are vital to the UK tech industry. What more can we do to support our entrepreneurs of the future?

The Group felt the focus should not solely be on start-ups because of their high failure rate, but on 'scale-ups' too.

The support could be in the form of grants which would allow the scale-ups to enter new markets, undertake more advertising or develop new products for example. Support should be given to enable them to survive and not be taken over by larger industry players, so that we can have our own 'Amazon' for example.

Start-ups could be supported by developing business parks, aligned to Universities, so there is a real, readily available pool of talent. The parks could offer reduced rates and shared services such as legal services to defend the start-ups intellectual property rights. These shared services could be funded by or subsidised by Government.

A point was made that the development of business parks could be undertaken in deprived areas. Whilst recognising that these areas may not offer a ready pool of skilled people, the talent to be developed is still there. Reference was made to Facebook starting up in Naples, Italy.

6. Social media has experienced serious challenges recently. How active should Government be in addressing the challenges posed by social media?

Much of our discussion for Question 1 and 2 did address social media and its harms. We thought the Government's role should be as an enabler for individuals or consumer groups to take responsibility for their use of social media, through education and support, and to take on providers by setting the framework to force them to change.

In addition, Government has a moral and social responsibility to lead and could pitch itself as a world leader in setting the standards that govern the online DA of the future. Legislation is very difficult because of the speed of change and the global context; regulation is harder for similar reasons but standards could be set here, that are shown to be ethical, workable and fair that other countries / institutions then adopt.

7. How concerned are you that the automation of jobs will put many people out of work? Do you think the creation of new jobs from the tech revolution will be sufficient?

The Group felt that the creation of new jobs would far outstrip the loss of existing jobs through automation. Therefore the Group had few concerns that people would be out of work, more that people would need to be supported in recognising the new opportunities and either offered training for or be retrained for these.

The Government could help reassure people/communities by citing examples from the past, where automation has changed the workplace radically but opened up new opportunities. The challenge is the speed of development in the DA and the fact that people's attitudes and acquisition of new skills can lag behind.

An example of people's attitudes is the 'fear' of driverless trains - despite the fact they have been in operation for years on the Docklands Light Railway or driverless cars, despite their effective use at Heathrow Terminal 5.

The Group felt that the ample supply of low wage workers had in fact been a drag on innovation, investment and automation and so saw an opportunity going forward.

The Group felt that automation was inevitable and that if we don't adapt, someone else will adapt for us.

8. Is there any other question you think should have been asked or observation you would like to make?

'Zero Hours Contracts' - when will there be action to tackle the 'unacceptable face of capitalism'. Not to legislate against their use but to legislate to tackle their misuse. They have a place but need managing.

FEEDBACK ON PAPER



What did you find useful?

Papers were useful, providing enough information to enable an informed discussion but not so long as put anyone off. One member of the group had a non tech background but still understood the papers, so they were pitched at the right level. The links were useful for further reading.

What did you not find helpful?

We didn't use the powerpoint, but may have if we had had a larger group of people who needed briefing prior to commencement of the discussion.

Do you have any suggestions for how we might improve future briefings?

Thank You. Please return to: CPF.Papers@conservatives.com