

The Prime Minister's building plans

The Prime Minister set out a vision of hope and optimism yesterday about economic recovery. He also detailed some £5bn of accelerated and useful public sector investment in better school and FE buildings, road improvements, health buildings and new schools. This is welcome.

We also need to recognise that even allowing for the temporary sharp fall in output the UK economy is still a £2 trillion economy. A recovery rests heavily on the positive response of the private sector. Better roads and communications help. Good quality education and plenty of educational opportunity for all is crucial.

The big numbers of state support rest in the furlough scheme and the 8 million people currently helped by it. Success in recovery will come from finding the right ways to get the companies that employ them off state support, and restoring as many of those jobs as possible. For those who do lose their jobs from their current employers, we need maximum job opportunities to speed new openings for those made redundant.

Here the challenge is to think through what the future offers for shops, cafes, restaurants and a range of services on our High Streets. Maximum flexibility is needed for landlords and tenants to adjust their use of buildings to new ventures or socially distanced versions of old activities. There needs to be many strands to generating more new jobs. These can come from the digital revolution, from the artificial intelligence reforms and from the onward march of the robots. They can come from growing more of our own food, catching and processing more of our own fish, growing more of our own timbers, generating more of our own power and all the other openings identified.

Yesterday the Environment and Housing Secretary set out proposals to make it easier to flex the use of commercial buildings with all this in mind.

We do need education to equip young people for the opportunities of the digital world. We are entering an era of rapid change, where the transition to a digital and on line economy has just been out into fast forward by the arrival of home working for the many.