



House of Commons  
Science and Technology  
Committee

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# Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health

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**Fourteenth Report of Session 2017–19**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 29 January 2019*

## Science and Technology Committee

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## Summary

Social media and screens have become ubiquitous in the lives of children. Figures produced by Ofcom indicated that 70% of 12–15 year olds have a profile on social media, while the OECD reported in 2015 that 94.8% of 15 year olds in the UK used social media sites before or after school. Social media has undoubtedly connected people around the world and provided unprecedented ways to communicate instantaneously. Yet concerns have been growing about its effects on our wellbeing, and particularly on the physical and mental health of children. With the Government set to legislate on Online Harms in the next parliamentary session, our Report considers:

- whether the growing use of social media, and screens, among children is healthy or harmful;
- the evidence base for such claims; and
- whether any new measures or controls are required.

First and foremost, providing unambiguous answers to our questions was hindered by the limited quantity and quality of academic evidence available. Social media is a relatively new phenomenon and, consequently, there is not yet a well-established body of research in this area examining its effects on children. Similarly, research on screens has tended not to focus on newer devices like smartphones. We found that the majority of published research did not provide a clear indication of causation, but instead indicated a possible correlation between social media/screens and a particular health effect. There was even less focus in published research on exactly who was at risk and if some groups were potentially more vulnerable than others when using screens and social media. Given the Government's intention to legislate in this area, we are surprised to find that it has not commissioned any new, substantive research to help inform its proposals. We recommend that, as a matter of urgency, the Government should commission research to identify who is at risk of experiencing harm online and on social media, and why, and the longer-term consequences of that exposure on children. We also call on social media companies to make anonymised high-level data available, for research purposes, to bona fide researchers so that a better understanding of social media's effects on users can be established. The Government should consider what legislation is required to improve researchers' access to this type of data.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the absence of good academic evidence is not, in itself, evidence that social media and screens have no effect on young people. The potential links between social media, screens and health is an area of concern for parents, carers, teachers and children alike. While we heard about a variety of instances where social media could be a force for good, we also received evidence about some of the potential negative impacts of social media on the health and emotional wellbeing of children. These ranged from detrimental effects on sleep patterns and body image through to cyberbullying, grooming and 'sexting'. Generally, social media was not the root cause of the risk but helped to facilitate it, while also providing the opportunity for a large degree of amplification. This was particularly apparent in the case of the abuse of children online, via social media. It is imperative that the Government leads the way in ensuring that an effective partnership is in place, across civil society, technology companies, law

enforcement agencies, the Government and non-governmental organisations, aimed at ending child sexual exploitation (CSE) and abuse online. We recommend that the Government commissions research to establish its scale and prevalence and then sets itself an ambitious target to halve reported online CSE in two years and all but eliminate it in four years.

Children must, as far as practically possible, be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites. At present, however, there is a patchwork of regulation and legislation in place, resulting in a “standards lottery” that does little to ensure that children are as safe as possible when they go online, as they are offline. This principle—to protect children from harm when on social media sites—must be enshrined in legislation as social media companies having a ‘duty of care’ towards its users who are under 18. Social media companies must also be far more open and transparent regarding how they operate and particularly how they moderate, review and prioritise content.

To achieve this, the Government should introduce, through new primary legislation, a statutory code of practice for social media companies, to provide consistency on content reporting practices and moderation mechanisms. This should be accompanied by a requirement for social media companies to publish detailed Transparency Reports every six months. Furthermore, when content that is potentially illegal under UK law is reported to a social media company, it should have to review the content, take a decision on whether to remove, block or flag that item (if appropriate), and relay that decision to the individual/organisation reporting it within 24 hours, such as now occurs in Germany. We believe that Ofcom is well-placed to perform the duties of the regulator and recommend that the Government resources Ofcom accordingly.

Finally, the digital literacy and resilience of children, as well as their teachers and parents, must be improved to help safeguard children from risks and harms when using social media. PSHE education must be made mandatory by the Government for primary and secondary school pupils and should deliver an age-appropriate understanding of, and resilience towards, the harms and benefits of the digital world.

# 1 Introduction

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## Background

1. Adults and children are spending ever-increasing amounts of time 'online'. Across the world, every 60 seconds an estimated 156 million emails are sent, 3.8 million search requests are made on Google and two million minutes of calls are made via Skype, with the average internet user now spending "around 6 hours each day using internet-powered devices and services".<sup>1</sup> Much of this time is also spent on social media. While there is no agreed definition of social media, we have understood it to include "websites and apps that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking".<sup>2</sup> We also recognise that the lines have blurred between different types of online media, with some gaming sites, for example, now involving social networking.<sup>3</sup> *We are social's* Global Digital report estimated that more than 3 billion people globally use social media each month,<sup>4</sup> while in Great Britain the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that 66% of all adults aged 16+, and 96% in the 16–24 age group, had used social networking within the last three months.<sup>5</sup>

2. Children's engagement with social media is similarly high and is increasing. Figures produced by the ONS show that in 2010–11, 8.6% of children (aged 0–15 years) reported spending more than three hours on social networks on a normal school day, rising to 12.8% of children in 2015–16.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, data compiled by the OECD showed that young people in the UK were extensive users of both the internet in general, and social media in particular. In 2015, 24.1% of 15 year olds in the UK spent more than 6 hours, outside of school, online, compared to an OECD average of 16.2%, while 94.8% of 15 year olds used social media sites before or after school.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, England has also witnessed a rise in the prevalence of 'mental disorders' in children aged 5–15 years, from 9.7% in 1999 to 11.2% in 2017.<sup>8</sup>

## Our inquiry

3. Statistics such as these have raised questions about the relationship between the increasing use of social media by children and its effects on their health and wellbeing. Our inquiry therefore set out to investigate whether the growing use of social media, and screens, among children is healthy or harmful, the evidence base for such claims, and whether any new measures or controls are required. We chose to focus on children since any positive or negative effects of social media, and screens, would be occurring alongside

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1 We are Social, [Digital in 2018: World's Internet Users Pass the 4 Billion Mark](#), January 2018

2 Law Commission, [Abusive and Offensive Online Communications: A Scoping Report](#), November 2018, HC 1682, p ix

3 The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has launched an inquiry into the growth of 'immersive and addictive technologies' and has explicitly asked young people and gamers for their views, see: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/news/gamers-call-for-evidence-17-19/>

4 We are social, [Digital in 2018: World's Internet Users Pass the 4 Billion Mark](#), January 2018

5 Office for National Statistics, [Social networking by age group, 2011 to 2017](#), August 2017. The ONS appears to use social networking and social media interchangeably.

6 Office for National Statistics, [Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018](#), March 2018

7 OECD, [PISA 2015 Results \(Volume III\): Students' well-being](#), OECD publishing Paris, 2017

8 NHS Digital, [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2017, Summary of Key Findings](#), November 2018, p8

critical developmental and “social, biological, cognitive and psychological changes”, thus making it particularly important to shine a light on this area.<sup>9</sup> We defined children in line with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* as people under the age of 18.<sup>10</sup>

4. Focusing on children also allowed us to avoid significant overlap with other Select Committee inquiries currently taking place in this area, including the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s examination of “Disinformation and ‘Fake News’”, the Home Affairs Committee’s inquiry into “Hate Crime and its violent consequences”, and the House of Lords Communications Committee’s inquiry into “The Internet: to regulate or not to regulate?”.<sup>11</sup> Towards the end of our inquiry the Petitions Committee published its Report on “Online abuse and the experience of disabled people”. We commend the Committee’s work on highlighting the nature and effects of online abuse towards disabled people.

5. Our inquiry was launched in February 2018. We received over 170 pieces of written evidence and held six evidence sessions with a total of 37 witnesses, including academics, social media companies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), clinicians, the Metropolitan Police, and Ofcom. We also took evidence from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Mental Health, Inequalities and Suicide Prevention, Jackie Doyle-Price MP, and the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, Margot James MP.

6. We were committed to hearing from children and young people during our inquiry. As well as holding a formal oral evidence session with five young people, we held an outreach event with Welland Park School (a secondary school in Market Harborough). Pupils from Years 9 and 11 at Welland Park spoke about their experiences of using social media, and their school’s policy of ‘banning’ the use of mobile phones in school, unless authorised by a teacher (see Annex 2). The Parliamentary Education Centre also polled children visiting Parliament about their use of social media.

7. To extend this work further, we subsequently produced a ‘teacher’s pack’, made available to teachers through the Parliamentary Education Centre and circulated by Members of the House. The pack included a lesson plan for both primary and secondary school children and aimed to facilitate a discussion on their thoughts and use of social media. The same survey given to children visiting Parliament was also contained in the pack. We received over 3,000 responses to the survey from 21 schools across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (see Annex 3).

8. In addition, we:

- held an outreach event in Reading to talk to youth leaders, parents and teachers about social media (see Annex 1);

9 Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, [How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships and physical activity? An evidence-focused literature review](#). Innocenti Discussion Paper 2017–02, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, p9

10 [https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC\\_summary-1.pdf](https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary-1.pdf)

11 Digital, Communication, Media and Sport Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, [Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Interim Report](#), HC 363; Home Affairs Committee, [Hate crime and its violent consequences](#)—inquiry ongoing; Petitions Committee, First Special Report of Session 2017–19, [Online abuse and the experience of disabled people: draft recommendations for consultation](#), HC 1459; House of Lords Communication Committee, [The Internet: to regulate or not to regulate?](#)—inquiry ongoing.



- visited 'Revealing Reality' in Clapham, South West London, to learn more about its research into children and adults' use of social media;
- held an informal meeting with the Chief Medical Officer for England, Dame Sally Davies, to discuss her review of the relationship between social media and the mental health of children and young people aged under 25 (see Annex 4) and;
- Members also undertook outreach in their own constituencies and spoke to both primary and secondary school children about social media.<sup>12</sup>

We are grateful to everyone who took the time to contribute to our inquiry.

### **Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper**

9. In May 2018, after we had launched our inquiry, the Government published the Response to its *Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper*.<sup>13</sup> This set out the direction of travel for a regulatory approach towards social media companies and provided more detail on the proposed social media code of practice, as established under section 103 of the *Digital Economy Act 2017*.<sup>14</sup> In its Response to the Green Paper, the Government outlined its intention to “publish a full White Paper later this year [2018] as a precursor to bringing forward online safety legislation that will cover the full range of online harms”.<sup>15</sup> Potential areas for legislation were identified as including “the code of practice, transparency reporting and online advertising”.<sup>16</sup>

10. We have since learned that the *Online Harms White Paper* is due to be published “this winter” and specifically “before March” 2019, with legislation introduced in the next parliamentary session.<sup>17</sup> Our Report is intended to inform the White Paper, though we expect that the Government will respond to our Report in the usual two-month response period. The Report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 considers the current research and evidence base on the relationship between social media, screen-use and health, and how it can be improved.
- Chapter 3 outlines both the benefits and risks of social media and identifies where risks may result in harm.
- Chapter 4 examines approaches to improve the digital literacy and resilience of children, particularly through ‘Personal, Social, Health and Economic’ (PSHE) education.
- Finally, in Chapter 5 we look at the legislative and non-legislative measures that are required to address current gaps in regulation.

12 See, for example, Liz Kendall MP ([SMH0179](#))

13 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018

14 Digital Economy Act, [section 103](#)

15 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p 3

16 *ibid*

17 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee Oral evidence: The work of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, HC 361 Wednesday 24 October 2018, Qq 258–259

### ***Responsibility for change***

11. The responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of children when they are online is diffuse and is shared across the Government, industry, parents, carers, schools, young people and non-governmental organisations, each of whom has an essential role to play. While we discuss these responsibilities throughout our Report, we are also clear that the Government must take a leading role to instigate the types of changes that are urgently needed. Consequently, our recommendations are directed at the Government, as is the norm in Select Committee Reports. We also acknowledge, however, where other stakeholders—like social media companies and schools—have a vital role to play.

## 2 Research on social media and screen-use

12. The evidence we received during our inquiry detailed a wide range of possible effects, both positive and negative, that social media and screen-use may have on the physical and mental wellbeing of young people. A note of caution, however, was sounded by some witnesses about the reliability and validity of the evidence base. Before outlining the benefits and harms associated with young people using social media and screens, this Chapter considers the methodological and theoretical quality of the research conducted in this field, and its implications for policymaking.

### Screen-time

13. Witnesses emphasised that ‘screen-use’ and ‘screen-time’ tended to be poorly defined, both in research studies and in the mainstream press, with limited effort being made to consider *what* the screen was being used for and the *type* of screen being used. The Science Media Centre, for example, noted that different types of technologies were simply “lumped together under the heading ‘screen time’”, to the extent that it had become shorthand for “many diverse things”.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Dr Peter Etchells, Senior Lecturer in Biological Psychology at Bath Spa University, highlighted how only a limited amount of research had attempted to differentiate between types of screen-time, thereby making it difficult to know if “an hour of watching an age-appropriate television is different to using social media for an hour, or playing a video game for an hour”.<sup>19</sup>

14. We also heard that answering this type of question was further complicated by the often outdated nature of the screens considered in existing studies. As the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) explained:

A major weakness in the current literature is its domination by television screen-time, which forms a rapidly decreasing proportion of children’s overall screen behaviour. Smaller numbers of studies have examined computer use or gaming, and very few studies have included mobile screen devices.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, in its review of ‘screen-time on health’, the RCPCH concluded that it was “unclear to what extent [existing] findings on screen-time can be generalised” to smart phones.<sup>21</sup>

15. The methods used to quantify ‘screen-time’ were similarly highlighted as problematic. Dr David Ellis, Lecturer in Computational Social Science at Lancaster University, reported that “time spent in front of a screen [was] almost never measured directly” but instead was reliant on ‘self-reporting’. This, he suggested, was problematic for several reasons:

18 Science Media Centre ([SMH0145](#))

19 Dr Peter Etchells ([SMH0116](#))

20 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health ([SMH0156](#)). See also Neza Stiglic and Russell M Viner “Effects of screentime on the health and well-being of children and adolescents: a systematic review of reviews” *BMJ Open* (2019) doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023191

21 *ibid*

not least that people often have little conscious awareness of such automatic behaviours (e.g. smartphone checking). Indeed, our own research has demonstrated that people have little insight regarding how many times they check their smartphone each day. Measuring screen time directly, we observed that people were checking their smartphone 85 times a day on average.<sup>22</sup>

16. In an open letter to *The Guardian* in 2017, an international group of scientists described the concept of screen-time as “simplistic and arguably meaningless”.<sup>23</sup> Focusing on the amount of screen-use was similarly deemed “unhelpful”. What was missing from the evidence base, they argued, was an examination of the “context of screen use, and the content that children encounter when using digital technologies”, both of which may “have a much greater impact than sheer quantity alone”.<sup>24</sup> Duncan Stephenson from the Royal Society for Public Health also emphasised that a more “nuanced picture” was needed and set out the difference between active participation and passive consumption of social media:

If you are using social media and are participating, that can be a positive, but smartphones are geared towards consuming information. There is some evidence that, if you are just consuming information, it impacts on levels of anxiety.<sup>25</sup>

The RCPCH found it “concerning” that “so little research” had examined “the benefits and harms from social media and mobile phone screen use”, given that “it affects almost all young people”.<sup>26</sup>

## Social media

17. Across the written evidence, there was an acknowledgement that social media remains a relatively new phenomenon and, as such, there had been a limited amount of time during which to research and understand its impacts.<sup>27</sup> The Education Policy Institute, for example, described the effects of social media as “a young research field”,<sup>28</sup> with the Royal Society for Public Health, the Science Media Centre and techUK, each noting that, as a result, there was not yet a large, well-established body of research in this area.<sup>29</sup>

## Research design

18. In addition to concerns about the *quantity* of evidence available, witnesses questioned the *quality* of existing research studies that had examined the relationship between social media and the physical and mental health of young people. The majority of problems were linked to the design of the research. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) called for more

22 Dr David Ellis, Lancaster University ([SMH0104](#))

23 “[Screen-time-guidelines-need-to-be-built-on-evidence-not-hype](#)”, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2017

24 “[Screen-time-guidelines-need-to-be-built-on-evidence-not-hype](#)”, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2017

25 [Q3](#)

26 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health ([SMH0156](#))

27 The major social media platforms have been operating for less than 15 years; Facebook was launched in 2004, followed by Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010, and Snapchat in 2011.

28 Education Policy Institute ([SMH0111](#))

29 Science Media Centre ([SMH0145](#)); The Royal Society for Public Health ([SMH0127](#)); techUK ([SMH0142](#))

“carefully designed, multi-disciplinary studies”, noting that “robust answers to concerns” were most likely “to come from research studies that consider social media not in isolation but as part of the complex environment for young people”.<sup>30</sup>

19. The need for research to focus more on the *context* in which social media use occurred was also emphasised by Dr Vicky Goodyear from the University of Birmingham. Dr Goodyear told us that her research showed that “school physical education, parents and other family members and peers played a key role in how much time [young people] spent on social media, but also what they were looking at and why”. She added that “evidence from broader samples of young people in different contexts and different demographics” was needed “to be able to understand what the influence is and define an effective response”.<sup>31</sup>

20. A review undertaken by Unicef’s Office of Research similarly stressed that “children’s online experiences cannot be studied in isolation from their lives in general” and that “more control variables need to be included in quantitative studies to ensure that variables that have known effects on child well-being outcomes are not excluded”. These include factors like age, gender, personality, life situation, as well as their social and cultural environment.<sup>32</sup> At present, there is thus a limited understanding of who is at risk and if some groups are potentially more vulnerable than others when online. This point is examined further in paragraph 54.

### *Correlation or causation?*

21. An additional limitation, linked to research design, concerned the reliance on studies that were “almost always correlational in nature” when examining the effects of social media.<sup>33</sup> Professor Peter Fonagy, National Clinical Adviser on children and young people’s mental health at NHS England, explained that these studies encounter the “chicken and egg problem”; namely that it is difficult to “untangle causation” since it is not possible to determine whether a health effect is the cause or consequence of using social media.<sup>34</sup> As Dr Mark Griffiths, Professor of Behavioural Addiction, from Nottingham Trent University told us:

What we have is a lot of what we call cross-sectional snapshot research, which is not longitudinal [...] There is no good causal evidence. We have lots of correlational evidence. I would add that there have now been over 100 studies of Facebook addiction. Most of them have very poor-quality data. There are very few nationally representative samples. There is almost nothing in terms of longitudinal research.<sup>35</sup>

30 UK Research and Innovation ([SMH0151](#)). UKRI is a non-departmental public body whose purpose is to invest in, and facilitate, research and innovation activities across the United Kingdom.

31 [Q321](#)

32 Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, [How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships and physical activity? An evidence-focused literature review](#). Innocenti Discussion Paper 2017–02, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, p 8

33 Dr David Ellis, Lancaster University ([SMH0104](#))

34 [Q286](#) [Professor Fonagy]

35 [Qq98–99](#)

22. According to CLOSER, “longitudinal research using existing studies” is needed in order “to track prevalence of social media and screen-use over time and uncover the long-term impacts on young people’s health”.<sup>36</sup> Existing, longitudinal studies include the *Millennium Cohort Study* which follows the lives of a sample of over 18,000 babies born in the UK between 2000 and 2001, and *Understanding Society*—the UK Household Longitudinal Study—which covers 40,000 households and includes all ages (there is a special questionnaire for children aged 10–15 years). To move beyond correlational studies, Dr Heather Woods from the University of Glasgow also advocated for the use of wearable devices “to monitor in real time who is doing what and when and what they are looking at, as well as the nature of the social interaction”.<sup>37</sup>

23. Where associations between social media and mental health had been found, some witnesses emphasised that the effects were “small”. According to Amy Orben, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Oxford:

Oftentimes, we do not find any effects. When we do find effects, they are extremely small. When we take the whole picture into account, they become vanishingly small. From the perspective that there has not been any really good quality evidence, I do not see that that link can be said to be present.<sup>38</sup>

Christopher Ferguson, Professor of Psychology at Stetson University, Florida, put the problem slightly differently. He told us that the evidence linking social media to children’s mental health was “very poor” and that much of this was due to a:

failure to communicate the difference between “statistical significance” and “effect size” when discussing research in the social sciences. Put simply, particularly with large samples, it is possible for some studies to achieve “statistical significance” but report effects that are so small or trivial that they would have little actual impact on children in the real world.<sup>39</sup>

### Accessing data

24. Several witnesses emphasised that a lack of access to key data on social media was holding back the development of the evidence base. Professor Andrew Przybylski, Director of Research at the Oxford Internet Institute, explained that while social media companies “collect, store, and profit from extremely rich and sensitive data on our daily lives” and were potentially “indispensable partners for the large-scale transparent scientific investigations that will lead to actionable evidence-based policy insights” such partnerships were identified as the exception rather than the norm.<sup>40</sup> Professor Przybylski described a “fundamental informational asymmetry between industry researchers and academic scientists”,<sup>41</sup> while Dr Max Davie from the RCPCH expressed his frustration at companies like Facebook and Twitter who “have data”, but who were “not sharing it with researchers to look at the actual consequences, the patterns of use and the effect”.<sup>42</sup>

36 CLOSER, the home of longitudinal research ([SMH0133](#)). CLOSER is a collaboration of leading social and biomedical longitudinal studies, the British Library and the UK Data Service, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Medical Research Council (MRC).

37 [Q319](#)

38 [Q95](#) [Amy Orben]

39 Dr Christopher Ferguson ([SMH0154](#))

40 Professor Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Amy Orben ([SMH0140](#))

41 Professor Andrew Przybylski ([SMH0160](#))

42 [Q321](#)

Building on Dr Davie's point, Dr Heather Woods from the University of Glasgow agreed that it was "very difficult to access data [...] the data are there, but enabling us to have access to it would give us a much more constructive answer to your question[s]".<sup>43</sup>

25. There are existing precedents for this type of data sharing with *bona fide* researchers. Dr Mark Griffiths from Nottingham Trent University noted that gambling operators had, voluntarily, made data about their users available to researchers. Dr Griffiths added that "social media companies have that data and, therefore, I think they should be regulated to use that data to help in those cases [where consumptive use leads to a potential problem]".<sup>44</sup> Academics were not the only witnesses to emphasise the need for greater access to social media companies' high-level data on how their platforms are used: Ofcom also raised information and data gathering powers.

26. Regulated industries, such as energy and telecommunications, are required to share data with their relevant regulator about—among other things—customer service and harms. Since social media companies are not currently regulated in the same way as a utility company, they are under no such obligation to share this type of information. While Ofcom has a duty under section 11 of the *Communications Act 2003* "to promote, and to carry out research in, media literacy", which includes "electronic media" and "electronic communications networks", Ofcom does not have the power to require online platforms to share high-level data with the regulator.<sup>45</sup> Such data might include how long users are spending on a particular platform, or the age profile of users. Instead, this and other information is gathered by Ofcom through annual surveys with both adults and children.<sup>46</sup>

27. Yih-Choung Teh, Group Director of Strategy and Research at Ofcom emphasised that "information-gathering powers" were something Ofcom "felt [were] quite important in [its] existing work, whether on broadcasting or telecoms".<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Sharon White, Chief Executive, Ofcom told the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in October 2018 that in order to "put sunshine on this area", it was important to get access to the relevant data and information. Ms White added that, even in those instances where Ofcom did have "statutory information-gathering powers", such as for telecommunications, it had taken "four or five years [...] to get data that [it believed] is the right quality and the right consistency to put out to the public" on issues such as "customer service".<sup>48</sup>

28. Facebook emphasised that it did have "partnerships with academics, NGOs and experts to [...] ensure that young people are kept safe online". The company also recognised the "the need for more research" and explained that they had "committed to addressing [...] and bridging some of the gaps that the research shows".<sup>49</sup>

**29. In order to develop a more valid and reliable understanding of the relationship between the use of social media by young people, and its effects on their health, the information asymmetry between tech companies, the Government, other public bodies and *bona fide* researchers must be addressed swiftly.**

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43 [Q324](#)

44 [Q120](#)

45 *Communications Act 2003*, [section 11](#)

46 See, for example, Ofcom, [Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2017](#), November 2017

47 [Q601](#)

48 Oral evidence taken before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee on 31 October 2018 [HC \(2017–19\) 363](#), Q3785 [Sharon White]

49 Facebook ([SMH0153](#))

30. *Regardless of whether Ofcom's remit is eventually expanded to cover social media platforms, its existing obligation to collect data on the 'media literacy' of both adults and children (as set out in the Communications Act 2003) should be strengthened through establishing statutory information-gathering powers. Such powers should require social media companies with registered UK users to provide the regulator with the high-level data it needs to fulfil its duties with respect to media literacy, with legislation introduced in the next Session.*

31. *While respecting data protection principles, social media companies should make anonymised high-level data available, for research purposes, to bona fide researchers so that a better understanding of social media's effects on users can be established. The Government should consider what legislation needs to be in place to improve access by researchers to this type of data.*

### Improving the evidence base

32. Across the written and oral evidence, both academics and non-governmental organisations highlighted the work of Professor Andrew Przybylski as the “best quality” research currently available on the effects of digital screen-time on the mental wellbeing of young people.<sup>50</sup> Based on data provided by more than 120,000 British adolescents, Professor Przybylski and colleagues found that the relationship between screen-time and wellbeing was “most probably non-linear”<sup>51</sup> and that “moderate engagement in digital activities has little detrimental effect on, and even some positive correlates with, wellbeing”.<sup>52</sup>

33. The researchers suggested that it was “possible that digital technologies, when used in moderation, afford measurable advantages to adolescents” while also reporting that “high levels of engagement may have a measurable, albeit small, negative influence”.<sup>53</sup> For the most part, however, Professor Przybylski agreed with other witnesses that the existing evidence base was “mixed and generally low in empirical quality”.<sup>54</sup> The benefits and risks of social media and screen-use are examined in detail in Chapter 3.

34. The Government acknowledged that “there is a need for further evidence around the impact of social media and screen-use on children's physical and mental well-being”.<sup>55</sup> In October 2017, it published a Green Paper on its *Internet Safety Strategy* and held a public consultation on its proposals. Over 500 individuals and 62 organisations responded. A key theme from the consultation—highlighted in the Government Response to its Green Paper in May 2018—was the need to build a “more robust evidence base”, across a range

50 [Q324](#) [Dr Davie]; Dr Peter Etchells ([SMH0116](#)); Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0155](#)); techUK ([SMH0142](#))

51 Professor Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Amy Orben ([SMH0140](#))

52 Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, “Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis: Quantifying the Relations Between Digital-Screen Use and the Mental Well-Being of Adolescents”, *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28 (2017) pp204–215

53 Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, “Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis: Quantifying the Relations Between Digital-Screen Use and the Mental Well-Being of Adolescents”, *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28 (2017) pp 204–215

54 Professor Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Amy Orben ([SMH0140](#))

55 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0155](#))



of areas, to inform the Government's work. In the context of mental health, for example, the Government stated that the "evidence around the impact of social media and internet use is not yet conclusive".<sup>56</sup>

35. The Government's approach to date, however, has been to commission several evidence reviews, rather than undertake new research studies. DCMS, for example, was reported to be "carrying out a rapid evidence review on trolling", while in 2017, the then Health Secretary, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, asked the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Dame Sally Davies, to "lead a systematic review to examine all relevant international research" on the relationship between social media and the mental health of children and young people.<sup>57</sup> The results of Dame Sally's review had not been published at the time of writing. Additionally, the CMO's 2013 annual report, *Public Mental Health Priorities: Investing in the Evidence* noted that while there were "widespread concerns" about the potential negative effects of electronic media, including "increased physiological arousal, decreased attention, hyperactivity, aggression, antisocial or fearful behaviour, social isolation and excessive use or 'technological addiction'", the evidence for those effects was found to be "sparse and contradictory".<sup>58</sup>

36. The only new, original research being sponsored by the Government was NHS Digital's prevalence survey on children and young people's mental health which, for the first time, covered social media use and experience. This was published in November 2018.<sup>59</sup> Government departments do have research budgets, albeit of varying sizes. Following the *Nurse Review of the UK Research Councils* in 2015, which called on Government departments to have "a more strategic approach in relation to their departmental R&D programmes", the majority of Government departments now issue documents setting out their "Areas of Research Interest" (ARI).<sup>60</sup>

37. DCMS describes its ARI as setting out those "research questions that will help [...] address the more immediate policy challenges facing the department" and "highlights areas where we [the department] encourage new research and discussion".<sup>61</sup> It does not, in other words, attach any funding calls to the research questions posed in the ARI. While the need for further research into "cyberbullying" and "sexting" among UK children is identified, there is nothing specifically in the ARI on the relationship between mental health and social media use, despite this being a "policy challenge" the department is currently facing.<sup>62</sup> When asked in December 2018 whether ARI's risked becoming 'pie in the sky' documents if they did not have funding attached to them, the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Patrick Vallance, gave a measured response. He told us that if it transpired "that turning them [ARIs] into action is difficult because they do not have the funding in the first place, we will need to look at it".<sup>63</sup>

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56 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p 12

57 *ibid*

58 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2013 [Public Mental Health Priorities: Investing in the Evidence](#), Department of Health, September 2014, p101

59 Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [Behaviours, lifestyles and identities](#), NHS Digital, November 2018

60 Paul Nurse, [Ensuring a successful UK research endeavour. A Review of the UK Research Councils](#), November 2015

61 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dcms-areas-of-research-interest>

62 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, [DCMS Areas of Research Interest](#), May 2018

63 Oral evidence take on Tuesday 11 December 2018, [HC \(2017-19\) 1826](#), Q89 [Dr Patrick Vallance]

38. We commend the Government for its efforts to think more closely about online harms and how best to address them, particularly when those harms have serious, detrimental effects on the lives of young people. While the Government has undertaken a wide-ranging consultation process through the publication of its Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, it is disappointing that it has not sought to address the current limitations of the evidence base by actively commissioning new research. As the Government Response to its Green Paper acknowledges, the evidence on the impact of social media on mental health “is not yet conclusive”. That the field requires more robust research should not come as a surprise when the Chief Medical Officer described the evidence base, in 2013, as “sparse and contradictory”.

39. *To ensure that policy is evidence-based, and that the research needs of Government departments are met, departmental ‘Areas of Research Interest’ documents must be accompanied by periodic funding calls. Such calls need to take place ahead of an area becoming the subject of a major policy initiative.*

40. *The existing Areas of Research Interest documents produced by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and by the Department of Health and Social Care, should be expanded to include how to measure and monitor the harms related to social media use. As a matter of urgency, DCMS should also commission research focused on identifying who is at risk of experiencing harm online, and why, and what the long-term consequences of that exposure are on the young person.*

### 3 Risks, harms and benefits of social media and screens

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41. Notwithstanding the points made in Chapter 2 about the current limitations of the evidence base, it is important to stress that the absence of good academic evidence is not—in itself—evidence that social media has no effect on young people.<sup>64</sup> During our inquiry, it has become increasingly clear to us that the potential links between social media, screens and the wellbeing of young people is an area of concern for parents, carers, teachers, and children alike.

42. The majority of the evidence we received focused on the benefits and harms to the health of young people of using social media platforms. This Chapter sets out that evidence. We also highlight some areas, however, that while not directly health-related, may nevertheless have implications for the health and wellbeing of young people.

#### Benefits of using social media

43. Much of the media attention surrounding social media has focused on its negative impacts, particularly on young people. In the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) wellbeing study of 15 year olds, however, 90.5% of boys and 92.3% of girls in the UK agreed with the statement that "it is very useful to have social media networks on the Internet".<sup>65</sup> Throughout our inquiry, we heard about a range of instances where social media was a force for good in the lives of young people.

#### *Friendships and support*

44. First and foremost, social media was seen as a vital way to connect with friends and family, particularly across long distances, but also with friends who attended different schools. Orlaith, one of the young people who gave oral evidence to us, explained how she was friends with "quite a lot of people" who she did "not see face to face frequently", and that social media was "useful to keep in contact" with them.<sup>66</sup> Our survey of over 3,000 pupils aged between 6 and 19 years showed that "following friends' updates" was the main reason 27% of respondents used social media.

45. A joint response from the charities YoungMinds and The Children's Society, based on their own engagement with 1,000 young people aged 11–25 years, reported that social media helped "to foster and sustain relationships", with 62% of respondents agreeing that "social media had a positive impact on their relationship with their friends".<sup>67</sup> They also emphasised that the nature of online communication enabled some young people to be more "open and honest" in their conversations with friends about their "thoughts and feelings".<sup>68</sup> As techUK put it:

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64 Professor Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Amy Orben ([SMH0140](#))

65 OECD, [PISA 2015 Results \(Volume III\): Students' well-being](#), (Paris, 2017)

66 [Q356](#)

67 YoungMinds and The Children's Society ([SMH0146](#))

68 *ibid*

The level of anonymity granted online allows young people the space to express themselves, something they might not be ready or able to do in a face-to-face setting. Forums and online groups create a safe space for young people to speak openly and frankly about their concerns and worries.<sup>69</sup>

This, in turn, can help young people to “bond and to feel less lonely”.<sup>70</sup>

46. In addition to keeping in touch with existing friends, social media was also highlighted as a way to make new friends, particularly with people who had shared interests and experiences. According to the Anti-bullying Alliance, building these types of connections can be particularly important when a young person is “experiencing social difficulties or isolation in their daily lives”.<sup>71</sup>

47. Research conducted with 1,060 teenagers in the USA, and highlighted by Professor Przybylski and colleagues, found that 57% of those aged 13 to 17 had made a new friend online, while 68% said they had “received social support by using [social media] technologies in tough or challenging times”.<sup>72</sup> This latter point came through in work conducted in the UK by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), with “nearly seven in 10 teens” reporting that they had received “support on social media during tough or challenging times”.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Creativity and learning***

48. Girlguiding stressed that “the positive and empowering ways that young people use the internet—such as for communication, creativity and activism—[should] not [be] overlooked”.<sup>74</sup> It went on to quote from one of its advocates, ‘Katie’, who stated that:

the internet gives young people a voice [...] gives us access to political discourse, and has made us one of the most connected and worldly generations of all time—and the value of this cannot be overlooked.<sup>75</sup>

A similar point was raised by a student from The Castle School in Gloucestershire. They explained how social media had created “a place where people can talk to and find out more about people from various different backgrounds”.<sup>76</sup>

49. As well as learning about people from different cultures, sites such as YouTube, with its video tutorials, were highlighted as playing an important role in helping people learn and develop skills.<sup>77</sup> The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) noted

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69 techUK ([SMH0142](#))

70 [Q4](#) [Dustin Hutchinson]

71 Anti-Bullying Alliance ([SMH0102](#))

72 Professor Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Amy Orben ([SMH0140](#)); Amanda Lenhart, Aaron Smith, Monica Anderson, Maeve Duggan and Andrew Perrin, [Teens Technology & Friendships](#), Pew Research Centre, 6 August 2015.

73 The Royal Society for Public Health ([SMH0127](#))

74 Girlguiding ([SMH0059](#))

75 Girlguiding ([SMH0059](#))

76 Student, The Castle School, Thornbury ([SMH0065](#))

77 Revealing Reality ([SMH0144](#)); EMLS RI ([SMH0141](#)); [Q454](#)

the potential for social media to facilitate collaboration on school projects while Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board reflected on how A-Level students were using social media to quickly exchange "revision tips and resources".<sup>78</sup>

50. Sharing creative projects, such as blogs, vlogs and podcasts, was also raised by the Big Lottery Fund as a means to improve the mental health of young people. It cited the example of HeadStart in Blackpool which had developed a series of social media accounts—with the content created by young people—as a means to build "young people's confidence" and help "them to support their peers".<sup>79</sup>

51. The potential for social media to empower young people with disabilities, through promoting "a sense of belonging, identity and community" was similarly emphasised by YoungMinds and The Children's Society. They stressed that "belonging to online communities can support children and young people who are isolated due to disabilities or communication needs".<sup>80</sup> Professor Przybylski also noted that online games (which have a 'social' element) can have "a destigmatising effect especially for people with different forms of disability who might [otherwise] be left out".<sup>81</sup>

### Health advice

52. A further potential benefit of social media was the provision of health advice. As UKRI explained, "social media can enable clinical engagement with hard-to-reach, vulnerable young people, and the recruitment of those groups to research studies, e.g. through Facebook and Twitter".<sup>82</sup> The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) found that young people rated YouTube positively "in terms of providing access to health information, awareness of other people's health and wellbeing issues" and delivering "emotional support". It went on to note that:

Health campaigns can gain credibility through community promotion on social media platforms, and the very personal nature of someone sharing their experiences, especially on platforms as interactive as YouTube, can provide others with practical strategies and coping mechanisms.<sup>83</sup>

53. Barnardo's, however, sounded a word of caution about the reliability and credibility of online health advice. It agreed with a recommendation made by the RSPH, in its *#StatusofMind* report, that NHS England's Information Standard Principles should be applied to health advice published on social media.<sup>84</sup> The Principles were designed to produce good quality, usable health information and their application to health advice on social media was viewed as a valuable means to communicate to children and young people that it was trustworthy.<sup>85</sup>

78 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0155](#)); Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board - E-Safety Working Group ([SMH0087](#))

79 Big Lottery Fund ([SMH0159](#))

80 YoungMinds and The Children's Society ([SMH0146](#))

81 [Q109](#) [Professor Przybylski]

82 UK Research and Innovation ([SMH0151](#))

83 The Royal Society for Public Health ([SMH0127](#))

84 Royal Society for Public Health, [#StatusofMind, Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing](#), p25

85 Barnardo's ([SMH0148](#))

## Risks of social media and screens

### *Risk or harm?*

54. Before examining some of the negative aspects of social media, it is important to emphasise that the terms 'risk' and 'harm' were often used interchangeably in the evidence that we received. Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics, however, has cautioned against conflating the two. According to Professor Livingstone, the identification of an "online risk does not imply that harm will follow, and nor that all users will be equally affected".<sup>86</sup> Risks, in other words, do not inevitably result in harm.

55. Figures from Ofcom show that "16% of 8–11s" and "31% of 12–15s" who go online say they have, at some point, "seen online content that they found worrying or nasty".<sup>87</sup> Previously, Ofcom asked children if they had seen anything in the "past year" that upset them rather than "ever". Our own survey of over 3,000 young people indicated that 54% of respondents had witnessed 'mean comments' on social media. We do not know from Ofcom's survey, or our own, what the consequences were on the child of viewing the worrying or nasty content and whether a particular 'harm' followed.

56. With these points in mind, this section outlines the potential risks we have heard about and details—where we have evidence—the likelihood and magnitude of harm.

### *Physical health and activity*

57. A limited amount of evidence was received on how social media and screen-use might have an impact on the physical health of young people. The literature in this area has tended to assume that negative, physical health effects arise from digital technologies 'displacing' other activities that are deemed more "valuable", such as exercise, socialising face-to-face, or reading a book.<sup>88</sup> Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Dr Vaughan Bell and colleagues noted that "low levels of physical activity associated with the passive use of digital technology have been linked to obesity and diabetes".<sup>89</sup> Dr Max Davie from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health told us that there were "a few ways" in which screen-time might impact upon obesity:

One is that it is sedentary. Secondly, it appears that you increase your intake of high density calorie food when you are engaged in screen time [...] Thirdly, there is exposure to high-density food advertising, which online is not very well regulated.<sup>90</sup>

58. Research to date, however, has focused on television screens, rather than smartphones, computers or tablets. The RCPCH's review of 'screen-time on health' found that while there was "moderately-strong evidence that higher television screen-time [was] associated

86 Sonia Livingstone, "Online risk, harm and vulnerability: reflections on the evidence base for child Internet safety policy". ZER: Journal of Communication Studies, vol 18 (2013). pp. 13–28

87 Ofcom, Children and parents media use and attitudes: annex 1 Children's research annex, January 2019, p123

88 Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, [How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships and physical activity? An evidence-focused literature review](#). Innocenti Discussion Paper 2017–02, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, p11

89 Vaughan Bell, Dorothy V M Bishop, Andrew K Przybylski, "The debate over digital technology and young people" [BMJ 2015](#); 351:h3064

90 [Q310](#)

with greater adiposity”, at all ages, there was “insufficient evidence for an association between adiposity and overall screen-time (i.e. across all types of screens)”.<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere it has been suggested that:

physical inactivity is unlikely to be a direct consequence of adolescents spending too much time on screen-based activities, but rather suggests that already-inactive adolescents have more time to spend in front of screens.<sup>92</sup>

59. Another area that has received attention is the relationship between social media, screen-time and sleep. The young people who gave evidence to our inquiry highlighted how the need to be on social media, and contactable at any time, could disrupt sleep. As Jack, who does not use social media, explained:

I always see people coming to school with red, bloodshot eyes [...] and you know what they have been doing: they had coffee last night or something and have been up all night on Snapchat or whatever.<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, Becca, another young person, remarked:

People always do stay up really late and I could confidently put a message in any of my group chats at 3 o'clock in the morning and someone would reply.<sup>94</sup>

One in five respondents to the Royal Society for Public Health's survey reported that they “wake up during the night to check messages on social media”. The RSPH stated that this had a negative impact on young people's health and well-being since a “lack of sleep leaves young people three times more likely to feel constantly tired at school than their classmates who don't use social media during the night”.<sup>95</sup> A recent study conducted in the USA reported that those children who undertook at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily, had between 9 and 11 hours sleep per night, and spent two hours or less using screens ‘recreationally’ had “superior global cognition”.<sup>96</sup> Based on their findings, the researchers recommended that parents and paediatricians should encourage limiting recreational screen-time and prioritising healthy sleep routines throughout childhood and adolescence.<sup>97</sup>

60. Once again, however, the academic evidence base has been called into question. The US study, for example, did not distinguish between types of screen, nor what the screen was being used for or the content being viewed. The RCPCH found that there was “weak evidence that screen-time is associated with poor sleep outcomes including delay

91 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (SMH0156); See also Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (SMH0156). See also Neza Stiglic and Russell M Viner “Effects of screentime on the health and well-being of children and adolescents: a systematic review of reviews” BMJ Open (2019) doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023191

92 Daniel Kardefelt-Winther. [How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships and physical activity? An evidence-focused literature review.](#) Innocenti Discussion Paper 2017-02, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, p20

93 Q421 [Jack]

94 Q421 [Becca]

95 The Royal Society for Public Health (SMH0127)

96 Jeremy J Walsh, Joel D Barnes, Jameason D Cameron et al, “Associations between 24 hour movement behaviours and global cognition in US children: a cross-sectional observational study”, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, vol 2 (2018), pp 783–791

97 ibid

in sleep onset, reduced total sleep time and daytime tiredness".<sup>98</sup> Professor Przybylski and colleagues, meanwhile, reported that the effects of screen-time on sleep outcomes were "complex" and potentially "bi-directional" since:

results from longitudinal studies [...] suggest that individuals who are unable to sleep are more motivated to use digital screens to manage their sleep problems, instead of a simple displacement effect where technology use directly decreases sleep time.<sup>99</sup>

61. There is some emerging evidence that the devices used to access social media and the Internet may have an effect on the body and its physical development. Anna Clark from Cardinus Risk Management highlighted that there was "research looking at backs, spines and posture" and that while the "biological make-up" of children can mean that they "tend not to get repetitive strain as often" as adults, there were ongoing studies examining "children texting with one thumb and texting with two thumbs and how it is impacting on the c-spine".<sup>100</sup>

62. Witnesses also drew attention to the potential effects of the 'blue light' emitted from smartphone and tablet screens on sleep. Dr Heather Woods, Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Glasgow, noted that there was "evidence to show that the blue light emitted from devices has an effect on a chemical in the brain called melatonin. Melatonin facilitates the onset of sleep and blue light suppresses that".<sup>101</sup> Dr Woods added, however, that "you would need to be on a screen for a very long time and have it very close to your face for it to have an effect".<sup>102</sup>

### *Electromagnetic fields*

63. We received some evidence that considered the health effects of non-ionising radiation, notably from the use of wi-fi on devices such as smartphones and tablets.<sup>103</sup> We note that Public Health England's guidance on this matter has been informed by a review of the scientific evidence undertaken by the Independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation and published in 2012.<sup>104</sup> The review concluded that "the evidence considered overall has not demonstrated any adverse health effects of RF [radiofrequency] field exposure below internationally accepted guideline levels". It added that there were "possible effects on EEG [brain activity] patterns, but these have not been conclusively established and it is unclear whether such effects would have any health consequences".<sup>105</sup>

64. *The report of the Independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation on the 'Health effects from Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields' is now nearly seven years*

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98 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health ([SMH0156](#))

99 Professor Andrew Przybylski, Netta Weinstein and Amy Orben ([SMH0140](#))

100 [Q306](#)

101 [Q319](#)

102 *ibid*

103 Angela Christie ([SMH0168](#)); Electrosensitivity UK ([SMH0158](#)); Dr Annelie Fitzgerald ([SMH0076](#)); Dave Ashton ([SMH0126](#)); Miss Debra Lynne Fry ([SMH0092](#)); Lynne Wycherley ([SMH0106](#))

104 Public Health England, [Wi-fi radio waves and health guidance](#), 1 November 2013; Health effects from Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields, Report of the independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation, April 2012

105 Health effects from Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields, Report of the independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation, April 2012, p4



*old. In its Response to our Report, we ask the Government to outline what assessment it has made of the quantity and quality of the research on this topic, published since 2012, and to explain whether another evidence review is now warranted.*

### Screen-time guidelines?

65. According to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) “no authoritative body has issued guidance on screen-time and media use for children in the UK”.<sup>106</sup> In the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) had previously recommended no screen-time for children younger than two years old and no more than two hours per day for older children (known as the 2 x 2 rule). In 2016, the AAP revised its guidance; for 2–5 year olds, screen-time should be less than one hour per day, with parents watching high-quality programming alongside their child to interpret and discuss what they are viewing. For those six years and over, parents should limit screen-time, in discussion/agreement with their children, to ensure that it does not displace other important activities such as sleeping and playing.<sup>107</sup>

66. Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology at the London School of Economics, noted that it was “hard to find the evidence in the report for the specific new recommendation of a one-hour limit for 2–5 year olds” and that “just one study” was cited on the correlation between screen-time and body mass index.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the RCPCH stated that there was generally “no strong evidence for a particular threshold or cut-point in terms of a recommended number of hours of screen-time in relation to adiposity”.<sup>109</sup>

67. Several witnesses, however, stressed that screen-time guidance was needed. Sarah Hannafin from the National Association of Head Teachers emphasised that some “evidence-based central guidance on screen time would be fantastic, not just for schools but for families, communities and for all of us”.<sup>110</sup> Will Gardner from the UK Safer Internet Centre also indicated that children themselves would appreciate guidance. Reflecting on a recent visit to a primary school, he explained how the children “wanted to know, ‘How do we recognise the signs of over-use of technology, and what strategies can we use to deal with those when they arise?’”.<sup>111</sup>

68. Some tech companies are now trying to make it easier for users to monitor their screen-time. Apple’s newest operating system, iOS 12, contains a feature called ‘screen time’ which will send daily or weekly activity reports, telling you how long has been spent on particular apps, as well as how frequently a user is picking the device up. It also includes ‘Downtime’; a feature that enables users to set a daily schedule for when they do not want to use the device. Once activated, the feature restricts device usage to phone calls and any apps that the user has specifically exempted from Downtime.

69. Early in 2019, the RCPCH published guidance to help parents manage their children’s screen-time, though it stopped short of recommending the maximum number of hours

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106 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health ([SMH0156](#))

107 [American Academy of Pediatrics Announces New Recommendations for Children’s Media Use](#), AAP News Room, 21 October 2016

108 Sonia Livingstone, [New ‘screen time’ rules from the American Academy of Pediatrics](#), LSE Media Policy Project Blog, 24 October 2016

109 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health ([SMH0156](#))

110 [Q534](#)

111 [Q534](#)

that should be spent in front of a screen. The guidance emphasised that “evidence is weak for a threshold to guide children and parents to the appropriate level of screen time” and did not “recommend a cut-off for children’s screen time overall”.<sup>112</sup> Instead, the RCPCH posed four questions aimed to help families examine, and guide, their screen time:

- “Is screen time in your household controlled?
- Does screen use interfere with what your family want to do?
- Does screen use interfere with sleep?
- Are you able to control snacking during screen time?”<sup>113</sup>

70. Guidance is also expected shortly from the Chief Medical Officer for England (CMO) Professor Dame Sally Davies. As noted in paragraph 35, the CMO is leading a “systematic review to examine all relevant international research” on the relationship between social media and the mental health of children and young people. Dame Sally has also been asked by the Health and Social Care Secretary of State, Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, to “draw up guidance to help parents ensure children don’t use social media in a way that harms their mental health”.<sup>114</sup> This will include guidance on “what age a child should be allowed to sign up to a social media account, and how often they should have access”.<sup>115</sup>

**71. We welcome Dame Sally Davies’ work in this important area and look forward to reading the results of her review, and subsequent guidance, in due course. We note that many parents find it extremely challenging to moderate social media usage, especially where older children are involved. It would be helpful if this was recognised by those giving guidance to parents.**

### ***Mental health and wellbeing***

72. In 2015, the Office for National Statistics reported that, based on data from 2011 and 2012, children who spent more than three hours on “social websites” on a normal school night were “more than twice as likely to show symptoms of mental ill-health” compared to those who spent no time, or less than three hours, on such websites.<sup>116</sup> What is unclear from the ONS statistics is the direction of the relationship; it could be, for example, that someone already experiencing a mental health problem is more likely to use social media.

73. Some of the most recent data on this issue comes from NHS Digital’s survey of the *Mental health of children and young people in England*, published in November 2018. It found that 11 to 19 years olds with a “mental disorder” were more likely to use social media every day (87.3%) than those without a disorder (77%) and were also more likely to be on social media for longer.<sup>117</sup> Rates of daily social media usage also varied by type of disorder; 90.4% of those with emotional disorders used social media daily, while 68.0%

112 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, *The health impacts of screen time - a guide for clinicians and parents*, Health Policy Team, January 2019

113 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, *The health impacts of screen time - a guide for clinicians and parents*, Health Policy Team, January 2019

114 [News Story: Matt Hancock warns of dangers of social media on children’s mental health](#), gov.uk, 2 October 2018

115 [News Story: Matt Hancock warns of dangers of social media on children’s mental health](#), gov.uk, 2 October 2018

116 Office for National Statistics, [More children using social media report mental ill-health symptoms](#), 20 October 2015

117 NHS Digital, [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2017, Summary of Key Findings](#), November 2018

of those with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder, did so.<sup>118</sup> Again, these statistics do not provide the direction of the relationship; they are indicators of an association.

74. In the context of screen-time, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health reported that there was “moderately-strong evidence for an association between screen-time and depressive symptoms” but that overall, the evidence for an association of screen-time with “behaviour problems, anxiety, hyperactivity and inattention, poor self-esteem and poor wellbeing [was] weak”.<sup>119</sup> As highlighted in Chapter 2, the most robust research to date indicates that “moderate engagement in digital activities has little detrimental effect on, and even some positive correlates with, well-being”.<sup>120</sup>

75. The evidence we received on the risks that social media and screens may present to a young person's mental health, however was wide-ranging and not confined to specific, diagnosed mental health conditions: Indeed much of it was focused on mental and emotional wellbeing more generally. Internet Matters, an organisation formed by the major UK Internet service providers, broke down the potential risks into the ‘three C’s’:

- “Content—what are children looking at and whether they are accessing inappropriate content.
- Contact—who are they speaking to—strangers and people presenting with false identities.
- Conduct—how they present themselves and engage with others, and the prevalence of online bullying”.<sup>121</sup>

76. A 2017 literature review conducted by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) Evidence Group presented the three C's in the following table:

	<b>Content Child as receiver (of mass productions)</b>	<b>Contact Child as participant (adult-initiated activity)</b>	<b>Conduct Child as actor (perpetrator/victim)</b>
Aggressive	Violent/gory content	Harassment stalking	Bullying, hostile peer activity
Sexual	Pornographic content	‘Grooming’, sexual abuse on meeting strangers	Sexual harassment, ‘sexting’
Values	Racist/hateful content	Ideological persuasion	Potentially harmful user-generated content
Commercial	Advertising, embedded marketing	Personal data exploitation	Gambling, copyright infringement

Source: UK Council for Child Internet Safety, [Children's online activities, risks and safety. A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group](#), October 2017, p 26

118 NHS Digital, [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2017, Behaviours, lifestyles and identities](#), November 2018, p12

119 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health ([SMH0156](#))

120 Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, “Large-Scale Test of the Goldilocks Hypothesis: Quantifying the Relations Between Digital-Screen Use and the Mental Well-Being of Adolescents”, *Psychological Science*, Vol. 28 (2017) pp 204–215

121 Internet Matters ([SMH0080](#))

## Content

### Pornography

77. According to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), “online pornography is one click away for most UK children”.<sup>122</sup> The BBFC’s written evidence highlighted UKCCIS research into the impact of pornography on children. It found that:

- “Exposure to pornography has adverse effects on children and young people’s sexual beliefs.
- There is evidence that extreme porn may be associated with sexually deviant/coercive behaviour.
- Pornography is the top content-related concern for children.”<sup>123</sup>

On the latter point, UKCCIS referenced the 2010 EU Kids Online survey of 10,000 children aged 9–16 years which found that pornography “topped the list of online content-related concerns”.<sup>124</sup>

78. Written evidence from Girlguiding indicates some of the harms that may arise from these experiences. Based on its 2015 survey with over 1,600 girls and young women aged 7 to 21 years, Girlguiding reported that:

- “70% of girls aged 13 to 21 thought the rise in online pornography contributes to women being treated less fairly”.
- Of girls aged 17 to 21:
- “80% thought it encourages society to view women as sex objects;
- 78% felt it encourages gender stereotyping of girls/women and boys/men;
- 71% thought it normalises aggressive or violent behaviour towards women;
- 71% thought it gives confusing messages about sexual consent;
- 66% thought it puts pressure on girls to have sex before they are ready;
- 65% thought it increases hateful language used about/to women;
- 53% thought it coerced girls into sex acts because boys are copying what they see in pornography”.<sup>125</sup>

79. Children are more likely to report unintentionally ‘stumbling across’, rather than intentionally viewing, pornography. The UK Safer Internet Centre reported findings from a 2016 study by the NSPCC, the Children’s Commissioner for England and Middlesex

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122 British Board of Film Classification ([SMH0162](#))

123 *ibid*

124 UK Council for Child Internet Safety, [Children’s online activities, risks and safety. A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group](#), October 2017, p 45

125 Girlguiding ([SMH0059](#))

University. The study found that “48% of 11–16 year olds had seen online pornography”; and of those, 46% “reported viewing online pornography for the first time because it ‘just popped up’”.<sup>126</sup>

### Hate speech

80. “Online hate” and “hate speech” was another type of upsetting content highlighted in our evidence. The UK Safer Internet Centre cited its 2016 report, based on a survey with 1,500 13–18 year olds, in which 82% said they had witnessed ‘online hate’—that they had “seen or heard offensive, mean or threatening behaviour targeted at or about someone based on their race, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation or transgender identity”. Furthermore, almost a quarter (24%) said they had been the target of online hate in the last year because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender or transgender identity”.<sup>127</sup> Facebook told us that in the first quarter of 2018, it had removed “2.5 million pieces of hate speech” from its platform.<sup>128</sup> Hate speech, and particularly the German Government’s approach to tackling the problem, is discussed further in Chapter 5.

### Violence

81. Closely linked to ‘online hate’ is violent content and particularly the incitement of violence via social media. Speaking to *The Times* in March 2018, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, stated that there was “definitely something about the impact of social media in terms of people being able to go from slightly angry with each other to ‘fight’ very quickly”, adding that social media “revs people up”.<sup>129</sup> Martin Hewitt, Assistant Commissioner at the Metropolitan Police, went into more detail in oral evidence. He told us that:

at one end it [social media] glamorises and normalises gang behaviour, violent behaviour and the behaviours and criminality that are associated with gangs. At the other end of the spectrum, in some cases the use of social media as some form of taunt or challenge has led directly to very serious criminality, up to and including murders.<sup>130</sup>

He went on to explain that:

What previously would have been a conflict between one gang and another that would have found its way through word of mouth [...] can now very quickly become amplified and spread as it moves across the various platforms, because things jump from platform to platform.<sup>131</sup>

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126 UK Safer Internet Centre (SMH0110). See also Elena Martellozzo, Andy Monaghan, Joanna R Adler, Julia Davidson, Rodolfo Leyva and Miranda AH Horvath, [I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it, A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people](#), revised May 2017. In addition 22% reported having online pornography shown to them by someone else without asking for/expecting it, and a further 22% searched for it on their own.

127 UK Safer Internet Centre (SMH0110)

128 Facebook (SMH0153)

129 [Web giants 'drive violence'](#), *The Times*, 31 March 2018

130 Q161

131 ibid

82. The Assistant Commissioner's latter point, that social media works to "amplify" existing violent behaviour and trends, was echoed by Dr Keir Irwin-Rogers, a Lecturer in Criminology at The Open University. Dr Irwin-Rogers remarked that:

the perennial problem that underpins lots of violence across societies and throughout history [is that] when an individual or a group disrespects or threatens another individual or group, it leads to violence. Social media does not fundamentally alter the nature of that; it just enhances the problem.<sup>132</sup>

Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board indicated that the amplification of violence via social media was apparent outside of 'gang-related' crime. It gave the example of "parents wading in on social media with threats of violence or confrontation to 'protect' their own child".<sup>133</sup>

83. A slightly different perspective was provided by Sheldon Thomas, a former gang member and now a consultant on gangs and youth violence for Gangsline. He described how "tit for tat" gang-related activity was "definitely played out on YouTube" but that the site was also used:

first, to recruit young people, secondly, to get girls, and, thirdly, to promote wealth. Drug gang members promote their wealth by showing off in their videos the diamonds, the stuff, the crystal, the drinks and the alcohol. Another thing they have been doing is promoting alcohol indirectly and subliminally by using YouTube videos.<sup>134</sup>

### Advertising

84. Mr Thomas was not the only witness to raise concerns about advertising via social media, albeit in a different context to gang-violence. Both young people and parents highlighted their experiences of children being exposed to, and targeted by, unsuitable advertisements. Orlaith, a young person, told us that a big issue for her was the "advertising on websites of other websites that are inappropriate",<sup>135</sup> while Becca, another young person, was concerned about "demeaning images towards women, which often pop up on websites and things, and the impact that that can have on what is normal to young people".<sup>136</sup> One parent outlined how, after his child had logged into an "anime cartoon channel", he was receiving "pop ups and advertising" that "directed him to [unsuitable] content", including pornography.<sup>137</sup>

85. Social media has also changed the nature and delivery of advertising. The Institute of Alcohol Studies noted that marketing to children and young people was often achieved via 'user-generated' content and social media influencers, rather than by the brand or organisation making a direct pitch. It suggested that the "nature and reach of social media might mean that this secondary sharing of user-generated content is more potent than the original campaign from the brand".<sup>138</sup> It added, however, that there was "little scope

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132 [Q164](#)

133 Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board - E-Safety Working Group ([SMH0087](#))

134 [Q166](#)

135 [Q391](#)

136 [Q392](#)

137 David Jones ([SMH0169](#))

138 Institute of Alcohol Studies ([SMH0164](#)). See also ASH and UKCTAS ([SMH0132](#)).

within the current self-regulatory system to address” the harms that may arise from user-generated content that is intended to advertise products like alcohol and tobacco to children.<sup>139</sup>

### *Fake news and ‘deep fakes’*

86. There was an awareness among the young people we heard from of ‘fake news’, though less so of ‘deep fake’ imagery and videos. The latter is a computer-generated replica of a person—be it a picture or video—usually doing or saying something that they have never, in real life, said or done. Though there is no agreed definition of ‘fake news’, Jack, a young person who gave evidence to our inquiry, likened it to the spread of “crazy stories” via social media, adding that it was:

so easy to write anything and then it is instantly [...] validated by the fact that someone else will read it and someone else will like it, and then, to you, that means it is real, so you are creating something or basically you think something is real because other people think it is real.<sup>140</sup>

For Jack, this meant that he was “sceptical about everything [he] reads”, while Becca, another young person who spoke to us, thought that young people were “much more aware now” of fake news.<sup>141</sup>

87. Despite being alert to the presence of fake news, we received a limited amount of evidence on its potential risks and harms to children. In its *Disinformation and ‘fake news’* inquiry, however, the DCMS Committee has examined, in detail, the impact both fake news and deep fakes may have on democracy, values and voting behaviour, and on the conduct of elections. For this reason, we have not explored the issue in depth. We welcome, however, the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries’ assurances that the need to warn users of potentially fake content is “very much in the ballpark” of what the Government is currently looking at including in its forthcoming White Paper.<sup>142</sup>

## **Contact**

### *Grooming, child abuse and child sexual exploitation*

88. The potential for grooming,<sup>143</sup> child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation to occur online, via social media, was referenced in the evidence we received. The NSPCC used the broader term “online abuse”, which it defined as

abuse that is facilitated using internet-connected technology [...] including, but not limited to: harassment; stalking; threatening behaviour; child

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139 *ibid*

140 [Qq372–373](#)

141 [Qq380–381](#)

142 [Q658](#)

143 ‘Grooming’ has been defined as a process of socialisation through which an adult engages with and manipulates a child or young person for the purpose of online sexual abuse.

sexual abuse material; inciting a child to sexual activity; sexual exploitation; grooming; sexual communication with a child; and, causing a child to view images or watch videos of a sexual act.<sup>144</sup>

89. Children and young people who have experienced this type of abuse online have reported a range of negative effects. The NSPCC noted that effects include “flashbacks; depression; self-harm; anxiety; and self-blame”.<sup>145</sup> A 2017 literature review conducted by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) Evidence Group warned, however, that there was “limited knowledge about the nature of sexual crimes against children mediated through information and communication technologies (ICT), those who perpetrate them, and the impact of these crimes on children”.<sup>146</sup> While similarly recognising that there was limited data on the prevalence of grooming, the UK Safer Internet Centre did draw attention to a 2016 survey of young adults aged between 12 and 16 years. The survey reported that “53% (n=181) of respondents in the UK had been sexually solicited online”.<sup>147</sup>

90. More recently, the NSPCC found, through Freedom of Information requests, that there were over 3,000 police-recorded offences for sexual communication with a child in England and Wales in 2017/18—2,813 in England and 274 in Wales—and a further 82 in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, there were 462 records of the equivalent offence of communicating indecently with a child in 2016/17.<sup>148</sup> The NSPCC’s own research has shown that “more than one in seven children aged 11–18 (15%) have been asked to send sexual messages or images of themselves, while one in ten girls aged 13 or under had received a request”.<sup>149</sup>

91. The statistics on recorded offences, however, may only tell a limited part of the story. The UKCCIS literature review noted that “online grooming is rarely disclosed by the victims”, possibly because they “may be in fear of the perpetrator” or because they “may feel that they are in a relationship with the perpetrator”.<sup>150</sup> The National Crime Agency (NCA) also stressed that the:

threat picture is impeded by a lack of reporting from vulnerable groups, including children who are disabled, those questioning their sexual identity and from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.<sup>151</sup>

92. Another measure to consider is referrals to other services. Emily Cherry from Barnardo’s was clear that one of the trends the charity is beginning to see is:

children being groomed by criminal gangs, for both sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation [...] When we looked at it in our “Digital dangers” report, our practitioners told us that, in a three-year period, the percentage

144 NSPCC, [How safe are our children? The most comprehensive overview of child protection in the UK](#), September 2018, p 85

145 NSPCC, [How safe are our children? The most comprehensive overview of child protection in the UK](#), September 2018, p 8

146 UK Council for Child Internet Safety, [Children’s online activities, risks and safety. A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group](#), October 2017, p47

147 UK Safer Internet Centre (SMH0110)

148 NSPCC, [How safe are our children? The most comprehensive overview of child protection in the UK](#), September 2018, p 7–8

149 ibid

150 UK Council for Child Internet Safety, [Children’s online activities, risks and safety. A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group](#), October 2017, p 47

151 National Crime Agency, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#), 2018, p27



of referrals for child sexual abuse [CSA] with an *internet aspect* had gone from 20% of young people in CSA services to 75% of the referrals coming through the doors (our emphasis).<sup>152</sup>

The NCA also reported that the referrals it had received from the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children had “increased by 700% over the last four years [2014–18]”. The NCA expected this upward trend to continue “as the volume of internet data continues to grow”.<sup>153</sup> The Home Secretary has stated that “up to 80,000 people” in the UK present “some kind of sexual threat to children online”.<sup>154</sup>

93. Guardian Saints, a charity focused on the online safety of children in care, noted that “looked after children” were “particularly vulnerable”, adding that “inappropriate contact by predatory adults is not uncommon”, with contact “often facilitated by the use of social media”.<sup>155</sup> In its written evidence, Barnardo’s stressed that referrals were not solely from groups already deemed ‘at risk’:

Victims of online abuse and exploitation accessing [...] services ‘do not necessarily have a stereotypical history of sexual abuse and/or exploitation. Increasingly, referrals are for children who come from stable, safe and supportive family environments’, there is no ‘typical victim’.<sup>156</sup>

94. The NSPCC told us how experiences of technology-facilitated abuse can have a “devastating and long-lasting impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing”, with children becoming “more likely to suffer from a range of long-term mental health conditions, including [...] anxiety, depression, self-harm, conduct disorders, and a higher risk of suicide”.<sup>157</sup> Once again, however, witnesses indicated that social media was not the cause of child abuse and sexual exploitation, but rather that it enabled “a large degree of amplification and facilitation”.<sup>158</sup>

95. As Will Gardner from the UK Safer Internet Centre explained, in the context of grooming via social media, “the groomer might have access to more young people than they would otherwise”.<sup>159</sup> The NSPCC provided more detail and emphasised how:

social networking and messaging apps allow offenders to immerse themselves into the most intimate aspects of children’s lives. Messages can be exchanged at night, out of sight of parents and carers, which can build feelings of secrecy and intimacy in increasingly exploitative and abusive relationships.<sup>160</sup>

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152 [Qq215–217](#)

153 National Crime Agency, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#), 2018, p27

154 [Tackling child sexual exploitation online](#), News Story, Gov.uk, 3 September 2018

155 Guardian Saints CIC ([SMH0022](#))

156 Barnardo’s ([SMH0134](#))

157 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#))

158 [Q529](#)

159 *ibid*

160 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#))

### 'Self-generated' images and 'sexting'

96. Claire Lilley from Google UK noted that a “lot of child sexual abuse is generated by young people themselves, taking what they call sexting images”.<sup>161</sup> While there is no clear definition of ‘sexting’ it is generally considered to be “sending or posting sexually suggestive images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via mobiles or over the Internet”.<sup>162</sup>

97. A 2016 study of 11–16 year olds, jointly conducted by the NSPCC, the Children’s Commissioner for England and Middlesex University, found that 13% of boys and girls had taken a topless picture of themselves and 3% had taken fully naked pictures. Of those who had taken sexual images, 55% had shared them with others while 31% had also shared the image with someone that they did not know.<sup>163</sup> Under the *Protection of Children Act 1978* (England and Wales) as amended by the *Sexual Offences Act 2003* (England and Wales) it is an offence to possess, distribute, show and make indecent images of children, with the *Sexual Offences Act 2003* defining a child, for the purposes of indecent images, as anyone under the age of 18.<sup>164</sup>

98. The non-consensual forwarding of such images was highlighted as causing the greatest distress. As the NSPCC put it, self-generated imagery can open the door for:

exploitation and blackmail (including to prevent disclosure). The impact of losing control over an image can be devastating, particularly when it is shared among peers’ social networks, sent to family members, or shared much more widely.<sup>165</sup>

It can also lead to humiliation and reputational damage both in and outside of school. Becca told us how she knew:

so many people who have had so many problems with this [sexting] and images being shared round the whole school, people going, “Oh, has anyone seen this?” It’s horrible, but there is so much pressure because people just want to feel like they are grown up and that people appreciate them.<sup>166</sup>

Students at Fullhurst College in Leicester thought that the pressure of ‘sexting’ became a bigger problem as you got older and that it was not discussed as part of online safety.<sup>167</sup>

99. In addition to sharing images between peers, adults grooming children may also coerce those children into taking and sharing indecent images of themselves. A report by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), published in May 2018, stated that, over the previous six months, its data had shown that:

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161 [Q505](#)

162 UKCCIS, [Sexting in schools and colleges: Responding to incidents and safeguarding young people](#)

163 Elena Martellozzo, Andy Monaghan, Joanna R Adler, Julia Davidson, Rodolfo Leyva and Miranda AH Horvath, [I wasn’t sure it was normal to watch it, A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people](#), revised May 2017, p53

164 UKCCIS, [Sexting in schools and colleges: Responding to incidents and safeguarding young people](#), August 2016

165 NSPCC, [How safe are our children? The most comprehensive overview of child protection in the UK](#), September 2018, p6

166 [Q431](#)

167 Liz Kendall MP ([SMH0179](#))

a little over a third (38%) of reports to the [IWF] on child sexual abuse online were now what we term 'self-produced'. This term refers to a scenario where the child is alone, or with other children and is persuaded or 'groomed' into taking images or videos of child sexual abuse and then share them, often with someone they trust.<sup>168</sup>

100. Susie Hargreaves from the IWF, developed this point further. She told us that, in the "13-plus age range", the IWF were:

seeing an increase in the amount of abuse where young people are self-generating images, and those are being shared in many ways. Normally, they are being coerced in some way to do that or the images are being shared without their permission. Those tend to be lower-level images, but the young people themselves are actively participating in them, even if it is under coercion.<sup>169</sup>

101. Speaking to *The Daily Telegraph*, the NCA's Director of Vulnerabilities, Rob Jones, explained that technology firms had the technology to be more proactive to prevent images reaching the web in the first place, to stop crime happening and to hunt down paedophiles grooming children but that their response to date had been "too reactive".<sup>170</sup> When asked if the NCA's view was unfair, Claire Lilley from Google UK replied that she thought it was, noting that:

At Google, we run our own technology to identify child sexual abuse images. We do that proactively. We have developed technology to identify child sexual abuse video content, and we make that freely available. In the last month, we have developed and released for use by industry players and NGOs content to identify new child sexual abuse material.<sup>171</sup>

### Live streaming

102. The live streaming of abuse was another major problem raised by the IWF, the Children's Commissioner for England and Barnardo's. Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner, described figures produced by the NSPCC on the scale of the problem as "horrific":

One in 10 children involved in video streaming have been asked to take off their clothes. It is a lower amount for live streaming, but that is a dreadfully high figure and it is growing.<sup>172</sup>

Emily Cherry from Barnardo's highlighted its report on live streaming which found that over 50% of children aged 10 to 15 years were using live streaming apps and that:

168 Internet Watch Foundation, [Press release - IWF research on child sex abuse live-streaming reveals 98% of victims are under 13](#), 15 May 2018

169 [Q218](#)

170 Tech giants 'could stop child porn if they wanted to', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 October 2018

171 [Q504](#)

172 [Q565](#)

over half of children regretted posting content after posting it. They are putting out live-streaming content and then experiencing negative comments, trolling and, potentially, adults grooming them.<sup>173</sup>

103. Live streaming was described by the NCA as a growing threat with “children’s own use of self-broadcast live-streaming apps now being exploited by offenders”.<sup>174</sup> According to Susie Hargreaves from the IWF, there is not, at the moment:

the technology to detect when that is happening in a live moment. What happens for us is that it may be recorded and then come on to sexual abuse websites. That content will reappear [...] Catching it in the moment is still very much a law enforcement issue.<sup>175</sup>

104. During our inquiry, *The Times* reported that it had “discovered more than 100 grooming cases in which young people who broadcast online” via YouTube, were “manipulated into inappropriate behaviour by strangers”. It added that children were promised “thousands of extra subscribers to their channels” if they complied and emphasised that the cases involved live streaming, with streams searched “using keywords” and children then communicated with groomers in the “comments section”.<sup>176</sup>

105. Throughout autumn and winter 2018, the Government made several announcements aimed at improving the response to, and ultimately stopping, child sexual exploitation online. In a speech at the NSPCC’s headquarters in September 2018, the Home Secretary, Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, explained that he wanted “a more effective partnership between technology companies, law enforcement, the charity sector and government so that we can be confident in our response to these types of crimes”. The Home Secretary added that he was “pushing for expectations about how companies deal with online child sexual exploitation to be included in the Code of Practice that we are already asking technology companies to abide by”.<sup>177</sup>

106. In particular, he expected technology companies to:

- “block child sexual abuse material as soon as companies detect it being uploaded;
- stop child grooming taking place on their platforms;
- work with government and law enforcement to shut down live-streamed child abuse;
- to be much more forward leaning in helping law enforcement agencies to deal with these types of crimes;
- show a greater level of openness and transparency and a willingness to share best practice and technology between companies.”

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173 [Q234](#)

174 National Crime Agency, [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#), 2018, p26

175 [Qq235–236](#)

176 Paedophiles grooming children live on YouTube, *The Times*, Monday 10 December 2018, pages 1 and 4

177 [Keeping our children safe](#), Speech given by Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, Speech at NSPCC headquarters, London, 3 September 2018

He also announced a “£250,000 innovation call” for organisations to bid for funding to assist them in developing innovative solutions to disrupt live streaming of abuse.<sup>178</sup>

107. Commenting on the Government’s work to date with technology companies, the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, Margot James MP, explained that:

the Home Office has had considerable success in working with technology companies to eradicate terrorist content online. To a lesser but still significant extent, progress has also been made on a voluntary basis with the reduction in child abuse images and child sexual exploitation [...] but this is a Home Office area [...] and it is clear that it does not feel that anything like enough is being done through voluntary measures.<sup>179</sup>

108. **Great strides have recently been made to address and remove content that incites terrorist activities. The same effort and determination must now be applied to curb the proliferation online of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse and exploitation of children, as a matter of urgency. The Home Secretary stated that he expects a more effective partnership between technology companies, law enforcement agencies, the charity sector and the Government to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation online. Simply ‘expecting’ more, however, is an insufficient approach to tackle the grievous nature of the problem. It is worrying that we still do not have a good understanding of the scale of online child sexual exploitation.**

109. *The Government must proactively lead the way in ensuring that an effective partnership is in place across civil society, technology companies, law enforcement, and non-governmental organisations aimed at ending child sexual exploitation (CSE) and abuse online. The Home Office should use its research budget to commission a large-scale study that establishes the scale and prevalence of CSE which should then be updated annually. Once this has been published, we recommend that the Government set itself an ambitious target to halve reported online CSE in two years and all but eliminate it in four years. That ambition should be matched with the necessary resources, raised by the digital services tax, to make it a reality and should occur in addition to—and not instead of—establishing a legal ‘duty of care’ by social media companies towards its users who are under 18. Where companies are not voluntarily working with the Government and law enforcement agencies to prevent CSE, the Government should consider whether legal action is necessary.*

## Conduct

### Cyberbullying

110. Much of the evidence we received about the harms associated with social media related to cyberbullying. The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum described cyberbullying as

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178 [News story - Tackling child sexual exploitation online](#), gov.uk, 3 September 2018. The call was led by the Joint Security and Resilience Centre in partnership with Innovate UK, under the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) and closed on 18 November 2018

179 [Q637](#)

bullying that takes place through electronic technologies such as mobile or smart phones, smart phone apps, social network websites and gaming consoles.<sup>180</sup> Barnardo's Northern Ireland outlined several different types of cyberbullying behaviour including;

- Name-calling or being mean online;
- Posting embarrassing photos or videos of others without their permission;
- Digitally manipulating pictures to create false impressions;
- Posting pointed statuses;
- 'Sexting' requests for pictures or videos;
- Cut and pasting pictures or status of others into group chats; and
- Deleting someone from a group chat.<sup>181</sup>

In addition, the Education Policy Institute drew attention to behaviours such as:

- Creating a website with mocking or critical content;
- Creating a fake profile to damage another's reputation; and
- Cyberstalking: continuously harassing and denigration including threats of physical harm.<sup>182</sup>

111. Sometimes cyberbullying takes the form of 'trolling'. This is defined by the Government, in its *Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper*, as alluding to the "method of catching fish by casting a baited line in the water and waiting for a fish to bite [...] a troll online tries to catch an unsuspecting victim to demean and humiliate".<sup>183</sup> Establishing the precise prevalence of cyberbullying has proved challenging.<sup>184</sup> DCMS reported that estimates of incidence "vary between 6–25%+ depending on measures—and that the reasons for victimisation are diverse".<sup>185</sup> It added that, in terms of those most at risk, the UKCCIS literature review had found that a large proportion of cyberbullying and online harassment was focused on "specific identity-related characteristics".<sup>186</sup>

112. Sue Jones from Ditch the Label, concurred and noted that "there are groups of people—minority groups—who we know will be more at risk [...] a young person who is transgender and is also a person of colour is much more likely to experience bullying".<sup>187</sup> Disabled children and those with special educational needs were also highlighted by Dustin Hutchinson from the National Children's Bureau as "more vulnerable to cyberbullying".<sup>188</sup>

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180 Barnardo's ([SMH0148](#))

181 Barnardo's ([SMH0148](#))

182 Emily Frith, [Social media and children's mental health: a review of the evidence](#), Education Policy Institute, June 2017

183 HM Government, *Internet Safety Strategy – Green paper*, October 2017, p50

184 Anti-Bullying Alliance ([SMH0102](#))

185 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0180](#))

186 *Ibid*

187 [Q40](#)

188 *Ibid*; see also Petitions Committee, First Special Report of Session 2017–19, [Online abuse and the experience of disabled people: draft recommendations for consultation](#), HC 1459

113. Most recently, NHS Digital's survey of the *Mental health of children and young people in England*, published in November 2018, indicated a gendered element to cyberbullying. It found that:

One in five children aged 11 to 19 had experienced cyberbullying in the past year (21.2%). Girls were more likely than boys to have been cyberbullied: one in four girls experienced this (25.8%) compared with one in six boys (16.7%) [...] Less than one in a hundred young people reported having been cyberbullied at least weekly (0.6%).<sup>189</sup>

Professor Przybylski explained that one of the reasons estimates of cyberbullying varied was due to the methodology employed and whether the researcher was focusing on incidence/frequency, or also on harm caused:

It is really important not to just ask somebody if they were bullied or how it felt; you have to ask them about the frequency, or how severe it is, because that is what we know is linked to psychopathology and functioning problems later.<sup>190</sup>

114. UKRI told us that cyberbullying exclusively via social media was “relatively uncommon among young people compared to other forms of peer victimisation, and does not normally occur in isolation”.<sup>191</sup> A major study published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* in 2017, based on a sample of 100,000 15 year olds from England, supported this conclusion.<sup>192</sup> It found that while:

nearly one third had reported some form of serious face-to-face bullying in the last six months [...] only about 4% said that they had been seriously bullied online and nine out of 10 of that 4% were also bullied face to face.<sup>193</sup>

As DCMS put it, cyber bullying alone “creates very few new victims of bullying” but instead presents “an avenue for further victimisation of those already suffering from traditional forms of bullying”.<sup>194</sup>

115. While current evidence indicates that there is a firm link between ‘offline’ bullying and ‘online’ bullying, the Anti-Bullying Alliance set out several ways in which online bullying was different (our emphasis):

- “**24/7 exposure**—the nature of online activity means you can be in contacted at any time, including what used to be the safety of your own home.
- There is the potential for a **wider audience** and bullying incidents can stay online, a photo that cannot be removed (online postings are too often indelible) and goes ‘viral’ for example.

189 Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [Behaviours, lifestyles and identities](#), NHS Digital, November 2018

190 [Q130](#)

191 UK Research and Innovation ([SMH0151](#))

192 Dr Andrew K Przybylski & Lucy Bowes, [Cyberbullying and adolescent well-being in England: a population-based cross-sectional study](#), *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* Vol 1 (2017), pp19–26,

193 [Q126](#)

194 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0180](#))

- **Evidence**—many cyberbullying incidents allow those experiencing it to keep evidence by; taking a screen shot of the image or message for example, to show to school staff or police, if necessary.
- **Potential to hide your identity**—it is possible to hide your identity online which can make cyberbullying incidents very scary.
- **Degree of separation**—people who cyberbully often do not see the reaction of those experiencing it so it can sometimes be harder for them to see and understand the impact of their actions. This sometimes leads to disinhibition and a tendency to post more extreme and hurtful material”.<sup>195</sup>

116. The potential for cyberbullying to be 24/7 was emphasised by several witnesses, including the Children's Commissioner for England. She emphasised how:

cyber-bullying gets you wherever you are, and that is particularly dangerous [...] what cyber-bullying does is allow individuals to track that person. They can never get away. [...] Young people talk to me about the constancy of it throughout the evening into the early morning.<sup>196</sup>

117. Witnesses also stressed the psychological impacts arising from an incident being repeated over and over online, as pictures or comments are re-posted and shared to a new audience. As Dustin Hutchinson from the National Children's Bureau put it, “when something is up there, it can be very hard to remove for the young person. It stays there and is a permanent record of the bullying or humiliation that they have experienced”.<sup>197</sup> This, in turn, may have “more psychological effects on the person, because of the reliving of that experience.”<sup>198</sup> Carolyn Bunting from Internet Matters described it as it taking “repetition to a different level. Basically, children can revisit the bullying over and over again”.<sup>199</sup>

118. Experiences of cyberbullying have been associated with a wide range of negative outcomes in young people including “reduced attainment, higher absence rates, increased tobacco, alcohol and drug use, mental health issues, reduced self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and poor physical health”.<sup>200</sup> Again it was acknowledged that social media “had not caused” cyberbullying, but rather had amplified it:<sup>201</sup> as Will Gardner noted, “the audience is bigger and, if there is humiliating content, its life can be longer than it would be if only eye witnesses saw it”.<sup>202</sup>

119. What was striking from the written evidence was the number of initiatives aimed at tackling cyberbullying. Facebook, for example, stated that “over the past five years” it had “partnered with The Diana Award in the delivery of AntiBullying Ambassador training to schools across the UK and Ireland”, which the Diana Award noted had reached 25,000 children.<sup>203</sup> The *Royal Foundation Taskforce on the Prevention of Cyberbullying* launched its

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195 Anti-Bullying Alliance ([SMH0102](#))

196 [Q555](#)

197 [Q35](#)

198 [Q128](#)

199 [Q35](#)

200 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0180](#))

201 [Q555](#)

202 [Q529](#)

203 Facebook ([SMH0153](#)); The Diana Award ([SMH0119](#))



'Stop Speak Support' campaign and created an online code of conduct for 11–16 year olds who encounter cyberbullying. DCMS also highlighted how the Department for Education was providing £1.75m of funding, over two years, for four anti-bullying organisations to "support schools to tackle bullying" including "projects targeting bullying of particular groups [...] such as those with SEND [Special Educational Needs and Disability] and those who are victims of hate related bullying, along with a project to report bullying online".<sup>204</sup>

### Body image

120. One of the key features of social media is that it hands control over to the user as to how they portray themselves online. Technology, meanwhile, from filters to image-manipulation techniques, allow users not only to edit images but to "drastically change" them.<sup>205</sup> This, in turn can produce what the Royal Society for Public Health described as a "compare and despair" attitude: "Individuals may view heavily photo-shopped, edited or staged photographs and videos and compare them to their seemingly mundane lives".<sup>206</sup>

As Sienna explained:

When you make your own profile, you pick your nice images that you want to post and you work out how they will look next to each other. That is definitely a positive—that people can use it as the latest art form that everyone can use [...] But, yes, it does mean that you are putting forward your most positive side and it means that you don't think you can recognise your emotions.<sup>207</sup>

121. A similar theme came through in the YMCA's 'Somebody Like Me' research which indicated that young people's relationships with social media and messaging platforms can "fuel an on-going internal battle in those trying to keep up with appearance-based 'ideals' to gain acceptance from others" with young people becoming "consumed by which photos they put online and the image they portray online".<sup>208</sup> Natasha Devon, a mental health and body image campaigner, described social media as having a "momentous impact [on] young people's relationship with their bodies"<sup>209</sup> while the Nuffield Council on Bioethics pointed to a "growing 'visual diet' of appearance-related images" which, it stated, has "been associated with greater unhappiness about appearance, particularly among children and young people".<sup>210</sup>

122. The power of celebrities and social media influencers was also highlighted by our witnesses. Dustin Hutchinson from the National Children's Bureau described how young people:

talked a lot about the fact that a lot of provocative pictures are posted by models and bloggers, which can put pressure on young people to replicate that behaviour and then to view their own self-worth and popularity in terms of how many likes or followers they get.<sup>211</sup>

204 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0155](#))

205 Barnardo's ([SMH0148](#))

206 The Royal Society for Public Health ([SMH0127](#))

207 [Q428](#)

208 YMCA England & Wales ([SMH0108](#))

209 [Q603](#)

210 Nuffield Council on Bioethics ([SMH0079](#))

211 [Q23](#)

123. Sienna, a young person, explained how:

If you are following celebrities, models or people that society aspires to, then even if it is not a conscious effort that you want to look like them, it is just something that gradually, over time, is ingrained into you and you think the tall, slim model is something that you want to be.<sup>212</sup>

124. Students from schools across the Leicester West constituency similarly explained that, while they knew it was “unrealistic to think you can look like or have the same life as a celebrity”, it was increasingly “hard not to make comparisons when so much [...] of their time is now spent online”.<sup>213</sup> Despite the increasing awareness of the harmful effects of promoting certain body images and ‘ideals’ in traditional media, the OECD noted that there has been “limited research of the effect of promoting a narrow range of body images on social media”.<sup>214</sup>

### *Promoting harmful information and behaviours*

125. Linked to body image was the promotion of harmful information and/or unhealthy behaviours via social media and other websites. David Austin from the British Board of Film Classification highlighted how its large-scale public consultation—asking the public what issues concern them in film content, video content and on websites—had indicated clear concerns “about depictions of pro-anorexic content, self-harm and suicide”.<sup>215</sup>

126. Natasha Devon emphasised that, in her experience, self-harm was one of the “fastest-growing mental health issues in people aged under 21”. The feedback she received from young people was that occasionally “the internet has taught them how to self-harm—they have found instructional articles on pro-self-harm websites”.<sup>216</sup> She went on to stress, however, that it was “not the reason they are doing it in the first place” and questioned whether too much focus had been placed on the role of social media:

My belief is that by focusing so much on social media as a cause we can sometimes take our eye off other things. Anxiety and self-harm in particular have risen dramatically since 2010. When you look at what happened in 2010 in terms of the effects that austerity has had on families, we know there is a link between poverty and poor mental health.<sup>217</sup>

127. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Mental Health, Inequalities and Suicide Prevention, Jackie Doyle-Price MP, similarly reflected that there was a complex range of factors that led to a person taking their own life. Though she was “very concerned about online content being a driver for that”, she acknowledged that to “say that it is down to one thing or another is quite difficult”, adding that while “we can all come to conclusions and think anecdotally of examples, but we really need the evidence.”<sup>218</sup>

212 [Q376](#)

213 [Liz Kendall MP \(SMH0179\)](#)

214 OECD, [Children & Young People's Mental Health in the Digital Age Shaping the Future](#), October 2018

215 [Q218](#)

216 [Q552](#)

217 [Q552](#)

218 [Q643](#)

## Next steps

128. This Chapter has set out some of the benefits and harms linked to social media that we have heard about during our inquiry. While there is no 'silver bullet' response that will minimise the harms while amplifying the benefits, several suggestions were made to us about possible next steps. Yih-Choung Teh from Ofcom was very clear that, what had previously worked well in broadcasting was "Parliament setting some high-level objectives for the problem we are trying to address". These, he suggested, should be "principles-based so that there can be adaptability", partly because social norms change over time.<sup>219</sup> Karim Palant from Facebook similarly stated that a "principles-based approach was needed [...] where you start with the harm you are trying to tackle".<sup>220</sup>

129. When asked what the principles should be, Yih-Choung Teh suggested that, based on Ofcom's research, the "protection of children [was] a very large concern for society as a whole".<sup>221</sup> Speaking to the Lords Communication Committee, Tony Stower from the NSPCC also focused on the protection of children, stating that "if we are talking about principles-based regulation, the first principle would be that services that are open to children should be safe for children to use in the first place".<sup>222</sup>

130. It appears that the Government is also considering a principles-based approach. Giving evidence to the DCMS Committee in October 2018, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Rt Hon Jeremy Wright MP, confirmed that:

one of the reasons the White Paper is taking the time it is taking, is that it needs to address the whole spectrum of online harm and that is a wide spectrum [...] we start with the White Paper, we work through the principles, we set out in the White Paper the approach we think we need to take to that spectrum of harm, legal and illegal, and then follow through with legislation.<sup>223</sup>

**131. Our inquiry has illuminated the broad spectrum of benefits, risks and harms that children and young people may encounter via social media and screen-use. While social media and screen-use is not necessarily creating these risks, it has, in numerous cases, amplified them. Initiatives are in place to address some of these harms—notably around cyberbullying—yet others are falling through the cracks. A comprehensive, joined-up approach to address the plethora of negative effects is needed.**

*132. Underpinning the Government's forthcoming White Paper, and subsequent legislation, should be the principle that children must, as far as practicably possible, be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites. All the physical and mental health harms we have outlined in this chapter—including cyberbullying, grooming, child abuse and child sexual exploitation (CSE), 'self-generated' images and 'sexting', the live streaming of CSE, violence, hate speech and pornography—should be covered.*

We discuss a proposed way forward in Chapter 5.

219 [Q589](#)

220 [Q465](#), [Q511](#)

221 [Q590](#)

222 [Oral evidence taken before the House of Lords Communications Committee](#), 19 June 2018, Q73 [Tony Stower]

223 [Oral evidence taken before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee on 24 October 2018](#), [HC \(2017–19\) 361](#), Qq225–230 [Rt Hon Jeremy Wright MP]

## 4 Resources for schools and parents

133. Improving the digital literacy and resilience of children and young people was highlighted across the evidence as an important means of safeguarding them from harm when using social media. This Chapter considers how this might be achieved in practice.

### Digital literacy and Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education

134. Digital literacy can be understood as “the ability of individuals to use skills, knowledge and understanding in order to make full use of the opportunities offered by the new media environment as well as safeguard themselves from associated risks”.<sup>224</sup> The need to improve the digital literacy of young people was a key theme from the written evidence.<sup>225</sup> Sue Jones from Ditch the Label told us that:

real media information literacy within education, from a very young age [is missing]. We have talked about phased approaches to technology, but we also need to teach young people how to navigate the internet critically—all of it, whether it is social media platforms or websites.<sup>226</sup>

135. This insight was also raised by the House of Lords Communication Committee in its 2017 report *Growing up with the Internet*. It recommended that “digital literacy should be the fourth pillar of a child’s education alongside reading, writing and mathematics, and be resourced and taught accordingly”.<sup>227</sup> Our witnesses were supportive of the idea that digital literacy should be an integral part of the primary and secondary school curriculum. The evidence we received advocated making PSHE education mandatory in schools while also ‘embedding’ digital literacy and eSafety in the PSHE curriculum.<sup>228</sup>

136. According to Dr Griffiths, PSHE education was “probably the best platform and arena” through which to deliver “compulsory” digital literacy in schools.<sup>229</sup> Dr Max Davie, from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, noted that it had been the RCPCH’s “policy for a number of years that [PSHE education] should be compulsory”<sup>230</sup> while Dustin Hutchinson from the National Children’s Bureau emphasised that:

education in social media should be a timetabled part of the curriculum, whether it be in PSHE or in sex and relationships education [...] and delivered by educators specifically trained to educate about the risks and the benefits.<sup>231</sup>

224 UK Council for Child Internet Safety, [Children’s online activities, risks and safety. A literature review by the UKCCIS Evidence Group](#), October 2017, p66

225 YMCA England & Wales ([SMH0108](#)); The British Psychological Society ([SMH0020](#)); University of Birmingham ([SMH0098](#)); Barnardo’s ([SMH0134](#))

226 [Q13](#)

227 House of Lords, *Growing up with the internet*, Second Report of the Select Committee on Communications, Session 2016–17, [HL Paper 130](#), para 30

228 [Qq69–70](#)

229 [Q143](#)

230 [Q299](#)

231 [Q67](#)

The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, also identified 'critical times' when such lessons were invaluable, including the transition from primary to secondary school.<sup>232</sup>

137. Matt Blow from YoungMinds explained that, within digital literacy, there also needed to be a focus on building "digital resilience":

so that, when they [children] encounter harm, they know how to respond and are able to mitigate it themselves. That needs to be part of the focus of the education.<sup>233</sup>

YMCA England and Wales suggested that building children's resilience was a means to help ensure that "risk does not become harm"<sup>234</sup> while Virgin Media saw "resilient online users" as people who were "better equipped with the tools to respond to harms when they confront them".<sup>235</sup>

138. In 2017, however, the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, reported that children were "not being equipped with adequate skills to negotiate their lives online" and that they needed help from adults to "develop resilience and the ability to interact critically with the world".<sup>236</sup> Giving evidence to us a year later, Ms Longfield noted that while "[eSafety] within school has really progressed [...] the emotional resilience to be able to deal with [life online] it is not there yet".<sup>237</sup>

139. Changes to PSHE education are, however, in motion. Section 34 of the *Children and Social Work Act 2017* required the Education Secretary in England to make Relationships Education mandatory in all primary schools, and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) mandatory in all secondary schools through regulations. Section 35 of the Act also states that the "Secretary of State may by regulations make provision requiring personal, social, health and economic education (beyond that required by virtue of section 34) to be provided".<sup>238</sup> During our inquiry, the Government held a public consultation, seeking views on its draft regulations, statutory guidance, and regulatory impact assessment relating to Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education.<sup>239</sup>

140. The Government's proposed guidance for schools does consider online harms and states that "Pupils should be taught rules and principles for keeping safe online [including] how to recognise risks, harmful content and contact, and how and to whom to report issues". In addition, the guidance states that:

Pupils should know [...] the similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world, including: the impact of unhealthy or obsessive comparison with others online through setting unrealistic expectations for body image, [...] over-reliance on online relationships (including social media), how advertising and information is targeted at them and how to be

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232 [Q575](#); [Qq588–589](#); see also [Q527](#)

233 [Q24](#)

234 YMCA England & Wales ([SMH0108](#))

235 Virgin Media ([SMH0152](#))

236 Children's Commissioner for England, [Growing Up Digital, A report of the Growing Up Digital Taskforce](#), January 2017

237 [Q566](#)

238 Children and Social Work Act 2017, [section 34](#)

239 <https://consult.education.gov.uk/pshe/relationships-education-rse-health-education/>

a discerning consumer of information online [...] how to identify harmful behaviours online (including bullying, abuse or harassment) and how to report, or get support, if they have been affected by those behaviours.<sup>240</sup>

At the time of writing, the Government had not published a Response to its consultation.

### *Training and resources for teachers*

141. Though PSHE education may soon be made mandatory across primary and secondary schools, Natasha Devon reflected that, at present, “PSHE is not funded, so you do not have specialist teachers. They do not have resources”.<sup>241</sup> Similarly, Becca, a young person, explained that:

Often the way schools do it [teach PSHE] is just to throw the form teacher into doing that, and a form teacher could be a PE teacher, a chemistry teacher, or whatever: that is their specialism and they have been trained to do that; they haven't been trained to talk about looking after yourself online. The teachers need to be given the tools to be able to educate the young people on it.<sup>242</sup>

Jack, another young person, also pointed to the “unrealistic” nature of some of the educational videos about online risks:

If you show them to a class of teenagers, they just laugh and no one takes it seriously. Some of the CEOP [child exploitation and online protection] videos do try to convey a serious message, but they are incredibly unrealistic. It is a scenario that would happen one in a million and they need to make it a lot more realistic and less humorous—they are not willingly humorous, obviously—a lot more serious and make it relate to what is happening.<sup>243</sup>

142. Carolyn Bunting from Internet Matters told us that while teachers are best placed to deliver digital literacy, “what we [Internet Matters] hear is that they need more help. It needs to be integrated into their teacher training, and we need to have changes made to the curriculum”.<sup>244</sup> Another issue for schools and teachers was that, while there is a “wealth of information and advice that is available” on digital literacy, there is, according to the British Psychological Society, “no centralised resource for parents and professionals to turn to for balanced advice”.<sup>245</sup> This, in turn, can make it difficult for teachers to know if the resources that they are finding are “reliable, of high quality and up to date”.<sup>246</sup> As Sue Jones from Ditch the Label put it:

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240 Department for Education, [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education, Guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers](#), July 2018, p29

241 [Q573](#)

242 [Q437](#)

243 [Q440](#)

244 [Q69](#)

245 [Q542](#); The British Psychological Society ([SMH0020](#))

246 [Q542](#)

There is such a mix. It is everywhere, across the board. There is not one place. As you probably all know, having media and information literacy go into schools came to a staggering halt in about 2014, so teachers are scurrying around everywhere to try to get it from the best possible places.<sup>247</sup>

143. In the absence of centralised, quality-assured resources, Carolyn Bunting from Internet Matters noted that, in some instances, schools had relied on external organisations to teach digital literacy and e-safety. She questioned whether it was:

necessarily right that we have lots of external organisations that will be difficult to control going into schools and trying to fix this problem. It feels like it is a fundamental piece of the curriculum, in making sure that children are able to deal with the digital world when they leave school.<sup>248</sup>

144. The House of Lords Communication Committee, in its 2017 report *Growing up with the Internet*, explained that it was “struck by the number and fragmented nature of organisations organised to manage internet harms”. While the Committee commended the work of the voluntary sector and industry in “delivering information and resources about online safety and digital literacy for parents and children”, it emphasised that the landscape was disjointed and “insufficient to meet the needs of all children”.<sup>249</sup>

145. Dr Vicky Goodyear from the University of Birmingham highlighted that there were “a lot of start-up companies offering guidance and tips about social media and digital literacy” and that there was a need “for evidence-based practice and quality assurance” of these resources.<sup>250</sup> Similarly, Barnardo’s emphasised that it was vital to “evaluate the effectiveness of ‘educational’ initiatives”, like those that are aimed at improving digital literacy, so that resources are directed towards “initiatives that have demonstrably positive effects and reduce the risk of promulgating interventions that, at best, have no effect and at worst, deepen the problem”.<sup>251</sup>

146. The Government, in its Response to its *Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper*, suggested that the current system, with multiple external providers of advice, not only led “to duplication of effort” but it could also mean that “some vulnerable users aren’t adequately supported” and that, in some instances, “users can receive conflicting messages which leads to confusion”. While the Government went on to state that it “strongly believes that there is definite value to be added from the convening power of Government to ensure that resources and funding are maximised across the digital ecosystem”, it concluded that “before we disrupt any existing initiatives, we believe that it is right that we take the time to agree the best approach to realise sustained, significant investment to counter online harms”.<sup>252</sup>

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247 [Q72](#)

248 [Q69](#)

249 House of Lords, *Growing up with the internet*, Second Report of the Select Committee on Communications, Session 2016–17, [HL Paper 130](#), para 320

250 [Q304](#)

251 Barnardo’s ([SMH0134](#))

252 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p27

147. In the meantime, Sarah Hannafin from the National Association of Head Teachers identified an opportunity for the Department for Education to:

think about signposting organisations that schools can rely on in producing high-quality, good teaching resources that are regularly reviewed and kept up to date, which for the online world is very important. Rather than expecting the DfE to produce resources, they should take responsibility and identify the organisations and charities that are doing that job very well. That then points schools in the right direction.<sup>253</sup>

148. **As children spend an increasing proportion of their life online, there is a pressing need for the education system to catch up and ensure that young people are equipped with the skills that they need to navigate, and critically assess, what they are seeing on social media and beyond. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 presents the Government with a vital opportunity to establish digital literacy and resilience as integral parts of the curriculum for primary and secondary school students, through making 'Personal, Social, Health and Economic' (PSHE) education mandatory. This chance must not be wasted.**

149. *We recommend that 'Personal, Social, Health and Economic' (PSHE) education be made mandatory for primary and secondary school children in the next parliamentary session and that the PSHE curriculum delivers an age-appropriate understanding of, and resilience towards, the harms and benefits of the digital world.*

150. *The Department for Education should commission research early in 2019 to evaluate existing resources on online safety and digital resilience. This should be undertaken with a view to creating guidance on, and signposting teachers towards, high-quality information and teaching resources that can be used with primary and secondary school-age children.*

## Parental awareness and engagement

151. According to some schools and organisations, the 'missing link' in delivering digital literacy and resilience may be a lack of parental awareness and, in some instances, engagement. The National Association of Head Teachers was clear that young people's use of social media cuts through their day-to-day lives, thereby making it crucial to ensure "that their parents and carers are also aware of the dangers of harmful content or excessive use".<sup>254</sup> Emily Cherry from Barnardo's, however, emphasised that some parents were "giving children early access to material, websites and technology without an understanding of the risks and the dangers".<sup>255</sup>

152. Written submissions from some schools and teachers made similar points about lack of parental awareness. Longdean School in Hemel Hempstead, for example, stated that:

Parental (and wider social) awareness of these [online] risks is painfully weak. I liken it to allowing a young person to roam the streets of a dangerous

253 [Q542](#)

254 National Association of Head Teachers ([SMH0097](#))

255 [Q250](#); See also [Corsham Institute \(SMH0147\)](#)



area unaccompanied late at night. There seems to be a complete lack of awareness as to a) what is happening and b) what parental responsibility should be.<sup>256</sup>

153. Paul Mogie, who works in a secondary school, explained that he was “increasingly dealing with social media issues” on a “daily basis”, adding that “on the whole, parents seem oblivious to what their child is doing on social media”.<sup>257</sup> According to Bristol Safeguarding Children’s Board, parents were “incredibly difficult to engage when trying to talk about Online Safety”, and that schools were asking “for advice about how to engage parents with Online Safety topics”.<sup>258</sup> The Children’s Commissioner for England, however, in her report *Growing up Digital*, stressed that parents were telling her that they were “not confident about how to prepare children for life online”.<sup>259</sup> Dr Vicky Goodyear from the University of Birmingham noted that while much had already been said about the need to educate young people, “adult digital literacy” was also crucial “if [adults] are going to be able to help young people”.<sup>260</sup>

154. Exactly how adults should be supported to raise “digitally resilient children, who understand the benefits and challenges of constant connectivity”, was highlighted by Internet Matters as a key hurdle to overcome.<sup>261</sup> Dr Netta Weinstein from the School of Psychology at Cardiff University suggested that, rather than trying to provoke a “fear response” in adults and children, what seemed to be “more effective [was] parents being more closely engaged with their youngsters’ social media use”.<sup>262</sup> Citing Jane Tollin, Co-Executive Director, MediaSmarts (Canada), Dr Bex Lewis from Manchester Metropolitan University maintained that young people “need less surveillance and more mentorship online”, adding that “zero-tolerance policies don’t work. Encouraging trust and open dialogue is the best approach”.<sup>263</sup> In its written evidence, the Government stated that the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) would “undertake a review of available online safety information available to parents and identify gaps in resources”.<sup>264</sup>

**155. Parental engagement can play a vital role in helping children develop ‘digital resilience’, so that they can confidently identify and judge online risks themselves. Parents, however, need high-quality support to ensure these conversations are as effective as possible.**

**156. *In addition to identifying the gaps in the ‘online safety information available to parents’, the Government should commission the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to produce a toolkit in 2019 for parents and caregivers. The toolkit should enable them to have an effective, open and ongoing dialogue with their children about how to recognise, manage and mitigate online risks in relation to social media. This work should complement the proposed review of existing teaching resources recommended in paragraph 150.***

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256 Longdean School ([SMH0082](#))

257 Paul Mogie ([SMH0006](#))

258 Bristol Safeguarding Children’s Board - E-Safety Working Group ([SMH0087](#))

259 Children’s Commissioner for England, [Growing up Digital](#), January 2017, p4

260 [Q295](#)

261 Internet Matters ([SMH0080](#))

262 [Q198](#)

263 Dr Bex Lewis, Manchester Metropolitan University ([SMH0093](#))

264 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0155](#))

## Mobile phones in schools

157. According to Ofcom, 44% of 5–15 year olds in the UK owned a smartphone in 2018, with tablet ownership across the same age group slightly higher at 47%.<sup>265</sup> When broken down by age, Ofcom's figures show that 87% of 14 year olds and 93% of 15 year olds own a smartphone.<sup>266</sup> Across the UK, it is currently the responsibility of individual schools to determine whether mobile phones are allowed on school premises. The Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb MP, explained that, under the current rules, schools can:

choose to ban or limit the use of smart phone or tablets on school premises during the school day. Schools should make any policies on smart phones or tablets known to all staff, pupils and parents. These policies should outline any sanctions that will be imposed if pupils break these rules".<sup>267</sup>

Consequently, policies across the UK schools vary, ranging from outright bans at some schools to the inclusion of phones as part of lessons in others. Sarah Hannafin from the National Association of Head Teachers noted how:

some secondary schools [...] do impose a blanket ban on mobile phones, but we see a lot of members that manage the use—so phones may be banned at lesson time, but there may be flexibility at break time and lunch time.<sup>268</sup>

158. The French Government, in contrast, has recently introduced a ban on using mobile phones in the country's primary, junior and middle schools. Children are allowed to bring their phones to school, but they are not allowed to use them out at any time until they leave, including during breaks.<sup>269</sup>

159. There is some evidence that not allowing mobile phones in lessons has a positive impact on attainment. Research by Dr Richard Murphy at the London School of Economics found that banning mobile phones improved students' GCSE outcomes to the extent equivalent to an additional hour a week in school or to increasing the school year by five days.<sup>270</sup> In his written evidence, Dr Murphy added that the measure helped those with previously low attainment scores:

Students in the top 40% of the achievement distribution gained nothing from the bans, but those in the bottom 40% gained around 12% on average.<sup>271</sup>

In our survey of over 3,000 children and young people, we asked them what impact social media has on their concentration when completing a task. Over 45% thought it had either a 'somewhat' or 'mostly' negative impact on their concentration, while 30% thought it had no impact at all.

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265 Ofcom, Children and parents media use and attitudes: annex 1 Children's research annex, January 2019, p29

266 Ofcom, Children and parents media use and attitudes: annex 1 Children's research annex, January 2019, p29

267 [PQ 149714](#) [on Schools: Mobile Phones], 4 June 2018. The position is similar in Scotland. While advice published by the Scottish Government in 2013 states that "it is unreasonable and impractical to attempt to impose a ban on mobile devices in schools" it remains up to individual schools to decide on their own policy. See The Scottish Government, [Guidance on Developing Policies to Promote the Safe and Responsible Use of Mobile Technology in Schools](#), November 2013

268 [Q533](#)

269 BBC News Online, [French MPs back ban on mobile phone use in schools](#), 7 June 2018

270 Richard Murphy and Louis-Philippe Beland, [How smart is it to allow students to use mobile phones at school?](#), The Conversation, 12 May 2015

271 Dr Richard Murphy ([SMH0161](#))

160. Outreach with Welland Park Academy—which has a policy of not allowing mobile phones to be switched on while in school unless authorised by a teacher, as part of a lesson—highlighted how some students found this approach gave them a welcome, “enforced break” from social media. Other students, however, questioned why mobile phones could not be used at breaktimes and noted different policies at neighbouring schools.<sup>272</sup>

161. Some schools have worked to integrate phones into lessons. Sue Jones from Ditch the Label explained how:

Overwhelmingly, we are told by teachers that [...] they have given up trying to fight the use of phones in classrooms. They are now trying to integrate them within the lesson. You have the online polls that are happening in lessons. They are trying to bring in technology in that way, because otherwise they spend half the lesson trying to take phones off people.<sup>273</sup>

Will Gardner from the UK Safer Internet Centre also highlighted instances where schools were considering a “bring your own device to school” policy, adding that when there was “amazing technology at home and, perhaps, less amazing technology within school, there may be a way to mobilise that to the benefit of the school”.<sup>274</sup>

162. We received some evidence from teaching staff, however, of smartphones being a barrier to learning. Natasha Porter, a teaching assistant at Crawley College, told us that:

The number one distraction, from every single student, is phone use for, predominantly, Instagram and Snapchat. It has come to a point where we have to put their phones in a box at the beginning of some lessons. When asking for phones to be handed in, we’ve had tears, tantrums and students walk out and not come back.<sup>275</sup>

Another secondary school teacher stated that she had noticed:

a massive shift in teenage attitudes in the last ten years. They find it difficult to concentrate on school work when their ‘real lives’ are continuing in their pockets, driving them wild with frustration and distraction in lessons.<sup>276</sup>

163. Both Will Gardner and Sarah Hannafin suggested that there was more room for centrally-provided, evidence-based guidance on mobile phone use in schools.<sup>277</sup> As Ms Hannafin put it:

On mobile phones, it is always good to share practice between schools, and it is much easier to do it centrally, so that schools can see what other schools are doing[...] [it] is important is that the best practice represents a variety of different policies that schools might have approached. It also addresses the challenges and pitfalls that schools might face when implementing

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272 See Annex 2

273 [Q67](#)

274 [Q533](#)

275 Miss Natasha Porter ([SMH0013](#))

276 Mrs Cat Sabben-Clare, Dr Sonia Kersey and Mrs Sara Keel ([SMH0060](#))

277 [Q534](#)

or changing a policy on mobile phones or social media [...] Seeing what challenges different schools faced and how they acted to overcome them is really useful.<sup>278</sup>

**164. We have heard how children bringing smartphones into schools can be both a help and a hinderance to learning. While it is right that each school should have the freedom to decide its own policy on the use of mobile phones on its premises, it is essential that schools are supported to make that choice with evidence-based guidance.**

***165. We recommend that the Government's 'What Works Centre for Education' evaluates the different approaches to handling smartphone use in schools so as to provide a basis for making evidence-based guidance available to both primary and secondary schools. This evaluation should be produced by the end of 2019.***

## 5 Regulation and guidance

166. Childhood, even without social media and the Internet, is not risk-free. While it is important that we teach children how to reduce risk, and be digitally literate and resilient, the overall ‘burden’ should not be placed on children. As far as possible, online risks must be managed, minimised and, ideally, prevented. Legislative and non-legislative responses—alongside possible technical solutions—to the harms we have heard about are set out in this Chapter. While we have focused throughout our Report on children, many of the proposals we make in this Chapter could equally apply to adults.

### Gaps in regulation

167. Throughout our inquiry, witnesses repeated the same general point that there was a lack of regulation covering social media sites.<sup>279</sup> A 2018 report by Doteveryone, a think tank founded by Baroness Lane Fox, described the current “regulatory landscape” as one that had organically “evolved over time to cover aspects of digital technologies”. The report went on to stress that this evolution had “resulted in a patchwork of regulation and legislation, [...] an inconsistent and fragmented system and [...] some significant gaps in ensuring comprehensive oversight and accountability” where the Internet was concerned.<sup>280</sup>

168. Ofcom’s recent paper, *Addressing Harmful Content Online*, noted that while the “regulatory regime covering online content has evolved in recent years” there were “still significant disparities in whether and how online content is regulated”.<sup>281</sup> With the exceptions of BBC online material, and on-demand streaming services (like Amazon Prime and ITV Hub), “most online content is subject to little or no specific regulation”. Such disparities, we heard, had produced a “standards lottery”.<sup>282</sup> Key areas that are not currently the subject of specific regulation, identified by Ofcom, are:

- “platforms whose principal focus [was] video sharing, such as YouTube;
- platforms centred around social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter;
- search engines that direct Internet users towards different types of information from many Internet services, such as Google and Bing; and
- nearly all other online services, including messaging services, with a few exceptions such as the BBC’s online services (as discussed above), and certain news sites that are overseen by the press regulatory bodies IPSO [Independent Press Standards Organisation] and IMPRESS [UK independent press regulator]; and political advertising online”.<sup>283</sup>

Without direction from Parliament, however, Ofcom cannot expand its remit to cover any of these areas.

279 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#)); [Q266](#); [Qq583–585](#); [Q592](#)

280 Doteveryone, [Regulating for Responsible Technology: Making the case for an Independent Internet Regulator](#), A Doteveryone Green Paper, May 2018, p8–9

281 Ofcom, [Addressing harmful online content A perspective from broadcasting and on-demand standards regulation](#), September 2018, p3

282 [Q584](#). We found a similar lack of regulatory consistency in our *Energy Drinks and Children* report regarding the age used to define a child when it comes to the marketing, sale and advertising of energy drinks

283 Ofcom, [Addressing harmful online content A perspective from broadcasting and on-demand standards regulation](#), September 2018, p16

## Responsibility for content on social media sites: the status quo

169. The liability of social media companies (and others) for the content they host is currently limited by the the 2000 *European e-Commerce Directive*.<sup>284</sup> Under the Directive, 'intermediaries' (like social media companies) are exempt from liability for the content they host, so long as they "play a neutral, merely technical and passive role towards the hosted content".<sup>285</sup> Once they become aware of the illegal nature of any hosted content, the Directive states that "they need to remove it or disable access to it expeditiously". An exact timeframe for removal is not specified.

170. For content that is not illegal but could be deemed inappropriate and harmful, platforms self-regulate, usually by making their content rules explicit through 'community standards' and 'terms of use' which users sign up to when joining a social media platform. Violation of those standards may result in the content being removed and/or access to the site being revoked, either temporally or indefinitely. YoungMinds and The Children's Society described the status quo as akin to social media companies "marking their own homework".<sup>286</sup> Others have likened the situation to the lawlessness of the "Wild West".<sup>287</sup> The NSPCC told us that:

Thirteen previous self-regulatory Codes of Practice and other self-regulatory approaches have failed to result in any meaningful reduction in the exposure of children to online harms, because there has been no mechanism to force companies to do more, nor to hold them publicly hold them to account.<sup>288</sup>

171. Mark Bunting, a Partner at Communications Chambers, however, has stressed that even the "wild west had rules". The problem, he went on to explain, was that "today's online sheriffs are private firms whose policies, decision processes and enforcement actions can be opaque and subject to little external accountability".<sup>289</sup> For example, Tumblr was removed from Apple's App Store in November 2018 because it let some users post "media featuring child sexual exploitation and abuse".<sup>290</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* reported, however, that the app was still available through Google's app store.<sup>291</sup> It is unclear whether the Android version did not have the same problem as the Apple version of the app, or if the Google App Store applies different criteria as to the apps it makes available. By December, the Tumblr iOS app was available again in the Apple App Store, though no details were provided on why it was reinstated and if the problem had been resolved.

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284 [Directive 2000/31/EC](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2000 on certain legal aspects of information society services, in particular electronic commerce, in the Internal Market ('Directive on electronic commerce').

285 Transposed into UK law through the [Electronic Commerce \(EC Directive\) Regulations 2002](#).

286 YoungMinds and The Children's Society ([SMH0146](#))

287 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#)); <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/wild-west-web/>

288 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#))

289 Mark Bunting, [Keeping Consumers Safe Online, Legislating for platform accountability for online content](#), July 2018, p8

290 Tumblr Help Centre, [November 16, 2018: Issues with the iOS app](#)

291 [Social network Tumblr removed from Apple's App Store due to child pornography](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 2018

### Platform or publisher?

172. There is a growing consensus that the *status quo* is not working and that a new liability regime for social media companies, and the content on their sites, is required. How this should be achieved, however, is a subject of ongoing debate.<sup>292</sup> The Children's Commissioner for England told us how she had:

been pushing the tech companies for a couple of years now, with limited success, about them taking more responsibility for their platforms being a positive environment [...] The notion that platforms need to take responsibility for content is much discussed. If it was an area of the community, there would be no doubt that that community needed some framework that protected but also enabled children within it.<sup>293</sup>

173. Much of the debate has been framed in terms of whether social media companies are publishers or platforms. Giving evidence to the DCMS Committee in October 2017, the then Chair of Ofcom, Dame Patricia Hodgson, stated that, her “personal view” was that social media companies “are publishers” though stressed that this was “not an Ofcom view”.<sup>294</sup>

174. The evidence we received, however, has not advocated for social media companies to be treated as publishers. As the DCMS Committee put it in July 2018, social media is “significantly different” from the traditional model of a ‘publisher’, which commissions, pays for, edits and takes responsibility for the content it disseminates.<sup>295</sup> The Government also stated, in its Response to the *Internet Safety Strategy*, that “applying publisher standards of liability to all online platforms could risk real damage to the digital economy, which would be to the detriment of the public who benefit from them”.<sup>296</sup>

175. The practicalities and ‘fit’ of the publisher model have similarly been called into question. Ofcom noted that the sheer scale of the material uploaded by users (e.g. 400 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every 60 seconds) meant that the regulatory model used for traditional broadcasting could not readily be transferred, wholesale, and applied to social media sites.<sup>297</sup> William Perrin, a trustee of Carnegie UK Trust, also emphasised that the publisher model was an “ill-fit” for current practice, while Mark Bunting, an expert in telecommunications and the law, argued that “shoehorning them [social media companies] into legal frameworks from another technological era [was] a mistake”.<sup>298</sup>

176. Witnesses did not agree, however, that social media companies ought to continue to be treated as “neutral” platforms. Speaking to the Lords Communications Committee, Mark Bunting highlighted how social media companies were not just a “conduit for

292 See, for example, oral evidence taken before the House Lords Communication Committee during its inquiry on *The Internet: to regulate or not to regulate*, 2018

293 [Q589](#); [Q603](#)

294 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee Oral evidence: [The Work of Ofcom](#), HC 407, Q50

295 Digital, Communication, Media and Sport Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, [Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Interim Report](#), HC 363, para 57

296 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p14

297 Ofcom, [Addressing harmful online content A perspective from broadcasting and on-demand standards regulation](#), September 2018

298 William Perrin, [Harm Reduction In Social Media – A Proposal](#), March 2018; Mark Bunting, [Keeping Consumers Safe Online: Legislating for platform accountability for online content](#), July 2018

content” but that they “actively” curated content: “I mean that they select which content is presented to users; they rank that content; they recommend content; and they moderate content. You cannot do that in a purely neutral way”.<sup>299</sup>

177. The notion of social media companies being ‘platforms’, in other words, is also an inadequate way of capturing their responsibilities. The DCMS Committee recommended that “a new category of tech company is formulated, which tightens tech companies’ liabilities, and which is not necessarily either a ‘platform’ or a ‘publisher’.”<sup>300</sup> Dr Damian Tambini, from the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, has similarly argued that “the law needs to catch up in some way, and there needs to be an intermediate category between publishers and mere conduits”.<sup>301</sup> He added, however, that this was “easier to say than it is to do”.<sup>302</sup> The Government stated that it was:

working with our European and international partners, as well as the businesses themselves, to understand how we can make the existing frameworks and definitions work better, and what a liability regime of the future should look like.<sup>303</sup>

## Reporting illegal and inappropriate content

178. At present, the onus is on a user to identify and ‘report’ to the social media company any content that the user deems to be problematic. Sometimes there is a clear ‘button’ to click near the offending material while on other sites reporting takes more effort. Giving evidence to the House of Lords Communications Committee, Lorna Woods, Professor of Internet Law, University of Essex, explained that it is often “the victim” who has to “keep an eye out for problem content and then persuade the platform to do something about it. That is a problem [...]. It is really hurtful to expect someone to have to monitor”.<sup>304</sup>

179. Becca, one of the young people who gave evidence to us, noted that even when a report is made, it does not guarantee the content will be removed: “I report things, things which are quite clearly completely inappropriate or go against all the guidelines. It often comes back saying, “We have not found it breaches any guidelines””.<sup>305</sup> Orlaith, another young person who gave evidence to us, recalled that she knew of “people who have reported adults messaging young girls and have reported Nazis. None of the content gets removed”.<sup>306</sup> Becca’s and Orlaith’s experiences are not isolated incidents. Sue Jones from Ditch the Label told us that they hear from young people “all the time” that “I reported, and nothing happened.”<sup>307</sup> She added that sometimes young people have been trying

299 [Oral evidence taken before the House of Lords Communications Committee](#), 1 May 2018, Q13 [Mark Bunting]

300 Digital, Communication, Media and Sport Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, [Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Interim Report](#), HC 363, para 58

301 [Oral evidence taken before the House of Lords Communications Committee](#), 1 May 2018, Q13 [Dr Damian Tambini]

302 *ibid*

303 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p 14

304 [Oral evidence taken before the House of Lords Communications Committee](#), 24 April 2018, Q3 [Professor Lorna Woods]

305 [Q388](#)

306 [Q449](#)

307 [Q16](#)



for “trying for weeks and months”, with no success, to get content removed.<sup>308</sup> At the moment, there is not consistently produced, UK-focused data to quantify the scale of the problem, a point we examine further in paragraphs 194–196.

180. Some witnesses agreed that an “industry standard” for reporting content was needed.<sup>309</sup> Witnesses also suggested that the reporting process should be demystified. Matt Blow from YoungMinds, a charity aimed at improving the mental health of children, explained that social media companies needed to improve their communications, “so that young people can understand what will happen if they report”.<sup>310</sup> Dustin Hutchinson from the National Children’s Bureau also highlighted the lack of feedback after a report was logged: “Often young people say that they report something, but they do not know what happens as a result. There should be some feedback mechanism”.<sup>311</sup>

181. Some progress appears to have been made. Notably Facebook has introduced a ‘support inbox’, so that if a user has reported something for not following Facebook’s Community Standards, the status of the report can be viewed in the inbox.<sup>312</sup> Similarly, Google highlighted how it had launched a “user dashboard” for YouTube where “if you make a report, you will now get information about what has happened to that report, which did not happen previously”.<sup>313</sup>

182. Social media companies have also stated their intention to be more proactive about identifying and removing inappropriate content. Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, told a US Congressional Committee in September 2018 that:

we can’t place the burden on the victims and that means we need to build technology so that we are not waiting for reports [but rather] are actively looking for instances [...] while we are making those changes and building that technology, we need to do a better job at prioritizing, especially any sort of violent or threatening information.<sup>314</sup>

Sinéad McSweeney from Twitter told us that the social media company would be:

the first to put our hands up—in fact, we have done so—to say that we did not do enough, particularly in the early years, to address users’ concerns about the ways in which people could report content and about people’s understanding of the rules. There was a lack of clarity and usability. I have seen a sea change, thankfully, in all that. Our rules are more accessible, it is far easier to report and we are much more transparent about how and when we action reports.<sup>315</sup>

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308 [Q78](#)

309 [Qq17–19](#)

310 [Q17](#); see also [Q567](#) [Anne Longfield]

311 [Q18](#)

312 Facebook ([SMH0153](#))

313 [Q462](#)

314 US House of Representatives, Committee on Energy and Commerce, [Twitter: transparency and accountability](#), Wednesday 5 September 2018

315 [Q458](#)

### Trusted flagger programme

183. When individuals have reported content and failed to achieve their desired response, some turn to organisations to help them further. We heard particularly about the Trusted Flagger Programme, in which volunteers (often organisations), who have been accepted through an application process, are given the authority to flag content that violates the terms and conditions of a social media platform. Users can highlight content to a trusted flagger, who will assess it, and then take it forward with the relevant social media company.

184. Sue Jones from Ditch the Label stated that the programme “really helps the platforms, because they are overwhelmed by reports”.<sup>316</sup> She added that the programme often led to content being removed in “a couple of hours”.<sup>317</sup> Claire Lilley from Google UK, which participates in the scheme, noted that “eighty-eight per cent of what they [flaggers] report will be taken down, compared with an overall rate of 32%”.<sup>318</sup> According to Ms Lilley, there were currently “30 [trusted flaggers—specialist organisations] in the UK, including NSPCC ChildLine and the members of the UK Safer Internet Centre”.<sup>319</sup>

185. Assistant Commissioner Martin Hewitt explained that the Metropolitan Police was about to trial “some trusted flaggers from the police service”. He emphasised that the police had a role to play in:

translating, because something that appears innocuous may be a very direct threat between individuals or groups, but if you do not understand the language, the context and the names in an area it is really difficult.<sup>320</sup>

Both Facebook and Twitter stated that they worked with a range of organisations but did not have a trusted flagger programme *per se*.<sup>321</sup>

186. Barnardo's and Catch22 (a social business that delivers a range of social services) told us that they were trusted flaggers, though they had different views on the resources needed to perform the role. Emily Cherry from Barnardo's explained that Google offered a “voluntary grant” to trusted flaggers which “you have to ask for [...] to take it up”.<sup>322</sup> Google UK confirmed that the grant was for \$10,000 and was available to organisations who were flaggers but not to individuals.<sup>323</sup> Beth Murray, however, stated that while Catch22 was part of the trusted flagger programme, its:

1,300 frontline workers—teachers, social workers, youth workers, gang violence workers and prison workers—who are working incredibly hard [...] do not have the time or resource to spend on doing the job of policing social media platforms [...] We are happy to do it [...] but there needs to be resourcing.<sup>324</sup>

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316 [Q16](#)

317 [Q78](#)

318 [Q484](#)

319 [Q481](#)

320 [Q183](#)

321 [Qq487-488](#)

322 [Q270](#)

323 Google UK ([SMH0183](#))

324 [Q182](#)

187. In addition to the resourcing of the scheme, a further problem raised by Barnardo's was the lack of feedback they received. Emily Cherry described the programme as "quite a one-way process":

We will share in context intelligence on what is happening in individual cases. Aside from our knowing that action has been taken, there is very little coming back out of the companies. They are aggregating across the UK different harms, new trends and things that are happening to children, but they do not share that back with the trusted flagger community. We then have to play catch-up. New terms [...] should be shared across all flaggers, so that they can look out for that kind of thing.<sup>325</sup>

### **German Network Enforcement Law**

188. In an attempt to increase the speed in which certain content is reviewed and potentially taken down, the Network Enforcement Law (NetzDG) has been introduced in Germany. The law came into full effect on 1 January 2018 and applies to social media platforms with over two million users. It enables Germany to fine social media companies up to €50 million if they do not delete posts contravening German hate speech law within 24 hours of receiving a complaint. Where the illegality is not obvious, the provider has up to seven days to decide on the case.

189. Commenting on the NetzDG law, Ofcom noted that "fines will not be applied for one-off infractions, only for "repeated neglect", [such as] systemic failure, where the complaint system is not adequately established, managed or observed".<sup>326</sup> Enforcement action, meanwhile, is taken by the courts. Ofcom told us "that no cases have reached this stage yet, and therefore there have not been any fines".<sup>327</sup>

190. Facebook's transparency report, published in July 2018, showed that, in the period between 1 January 2018 and 30 June 2018, there were "886 NetzDG reports identifying a total of 1,704 pieces of content", with "218 NetzDG reports" resulting in the deletion or blocking of content. This, Facebook noted, "amounted to a total of 362 deleted or blocked pieces of content" (since a single report may flag more than one piece of content).<sup>328</sup> Twitter's transparency report, covering the same period, indicated that they received a total of 264,818 complaints of which "action" was taken on 28,645. "Action", Twitter explained, involved either completely removing it from the platform, due to it breaching its terms and conditions, or withdrawing it specifically in Germany because it breached the NetzDG law.<sup>329</sup> Google, meanwhile, received reports relating to 214,827 'items' on YouTube (where one item is a video or a comment posted beneath a video), of which 56,297 resulted in action, either the item being removed or blocked.<sup>330</sup>

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325 [Q271](#)

326 Ofcom ([SMH0182](#))

327 *ibid*

328 [https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/facebook\\_netzdg\\_july\\_2018\\_english-1.pdf](https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/facebook_netzdg_july_2018_english-1.pdf)

329 <https://cdn.cms-twdigitalassets.com/content/dam/transparency-twitter/data/download-netzdg-report/netzdg-jan-jun-2018.pdf>

330 <https://transparencyreport.google.com/netzdg/youtube?hl=en>

191. Concerns have been raised by civil rights groups in Germany that the new law has 'privatised' law enforcement and that the courts, rather than social media companies, should continue to determine what speech contravenes German law.<sup>331</sup> Karim Palant from Facebook told us that the German approach had a number of risks and that he did not think it would work in the UK:

Under the German legislation, there is a real risk of requiring companies that do not necessarily have the resources legally to review every piece of content to remove, on a precautionary principle, a huge amount of content that would be perfectly legitimate. It is not a regulatory model that I would say the UK is even looking at, for very understandable reasons, especially given that the UK hate speech laws are far less fitted to that kind of model.<sup>332</sup>

He added that "Germany has a very prescriptive set of things that are very clearly defined in law as constituting hate speech. That is not the way in which UK hate speech law works, so some of the downsides of the German law would be magnified here".<sup>333</sup>

192. To address concerns about the current state of UK law, the Prime Minister announced in February 2018 that the Law Commission was to review the current law around abusive and offensive online communications. It was also asked to highlight any gaps in criminal law which cause problems in tackling this abuse. In its initial report, published on 1 November 2018, the Commission stated that they did "not consider there to be major gaps in the current state of the criminal law concerning abusive and offensive online communications".<sup>334</sup> The report went on to say, however, that "many of the applicable offences" were "not constructed and targeted in a way that adequately reflects the nature of offending behaviour in the online environment, and the degree of harm that it causes in certain contexts".<sup>335</sup> It concluded that "reform could help ensure that the most harmful conduct is punished appropriately, while maintaining and enhancing protection for freedom of expression".<sup>336</sup> It also recommended that:

As part of the reform of communications offences, the meaning of "obscene" and "indecent" should be reviewed, and further consideration should be given to the meaning of the terms "publish", "display", "possession" and "public place" under the applicable offences.<sup>337</sup>

193. Yih-Choung Teh from Ofcom was clear that the NetzDG law had shown that individual countries were able to take action to address illegal content and that "national law can make a difference".<sup>338</sup> When asked if the Government was considering adopting a similar approach in the UK, the Minister for Digital and Creative Industries, Margot James MP, replied "Yes, indeed, we are".<sup>339</sup> She explained that she was "very interested in

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331 Center for Democracy & Technology, "[German Social Media Law Creates Strong Incentives for Censorship](#)", 7 July 2017

332 [Q496](#)

333 *ibid*

334 The Law Commission, [Abusive and Offensive Online Communications: A Scoping Report](#), HC 1682, November 2018, p328

335 *ibid*

336 *ibid*

337 The Law Commission, [Abusive and Offensive Online Communications: A Scoping Report](#), HC 1682, November 2018, p330

338 [Q594](#)

339 [Q653](#)

the German approach” and, much like Ofcom, highlighted that it was “interesting to note that the German Government have been able to introduce this law [...] and that has been deemed compliant with the European e-commerce directive”.<sup>340</sup>

### Content moderators

194. Reported content may be reviewed by human moderators or by machine learning tools. In the past, social media companies have been reluctant to state how many human moderators they employ. To some extent, the NetzDG law appears to have prompted a degree of openness. Twitter stated that “more than 50 people work specifically on NetzDG”, while at Facebook there are “65 individuals [...] who process reports submitted through the NetzDG reporting form”.<sup>341</sup> Google meanwhile outlined in its NetzDG transparency report that:

Depending on the amount of incoming NetzDG requests, the number of content reviewers supporting the YouTube operation and the legal team can vary. Approximately 100 content reviewers for YouTube and Google+ only working on NetzDG complaints were employed by an external service provider.<sup>342</sup>

195. Twitter, however, told us that they “have not released figures around the number of moderators” they employ globally on the grounds that “as we use technology more and more, [a focus on moderators] is telling only half the story”.<sup>343</sup> Tumblr told us that it had “recently increased the size of its content review team to ensure that it can continue to apply this level of scrutiny to incoming reports” though it too did not give us any figures.<sup>344</sup>

196. Facebook stressed that it was “the first major platform to confirm the number of reviewers who look at reports from users”.<sup>345</sup> Karim Palant from Facebook told us that “by the end of 2017, [it] had increased the number from about 3,500 to 8,000”. He added that Facebook had “made a commitment this year to double overall the teams working on safety and security at Facebook, so that number is changing rapidly and upwards”.<sup>346</sup> Google UK also told us that its goal was to “bring the total number of people across Google working to address content that might violate our policies to over 10,000 by next month”.<sup>347</sup> Both sets of numbers referred to those employed *globally* (ie not only in the UK) to review content.

### Transparency reporting

197. Failures by some social media companies to disclose the number of human moderators they employ were symptomatic of a broader lack of transparency around how they operate and the processes through which (reported) content was monitored, prioritised and, in some instances, removed. As the charities YoungMinds and The Children’s Society explained:

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340 [Q649](#)

341 [Twitter \(SMH0175\)](#); [Facebook \(SMH0176\)](#)

342 <https://transparencyreport.google.com/netzdg/youtube?hl=en>

343 [Qq473-474](#)

344 [Tumblr \(SMH0171\)](#)

345 [Facebook \(SMH0153\)](#)

346 [Q478](#)

347 [Google UK \(SMH0183\)](#)

It is particularly difficult to assess the success rate of social media platforms in tackling [...] digital harms, as companies do not consistently record and report on the nature, volume and outcomes of such complaints made within their systems. There is also poor transparency regarding moderation processes, including: details about the number of moderators, how decisions are made, their training and the tools available to them.<sup>348</sup>

198. Speaking to the House of Lords Communications Committee in July 2018, Adam Kinsey, Director of Policy at Sky, acknowledged that platforms already policed content, albeit to “differing extents”, but stressed that there was “no accountability”:

For example, how are they doing it? What is the split between moderators and AI? How are they doing it across different content classes? What does it look like when they are considering reports from children? None of that is transparent. Transparency is only available when the platforms decide to do it, on a global basis, at a time of their choosing.<sup>349</sup>

199. One proposal to address these problems was ‘transparency reporting’. In her speech on ‘Standards in Public Life’ in February 2018, the Prime Minister described social media as one of the “defining technologies of our age” and committed to establishing “a new Annual Internet Safety Transparency Report”. This, she explained, would “provide UK-level data on what offensive online content is being reported, how social media companies are responding to complaints, and what material is removed”.<sup>350</sup> Further details have been provided in the Government Response to its *Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper*, which included a “draft transparency reporting template”. The template detailed:

the metrics that we [the Government] expect companies to report on. The template includes basic, but vital and hitherto unavailable, information on the total number of UK users, total number of UK posts and total number of reports, as well as what information companies signpost users to when they have reported an issue [...] We are also seeking information about the company’s processes for handling reports, as well as specific information relating to the types of reports which are made and how quickly they are resolved.

200. This approach has been widely welcomed. As Carolyn Bunting from Internet Matters put it, “if you do not measure stuff, you cannot possibly manage this. The very first step in this is to get to grips with what is actually going on for UK children on social media” through transparency reporting.<sup>351</sup> The NSPCC also stressed that:

Transparency reports must be a key part of any regulatory solution, allowing Parliament, civil society and users to fully understand industry processes and outcomes. As a minimum, regulatory reporting should set out how sites resource their moderation and reporting processes; and the specific outcomes that result from reports being made by children or in relation to child abuse.<sup>352</sup>

348 YoungMinds and The Children’s Society (SMH0146)

349 [Oral evidence taken before the House of Lords Communications Committee](#), 10 July 2018, Q106 [Adam Kinsey]

350 [PM speech on standards in public life](#): 6 February 2018, gov.uk

351 [Q83](#)

352 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#))

201. While the major social media companies have started to produce transparency reports, ahead of any formal requirement to do so, Duncan Stephenson from the Royal Society for Public Health pointed to a “lack of consistency in how different platforms [were] approaching and embracing this”<sup>353</sup> including how frequently such reports were published, and what information was, or was not, included. We heard that Twitter’s transparency report focused only on illegal content, with reports on cyberbullying, for example, not included.<sup>354</sup> Since November 2018, in contrast, Facebook has included “Bullying and Harassment and Child Nudity and Sexual Exploitation of Children” in its transparency report.<sup>355</sup> As Yih-Choung Teh from Ofcom also noted, “different platforms have different community standards” with some offering a “greater degrees of protection than others”.<sup>356</sup> This, in turn, may impact on what they consider including in their transparency reports.

202. The Government has indicated that transparency reporting is one of the “potential areas where the Government will legislate”.<sup>357</sup>

### Code of practice

203. The Government committed to introduce a code of practice for social media platforms under section 103 of the *Digital Economy Act 2017*.<sup>358</sup> The Act requires that the code addresses conduct that involves bullying or insulting an individual online, or other behaviour likely to intimidate or humiliate the individual. The Government has since confirmed that the code will “apply to conduct directed at groups and businesses, as users can be upset by content even if it’s not directed towards them individually”.<sup>359</sup>

204. Details of the code were outlined in the Government’s Green Paper on the *Internet Safety Strategy*, as well as in the Government Response to the Green Paper. The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, then Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, described the code of practice as providing “guidance to social media providers on appropriate reporting mechanisms and moderation processes to tackle abusive content”.<sup>360</sup> The code is also identified as a “potential area” for legislation.<sup>361</sup> According to the Government, the code will cover the following broad areas:

- Clear and transparent reporting practices;
- Processes for dealing with notifications from users;
- Clear and understandable terms and conditions and the expectation that these will be enforced, including the action taken to prevent anonymous abuse;
- Clear explanations to the complainant about the action taken in response to their complaint (‘comply or explain’);

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353 [Q84](#)

354 [Q516](#)

355 <https://transparency.facebook.com/community-standards-enforcement>

356 [Q587](#)

357 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p15; [Q646](#)

358 Digital Economy Act 2017, [section 103](#)

359 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p24

360 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p2

361 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p15

- Information about how to report potentially illegal content and contact, to the relevant authorities;
- A commitment to signpost users to useful information when they experience harmful content, as appropriate; and
- Use of technology to identify potentially harmful online content and behaviours.<sup>362</sup>

205. Emily Cherry from Barnardo's told the Committee that she was pleased with the Government's commitment to looking at regulation. She added that Barnardo's:

has been calling for some time for a statutory code of practice, to apply to all social media sites, and an independent regulator with the teeth to hold social media companies to account. That means bringing them to the table, issuing fines if they are unable to comply with the code.<sup>363</sup>

206. At present, however, it is unclear whether/how the code of conduct will be enforced. The Government stated in May 2018 that it "will *encourage* all social media platforms to sign up to our code of practice and transparency reporting" (our emphasis).<sup>364</sup> Reflecting on the code, Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin commented that:

while the Government has put forward a draft Code of Practice for social media companies, as required under the Digital Economy Act 2017, we believe that such a voluntary Code is now no longer sufficient on its own to pre-empt and reduce the current level of harms that can be experienced by users of social media.<sup>365</sup>

The NSPCC also stated that it was:

essential that the Government commits to statutory regulation of social networks. Since a voluntary Code of Practice was first proposed in the Byron Review ten years ago, social networks have consistently failed to prioritise child protection and safeguarding practices.<sup>366</sup>

The Royal Society for Public Health, in contrast, thought that industry "should be given the chance to regulate themselves in line with a voluntary code of practice".<sup>367</sup>

207. When asked if the code would be voluntary or statutory the Minister indicated that the Government's thinking on the matter was evolving:

At the point of the Green Paper published last year, there was an expectation that, although rooted in the Digital Economy Act and, therefore, a statutory code, it would be undertaken on a voluntary basis. However, in our response to the consultation that followed from the Green Paper, which we published in May, we announced that we would work on a White Paper that would produce recommendations to enforce the code of conduct and transparency

362 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p23

363 [Q274](#); the Anti-bullying Alliance and UK Safer Internet Centre also stated that they supported the code of practice, see Anti-Bullying Alliance ([SMH0102](#)); UK Safer Internet Centre ([SMH0110](#))

364 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p20

365 Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin ([SMH0172](#))

366 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#))

367 The Royal Society for Public Health ([SMH0127](#))



reporting by a means of legislative and non-legislative measures. Our thinking is developing towards the view that some level of statutory legal regulation will be required.<sup>368</sup>

## Age verification

208. Access to some content online is only available after the user has verified that they are over a certain age. Under section 14 of the *Digital Economy Act 2017*, there is a requirement to prevent access to Internet pornography “by persons under 18”.<sup>369</sup> Though the Act received Royal Assent in April 2017, section 14 of the Act has yet to come fully into force. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) has, however, been appointed as the regulator.

209. Pornographic material is readily available through some social media platforms, which host accounts that promote the publishers and stars of pornography. The Digital Policy Alliance highlighted how there was:

still no clarity regarding the extent to which Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), search engines and social media platforms will be captured as ancillary service providers [under the Act] and held to account for pornography accessed by children via these paths.<sup>370</sup>

210. In October 2018, the Government produced the *Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations*.<sup>371</sup> The Regulations defined the “Circumstances in which pornographic material is to be regarded as made available on a commercial basis”. The Regulations stated that they did “not apply in a case where it is reasonable for the age-verification regulator to assume that pornographic material makes up less than one-third of the content of the material made available on or via the internet site”. This has been interpreted to mean that social media platforms will not be captured by the age verification requirements of the Digital Economy Act.

211. The regulations were approved in December 2018, with the Minister anticipating that age verification would “be in force by Easter next year”.<sup>372</sup> She added that the Government had “always said that we will permit the industry three months to get up to speed with the practicalities” of delivering the age verification.<sup>373</sup> The Minister also acknowledged that the ‘one-third’ rule was a weakness in regulations:

it is well known that certain social media platforms that many people use regularly have pornography freely available. We have decided to start with the commercial operations while we bring in the age verification techniques that have not been widely used to date. But we will keep a watching brief on how effective those age verification procedures turn out to be with commercial providers and will keep a close eye on how social

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368 [Q621](#)

369 *Digital Economy Act 2017*, [section 14](#)

370 Digital Policy Alliance, Age Verification & Internet Safety Working Group - Briefing, [Online Pornography: Outstanding issues with implementation of the Digital Economy Act 2017](#), September 2018

371 [Online Pornography \(Commercial Basis\) Regulations 2018](#)

372 [Q630](#)

373 *ibid*

media platforms develop in terms of the extent of pornographic material, particularly if they are platforms that appeal to children—not all are. You point to a legitimate weakness, on which we have a close eye.<sup>374</sup>

David Austin from the BBFC, however, pointed out that there was a legal obligation on the regulator to:

report back to the Government 12 months after implementation to say what has and has not worked well. If after 12 months social media are an issue in relation to pornography, we will certainly make that clear.<sup>375</sup>

212. Where non-pornographic content was concerned, the Government also acknowledged a more widespread lack of age verification for social media platforms, stating that it needed “to continue to tackle” the issue “head-on and evolve [its] work on online safety”.<sup>376</sup> What this will involve is unclear. The Health Secretary, Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, told *The House Magazine* that there “absolutely” should be a minimum and enforced legal age requirement to use social media sites. When asked what the age limits should be, he replied: “Well, the terms and conditions of the main social media sites are that you shouldn’t use it under the age of 13, but the companies do absolutely nothing to enforce against that. And they should, I think that should be a requirement”.<sup>377</sup>

213. Some of the evidence we received, however, was sceptical about the effectiveness of age verification technology. YMCA England and Wales explained that:

although age restrictions have been put in place on social media sites, young people are continuously evading these. Indeed, young people frequently spoke of having signed up to multiple social media accounts by the age of seven illustrating the protections being put in place to protect young people are currently failing to do so.<sup>378</sup>

According to Professor Przybylski, Director of Research at the Oxford Internet Institute, introducing age verification could lead to harmful, unintended consequences. He told the Committee that it would teach young people:

how to use proxies, VPN and other technologies. My legitimate concern [...] is that many young people will wind up using insecure services to access mature material. They will wind up having viruses or other material infect the browser.<sup>379</sup>

214. Karim Palant from Facebook also told us that he was “not aware of anywhere where there is an age verification process for people in their teens that would compare with the BBFC process that is still being worked on for 18-year-olds for pornography here in the UK”.<sup>380</sup> Both Facebook and Twitter pointed to “tensions”<sup>381</sup> relating to the amount of data their companies held on under 18s, with Karim Palant questioning:

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374 [Q632](#)

375 [Q239](#)

376 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p15

377 [“We are going to make it a joy to work in the NHS”](#), interview with Matt Hancock, *The House Magazine*, 25 October 2018

378 YMCA England & Wales ([SMH0108](#))

379 [Q121](#)

380 [Q518](#)

381 [Qq517–518](#)

how much data [do] you want to keep on 13, 14 or 15-year-olds and how many younger people you wish to restrict from accessing internet products by requiring them to have access to a credit card or a photo ID.<sup>382</sup>

215. In contrast, both the Digital Policy Alliance and Yoti (an identity verification platform) told us that there were technological solutions to the problem.<sup>383</sup> Yoti, for example, highlighted how:

school databases could be used by Government should they wish to allow identity companies to check on a yes/no basis that a child or young person is over 13, 13–17 or 18 and over.<sup>384</sup>

David Austin from the BBFC also pointed to significant innovation taking place in this field:

A year ago, the industry was saying, “We can’t age-verify at a reasonable cost. It will cost us £1 to £1.50 each time we age-verify.” The progress it has made over the last 12 months means that now it is free or costs only a fraction of a penny to age-verify. We have seen massive technological innovation.<sup>385</sup>

216. The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries indicated that establishing a digital identity for children, which confirms their age, may be on the horizon:

At the moment, we think we have a robust means by which to verify people’s age at 18; the challenge is to develop tools that can verify people’s age at a younger age, such as 13. Those techniques are not robust enough yet, but a lot of technological research is going on, and I am reasonably confident that, over the next few years, there will be robust means by which to identify age at younger than 18.<sup>386</sup>

## Age-appropriate design

217. Instead of looking at how to prevent children from accessing certain sites, some witnesses focused on how to ensure platforms were designed, from the outset, to be safe for children. Under section 123 of the *Data Protection Act 2018*, the Information Commissioner must prepare a “code of practice” which contains guidance on “standards of age-appropriate design of relevant information society services which are likely to be accessed by children”.<sup>387</sup> During a debate on the Data Protection Bill in December 2017, the Government committed to supporting the Commissioner in her development of the Code by providing a list of “minimum standards to be taken into account when designing it”. According to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in DCMS, Lord Ashton, the standards included:

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382 [Q517](#)

383 Digital Policy Alliance ([SMH0184](#)); Yoti ([SMH0177](#))

384 Yoti ([SMH0177](#)). Such databases include the centrally-held ‘National Pupil Database’, as well as individual ‘School Information Management System’ (SIMS) databases.

385 [Q230](#)

386 [Q633](#)

387 Data Protection Act 2018, [section 123](#)

default privacy settings, data minimisation standards, the presentation and language of terms and conditions and privacy notices, uses of geolocation technology, automated and semi-automated profiling, transparency of paid-for activity such as product placement and marketing, the sharing and resale of data, the strategies used to encourage extended user engagement, user reporting and resolution processes and systems, the ability to understand and activate a child's right to erasure, rectification and restriction, the ability to access advice from independent, specialist advocates on all data rights, and any other aspect of design that the commissioner considers relevant.<sup>388</sup>

218. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) consulted on the design code between June and September 2018.<sup>389</sup> A response had not been published at the time of writing. Charities and NGOs broadly welcomed its development. Emily Cherry from Barnardo's was clear that the UK:

absolutely needs to have [...] safety-by-design principles in place [...] nobody can launch a new shop children will go into or a new playground where children can play without having health and safety features in place. Why should the online world be any different?<sup>390</sup>

219. Internet Matters highlighted that some social media sites were currently designed to “keep people online for as long as possible”, adding that this was “the metric of success for many of these companies”. It stressed that currently there was “little to no regulation around this area—especially on apps or devices designed and targeted at children and young people”.<sup>391</sup>

220. A similar point was made by Dr James Williams, a former product designer at Google. In his book, *Stand out of Our Light*, he wrote that “success” from the perspective of a major online tech company was typically defined in the form of low-level “engagement” goals which “include things like maximizing the amount of time you spend with their product, keeping you clicking or tapping or scrolling as much as possible, or showing you as many pages or ads as they can”. According to Dr Williams, he soon came to understand that companies like Google were focused on holding the attention of their users for as long as possible.<sup>392</sup> Our colleagues on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee recently launched an inquiry on “Immersive and addictive technologies” and will be examining this aspect of social media in more detail.<sup>393</sup>

221. Some tech and social media companies, along with Internet Service Providers, have attempted to integrate ‘safety-by-design’ principles into their products. Claire Lilley from Google UK told us about YouTube Kids which she described as a “restricted version of YouTube for younger children” aged under 13. She explained that you “cannot make any comments on it or upload any content. You can turn the search function off completely”<sup>394</sup>

388 HL Deb, 11 Dec 2017, [col 1440](#) [Lords Chamber]

389 The consultation results had not been published at the time of writing.

390 [Q229](#)

391 Internet Matters ([SMH0080](#))

392 James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, (Cambridge, 2018)

393 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/immersive-technologies/>

394 [Q455](#)

while algorithms are used “to curate the right kind of age-appropriate content”.<sup>395</sup> The UK’s four large fixed-line ISPs (BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media) also offer all new Internet customers a family-friendly network-level filtering service.

222. The need for these types of technical controls—including content filtering/blocking, privacy and location settings set, by default, to the strongest available for under 18s, and deactivating features designed to promote extended use—were emphasised by children’s NGOs including the NSPCC and Barnardo’s.<sup>396</sup> The Government, in its Response to the *Internet Safety Strategy*, asserted that a fundamental shift in approach was required: one that moves “the burden away from consumers having to secure their devices and instead ensuring strong security is built into consumer [...] products by design”.<sup>397</sup>

### A way forward—establishing a ‘duty of care’

223. In Chapter 3 we recommended that the Government’s forthcoming White Paper on *Online Harms* should be underpinned by the principle that children must, as far as practicably possible, be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites. It has been suggested that this could be translated into a statutory requirement for social media companies to have a ‘duty of care’ towards its users. A duty of care, applying to both a person and to companies, has been defined as a requirement to:

take care in relation to a particular activity as it affects particular people or things. If that person does not take care, and someone comes to a harm identified in the relevant regime as a result, there are legal consequences, primarily through a regulatory scheme but also with the option of personal legal redress.<sup>398</sup>

224. The ‘duty of care’ approach, according to Lorna Woods, Professor of Internet Law, University of Essex, and William Perrin, was “essentially preventative” and aimed at “reducing adverse impact on users before it happens, rather than a system aimed at compensation/redress”. They added that “the categories of harm can be specified at a high level, by Parliament, in statute” which is similar to the approach outlined by Ofcom.<sup>399</sup> Building on this point, the NSPCC emphasised that there would need to be a regulator who could assess social media companies progress against: “identified harms, and could instruct that additional measures are taken, or sanctions imposed, if platforms fail to appropriately resource or deliver harm reduction strategies”.<sup>400</sup>

225. Professor Woods and William Perrin similarly stated that a regulator would be needed to:

provide guidance on the meaning of harms; support best practice (including by recognising good practice in industry codes); gather evidence; encourage media literacy; monitor compliance; and take enforcement action where necessary.<sup>401</sup>

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395 [Q253](#)

396 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#)); Barnardo’s ([SMH0134](#))

397 HM Government, [Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper](#), May 2018, p28

398 Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin ([SMH0172](#))

399 Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin ([SMH0172](#))

400 NSPCC ([SMH0174](#))

401 Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin ([SMH0172](#))

In January 2019, Professor Woods and William Perrin updated their ‘duty of care’ approach. Notably, they broadened the scope of their original proposals to apply to “all relevant service providers irrespective of size”. To strengthen the “enforcement mechanisms”, they also suggested that “directors should be liable to fines personally” for non-compliance with the regulatory regime, though added that this was “a preliminary view”.<sup>402</sup> The Minister for Digital and Creative Industries, Margot James MP, told us that establishing a ‘duty of care’ was “one proposal that we [the Government] are looking at”.<sup>403</sup>

## Conclusions and recommendations

**226. In February 2018, the Prime Minister described social media as one of the “defining technologies of our age”. Like many age-defining technologies, it has brought a raft of benefits to its users, together with a host of unintended consequences; a number of which have been particularly detrimental—and in some instances, dangerous—to the wellbeing of children. Currently, there is a patchwork of regulation and legislation in place, resulting in a “standards lottery” that does little to ensure that children are as safe as possible when they go online, as they are offline. A plethora of public and private initiatives, from digital literacy training to technology ‘solutions’, have attempted to plug the gaps. While the majority of these are to be welcomed, they can only go so far. A comprehensive regulatory framework is urgently needed: one that clearly sets out the responsibilities of social media companies towards their users, alongside a regime for upholding those responsibilities. The Government’s forthcoming Online Harms White Paper, and subsequent legislation, presents a crucial opportunity to put a world-leading regulatory framework in place. Given the international nature of social media platforms the Government should ideally work with those in other jurisdictions to develop an international approach. We are concerned, however, based on the Government Response to its Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, that it may not be as coherent, and joined-up, as it needs to be. We recommend a package of measures in this Report to form the basis of a comprehensive regulatory framework.**

*227. To ensure that the boundaries of the law are clear, and that illegal content can be identified and removed, the Government must act on the Law Commission’s findings on Abusive and Offensive Online Communication. The Government should now ask the Law Commission to produce clear recommendations on how to reform existing laws dealing with communication offences so that there is precision and clarity regarding what constitutes illegal online content and behaviour. The scope for enforcing existing laws against those who are posting illegal content must be strengthened to enable appropriate punishment, while also protecting freedom of speech.*

*228. A principles-based regulatory regime for social media companies should be introduced in the forthcoming parliamentary session. The regime should apply to any site with registered UK users. One of the key principles of the regulatory regime must be to protect children from harm when accessing and using social media sites, while safeguarding freedom of speech (within the bounds of existing law). This principle should be enshrined in legislation as social media companies having a ‘duty of care’ towards its*

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402 Carnegie Trust UK, Internet Harm Reduction, An updated proposal by Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin, January 2019

403 [Q626](#)

*users who are under 18 to act with reasonable care to avoid identified harms. This duty should extend beyond the age of 18 for those groups who are particularly vulnerable, as determined by the Government.*

229. *While the Government should have the power to set the principles underpinning the new regulatory regime, and identify the harms to be minimised, flexibility should be built into the legislation so that it can straightforwardly adapt and evolve as trends change and new technologies emerge.*

230. *A statutory code of practice for social media companies, to provide consistency on content reporting practices and moderation mechanisms, must be introduced through new primary legislation, based on the template in the Government Response to its Internet Safety Strategy. The template must, however, be extended to include reports of, and responses to, child sexual abuse and exploitation.*

231. *A regulator should be appointed by the end of October 2019 to uphold the new regime. It must be incumbent upon the regulator to provide explanatory guidance on the meaning and nature of the harms to be minimised; to monitor compliance with the code of practice; to publish compliance data regularly; and to take enforcement action, when warranted. Enforcement actions must be backed up by a strong and effective sanctions regime, including consideration being given to the case for the personal liability of directors. The regulator must be given the necessary statutory information-gathering powers to enable it to monitor compliance effectively.*

232. *Those subject to the regulatory regime should be required to publish detailed Transparency Reports every six months. As a minimum, the reports must contain information on the number of registered UK users, the number of human moderators reviewing reports flagged in the UK, the volume of reports received from UK users broken down by age, what harms the reports relate to, the processes by which reports are handled—including information on how they are prioritised, the split between human and machine moderation and any reliance on third parties, such as Trusted Flaggers—the speed at which reports are resolved, data on how it was resolved, and information on how the resolution or response was fed back to the user.*

233. *The Government should consider implementing new legislation, similar to that introduced in Germany, such that when content that is potentially illegal under UK law is reported to a social media company, it should have to review the content, take a decision on whether to remove, block or flag that item (if appropriate) or take other actions, and relay that decision to the individual/organisation reporting it within 24 hours. Where the illegality of the content is unclear, the social media company should raise the case with the regulator, who has the authority to grant the social media company additional time to investigate further. The Government should consider whether the approach adopted in Germany of allowing an extra seven days, in the first instance, to review and investigate further should be introduced in the UK.*

234. *Given the innovation of new technologies such as “deep fake videos” which cannot be easily identified by human moderators, social media companies should put in place artificial intelligence techniques to identify content that may be fake, and introduce ways in which to “flag” such content to users, or remove (as appropriate).*

*235. Social media companies must put robust systems in place—that go beyond a simple ‘tick box’ or entering a date of birth—to verify the age of the user. Guidance should be provided, and monitoring undertaken, by the regulator. The Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations must be immediately revised so that making pornography available on, or via, social media platforms falls within the scope of the regulations.*

*236. Safety-by-design principles should be integrated into the accounts of those who are under 18 years of age. This includes ensuring strong security and privacy settings are switched on by default, while geo-location settings are turned off. Strategies to prolong user engagement should be prohibited and the Government should consider improvements to ways in which children are given recourse to data erasure where appropriate.*

*237. We believe that Ofcom, working closely alongside the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), is well-placed to perform the regulatory duties and recommend to the Government that it resource Ofcom, and where relevant, the ICO, accordingly to perform the additional functions outlined above.*



## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Research on social media and screen-use

1. In order to develop a more valid and reliable understanding of the relationship between the use of social media by young people, and its effects on their health, the information asymmetry between tech companies, the Government, other public bodies and bona fide researchers must be addressed swiftly. (Paragraph 29)
2. *Regardless of whether Ofcom's remit is eventually expanded to cover social media platforms, its existing obligation to collect data on the 'media literacy' of both adults and children (as set out in the Communications Act 2003) should be strengthened through establishing statutory information-gathering powers. Such powers should require social media companies with registered UK users to provide the regulator with the high-level data it needs to fulfil its duties with respect to media literacy, with legislation introduced in the next Session.* (Paragraph 30)
3. *While respecting data protection principles, social media companies should make anonymised high-level data available, for research purposes, to bona fide researchers so that a better understanding of social media's effects on users can be established. The Government should consider what legislation needs to be in place to improve access by researchers to this type of data.* (Paragraph 31)
4. We commend the Government for its efforts to think more closely about online harms and how best to address them, particularly when those harms have serious, detrimental effects on the lives of young people. While the Government has undertaken a wide-ranging consultation process through the publication of its Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, it is disappointing that it has not sought to address the current limitations of the evidence base by actively commissioning new research. As the Government Response to its Green Paper acknowledges, the evidence on the impact of social media on mental health "is not yet conclusive". That the field requires more robust research should not come as a surprise when the Chief Medical Officer described the evidence base, in 2013, as "sparse and contradictory". (Paragraph 38)
5. *To ensure that policy is evidence-based, and that the research needs of Government departments are met, departmental 'Areas of Research Interest' documents must be accompanied by periodic funding calls. Such calls need to take place ahead of an area becoming the subject of a major policy initiative.* (Paragraph 39)
6. *The existing Areas of Research Interest documents produced by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and by the Department of Health and Social Care, should be expanded to include how to measure and monitor the harms related to social media use. As a matter of urgency, DCMS should also commission research focused on identifying who is at risk of experiencing harm online, and why, and what the long-term consequences of that exposure are on the young person.* (Paragraph 40)

## Risks, harms and benefits of social media and screens

7. *The report of the Independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation on the 'Health effects from Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields' is now nearly seven years old. In its Response to our Report, we ask the Government to outline what assessment it has made of the quantity and quality of the research on this topic, published since 2012, and to explain whether another evidence review is now warranted. (Paragraph 64)*
8. *We welcome Dame Sally Davies' work in this important area and look forward to reading the results of her review, and subsequent guidance, in due course. We note that many parents find it extremely challenging to moderate social media usage, especially where older children are involved. It would be helpful if this was recognised by those giving guidance to parents. (Paragraph 71)*
9. Great strides have recently been made to address and remove content that incites terrorist activities. The same effort and determination must now be applied to curb the proliferation online of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse and exploitation of children, as a matter of urgency. The Home Secretary stated that he expects a more effective partnership between technology companies, law enforcement agencies, the charity sector and the Government to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation online. Simply 'expecting' more, however, is an insufficient approach to tackle the grievous nature of the problem. It is worrying that we still do not have a good understanding of the scale of online child sexual exploitation. (Paragraph 108)
10. *The Government must proactively lead the way in ensuring that an effective partnership is in place across civil society, technology companies, law enforcement, and non-governmental organisations aimed at ending child sexual exploitation (CSE) and abuse online. The Home Office should use its research budget to commission a large-scale study that establishes the scale and prevalence of CSE which should then be updated annually. Once this has been published, we recommend that the Government set itself an ambitious target to halve reported online CSE in two years and all but eliminate it in four years. That ambition should be matched with the necessary resources, raised by the digital services tax, to make it a reality and should occur in addition to—and not instead of—establishing a legal 'duty of care' by social media companies towards its users who are under 18. Where companies are not voluntarily working with the Government and law enforcement agencies to prevent CSE, the Government should consider whether legal action is necessary. (Paragraph 109)*
11. Our inquiry has illuminated the broad spectrum of benefits, risks and harms that children and young people may encounter via social media and screen-use. While social media and screen-use is not necessarily creating these risks, it has, in numerous cases, amplified them. Initiatives are in place to address some of these harms—notably around cyberbullying—yet others are falling through the cracks. A comprehensive, joined-up approach to address the plethora of negative effects is needed. (Paragraph 131)
12. *Underpinning the Government's forthcoming White Paper, and subsequent legislation, should be the principle that children must, as far as practicably possible, be protected from harm when accessing and using social media sites. All the physical and mental health harms we have outlined in this chapter—including cyberbullying, grooming,*

*child abuse and child sexual exploitation (CSE), 'self-generated' images and 'sexting', the live streaming of CSE, violence, hate speech and pornography—should be covered. (Paragraph 132)*

### Resources for schools and parents

13. As children spend an increasing proportion of their life online, there is a pressing need for the education system to catch up and ensure that young people are equipped with the skills that they need to navigate, and critically assess, what they are seeing on social media and beyond. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 presents the Government with a vital opportunity to establish digital literacy and resilience as integral parts of the curriculum for primary and secondary school students, through making 'Personal, Social, Health and Economic' (PSHE) education mandatory. This chance must not be wasted. (Paragraph 148)
14. *We recommend that 'Personal, Social, Health and Economic' (PSHE) education be made mandatory for primary and secondary school children in the next parliamentary session and that the PSHE curriculum delivers an age-appropriate understanding of, and resilience towards, the harms and benefits of the digital world. (Paragraph 149)*
15. *The Department for Education should commission research early in 2019 to evaluate existing resources on online safety and digital resilience. This should be undertaken with a view to creating guidance on, and signposting teachers towards, high-quality information and teaching resources that can be used with primary and secondary school-age children. (Paragraph 150)*
16. Parental engagement can play a vital role in helping children develop 'digital resilience', so that they can confidently identify and judge online risks themselves. Parents, however, need high-quality support to ensure these conversations are as effective as possible. (Paragraph 155)
17. *In addition to identifying the gaps in the 'online safety information available to parents', the Government should commission the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to produce a toolkit in 2019 for parents and caregivers. The toolkit should enable them to have an effective, open and ongoing dialogue with their children about how to recognise, manage and mitigate online risks in relation to social media. This work should complement the proposed review of existing teaching resources recommended in paragraph 150. (Paragraph 156)*
18. We have heard how children bringing smartphones into schools can be both a help and a hinderance to learning. While it is right that each school should have the freedom to decide its own policy on the use of mobile phones on its premises, it is essential that schools are supported to make that choice with evidence-based guidance. (Paragraph 164)
19. *We recommend that the Government's 'What Works Centre for Education' evaluates the different approaches to handling smartphone use in schools so as to provide a basis for making evidence-based guidance available to both primary and secondary schools. This evaluation should be produced by the end of 2019. (Paragraph 165)*

## Regulation and guidance

20. In February 2018, the Prime Minister described social media as one of the “defining technologies of our age”. Like many age-defining technologies, it has brought a raft of benefits to its users, together with a host of unintended consequences; a number of which have been particularly detrimental—and in some instances, dangerous—to the wellbeing of children. Currently, there is a patchwork of regulation and legislation in place, resulting in a “standards lottery” that does little to ensure that children are as safe as possible when they go online, as they are offline. A plethora of public and private initiatives, from digital literacy training to technology ‘solutions’, have attempted to plug the gaps. While the majority of these are to be welcomed, they can only go so far. A comprehensive regulatory framework is urgently needed: one that clearly sets out the responsibilities of social media companies towards their users, alongside a regime for upholding those responsibilities. The Government’s forthcoming Online Harms White Paper, and subsequent legislation, presents a crucial opportunity to put a world-leading regulatory framework in place. Given the international nature of social media platforms the Government should ideally work with those in other jurisdictions to develop an international approach. We are concerned, however, based on the Government Response to its Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, that it may not be as coherent, and joined-up, as it needs to be. We recommend a package of measures in this Report to form the basis of a comprehensive regulatory framework. (Paragraph 226)
21. *To ensure that the boundaries of the law are clear, and that illegal content can be identified and removed, the Government must act on the Law Commission’s findings on Abusive and Offensive Online Communication. The Government should now ask the Law Commission to produce clear recommendations on how to reform existing laws dealing with communication offences so that there is precision and clarity regarding what constitutes illegal online content and behaviour. The scope for enforcing existing laws against those who are posting illegal content must be strengthened to enable appropriate punishment, while also protecting freedom of speech.* (Paragraph 227)
22. *A principles-based regulatory regime for social media companies should be introduced in the forthcoming parliamentary session. The regime should apply to any site with registered UK users. One of the key principles of the regulatory regime must be to protect children from harm when accessing and using social media sites, while safeguarding freedom of speech (within the bounds of existing law). This principle should be enshrined in legislation as social media companies having a ‘duty of care’ towards its users who are under 18 to act with reasonable care to avoid identified harms. This duty should extend beyond the age of 18 for those groups who are particularly vulnerable, as determined by the Government.* (Paragraph 228)
23. *While the Government should have the power to set the principles underpinning the new regulatory regime, and identify the harms to be minimised, flexibility should be built into the legislation so that it can straightforwardly adapt and evolve as trends change and new technologies emerge.* (Paragraph 229)
24. *A statutory code of practice for social media companies, to provide consistency on content reporting practices and moderation mechanisms, must be introduced through*

*new primary legislation, based on the template in the Government Response to its Internet Safety Strategy. The template must, however, be extended to include reports of, and responses to, child sexual abuse and exploitation. (Paragraph 230)*

25. *A regulator should be appointed by the end of October 2019 to uphold the new regime. It must be incumbent upon the regulator to provide explanatory guidance on the meaning and nature of the harms to be minimised; to monitor compliance with the code of practice; to publish compliance data regularly; and to take enforcement action, when warranted. Enforcement actions must be backed up by a strong and effective sanctions regime, including consideration being given to the case for the personal liability of directors. The regulator must be given the necessary statutory information-gathering powers to enable it to monitor compliance effectively. (Paragraph 231)*
26. *Those subject to the regulatory regime should be required to publish detailed Transparency Reports every six months. As a minimum, the reports must contain information on the number of registered UK users, the number of human moderators reviewing reports flagged in the UK, the volume of reports received from UK users broken down by age, what harms the reports relate to, the processes by which reports are handled—including information on how they are prioritised, the split between human and machine moderation and any reliance on third parties, such as Trusted Flaggers—the speed at which reports are resolved, data on how it was resolved, and information on how the resolution or response was fed back to the user. (Paragraph 232)*
27. *The Government should consider implementing new legislation, similar to that introduced in Germany, such that when content that is potentially illegal under UK law is reported to a social media company, it should have to review the content, take a decision on whether to remove, block or flag that item (if appropriate) or take other actions, and relay that decision to the individual/organisation reporting it within 24 hours. Where the illegality of the content is unclear, the social media company should raise the case with the regulator, who has the authority to grant the social media company additional time to investigate further. The Government should consider whether the approach adopted in Germany of allowing an extra seven days, in the first instance, to review and investigate further should be introduced in the UK. (Paragraph 233)*
28. *Given the innovation of new technologies such as “deep fake videos” which cannot be easily identified by human moderators, Social media companies should put in place artificial intelligence techniques to identify content that may be fake, and introduce ways in which to “flag” such content to users, or remove (as appropriate). (Paragraph 234)*
29. *Social media companies must put robust systems in place—that go beyond a simple ‘tick box’ or entering a date of birth—to verify the age of the user. Guidance should be provided, and monitoring undertaken, by the regulator. The Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations must be immediately revised so that making pornography available on, or via, social media platforms falls within the scope of the regulations. (Paragraph 235)*
30. *Safety-by-design principles should be integrated into the accounts of those who are under 18 years of age. This includes ensuring strong security and privacy settings*

*are switched on by default, while geo-location settings are turned off. Strategies to prolong user engagement should be prohibited and the Government should consider improvements to ways in which children are given recourse to data erasure where appropriate. (Paragraph 236)*

31. *We believe that Ofcom, working closely alongside the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), is well-placed to perform the regulatory duties and recommend to the Government that it resource Ofcom, and where relevant, the ICO, accordingly to perform the additional functions outlined above. (Paragraph 237)*

## Annex 1: Outreach event, Reading

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1) On 16 May 2018, an outreach event was held at South Street Arts Centre, Reading, to talk with youth leaders, parents and teachers about their views on social media. The following Members were present:

- Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP, Chair
- Bill Grant MP
- Neil O'Brien MP

2) The event involved:

- Polling attendees using voting pods with questions covering social media usage;
- Deliberative discussion on social media, followed by feedback of the key points.

3) The following points were raised:

- i) Bullying through social media was identified as the biggest worry among participants.
- ii) Some schools struggle to implement strategies for how to deal with social media bullying, particularly as certain apps (such as Snapchat) delete messages once the recipient reads/watches it, thereby erasing the 'proof'.
- iii) Parents stated that the social media companies should work to prevent bullying.
- iv) If you are being bullied or pressured by peers at school, participants highlighted that the "constant" nature of social media and apps enables the bullying to continue once the child has left the school.
- v) Body image also featured in the discussions. It was noted that problems arise not just from direct bullying, but also from the high standards set by peers posting 'highlights' of their lives on social media, which adds to the pressure felt by young people.
- vi) Several participants argued that children need to be taught how to be "social media safe" and how to treat others on social media apps.
- vii) On the issue of banning phones in schools, participants explained that children find ways of using them and the process of concealing the phones can cause more disruptions for the individual students and the class.

## Annex 2: Outreach event, Welland Park School

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1) On 10 October 2018, a group of 26 students from years 9 and 11 took part in a facilitated discussion, in Parliament, about social media and phone use in schools. The students from Welland Park Academy were split into four groups and were asked the following three questions:

- i) What is the social media policy in your school and classes?
- ii) What are your thoughts on the use of social media and screens in classrooms and schools?
- iii) What measures can be used to manage mobile phone use in schools?

As an icebreaker, the students were also asked which platforms they used and why. The notes below provide a summary of the students' discussions.

2) **Icebreaker:** The majority of students said that the social media platforms they used were Snapchat, Whatsapp and Instagram. Other platforms mentioned included Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Discord and YouTube, with the latter used to watch videos, rather than to post, or comment on, content. Students emphasised that social media enabled them to keep in touch with friends and was a fun way of staying connected. They also indicated that their privacy settings were activated so only friends could contact them. Some students followed accounts in the business and fashion worlds, and used social media for news, but did not post content.

3) **Question 1:** The Students were very aware of their school's social media policy and noted that at the start of every academic year, they and their parents signed a form agreeing to adhere to the policy. Mobile phones are allowed on the school's premises but are not to be switched on while in school unless authorised by a teacher to do so, as part of a lesson. The sanctions for being caught using a phone increase over time: on the third occasion of being caught, the phone is collected by a parent and both the parent and student then sign an agreement to hand the phone in to 'Pastoral', on a daily basis, and collect it at the end of the day, for two weeks.

4) **Question 2:** In general, students thought the policy was fair; they understood why it was in place and stressed that school was a time for learning. It was also noted that boundaries needed to be in place for phone-use and that school was a good place to set them. Some explained that the policy meant they got an enforced 'break' from social media and provided one less distraction in the classroom. Others questioned why phones could not be used at breaktimes and noted that policies at neighbouring schools were different.

5) **Question 3:** There were some complaints that the policy was not consistently enforced and that, in practice, it can be possible to sneak a look at phones in lessons. Carrying through with punishments if someone was caught using their phone was identified as an important deterrent and way to manage phone use. Holding assemblies and workshops to educate students on the dangers and pitfalls of social media use were highlighted. They



suggested that some of these sessions got a bit monotonous and tell them things they already know. They also suggested some of the informative videos might need updating as they deal with older forms of social media use.

## Annex 3: Survey Results

Question	Answers	Number
Which age group do you fit into?	a. 6–7	73
	b. 8–11	954
	c. 12–16	1996
	d. 17–18	325
	e. 19	2
		3350

Question	Answer	Number
Gender identity?	a. Male	1537
	b. Female	1567
	c. Other gender identity	28
	d. Prefer not to say	80
		3212

Question	Answer	Number
How long each day on average do you spend using social media?	a. Never	312
	b. Less than an hour a day	653
	c. 1 to 2 hours a day	1079
	d. 2 to 3 hours a day	698
	e. Over 3 hours a day	514
		3256

Question	Answer	Number
What is the main reason you use social media?	a. Follow friends' updates	892
	b. Keep updated with current events/news	515
	c. Follow celebrities	187
	d. Share my day	248
	e. Memes	605
	f. Other	815
		3262

Question	Answer	Number
When you post a picture on social media, how important are 'likes'?	a. Very important	431
	b. Important	563
	c. Reasonably important	611
	d. Not important	731
	e. Don't post	887
		3223

Question	Answer	Number
Have you witnessed any mean comments on social media?	a. Yes	1778
	b. No	940
	c. Prefer not to say	224
	d. Don't know	268
		3210

Question	Answer	Number
What kind of impact does social media have on your mood?	a. Mostly positive	1153
	b. Somewhat positive	903
	c. Somewhat negative	209
	d. Mostly negative	93
	e. No impact	836
		3194

Question	Answer	Number
How important is social media to your social life?	a. Very important	782
	b. Important	824
	c. Reasonably important	824
	d. Not important	760
		3190

Question	Answer	Number
What kind of impact does social media have on your concentration when completing a task?	a. Mostly positive	329
	b. Somewhat positive	425
	c. Somewhat negative	999
	d. Mostly negative	526
	e. No impact	935
		3214

## Annex 4: Informal meeting with the Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies

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1) On Thursday 15 November 2018, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Professor Dame Sally Davies, met with the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP, to discuss the CMO's review of the evidence "around the relationship between social media use and the mental health of young people up to the age of 25". The CMO noted that she had commissioned academics at University College, London to investigate the following research questions:

- RQ 1: Is there a prospective association between children and young people's use of social media and mental health and psychosocial outcomes?
- RQ2: Is there a prospective association between cyberbullying via social media and mental health and psychosocial outcomes?
- RQ 3: What are children and young people's views about the relationship between social media and mental health and psychosocial wellbeing?

2) At the time, out of 16,000 citations and 88 systematic reviews, 71 were deemed in scope, with 7 on problematic Internet use. The outcome of the review was not known at the time of the meeting. The CMO explained that the findings would influence what advice she could usefully provide. Possible age verification/age restrictions on children accessing social media were also discussed.

# Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 29 January 2019**

Members present:

Norman Lamb, in the Chair

Vicky Ford	Carol Monaghan
Bill Grant	Damien Moore
Mr Sam Gyimah	Graham Stringer
Darren Jones	Martin Whitfield
Stephen Metcalfe	

Draft Report (*Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 237 read and agreed to.

Annexes and Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fourteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

[Adjourned till Wednesday 30 January at 9.00 am

## Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Tuesday 22 May 2018

**Matt Blow**, Policy and Government Affairs Manager, YoungMinds, **Sue Jones**, Global Deputy CEO, Ditch the Label, **Dustin Hutchinson**, Research and Policy Analyst, National Children's Bureau, **Carolyn Bunting**, CEO, Internet Matters, and **Duncan Stephenson**, Director of External Affairs and Marketing, Royal Society for Public Health

[Q1–92](#)

**Amy Orben**, Lecturer, British Psychological Society, **Dr Lucy Betts**, Associate Professor, Nottingham Trent University, **Dr Mark Griffiths**, Distinguished Professor, Nottingham Trent University, and **Professor Andrew Przybylski**, Director of Research, Oxford Internet Institute

[Q93–159](#)

### Wednesday 23 May 2018

**Martin Hewitt**, Assistant Commissioner, Metropolitan Police Service, **Dr Netta Weinstein**, Senior Lecturer, Cardiff University, **Beth Murray**, Director of Communications and Engagement, Catch 22, **Dr Keir Irwin-Rogers**, Lecturer, The Open University, **Sheldon Thomas**, Consultant on gang and youth violence, Gangsline

[Q160–213](#)

### Tuesday 3 July 2018

**Susie Hargreaves OBE**, Chief Executive, Internet Watch Foundation, **David Austin**, CEO, British Board of Film Classification, and **Emily Cherry**, Assistant Director of Policy & Public Affairs, Barnardo's

[Q214–282](#)

**Anna Clark**, Cardinus Risk Management, **Dr Vicky Goodyear**, Lecturer in Pedagogy in Sport, Physical Activity and Health, University of Birmingham, **Dr Heather Woods**, Lecturer, School of Psychology, University of Glasgow, **Dr Max Davie**, Officer for Health Promotion and Mental Health Lead, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and **Professor Peter Fonagy**, National Clinical Adviser on children and young people's mental health, NHS England

[Q283–352](#)

### Wednesday 4 July 2018

**Becca**, Member of Youth Select Committee 2017, **Sienna**, nominated by the National Children's Bureau, **Bethan**, nominated by the National Children's Bureau, **Orlaith**, nominated by Barnardo's, and **Jack**, nominated by Kidscape

[Q353–452](#)

**Tuesday 16 October 2018**

**Karim Palant**, UK Public Policy Manager, Facebook, **Claire Lilley**, Europe, the Middle East and Africa lead on Child Safety, Google UK, and **Sinead McSweeney**, Vice-President of Public Policy and Communications for Europe, the Middle East and Africa region, Twitter

[Q453–525](#)

**Will Gardner**, Director, UK Safer Internet Centre, and **Sarah Hannafin**, Senior Policy Adviser, National Association of Head Teachers

[Q526–550](#)

**Tuesday 13 November 2018**

**Anne Longfield**, Children's Commissioner for England, **Yih-Choung Teh**, Group Director, Strategy and Research, Ofcom, and **Natasha Devon**, Body Image & Mental Health Campaigner

[Q551–609](#)

**Margot James MP**, Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and **Jackie Doyle-Price MP**, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health, Inequalities and Suicide Prevention, Department of Health and Social Care

[Q610–664](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

SMH numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Agnew, Dawn ([SMH0007](#))
- 2 Anti-Bullying Alliance ([SMH0102](#))
- 3 ASH and UKCTAS ([SMH0132](#))
- 4 Ashton, Dave ([SMH0126](#))
- 5 Association of Educational Psychologists ([SMH0112](#))
- 6 Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) ([SMH0085](#))
- 7 Azoomee ([SMH0115](#))
- 8 Barnardo's ([SMH0134](#)), ([SMH0148](#))
- 9 Ben, Maddy and Holly, The Castle School, Thornbury ([SMH0066](#))
- 10 Benjamin Guilfoyle, The Castle School, Thornbury ([SMH0067](#))
- 11 Berkhamsted Schools Group ([SMH0095](#))
- 12 Best, Mrs Emma ([SMH0016](#))
- 13 Big Lottery Fund ([SMH0159](#))
- 14 Bonelli, Mrs Helen ([SMH0026](#))
- 15 Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board - E-Safety Working Group ([SMH0087](#))
- 16 British Board of Film Classification ([SMH0162](#))
- 17 The British Psychological Society ([SMH0020](#))
- 18 The Brunswick Centre ([SMH0028](#))
- 19 Bucknall, Mrs Amanda ([SMH0149](#))
- 20 Cardinus Risk Management ([SMH0021](#))
- 21 Centre for Youth, Community and Education Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University ([SMH0125](#))
- 22 Christie, Angela ([SMH0168](#))
- 23 CLOSER, the home of longitudinal research ([SMH0133](#))
- 24 Collins, Benjamin ([SMH0166](#))
- 25 Common Sense ([SMH0135](#))
- 26 Corsham Institute ([SMH0147](#))
- 27 Couch, Mr Raymond ([SMH0003](#))
- 28 Cruise, Ellie ([SMH0170](#))
- 29 Culbert, Mrs Catherine ([SMH0139](#))
- 30 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ([SMH0155](#)), ([SMH0180](#))
- 31 Department of Health and Social Care ([SMH0178](#))
- 32 The Diana Award ([SMH0119](#))
- 33 Digital Policy Alliance ([SMH0184](#))



- 34 Dr Andrew Tresidder ([SMH0186](#))
- 35 Dr Bex Lewis, Manchester Metropolitan University ([SMH0093](#))
- 36 Dr David Ellis, Lancaster University ([SMH0104](#))
- 37 Dr Heather Cleland Woods, Mrs Holly Scott and Professor Stephany Biello ([SMH0103](#))
- 38 Dr Sarah Kirby and Abigail Brandreth ([SMH0088](#))
- 39 DYS Space Ltd (Space\*) ([SMH0096](#))
- 40 The Eastwood Academy ([SMH0057](#))
- 41 Education Policy Institute ([SMH0111](#))
- 42 Electrosensitivity UK ([SMH0158](#))
- 43 Elisha Cocks, The Castle School, Thornbury ([SMH0062](#))
- 44 EMLS RI ([SMH0141](#))
- 45 ESRC International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health (ICLS) ([SMH0128](#))
- 46 Etchells, Dr Peter ([SMH0116](#))
- 47 Facebook ([SMH0153](#))
- 48 Facebook ([SMH0176](#))
- 49 Ferguson, Dr Christopher ([SMH0154](#))
- 50 Fernandez Fawaz, Mrs Carolina ([SMH0014](#))
- 51 Fitzgerald, Dr Annelie ([SMH0076](#))
- 52 Fitzgerald, Dr Annelie ([SMH0084](#))
- 53 Fitzgerald, Mr Anthony ([SMH0081](#))
- 54 Foster, Mrs Jennifer ([SMH0101](#))
- 55 Fry, Miss Debra Lynne ([SMH0092](#))
- 56 George, Harrison and Jack, The Castle School, Thornbury ([SMH0061](#))
- 57 Girlguiding ([SMH0059](#))
- 58 Google UK ([SMH0183](#))
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