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The Science and Technology Committee's inquiry into the impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health

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Written evidence submitted by the UK Safer Internet Centre

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Executive Summary

- Technology brings many benefits to children and young people for creativity, learning, connection, self-expression, support and advice. The internet provides an essential means for children to claim and fulfil their rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is important to ensure that any policy or intervention to protect and empower children online does not restrict their access to the opportunities offered by technology.

- While digital technology offers many opportunities, it can also expose children and young people to risks, including of content, contact and conduct, such exposure to pornography, grooming, bullying, sexting, sexual harassment and excessive use. The internet can also magnify peer pressure and create constant comparison that places unrealistic demands on young people, for example around body image and popularity. This can have a significant impact on young people's self-worth and self-esteem and the way young people build relationships.

- We all have a responsibility to work collaboratively to promote children and young people's wellbeing online, and there is a key role for everyone to play, including industry, educators, policymakers, parents, carers and young people themselves. It is essential we address this on a society-wide level, with improved support and education for young people to promote their wellbeing, self-esteem and socio-emotional skills, as well as steps from industry to fulfil their duty to create an online environment that supports the wellbeing of children and young people.

About the UK Safer Internet Centre

The [UK Safer Internet Centre](#)[1] is a partnership of three leading charities – Childnet, Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) - with a shared mission to make the internet a better place for children and young people.

The partnership was appointed by the European Commission as the Safer Internet Centre for the UK in January 2011 and is one of the 31 Safer Internet Centres of the Insafe network. The centre has five main functions:

1. **Education, training and awareness:** increasing the UK's resilience through innovative tools, services, resources, campaigns and training

2. **Helpline:** supporting the children's workforce

3. **Hotline:** disrupting the distribution of child sexual abuse content

4. **Youth Participation:** giving youth a voice and inspiring active digital citizenship

5. **Leadership and collaboration:** creating a UK and global eco-system that embeds online safety

Key highlights

- We coordinate the annual [Safer Internet Day](#)[2] campaign, which mobilised over 1,700 organisations across the UK in 2018, collectively reaching 45% of UK children and 30% of UK parents.

- Our [Online Safety Live](#)[3] outreach programme has presented 354 sessions since 2012 and trained 15,228 professionals including teachers, social workers, police officers and many others who work with around 6 million UK children.

- Our [Childnet Digital Leaders Programme](#)[4] has recruited 610 schools since launching in 2015 and has trained 3,839 children to be peer educators in their school communities.

- We launched the world's first helpline dedicated to supporting the children's workforce with online safety issues – the [Professionals Online Safety Helpline](#).[5]

- Our hotline, the [Internet Watch Foundation](#),[6] ensures that the UK hosts a small volume of online child sexual abuse content – in 2016 this figure was just 0.1% of the global total, down from 0.2% in 2015. When the IWF started in 1996, that figure was 18%.

- We offer free resources and advice in our [Advice Centre](#)[7] for children, parents, carers, teachers,

Visit www.saferinternet.org.uk for more information, as well as the websites of the three partners in the UK Safer Internet Centre:
- Childnet www.childnet.com

- Internet Watch Foundation www.iwf.org.uk
- South West Grid for Learning www.swgfl.org.uk

UK Safer Internet Centre's response

1. **Evidence on the effects of screen-use on young people's wellbeing**

Benefits of screen-use

1. Technology brings many benefits to children and young people for creativity, learning, connection, self-expression, support and advice.

2. The internet provides an essential means for children to claim and fulfil their rights, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is important to ensure that any policy or intervention to protect and empower children online is does not restrict their access to the opportunities offered by technology.

3. Research [published by the UK Safer Internet Centre](#)[8] for Safer Internet Day 2018 found that the majority of young people aged 8-17 years had experienced positive emotions online, reporting feeling happy (89%), excited (82%) or inspired (74%) by something they had seen online in the last week. The research found that social media facilitates their friendships, with over half (54%) of respondents aged 8-17 saying they would feel isolated if they couldn't talk to their friends via technology. More than four in five (83%) of 8-17s had experienced people being kind to them online in the last year, while 68% of young people said that chatting to their friends online cheers them up. Indeed, in the last year, 88% respondents said they had sent a kind message online to a friend who was feeling upset.

4. We know from our work with children and young people that they are turning to the internet for advice and support, including from important online services like Childline and The Mix. Accessing advice online can remove barriers that young people face when seeking help.

5. Social media companies have some examples of best practice about how to support children and young people, and other users, in moments of mental health crisis. For example, Facebook has a [Suicide Prevention Tool](#)[9] which helps ensure that people receive appropriate support if someone reports concerns about their wellbeing.

Potential harms from social media use

6. While digital technology offers many opportunities, it can also expose children and young people to risks, including of content, contact and conduct. Content risks including exposure to pornography, violence and hateful content. Contact risks include grooming and radicalisation.

Conduct risks include bullying, sexting, sexual harassment, peer-to-peer abuse, gambling and excessive use.

7. The internet can also magnify peer pressure and create constant comparison that places unrealistic demands on young people, for example around body image and popularity. This can have a significant impact on young people's self-worth and self-esteem and the way young people build relationships. Digital technology can also facilitate young people's risk-taking, making it easy to take 'in-the-moment' decisions that can have a wide-ranging impact, while there are often new viral campaigns promoting harmful behaviour.

8. It is important to consider the impact of exposure to such risks and pressures on children and young people's subjective experiences. Research from EU Kids Online (2011)[10] finds that children see the internet positively on balance, but are aware of the risks it can present. Importantly the report shows that exposure to risk does not necessarily result in harm. A minority of children report harm ('feeling bothered') as a result of exposure to various risks online. The report concludes that "while some risks result in harm (since a risk can be defined as the probability of harm), not all risks necessarily result in harm for all children. In relation to the internet, the probability that online risk results in harm to a child is often low. Further, under certain circumstances children learn to cope, becoming resilient precisely because of their exposure to a degree of risk." (pg 144).

9. There are many research studies into children's exposure to risk and experience of harm online. The key publications are summarised by the UKCCIS Evidence Group on the UK Safer Internet Centre's website.[11]

10. **Impact of exposure to harmful or age-inappropriate content, including pornography and online hate.** A 2016 report[12] from the NSPCC, Children's Commissioner and Middlesex University found that 48% of 11-16 year olds had seen online pornography; and of those, 46% said they had accidentally stumbled upon it. A 2016 report from the UK Safer Internet Centre[13] found that more than four in five (82%) 13-18 year olds said they witnessed online hate, having 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. 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.

11. **Impact of peer-to-peer abuse, including cyberbullying and online sexual harassment**. The UK Safer Internet Centre's Digital Friendships Report[14] published for Safer Internet Day 2018 found that 49% of 8-17 year olds have experienced someone being mean to them online in the last year. Childnet published a report in 2017 into young people's experiences of online sexual harassment[15]. The survey of 1,559 UK teens found that in the last year almost a third of girls aged 13-17 years (31%) have received unwanted sexual messages online from their peers (compared to 11% of boys), while 1 in 10 UK youth have been targeted online by their peers with sexual threats such as rape threats. Over half of UK teens have witnessed their peers circulating nude or nearly nude images of someone they know. This research was delivered as part of an EC-funded

project, Project deSHAME[16], which will see the development of training materials for teachers and police and educational resources for teens.

12. **Impact of harmful contact from adults, including grooming and child sexual abuse exploitation**. There is limited data on the prevalence of grooming, but Davidson et al. (2016)[17] found that in a survey of young adults that 53% (n=181) of respondents in the UK had been sexually solicited online between the ages of 12 and 16. The Internet Watch Foundation's 2016 annual report[18] revealed that they assessed 57,335 URLs as containing child sexual abuse imagery, having links to the imagery, or advertising it. Their analysis revealed that in this child sexual abuse imagery, 53% of the children were assessed as aged 10 or under.

13. **Impact of peer pressure and societal expectations**: The UK Safer Internet Centre's Digital Friendships Report[19] published for Safer Internet Day 2018 found that expectations being formed in young people's relationships online can add to the pressure to be 'always on'. Over seven in ten (73%) 8-17 year olds think it's important for their friends to reply to their messages once they've seen them, while young people say on average they need 73 days in a Snapchat streak (i.e. consecutive days of image-sharing with a friend) to show they are good friends. The UK Safer Internet Centre's Power of Image Report[20] published for Safer Internet Day 2017 revealed the importance of images and videos in young people's lives and how this can magnify pressures around body image and popularity, particularly for girls. On average young people aged 8-17 years take 12 selfies before they are happy to post one online, and 43% said they worry about how attractive they look when they share photos online, rising from 35% of boys to 51% of girls. Almost a third (30%) of young people aged 8-17 years said they have felt sad about their appearance after seeing a particular image or video. Furthermore, 45% have used an image filter in the last year to make themselves look better, with 52% of girls saying they have done this compared to 38% of boys.

14. **Impact of excessive use:** SWGfL, as part of UKSIC, have recently published a report[21] on the effects of screen time. This is the first in a series, titled Young People, Internet Use and Wellbeing in the UK compiled by Professor Andy Phippen from Plymouth University, based on research with more than 6,620 young people from year 4 to year 13 across over 100 schools in the UK. The primary finding from this analysis is the clear link between the amount of time a young person spends online and their exposure to upset, risk, and issues related to wellbeing. Additionally, many young people said "fear of missing out" is one of the main reasons they will spend "too much" time online.

Gaps in research

15. It is important for us to better understand the factors underpinning healthy technology use compared to harmful technology use, including identifying vulnerable groups, protective factors and diagnosing problematic behaviour. This includes considering the impact of the internet on emotional health and wellbeing and social development. It is clear that not all exposure to risk results in harm to a child, and even apparently 'excessive' use can support wellbeing if the

activities being undertaken are beneficial and not detrimental to the child's wellbeing. A better understanding of this nuanced landscape will support targeted interventions that are more effective. A key step will be to evaluate these interventions to ensure that our solutions are effective and evidence-led.

16. SWGfL, partner in UKSIC, will be addressing some of these gaps by working in partnership with HeadStart Kernow, part of the Big Lottery HeadStart Strategic Programme. HeadStart Kernow is undertaking an in depth qualitative research study and project to explore the way in which social media and technology are impacting the way young people view themselves, the way the manage their emotions, the way they understand others and the way they relate and build social relationships with others. Based upon this understanding, it will be possible to develop improved support that will benefit young people in both their online and offline worlds.

2. Existing measures to promote children's wellbeing online – and gaps in provision

17. We all have a responsibility to work collaboratively to promote children and young people's wellbeing online, and there is a key role for everyone to play, including industry, educators, policymakers, parents, carers and young people themselves. It is essential we address this on a society-wide level, with improved support and education for young people to promote their wellbeing, self-esteem and socio-emotional skills, as well as steps from industry to fulfil their duty to create an online environment that supports the wellbeing of children and young people.

Education

18. A range of initiatives, including those delivered by the UK Safer Internet Centre, exist to support children and young people's wellbeing online, and to support their parents, carers, teachers and the wider children's workforce in relation to this. Safer Internet Day provides a key opportunity to highlight the importance of these issues and reach across the UK population. Safer Internet Day 2018 reached 45% of UK children and 30% of UK parents. Of the 8-17 year olds who had heard about Safer Internet Day, 80% said they felt more confident about what to do if they were worried about something online. The day also encouraged young people to speak up: 18% said they spoke to someone about something that had been worrying them online.

19. There are a range of resources that support **parents and carers**. The UK Safer Internet Centre website[22] offers a range of advice, highlighting the importance of parental engagement and regular dialogue as well as offering practical guides to safety tools from ISPs, device manufactures, social media providers and other online services (such as TV on Demand).

20. The UK Safer Internet Centre provides a range of support to **schools**. It supports school improvement, for example through SWGfL's free 360 degree safe self-assessment tool[23] and Childnet's guidance for schools on preventing and responding to cyberbullying[24]. It offers high quality and practical educational resources[25] to empower teachers to educate children and parents. It also trains teachers and the wider children's workforce through Online Safety Live[26],

free training events across the UK. The [Professionals Online Safety Helpline](#)[27] offers free, tailored advice for schools and the wider children's workforce to support them in handling incidents effectively and liaising with social media companies to ensure the swift removal of harmful content. The UK Safer Internet Centre has played an active role in shaping the online safety component of the 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' statutory guidance and also shaping curricula, including the Computing curriculum, as well as calling for the Government to make PSHE and RSE statutory in all primary and secondary schools.

21. It is essential that we also empower young people to play an active role in creating online communities that are supportive and kind, as well as taking action if they experience or witness any abuse. The UK Safer Internet Centre champions the role of youth leadership in online safety, delivering the [Childnet Digital Leaders Programme](#)[28] which trains young people to be peer educators in their school communities. Since launching in 2015 it has trained over 3,800 young people to be Digital Leaders in primary and secondary schools across the UK. Young people can be powerful role models and play an important role in supporting their peers. The UK Safer Internet Centre's [Digital Friendships Report](#)[29] found that in the last year, 88% of respondents aged 8-17 years said they had sent a kind message online to a friend who was feeling upset, while four in five (80%) said they have stood up for their friend online when other people were being mean.

Technical solutions and policy

22. The UK Safer Internet Centre welcomed the Government's Internet Safety Strategy ([see our response here](#)[30]) and share the aim of making the UK the safest place to be online. The work of the [UK Council for Child Internet Safety](#)[31], and its working groups, has provided an important contribution. For example, the [Education for a Connected World Framework](#) and [guidance for schools on responding to incidents of sexting](#)[32] provide important guidance for schools. The [Research Highlight Series](#)[33] from the UKCCIS evidence group helps disseminate key research findings and ensures that policy and practice are evidence-led. The UK Safer Internet Centre welcomed the introduction of the Computing curriculum, which aims to ensure that all pupils are responsible, competent, confident and creative users of information and communication technology. The UK Safer Internet Centre has called on the Government to ensure that PSHE and RSE reflect children's digital lives and to make them compulsory for all schools, and to ensure that teachers are properly supported in this work.

23. Industry have a responsibility to provide easy-to-use tools for users that enable them to manage their use of the product (including privacy, time management) and help them to respond quickly to any issues (including reporting, blocking). There are good examples from industry, for example ISP filters that offer a way to manage time usage online, or Facebook's Support Inbox (something now adopted by Instagram, Twitter and soon YouTube) which provides feedback to users who make a report. Industry also must play an active role in educating and empowering users, both on their services (and safety tools) at the point of use, and also by supporting educational initiatives.

24. There is always more that industry can do to empower and support users, and the UK Safer Internet Centre looks forward to helping to shape this best practice through the Code of Practice proposed in the Government's Internet Safety Strategy. It is essential that industry listens to user needs and analyses emerging threats, to ensure that safety tools keep pace with the changing use of technology. The UK Safer Internet Centre has called for a unified approach to make it as easy as possible for users to understand and use safety tools such as reporting mechanisms. In many instances, an independent mediation service for removal of harmful content would be valuable for children and young people. It is important that this service would be available to all internet users, not just children and the UK Safer Internet Centre has the necessary skills and capabilities and experiences to play a significant role in this type of service.

[1] www.saferinternet.org.uk
[2] www.saferinternetday.org.uk
[3] www.saferinternet.org.uk/online-safety-live
[4] www.childnet.com/digital-leaders
[5] www.saferinternet.org.uk/helpline
[6] www.iwf.org.uk
[7] www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre
[8] www.saferinternet.org.uk/digital-friendships
[9] https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/03/building-a-safer-community-with-new-suicide-prevention-tools/
[10] EU Kids Online (2011): Risks and Safety on the internet
[11] www.saferinternet.org.uk/research
[12] Martellozzo et al (2016) I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it
[13] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/safer-internet-day/sid-2016/creating-better-internet-all-report-launched
[14] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/digital-friendships
[15] http://www.childnet.com/our-projects/project-deshame/research
[16] www.deshame.eu
[17] Davidson et al (2016) Enhancing Police and Industry Practice
[18] https://www.iwf.org.uk/report/2016-annual-report
[19] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/digital-friendships
[20] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/safer-internet-day/2017/power-of-image-report
[21] Phippen (2018) Screen-Time Report
[22] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/parents-and-carers
[23] https://360safe.org.uk/
[24] http://childnet.com/cyberbullying-guidance
[25] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/teachers-and-school-staff/teaching-resources
[26] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/online-safety-live
[27] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/professionals-online-safety-helpline
[28] http://www.childnet.com/our-projects/childnet-digital-leaders-programme
[29] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/digital-friendships
[30] http://www.childnet.com/ufiles/UKSIC-response-to-the-DCMS-Internet-Safety-Strategy-(Dec-2017).pdf
[31] https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-council-for-child-internet-safety-ukccis
[32] Sexting in schools and colleges: responding to incidents and safeguarding young people
[33] https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/research