All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media Oral Evidence Session: Charities Panel

Monday 26 April 2021: "Selfie Generation: What's behind the rise of Self-Generated Indecent Images of Children Online?"

Attendees:

Chris Elmore MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media
Damian Hinds MP, Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media
Baroness Brady of Knightsbridge CBE, Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media
Lord Kirkhope of Harrogate
Lord Blunkett
Baroness Featherstone
Baroness Newlove
Alexandra Landes, Office of Chris Elmore MP
John Maier, Office of Chris Elmore MP
Iain Dow, Office of Dr Lisa Cameron MP
James Bamborough, Office of Chi Onwurah MP
Ryan Pratt, Office of Lord Taylor of Warwick
Claire Stewart, Barnado's
Hannah Ruschen, NSPCC
Steve Bailey,

Panellists:

Will Gardner OBE, CEO, Childnet International
David Wright, Director, South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL)
Olivia Robey, Child Abuse and Exploitation Lead, Centre for Social Justice
Claire Levens, Policy Director, Internet Matters
Andy Burrows, Head of Online Safety, NSPCC
Emma James, Senior Policy Advisor, Barnardo's

Secretariat:

Susie Hargreaves OBE, CEO, IWF and UKSIC
Michael Tunks, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Manager, IWF and UKSIC
Abigail Fedorovsky, Policy and Public Affairs Assistant, IWF and UKSIC

1. **Introduction and Opening Remarks – Chris Elmore MP**

Chris welcome everyone to the meeting and introduced the APPG. He asked each panellist to share their opening statements for five minutes each.

2. **Opening Statement from Will Gardner, CEO, Childnet International**

Will introduced Childnet International, one third of the UK Safer Internet Centre. Childnet organises Safer Internet Day each year and in 2021, this reached 51% of young people and 38% of their parents and carers. Will also chairs UK Council for Internet Safety's the Early Warning Group which brings together professionals in this space to keep track of online risk and harm and has been meeting monthly during the pandemic.

Childnet focuses on young people's perspectives on the internet and online harm. They try to listen to young people and engage them with finding solutions. One example of this is their Digital Leaders programme which aims to give young people the tools to educate and empower their peers.

Age at which these issues arise-, Will has found that these topics are difficult for both young people and adults to talk about. Childnet recently launched Project deSHAME which focuses on online harassment, but many of the same lessons apply when it comes to "self-generated" abuse. Childnet originally worked with 13–18-year-olds on this project but have also now extended this to included 9–12-year-olds as young people expressed that this affected them at a younger age.

Embarrassment, Blame and Response- Childnet has found that young people are often too embarrassed to talk about this topic, worried they might be to blame and often would prefer to work out a solution for themselves as they do not have confidence that by talking to an adult that this will help. They found it difficult to know who to confide in and the response and reaction to confiding in someone a challenge. This shows us that it is important to focus on some of the more practical solutions that are needed to some of these problems.

Reporting and raising awareness- Many young people also do not think that social media companies will do anything, or the companies might inform the person about who reported them.

When Childnet launched their resources, one teenage girl said that young people see these things happening, but no one talks about them, so this creates shame for the young people around these topics.

Childnet has found that if schools bring up these issues, children feel more confident in talking about them. This also applies when parents or carers bring up these issues too.

Appropriate Funding Support- Will concluded by pointing out that a lot of the work on internet safety is currently EU-funded (including the UK Safer Internet Centre), so it is important to think about who will be paying for the resources in the future. There is a gap that needs to be filled.

Chris re-emphasised the concern that many of the current programmes and systems are EU-funded. He has been in regular conversations with the Cabinet Office around funding for taking down URLs.

3. Opening Statement from David Wright, Director, South West Grid for Learning

David introduced South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL), one third of the UK Safer Internet Centre. SWGfL run various helplines including the Revenge Porn helpline which has seen a doubling in reports of non-consensual image sharing over the past 12 months. They have continued to see a rise during 2021 too.

They also operate ReportHarmfulContent where users can report legal, but harmful content.

SWGfL has also produced a resource called *So you got naked online?* In the past the general message to young people was that they simply should not share images, but this resource gives them information about how to minimise the impact if they have already shared an image online.

Pace of Technological change- Technology constantly develops and changes, so the legislation needs to be flexible enough to accommodate that.

Interconnected nature of Online Harms- Harmful online content is complex and different issues are interconnected to each other.

David pointed out that education is highly important – we need to move from purely focusing on harm, but also now teach children the skills they need to navigate the internet and risk online.

Resources and Funding-The Government should continue funding resources, including the UK Safer Internet Centre.

David concluded by making the point that children need to have confidence in the people they report content to.

4. Opening Statement from Olivia Robey, **Child Abuse and Exploitation Lead, Centre for Social Justice**

Olivia introduced her role as leading the Centre for Social Justice's work on ending child exploitation. The Centre has just published recommendations in a new report, supported by others on the call including the IWF and the NSPCC.

Olivia made three main points:

- Encourage Children not to share imagery in the first place- It is important to move young people away from sharing nudes, even as part of a relationship.
- Prevent offenders from Grooming Children-It is important to consider how we better prevent predatory adults from grooming children online.
- Empower survivors.

Olivia then went into more detail about each of these.

The **RSE curriculum** provides a good opportunity to have conversations with young people about the online aspects of peer relationships and associated risks. It is important to have clear quality assurance from the Department for Education about the products being used in schools.

Olivia highlighted the work of the NSPCC to develop a great app for defanging the conversation when young people are being asked for nudes from a peer. She pointed out that sometimes young people are asked by peers they respect and so this app gives young people the language to say no in a non-aggressive way.

We need to consider how we are safeguarding **young men and boys from viewing developmentally inappropriate content** and societal messages that are warping their sense of normal sexual behaviour. We need to invest in young men, including through enacting Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act and looking at platforms like OnlyFans.

It is **important not to criminalise young people** and instead do much more work to set clear and healthy boundaries.

We need to conduct much more research on the pathways to viewing material, including the role of pornography. Deterrence messages are very powerful.

It is important that those who are concerned about their feelings can access help and support, for example 41% of the calls to the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, an organisation working with offenders are not answered. This is vital work that needs to be appropriately **resourced and well-funded.**

We need to **understand how offenders are migrating between platforms**, for instance if the offender connects with a young person on Snapchat and then migrates to WhatsApp. We need to understand the impact of greater anonymisation n this. We want to see platforms working together to understand these pathways and avoid high-risk design features e.g. end-to-end encryption where there is no child safety mitigation in place.)

We need to empower survivors and have simple to navigate and **child-friendly reporting channels across all platforms so that young people can have images taken down if they're being shared.**

The issue of **sentencing for offending is concerning**. At the moment it is an average of 18 months, with over 40% receiving a suspended sentence. The impact of contact and online offending is the same on the child, so the two criminal acts need to be treated with greater parity.

Finally, Olivia highlighted that the **Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority needs an overhaul: the scheme currently does not provide compensation to victims of non-contact abuse.**

5. Opening Statement from Claire Levens, Policy Director, Internet Matters

Claire introduced Internet Matters, a not-for-profit funded by most of the internet industry. Claire also chairs the Vulnerable User's Working Group of the UK Council for Internet Safety.

Understanding motivations for sharing imagery- It is important to understand why children and young people send intimate images. We can only talk to them meaningfully if we understand this. In a survey conducted (pre-pandemic), 6% of girls, 7% of boys and 15% of those who identify as non-binary said that they have shared images. Some of those shared because they were in relationships, but many shared because they were coerced into it.

Vulnerable users- Online risk is not spread evenly amongst the population. For instance, those over the age of 15 are more likely to share images. Out of 11-17-year-olds who have an eating disorder, almost a quarter have shared images, and those with care experience are also very at risk. Those children who are more vulnerable are also less likely to take notice of online safety advice.

About 75% of children and young people who had shared images say that there were no significant consequences. As their experience do not coordinate with the reality that we are seeing, we need to think carefully about how we talk to children.

Crossovers with other Harms- Those who do send images are also more likely to see other harmful content, to talk to people in chatrooms and visit gambling sites. We need to be more nuanced about how we talk about these issues, for instance there is a difference between young people who share images consensually than through coercion.

More Proactive approach from Platforms-Platforms need to do more (some already are acting ahead of regulation.) The upcoming Media Literacy Strategy provides a good opportunity to have pre-emptive conversations about these issues.

Access to Pornography- We need to think about broader society – the sexualisation of our society and how easy it is to access pornography. This is a broader problem and not solely just about social media.

6. Opening Statement from Andy Burrows, Head of Child Online Safety, NSPCC

Andy opened by making the point that there are a complex set of issues and drivers that lead to "self-generated" indecent imagery being produced (too often because of coercion or abusive dynamics.) Whenever an image of a young person is taken and shared, there is always a risk that it could be shared as child sexual abuse material. Childline hears every day about the devastating impacts that this can have on children and young people.

It is important to have a child-centred starting point when considering how to design interventions and also to look at a whole system set of solutions.

It is vital to have high-quality nuanced interventions that start at the points that children and young people are at, for instance the **RSE is an opportunity to teach young people about what healthy relationships** look like, how to recognise abusive dynamics in behaviour and how to disclose abuse. It is vital that this is informed by high-quality research.

Young people are likely to feel **shame and embarrassment** if they have shared an image.

RSE needs to be introduced both effectively and quickly. Research with teaching unions in 2019 found that only half of teachers felt confident about introducing the curriculum.

NSPCC has been at the forefront of campaigning for a new duty of care. This is essential: platforms need to pull their weight. We need to see safety by design embedded into the regulatory scheme and into how platforms are developing their products.

NSPCC are particularly concerned about end-to-end encryption, both in terms of being able to identify new images and being able to identify grooming through artificial intelligence, and being able to detect and remove known images too.

It is important to give children and young people the ability to take control. Children have the **legal right of erasure under GDPR.**

The IWF and NSPCC are launching Report Remove, so that children can report CSAM to have it taken down. This will **encourage a child-centric approach** and give children somewhere to turn if something does go wrong, hopefully give them more power.

7. Opening Statement from Emma James, Senior Policy Advisor, Barnardo's

Emma introduced her role leading the policy work on domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation and abuse at Barnardo's.

Platform Design- Technology is not currently safe for children. The best interests of children are not being considered in the design yet.

Child on Child abuse- More must be done in terms of interventions for children coercing other children into sharing images. They need to be treated as children, rather than as offenders. Most of them have experienced chronic neglect and abuse. Both victims and those who are involved in coercion need to have support, rather than be criminalised.

In the last year, children and young people have been online more than ever before. Barnardo's did a survey in lockdown and a quarter of young men said they had seen more content that concerned them than before lockdown, and almost half of young women said the same.

Children have a right to be safe and they trust adults to ensure this for them, but we often put the onus on children to stay safe.

Importance of Terminology and avoiding victim blaming- We know not to blame children for contact sexual activity, however sometimes when it's online we use victim-blaming language. Even the term "self-generated" feels like it's laying the blame on the child.

Education is very important in helping children understand what a healthy relationship looks like, but we also need to make other changes, for instance making it harder for children to access pornography.

Age Verification and Pornography- Safety by design is needed and age verification to prevent access to pornography. Tech companies are capable of developing these things and if there was a financial incentive then they would probably be doing more.

The impact of abuse online on children is often underestimated, and they are often not offered the same support as those abused offline.

There seems to be a stereotypical view of what a victim looks like – there are hidden groups that can be affected more severely. For instance, following the story line Barnardo's helped to develop in Emmerdale, many members of the public do not believe boys are victims when they have been groomed.

Questions from Parliamentarians:

Q1. Lord Kirkhope mentioned that he has been an IWF Champion for many years. He is frustrated with social media platforms themselves in terms of reporting – if you want concerns to be dealt with, it is often difficult to know who to connect with. He also highlighted that regulation is difficult when online harm is such a global problem.

Claire Social media companies need to demonstrate to children that they are listening to them by acting swiftly on any concerns. Children need to be able to understand the reporting process, and the timelines and likely roots of redress. She suggested that the APPG could consider urging social media companies to believe children by default and take content down straight away to reupload if it does not fail the terms and conditions.

David It is often not the larger platforms where there is a problem having content taken down, but with smaller platforms that have sometimes not properly thought through these processes. The introduction of a duty of care is very important.

Emma said that all social media platforms should have flags to show clearly how to report.

Q2. Damian Hinds MP pointed out that several the panellists talked about how to prevent young people sharing intimate images in the first place and that, as soon as the image has left your possession you no longer have control of it. He asked a question about RSE as an opportunity to talk about healthy relationships and asked whether there are examples of best practice globally that take an approach that works effectively when it comes to education?

David shared an example of an assessment SWGfL made of 15,000 schools. Over 40% do not have any professional development for staff about online safety. He highlighted how important it is to invest in the school workforce to be able to deliver digital education effectively.

Andy echoed David's point that there is vital need to offer high-quality support to teachers about how to teach this material in an engaging way. It is not just about what content is in the curriculum, but also about how they talk about it.

Will said that Childnet have been doing some work with Denmark and Hungary through project DeShame. One of the striking things he's seen from the three countries is that there is more that is common about young people's experiences than different. This is also the same when it comes to the levels of confidence that teachers have in their ability to teach.

Q3. Baroness Brady asked a question about the fact that 40% of teachers feel uncomfortable talking to young people about these issues and reference Olivia's earlier contribution about a "queasy feeling" amongst the sector in addressing this. How do we get the message across if that is the case?

Olivia answered that RSE efforts are not about training children up to avoid sexual abuse, but about encouraging children to disclose if anything does happen. It is important to think about who the people are in schools who could handle disclosures and consider a whole school response (including all non-teaching staff.) It might be that a child has a relationship with someone else in school they feel more comfortable with than their teacher. School nurses are very important, and we should return to pre-2010 levels of school nurses. A child might feel more comfortable having a conversation with a healthcare professional. We should move away from the presumption that headteachers should be the designated safeguarding lead in primary schools. There may easily be a more suitable professional in the school.

Claire pointed out that it is important to think more widely (e.g. social workers, speech and language therapists) and provide necessary skills for those individuals. At the moment this is lacking, for instance there is currently no requirement for foster parents to receive online safety training, even though we know that those who have been in care are more vulnerable to online harm.

Emma made a brief point that it might be preferable to have a professional providing RSE teaching, instead of a teacher.

Chris Elmore MP concluded the meeting and thanked everyone for coming.