



Online Harms Experienced by Children and Young People:

‘ACCEPTABLE USE’ AND REGULATION

FULL REPORT

DR FAITH GORDON | NOVEMBER 2021

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The author recognises the details reported here represent lived experiences. This report acknowledges the damaging effects of online harms on children, young people, families, and communities. This report discusses issues that some people may find alarming and/or distressing.

**To discuss any of the matters in this report or to be put in contact with one of Catch22's support services, please contact the Catch22 Head Office:
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business with
a social mission

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ABOUT CATCH22

For over 200 years Catch22 has designed and delivered public services that build resilience and aspirations in people and communities. As a not-for-profit, with a social mission, Catch22's vision is a strong society where everyone has a good place to live, a purpose and good people around them. They exist to ensure these are achievable for everyone, no matter what their background.

Catch22's 1500 colleagues work at every stage of the social welfare cycle, supporting more than 120,000 individuals. Today they deliver alternative education, apprenticeships and employability programmes, justice and rehabilitation services (in 22 prisons and in the community), gangs intervention work, emotional wellbeing and substance misuse services, and children's social care programmes. Catch22 services work to prevent violence, support children at risk of exploitation, and help those and their families already affected.

Since 2019, in partnership with Redthread, Catch22 has co-delivered The Social Switch Project, equipping frontline professionals and youth workers with the confidence and knowledge to address issues faced online. This project followed earlier research in this space, including Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger to Youth Violence and Safer Schools: Keeping gang culture outside the school gates.

Catch-22.org.uk

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FRSA, FHEA, PhD, MSSc, PGCert, LL.B., LNEA, is a Senior Lecturer in Law at the ANU College of Law. Previously holding academic positions at Queen's University Belfast, University of Westminster and Monash University, Faith established the Interdisciplinary International Youth Justice Network and co-founded the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology's Thematic Group on CYP in the criminal justice system. She is also an Associate Research Fellow at the Information Law and Policy Centre, Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, London. Faith has international expertise and research experience in youth justice; media representations; children's rights; criminal law; digital technologies; regulation and privacy law and has held visiting positions at Oxford University, UCL, Queen's University and University of Westminster.

Faith was lead researcher on the ESRC Knowledge Exchange Project: Identifying and Challenging the Negative Media Representation of CYP in Northern Ireland, which involved over 170 CYP. Her first sole-authored monograph: Children, Young People, and the Press in a Transitioning Society: Representations, Reactions and Criminalisation, was published as part of the Socio-Legal Series, Palgrave Macmillan in 2018. Faith has edited a collection with Dr Daniel Newman: Leading Works in Law and Social Justice, published by Routledge in 2021. Faith sits on several international editorial boards, including Communications Law and is book review editor for the journal – Law, Technology and Humans.

Faith has recently published on the topics of lifelong anonymity and pre-charge identification of minors in the digital age. Her research has been referred to by legal practitioners internationally; her work on the police release of children's images has been referred to by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2015), in the Northern Ireland High Court and in the UK Court of Appeal (2019).



FOREWORD

John Poyton CEO Redthread

From zoom quizzes, virtual birthdays to online doctors' consultations- the past year has given us all an insight into what it means to live online. But for young people the blurring of the digital and offline worlds was already commonplace. As the report shows, for them friendships are both made and broken online, games are played, new skills learned, articles read and minds expanded. Young people are forging out spaces where they feel comfortable to be themselves and express themselves. Just like generations before them, they're investing time in exploring and expressing their identities, but they have new tools through which to do this. We can't and shouldn't mute this natural adolescent stage, for practitioners it's all about helping young people do this as safely as possible. That's why I'm so proud of the Social Switch Project training over 1000 practitioners and counting. Our collective expertise can shift practice to ensure online world is addressed, and ultimately keep children safe from both in person and online threats.

Platforms are powerful- they can give a voice to those who feel voiceless, are a source of new and fresh ideas and provide a way to feel connected to each other. But the very freedom and sense of possibility which makes them appealing is also the risk within them, and the time has come for policy oversight of how content is disseminated through social media. This report is a huge asset to policy makers looking to make a change to online safety.



Chris Wright CEO Catch22

The online world presents opportunities for all.

The last two years have seen us rely on communicating online more than ever before. For Catch22's staff and service users, being able to meet online, access training, employment and education over the internet – and socialise on the internet has been a lifeline.

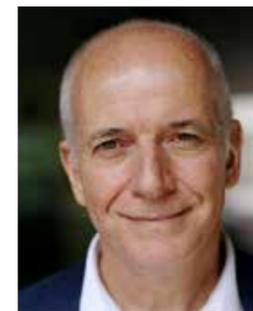
It has enabled us to continue to deliver all our services throughout the pandemic; to place more than 500 people in meaningful, sustainable jobs; to support more than 1,000 children through alternative education.

But with this increased online usage, we have seen the increased risk too – a risk that frontline professionals across every industry were in many cases not prepared for.

The online world means the ability to groom a young person for criminal activity has never been easier. Platform content can encourage gang activity, and unsupervised, children are able to engage in any material an adult might find online too.

The upcoming Online Safety Bill provides the opportunity to hold technology platforms and ourselves as a society to account. I want to see children and young people afforded their rights – their right to play, their right to learn, and their right to develop the digital skills that they will most certainly need in their future. But there must be measures in place to intervene and prevent the harm that can result.

This report makes the compelling case for why children's wellbeing and their future must be at the centre of any future bill. We have given a platform to the children and young people who we engage with every day, and we hope their voices provide some influence over the future design and standards of our online world.



Lib Peck Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit

London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) was set up by the Mayor of London, to take a fresh look at the complex causes and underlying issues contributing to violence and to develop immediate and long-term solutions.

London's VRU is both a champion and a voice for young people, supporting them to lead change and to create positive, long-lasting opportunities. And it's the internet – in this digital age – that so often provides a world of endless opportunity for young people. It's used for entertainment, a space to learn and train, and a platform that can help young people express themselves.

Our reliance on the internet and being online has never been greater. The global pandemic meant children and young people had to be educated at home, using the endless resources and information available to them at the click of a button.

But being online for a young person comes with risks, and this report shines a light on the need to make online spaces safer, more inclusive and generally more supportive of young people.

The report is a significant piece of work that helps us better understand the impact lockdowns had on young people. That's why we funded Catch22 and Redthread – two well-respected organisations – as part of the Social Switch Project, to get a better insight into online harms.

That involved speaking and listening to young people and experts about not only their experiences, but ideas and solutions to tackling online harms. They gave first-hand accounts of being subjected to cyberbullying, threats or being exposed to violent or graphic content.

More needs to be done by those that provide platforms almost unregulated, starting with the seven recommended action points, which clearly set out how to go about improvements. Harmful content should be recognised in future legislation and there is a need for a clear duty of care from tech companies.

It's absolutely vital that we listen and take action to address young people's concerns, so that they have the platform, tools and resources needed to develop and thrive in the digital age.



RESEARCH AND DATA SOURCES



In light of the increased amount of time children and young people (CYP) have been spending online during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the Catch22 Online Harms Consultation was launched in 2020. It received responses from 22 young people, 75 frontline professionals, representatives from tech platforms and Commissioners, on the challenges of online harm.

The findings from this survey indicated that more than 70% of young people have seen content online that they found concerning, referring to specific violent and explicit content. Only 40% of young people reported online harm to the platforms they are using.

To ensure that the most marginalised voices have been directly heard on these important issues and that professionals and industry representatives have had an opportunity to explore the impact, implications and consider possible solutions, the need for much further in-depth research and inquiry was identified. In commissioning this research, Catch22 has ensured that a clear 'gap' in the existing body of research has been addressed – namely the absence of the voices and experiences of some of the most marginalised CYP in the United Kingdom.

The qualitative research which informs this report was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the United Kingdom. The collection and analysis of data were drawn from four main sources.

Firstly, consultations with a children's and young people's advisory group for the project was integral to shaping the direction of the study. The advisory group reviewed the wording of the focus group schedule and interview questions and made suggestions about the structure of focus groups. The youth advisory group also formulated and led questions at the dissemination webinar event in December 2020.

Secondly, extensive focus groups and interviews were conducted with 42 CYP aged 10-22 years during the UK's lockdown. The platform Zoom was used to facilitate the focus groups, which were fully transcribed and checked for accuracy.

Thirdly, 15 interviews were conducted with stakeholders and professionals, from police, safeguarding, youth work, victim support service providers, tech and gaming companies, regulators and the wider industry. The platform Zoom was used to facilitate the interviews, which were fully transcribed and checked for accuracy.

The study also involved the collection and analysis of quantitative data from service providers pre-pandemic and during the UK lockdowns, as well as reference to international literature and materials.

Ethical Approval for the project was granted by the Australian National University, Canberra and internal approval processes at Catch22. ANU's Ethics Reference Protocol No.: 2020/567.



RESEARCH OUTPUTS, IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT

Interim findings from this research were presented in December 2020 at a webinar opened by Minister of State for Digital and Culture in the UK, Caroline Dinenage. A CYP panel discussion on the findings included UK Victims Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, Dr Gordon, Professor Lorna Woods, and Jordan Khanu from the Mayor of London Violence Reduction Unit's Young People's Action Group.

Since then, the research has been updated and preliminary findings were shared with various audiences:

- In November 2020, Dr Faith Gordon and Catch22 submitted evidence to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to the draft General Comment on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment.
- In December 2020, Dr Gordon presented the paper: Harm, Violence, and the COVID-19 Pandemic Context: Blurring Safety between Children's and Young People's Online and Offline Worlds, at the Public Policy Exchange's event, 'Tackling Knife Crime Together: Working in Partnership to Tackle Serious Youth Violence'.
- In March 2021, Dr Gordon gave a presentation on Children and Young People's Experiences of Online Harm: Perspectives on Policing, to 220 police officers online, alongside the Metropolitan Police UK.

- Catch22 delivered further interim findings at both the Demos Good Web Festival and at the Four Nations Conference – the National Police Chief's Council – in March 2021.
- At Catch22's international Euromet conference in April 2021, The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Vulnerable Young People, Dr Faith Gordon presented the keynote paper, "Digital by Default": The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Young People's Experiences Online.
- In June 2021, findings were shared at 'The rights of children in the digital environment', webinar hosted by the Diplomacy Training Programme.
- In July 2021, Dr Gordon presented the paper, Significance of Sibling Support for Children Navigating Online Harms and Seeking Redress, at a conference on Conceptualizing and Responding to Online Harms in Youth Digital Culture, hosted by Institute of Advanced Studies and University of Surrey.
- In September 2021, the research findings were shared at the 'Young People, Mental Health and COVID-19' event, hosted by Affinity Intercultural Foundation, ANU College of Law, and UN Youth.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the children's and young people's advisory group, the 42 CYP who participated in the focus groups and the professionals, for giving up their time to share their experiences and expertise. It is their voices, experiences and expertise that fill the pages of this report. It is hoped that their voices will inform advocacy and inspire change.

Thank you to members of The Social Switch Project's Advisory Panel, and to the staff at Catch22 and Redthread, who have been extremely giving of their time and expertise, as well as the Research Office staff at the Australian National University. This research would not have been possible without funding from The Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit.

DEFINITION OF THE TERMS

Acceptable use – what is suitable, tolerated and allowed.

Acceptable use policy – a policy document or set of rules which outlines in writing the constraints and practices that a user must agree to for access to, and use of a network, platform or the Internet. It is also known as an acceptable usage policy or fair use policy.

Age verification - a process by which steps are taken to verify a customer's/user's age.

Child – Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines 'a child' as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'.

Child Protection – is the safeguarding of children from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) outlines the need for protection of children in and out of the home.

Child Protection System – usually government-run services designed to protect CYP. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (2008) refer to these systems as 'part of social protection and extend beyond it'.

Exploitation – use of someone unfairly for an advantage. Article 36 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Gaming platform - a computerised system specially made for playing video games. There can be 'live' elements to the gaming platform via the internet.

Harm - to damage or injure physically, psychologically, or emotionally.

'Hidden' Victim – a person who experiences victimisation that often goes unrecognised or is not acknowledged. A person who experiences victimisation and remains 'hidden' from services and/or a person who may face additional barriers to accessing support.

Image-based abuse – the Australian e-safety Commissioner defines image-based abuse as happening when an intimate image or video is shared without the consent of the person pictured. This includes images or videos that have been digitally altered (using Photoshop or specialised software). Image-based abuse also includes the threat of an intimate image being shared.

Online Grooming – Childnet International (2020) defines online grooming as a process whereby 'someone befriends a child online and builds up their trust with the intention of exploiting them and causing them harm'.

Online Risk – online risks are often referred to as 'conduct', 'contact', 'content' and also 'commerce' within the field of online safety.

Online Safety – the act of staying safe online. Also referred to as internet safety, e-safety and cyber safety.

Redress - to remedy or set right (an undesirable or unfair situation).

Regulation – is the controlling of an activity or process, usually by means of rules.

Safeguarding - protecting a person's safety, and ensuring they are free from abuse or neglect. Local authorities have duties under the law towards people who are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, abuse or neglect.

Safety by design - positions the safety and rights of users at the centre of the design, development and deployment of online products and services. The initiative, led in Australia by the eSafety Commission, aims to assist industry to take a proactive and consistent approach to user safety when developing online products and services. It seeks to create stronger, healthier and more positive communities online by driving-up standards of user safety.

Self-regulation - an organisation, for example a social media company regulating itself without intervention from external bodies. Can also refer to individuals regulating their own behaviours online.

Social media platform - user-specific web-based technology intended to create virtual connections through the internet, which can include social networking sites, blog sites, video-sharing sites and others.

Social media networking - use of Internet-based social media platforms to connect with other users.

The Darknet or Dark Net - refers to networks that are not indexed by search engines such as Google and Yahoo.

User - a person who uses the internet, social media platforms, gaming platforms and others.

Vulnerable - exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically, psychologically or emotionally.

Young Person - The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth/young people (Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly, A/40/256, 1985).



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1. INTRODUCTION

“[Exploring online harms] I think that’s probably best done in a qualitative sense, working with organisations that work with children, to **better understand what the challenges** are and how they can be addressed.”

(Tech Industry Representative – Interviewee 2)

In a world where we are increasingly becoming more reliant on the digital environment, new legislation in the UK proposes to address online harms and make online spaces safer for children, young people and other vulnerable social groups.

While committing to make the UK “the safest place in the world” to be online, the UK Government’s proposed provision of a ‘duty of care’ to users, particularly in relation to terrorism content, child abuse, misinformation or disinformation, is just a start in holding tech platforms to account.

COVID-19 Context

During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1.5 billion CYP have been affected by school closures worldwide (UNICEF, 2020). The Internet Watch Foundation (2020) reported that in the 11 weeks from 23 March 2020, its phoneline logged 44,809 reports of images compared with 29,698 the previous year. UK Home Office data reports 17,699 online child sex offences recorded by police in England and Wales between April and September 2020, an increase of 15,183 for same period in 2019. The impact of the pandemic means it has never been more essential to regulate our online spaces.

Draft Legislation: Online Safety

The Draft Online Safety Bill published in May 2021 proposes an end to “self-regulation” and places legal and practical responsibility on online companies to take action to address illegal activities that threaten the safety of children. It places emphasis on companies to put strong protections in place for children, preventing cyberbullying and access to materials that are deemed inappropriate for children. The proposals include fines if companies fail to comply with the new regulations.

‘Children’s Code’

The sharing of children’s and young people’s data by social media platforms, gaming platforms and other streaming sites, can cause emotional, financial, and physical harms. To address this, the Information Commissioner’s Office, an independent data authority in the UK, introduced the ‘Age Appropriate Design Code’, also known as the ‘Children’s Code’ in September 2020, with a 12-month transition period for companies.

The Information Commissioner has been concerned about privacy protections, the impact of inappropriate advertising and the negative influence of strategies to extend the time children would remain online (such as auto-playing on video sharing platforms). To address these concerns, the ‘Children’s Code’ contains fifteen standards that online services (such as apps, games, connected toys and devices and news services) must follow, to ensure compliance with obligations under data protection laws (such as The Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018 and Article 5(1)(a) of the GDPR).

The code has several relevant elements in it, with the ultimate goal of creating “a better internet for children”. The elements are applicable to UK and non-UK companies who process the personal data of UK-based children. Companies now need to consider a range of issues including: the mapping out of what personal data they collect from children and young people; checking the age of the people who visit websites, download apps or access and play games; the provision of high levels of privacy as a default; switching off geolocation services that track users; not employing ‘nudge’ techniques to ask children to provide companies with personal data.

The ‘Children’s Code’ is the first of its kind and has the potential to make a significant difference to the way in which UK children’s data is collected, shared, and used by UK and non-UK companies.

Need for Qualitative Research

There is a clear need for qualitative research on these issues. An in-depth and evidence-based exploration of online harms, ‘acceptable’ use and regulation, that includes the voices and experiences of the most marginalised voices, is missing from the body of existing research.

This report provides a unique insight into CYP’s experiences of online platforms, their experiences of online harms and the impact this has on their lives, what they perceive ‘acceptable use’ to be, their views and experiences of law enforcements, and their opinions on what future regulatory frameworks and arrangements should be developed.

The perspectives of key stakeholders, including police, educators, safeguarding experts, youth workers, victim support and service provision, tech and gaming companies, regulators and representatives from the wider tech industry, have also been included. This rounded approach means this report is giving a voice and context to the experiences of some of the most vulnerable users of today’s most influential platforms.



2. AIMS OF THE REPORT

This research has its foundation in a survey conducted by Catch22 in June and July 2020. Following reports of increases in the amount of time CYP have been spending online during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the Catch22 Online Harms Consultation was launched and received responses from 22 young people, 75 frontline professionals, from tech platforms and commissioners on the challenges of online harms.

The consultation findings found that more than 70% of young people who responded to the survey, had seen content online that they have found concerning. The young people's responses also referred to specific violent and explicit content.

Significantly only 40% of young people said that they would report or have reported online harms to the platforms they are using.

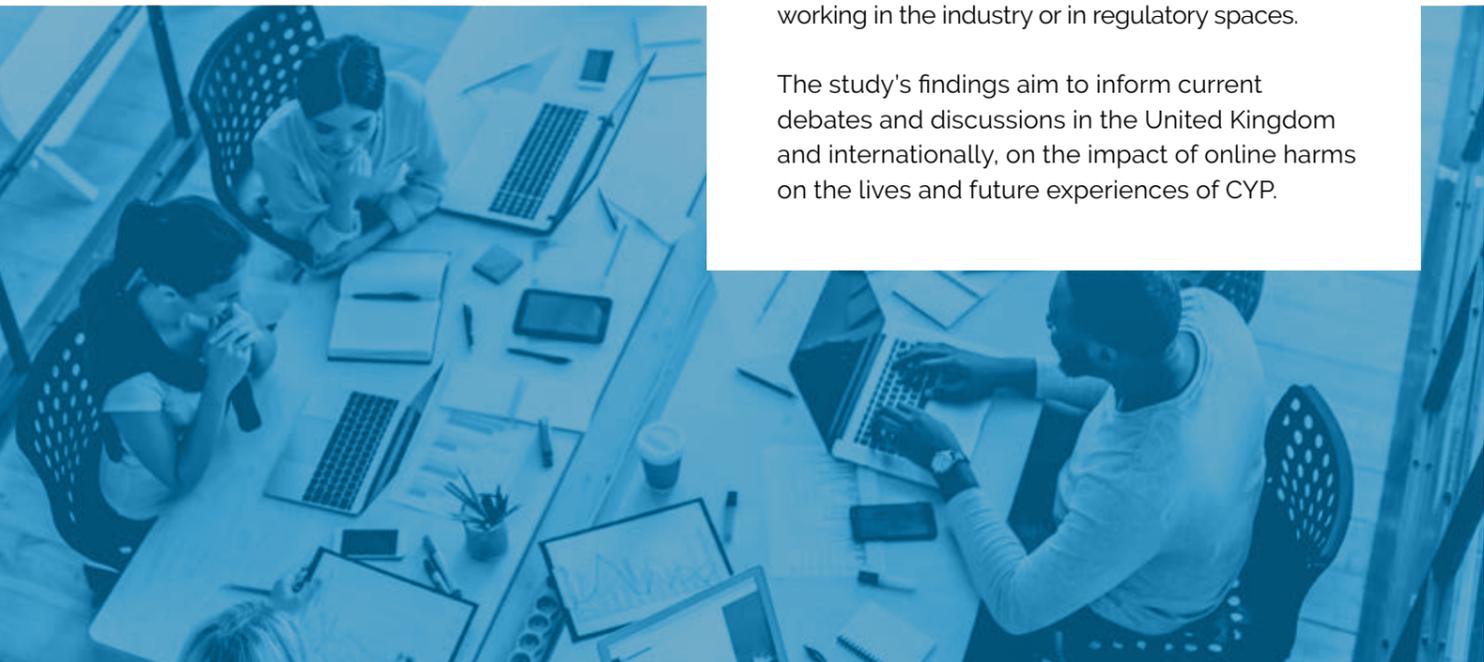
It was identified that additional research should be conducted to explore in more detail a number of the key themes that had emerged from the consultation.

In commissioning this large-scale study, Catch22 set out to better understand children's and young people's:

- experiences of online platforms, social media platforms, apps and gaming;
- experiences of online harms and the impact on their lives;
- perceptions of what 'acceptable use' is in online spaces;
- views on law enforcement's role in addressing online harms;
- views on what future regulatory frameworks and arrangements should be developed.

The aim of this research study was therefore to provide a platform for the voices and experiences of the most marginalised CYP to be heard on issues that concern them when using online platforms, social media and gaming platforms. It also offered an opportunity for a range of professionals to present their perspectives on the challenges they face in navigating the impacts of online harms or working in the industry or in regulatory spaces.

The study's findings aim to inform current debates and discussions in the United Kingdom and internationally, on the impact of online harms on the lives and future experiences of CYP.



3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore how CYP engage with online platforms, social media and gaming platforms.

The methodology ensured that youth participation was at the heart of the approach. The central role of the youth advisory group for the project was essential in ensuring that children's and young people's voices and experiences are heard on these issues and that the research approach was sensitive, ethical and engaging.

The methods included:

- working with a youth advisory group to refine the research questions, gaining children's and young people's expert advice on drafting the focus group questions, consideration of how best to employ child and young person-specific language and the design and production of suitable materials for focus groups;
- the designing of qualitative semi-structured interview questions for professionals working in a range of industries and professions;
- holding an online preliminary findings event and panel session to discuss preliminary findings and further engage with young people and experts, which included young people leading the questioning of panel participants;
- a thematic analysis of qualitative data from focus groups and interviews and analysis of quantitative data on referrals and service provision in 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2020 (during the pandemic), to compare the nature and volume of referrals to victim support services and other related services.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 42 CYP aged 10-22 years in November and December 2020. Focus Groups were between 1 hour and 1 hour 20 minutes.

Fifteen qualitative interviews were conducted, with key stakeholders and professionals, including senior police, educators, safeguarding experts, youth workers, victim support service providers, tech and gaming companies, regulators, and representatives from the wider tech industry. Interviews were between 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes and took place in November, December 2020 and January 2021.

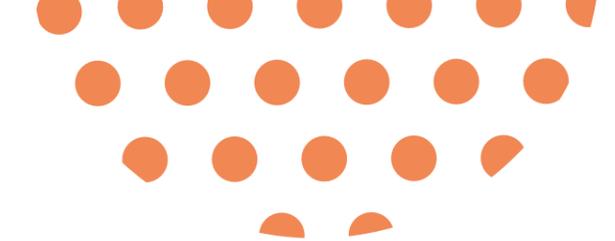
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study employed online research methods, recording focus groups and interviews using Zoom. Focus groups and interviews were transcribed in full for analysis purposes and checked for accuracy.

The study also involved analysis of quantitative data from service providers pre-pandemic and during the UK lockdowns. This explored the levels of reporting of incidents that involved elements of online harm, the levels of service provision and the interactions of service providers with law enforcement and compared the data with pre-pandemic reporting.

Preliminary findings were presented at an online event in December 2020 and feedback was obtained from young people, staff and participants at the event.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Australian National University's Human Research Ethics Committee – Reference Number 2020/567.

Informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants and anonymity was guaranteed. Throughout the report, a reference system has been employed to ensure that the identities of the participants remain anonymous.





4. POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, APPS AND ONLINE GAMING PLATFORMS

Introduction

During the focus groups, CYP discussed their regular use of social media platforms, with the most popular platforms being TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram. They also discussed using WhatsApp and Discord to interact with friends or share images, and YouTube and Twitch to watch videos and post content. To a more limited extent some older young people referred to "sometimes" using Facebook.

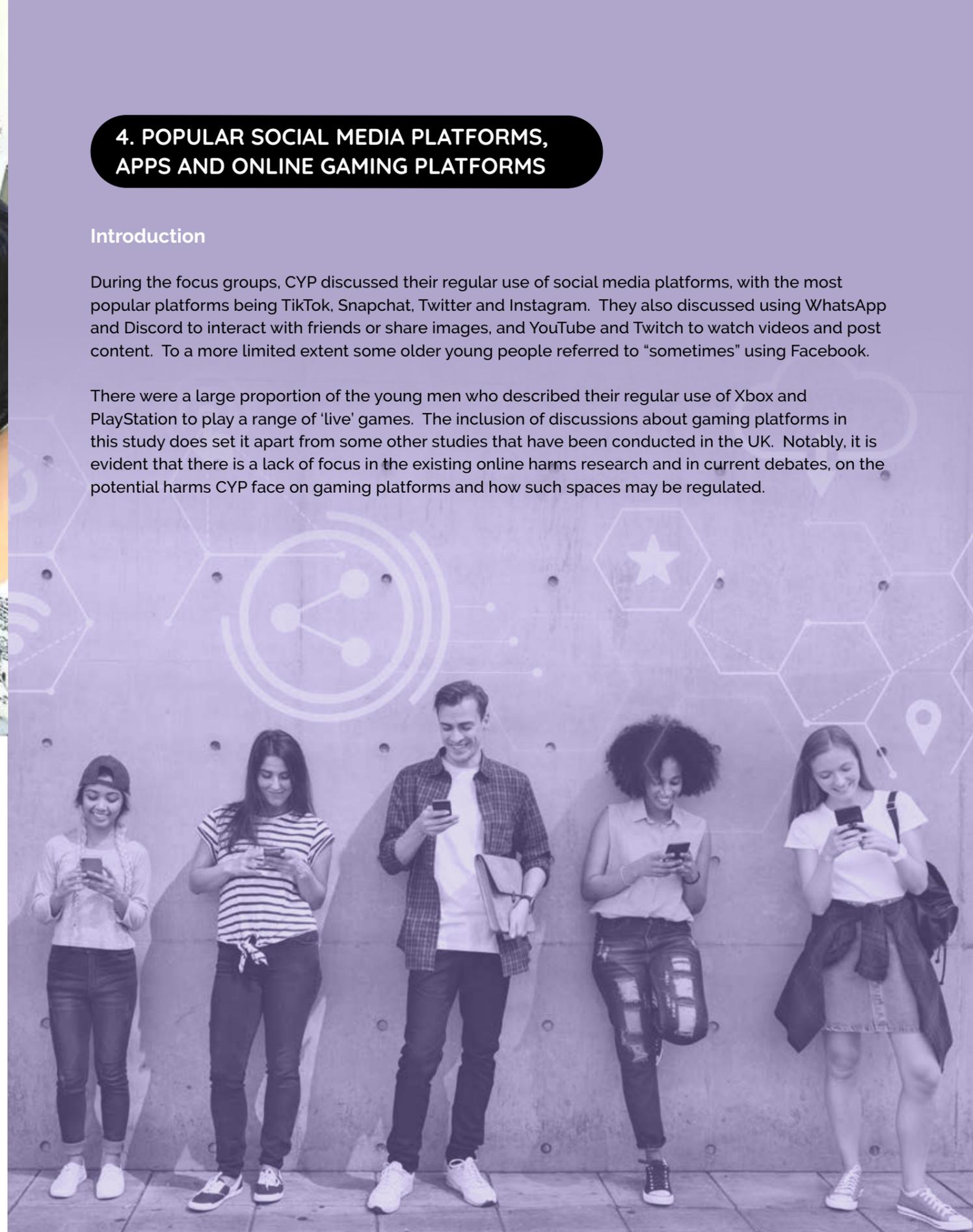
There were a large proportion of the young men who described their regular use of Xbox and PlayStation to play a range of 'live' games. The inclusion of discussions about gaming platforms in this study does set it apart from some other studies that have been conducted in the UK. Notably, it is evident that there is a lack of focus in the existing online harms research and in current debates, on the potential harms CYP face on gaming platforms and how such spaces may be regulated.

Limitations of the Study

This report provides an insight into children's and young people's experiences of online platforms, apps, and online gaming more broadly. As outlined, the fieldwork took place during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and this context provided a unique period to explore these issues.

The 42 CYP who participated are either service users of the organisation Catch22 or have a connection to the organisation's work and advocacy. All of those who participated live in cities and towns throughout England and while this study attempted to capture the experiences of as many CYP as possible, those living in rural areas and other parts of the United Kingdom (such as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) were not equally represented in the overall numbers.

The researcher contacted a range of social media platforms, gaming designers and companies but not all agreed to be involved in the research. Several professional interviewees produced briefing documents and would not answer any probing or follow-up questions. That said, the research does include a range of voices and expert insights from companies, tech industry representatives and those working within regulatory bodies.





Brief Guide

Below is a very brief guide to the key platforms mentioned by CYP.

Discord is an instant messaging and digital distribution platform designed for creating communities. Users communicate with voice calls, video calls, text messaging, media and files in private chats or as part of communities called "servers."

Instagram is a photo and video sharing social networking service owned by Facebook.

PlayStation is a home video game console.

Snapchat is a multimedia messaging app. One of the features of Snapchat is that pictures and messages are usually only available for a short time before they become inaccessible to their recipients.

TikTok is a video-sharing social networking service owned by Chinese company ByteDance. The social media platform is used to make a variety of short-form videos, from genres like dance, comedy, and education, that have a duration from three seconds to one minute.

Twitch is a live streaming platform for gamers.

Twitter is a microblogging and social networking service which enables users to post and interact with messages known as "tweets". Also registered users can post, like and retweet tweets.

WhatsApp is a cross-platform centralized messaging and voice-over-IP service owned by Facebook. It allows users to send text messages and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, documents, user locations, and other content.

Xbox is a gaming console brand developed and owned by Microsoft.

5. VOICES OF CYP: FINDINGS ABOUT PLATFORMS, 'ACCEPTABLE USE', 'HARM' AND REGULATION

"I don't think I know one person who hasn't had something bad go on online." (Young Person, Focus Group 7)

"Acceptable use should be something that relates to not just the consumers and the users, but the creators of these apps." (Young Person, Focus Group 4)

"If that company isn't doing what they can to make it safe ... they're not doing their job properly." (Young Person, Focus Group 8)

Introduction

This section of the report presents the key findings from the focus groups with 42 CYP. A number of the CYP have experienced the criminal justice system, the care system and/or have direct experiences of victimisation. Their voices typically are largely unheard on issues affecting their lives and collectively they felt that adults rarely listen to their opinions nor acknowledge their suggestions as important.

It was evident that CYP had a lot to say about their experiences online and repeated references to their own experiences and that of their peer group, painted a picture of the prevalence of "bad" experiences online. As one representative comment outlined: "I don't think I know one person who hasn't had something bad go on online" (Young Person, Focus Group 7).

The findings in this section are presented as a thematic analysis, drawing out the prominent themes that emerged during the focus groups and presenting clear recommendations from CYP for future reforms, regulation and education provision.

Experiences of using platforms

Positive perceptions of platforms

During the focus groups, many CYP mentioned the aspects of their time spent online that they considered to be “fun” and enjoyable. When specifically asked about what is ‘good’ or ‘positive’ about social media platforms, online platforms, apps and games, they presented a range of opinions. Some CYP highlighted how social networking platforms keep them connected with friends and family:

“Communicating with my old friends, because I moved schools, so it definitely gave me a chance to reconnect with them as well... sharing memories and stuff.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

“I got it when I was little because I was leaving a country, I was moving and it just good to be able to keep in touch with all my friends from my old country. I just feel like there’s loads of reasons you could use it that are positive.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

“Being able to talk to my friends.” (Young Person, Focus Group 9)

“[You] can interact with your friends. It’s just fun because you could be playing a game and you know your friends are playing with you.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 7)

Young people also identified what they described as the positive “educational” benefits of social networking platforms:

“from an educational point of view of social media... you can just go on the [platform] group and be like, does anybody know how to do this question of the homework? I think that has actually got quite a big educational benefit...”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

CYP described how the internet and social media provided opportunities to identify and pursue new hobbies. They described how they utilise it to find groups of people who enjoy doing the same things, and who share similar interests:

“I do think it is a good thing because you can find new hobbies, you can find new people to talk with, new friends, and people who can help you improve being who you are.” (Young Person, Focus Group 8)

Regularly young people referred to locating “communities” online and related this to feeling a sense of belonging. In particular, young people who identified as LGBTIQ+ found online spaces helpful in this way.

“Finding communities of people who have stuff in common with you. I know that I do this on [platform] ... find people who share stuff in common ... and it’s really nice because people that we immediately know don’t share them interests but someone on the internet does.”

(Young person, Focus Group 6)

For some young people, this extended to meeting people in person:

“When you’re on apps... you can meet new people that do the same thing. If they’re close enough, you can meet up and that.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 9)

Young people enjoyed the “instant” nature of their connections and communications, typically referring to the past, before the internet existed:

“With social media, you’re in the present moment; with a letter, it takes quite a while to get to someone... it’s definitely a quicker way of communicating.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

A prominent positive for several young people was that they felt social media and social networking platforms enabled them to be more confident in communicating with other people:

“It’s a lot easier to talk to people on there. I get more nervous in person. I don’t think I would say as much in person as I am online ... online you can say a lot more and get to know each other a lot more.” (Young Person, Focus Group 10)



Negative perceptions of platforms

While CYP identified this range of positive benefits, it was much more evident in focus groups that they held predominantly negative perceptions about the internet, social media, apps and gaming platforms. The negative aspects typically related to online harms, safety online as well as offline, peer pressure and concerns about their future employment prospects being affected by content they had posted and were unable to remove.

A commonly held opinion was that while it could be, or had the potential to be, a positive aspect in their lives, often time spent online was not positive due to the behaviour of those they engaged with online, or the unwanted content they were exposed to. As young people stated:

“I don’t think social media is a bad thing to begin with. The idea of social media is brilliant, that you have access to everything, you can follow people that you like... There’s just certain aspects that just ruin it for everyone, and I don’t think it’s about stopping kids from having [it]...”

(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

“I think it [social media] could be a positive thing, but I think people use it and make it into a negative thing.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

CYP identified a range of ‘negative’ aspects, many of which related to their own personal lived experiences or those experiences of peers or family members. Many of the focus group participants referred to cyberbullying as being a dominant feature during their time at school. They noted how difficult it often was to identify the perpetrators in order to report harmful behaviour:

“You type anonymous messages and people can’t see who it’s from.”

(Young person, Focus Group 1)

Young people noted that those who perpetrate cyberbullying and other forms of online harm, rarely see the damage done to the victim:

“I think if someone’s being going on and on insulting you over the years online, I think it’s really hard to see the impact of it because you’re not in person.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

The permanency element of much of the commentary and imagery posted online, left many victims of cyberbullying feeling that they had to relive the incidents and were therefore unable to obtain any closure on negative events:

“When you can’t get rid of something it plays on your mind a lot... being able to relive something. With something being online all the time, you can just relive it, so then that creates false senses of security for everyone. So, it’s toxic... in that sense as well.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

The description of social media as being “toxic” was a prominent theme arising from the focus group discussions. Often this was linked with the negative impact on children’s and young people’s mental health and physical well-being.

Young people discussed how their peer group often sought validation from the numbers of followers on their social media accounts. Some young people spoke of the negative impact of comparing one another’s content or number of followers:

“I think it needs to be noted the fact that a lot of younger people seem to think that the number of followers you have is a competition. It’s like the number doesn’t give value, but the toxic vibes that some people might bring to your account can harm your wellbeing a lot more than having less followers than one of your friends.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Young people identified particular platforms and content which they felt had the most effect on mental health and well-being. Young people described how the content they see on certain platforms can have a negative impact on perceptions of body image and on their mental health:

“There’s always this projected idea of this perfect skinny body which is really inaccurate, and it’s constantly pushed in our faces.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)

“So I wore like this vest top when I was like 12. I posted it [and] my friends were just like ‘oh, why are you wearing a bra, you slut?’ They weren’t friends, obviously but [that] is going to affect you. Even just about the positive things, you’re going to feel like – if you like, I don’t know, if you lost a bit of weight and then you took a picture and you got so much praise for it, when you gained that weight back, you’re going to feel like crap. You’re going to be like, oh people only like me when I’m skinny, because this is the photo that I had the most likes on. It’s just urgh!”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)





For this reason, several young people, in particular young women, had opted not to use particular platforms or had taken regular 'breaks' from using certain platforms:

“It’s literally a thing where you’re seeing different people wearing the most expensive clothes, or having the good deals, and it’s almost a thing where it gets you jealous and uncomfortable seeing that as you don’t have it. Then it could force you to make poor decisions trying to earn money or trying to get that in different ways. So I feel it’s a thing where social media platforms... add pressure on people to say this is how you must look in society, when that’s not really the case.” (Young Person, Focus Group 4)

While raising concerns about how social media can make young people “depressed” or give them “anxiety”, one young person felt that social media also can offer people a space to learn about, and be positive about mental health. However, the young person did note that this too can create issues:

“You’ve got the whole mental health being a positive phase thing. I don’t know how many people see that on social media, but it’s like they’ll kind of big you up for having mental health problems and stuff like that. I don’t really understand why, but, then you’ll have people who don’t have mental health problems wanting to have mental health problems, and then other people are playing down their mental health problems.” (Young Person, Focus Group 4)

“I don’t use [platform], which I think is one of the biggest ones, the biggest probably, because of that. There’s just too much negativity around it, and body image shaming, stuff like that.” (Young Person, Focus Group 11)



While some young people referred to the sense of “community” that can be created online and associated this with being positive, they also referred to young people being influenced by other responses online:

“It defo kind of influences what you’re doing or what you would speak about... If I’m always seeing... a prank ... something that’s funny and it looks like, maybe I should get involved with that, but deep down you know that you shouldn’t. But because so many people are doing it, it’s like, yes, let me jump on the bandwagon.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

A large number of young people also highlighted that being monitored online was one negative aspect of social media:

“I didn’t know about like audio monitoring stuff, but I just assume whatever social media you use, it’s all going to big brother anyway.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Negative perceptions about being monitored also extended to discussions about permanency of content and the large reach of content, which some young people felt was one of the most difficult challenges for them to navigate. They also felt that this had potential to affect their futures the most, particularly job prospects:

“If a video, or a picture has been uploaded on to the internet, as soon as that goes on there there’s millions of people that can see it, and they can always save it and they can share it to another platform, so it will never go away like properly, it will always be there...”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Lastly, a prominent negative for CYP, which will be explored in greater detail below, was the age range using social media platforms and the regular unwanted content and unwanted contact CYP received. Collectively, the CYP who participated in the focus groups felt that harmful content and unwanted content, as well as harmful contact online, can have long-lasting consequences and can affect their future experiences online and offline:

“Children are exposed to a lot of things that they shouldn’t be exposed to at a young age, which can cause detrimental impact on their future self.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Young people referred to a lack of boundaries and the limited restrictions for adults as well as for CYP online:

“I think what scares me the most is that once you have the social media platform, it’s not where you’re restricted. You’re almost like available to everything, and it’s all age ranges. I’m not sure if there’s legal age, but the age that a lot of people recommend for social media is the age of 13, yet there’s people that are already 20, 30, 50, 60 going on. It’s that you can be exposed to things for a much older age group that at a young age you shouldn’t be exposed to.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Young people also regularly described being contacted by people they did not know:

“It’s really easy... a while ago I was messaged about a person saying that he was trying to reconnect with his friend... just because we had the same name, he messaged me saying, ‘I thought you were this person, but you’re not’. It’s just the idea that if you have some piece of information out there, someone can just type it and then they’ll message you, but then it’s not the right person or the right message, so I feel that’s how, once you have it, you’re exposed to everything and anyone can get in contact with you.”

The levels of exposure to unwanted content and unwanted contact, left many CYP feeling uncomfortable. As will be explored in more detail below, older siblings played a key role in assisting younger children who had been contacted by adults inappropriately online.

While many young people resisted being surveilled by their parents or guardians, they often played a key role in “looking out for” their younger siblings online. As will be discussed, the perception of difference in ‘risk’ and ‘danger’ for younger online users, was also a perception held by many young people who participated in the focus groups.



Perceptions of Difference

As a theme, perceptions of 'difference' emerged in several ways. Firstly, CYP perceived different online platforms, social media and gaming platforms to vary in relation to the levels of 'harm', types of harm and risks associated with particular platforms. One such example was 'live gaming' experiences:

“So for [gaming platform] and stuff, the social media you use for that, I feel like that’s got a different risk because you’re talking to loads of strangers on there. I feel like it’s different risks for the different things.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

Secondly, perceived differences in relation to how people use particular platforms, with reference to perceived differences in relation to gender, as well as the types of harms experienced. For example, perceptions existed in relation to the perceived gendered nature of gaming as compared to image sharing content apps:

“The boys are more likely to go for [gaming platform] than [image sharing platform].”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

“I think it was more pressured for girls to have it because girls are more like the culture of, ‘ooh, join these group chat, ooh, I’ll send you a quick little text message’ ... I feel like the only reason why boys would get it was for school reasons. We make a lot of group chats on social media, so from that young age you want that group chat for your teaching group or your class.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

Thirdly, young people were of the opinion that there were different risks online associated with different age groups, with a particular emphasis on children being 'most' at risk:

“I think there’s different risks for different age groups. We have more exposure to explicit images and there’s a lot more of them for our age group... So I think with different age groups comes a different risk and each risk is equally as dangerous.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

This perceived difference was also referred to in discussions of impacts of online harms. The majority of young people feel that children, in particular those who have particular needs or what were described as 'vulnerabilities' would be most at 'risk' of harm and most in need of support:

“Also, the dangers on other vulnerable children, because not all children are in the same circumstances, and there’s obviously ones that are more vulnerable than others, and when they might be feeling upset, they’re in a more vulnerable state, so they need – the dangers of that, that someone isn’t helping them, or they need support.”

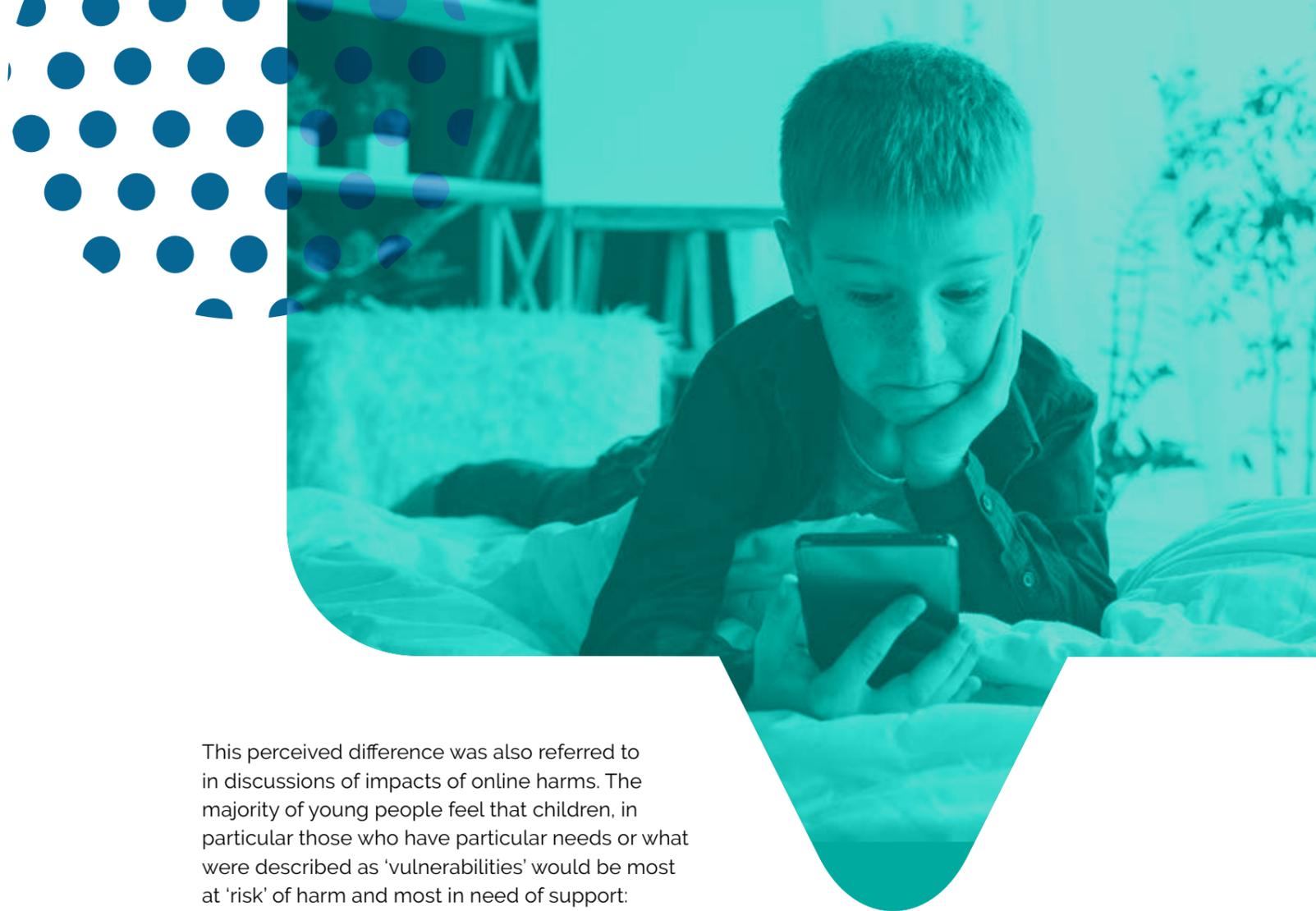
(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

Fourthly, perceived difference emerged in discussions in relation to the response of platforms, with young people noting that some platforms are perceived as much more responsive than others:

“[platform] takes down videos that have been rude to people, whereas [platform] doesn’t take down inappropriate pictures or inappropriate accounts.”

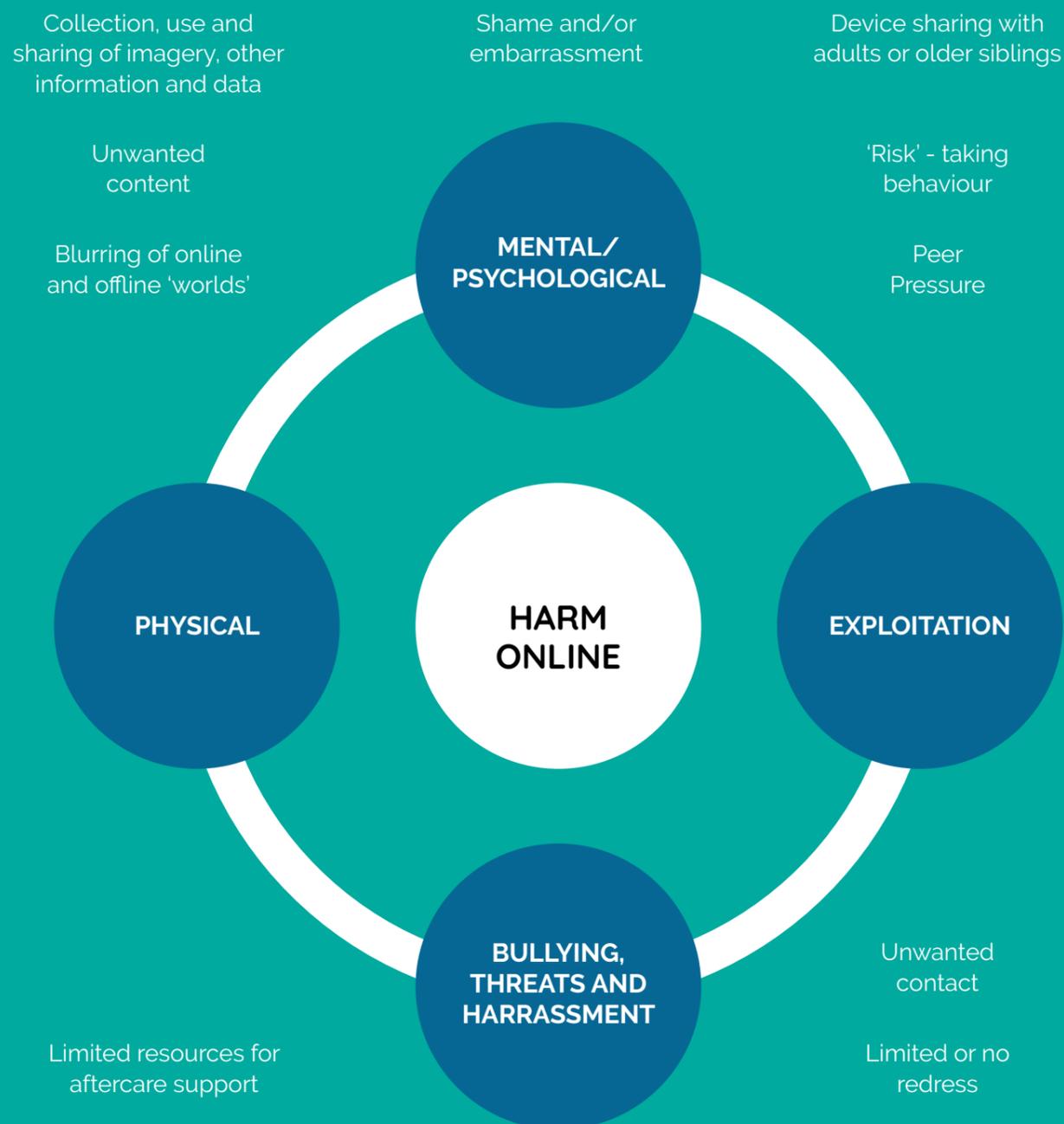
(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

These perceptions of difference ran through several of the other core themes that emerged from the focus groups, in particular with reference to children's and young people's experiences of making complaints and seeking redress. Also in relation to CYP's use of social media and social networking platforms during the COVID-19 lockdown.



HARMS EXPERIENCED ONLINE

Pathways to Harm and the Impact



COVID-19 Pandemic and Impact of Lockdowns

The fieldwork for this study took place during one of the COVID-19 lockdowns in the United Kingdom. CYP identified a marked difference between their pre-pandemic levels of usage of online platforms and social media to connect, compared with the levels of use during lockdown.

Most of the CYP who participated in the focus groups described a major increase in their use of online platforms during the pandemic.

CYP raised concerns about levels of isolation during lockdown. Several young people referred to social networking platforms as one of the key mediums to feel connected to their peers and others during the lockdown:

“I feel like especially now, while we’ve got coronavirus... it’s really good at helping you not feel isolated. So during the first lockdown we were all having calls and we were all talking to each other over social media... makes it a lot easier to get through because you don’t feel completely alone because you can still talk to people. Also, it’s keeping in touch with people from all around.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

As one young person also stated:

“In lockdown, we weren’t allowed to see our friends, or... family even. I feel for previous generations, that would have been really hard, because you’re basically stuck in your house and you can’t leave, you can’t see anyone. Not only us, but obviously adults as well, we had things like phones and you can just text anyone, call anyone, FaceTime anyone. It’s like we’re less isolated.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

While social media and social networking platforms were viewed by many of the CYP as useful in helping them feel less isolated during lockdown, a number of young people also indicated that the expectations around constantly "being available" was not always a positive thing:

“I feel like friendships can have a lot of strain on them... there was like a pressure to be constantly texting and stuff. So I think it can go both ways.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Many young people were concerned by the increase in their use of online platforms. Several young people also expressed strong concerns about the collective number of hours they had been spending online and often referred to screen time updates, which record usage:

“I often got that notification, your screen time has been up by 89 per cent this week.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)



A number of young people described deliberate periods away from social media and online networking platforms. Breaks away from platforms were described by young people as necessary for their mental health and well-being, to pursue other interests, as well as to avoid “fake news”. As one young person stated:

“So I would say quarantine is a thing where I would not use it for a thing of like just being on social media. Even during quarantine, I took a three-week break off social media. That’s why I was able to reflect on myself and my life, isn’t it? Yes, that’s how I used quarantine.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

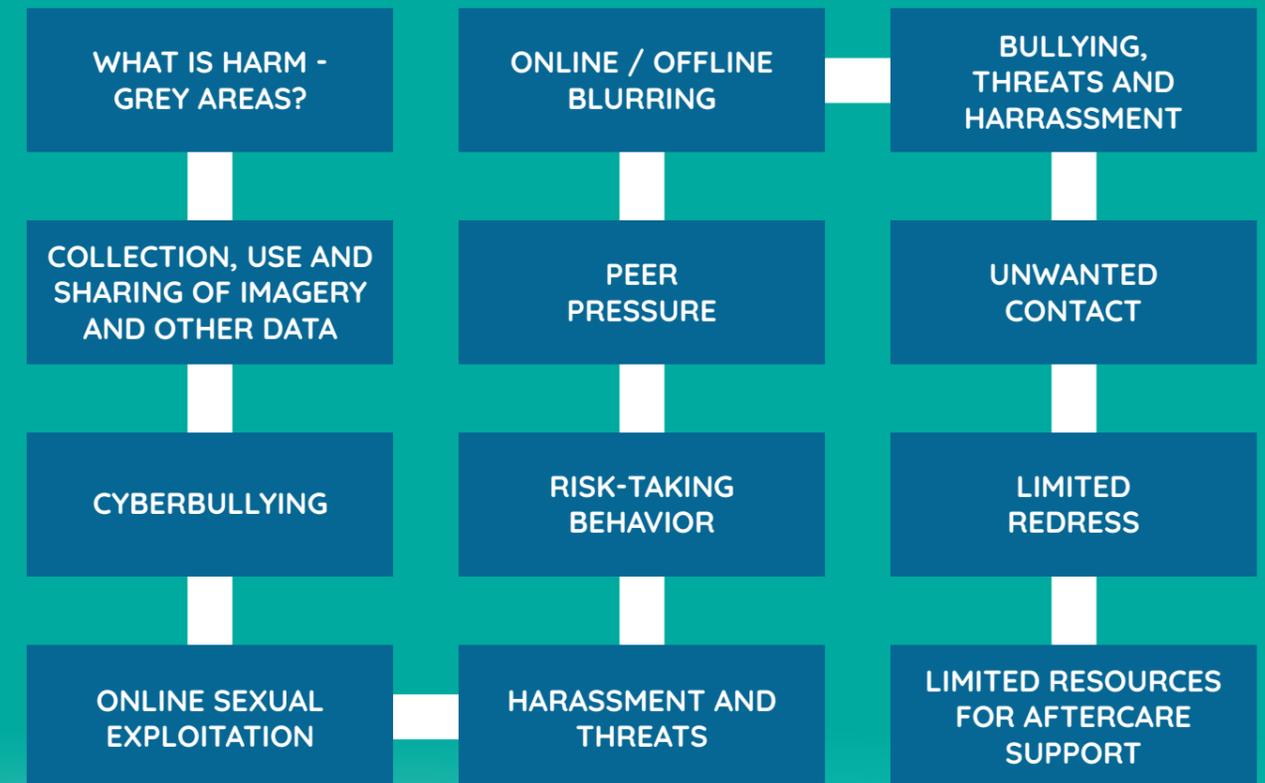
Many young people shared experiences of feeling overwhelmed by the volume and detail of the contents, particularly in relation to COVID-19, conspiracy theories and levels of reporting on the virus. Many chose to spend time away from social media for this reason:

“I’d taken a break from social media back in about January... then being indoors all the time, it was kind of like what else can you do but use social media? I feel that loads of other people did it as well, where no one was using [platform] and then, boom, everyone’s on [platform]. Then you had the whole conspiracy theory stuff going on at the beginning of COVID... so it’s like, you’re hearing the news... then you go through [platform] and see something else. All was a bit confusing to the point I had to just say, let me come back off because it was too much information at once.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

HARMFUL CONTENT, RISKS AND EXPERIENCES

While increased online activity can support children and young to learn, socialise and play, it also puts them at heightened risk of harm. Notably, not all risks evolve into harm.



CYP spoke at length in the focus groups about the harmful content they, their siblings and/or peer groups had experienced online. They outlined in detail the risks of engaging with particular platforms.

Representative examples of harmful content and negative experiences included:

“[watching a video of] someone who had committed suicide on the... platform.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

“Aggressive videos on the internet.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“Some of it [the game] swears.”

(Child, Focus Group 5)

“Weirdos ... they have found people that live near them.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

“There have been quite a few people, like adults, where they have made a video and then flashed the audience. They’ve made a video and they’ve flashed, and posted it, and loads of people have seen.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

“Dating apps for teenagers... like Tinder and that, but it’s something else... She’ll [friend] talk to a lot of guys or girls on there, not necessarily knowing them. It’s a bit, yes... dodgy.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

“Cyberbullying and more.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

“I feel like people text a lot of stuff saying, ‘kill yourself.’”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

CYP questioned claims made by platforms about their safety and felt that these claims lacked transparency:

“If the platforms are safe and that, how does child porn get on to platforms, and how does the grooming happen and that?”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

CYP also referred to particular platforms as posing the most risk for them:

“[Platform] can be very bad, there are predators on there, and people aren’t really keeping themselves safe.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

“[Platform] because they put something up very disturbing about men committing suicide.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

“Vivid images and videos... It can be things like abuse; either animal abuse or abuse to humans... I don’t think [platform] is as careful as to what they post, as to what people are allowed to post, but I think it should be.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)



CYP considered apps and platforms that enabled individuals to contact them, particularly people they did not know, as being some of the most ‘risky’ online spaces:

“Because of the app, you can get quite old people trying to ... like I was on a livestream the other day and there was this 21-year-old trying to join in a 16-year-old’s livestream... keep requesting to join. That was quite concerning.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

Other ‘risks’ identified by CYP included being exposed to “scams” or “viruses” which may affect their computer or other device. “Scams” were closely associated with unwanted contact that was often facilitated through direct messages or follow requests:

“The amount of times I’ve seen products on social media that turn out to be fake and people aren’t getting given the products, or people are getting scammed for even more money.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Extremely harmful content was identified by CYP, when they discussed experiencing distress following exposure to videos involving self-harm and suicide.

CYP spoke at length about the distressing nature of the content and the impact it had had on them. They placed responsibility on the platforms for allowing the content to be posted and criticised what they felt was “slow action” on the part of platforms in their removal of such content:

“Mocking someone who had committed suicide on the [name] platform, they allowed him to put that video online, and so it wasn’t monitored closely enough. I know monitoring, when things are being put up, hundreds and thousands of things are being put up constantly, it’s obviously going to be hard to monitor, but it’s - very serious things can slip through the cracks like that, which has to be tighter.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

Another of the focus group discussions referred to a similar video and noted the impact on those who had viewed the video:

“You get the younger ones who are terrified about it. Then, you get a couple of 17-year-olds laughing about it, which I disagree with. Most people were horrified it was even on there. You don’t want to go on [platform] to have a laugh, then find that on there. That’s just horrible.” (Young Person, Focus Group 10)

One young person who had been exposed to a video on [platform] which showed a person self-harming referred to long-term effects:

“It definitely just stays with you.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)

Other young people spoke of younger siblings being impacted by content they felt was inappropriate:

“They’ll say sexual jokes and she might not get it, but she’s still listening to it.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Young people placed responsibility on the platforms to ensure that this type of content does not reach young users online:

“Some of the younger children won’t really understand what’s happened. They’ll be telling their friends about it and their friends will be telling their other friends about it and, as far as you know, it could basically affect everyone; the whole friendship group.” (Young Person, Focus Group 10)

“Fake accounts” and adults posing as children was also described by CYP as a major concern for them:

“With like fake accounts, if I had a child and they were talking to someone on [platform] that they were saying it was their mate, that may not be their mate, it could be a fake account using their mate’s name. Then they’re going to go out to meet them, and then they’ll end up getting groomed and that.” (Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“Most people that I know, they’re like 14, 13, and it can be old people, just predators and stuff like that. Because their account is not private, they can just message them straightaway.” (Young Person, Focus Group 8)



‘Live’ gaming platforms were identified by CYP as being a particularly challenging spaces and they described listening to swearing and shouting. In noting the uncertainty about what you might have to listen to during a game, many CYP noted that there is little they can do to challenge this, if they want to play and engage in the game:

“In games, where you’re playing... and someone’s on the mic, you never know who it is. It could be someone who’s murdered someone or something like that, and you don’t know what they’ve done.” (Young Person, Focus Group 7)

“It’s like when I’m playing [name of game], when you go online, if you’re not already in a party on [gaming platform], you’ll straightaway go into the game chat and in the game chat there’s literally anyone there. You can hear shouting, you can hear screaming, you can hear people swearing, people just doing anything ... if you’re not aware of how the console works and how to enter a private session... control what you do.” (Young Person, Focus Group 4)



Unwanted Content, Unwanted Contact, Threats and Harassment

During the focus groups, CYP described the impact of unwanted content, unwanted contact, threats and harassment. Two 10-year-old children described crying or feeling "scared" during a game which contained high levels of violence:

"It [the game] scared the life out of me... Just eventually like... I ran. I ran out of my room... [the game] They have to try to... Kill them...Kill them to win the game ... There's this button that says, 'kill them'. Once they die, they become a ghost, but they still can do tasks." (Child, Focus Group 5)

"I... cry... I get scared by playing games like that."

(Child, Focus Group 5)

Other young people described how things can quickly escalate on online spaces and this posed a challenge for them:

"Sometimes it can just get a bit out of hand."

(Young Person, Focus Group 7)

Young people raised specific issues they experienced online, including seeing unwanted content or being asked to send images or personal details to people they did not know.

For some young people, they identified what they felt were "inappropriate" and "unwanted" images or videos. This included content featuring nudity and/or racism:

"A lot of [platform] videos have been posted on [platform] and there was one of them, it was all capitals and I can't remember her name, but so-and-so flashes her privates on video." (Young Person, Focus Group 8)

"With all social media platforms ... it's easy for spam accounts to contact you. Like for me it makes no sense how I can get similar type of messages on my [platform] and on my [platform], asking about accounts, saying that if you click here you can see these type of photos. Follow me and then do this, follow my followers and I'll send you something nice. It makes nos ense how there's nothing in my account that's related to that, but then yet I'm still getting these messages. Now, if I'm getting these messages, it's making my scroll page or my like additional pictures based on those images, even that's something that's truly not about me."

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

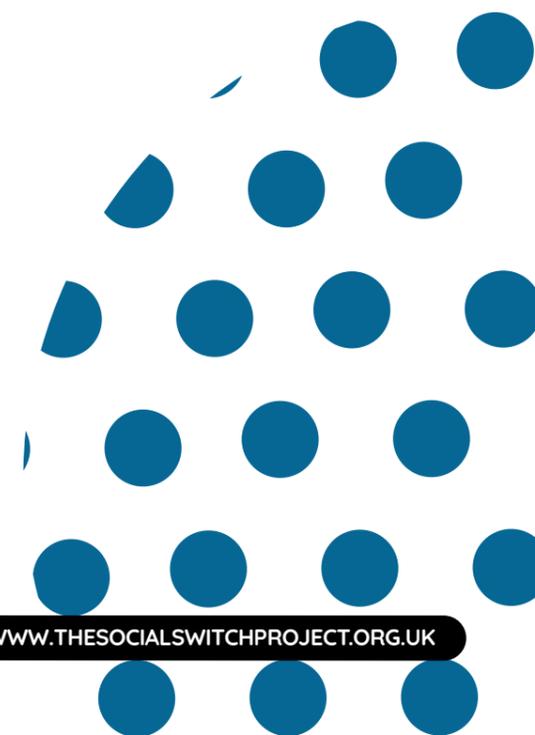
"When I realised what they were posting, it was - so there was a lot about race, it was... racist what they were posting and obviously it was racist against my own colour, so I didn't understand why."

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Young people described being sent targeted messages asking them to create or share imagery of themselves:

"It's either send pictures of you in underwear and stuff like that or it's just any random modelling agencies... Obviously, it's fake, basically. You just got a lot of them weird messages trying to get you into something; trying to persuade you to do something."

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)



Unwanted contact also placed CYP in what they described as “vulnerable situations”, which made them feel uncomfortable:

“Lots of accounts following you randomly... There tends to be a lot of accounts that are related to drugs and stuff, that just follow me. Then they’ll advertise... different sort of, sometimes even weapons and drugs that they sell on their actual [platform]. That’s not been monitored, it’s not been banned or flagged or anything. That’s definitely an issue.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

After repeated experiences, some young people chose to report and block accounts:

“Some bloke started texting me from California... sent me loads of videos of loads of drugs and I didn’t know who he was, so I just reported him and blocked him.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 7)

Young people questioned why unwanted contact and unwanted content were regularly experienced by them personally and by their peer group. They placed responsibility on the platforms for “not doing enough” to stop this occurring:

“Why do they allow it to happen? Why do they allow these people to pop up on your screen when you don’t know who they are or you’re talking to someone on Xbox or something in a match of [name of game] or something?”

(Young Person, Focus Group 7)

“Well, on [platform], I can’t remember what it was, but I was just scrolling through [platform] and I saw an inappropriate image. If a six-year-old or a nine-year-old saw that, it would not be good. So I don’t think [platform] is doing enough, like look at the actual videos and make sure that they are appropriate and safe.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

As will be discussed, CYP clearly wanted platforms to “be more responsible” and to take action in relation to unwanted content, unwanted contact, threats and harassment.

Views on the Platforms and their Responsibility

CYP raised serious concerns in relation to protection of their privacy and the levels of surveillance. They discussed encryption and considered the moves by platforms to introduce end-to-end encryption.

While some young people did not focus on protection of their personal privacy, they did recognise why other young people would want privacy protection:

“I’m not fussed because I’ve got nothing to hide. Yes, I can see why some people would find that [privacy protection] beneficial or unbeneficial.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

In contrast, some young people really wanted to be guaranteed privacy, particularly in relation to their private personal conversations and believed law enforcement should not receive access to private conversations:

“I don’t think I want the UK to become like a police state, where you’re like monitoring everything we say... If it’s between like private people, like private conversations that’s got nothing to do with the police.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

CYP noted that technology facilitates other ways to copy and make content permanent, such as the use of screenshotting. Young people made suggestions as to how their privacy could be better protected and these included:

“A social media... wasn’t linked back to a number, or something, I think that privacy value would be a lot... Then again, there’s the thing about police not being able to track that back.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

During the focus groups, CYP referred to particular programmes and platforms, which they felt did encroach on their privacy:

“I think with [platform], I always thought was really weird was [platform], where you can see where everyone is. If say, you just went on your phone really quickly and someone had added you and you just add them for a second, not really thinking about it, they know your location straightaway. I know you can turn it off, but it’s still a bit weird.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)



Young people also expressed concerns about what data is being collected about them and how it is used by third parties, without express permission:

“As I’ve got older, when it says, can we share your data with blah, blah, blah? I know as soon as I click the agree to that, whatever company’s getting the data I use on this app to then share that data, to use me as a product of their advertisements really... we’ve all experienced clicking on certain [platform] videos, or clicking on certain shopping things, or listen to one minute, and then all you get for the next three days is adverts on them things... it’s just the way organisations word these things catch young people out because they’ve never experienced wording in that way, so then we don’t even know what it means, we’re just agreeing to stuff because we want to get on to that app.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

CYP described the introduction of new measures and sometimes the lack of clear information on what the new measures are and how they might affect them in reality:

“[Gaming platform] parties ... from a couple of months ago, they made an update which you have to consent to, which means that you see in your private chats all your information. Everything that you say over the microphone, everything gets shared to the main building. So whereas before, we can talk on our parties, we can’t say certain things now. Everything you say gets monitored and recorded.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

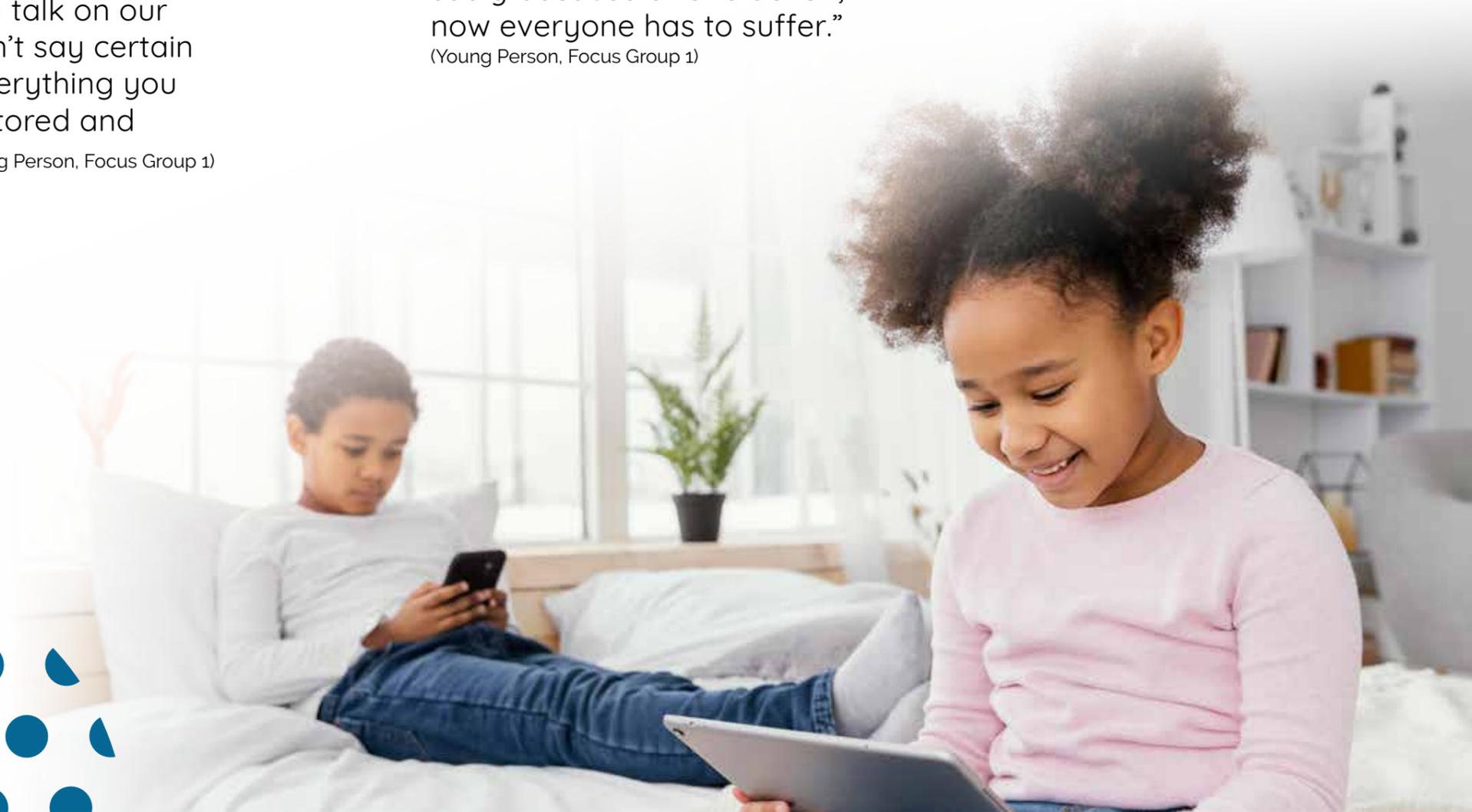
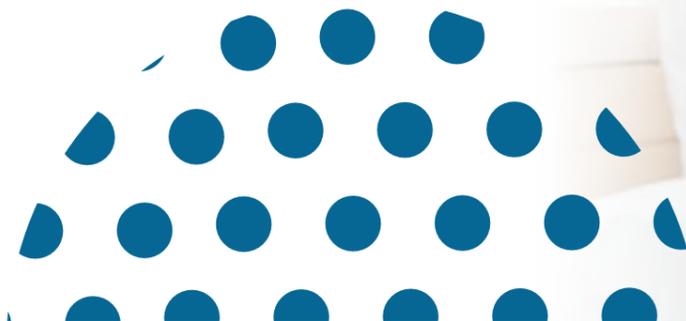
“I know the background of why they started recording, because apparently someone said something to another boy over [Gaming platform] party which actually caused him to commit suicide. So it’s a good thing to understand why they’re recording. It’s like... sometimes if I’m playing with my friends, it’s like I just want to talk about my life, like my personal stuff. It’s not fair that, sadly because of one action, now everyone has to suffer.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

When asked how this new function made young people feel:

“It’s kind of annoying to be honest... it’s just like, you know like it’s a boys’ group chat, you talk about everything and anything.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Young people noted the impact on privacy, when new protective measures were introduced but were aware of the context and reasons behind their introduction, especially if high profile cases have resulted in campaigns calling for change.



'Acceptable use', Consent and Terms and Conditions

For many CYP 'acceptable use' was interpreted as what was "OK" to do online. They felt that social media platforms and other online platforms should:

"Have limits, so they should say, please don't put anything aggressive or judgemental or racist or offensive. While on the other side, they can guide you and say, this is what you can put up. You can put photos up of yourself or anything which is not, you know, any way unkind or anything. I think there should be limits, but it's down to the platform itself to tell how they operate really."

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

CYP wanted to be better informed about their rights online and they felt that this was closely related to 'acceptable use' and consent:

"Your rights on social media. Your rights as a user, so what you are allowed and not allowed to do, and what is not allowed to be done upon you and what is - do you know what I'm saying? So then you know... right and wrong and where you stand. You know where that line is, you're not always being told by someone else where that line is."

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

All CYP stated that terms and conditions are not typically in child or young person friendly formats and they rarely read them. They noted that they often do not fully know what they have consented to and called for greater focus and time spent on design, with platforms accountable for communicating in an accessible way to diverse users.

Young people stated:

"Nobody reads that. We all skip it... it's not like we need to read the entire 50 pages, or whatever it is."

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

"I don't know what I'm accepting; I just accept it... many of us are just going to click agree and just continue with what we're doing."

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

"One, it's too long. Two, it's too complicated, it's filled with like legal jargon and whatever else. Three, it's just not like... really relevant. It's not necessary for us to read. If there was something just shorter, simplified, perhaps more catered towards us, then it would be fine. It's like them covering their own backs, in terms of being legally sued... It's nothing to do with actually how we promote ourselves."

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

They recommended that companies should design something more interactive and engaging for CYP, keeping in mind diversity in relation to literacy levels and language skills:

"Maybe something more interactive and a lot more shorter... like a two-minute video... as short as you could possibly get it. Make it as interactive as possible, but also have some words in it so people can kind of follow it."

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)



"The one change that could be made to social media and that, is the simplification of things like wording and settings and complaints and simplifying it so it's a lot more understandable for the younger generation, it's a lot more easy to use. It may be easy to use for an adult, but for the young people who don't understand it, like we've been saying, it's not easy to use it, you find it quite hard."

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Age Restrictions, Age Verification and Identity Verification

Young people outlined the challenges when setting age restrictions, especially in light of the perceived large numbers of children using particular platforms:

“You know like so many six-year-olds, I see six-year-olds on [platform], seven-year-olds.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“I had a phone at six.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“You can’t report every eight-year-old because there’s too many.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

CYP felt that age restrictions on content were in principle a good thing:

“I think they should have age restrictions on videos.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Particularly young people mentioned the types of content that they felt was inappropriate for young children:

“Quite a lot of content isn’t suitable. Most music nowadays has some sort of swearing in it. You don’t expect a six-year-old to go around school swearing at everything, just because they heard it on [platform]. It’s going to affect their education in a way.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

“I think it’s got a rating of seven, I think, [name of game], so I think it’s seven and over... It is for us... I don’t play it. It’s too freaky... They have guns, I think, some of them, don’t they? They have some weapons to shoot. They have a weapon to fight each other... but I think that’s not really for your age because you shouldn’t be learning about GUNS.”

(Child, Focus Group 5)

However, in practical terms young people in particular, felt that it was currently ineffective and did not protect them from harm. They noted that while platforms have age restrictions, CYP can still access them and engage with the content:

“You get ages for different things. So they say [platform], you have to be 13... but then you see people on there at about eight, nine, and it’s just crazy because they don’t know what they’re doing...”

(Young Person, Focus Group 7)

Young people made a number of suggestions about reforms to the current age verification processes, which they referred to as “ineffective”, noting that they are easy to get around:

“I think age restrictions are very easy to bypass, or... a lot of people are going to put in a fake birthday and stuff. I don’t really know how that could be managed, but it’s just a thing that is there.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

“It’s so easy to just lie about your age so you can get social media and you feel like you won’t get any implications for doing that.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

“It’s very easy to bypass verification as well, all you need is a date of birth. There’s nothing additional. I could just lie about how old I am. An 11-year-old, a ten-year-old could join [platform] without having to actually prove they’re actually 13 or over.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Suggestions for change included asking users to show their passports as a form of ID: “ask them for your passport and all that” (Young Person, Focus Group 2). However, a number of young people felt that this was not practical and proposed that companies could check with a trusted adult:

“If an app like [platform] or [platform] is asking you to prove your identity by a passport, that’s just like, you know, a bit too much... you can get your parents to confirm the apps for you, or they can send a call to your parent’s phone or something.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Young people highlighted the urgent need to address the issues surrounding age verification, as they felt that the impacts, particularly for younger children, were concerning:

“I think they should just be careful with the age groups that they have on them. You see a lot of six-year-olds and stuff like that on [platform]. I think, to see videos like that is probably a little more distressing to them. Obviously, a lot more confusing. I’m sure they don’t really understand what’s going on. I think them kind of videos could probably just do something to them in a way, cause distress to them especially. I think it’s just they have to be a little bit more careful with the types of videos that they’re allowing people to post.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

They also noted the importance of educating younger children about the potential ramifications of “bypassing” the age verification process:

“It was so easy to change my date of birth when I was younger from 2000 to 1997. It was so easy to do that. Kids don’t get taught these things about the dangers of doing those things.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Young people also suggested that better use of “notices” or “warnings” from companies could impact on the levels of unwanted content experienced, however they noted that can also make users intrigued to engage with the content behind the warning:

“You know certain posts where you get stabbings revealed, you need to confirm before you view the video and that’s the only age restriction that is part of [platform].”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“It says sensitive content and you click if you want to see it or not.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

In describing the creation and promotion of “youth only” apps, CYP described the existence of challenges on such platforms:

“When I say it’s meant to be a teens’ app, one of my friends who’s 16 she had a 19-year-old message her a few weeks ago. Of course, she blocked the 19-year-old because she didn’t want to get in touch with him, but he was like - what he was posting wasn’t very nice. You can post on dating apps, on the profile and that, and quite a lot was targeting racism.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)



Duty of Care

When asked their opinion on the proposed statutory duty of care in the United Kingdom, whereby social media companies and other online platforms would be required to have a duty of care towards their users, CYP held differing views. Some young people felt that it had potential to protect CYP to a certain extent, but many were sceptical about whether this would offer enough protection:

“I think duty of care can only go so far, in terms of it can’t overstep and it can’t sensor people as well. So there’s a limit to how much you prevent someone from speaking about things, so free speech. So definitely if it was something about politics or something, you can’t control someone in terms of how they speak. Well, you can control how they speak, but you can’t control what they’re saying. So as long as it’s agreeable, then I think that would fall within duty of care, but if it’s something that’s perhaps more discriminatory or harassment then it would have to be some of this on the social media platforms’ responsibility, if that makes sense?”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

The balancing of freedom of expression, access to information and safety from exploitation, was viewed by young people as a major challenge for companies, the government and wider society. However, as their responses highlighted, it is a balance that needs to be struck in order for CYP to remain safe, as well as enable rather than constrain their participation.

Content Removal and Restrictions

CYP were collectively concerned about the “slow” responses and removal of content, as well as the perceived lack of restrictions placed on content. They collectively felt that companies should be doing more to address these issues. Young people stated that companies are “not putting enough restrictions in place on videos” (Young Person, Focus Group 2). They also referenced particular companies:

“[platform] [is] quite dodgy... because of the recent thing that’s happened. The police have been around telling everyone not to watch this one video because it’s quite alarming. I’ve heard cases of people posting suicides on [platform]. You don’t want to see that on [platform]. It’s just horrific... because it was trending on [platform]. Literally, most people saw it.” (Young Person, Focus Group 10)

Young people felt that if companies are not taking down content that is obviously harmful, then this made them concerned about other more hidden content:

“It’s like if people can’t take down pages that are so obvious about what they do, then what about the pages that aren’t so obvious, like grooming people? If the basic things can’t get found out, what about the really subtle things? They’re definitely not going to get found out then.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

The focus groups also made a number of suggestions of how companies should respond and typically they felt that companies should be intervening prior to content being posted, or removal of inappropriate content as promptly as possible:

“I think they should ban it straightaway. If there’s a video that’s really alarming, they should just actually ban it instead of it getting to younger teenagers.” (Young People, Focus Group 10)

“They can’t recognise it soon enough. It goes on, loads of people see it and then it’s recognised, but the damage has already been done.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Young people suggested that companies should be using the technology that they have, to assist with monitoring and removing harmful content before users are affected by it:

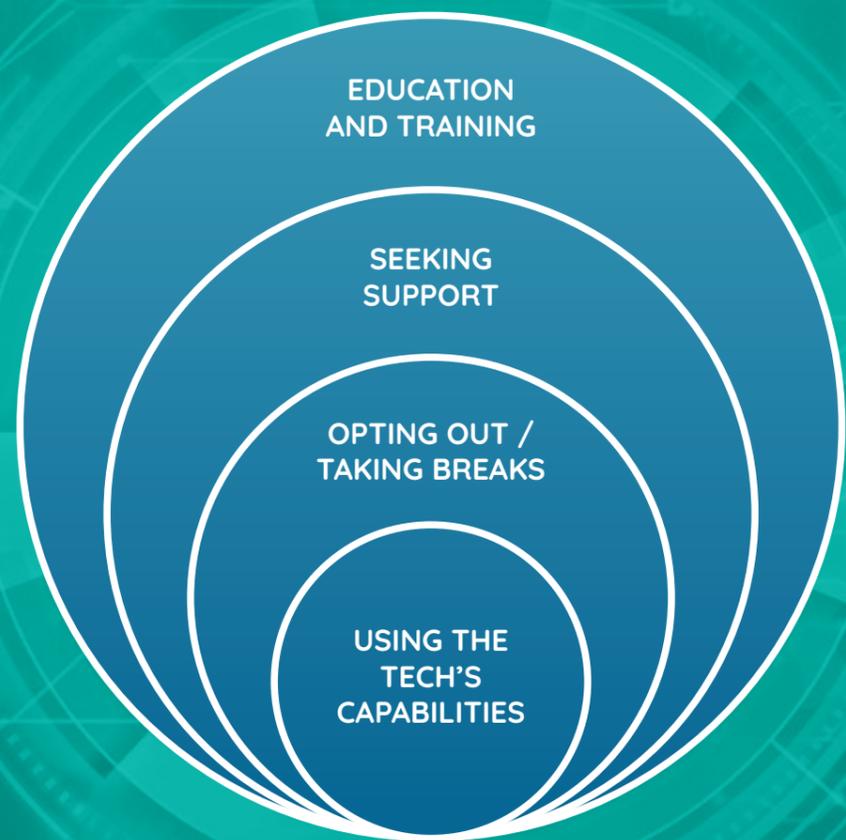
“I would say, the thing with bullying online, have a certain word to look out for in messages to see if people are being bullied or something bad is happening.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

They also called on companies to employ more in person content moderators:

“I’d say making sure there was lots of people looking out, so hiring more people to monitor it.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)





Opting out or “Taking a break”

Many young people reported “taking a break” from social media and social networking platforms during lockdown, as being necessary for their mental well-being. Also experiencing unwanted contact or unwanted content was another major reason for young people taking a break from social media.

One young person described seeing a live video of a person self-harming and described the impact and their decision to opt out of using the app for a period:

“After that, I didn’t really use the app for a few months. I’ve only just started using it again.”
(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

In particular, young people stated that they had notably low trust levels in relation to some platforms and companies. This was mainly due to negative personal experiences or a reputation within their peer group about online harms associated with particular platforms. Often the result was that young people decided not to engage much with those platforms or completely opted out of accessing and using them:

“I don’t trust social media enough anyway, I don’t really put much out on social media.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

Many young people mentioned the need to be aware of “fake news” and many questioned what they read on social media posts, acknowledging that many people do automatically believe what they read online:

“I’m actually using it a lot less because of being careful of all the fake news you see, all the stuff on [platform] and sometimes I read it. It’s like, oh, is it true or not? So I’m trying to be careful not to always look at it because you’re scrolling and scrolling and it’s like, oh, I don’t know if this is real or not.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

Some young people mentioned the pressures that they felt under, particularly from their peer group, to engage with online platforms. One representative experience was:

“like all the time people ask me like what’s my [platform] or [platform], and I tell them I don’t have it and my friends always tell me that I need to get on it because I’m missing out on so much, so I do get pressured to get it.”

(Child, Focus Group 2)

They emphasised that some victims/survivors of crime may not want to engage in conversations or with particular types of content online, as this may trigger traumatic reactions for them:

“If someone’s been raped or sexually assaulted, they may not want to talk about it. I know this from previous experience. I’ve been a victim of crime, and I’m not going to tell you what happened, but I don’t want to be blubbing about it on social media. It’s not something you want to talk about. It’s a very traumatic experience, so you’ve got to be careful, and today is actual World Kindness Day, so we need to be a bit more kinder on social media.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

Right to Erasure and Screenshotting

CYP wanted control over their content online and many mentioned wanting to erase previous content. Young people typically reflected back on content they posted when they were younger and held concerns about it affecting their future prospects:

One common observation was that:

“It doesn’t represent who you are right now.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1).

Young people noted the permanency of content when posted online:

“Even if it’s somehow taken off and [platform], a post, it’s somehow somewhere else anyway, so it doesn’t leave the internet or leave the cloud, anything you do post.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

In focus groups, young people discussed the dangers of posting content online and they noted the need to think before posting, and also described how information posted could be used opportunistically by people who may not have positive intentions:

“Anyone, if you post the wrong thing, you could find out where someone lives, who people’s friends are, and it’s very worrying, where if you’re in trouble, in a situation, you are not putting yourself in danger, but you’re putting your friends in danger. It’s just a whole scary process really.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

They felt that a right to erase your online footprint

from your youth would be a very beneficial process:

“I’m actually in the process of deleting one of my old [platform] accounts, because some of the stuff that I’ve said in there is actually shameful. If I met me, I would literally have the biggest shouting argument with me, about some of the stuff that I’ve tweeted in the past. Everyone does make mistakes and people should have space to grow from that and not be dragged down by it.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

A further aspect discussed in relation the permanency of content, was the positives and negatives of “screenshotting”. A large number of young people did not agree with “screenshotting”:

“I think it is a worry that people can screenshot things and also, if you get logged out of an ... account it’s really hard to get it taken down if you’re logged out of it. It’s really hard to get that removed ... I feel like it’s really difficult for stuff and I feel like it is very permanent and younger people, they would just post whatever, whereas that can be screenshotted which is really dangerous.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)

The context and the reason for “screenshotting” appeared to be an important factor for young people in discussing whether it was a positive or negative approach. Some CYP noted that “screenshotting” something is useful when they might require evidence of harm or harassment experienced. For example:

“Like if someone is harassing me and saying horrible things to me and then lying about it, and I screenshotted that, that’s kind of like just evidence. I feel like it does really depend on the situation.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Other young people found the ability to record an image of conversations, as an important mechanism to “protect” themselves:

“If I said someone’s talking to you or harassing you or bothering you then you screenshot it. It’s not really anything to do with anything but protecting yourself.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Focus group participants felt that platforms could use functions already in operation, to provide protection for users from having personal conversations “recorded”:

“I feel like there is stuff they can do about it. For example... if you try and screenshot or screen record when you’re watching something, the screen goes black. I don’t know what they do, because I don’t know anything about coding, whatever. They’ve obviously got some kind of algorithm which means that even if you try and screenshot something, you don’t get an actual image. I feel like they could maybe introduce an option where I don’t want to get screenshotted. Then, even if someone tries to screenshot it, they won’t actually get anything. I feel like privacy, at the end of the day you’re like, I’m having a conversation with one person. That’s with that person.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Mechanisms to Protect themselves online

Following the discussions of the types and levels of harm, and the impact of online harm on their lives, CYP described the mechanisms that they put in place to “protect” themselves online. Several young people mentioned the ways in which they attempted to protect their privacy:

“I think for our generation, it tends to be a thing where we really value our privacy. I know for a lot of my friends, they use VPNs and stuff, because they really value the fact that there’s encryption to it.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Examples included not using their name or their full name on accounts and as their profile name:

“Oh yes, like people just go on different aliases to try and protect their name, if they want to talk about something private.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

As mentioned above, a large number of CYP decided to “opt out” of using particular platforms and this tended to be because of negative experiences they had experienced or was based on the advice of siblings or peers:

“I personally don’t use like [platform] or [platform] because I feel like it’s too personal, so I’m waiting until I’m older age to be able to just go on to those apps.”

(Child, Focus Group 2)

Many CYP decided when and at what age they felt it was appropriate for them to participate, while also highlighting the pressures from their peer group.



Peer Support and Sibling Support

While peers were referred to often as a source of pressure to sign up to certain platforms, children’s and young people’s peer group were also referred to as a source of support, alongside older siblings. For many CYP, their friends and/or their siblings had supported them to make complaints to platforms, to block unwanted contact from other users and to raise concerns with adults:

“My friend ... told me. He’s nice and he showed me how to report people.” (Child, Focus Group 5)

“I have an older sister, she’s only three years older, so I think she watched over me just to make sure I’m being safe with everything and made sure my account was private and things like that.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

Older siblings reflected upon their own experiences and described not wanting younger siblings to experience harm or distress:

“I have a younger sister and sometimes, like I’ll see her watching things it’s unacceptable, and it’s weird because I used to watch the same things, but that has like, it’s changed me as a person, so I don’t want her to watch it, and it’s hard because I tell her to stop watching it, but I know that it’s fun to watch, but like I can’t let her watch it, so yes.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“I know my sister uses [platform] quite frequently, but I think she has a mature age on it, so some of the contents aren’t appropriate.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

“I think with younger siblings, it’s just the worry that people will be following them that they don’t know and that could be a concern.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)

Children also discussed their decisions to tell a trusted adult about negative experiences online:

“I gave someone my name and then they started to swear at me, so then I went to tell my dad and then my dad said, ‘ban them’. I said, ‘okay’, and then I banned them forever... then I changed my name... I changed my name on the [gaming platform].”

(Child, Focus Group 5)

Seeking Redress and Views on Regulation and Education

Perceptions of Reporting Mechanisms and Platform Responsibility

Young people observed that the variety of different rules and regulations differed from platform to platform, which made it difficult to create a sense of what is acceptable and what is not, how to complain and what to expect in relation to any redress sought:

“Every platform has their own rules and regulations.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

A number of CYP did not know how to make a complaint and seek redress:

“I’ve never made a report on any game console because I just don’t know how to.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

“Like I use [platform] a lot, but it doesn’t show clearly that you can actually report something to [platform].”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

A number of young people felt dissatisfied by the current arrangements for making reporting something or a complaint:

“When you report something it has to have a certain amount of people reporting it before they actually do something about it... I feel like the platforms need to sensor a little bit more of what’s been posted in the first place so that that content isn’t actually there.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)

They typically described the mechanisms, for example: “blocking” someone, as being ineffective more broadly given their experience of repeated unwanted contact:

“I’ve left it and blocked it but it keeps happening again and again.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

As one young person stated:

“I would like to see all these platforms say we have to put a stop to this and not let it happen... a platform could just pull up their socks a bit with it and if someone’s young and they can see they’re young on [platform], keep an eye on all the accounts.” (Young Person, Focus Group 7)

Other young people felt that the companies should be responsible for greater monitoring and should act more swiftly to remove users’ accounts that breach community rules. They felt it was unfair to leave all of the responsibility and effort to an individual user:

“I think [platform] needs to change their policies, and actually monitor people’s accounts and see what they’re posting.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

Young people felt that many companies have abdicated their responsibility, which made them feel annoyed, especially if younger users were subjected to unwanted and/or harmful content:

“It is kind of annoying, because I think as a social media platform, you do have a responsibility to protect the people using it, especially young people... if my 13-year-old sibling or cousin was seeing those things, I’d be horrified.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Young people were disappointed when companies did not act on their complaints and they felt that they had no other route to take in seeking redress:

“When I have tried to report stuff on [platform], they haven’t done anything, even though the account will be blatantly going against the rules. So posting kind of like graphic stuff on hate and stuff like that, or revenge porn and things like that. Then you go and report it and two days later, I got a message from [platform] saying, oh we can’t go through all the reports right now, there’s not enough people working. It felt like you’re saying you’ve got these rules in place to kind of stop this stuff from spreading on the platform, but you’re not actually enforcing them.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)



“When you report something, it’s normally not taken down or anything because one report doesn’t do anything.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“I actually had to anonymously report someone on [platform] because they put something up very disturbing about men committing suicide. I reported it to [platform] and there was no action taken afterwards. I had no messages.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

Young people felt that the types of automated responses from companies did little to make them feel listened to. They felt that more personalised responses, stating what actions the company would take, would assist them in feeling that something was being done:

“They’re very generic. They just send the same response to everybody. So if it ticks a certain box, they’ll just send that response, so it feels like there’s no personal touch and whether they’ve actually properly looked into it. You don’t really know.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)



Young people described how delays on the part of companies made them relive aspects of the harm, and that companies should have a duty to respond promptly and efficiently to complaints made:

“I tried to make a complaint at [platform], and I sent a message a month ago and it only responded to me just yesterday. So it’s like, how am I supposed to know that my response has been acted on when it’s taking companies so long to respond back to me?”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Young people suggested that companies should produce videos on how to complain and how to access assistance. They also felt that speaking to someone on the phone or having a dedicated team, would be more beneficial than a chat bot.



Self-regulation versus Independent regulatory frameworks

CYP did not feel the current arrangements for regulating and holding companies to account, was effective:

“I feel like it [the companies] needs to be monitored a lot more.” (Young Person, Focus Group 6)

They called for the need for an independent body which would monitor and hold companies to account. Young people stated that they would feel more confident in an organisation that was fully independent from the companies:

“I think there does need to be someone else that holds them to account a little bit higher up because them being accountable, obviously, isn’t working.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)



One young person felt that companies should internally monitor, govern and regulate their actions:

“They shouldn’t have to get someone else to govern what they’re doing. I feel like from, that app has registered as a business they should have the full team inhouse, so like a security type person. Someone who’s specifically for the younger people, so they have a list of these younger accounts and maybe block certain things from viewing for these accounts.” (Young Person, Focus Group 4)

Young people felt that an independent regulator would need to ensure that they listened to the public’s concerns and experiences and acted upon them in a way that hold companies to account:

“It would depend on how thorough the independent people were. I feel like if you know that there’s someone out there whose job it is, like their job role is to listen to you and get your concerns met... if there was one company set up just to do this, then it’s like you can have a bit more faith that you will be listened to.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

They also noted that regulation works in other industries and that there are models to look to in designing and bringing about reform:

“I personally feel like them doing it themselves isn't really enough. If you think about it, they profit from more people using their platform... at the end of the day, companies, they are always going to put their profits first, that's how they are... it would be good to have an independent body that was there putting pressure on. You have them for other industries. Every other industry gets inspections. We have school inspections. In a shop you get health and safety regulators. So I don't see how it's different for social media.”

A number of young people felt that the proposed legislative change would have the potential to make companies change their behaviour, especially if there were “repercussions” for non-compliance:

“I think there should be - like if there was a law put in... saying next year, and they didn't change anything, then there has to be repercussions, because then there wouldn't be any point in the rule in the first place. I think with big online platforms, because they are so powerful, they've got so much influence on the world, there's no one really going up against them, because even if you think it's bad, you're still using the product that they've produced. I think if there was a law put in place, that's the best route for it, because then it's like, hang on, there's a government that can say, no, this is wrong, and you have to change.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 11)

Redress and Reform

CYP described “blocking” and “reporting” unwanted contact, as one means of seeking redress they could take control of:

“You can block them or report them.” (Young Person, Focus Group 9)

“You go onto [gaming platform] and then you click on the person's name. Then you add them as a friend, but then you should see, report, and then you can report what they've done, and then I reported them for swearing. Then they couldn't play [name of game] anymore.” (Child, Focus Group 5)

They described their own experiences of reporting unwanted contact and unwanted content, as well as the experiences of their peer groups. For CYP, the speed at which action could be taken, made a real difference to their experience online:

“This one app which she uses, I think he was banned within two hours; she let the person know.” (Young Person, Focus Group 10)

CYP also noted feeling responsible for reporting content as they did not want other children or young people to view the content and be equally as distressed. They also highlighted that delays in removing content mean that further potential harm is caused:

“It makes you feel bad, because you might report it and it might not get removed. Then, other kids might see it. Then, they might not know what it is, so they might not report it. Then, you get someone else reporting it and it's gone. You feel sorry, because you don't know how many people have seen it before it's actually gone.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

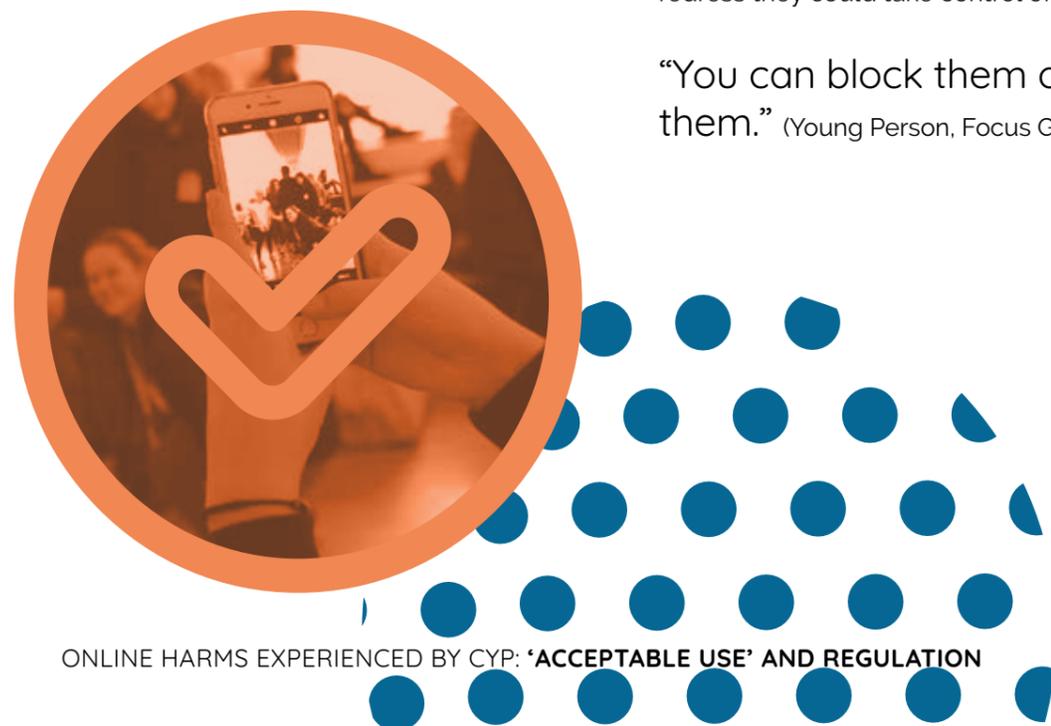
In discussing redress, CYP collectively referred to “damage” already being done. They did make suggestions about fines for large companies and also making Executives responsible for the practices of their companies:

“Hit them where it hurts most, their purse. Make sure they actually have to pay out whatever lump sums that they have to, because kids, we're all still growing up, and especially when I was like 11-years-old, I was stupid. So because we're still developing and because we can't really be responsible for our own thoughts, or the way we speak, because we're still in that process of learning about how we talk and learning about different walks of life, it's not fair for social media platforms to then put the entire responsibility on.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

“He's responsible because he's the CEO. He is responsible for putting the things in place to stop that from happening.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)



Views about Law Enforcement

Young people generally felt that if harm was of a severe nature then "the police need to get involved" (Young Person, Focus Group 9). One example young people gave requiring intervention by the police, was if someone had received death threats and had attempted to self-harm:

"If it is really, really bad, the police should get involved. There can be death threats, there can be people wanting to kill themselves because of the bullying, and nobody would do anything to stop that."

(Young Person, Focus Group 8)

A number of young people described phone removals by the police in the course of investigating alleged crime. Young people raised a number of concerns about timescales in returning the phone and the types of information extracted and used:

"Just in terms of how long they need to keep our phone for. That's the only personal issue I've had, like with police."

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

"At one point, one of my friends had their phone taken and she was like - I hate to use the word victim - but she was the victim in this scenario. Her phone was taken away for literally four months. She didn't have a phone for four months. Well, she did because we sorted her one out. So no one should have to go that long." (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Young people stressed the need for the police to fully explain to a young person what will be happening with their device and how long they will require it for:

"I think if you are going to talk to police, just make sure that if they are going to take someone's phone, it's absolutely necessary and that they communicate what they'll be going on on the phone. So it's not just, we need your phone. It's, we'll only be going through your interactions with this person." (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Some young people felt that the police should be more closely monitoring social media platforms and other platforms:

"I think that police should look over what they're doing, I think seeing how they can actually improve the safety, because there is quite a lot of stuff which you do see now and then which makes you think, this should not be on [platform]."

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

It was also suggested by some young people that within law enforcement:

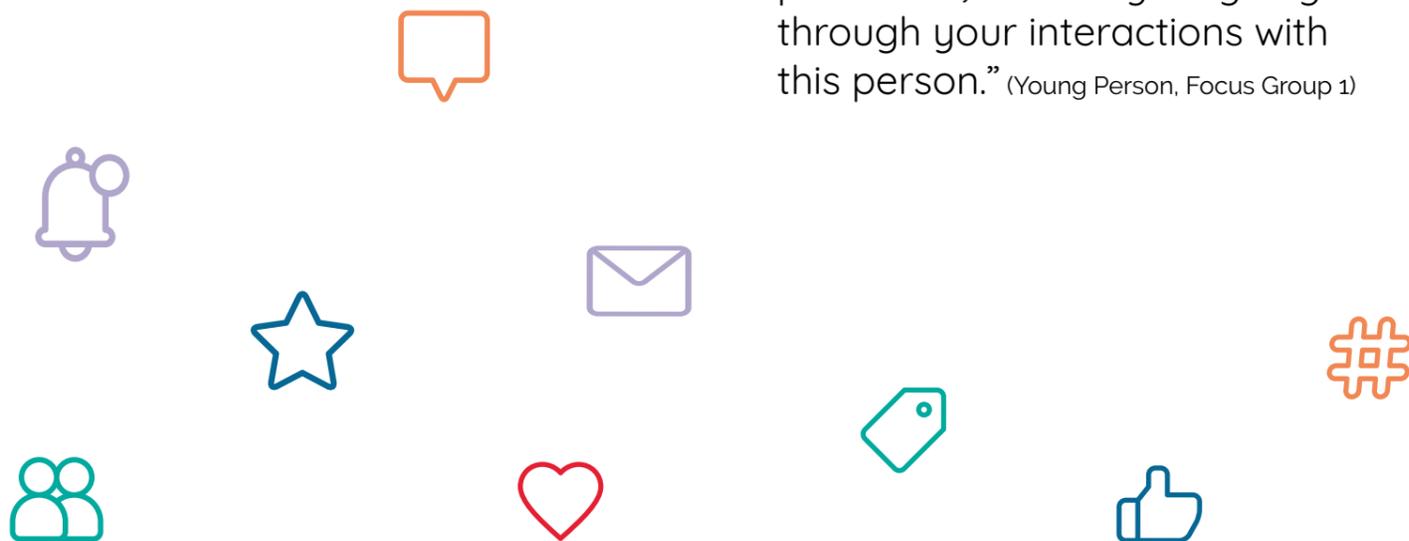
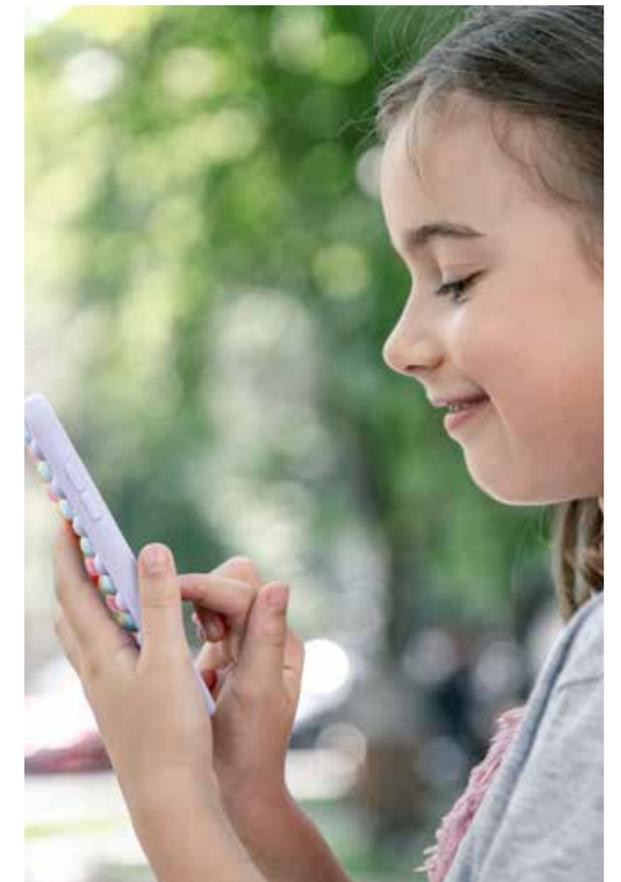
"I think there needs to be maybe a separate branch... that does look into social media because it's such a big part of society and we have special branches for all sorts of things, and I think that there needs to be some kind of... Maybe a branch of the police... that regulates social media a little bit closer because it is such a big part of everybody's lives, whether they have it or not, it's still a big part of their lives so it needs to be monitored in a more formal way... there is something bigger that should be done."

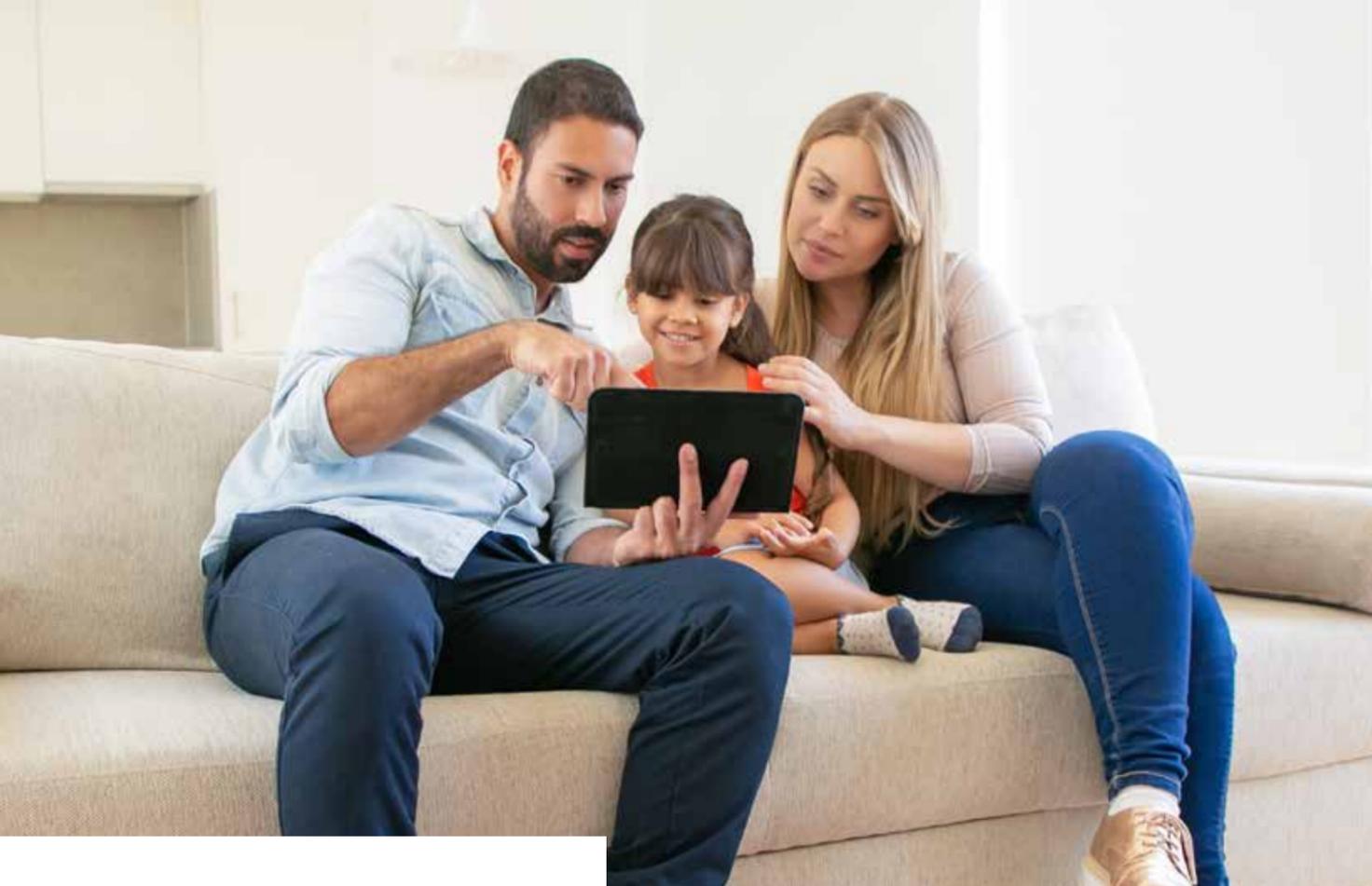
(Young Person, Focus Group 6)

CYP also suggested that more police should facilitate education initiatives focused on issues surrounding online harms:

"Maybe get more police in schools and colleges raising it. When I was in school, we had one policeman talk about being safe online, but he just went on about what you can and can't do. He didn't really mention scams and that. None of the younger children really actually know what it is. Maybe try and get police to focus on that more."

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)





Parents, Guardians and Carers

Some CYP made reference to the responsibility of parents, guardians and carers, for overseeing their use of online spaces. They particularly made reference to the types of content and also the time spent online:

“At the end of the day it’s the parents saying whether the child is playing in a controlled environment. For example, some children... might be playing the game after school, before school, so first thing in the morning they’re waking up to the game.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

CYP felt the involvement or support of known and/or “trusted” adults, provided reassurance to them, in particular in relation to addressing unwanted contact online:

“No matter what age a child is, from the age of 13 to upper, a device from a child should still be looked by a parent.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“Wouldn’t you rather want your parent to look at your phone first because you would like go on social media without them knowing, and you getting groomed, and then telling them after? To be honest, I’d rather tell my parents first.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

In contrast, other CYP felt that this invaded their privacy and inhibited their autonomy to make their own decisions:

“I wouldn’t be comfortable if my mum were snooping through my phone now... it’s called invading your child’s privacy.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“I personally think that your parents shouldn’t be going through all of your social media because that’s private conversations that you’ve had with someone. I wouldn’t want then for someone else to read it out. That’s like me recording.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“You’re invading someone’s privacy and that’s what breaks a child’s bond with the parents invading their privacy.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

In particular, some of the youngest focus group participants mentioned reporting online harm to a parent, carer, or guardian, while young people generally felt that their peer group were their main support when navigating challenges. Young people also raised concerns about:

“People who don’t live with parents, or don’t have parents to actually give consent with.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

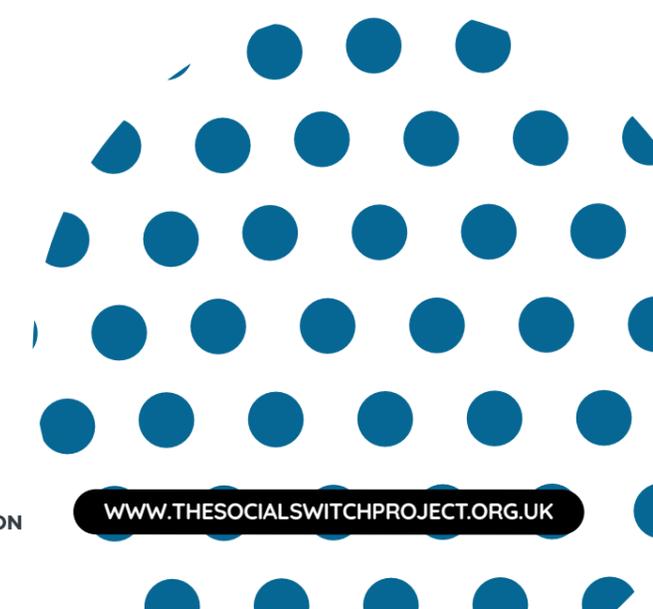
A number of young people felt that resting responsibility solely on individual parents for example, was not an appropriate, as in their opinion:

“Everyone is different... Everyone’s going to have a different parent who wants different things for their kids. They all want different things... so you can’t make a category for every single person using that one social media platform because (1), that’s not fair, and (2), that’s unrealistic.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“Some parents don’t care, and I still think that the social media company should be partly responsible because it’s their duty of care to make sure that their duty and care to make sure that their age restrictions are being like abided by.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)



Many young people mentioned that due to the nature of online spaces, it would be impossible for adults to constantly monitor CYP:

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with anything being on the internet, but whether you want your kid watching it is your decision and you need to make sure you know what your kid is watching. Social media can’t always filter what they’re putting on the internet because that’s hard. There are thousands and thousands of people on that platform. You can’t always monitor it. That’s just not possible, so if you don’t want your kid personally watching that, then you need to make sure they’re not.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Young people made suggestions:

“Like use parental lock where, if they show their age under like maybe 16, that you’re only allowed on certain things.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

“There should be an age restriction for a person or an individual’s safety.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 3)

However, it was noted that regardless of having “a strict parent”, some CYP:

“Would still download apps without [parent] knowing, or... use apps without her knowing.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

In attributing “blame”, some young people felt that it was therefore not something which the parents should be blamed for as: “sometimes it’s not even the parents’ fault, it’s the kid’s fault because they’re doing whatever they want.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)



Education and Safeguarding

CYP collectively felt that the education and training they received on online safety ranged from being “outdated”, infrequent rather than a continuous dialogue, presented by adults who may not use the platforms themselves:

“There’s like an antibullying week or a cyberbullying week, and then after that week’s done it just goes back to how it WAS.” (Young Person, Focus Group 4)

“For a lot of schools... they wanted to just get it out of the way. We’d have an assembly on it, but that would only be a 15-minute assembly. It’d be nice and quick... brief, and it’s out of the way and they wouldn’t really talk about it so much. I think it should be more of an open topic. They should... try and just make it more talked about...”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

Young people felt that the current arrangements in schools are not effective at providing the necessary guidance for CYP and the education in this area should commence in primary schools:

“Online safeguarding... or... training for young people - it isn’t successful enough, it doesn’t work and it’s nowhere near as frequent as it needs to be... It’s not engaging. Even if you are taught of the risks, it’s easy, because... it’s coming from an adult’s perspective, to just disobey that authority.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

“I think also, in primary school... we don’t really get educated. I can’t really remember anything from primary school like when we started using the app, to say how to use it or what’s the best way to use it, because I don’t think anybody educated us enough.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 6)



CYP had a number of suggestions, including peer-led training, different formats including interactive videos and ensuring that written information is updated with the introduction of new tech, platforms and advice:

“Say I’m a kid in Liverpool, I don’t want to be in Liverpool listening to a 37-year-old man from London talk about gaming. I want to hear another 16-year-old boy, or another 19-year-old that’s in, like someone that’s close to my age group that’s from the local area, who I might even know. Coming from someone like that, you relate to it way much more and it feels way more real, so you take what you’re saying on more of a face value than always trying to read between the lines of what’s actually being said.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

“They’re quite out of date, and they’ll be discussing things that have happened a long time ago, or... Even if you just read the pamphlets you’re given, talking about [platform] and the dangers of it, it doesn’t really understand that everything’s a trend, and it’s all very quick and fast, and things aren’t going to be the same as they were tomorrow when you go on your apps.” (Young Person, Focus Group 11)

“I think it’s talked about in schools, but they get adults to talk about it... A lot of the advice we get is very like, honestly like patronising and quite babyish.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 1)

The current PSHE module in schools was typically described as in need of redevelopment. The focus group participants did note that it is the module that is likely to have the most impact, if delivered in an engaging way to students:

“For me it’s just utilising the PSHE module... PHSE is the most pointless class or thing I ever did in school ... I think that whole module can be relooked at, reshaped and revamped to actually mean something. So then you can actually have a qualification in PSHE that means something instead of just doing classes and not even knowing where it’s taking you.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

“I think PHSE is the perfect place to teach young people about this because you catch them at their most sponge-like mentality.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)



A number of young people felt that children should be taught more about the nature of agreements, which would enable them to make more informed decisions about what they sign up to:

“Teach kids... the importance of agreements and terms because they’re still contracts at the end of the day... none of us really understood a lot of that as kids and it’s kind of stuck with us... when I get a game, or when I get a new app, I accept stuff without reading it, and it’s probably one of my worst habits because you never know what they’re putting in there.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 4)

In redesigning the education and support, young people called on educators to “try and realise that there is more to it” (Young Person, Focus Group 10), noting the complexities of online harms and the various “grey” issues surrounding what is harm and what is not classed as harm. As one young person observed:

“I think it’s probably just noticing the little signs. I think schools talk about the bigger ones, the more noticeable little signs. I think it’s just the little ones that you don’t really think about; the ones that get you more intrigued into it. I think they’re the ones that are obviously the ones that are harder to get out of. It’s the little things that I think that you can focus on more.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 10)

Significantly, young people felt that education should not be confined solely to school environments and they felt that if wider society was better educated, then a lot of the issues surrounding harmful content online, might be addressed:

“If we’re taught as a society the difference between right and wrong, then a lot of the content won’t be on there.”

(Young Person, Focus Group 2)

Summary

CYP report positives about online platforms. These positives include facilitating communication with friends, for keeping in contact with people in other places, for educational purposes, finding new hobbies and having a sense of belonging as part of an online "community". Significantly some young people felt it was easier to talk to people online than in person and this assisted them with participation. Young people who identified as part of the LGBTIQ+ community, feel that online spaces provided them with information and a sense of "belonging".

In the context of the pandemic, CYP described spending notably increased amounts of time online during the COVID-19 lockdowns. They noted that time spent online assisted them with experiences of loneliness and isolation.

While these positives were identified, CYP held predominantly negative perceptions about online platforms, mainly due to the behaviour of others and the unwanted content and contact they experience. Negatives for CYP include cyberbullying, threats, harassment, unwanted contact, unwanted content, negative consequences for mental health, the "toxic" nature of interactions and the levels of surveillance.

CYP want the right to have control over their own content and feel that the 'right to be forgotten' is a useful mechanism. CYP have concerns that content they had posted online, might affect their future prospects, particularly in relation to employment and job prospects.

ACTION: CYP want control over their own content and data and want to be able to access the 'right to be forgotten' mechanism.

ACTION: CYP want tech companies, gaming companies and the government to ensure that online spaces are safe.

ACTION: CYP feel that all users should be aware of what is acceptable and what is not, and that acceptable use should also apply to designers and companies.

Identified online harms experienced by CYP included: watching videos of someone committing suicide; watching videos that included aggressive violence; listening to swearing; seeing content that included nudity; cyberbullying; experiencing threats; being asked to send imagery to people they did not know; being encouraged to physically harm themselves; being exposed to "scams" online. Young people highlighted the prevalence and the complexities surrounding "fake accounts" and being targeted.

CYP noted levels of distress, long-term consequences, including on their mental health and well-being. Negative experiences online resulted in many CYP deciding to opt out or making the decision to take regular breaks from using online platforms.

CYP placed responsibility on the platforms for not doing enough to protect users, in particular young users. CYP were collectively concerned about the "slow" or "delayed" responses from companies when they requested content to be removed. There was criticism existing in relation to the perceived lack of restrictions placed on content. CYP raised concerns in relation to the protection of their privacy and the levels of surveillance.

ACTION: CYP want tech companies and gaming platforms to present the terms and conditions in child or young person friendly formats.

ACTION: CYP want swift action from companies when they make complaints and want companies to be held accountable for inaction.

ACTION: Young people suggested that better use of "notices" or "warnings" from companies could impact the levels of unwanted content experienced. They noted that "warnings" can intrigue CYP, therefore a better design process in relation to this, needs to be implemented.

CYP felt that age restrictions on content were in principle a good thing, however in practical terms they felt that it was currently ineffective and did not protect them from harm. Some CYP chose to report and/or block accounts. Many CYP did not know how to make a complaint, particularly online gaming platforms were mentioned as being difficult to navigate in this regard. CYP described not using their real or full names on accounts and profiles, to protect themselves. CYP noted how older siblings, peers and/or "trusted" adults were helpful in navigating how to make complaints or how to block a profile. Older siblings reflected on their own experiences and described monitoring and assisting younger siblings.

ACTION: CYP want clear signposting by companies on how to make a complaint. CYP noted that online gaming platforms do not clearly signpost the complaints process.

ACTION: In relation to age verification, a more rigorous process is required for all users, including for adults. Suggestions include asking people for their passports as a form of ID, using secure apps and advocating for digital passports, which have been officially verified.

Some of the CYP noted feeling responsible for reporting content as they did not want other CYP to view the content and be equally as distressed. Several CYP did not know how to seek redress. Others felt that often redress was not possible, as the "damage" is already done. Many felt that it was pointless to complain if the company responded with an automated response or if nothing happened about the complaint.

ACTION: CYP called for the need for an independent body which would monitor and hold companies to account.

CYP felt that law enforcement should not be able to access and read private conversations that do not relate to an alleged crime, or complaint. Young people were concerned about what data is being collected about them and how it is being used by third parties.

Action: Phone removals by the police in the course of investigations should be for the least possible time period. CYP should initially be informed of the timescale and provided updates. They should be informed about the types of information that is being extracted and used, and the reasons for this.

CYP felt that the education and training they received on online safety is "outdated" and does not keep up with latest developments. CYP wanted to be better informed about their rights online and they felt that this was closely related to "acceptable use" and consent. Young people noted the importance of educating younger children about the potential ramifications of bypassing the age verification process.

ACTION: Education programmes need to be up-to-date and more effective. The current PSHE module needs to be redeveloped.

ACTION: CYP want peer-led training and different formats including interactive videos. They viewed keeping information up-to-date, as being essential for education and learning for all children, young people and adults.

ACTION: CYP suggested that police, in partnership with CYP, should facilitate education initiatives focused on issues surrounding online harms.

ACTION: CYP proposed that tech companies should have youth panels and should consider their opinions in design and safety.

6. COVID-19 PANDEMIC CONTEXT AND THE IMPACT ON SERVICE PROVISION

COVID-19 lockdowns have had a clear impact on service provision, with increased need for services due to a rise in child sexual exploitation referrals which have an online social media element to them.

Rise in Referrals and Impact on Service Provision

In relation to service provision, 97% percent of Catch22's child sexual exploitation referrals (internal data obtained) have an online or social media element.

The table below refers to cases where online grooming and abuse is the primary concern. It shows comparative data from Catch22's largest service for responding to child exploitation. The data illustrates referrals Quarters 1, 2, 3 and 4 in 2019-2020 and the same for the current year 2020-2021, from the largest child exploitation service.

FIRST YEAR/TIME PERIOD	SECOND QUARTER	THIRD QUARTER	FOURTH QUARTER	ANNUAL QUARTER	TOTAL
2019-2020	34%	35%	37%	58%	42%
2020-2021	45%	54%	28%	51%	44%

As the figures above illustrate, there were large increases in the referrals of CYP during the pandemic, demonstrating the need for increased levels of funding to support the specialist tailored support services that do vital work to respond to the needs of CYP.

The first and second quarters of 2020 represent the first lockdown in the United Kingdom and the referrals in relation to online concerns increased by 15 percent, which equated to a 30 percent increase of all total referrals. In the first three quarters of 2019-2020, Catch22 received 260 CSE referrals, whereas in the first three quarters of 2020, they have received 353 referrals into this service.

In quarter three of 2020 the schools were open and CYP were able to meet with others in person and the number of referrals fell slightly below the 35 percent average for the previous year of 2019-2020.

In 2020-2021, staff note that fluctuation across the year has been far greater than they would normally expect to see, and the proportion of online concerns has increased. Staff working directly in this area report that the increase can only partly be explained by increasing awareness among professionals of the existence of the service.

Summary

This study was conducted during periods of lockdown in the United Kingdom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was evident that the pandemic context was having a considerable impact on service provision. As the figures above illustrate large increases in the referrals of CYP, demonstrates the need for increased levels of funding to support the specialist tailored support services that do vital work to respond to the needs of CYP.

7. PERSPECTIVES OF PROFESSIONALS

Introduction

This section contains the views, experiences and insights from key professionals working in education, safeguarding, victim support, law enforcement, policy, tech companies and professionals working in the field of regulation. Their insights offer unique perspectives into the challenges of addressing and preventing online harms, the challenges of investigating online harms, the need for more resources, education and training for professionals working across different fields.

“I think large tech companies have really failed their responsibility to the public.”

(Interviewee 10 – Counter-terrorism Policing Professional)

“Companies simply have not done enough to protect their legitimate users... Every child should be able to go on to the web [and] on to a social media platform and do it knowing that they are safe and secure. I don't think that's unreasonable.”

(Interviewee 4 – Police Professional and Lead on Child Protection)

“Everybody's thinking, 'oh, the end-user can just manage it, it's fine', instead of recognising that these systems could be made safe for people, but it's a political argument isn't it? Sadly.”

(Interviewee 1 – Schools Safeguarding Specialist)

“I think in the offline world we have police; we have courts to adjudicate... I think online it's expected or placed upon the platforms to do that really complicated role with trying to define and understand the context and land in the right area. I think sometimes those decisions, because they are so difficult, they get them wrong, and then there's a question about how do we make those decisions easier and how do we enable them to take firmer action?”

(Interviewee 3 – Tech representative)

“If we're truly putting citizens and victims at the heart of our approach, then we need to work collectively and collaboratively... I'm concerned about the fragmentation that could occur through different pieces of legislation and what that means for the general users. Also, for industry being able to weave and play jurisdictions off against each other. I think... an international collaboration, is critical at this stage.”

(Interviewee 11 – eSafety Representative, Australia)

“The moral aspect of what we say online I think has shifted. Adults are more confused by it, which means that sometimes they struggle to help young people. That goes right the way down to primary age children, are experiencing that content.”

(Interviewee 1 – Schools Safeguarding Specialist)

Educators and safeguarding professionals working on the ground with children, young people and other agencies, offered a detailed insight into the realities for children, young people and educators, when navigating online spaces and in responding to incidents when they occur.

The blurring of boundaries between 'online and offline' spaces, as well as quick adjustment to online learning during the first lockdown in the United Kingdom, caused significant challenges for educators and practitioners, especially when contacting already stretched external agencies, such as the police, victim support and child protection services.

Challenges in Practice and Protection

Educators and safeguarding professionals outlined the challenges that exist for them and other agencies working to protect and empower CYP. They identified the high levels of online harms reported to them, the evolving nature of new harms and the grey areas in relation to online harm. They reflected on the challenges in resourcing the delivery of effective responses to address harms.

Those working in education and safeguarding questioned the focus on the age bracket of 10–16-year-olds and they felt that education was needed for children much younger, and they discussed several examples of online harm, involving children as young as two years old:

“We’ve got children who are two and three who’ve used Siri and have been exposed to extreme pornography on mum’s phone and we routinely have children who are as young as seven and eight, using [platform] and [platform] and [platform] and [platform].”

(Interviewee 6)

Descriptions of the challenges posed by this kind of device sharing between children and parents, or children and older siblings, were heightened during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The interviewees also referred to “pushed content”, which typically resulted in CYP viewing unwanted content:

“Pushed content is a real worry, where they’re getting adult content, unwise content which is popping up in a [platform] feed, or up next on your [platform], whatever. Even when it’s the child’s own device and the child isn’t sharing the device, they’re still subject to that, although it becomes far more problematic when they’re sharing with an adult and the adult is maybe perfectly reasonably looking at adult content but they haven’t set up separate profiles.” (Interviewee 1)

Educators and safeguarding professionals were extremely concerned about harms that had occurred during the lockdowns in the UK, with examples including:

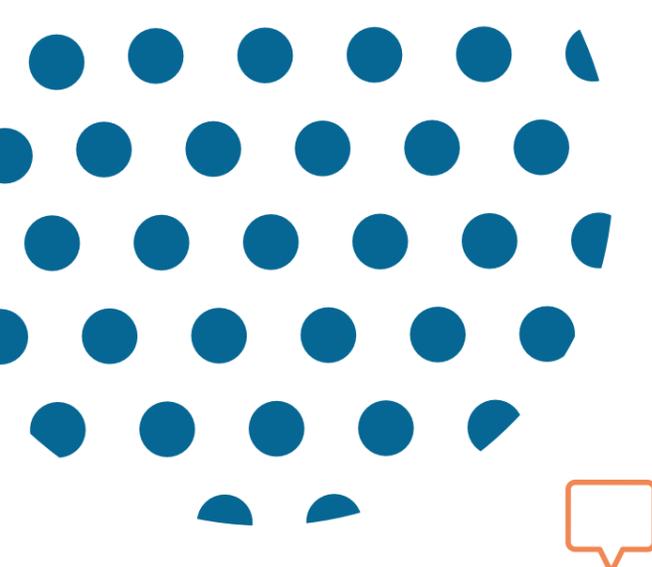
“Child abuse content shared on [platform] groups recently, child abuse content with nine and ten-year-olds.” (Interviewee 6)

“Very serious knife crime, gangs, children being nudged into violence... acts of violence... [are] common content that is shared amongst gangs of young children, particularly teenagers.” (Interviewee 6)

“On social media, [platform] and [platform], violence and threats of violence with young primary aged children, this is all primary aged children. Then we’ve had pornography, again, actually this [platform] this time... So [platform] pushes you to, as does most social media, pornography very quickly, but children sharing [platform] links amongst class groups ... and it became quickly apparent that it was based on the algorithm of the device that you’re on.” (Interviewee 6)

“We’ve had a real rise in self-harm, particularly among girls, increases in eating disorders, and... the FOMO, the fear of missing out.” (Interviewee 1)





It was evident that CYP reported incidents on their return to school in June and July 2020, following a period of lockdown. School safeguarding professionals noted that after the lockdown, children “disclosed”, and professionals believed this was due to feeling “muted when they were in isolation,” as well as a lack of knowledge about where and “how to get help” (Interviewee 1). The interviewees reported that children went to their “trusted adult”, and a number also phoned “Childline” and other helplines.

Those working in schools reflected on the pressures placed on senior leadership figures, who have to address incidents of online harms and engage with outside agencies, such as the police and children protection services:

“All the headteachers... they’ve got to spend so much time, they have a case that comes from outside school, comes into school... They’ve got to readdress it, provide not therapy, but provide restorative sessions for the class. They’ve got to do parent sessions; they’ve got to get the police involved. It’s exhausting.” (Interviewee 6)

It was noted that there was a lack of resources to respond to the rise in incidents during the lockdowns and this left many educators and safeguarding experts overwhelmed and concerned. They felt that the lack of knowledge held by outside agencies, including the police, made their roles more challenging:

“I do think people feel out of their depth, and even when in training you say, you can go here, you can go here, you can go here, you can go here - when it actually happens, they’re like the rabbit caught in the headlights, and they don’t know where to go, and sometimes that leads to delays or them taking the wrong actions and things of that kind.” (Interviewee 1)

The perceived lack of understanding on the part of adults, particularly in relation to harmful content, was said to be concerning for educators and safeguarding professionals:

“Some of it is the way in which families don’t understand how to use the technology to at least protect the child against inadvertent content. Some of the inadvertent content is becoming far more extreme...” (Interviewee 1)

Educators and those working in the area of safeguarding noted that the police experience many challenges in addressing online harm:

“Law enforcement didn’t know how to cope with it, people didn’t understand the risk. If you look at our statutory guidance, ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’, which is the main multiagency guidance in this country, the internet hardly features - I think there’s, out of however many hundred pages it is, I think there’s something like four words which could vaguely allude to being online.” (Interviewee 1)

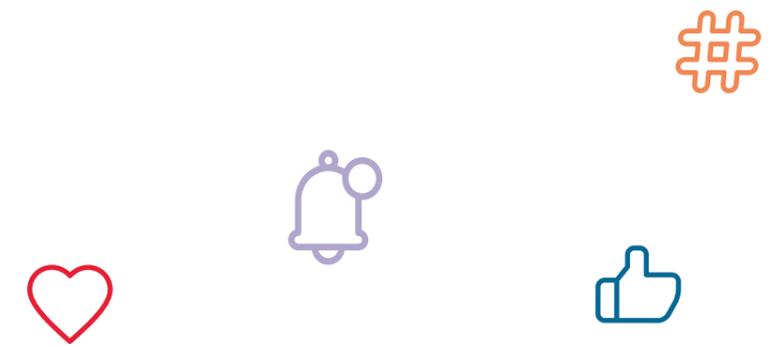
The interviewee referred to an example describing how they had to direct the police to the Internet Watch Foundation:

“We had an example ... real-world abuse that was filmed, so we had a girl, and she was raped ... and the rape was filmed ... the film went viral very, very fast, to the point that she couldn’t leave home. She was absolutely the victim here. Police didn’t act fast enough - and I don’t think police often understand how to get stuff taken down. I had to tell our police force about the Internet Watch Foundation, and then

when I sent the link through they said, ‘are you sure this isn’t a scam?’ Their lack of understanding of these larger bodies that are there to protect children is really quite shocking sometimes.” (Interviewee 1)

In discussing the ‘Age-appropriate Design Code’ that was produced by the Information Commissioner’s Office in the UK, several of the interviewees felt that the main principles were “useful”, however the challenge in seeing any positive change was hindered by the fact that it is not particularly well applied in practice nor adhered to:

“They’re not very well applied by the software platforms, and then they’re not well adhered to by the users. I was really disappointed when age verification for pornography was thrown out because that struck me as something that was quite straightforward, and it could have been reasonably applied, instead of which it was thrown out completely.” (Interviewee 1)



Redress and Regulation

Educators and safeguarding professionals discussed the importance for CYP to feel empowered to make complaints if they want to seek redress. The interviewees were clear that the damage is done at this stage, however in their experience, for “the children that have made complaints, often it’s made them feel better” (Interviewee 1). They described their role in assisting children to phone helplines, noting that automated online responses do not provide the same level of reassurance to CYP:

“The human response of a telephone helpline I think is enormously valuable. It’s difficult when you’re reporting online... I think if children report, what they’ve said to me is they want to know the outcome... we have had some children who’ve reported on [platform] - they shouldn’t have been on [platform] admittedly because they’re too young, but they reported on [platform] about content which isn’t right, and two or three days later they get the message that says, ‘thank you for telling us this, our investigation found that this tweet or this account breached [platform] guidelines’. **For the child, they just think, Yes! they get a sense of - like they’ve been responsible for doing something about a bit of content ... low level actions taken by children can be remarkably empowering,** because it means that if things got worse, you get the sense that they would talk to somebody, because they’d feel like they’d be listened to.” (Interviewee 1)

When discussing the proposed new regulatory frameworks, the interviewees were not convinced that an external regulator should be viewed as the only way to address the issues being experienced:

“I’m not sure an external regulator... How are they going to do that, in all honesty?” (Interviewee 1)

They also felt that while a duty of care was a useful concept, it was difficult to envisage how this would work in practice in online spaces:

“Because we have statutory duties of care about real-world harms, and their agencies hold each other to account, and when you get serious failure you’ve got a serious case review, but you’ve got something tangible, and you know who the different players are around the table. The minute you get to online, that’s not visible.” (Interviewee 1)

The interviewees stressed the need for those with the best possible expertise and knowledge to lead and work in the regulatory space:

“If you had a newly setup body that recruited people with exactly the right expertise, it might stand more chance, or if Ofcom had a branch that was newly setup, not where you had people just employed into it, like we have with track and trace... Too often it strikes me that the people that they put in charge, they’ve put in charge because of who they are or who they’ve been as opposed to the expertise that they’ve got.” (Interviewee 1)





VICTIM SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

Those working with victims to support them, indicated that the COVID-19 lockdowns had resulted in a major increase in the need for service provision. They discussed the impact of online harms on CYP, the need for often extended support and counselling, as well as the interactions with other agencies, including the police. The interviewees also discussed the kinds of redress CYP typically sought or the reasons for choosing not to seek redress.

Increases in Need for Support Services and the Impact on Children

Victims support providers and other support professionals felt that the need for support had dramatically increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, yet funding was a challenge for many service providers. They noted that lockdown had played a part in the increase in victimisation and opportunities for bullying, harassment, and grooming, in particular, to occur. Professionals also noted the increases in reporting of CYP who were facing challenges following the sharing of nude images and sexting. Those interviewed work with CYP aged between 4 and 17 years old.

As one victim support professional stated, “unwanted contact” often led to the sharing of imagery or threats being made during the lockdowns in the UK:

“A lot of it was from social media... bullying online, indecent images online, whether that was they sent themselves, or they were asked to send them, or someone hacked into their account and sent them on their behalf. We also saw quite a few cases from gaming online, so Fortnite and things like that, where people would be befriended and then they were then asked to send those images, or threats made that if you don't do this we'll come and harm you and things like that. So there's definitely been an increase in online harms, in our cases... this year, definitely.”
(Interviewee 7)

This had resulted in several CYP concealing incidents of grooming and the sharing of content, until it became “so bad that they have attempted suicide or self-harm and that's how it's then come to light that this has happened” (Interviewee 7).

Those working closely with CYP, often for prolonged periods of time, discussed how many do not see themselves as a victim of crime, rather “they blame themselves for what happened, and they blame themselves for letting it get that far or to escalate” (Interviewee 7).

As one interviewee stressed that CYP can be affected in a variety of ways:

“Especially if the young person is already vulnerable... it massively impacts young people's mental health... anxiety levels increase, to the point that people wouldn't leave the house because they were worried about bumping into the perpetrator or just generally not feeling safe.”

(Interviewee 7)

“Their school life was impacted, whether that be that they didn't go to school, maybe their lack of attendance, or that their behaviour went the other way and actually they were acting out, or they were acting in a certain way or behaving in a certain way because of the impact.” (Interviewee 7)

As one interviewee stressed, CYP can be affected in a variety of different ways:

“Lots of people think if they just come off social media that's fine, it's dealt with, when actually there are longer term effects which can take months to try and recover from.”
(Interviewee 7)

In educating children, as part of therapeutic practice, victim support professionals develop child-friendly online safety games and employ interactive methods for informing children about the risks online, as well as the ways in which they can protect themselves.

Challenges for Law Enforcement

Those working in victim support have regular interactions with law enforcement and regularly support CYP and their families in making complaints to the police. The interviewees noted that often victims do not receive redress or a sense of closure, due to the challenges of identifying perpetrators in online spaces:

“Most of the time it’s reported to the police, the police do try and look into it, but because it’s an online game it’s very difficult to try and identify who the offender is. One case I can think of, I know that the mum in the situation did report it to the game but I’m not sure if she heard back.” (Interviewee 7)



“Where it’s been accounts that have obviously been involved in grooming or exploitation, I know that they’ve been reported. **However, one case I can think of which comes to mind which is racially aggravated abuse online, that was reported to both the police and [platform] and the police told the victim they couldn’t do anything because the identity of the account couldn’t be confirmed. So obviously the young person was very upset and was in a bit of a situation of, okay, what can happen?...** I have seen that it takes an awful long time to get an account removed or for something to happen.” (Interviewee 7)

Reforms, Regulation and Education

One interviewee felt that proof of identity through other means such as a passport, would be more effective than the current practices:

“There’s been talks in the past about if you sign up to an app you have to add a form of identity, so a passport, or driver’s licence... I think, actually, in the long run, would be really effective because if someone has an account they have to verify that account and if they are then bullying, or grooming, or trolling, then their identity is more likely to be found out... there should be something in place...” (Interviewee 7)

Those supporting and working with victims and survivors, outline that some CYP do want redress, however a large number of those who are victims or survivors want to “move on” from the incident:

“It’s kind of split, so lots of young people think, actually, I don’t care what happens, I just want to move on and get over it, and lots of other young people think, no I want justice, I want someone to be held accountable, I want the police to find someone guilty. Which is obviously of course their right as a victim, however, very difficult because of these flaws that platforms have in finding the person responsible.” (Interviewee 7)

When discussing the need for regulation, interviewees felt that monetary fines “doesn’t deal with the impact emotionally and physically that someone has been subjected to” (Interviewee 7). When arguing for the introduction of an independent model of regulation, interviewees typically referred to examples of serious online harm:

“Some form of regulation does need to happen... from an external body. Purely because, from what I’ve seen... that video that recently went round on, it was on a [platform] of someone committing suicide... this video was then put on to [platform], which [platform] removed, however, was then recreated so it would have... puppies or something fun at the start of the video which would then pop up with this video of someone committing suicide. So I think, you know, [platform] tried their best to get rid of this video, however, it was still circulating in a way that a six-year-old - not that they should have [platform] - might come across a video of some puppies and then see that.” (Interviewee 7)

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Those interviewed who work in law enforcement in the UK, had specialisms and experience working in child protection and counterterrorism, including an interviewee who holds a national position.

Increase in the Volume of Online Harm

The interviewees commented on the volume of harmful and illegal material on the internet and on the dark net. As one interviewee stated:

“The volume of material that’s now out there is just I think beyond most people’s comprehension... at this moment in time, we are overwhelmed with the sheer volume of material and the sheer volume of offences.”

(Interviewee 4)

During the lockdowns in the UK, those working in child protection noted the increase in the reporting of online harms. When asked about the most prevalent online harms, Interviewee 4 stated that:

“Overwhelmingly, it is the viewing, sharing of indecent imagery”, followed by “purchasing and directing of the abuse with livestreaming of abuse ... in terms of the scale or volume.” (Interviewee 4)

Law Enforcement as “One Step Behind”

Those working in law enforcement used the phrase “one step behind” to describe their perception of always being behind the developments in technology, as well as new and forms of perpetration of offences and harm. They felt this also impacted upon public perceptions of policing of online harms more generally, as well as the behaviour of perpetrators. As one interviewee stated:

“We’re always just one step behind, but all I would say is that I think we have really undermined the confidence in a lot of people that actually you can go on to the website and view images and groom a child, simply because of the number of arrests that we’re making ... despite the fact that we’re arresting 700 men every month and safeguarding 900 children every month, the numbers carry on growing.” (Interviewee 4)

Another interviewee described the need for continuous innovation in the technology, in order to attempt to be steps ahead of perpetrators and respond in a way which will deter future offending:

“I always think about it like bike locks, the first bike locks. **Every time they’d break through it, the manufacturers would go back, and they’d have to make something even sturdier...** It always reminds me the perpetrator’s always actively finding ways to penetrate whatever security force you’re putting on there. They’ll be devious about it and they’ll be more, they’ll use more software with it, but it would be something that, if the time and space or money is given to it for research to be conducted to stop them before they even happen to think two steps ahead of the game and try and put in features which would help. Not after all the damage is done, which we’ve seen with a lot of social media companies where they claim there wasn’t a social corporate responsibility element to it.”

(Interviewee 10)

In discussing platforms and their capability functions, law enforcement representatives felt that the COVID-19 lockdowns had shone a light onto the moderation of content online, with artificial intelligence proving to be less effective than human moderators:

“What they have done during COVID is the human moderators, whom they are reliant upon to take down material, have all been working from home and not been able to do their jobs. So they’ve relied on artificial intelligence ...the AI is not as good as the human moderators, so we now know that there is a ... significant amount of previously unidentified unseen material that’s now out there. **It will come to our attention at some point and then there will then be a big bubble of cases that will then hit the police service.”** (Interviewee 4)

The heavy reliance on AI as a moderator of content, was predicted to have a knock-on effect on the numbers and types of case law enforcement would be dealing with in the future.

Ineffectiveness of Self-Regulation and Discussions about Reform

It was evident that those working in law enforcement felt that the current system of self-regulation is ineffective. They positioned considerable blame on the tech companies for not taking responsibility for addressing and preventing harms from occurring:

“I think large tech companies have really failed in their responsibility to the public... Maybe they weren’t quick enough, maybe they haven’t developed some sort of AI to detect those and delete them as soon as they come out, but those kinds of images, that video circulated amongst the community members all around the world. I think it had such a big impact... I think there’s not enough regulation around it.” (Interviewee 10)

It was evident in the responses from the interviewees, that they felt that tech companies did not prioritise the needs and protection of vulnerable users:

“I feel like their priorities are not the protection of young people.” (Interviewee 10)

In reflecting on what is happening in other jurisdictions, those interviewed stated that:

“More and more countries are resorting to legislation to tighten things up.” (Interviewee 4)

The interviewees highlighted that proposed reforms may enable them to have a new framework, with increased powers for the police and for a main regulator. However, several interviewees were concerned and wanted to read more detail on the proposed reforms:

“What punitive measures can the regulator lay at the door of the companies, how robust are they going to be, what’s their capacity and capability going to be to go after these companies that are flagrantly not protecting children online and permitting abusive images to be uploaded and shared? I still think there’s an awful lot of water that’s got to pass under the bridge on this yet.” (Interviewee 4)

The uncertainties and lack of detail were concerning for those interviewed and as one interviewee stated:

“My ongoing plea to government and plea to ministers has been, look, you’ve got to tighten up on the rules and regulations, you’ve got to bring in this legislation, because if you do that, it will take away the volume that we are having to deal with every single day and allow us to focus on your sophisticated high-end high-harm offenders. We don’t have the time, the space, the capacity, the capability to be able to do that right now, because we are simply overwhelmed with the sheer volume of the number of referrals and the number of jobs that we are having to deal with.” (Interviewee 4)

The need for the police to have strong relationships with tech companies was viewed as essential in addressing online harm and as one interviewee stated:

“There’s really strong relationships with the companies that are helping us to detect the material in the first place, so that’s all positive. The engagement with [platform] is not as positive.” (Interviewee 4)



Importance of Training and Education

One of the interviewees identified the importance of training and education for law enforcement and stated that:

“I really feel like there was that knowledge gap for myself... my colleagues as well.” (Interviewee 10)

The training provided by The Social Switch Project was referred to as a vital resource for police and as one interviewee stated:

“Bespoke training... with the Social Switch... these kinds of partnerships are really important because they help us keep abreast of stuff that we maybe wouldn’t have the time to do learning and development-wise, just to see what’s happening, what’s changing in the world and how we can keep up with that.” (Interviewee 10)

Those interviewed acknowledged the importance of engaging in such training, in order to gain better understandings of the issues and the Social Switch Project was set apart from other existing training, as it has been designed involving young people:

“I know Social Switch, there’s a lot of conversations with young people as well to inform their training.” (Interviewee 10)

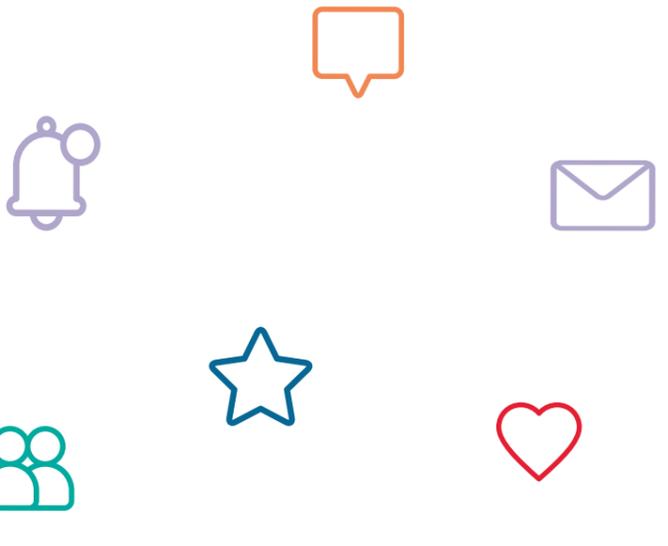
This was deemed as important for those working in law enforcement as:

“it’s important for us as adults... in this space, if we are doing policing there, one engagement is at the core of what we’re doing, but secondly, I think is, really understanding the needs of young people nowadays.” (Interviewee 10)

One interviewee felt that training, such as that offered by the Social Switch Project, should be mandatory for all frontline police officers, especially those working with CYP, which would assist with equipping police officers with the latest knowledge:

“I think that level of reassurance needs to be done from within our police, and that’s how we can tackle it probably regionally” (Interviewee 10)

In addition to training, resources, materials and toolkits for police, informed by the NGO sector, were viewed as being of great benefit for frontline officers.





POLICY PROFESSIONALS

Importance of language and terminology

Policy professionals felt that the language used and the meaning behind terminology was an important aspect to explore. During the interviews, those working in the policy space questioned the language used by other professionals and the UK Government in particular. They referred to some of the language employed by the government as being "problematic" and unclear. They felt that language played a key role in framing what types of online harms exist and their perceived prevalence. Interviewee 5 felt that there was a need to "differentiate between what is illegal ... the most serious harm out there" and other harms that are "far more prevalent... like bullying online... which can be just as harmful".

Challenges with Current Proposals

In describing the current system of self-regulation, policy professionals referred to it as a system which has not been effective to date. They also argued that "regulation alone isn't enough" as "it's always too prospective" (Interviewee 5). They felt that tech companies "have been able to get away for a long time because there hasn't been public debate" (Interviewee 5). Public debate on issues were described by Interviewee 5 as being useful in driving innovation:

"Public debate has driven far more innovations in the space of safety by design, and like the action to tackle things like misinformation and harassment online, and all of that, has been a real driver for innovation. So clearly, there needs to be some pressure for companies to continue that work, and the threat of regulation is in the front seat in terms of driving it."

(Interviewee 5)

Policy professionals also provided their opinions on the realities of the current proposals and how these may operate in practice, if implemented. There was criticism and levels of caution expressed in relation to the approach taken by the UK Government and the current proposals. Ensuring that the reforms introduced are based on "robust evidence" and not introduced based on having to be "seen to be ... doing something", was a prominent opinion held by policy professionals.

One of the policy professionals interviewed was very critical of several aspects of the current proposals and felt that in reality, implementation and practice would not be as straightforward process as some might imagine it to be:

"I don't think a straightforward strong regulatory body with heavy enforcement powers is necessarily going to be the most effective." (Interviewee 5)

One prominent example was a discussion of "age verification" and whether it "will ... actually work or not?" (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 5 outlined that they were "pessimistic" about the future effectiveness of "age verification" and stated that:

"We'll wait and see now for a review a couple of years down the line, but ... I think the debate is quite ill-informed, both because it's a new area and so there isn't that robust an evidence base to work of, but also almost like a lack of interest in building that evidence base, and more [the approach of] we need to move quickly, we don't have time for evidence, clearly something has to be done, let's just throw the kitchen sink at it and see what works." (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 5 also felt like a clear distinction needed to be made between "extreme harm" and the more "grey areas" that exist in relation to online harms. They were of the opinion that a collective approach of grouping all online harms together in order to develop broad responses, would not work well in practice:

"I think it needs to be looked at holistically, but the thing that concerns me most is this bundling together of very different issues. Should you be dealing with terrorist content in the same way as you deal with advertising of fast food?" (Interviewee 5)

Advocating for "Principles" based approach

Policy professionals advocated for an approach which rather than focusing on specific companies or specific tech, takes a more "principles" based approach in devising a legislative framework. This "idea that law should be based on principles rather than responding to specific technologies" (Interviewee 5) was viewed as more likely to be able to adapt to the ever-changing nature of tech and the new kind of harms that may emerge in the future. As one interviewee described it:

"It's about trying to understand the principles behind something, rather than trying to respond to specific technologies, because I think as soon as you start to try and respond to specific technologies, by the time you get the legislation through it's probably already out of date. I mean, it's moving so fast, and yes, you do have to think about in the future it's tricky... it surely has to be based on principles rather than technologies." (Interviewee 5)

In addition to a "holistic" approach to the legislation, policy professionals felt that a "holistic" approach to education would be beneficial.



They felt that a tailored education programme which required teachers to better understand some of the platforms was required. A system that approached educating the educators first was deemed as more likely to succeed:

“Almost education for the teachers first, for them to be able to appropriately discuss these issues with young people.” (Interviewee 5)

More Transparency and Research Needed

In moving forward, policymakers felt that companies needed to be more transparent and should be more open to collaborations with academics, to create new knowledge, generate more data on the capabilities of tech and therefore, enable society to gain more insight:

“If you think of data as like a commodity now, obviously companies don’t want to give that up, and yet at the same time I think it’s clearly coming to a crunch point where, unless they start to proactively work with academics, in order to build sort of an evidence case for the positives, the negatives are stacking against them. I think that will be a real driver to helping to - in almost forcing their hand to open up their data sets to get those insights.”

(Interviewee 5)

They believed while innovations such as “safety by design” are presented as being more transparent, in reality such processes can result in some groups of young people who “don’t feel very involved” or included (Interviewee 5). While this approach is shining a light onto “how important diversity is in the design process”, it was argued that:

“there’s only so far you can go, and, obviously, safety by design starts butting up against freedom of expression, and all of - some other fundamental rights. But often it’s just designers haven’t thought about how to make their product safer, because for them it is safe.” (Interviewee 5)

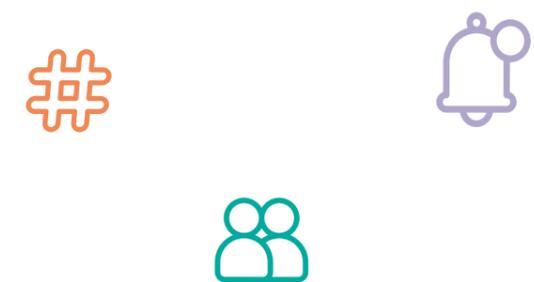
Overall, those interviewed felt that regulation alone was not sufficient to address the issues that exist in the UK surrounding online harms, and they felt that the proposed regulatory framework is likely to bring with it what were described as “unintended consequences” (Interviewee 5).

Better Innovation in Education

The importance of a clear and effective education system for adults, as well as for CYP, was deemed as vital by policy professionals. Policy professionals interviewed were critical of the current education system’s responses to online harms, noting that “education about these things hasn’t been brought into mainstream in the UK curriculum at all” (Interviewee 5). The interviewees also indicated that while in the UK:

“The big online harms debate [is] happening, and that’s really concentrated on... what new regulations and legislation can we introduce, and I think very little has been dedicated to... how do we educate children about putting up those borders and curating a space for them.”

(Interviewee 5)



TECH INDUSTRY

Representatives from the tech industry stressed the importance of defining what "harm" is and typically held the view that CYP needed to develop greater "resilience" in navigating online spaces. They also suggested that models of industry "self-regulation" should not be discounted.

Definitions: Language and Meaning Matters

One interviewee was critical of the definition Ofcom utilises when conducting research:

"Ofcom, when they do research, they define online harm as things including spam and unwanted messages in the same area as terrorist content, so it's a really broad bucket when they're talking about harm." (Interviewee 2)

The issue of a lack of a consistent definition of 'harm' was described as an issue:

"I would say that there is a huge issue in just defining what we mean by harm... to civil servants and MPs and stakeholders, campaigners in this area, each of them thinks harm is something or something else or they think that body image is a harm concern, but actually someone else doesn't. I think a common understanding of what we mean by harm is really important." (Interviewee 2)

Similarly, another interviewee called for clarity on the definitions of harm and risk and felt that this would assist in tailoring responses that are appropriate to address harm:

"I think it's just clarity is needed on both of those things when thinking about types of harm experienced by young people. I don't think it's a very straightforward question that you can reel them off, because it's completely subjective to different vulnerabilities, different levels of education, different levels of resilience experienced by young people." (Interviewee 3)

Emphasis on 'Risk' and 'Resilience'

Those interviewed described the role of "risk" and the need for CYP to "build resilience". One interviewee held the opinion that:

"Experiencing risk is an essential part of building resilience as well. In order for a young person to be able to respond to a challenge... they need to experience a risk and then have the support, education, whatever it might be, to understand that that's a risk." (Interviewee 3)

Interviewees emphasised the need for educators and youth workers to assist CYP to continue to develop "resilience". One interviewee proposed that:

"We typically use age as a proxy for resilience, and that's not necessarily true. I think we all know different - two thirteen-year-olds, who one is more mature than the other and more resilient than the other... I think looking at not just what is the harm, how are we defining the harm, but also looking at that young person as an individual and not as a group in terms of their vulnerability, their resilience. I think that risk versus impact or risk versus reality is really important." (Interviewee 2)

In contrast to educators and safeguarding professionals, who emphasised the high levels of children and young who wanted information on how to complain to tech companies and the police, the interviewees proposed that those who are the victims of online harms:

"Actually want the least action to be taken, because either they might have more resilience or whatever it is, at the end of the day." (Interviewee 2)

"A prioritisation in terms of moderation towards the most extreme harms as well, to make sure that, at a time when we're all faced with challenges around working remotely, that those are still covered in the same sense." (Interviewee 2)

"How that's going to be achieved by that implementation deadline if engineers - if the guidance is finalised... that only leaves a number of months for companies to actually know what they need to do and then to implement it." (Interviewee 2)



Age Verification

Those working in the industry felt that the use of age assurance or age verification would mean that user numbers would drop and that it was potentially a major concern for the business side of operations:

“If implementing age assurance or age verification would mean that you’d see a drop-off of users around 30 per cent, 40 per cent, or your advertising would be worth 30 per cent to 40 per cent less, you might have to rethink that entire business model, at the end of the day. That’s obviously not just a concern for the business but also for those children to access that content and have that space to learn and explore, and the rights under UNCRC which are so important, so the challenge there as well.”

(Interviewee 2)

Those representing the tech industry felt that it was too premature to assess how the age verification system is operating: “age verification system where the market itself is really - it’s not mature yet in terms of those products and services” (Interviewee 2). Interviewees did acknowledge that it was easier to verify the age of “over-18s ... so that they can access adult content, because typically they will have a passport or a driver’s licence” (Interviewee 2). They felt that it was more:

“Difficult once you’re trying to verify under-18s or that they’re in a certain age bracket. They’re just - we don’t have a national identity system in the UK; there isn’t this central database of age that you can verify against, so it becomes really, really difficult.” (Interviewee 2)

Another proposed challenge for the effectiveness of age verification is “in theory it would apply in the UK; it would not apply internationally” (Interviewee 2).

Redress and Regulation

In contrast to other professionals interviewed, those working in the tech industry felt that policymakers should not “discount the role and effectiveness of self-regulation” (Interviewee 2). Those interviewed also felt that industry and the companies themselves are best place to regulate:

“In terms of who is best to regulate content, I think online companies have the greatest understanding and expertise of their users and their product and how it’s used.” (Interviewee 3)



Interviewees referred to mechanisms already in place:

“I think broadly Notice and Takedown as a system has been effective... It is the most appropriate system in addition to the proactive AI that they have in place to flag and to remove certain content. I think [platform] and others have stats around I think 90 per cent of harmful content removed before it's seen by others or within a certain time period... In terms of an independent body, I think that is going to be very difficult in a sense that, one, they don't have the kind of expertise that that platform might have, and then you get into a question of appeals. As I say, because it's such a binary outcome, you're going to get an appeal whether or not people agree with it, and I think that presents whole new challenges.”

(Interviewee 2)

Those working in the tech industry felt that:

“There needs to be just a really good understanding of what currently happens. How does the current system work? What are companies working on? That kind of stuff, and then secondly, what is the challenge and harm and how do we then best address that?”

(Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 3 referred to investments made by Facebook:

“They invested I think it was 700 million this year in trust and safety and security, and that is obviously a huge amount of money and they have... 40,000 people now looking at this area, focusing on safety and security. I think that isn't necessarily captured in the same conversation with looking at what more needs to be done. We look at social enterprises and start-ups in the space, but actually a huge amount of innovation, a huge amount of tools and design is done proactively.” (Interviewee 3)

When asked for examples of innovation that applied to CYP and were developed over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, no immediate examples were suggested by those interviewed and working in or representing the tech industry.



REGULATION PROFESSIONALS

Those working in the field of regulation noted that current measures such as “content warnings” prove very ineffective with young users:

“I think the thing with the sensitive content labels with children, it is like, big red button do not press, and what do kids want to do? Well, they want to press it. So the unintended consequences of flagging inappropriate content is that children are really attracted to it!” (Interviewee 8)

The interviewees also note that research demonstrates that while parents “generally are aware that there is an age requirement ... actually quoting the correct age is quite low” (Interviewee 8). Those working in the regulation space referred to the need for self-regulation amongst users, with CYP developing the skills to identify harmful behaviour and report such incidents:

“One girl who was being really horrifically trolled on social media by somebody that they think was at school, but they were doing it via a private network. So her parents got in touch with the police, that's how serious it was, but they couldn't trace who this person was... another boy who I think at the time was something like 10 or 11, and somebody on a game that he was playing had started asking him where he lived. He knew instinctively that this was wrong... He raised that with his parents who then took action and blocked that person.” (Interviewee 9)



Reflections from Australia on its co-regulatory model

Those working in other jurisdictions such as Australia note that a “multipronged” approach is required to address online harms and promote online safety:

“[In Australia] our model is really interesting... we’ve got those regulatory schemes that we receive reports from the public about complaints and things that happen on their services. We also have a big raising awareness, education and outreach piece as well. So that enables us to hear from both practitioners, teachers, and people working in the space, the experiences of CYP. So we get a lot of our information through those routes. We’ve got an in-house research team that underpins all of our work, and they carry out extensive surveys and research on the general population.” (Interviewee 11)

The main focus of the esafety Commissioner’s office in Australia and the regulatory schemes are the issues of cyberbullying, image-based abuse and prohibited online content, with the remainder of their work focusing on other types of online harms that affect individuals. The interviewee stated that industry relationships are key to the success of regulatory in Australia:

“I think although we’ve got a regulatory model, I think you can almost look at it as a coregulatory model, because we’ve got all the civil powers and criminal penalties that sit under our legislation. We’ve never actually gone as far as administering some of the harsher penalties. That’s because we’ve tried to establish really strong relationships with industry.”
(Interviewee 11)

In discussing the emerging proposals from the United Kingdom, those working in Australia stated:

“The UK’s been an interesting one, because I think everybody’s eyes were on them both in terms of the age verification and the online harms, but just the length of time I think that other countries are overtaking them a little bit, just in terms of their processes. I think the duty of care model is very similar to our approach here. I know that they’re not looking at content takedown. They’re saying now the systems and processes with which again, is very like our Safety by Design. I just think, having an agency that acts as a safety and acts for the general population is vitally important.”
(Interviewee 11)

This criticism in relation to the delays on the part of the UK to implement change, is also reflected in comments in relation to the lack of detail about infrastructure and approaches:

“The devil is in the detail in terms of what sits behind those expectations; whether they’re going to be codes of practice, what guidance is industry going to be given. I think it’s going to be that aspect that is very easy to put things into legislation, but actually operationalising things to make them effective and impactful, I think that’s going to be the tricky bit.” (Interviewee 11)

Overall, those working in the field of regulation, felt that the UK would benefit from having an independent and transparent regulator. In addition, they identified that the education of members of the public on how to engage with the regulator and access the redress mechanisms, would be essential, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society:

“For the UK, I do think having that element of that need for transparency and for the regulator to be able to ask those questions is vitally important.” (Interviewee 11)

Summary

Educators and Safeguarding Professionals

Educators and safeguarding professionals noted that high levels of online harm reported to them, the evolving and changing nature of online harms and the challenges in resourcing delivery of effective responses, were key concerns. "Pushed content" and "device sharing" meant that much younger children were exposed to harmful materials and content, often without the knowledge of adults initially. Safeguarding professionals noted that after lockdown was over children disclosed and they believed that was due to feelings of being muted, isolated and a lack of knowledge about where and how to access help and support. Educators and safeguarding professionals were not convinced that an external regulator should be viewed as the only way to address the issues posed by online harms.

ACTION: Those with the best possible expertise and knowledge need to lead the work in the regulatory space.

ACTION: Phonelines and personalised responses are deemed more beneficial for CYP in seeking support and redress.

ACTION: Educators and safeguarding professionals want to see better education for outside agencies, including the police.

ACTION: Educators and safeguarding professionals require more resources to respond to the rise in need for support.

Victim Support Professionals

The COVID-19 lockdowns have resulted in a major increase in referrals to victim support services and an increase in the need for service provision. Victim support professionals referred to data which demonstrated that lockdown had played a part in the increase in victimisation and opportunities for bullying, harassment and grooming. Professionals noted that the police's involvement and outcomes often did not bring a sense of closure or redress to victims.

ACTION: Given the significant rise in referrals to victim support services and the need for long-term support, more funding needs to be provided to support services.

ACTION: Greater education and information about the options for available service provision and support needs to be prioritised, as professionals noted that feelings of shame or embarrassment often stopped or delayed CYP from seeking support.

Law Enforcement

Those working in law enforcement stressed the high volume of harmful and illegal material on the internet and on the "Dark Net". Law enforcement described feeling "one step behind" the developments in technology, as well as the new forms of perpetration of offences and harm. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, those working in child protection in law enforcement noted the increase in the reporting of online harms such as bullying, grooming, sexual harm and exploitation. Law enforcement felt that the COVID-19 lockdowns had shone a light onto the moderation of content online, with artificial intelligence deemed to be less effective than human moderators. Law enforcement felt that the current system of self-regulation is ineffective and placed considerable blame on tech companies for not taking responsibility.

ACTION: More transparency and engagement on the part of tech companies is required. The need for police to have strong relationships with tech companies was viewed as essential.

ACTION: Training and education for law enforcement is required to address identified gaps in knowledge. Programmes such as The Social Switch Project, which has been informed by the voices and experiences of young people, was deemed as a vital resource for police.

Policy Professionals

Policy professionals felt that the language used and the meaning behind terminology was important. They felt that some of the language being used by the UK Government was problematic and unclear. Self-regulation was referred to as ineffective by policy professionals and they advocated for reforms to be based on evidence.

ACTION: A principles-based approach should be taken by the Government when devising a legislative framework, which would be more likely to adapt to the ever-changing nature of tech and the new kinds of harms that may emerge in the future.

ACTION: A distinction should be made in relation to extreme harms and the more "grey areas" that exist, as grouping all online harms together to provide broad responses may not work in practice.

ACTION: More transparency on the part of companies is needed and collaborations with academics to create new knowledge, generate more data on the capabilities of tech and therefore better inform and enable society to gain more insight.

Tech Industry

Tech industry professionals recommended that models of self regulation should not be discounted and felt that the industry is best placed to regulate itself. Industry professionals held the opinion that CYP should develop greater levels of "resilience". Tech professionals and representatives felt that victims of online harms did not want to report or wanted the least action taken. When asked for examples of safety innovation on the part of companies, that applied to CYP, during the COVID-19 pandemic, no immediate examples were provided. Tech industry professionals and representatives felt that it was too premature to assess how age verification is operating.

ACTION: Representatives from the tech profession stressed the importance of defining what "harm" is and the need for a recognisable definition.

Regulation Professionals

Those working in the field of regulation felt that CYP should be educated to 'self-regulate' and should develop skills to identify harmful behaviour and report such incidents.

ACTION: The UK would benefit from having an independent and transparent regulator and education for members of the public, particularly the most vulnerable, on how to engage with the regulator and the redress mechanisms.

ACTION: Research demonstrates that there exists a lack of knowledge on the part of adults in relation to age requirements for platforms and games. Better education needs to be prioritised and promoted.

8. REPORT CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research set out to explore CYP's experiences of online platforms, social media platforms, apps and gaming platforms. In particular, the study focused on CYP's experiences of online harms and the impact these have on their lives. Further, the research explored perceptions of what 'acceptable use' is in online spaces and obtained views on law enforcement's role in addressing online harms and on what future regulatory frameworks and arrangements should be developed.

The central aim was to provide a platform for the voices and experiences of the most marginalised CYP to be heard on issues that concern them when using online platforms, social media and gaming platforms. It also offered an opportunity for a range of professionals to present their perspectives and the challenges they face in navigating the impacts of online harms or working in industry and regulatory spaces.

The key findings and recommendations aim to inform current debates and discussions in the United Kingdom and internationally, on the impact of online harms for the lives and future experiences of CYP.

What is 'harm' online?

When CYP were asked about what 'harm' means to them and what is 'harmful' for them in online spaces, they identified the following:

Unwanted content

CYP spoke of being exposed to unwanted content online, this included graphic imagery, videos, advertisements, and other confronting content.

Unwanted contact

CYP spoke about the behaviour of others on online spaces and the unwanted contact they received from adults, and on occasions from other children or young people, commercial companies, or bots. Unwanted contact took the form typically of cyberbullying, threats, harassment, "toxic" interactions, and they described the contact as lacking appropriate boundaries.

Unwanted surveillance and use of data

CYP wanted their privacy to be respected and they did not want to be surveilled by parents, guardians, police, commercial companies, and people they did not know.

Unreasonable delay in action and lack of redress

In discussing delay in action on the part of companies, CYP stated that sometimes they did not hear back after making a complaint or they often received responses some time afterwards and this had caused them to relive the event/incident. Many felt that it was pointless to complain if the company responded with an automated response or if nothing happened about the complaint.

What is needed? - 'A GOOD WEB'

CYP want to have access to all the benefits of online spaces, acknowledging children's right to play and right to learn. But CYP want users to be respectful, for their behaviours to be 'acceptable', and for younger users to feel safe.

Acceptable use of online spaces

For many CYP 'acceptable use' was interpreted as what was "OK" to do online. They felt that platforms should have boundaries in relation to what is acceptable and what is not. CYP want to be better informed about their rights online and they feel that is closely related to 'acceptable use'.

"I have a younger sister and sometimes, I'll see her watching things - it's unacceptable, and it's weird because I used to watch the same things, but that has like, it's changed me as a person."

Guidelines and boundaries

CYP recommend that terms and conditions and other agreements should be designed to acknowledge diversity in literacy levels and language skills. They need to be made shorter in length, more accessible, and easy for all age groups to understand.

In relation to age verification, CYP suggest a more rigorous process for all age groups, including adults. Suggestions include asking people for their passports as a form of ID, using secure apps and advocating for digital passports.

Opportunities

Online spaces can give CYP unique opportunities for learning, play, and to express themselves. Young people recognise how much opportunity for future income there is through the digital world, and they want support to access this. Online spaces should be designed and exist in a way that promotes positive benefits, not just responding in times of harm.

"You can find new hobbies, you can find new people to talk with, new friends, and people who can help you improve being who you are."

Options

As online users, CYP enjoy having options. They did not want to see 'kids' or 'teens' versions of apps, but rather wanted equality in relation to access to online spaces and safe platforms which promoted greater agency and control over the type of content they see.

They feel that the 'right to be forgotten' was important for young users and their future prospects.

Digital Inclusion and Innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light onto the 'digital divide', with many CYP not having regular or any access to technology or the internet/data. This was due to a range of reasons including financial challenges and circumstances such as transitioning out of care and formal education programmes.

Issues also exist in relation to digital literacy of CYP and adults, and this needs to be addressed via tailored educational programmes and training.

Innovation in technology and its capabilities should be used for the 'social good'. Tech companies and online platforms should use their expertise and innovation for 'social good'. The capabilities of technology and platforms should be employed to prevent and address online harms. Young people suggest that companies should be using the technology that they have, to assist with the monitoring and removal of harmful content before users are affected by it.

What, where, who, when, and why?

There is a need to identify, recognise and thoroughly understand harm online in order to address it. Children and young people are highly aware that adults tend to have minimal knowledge of the behaviour taking place online.

What is happening online?

- Online spaces provide CYP with opportunities to communicate, to learn, to find new hobbies, and have a sense of belonging. Some young people feel it was easier to talk to people online than in person and this helps with participation, building confidence and combatting loneliness.
- In contrast, CYP describe cyberbullying, threats, harassment, unwanted contact from older adults, and receiving explicit content online. CYP outline examples of seeing videos of suicide, nudity, aggressive violence, and abusive language.

Where is the harm happening?

- CYP indicate that video-sharing platforms, image-sharing platforms, online gaming platforms and social networking sites are amongst the most "toxic" spaces online. Very young children who are device sharing can be exposed to harmful content and "pushed content", often without the knowledge of adults.

Who is affected and who provides support?

- CYP note levels of distress and long-term consequences, including on their mental health and well-being.
- Professionals discussed the need for often extended support and counselling, and interactions with other agencies, including the police. They note that the police's involvement and outcomes often did not bring a sense of closure or resolution for victims and survivors.

When do CYP respond and when do they choose not to?

- CYP referred to taking regular breaks or opting out of platforms entirely, and others blocked accounts, following harm. Children referenced how older siblings, parents/ guardians, or "trusted" adults can be helpful in navigating online spaces and reporting.
- Many choose not to complain and describe it as "pointless" if the company responds with an automated response or if nothing happens about the complaint. A few CYP feel often that resolution is not possible, as the "damage" is already done.
- As a safeguard, particularly after negative experiences, some CYP describe not using their real or full names on accounts and profiles, to protect themselves.

Why might the COVID-19 lockdowns be having an impact?

- CYP describe spending notably increased amounts of time online during the COVID-19 lockdowns and highlight the prevalence and the complexities surrounding "fake accounts".
- Key concerns for safeguarding professionals are the high levels of online harm reported to them following lockdowns and the return to school; the evolving and changing nature of online harms; and the challenges in resourcing delivery of effective responses.
- Law enforcement professionals feel that the COVID-19 lockdowns have shone a light directly onto the ineffectiveness in the moderation of content online, with artificial intelligence deemed to be less effective than human moderators.



Education

CYP feel that the education and training they receive on online safety is "outdated". CYP want to be better informed about their rights online and they feel that this was closely related to "acceptable use" and consent.

Redevelopment of the PSHE module in the UK was identified as vital. CYP feel that they should be asked to inform education programmes and that more police should facilitate education initiatives.

Tailored training for professionals is viewed as essential and urgent. The importance of training and education for law enforcement is highlighted by police professionals, particularly in relation to the complexities surrounding legal but harmful content. Programmes such as The Social Switch Project, informed by the voices and experiences of young people, was referred to as a vital resource.

Bringing about Change

What do CYP want to see change?

CYP want to see greater responsibility placed on the platforms for not doing enough to protect users, in particular young users. Young people feel that companies should be responsible for greater monitoring and should act more swiftly to remove users' accounts that breach community rules and/or the law. They feel that it is unfair to leave all of the responsibility and effort to an individual user.

Young people feel that companies should send personalised responses, as automated responses did little to make them feel listened to. Young people describe how delays on the part of companies often make them relive aspects of the harm and they assert that companies should have a duty to respond promptly and efficiently to complaints.

A number of young people feel that the proposed legislative changes could have the potential to make companies change their behaviour and they want to see effective "repercussions" for non-compliance. CYP feel that an independent regulator could ensure that they are listened to and that their experiences will be acted upon in a way that hold companies to account for their actions or inaction.

CYP want greater agency and control over their content online and many mentioned wanting to erase previous content. They feel that the 'right to be forgotten' was positive for young users and their future prospects.

Several young people describe phone removals by the police in the course of investigations and raise a number of concerns about timescales in returning the phone and the types of information that are extracted and used. Greater information and details, as well as updates would assist young people.

What do professionals feel is not working and what do they want to change?

Policy professionals feel that the language employed and the meaning behind terminology is important. They feel that some of the language that is being used by the UK Government is problematic and unclear.

Policy professionals feel that a distinction should be made in relation to "extreme harms" and the more "grey areas" that exist. Grouping all online harms together to provide broad responses would not work in practice. They advocate for a principles-based approach in devising a legislative framework, which would be more likely to adapt to the ever-changing nature of tech and the new kinds of harms that may emerge in the future. Policy professionals feel that self-regulation would be ineffective, and they advocate for reforms to be based on evidence.

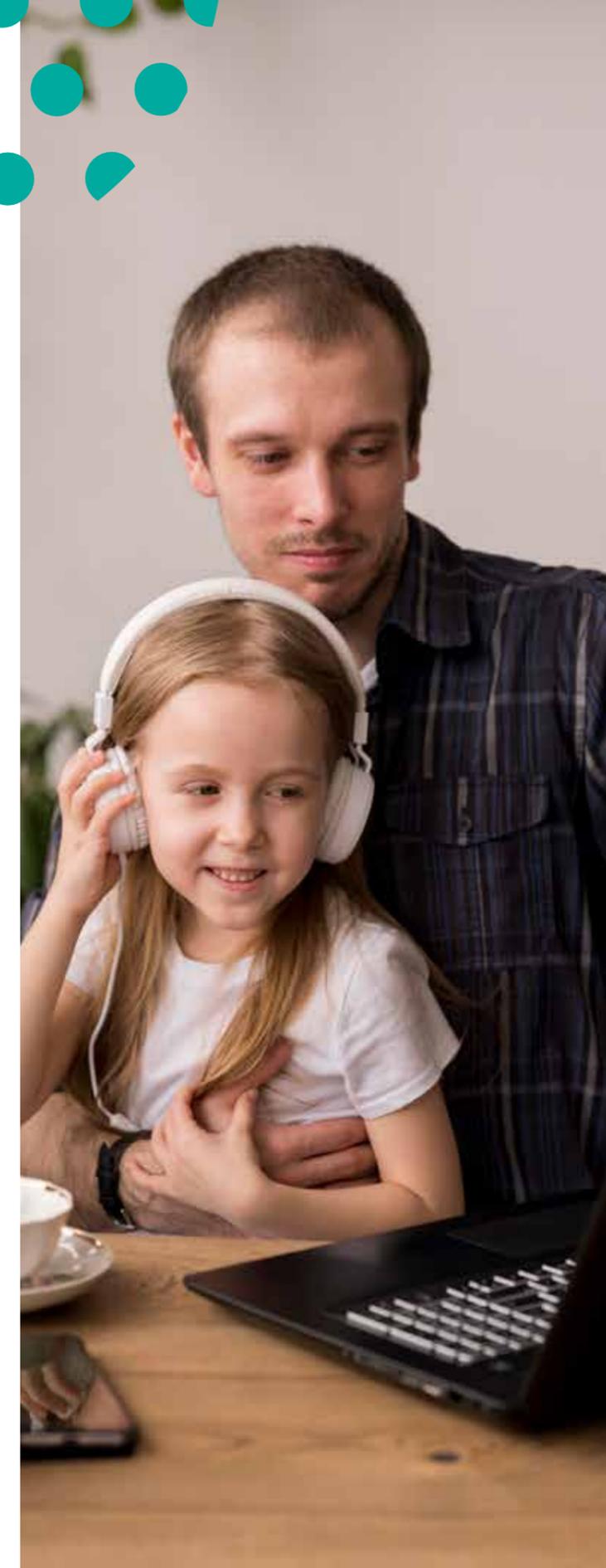
Law enforcement professionals describe feeling "one step behind" the developments in technology, as well as the new forms of perpetration of offences and harm. The need for police to have strong relationships with tech companies is viewed as essential.

Law enforcement professionals feel that the current system of self-regulation is ineffective. They place considerable blame on tech companies for not taking responsibility. Law enforcement professionals state that the proposed reforms may enable them to have a new framework, increased powers and the benefit of a main regulator for oversight. They did want to see the more detailed proposals, however.

What best practice and learning exists from elsewhere?

Several professionals interviewed, who work in the regulatory space feel that the UK would benefit from having an independent and transparent regulator. Further, they feel that the education of members of the public, particularly those referred to as being most "vulnerable", on how to engage with the regulator and the redress mechanisms available to them, would be of great importance.

Those working in the regulatory space in Australia propose that a multipronged approach is required to address online harms and promote online safety. They feel that much more detail is required from the UK government in relation to the proposed reforms. They promote the use of 'safety by design' and joined up partnership with industry and law enforcement.





WHAT ADVICE DO CYP HAVE FOR THEIR PEERS AND FOR ADULTS?

CYP have a lot of advice for their peers and adults in relation to responding and preventing online harms from occurring in the first place.

'Trusted' person: CYP encourage those who are experiencing harm online to reach out to someone they trust – this might be a parent, guardian, carer, teacher, peer or another trusted person.

“[Speak to] Parents and carers, teachers or counsellor maybe depending on who you are closest to, someone you trust.” (Child, Focus Group 2)

Monitoring balanced with respect for privacy: Some CYP felt that parents/guardians/carers should act in a more responsible way in monitoring usage. Whereas other CYP felt that privacy was essential.

“I think the parents should definitely just be educated more on the risks.” (Young Person, Focus Group 11)

More education for adults: They also felt that parents/guardians/carers should receive more education on online harms, risks and approaches to support CYP.

“Having these [tech] companies branch out to schools and be like, oh, I'll do an assembly on online harms.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

More tailored, interactive, and up-to-date education: Education in schools needs to be updated to keep up with the changing nature of online platforms. CYP felt that they would learn more from peer-to-peer learning.

“Just think hard before you post anything, because the person you are now, especially in your early teenage years, isn't going to be the same person you're going to be as an adult, and you just have to think about how that's going to affect your future, which can be a lot for kids to deal with, but it's something I wish I'd known when I was a little bit younger.” (Young Person, Focus Group 11)

Responsibility and Responses: Social media platforms should take responsibility, act promptly and employ technology for social good in making platforms safer for everyone. Online platforms, social media platforms and gaming should be given warnings when they have done something wrong and should be held accountable.

“The social media platform itself should take responsibility on - give warnings ... when they've clearly done something wrong.” (Young Person, Focus Group 11)

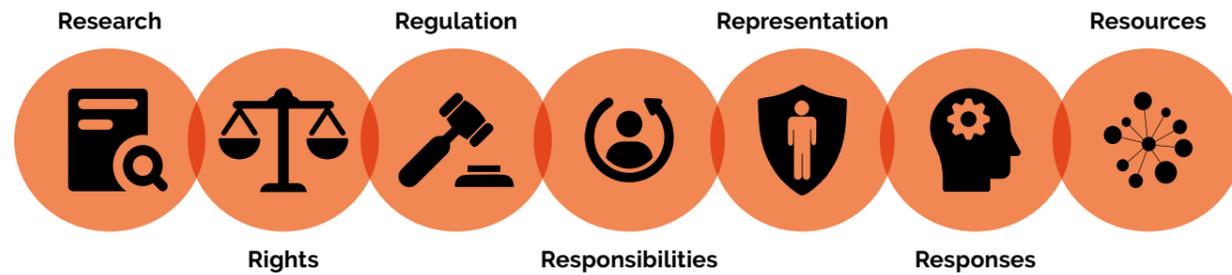
Youth Voice: CYP want to be asked by tech companies about what is bad about their platforms and products. Tech companies should have a youth panel and engage in a meaningful way with CYP when designing platforms and in the ongoing process of ensuring they are safe and remain safe.

“Every company, or social media company has the funds to have a youth panel. They could pay young people and just have them in everything. Everything. Don't leave them out of every meeting, they need to be there every step of the way and paid for every second of their time. If that ever happens, let us know.” (Young Person, Focus Group 1)

Children's and young people's views and opinions should be respected and at the heart of all debates and discussions in relation to reform.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS - 7 'R' FRAMEWORK



Research

Research is essential to generate evidence and insight and for the development of vital new knowledge. Given how rapidly platforms and technologies are evolving, investment and transparency are essential to ensure that research is up to date.

One such example in this study is the view of representatives from the tech profession, who stated that research is essential for the importance of defining what "harm" is. As outlined above, CYP in this study describe harm as unwanted content, unwanted contact, unwanted surveillance and collection of their data, as well as the clear lack of redress.

More transparency and engagement on the part of companies is needed. Collaborations with independent academics can create new knowledge, generate more data on the capabilities of tech and therefore better enable society to gain more insight.

ACTION: All reforms need to be based on evidence. For those that affect CYP, children and young people should be effectively consulted. Evidence about CYP should come from CYP.

ACTION: Given how rapidly platforms and technologies are evolving, resources need to be dedicated to independent research that is fully participatory and includes transparent input from tech companies.

Rights

When the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UN CRC) was drafted and adopted, we did not have the digital environment that we do today. It is an ever-evolving space and new and emerging technologies are constantly being introduced into our lives. In recognition of this, the United Nations General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment was formally adopted by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in February 2021.

It was clear from the discussions with CYP in the focus groups that what they often referred to as being important for them in their online interactions and use, were clearly linked to their rights under the UN CRC. For example, their right to participate and be listened to (Article 12), to engage in play (Article 31), to find and share information (Articles 13; 17) and their right to have their privacy protected (Article 16).

CYP also have several other rights which relate to issues that have emerged in the research findings in this report, including the right not to be exploited (Article 36).

ACTION: The United Nations General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment makes clear recommendations. The United Kingdom needs to engage more with the international children's rights instruments and embed the international children's rights frameworks into proposed reforms.

Regulation

Regulation and the creation of a regulatory framework has been the central focus throughout the discussions and debates in the United Kingdom. The proposed legislative framework of the draft Online Safety Bill, includes details of an independent regulator.

Regulation however is not a panacea. It will not address each and every aspect of online harm. It is one aspect in an array of required measures, including education, the need to address social inequalities, the need for transparency by companies and partnership work.

ACTION: Legal but harmful content should be recognised in future legislation and the need for a clear duty of care.

ACTION: For regulation to be successful, emphasis needs to be placed on areas such as education and development, addressing social inequalities, and the need for transparency by companies.

Responsibilities

CYP felt that balancing freedom of expression, access to information and safety from exploitation was a major challenge for companies, the government and wider society. CYP placed a lot of emphasis on the responsibilities of companies and felt that they should be held accountable for inaction. They felt that an independent oversight body would be an effective monitor on companies and could hold them to account.

A statutory duty of care placed on social media service providers as regards their users, was proposed by Professor Lorna Woods, William Perrin and Maeve Walsh, as part of the work of the Carnegie UK Trust. The authors argue that this proposed framework, supported by a code of practice that is drawn up with expert stakeholders, has the potential to assist with protecting CYP online.

ACTION: Companies should be responsible for the creation and maintenance of safe spaces online and they should be held accountable for inaction in addressing concerns.

ACTION: An independent and transparent oversight body is required for overseeing regulation, which can ensure that companies and individuals are held accountable. CYP need to be made aware of its existence and role, and all information and complaints processes need to be accessible for CYP.

ACTION: Research demonstrates lack of knowledge on the part of adults in relation to age requirements for platforms and games and more effort needs to be put into educating adults.

ACTION: In relation to age verification, CYP suggested a more rigorous process for their age group, as well as for adults. Suggestions included asking people for their passports as a form of ID, using secure apps and advocating for digital passports, which have been officially verified.

ACTION: Young people suggest that companies should be using the technology that they have, to assist with the monitoring and removal of harmful content before users are affected by it.

Representation



During this research, most CYP stated that this was one of the first times that they had been asked about their experiences online and what interventions they could suggest. CYP want more opportunities to express their opinions and for their suggestions to inform change. They also want opportunities to engage with those who design, maintain, and regulate online spaces.

ACTION: Policymakers, legislators, practitioners, and industry need to create greater opportunities for CYP's opinions, from a diverse range of backgrounds to be heard. They need to ensure that CYP's experiences inform change in areas such as online safety, accessibility and in the education design and delivery space. Australia's 'Safety by Design' approach is an example worth considering.

ACTION: CYP want to be part of the design and delivery of education programmes. They want to be part of panels that tech companies, platforms, and gaming designers consult with when designing, developing and updating new products.

Responses



CYP have said that responses from companies following a complaint often go unaddressed or there are delays. The delayed responses, often automated, were referred to as retraumatising and made CYP relive the original harmful experience.

A small number of CYP mentioned experiences of having their mobile phones taken away by the police for evidence-gathering purposes for months at a time, in response to serious incidences. For less serious incidences, professionals' approach was too often about CYP 'getting offline', which denied their access to the digital environment.

ACTION: CYP and their advocates want to see quick, appropriate, effective, and proportionate responses to online harms. They want personalised - not automated - responses and want to feel that companies are acting on complaints.

ACTION: CYP want law enforcement to outline from the outset how long they will require their phones and devices for, and they want swifter processing and better updates from law enforcement.

ACTION: Frontline professionals must be trained and prepared for responding to instances of online harms and divert CYP towards embracing the opportunities digital worlds can present.

Resources



There have been notable challenges for those working in education and safeguarding, in particular the impact of the blurred boundaries between online and offline spaces, the rapid need to adjust and transfer to educating CYP online during lockdowns, as well as engaging with already stretched external agencies such as the police, victim support and child protection services.

This research has demonstrated that educators and safeguarding professionals feel that the lack of resources to respond to the rise in incidents of online harms, leave them feeling overwhelmed and concerned for the safety, health and well-being of CYP.

ACTION: More resources are needed for those working in education and safeguarding and also adequate funding needs to be available for the provision of victim support to address harms originating online.

ACTION: CYP want reforms to PHSE education to include online behaviour, and professionals want to see more education on how to 'self-regulate', identify harmful behaviour and report such incidents too.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this report was to firstly produce an evidence-base on the online harms experienced by CYP and the impact of online harms on their lives and future experiences. Further, it was to gain a better insight into children's and young people's perceptions of what 'acceptable use' means to them in online spaces; the impact of online harms and the opportunities CYP have to make complaints; and their views on what future regulatory frameworks and arrangements should be developed.

One of the central aims of this research study was therefore to provide a platform for the voices and experiences of the most marginalised CYP to be heard on issues that concern them when using online platforms. Secondly, the report set out to gain the perspectives of key stakeholders and professionals, including senior police, educators, safeguarding experts, youth workers, victim service providers, tech and gaming companies, regulators and representatives from the wider tech industry. The findings have raised major concerns in relation the safety and well-being of CYP when using online spaces.

Some proposed changes, such as increased safety features incorporated into all devices; digital identification passports; the production and promotion of more up-to-date education and learning materials; CYP's participation as central to 'safety-by-design' processes; more transparency and access provided by tech companies for researchers, can be explored and implemented relatively swiftly. However, long-term societal change in relation to online platforms and their use, is a much longer-term and more complex project.

It is hoped that children's and young people's voices will be at the centre of discussions on all policy reforms in this area. They have a lot to say and contribute. In bringing about much-needed change, everyone has an essential part to play. It is hoped that this report and the 7 R's framework will provide an evidence-base, in order to reignite efforts to base all reforms on evidence and ensure that the most marginalised voices are heard and acted upon.



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