Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

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VISION, VOICE AND PRACTICE

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Report from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Inquiry:
"Managing the Impact of Social Media on Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing"

Foreword

Chris Elmore MP
Chair of the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

William Wragg MP
Secretary, of the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

For a growing number of people of all ages, spending hours on social media is now a completely normal part of their daily routine. Particularly for young people, the use of social media is an integral part of their lives. Even though there has been a steep rise in the use of social media, there has been a lack of legislative response to regulate social media platforms, given the huge influence they have on everyday life, especially for young people.

Our Inquiry shows that there are aspects of social media which are positive – particularly for bringing together people with similar interests, reducing loneliness and helping communities stay in touch. However, there are also several aspects of social media that can have very damaging effects on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, it is paramount that we protect young people to ensure they are kept safe and healthy when they are online. That is why our recommendations seek to improve measures to protect the vulnerable.

This is also why our inquiry into the effect of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing is so timely as further steps have to be taken to ensure that appropriate regulation is in place to ensure that social media is being used as a positive tool and that it is not having a detrimental effect on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

We would very much like to thank the Royal Society for Public Health, particularly Niamh McDade, for their organisation of this inquiry and bringing together such a fantastic range of organisations and individuals to submit truly insightful and valuable evidence. We would also like to thank all of the charities, academics, clinicians, industry representatives and the young people who all took the time and effort to contribute such important evidence that has helped shape this report. Without their input we would not have the breadth and depth of evidence that we have for this important Inquiry.

Chris Elmore MP, Chair and **William Wragg** MP, Secretary, of the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

KEY FINDINGS

- Social media can have a range of positive effects: providing a platform for self-expression, enhancing social connections, and supporting learning.
- Young people using social media to find support for mental health conditions are at high-risk of unintentional exposure to graphic content and that discourse could unhelpfully "glamorise" mental illness and prevent young people from accessing professional help.
- While 12% of children who spend no time on social networking websites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27% for those who are on the sites for three or more hours a day.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of young people reported social media was a good source of health information.
- Pressure to conform to beauty standards perpetuated and praised online can encourage harmful behaviours to achieve "results", including disordered eating and body shame.
- 46% of girls compared to 38% of all young people reporting that social media had a negative impact on their self-esteem.

CALLS TO ACTION

That the UK and Devolved Government's

- Establish a duty of care on all social media companies with registered UK users aged 24 and under in the form of a statutory code of conduct, with Ofcom to act as regulator.
- Create a Social Media Health Alliance, funded by a 0.5% levy on the profits of social companies, to review the growing evidence base on the impact of social media on health and wellbeing and establish clearer guidance for the public.
- That the Government publishes evidence based guidance for those aged 24 and younger to avoid excessive social media use, that is use of "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking".
- Urgently commission robust, longitudinal research, into understanding the extent to which the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing is one of cause or correlation and into whether the "addictive" nature of social media is sufficient for official disease classification.

1. About the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing was established in March 2018 and is a cross-party group of UK Parliamentarians with secretariat provided by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH).

The objectives of the group are to:

- **Build upon the evidence base of the impact of social media upon young people's mental health and wellbeing;**
- **Raise the political profile of the issue;**
- **Drive policy change that mitigates the bad and maximises the good of social media for young people.**

‘Managing the Impact of Social Media on Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing’

1.1 Background to the Inquiry

In early 2017, RSPH conducted a UK-wide survey of 1,479 14-24 year olds asking them about five of the most popular social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube. The aim of the survey was to find out how they felt each of these platforms impacted on their health and wellbeing (both positively and negatively), to make comparisons between these platforms, as well as asking them their views on a number of policy recommendations.

Based on these findings, RSPH published the #StatusofMind report[1], which considered the impact of social media on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. This report highlighted that social media has potential positive effects on mental health, including: providing access to other people’s health experiences and expert health information, emotional support and community building, providing a space for self-expression and self-identity and making, maintaining and building upon relationships.

However, with these positives came a range of potential negatives, with respondents to RSPH’s survey reporting that social media was responsible for creating feelings of anxiety and depression, negative body image, cyber bullying, poor sleep and a fear of missing out (FOMO).

Following these findings, and in light of growing public concern, it became a priority for RSPH to take measures to mitigate the negatives while maximising the positive impacts which social media can have on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. A key step in this was the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing.

On 18th April 2018, the APPG launched its Inquiry **“Managing the Impact of Social Media on Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing”.**

The Inquiry ran from 29th July 2018 until 9th January 2019 and was hosted in two stages, beginning with a call for written evidence open to the public. The Inquiry received written evidence submissions from 37 expert stakeholders including academics, charities, government officials, social media industry representatives, parents and young people, between 29th of June and 17th August 2018. A full list of all organisations who provided written evidence to support the Inquiry can be seen in Appendix 1. Additionally, a variety of reports in relation to social media and its potential impacts were submitted to the Group and helped inform the Inquiry as well as previous research conducted by RSPH into this topic, including the findings of the 2017 #StatusOfMind report.

Following a review of written evidence, the APPG invited a variety of expert stakeholders to provide oral evidence throughout the course of five oral evidence sessions held in the House of Commons between 24th October 2018 and 9th January 2019.

Figure 1. Witnesses who provided evidence to the APPG Inquiry into Managing the Impact of Social Media on Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

Sessions	Witnesses
24 October 2018	- Richard Crellin, Policy and Research Manager, Mental Health and Well-being, The Children's Society - Sagar Sharma, Director of Policy and Communications, Barnardo's - William Perrin, Trustee, Carnegie UK Trust - Professor Lorna Woods, Professor of Internet Law, University of Essex - Tessy Ojo, CEO, The Diana Award
31 October 2018	- Dr Lucy Biddle (PhD), Senior Lecturer in Medical Sociology, University of Bristol - Dr Mamas Pipis, Specialty Doctor in Brent Child and Adolescent Community Mental Health Team, NHS - Dr Parvinder Shergill, Specialty Doc-tor in Brent Child and Adolescent Community Mental Health Team, NHS - Dr Fiorenza Davida Shepherd, Speci-ality Doctor in Psychiatry in the Ealing Crisis and Assessment Function Team, West London Mental Health - Professor Yvonne Kelly, Director ESRC International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health, University College London - Dr Victoria Goodyear, Lecturer in Pedagogy in Sport, Physical Activity and Health
14 November 2018	- Vicki Shotbolt, Founder and CEO of Parent Zone - Dr Sylwia Holmes, University College London Institute of Education - Claire Levens, Policy Director, Internet Matters - Tanya Goodin, Founder of Time to Log Off - David Presky, Specialist Computing Teacher
28 November 2018	- Anya Meyer, Young Health Watch Northamptonshire - Bradley Gudger, NHS Youth Forum Member - Chloe Kazantzis, NHS Youth Forum Member - Justin Clarke, Young National, Chil-dren's Bureau representative - Steven Naulls, medical student at Imperial College London and Students Union Welfare Officer
9 January 2019	- Karim Palant, UK Public Policy Manager, Facebook and on behalf of Instagram - Charles Watson, Co-founder and COO, Tomorrow's Student

Also in attendance and provided input throughout the oral evidence sessions of the Inquiry:

Adam Galpin, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Salford

Alex Reeves, Account Manager, Oakhill Communication

Alexander Lee-Hall, Public Affairs and Campaigns Lead, RCPCH

Andy Bell, Deputy Chief Executive, Centre for Mental Health

Dr Anna Lavis, Lecturer in Medical Sociology, Institute of Applied Health Research, University of Birmingham

Charlotte Ranier, Policy Officer, The Children's Society

David Morris, On behalf of Bishop of Newcastle

Elizabeth Carr, Public Policy Graduate, Ofcom

Grace Freeman, Mind

Jan Nixon, Public Health England, Rise Above

John Dillon, Head of Marketing and Communications, PSHE Association

Martin Bell, Deputy Head of Policy and Public Affairs, BACP

Mihalis Papamichail, Barnardo's

Olivia Wolfheart, Project Manager, Corsham Institute

Rick Bradley, Operations Manager of Mind and Body at Addaction

This report provides a summary of the evidence presented to the Inquiry and all conclusions and accompanying policy recommendations are based on this evidence. In addition to written and oral evidence, the APPG engaged in meetings with relevant stakeholders throughout the Inquiry.

Our Inquiry specifically considers the impact of social media use on young people's mental health and wellbeing, which has the potential for various positive and negative impacts that can vary hugely from those experienced using screens in other ways, for example watching TV or playing games. By considering social media use separately, the APPG has sought to avoid obscuring the important differential effects for each kind of screen use.

Nonetheless, this report is not intended to be an exhaustive and comprehensive summary of all of the issues and viewpoints related to the potential impacts of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

The APPG also has taken account of a number of publications released since the launch of this Inquiry which have considered screen-use and screen-time more broadly, including the Science and Technology Committee report on the impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health[2], the 5Rights Foundation report, Towards an Internet Safety Strategy[3] and the UK Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) commentary on screen time and social media map of reviews[4].

Figure 2. Members of the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

Officers of the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

Chris Elmore (Chair), MP for Ogmore, Labour
William Wragg (Secretary), MP for Hazel Grove, Conservative
Sarah Champion (Treasurer), MP for Rotherham, Labour
Victoria Prentis (Vice-Chair), MP for North Oxfordshire, Conservative
Jess Morden (Vice-Chair), MP for Newport East, Labour
Bambos Charalambous (Vice-Chair), MP for Enfield, Southgate, Labour

Other Members of the Group

Alex Chalk, MP for Cheltenham, Conservative
Ben Bradley, MP for Mansfield, Conservative
Carolyn Harris, MP for Swansea East, Labour
Colleen Fletcher, MP Coventry North East, Labour
Darren Jones, MP for Bristol North West, Labour
David Linden, MP for Glasgow East, SNP
Julian Knight, MP for Solihull, Conservative
Dr Lisa Cameron, MP for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, SNP
Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, Labour Co-operative
Louise Haigh, MP for Sheffield Heeley, Labour
Nick Herbert MP, for Arundel and South Downs, Conservative
Ruth Cadbury MP for Brentford and Isleworth, Labour
Tracy Brabin, MP for Batley and Spen, Labour Co-operative

Acknowledgements and contact details

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing is grateful to the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) an independent, multi-disciplinary charity dedicated to the improvement of the public's health and wellbeing, for the provision of secretariat to the Group and for their support in developing this report. The Group also thanks Chris Elmore MP for chairing this Inquiry and is grateful for the support of William Wragg MP, David Lindon MP and Dr Lisa Cameron MP throughout the Inquiry sessions.

For all enquiries, please contact Niamh McDade, who prepared this report and provided secretariat to the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing, at **nmcdade@rsph.org.uk.**

2. Introduction

Social media has revolutionised the way we connect with each other and today forms an integral part of the lives of what is now over 4 billion users globally[5]. Although there is no agreed definition of social media, for the purposes of this inquiry, the APPG has taken social media to include "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking"[6].

The vast majority (91%) of 16-24 year-olds use the internet for social media[7] and while social media presents many benefits and opportunities for innovation, self-expression and creativity, public concern has been well documented regarding the impact of social media on mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

In May 2018, the Government response to the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper[8] set out the Government's intention to publish a White Paper to inform the establishment of online safety regulation to cover the "full range of online harms". This report aims to inform the Government White Paper when developing this legislation.

3. The impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing

3.1 Improving the evidence base

The input from research conducted by a range of stakeholders has played a pivotal role in informing our report and the Inquiry received evidence identifying many correlations between social media use and positive and negative mental health and wellbeing. However, the Inquiry was repeatedly made aware of the lack of robust scientific research evidencing whether social media actually causes mental health problems.

In written evidence the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) outlined:

> "There is not enough known currently about how social media affects children and young people. We cannot say for certain that it is possible to develop an entirely positive relationship with social media, in the same way that we cannot prove that social media only develops negative repercussions."

Written evidence received by CLOSER, the home of longitudinal studies at University College London's Institute of Education, outlined:

> "At present, there is not enough evidence to draw definitive conclusions on the long-term impact (whether positive or negative) of social media and screen-use on young people's health. For example, some studies suggest that interacting on social media might reduce social isolation; however, others have come to opposite conclusions."

Furthermore, when considering areas where further research would be of benefit, Dr Anna Lavis from the University of Birmingham told the APPG,

"There is a need for research that builds on our own explorations of the care and support that are found on social media around mental health difficulties, such as self-harm and eating disorders. What has been seen in the media as 'graphic' content has a function for the people who upload it; posting images of one's own self-harm, for example, can be a cry for help and support against the background of societal stigma and service gaps. Research is needed into what kinds of content facilitates the exchange of support and the mechanisms of this, as well as into the impact of varying forms of content on different social groups. This is key to developing the evidence base to design more positive online environments that build on existing peer support, rather than jumping to ban certain content and risk destroying or silencing support that, albeit ambivalent, may be needed and valued."

Professor Yvonne Kelly, Director ESRC International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health, University College London, told the Inquiry:

"Robust longitudinal research can help to identify who is at risk … with the right kinds of data we can look back at what has gone before in people's lives to get a handle on what is happening to them now. To improve understanding of positives as well as negatives we need to have repeated measurements of both their mental health as well as their social media use – as both can and do change. Very useful would be having data on reasons for stopping/changing patterns of use. Also, better data on content and context – what is being consumed (e.g. experiences of online harassment vs positive social connections and self-expression) and what if anything does it displace."

Professor Kelly further advocated ideal data sources would be a combination of extant longitudinal study resources in combination with data held by social media companies.

The APPG recommends that the UK Government prioritises investment into further research to understand the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing, and does so as a matter of urgency. In addition, the APPG calls for all social media companies to make all data, including data that is currently anonymised, available to researchers. It is recommended that legislation is updated to ensure that this data is available.

Throughout the Inquiry, the term 'social media addiction' was frequently used. In written evidence, one young person from NHS Youth Forum told the Inquiry:

"As time has gone on over the last 2 years I have developed an addiction with Twitter going from someone who only uses it once a day for a small time to someone who now uses in all the day everyday".

Young NCB Members also told the Inquiry:

"Addiction to social media is also another big problem," and that "Addiction and lack of real social life are problems."

Currently there is no clinical diagnosis for social media addiction. If the World Health Organisation were to classify social media addiction in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), it could be done in a similar way to gaming disorder, which will be presented to the World Health Assembly in May 2019 for adoption in member states in January 2022.

Evidence of gaming disorder was reviewed by experts in different disciplines and geographical areas through a series of consultations. The inclusion of gaming disorder in ICD-11 followed the development of treatment programmes for people with health conditions identical to those characteristic of gaming disorder in many parts of the world.

The APPG recommends further research into whether the "addictive" nature of social media is sufficient for official disease classification and hence, whether social media "addiction" could be treated in a similar way.

The APPG recommends further research is prioritised into the following areas:

- Whether the relationship between social media and mental health problems is one of cause or correlation.
- The extent to which the impact of social media varies across different demographics.
- Longitudinal research into understanding the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Defining which design aspects of social media platforms are inherently detrimental to young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Understanding what content is generating helpful or supportive conversations and what content risks being harmful.
- The development and evaluation of the effectiveness of best practice guidelines for the public.

3.2 The precautionary principle

The APPG recommends that a precautionary approach is taken to mitigate some of the potential harms of social media in the absence of more robust evidence of a causal negative effect of social media on the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

This recommendation supports that of the UK CMO's in their commentary more broadly on *"Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews"*[9].

In written evidence submitted by Professor Lorna Woods and William Perrin to the Science and Technology Committee Inquiry[10] into the impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health, the precautionary principle is identified and recommended as *"a well-established approach to assessing the desirability of regulation in the face of a plausible but still uncertain risk of harm".*

The government's Interdepartmental Liaison Group on Risk Assessment's (ILGRA) version of the precautionary principle, which is aimed at decision makers, outlines:

"The precautionary principle should be applied when, on the basis of the best scientific advice available in the time-frame for decision-making: there is good reason to believe that harmful effects may occur to human, animal or plant health, or to the environment; and the level of scientific uncertainty about the consequences or likelihoods is such that risk cannot be assessed with sufficient confidence to inform decision-making."[11]

3.3 Key findings from the Inquiry on the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing

Potential positives of social media

- Can provide young people with an opportunity to build and maintain real world relationships.
- Removes physical barriers to social connections, allowing young people to open up about their feelings, find support, and feel less isolated and lonely.
- Provides a valuable learning resource to support school work and a useful source of health information.
- Provides a platform for self-expression.

Potential negatives of social media

- Can isolate young people experiencing mental illness from accessing "real world" professional help and impede recovery.
- Can cause feelings of low self-esteem and negative body-image, resulting in harmful behaviours to achieve "results".
- The publicising of self-harm methods, in particular novel ones, as well as glamorisation of suicide, can lead to further deaths.
- Cyberbullying can cause lasting damaging effects on a young person's mental health and wellbeing and is more frequently experienced girls, with 40% of girls compared to 25% of boys experiencing online harassment or cyberbullying.

3.3 (1) The benefits of social media to young people's mental health and wellbeing

Social media can provide young people **with the opportunity to build and maintain real world relationships.** The APPG was provided with evidence that interacting with others online had **helped people to open up about their feelings, find support, and create human connections.** In written evidence, Young National Children's Bureau (NCB) members expressed the valuable role of social media in keeping them connected and informed, and enabling them to express themselves, stating, *"I can connect with friends easily and build a personal bond", "social media allows people to easily talk to their friends" … "there's nearly always a relative online somewhere who you can talk to if you are feeling lonely."*

Social media also plays a role in helping young people to **feel less isolated and lonely.** In evidence submitted by Samaritans' based on their Digital Futures[12] report, which sets out some of the ways social media can facilitate this process and have a protective effect on young people's emotional wellbeing, they stated, *"it was clear that, at least for those taking part in the research, that the online environment can be hugely important for reducing social isolation."*

Furthermore, in evidence received from Internet Matters, Dr Linda Papadopoulus advised that technology **takes away physical barriers to social connections,** which can be "especially important for children who fail to find their tribe at school and/ or have special interests or special needs."

The Inquiry found that social media can also be a **useful source of information** for young people through following Instagram accounts to learn about different cultures and political movements, developing new skills through YouTube tutorial videos and as a forum for discussion to help with school work. A recent study of 1,346 young people (age 13-18) in the UK conducted by the University of Birmingham found that for many young people, social media provided a **valuable learning resource**, with 63% reporting that social media was a good source of **health information[13].**

The Inquiry also heard evidence of **the role of social media in supporting recovery from mental illness.** One young person told the Inquiry that social media played a role in her recovery from anxiety and depression stating,

> "I needed to reach out to people who had no connection to my life and didn't know me, a safe place where I wouldn't be judged and relate to mental health problems- I didn't feel like my family and friends really got it. Especially talking and meeting new people online with the same health condition as me, they really got it and was the first time I felt my struggles were understood and accepted."

In written evidence received from Facebook, owner of Instagram, they referenced a range of Instagram accounts which are "dedicated to specific mental health issues, as well as hashtags such as #edrecovery and #bodypositive, which are used by our community to connect with one another, document their recovery, and offer encouragement and support for others going through similar experiences" and outlined that, "illnesses or disorders that may have been invisible previously, are becoming visible through creative and authentic photos and videos."

Young NCB members also referenced a variety of apps which helped with mental health or wellbeing, including those that helped with meditation and mindfulness through breathing exercises and other relaxing activities. They also discussed apps which put them in touch with mental health professionals for support, and apps which offered support through helping them connect with like-minded people.

"Apps, such as Breathe2Relax, help with stress management through breathing exercises"

"Apps, such as Headspace, teach meditation and can be used in order to 'detox' from the addictive world of social media."

"There is a website called 7 Cups which is completely free and allows you to connect with therapists and other professionals, as well as volunteers, about your worries or problems. You can also get specific professionals who are trained in the area that you are needing advice in."

3.3 (2) The negatives of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing

The APPG also heard evidence of a range of negative impacts, some of which were contradictory to those positives outlined.

Although evidence is largely inconclusive regarding the extent to which social media use causes or correlates with mental health issues , this Inquiry heard that heavy use of social media was having a detrimental impact on various aspects of young people's mental health and wellbeing. In evidence received from The Children's Society and Young Minds, the Good Childhood Report 2017[15] was referenced to have shown a connection between intensive social media use and mental ill health. 38% of young people reported that social media has a negative impact on how they feel about themselves, compared to 23% who reported that it has a positive impact. This was exacerbated for girls, with 46% of girls stating that social media had a negative impact on their self-esteem[16].

In evidence received from Barnardo's, the Inquiry heard that while 12% of children who spend no time on social networking websites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27% for those who are on the sites for three or more hours a day.

Professor Yvonne Kelly, Director ESRC International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health at University College London, provided evidence of links between heavy social media use and lower levels of wellbeing. Based on research into 10,000 fourteen year-olds[17], she told the Inquiry

"The average fourteen year-old may be using social media for 3-4 hours a day. For that average fourteen year-old, they will be getting less sleep, poorer quality sleep; they are much more likely to have low self-esteem, more likely to be deeply unhappy with their physical appearance, more likely to experience cyberbullying as either the victim or the perpetrator. Looking at all this together – low self-esteem, unhappiness with appearance, cyberbullying and sleep issues, these are the things that lead to a depressive experience."

The Inquiry also heard that although social media allowed young people to link with other like-minded individuals, this could be **triggering to a young person vulnerable to, or already experiencing, a mental health condition**. It was heard that relying on social media to access support could **isolate the individual from "real world" help, "glamorise" mental health conditions and impede recovery.**

Samaritans' told the Inquiry that **the publicising of suicide methods, in particular novel ones, as well as the glamorisation of suicide, can lead to further deaths through a process known as "contagion"**, and referenced research which shows that young people are more likely to engage in imitative behaviour[18]. This was reflected in evidence submitted by Dr Lucy Biddle of the University of Bristol, who led research exploring the impact of the internet on suicidal behaviour and/or self-harm. This research revealed that the use of social media to make sense of feelings and find support was common amongst this group, however, browsing social media in this way was of high-risk,

as negative content had a more powerful draw, graphic content was frequently viewed unintentionally, and discourse could unhelpfully normalise or glamorise suicide and self-harm[19]. Furthermore, in evidence received by Barnardos, one young person stated "social media glamorises mental illness, it makes it cool and trendy".

The Inquiry heard from a variety of stakeholders of the **negative impact which social media can have on young people's body image.** Evidence submitted by Healthwatch Essex based on interviews with over 2,500 young people revealed that overwhelming exposure to body ideals could negatively contribute to their self-esteem and self-confidence. Findings also revealed young people felt pressure to conform to beauty standards perpetuated and praised online, including the ideal for females to be thin and non-muscular, and for males to be broad and muscular. **The Inquiry heard this encouraged harmful behaviours to achieve "results" including disordered eating, body shame, disengagement from exercising publicly and stigmatisation from peers[20].**

One young person who had experienced cyberbullying told the Inquiry in a written evidence submission,

"It has impacted my mental health, untreated stress and anxiety and other emotional distress, even now I find this hard to write and is difficult to process, years after. At the time I was frequently on edge, stressed, anxious, wondering what else they would do next. I couldn't switch off, both psychologically and physically I would be checking my phone for messages."

Offline harassment and bullying can be more pronounced and damaging when experienced publically online. In 2017, RSPH found 7 in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying[21] and furthermore, the Inquiry learned of a survey[22] revealing that **half of girls in the UK aged between 11-18 have experienced some form of harassment or abuse on social media.** Dr Ali Hussain of Kings College London told the inquiry of the detrimental impacts on the mental health of young people, leading to a range of mental health consequences, even at midlife.

Furthermore, the APPG heard evidence that **certain groups of young people may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media.** As identified in research led by Professor Yvonne Kelly, the magnitude of association between social media use and depressive symptoms was larger for girls than for boys: "14-year-old girls were heavier users of social media with two fifths of them using it for more than three hours per day compared with one fifth of boys. Only 4% of girls reported not using social media compared to 10% of boys" [23]. Moreover, when examining the underlying processes that might be linked with social media use and depression, it was found that 40% of girls compared to 25% of boys had experience of online harassment or cyberbullying.[24] The Inquiry heard that it would be of benefit for more research to be conducted into understanding the extent to which the impact of social media varies amongst different demographics and the extent to which this may be discriminatory.

4. What action is being taken to address health harms?

4.1 Steps in the right direction by industry

The Inquiry was presented with examples of measures that industry had introduced with the objective of protecting children and young people when using social media.

- YouTube Community Guidelines[25] include rules prohibiting nudity or sexual content, harmful or dangerous videos, harassment and cyberbullying and promote child safety.
- The YouTube Trusted Flagger Programme[26] sets out to "help provide robust tools for individuals, government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are particularly effective at notifying YouTube of content that violates their Community Guidelines[27] ".

- Facebook has provided users with more control over what appears in their News Feed through features including See First[28], Hide[29], and Unfollow[30].
- Facebook Live now offers suicide prevention support[31] and the platform has introduced artificial intelligence[32] to detect suicidal posts even before they are reported.
- Facebook has developed partnerships with UK organisations working to improve digital safety, including providing funding for UK organisations The Diana Award and Childnet International, to offer every secondary school in the UK a trained digital safety ambassador.

- Instagram has launched tools[33] which set out to "proactively care for the community" including the You're All Caught Up[34] message in Feed to prevent passive and mindless scrolling of already-viewed content, as well as keyword filtering and sensitivity screens.
- Instagram Together[35] provides information and resources for parents and teens on digital well-being and Instagram's safety features.
- Instagram has announced changes to their approach on self-harm content including a ban on any graphic images of self-harm and non-graphic, self-harm related content in search, hashtags and the explore tab, and have committed to improving resources for people posting and searching for self-harm related content[36].

- The Twitter Trust & Safety Council provides input on their safety products, policies, and programmes. Twitter works with safety advocates, academics, and researchers; grassroots advocacy organisations that rely on Twitter to build movements; and community groups working to prevent abuse. In the UK, Council members include Childnet, the Cybersmile Foundation, the UK Safer Internet Centre and Anti-Bullying Pro.

Internet Matters

- Established in 2014, Internet Matters works collaboratively across industry, government and with schools to reach UK families with tools, tips and resources 'to help children benefit from connected technology smartly and safely'.
- Internet Matters is supported by a range of industry partners including BT, Sky, Facebook, TalkTalk, Virgin, Google and the BBC and leading child online safety experts to provide practical advice 'to help children and parents manage the risks they may face online'[37].

4.2 …But room for improvement

The APPG recommends that further research is undertaken to determine the effectiveness of industry initiatives such as those measures identified above and in defining which design aspects of social media platforms are inherently detrimental to young people's mental health and wellbeing.

An important aspect of this Inquiry has been the engagement with young social media users themselves. Elaine Bousfield, founder and chair of XenZone, established the UK's first online counselling service, Kooth, for children and young people in 2004, which is now available in over 80 clinical commissioning group (CCG) areas. On 1st August 2018, a Kooth Forum was dedicated to considering the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing to inform Kooth's response to the Inquiry.

Below is a selection of comments from children and young people in the session hosted by Kooth, which identify a range of areas of concern experienced by young social media users and suggestions for action and innovation:

Which negative areas of mental health and wellbeing impact of social media are of most concern and should be prioritised for action?

Anon.student
From personal experience I know how much other people's airbrushed photos can bring you down...

41m Like Reply

Anonymous · Anon
"There is not much guidance over what people should say over social media and it's easier to say something you don't mean when you aren't directly with them."

…there are a lot of sites that can jeopardise recovery. There are… pages promoting eating disorders and self-harm, and whilst there are options to report…it doesn't always happen. 9.32 AM

Is a healthy, positive relationship with social media possible, or is it always necessarily a case of mitigating negatives?

I think you can have a positive relationship with social media. Only add people you know and if you see something upsetting hide it, report it and block it.

Where does the balance and distribution of responsibility for managing the impact of social media on young people lie?

Anon.student
Social media should do more to encourage people to think about what they're posting and the effect it could have on others. Maybe on the side where they have adverts, every now and again just putting something about thinking before you put something out.

41m Like Reply

Anonymous · Anon
Put higher ratings on it like 15+ rather than 13+ and make it so you need some form of ID or parental consent

What role can third-party technological innovation play, including digital platforms and apps that can help young people manage their social media usage in a more health and wellbeing promoting way?

Maybe on younger people's social media pages there could be a tab about being affected by something on social media. Something that offers advice and support and gives you direct access to sites that can help you. 9.32 AM

5. Recommendations

5.1 Education

A comprehensive digital education

In order to ensure that young people have the opportunity to reap the benefits of social media, and adequately deal with the harms it may present, the APPG heard about the importance of equipping young people with digital resilience.

Digital resilience has been defined as *"a dynamic personality asset that grows from digital activation i.e. through engaging with appropriate opportunities and challenges online, rather than through avoidance and safety behaviours.[38]"*

Parent Zone outlined in their written evidence that *"any analysis of the impact of social media on wellbeing needs to consider digital resilience including the need to offer young people safe, appropriate opportunities to develop the skills and understanding they need in order to fully engage with digital opportunities. This process includes making mistakes and recovering from those mistakes."*

The Inquiry heard from young people regarding the role of education when managing the impact which social media can have on young people. Young NCB members commented:

"I think PSHE lessons could be adapted to include this new aspect of our lives."

"Make it the part of the school curriculum. Making it a necessity for schools teaching this to students."

"Schools – should do more. Not just explain basic effects and how to report it, should go further to educate."

Furthermore, in a statement included in written evidence received from XenZone, a young person said:

"At primary [school] we should be taught what not to post, and how to make a profile safe. Then in secondary school I feel we should be refreshed on this, and then taught the dangers like sexting, pro self-harm, eating disorder sites and online grooming".

Samaritans provided written evidence to the Inquiry stating that, *"Education and awareness is critical, and is not the responsibility of just one party. We need to think about social media as part of everyday life and therefore think about education around it as part of the set of skills and knowledge young people need to have. It should be as common as teaching children how to cross the road."*

Based on evidence received throughout the Inquiry, the APPG believes that a comprehensive digital education, which specifically addresses how to safely use social media, alongside the development of other key life skills, will empower young people to manage their social media use in the long term. Furthermore, while screen-use generally has the potential for different kinds of positive and negative impacts these can be very different in comparison to those specifically experienced by young people using social media. As identified by Professor Yvonne Kelly, *"Looking at a global measure of 'screen time' likely obscures important differential effects for each kind of screen use."* **Therefore, the APPG recommends that Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education is made mandatory for primary and secondary school children in the next parliamentary session and that the PSHE curriculum adequately delivers understanding of the harms and benefits specifically of social media to support digital resilience.**

5.2 Development of guidelines for the public

Throughout this Inquiry the APPG found evidence of existing guidance on how social media use for young people, parents and those working with young people, including: Parentzone's Parent Guides[39], the Children's Commissioner Digital 5-a-Day[40], the UK Chief Medical Officers' advice for parents and carers on children and young people's screen and social media use[41], and the Digital Resilience Toolkit developed by Internet Matters[42].

Yet, although a range of guidance is available, no one document has yet been recommended. The Inquiry heard from young people, parents and those working with children, of a lack of clarity on what they should do to make the most of the positive aspects of social media, whilst protecting themselves and their children from its negatives.

Internet Matters told the Inquiry *"the key to a healthy online life for children is parental engagement, which has to start with awareness and education*" and outlined that whilst *"96% of parents accept their responsibility to keep children safe and well, 70% of parents consistently tell us they want more help."*

In evidence received from the Corsham Institute, they identified key life skills which support young people in developing healthy relationships with social media. These skills include critical thinking, resilience, problem solving, creativity and empathy, which they argue will allow young people to *"critically engage with online content, show resilience in the face of online risks, have a reactive and creative approach to potential issues, and be respectful of others online."*

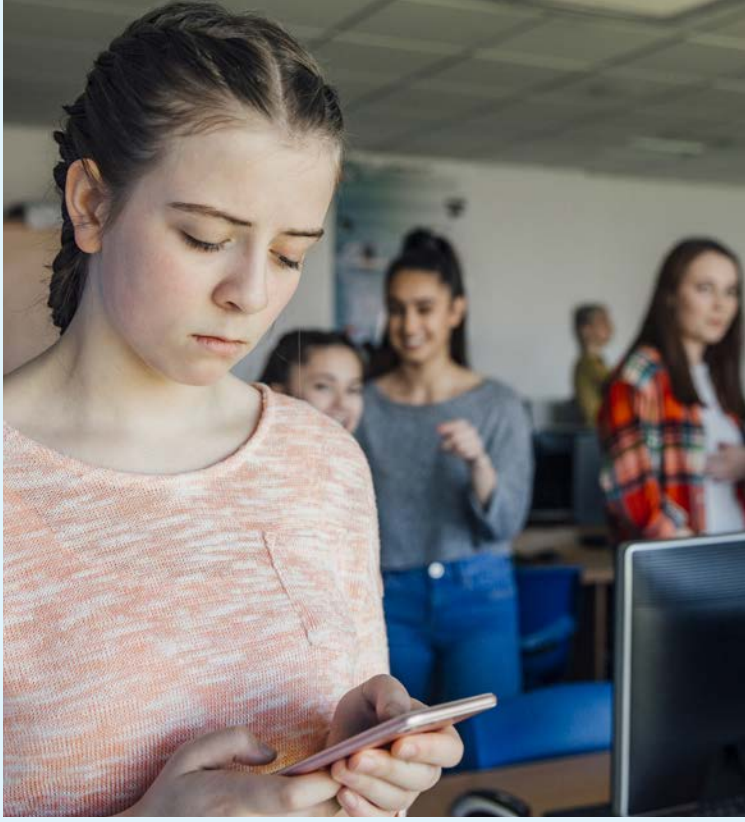
In further evidence received from Internet Matters, they stated:

"We need a multi sector, pan-industry alliance, supported by Government to create the cut through needed to engage and support parents in these new challenges. We would urge the APPG to lend its support to this with some urgency."

In the absence of an overarching and coherent set of guidelines, and building upon these key life skills identified, **the APPG recommends that a Social Media Health Alliance is established and develops a Charter which seeks to support young people, parents and those working with young people, to help mitigate some of the negative effects which social media can have on mental health and wellbeing, whilst promoting the positives.**

The APPG thus recommends that the Charter is developed by a newly constituted Social Media Health Alliance, and implemented with supporting campaign from Government. The guidelines should be informed by the following key life skills: critical thinking, resilience, problem solving, creativity and empathy.

As previously identified, the APPG heard evidence of an increase in experiences of mental ill health amongst young people using social media sites for three or more hours a day. Amongst other things, the more a young person engages with social media, there is an increased likelihood of social media negatively impacting a young person's sleep, self-esteem, of exposure to cyber-bullying, and an increased likelihood of social media negatively impacting a young person's sleep and self-esteem, and of exposure to cyber-bullying and inappropriate images or videos.



In the absence of further robust longitudinal research and data, taking a precautionary approach, **the APPG recommends the Government publishes evidence based guidance for those aged 24 and younger to avoid excessive social media use, that is use of "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking". Further research is also recommended to determine what constitutes "excessive use" and the extent to which this varies amongst different demographic groups.**

5.3 Establishing a statutory duty of care and code of conduct

The APPG commends actions being taken by industry to help protect children and young people online. However, polling commissioned by RSPH in April 2018 on behalf of the APPG found more than half of the public (52%) feel that not enough is being done by social media companies to address their potential impact on mental health and wellbeing, with a further 80% of respondents advocating that tighter regulation of social media companies was needed[43].

In April 2018, in response to the Internet Safety Strategy consultation, the Government outlined it would collaborate with industry, charities and the public on a White Paper which would provide legislation to *"cover the full range of online harms, including harmful and illegal content"*[44] .

Throughout this Inquiry there has been considerable evidence provided supporting the case that social media companies have a duty of care to protect their users. A statutory duty of care would provide a robust, flexible legal framework within which the Government could require the implementation of a social media code of conduct for providers, which specifically includes measures to protect the mental health and wellbeing of users.

i) A statutory duty of care

The concept of a statutory duty of care to apply to people and companies has been defined by William Perrin and Professor Lorna Woods in their work for Carnegie UK Trust[45] and summarised by the Science and Technology Committee in their report on the impact of social media and screen use on young people's health[46], as a requirement to:

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

William Perrin, Trustee of Carnegie UK Trust, and Professor Lorna Woods from the University of Essex, provided oral evidence to the Inquiry informed by their ongoing work on a proposal for Internet Harm Reduction[47] which advocates that social media networks should be seen as a public place. Using this analogy, when people go to social networks owned by companies, they should be protected. In their proposal, they outline a statutory duty of care model, which would require social media and other internet platforms to take reasonable steps

to prevent foreseeable harm from arising to users, whilst allowing a certain level of flexibility for social media platforms to take action appropriate to their respective services and the risks that those services create. Best practice could be agreed by industry and formulated into codes of conduct, with the emphasis on appropriate and proportionate responses allowing space for innovation. In the case that not enough progress is taken by industry, then appropriate action would be taken by an independent regulator. The independent regulator could have the role of approving industry agreed codes of conduct.

As is discussed by William Perrin in his blog post, Reducing harm in social media through a duty of care, *"An industry code of conduct has the benefit of guiding companies on where to focus and makes sure that Parliament's priorities are not lost"*[48].

ii) A statutory code of conduct

The harm reduction principles behind the duty of care were also endorsed by a number of charities when recommending the introduction of a code of conduct for social media companies. For example, Barnardo's called for a statutory code of conduct for all social media sites and an independent watchdog to hold them to account, with powers to issue fines. In written evidence, Barnardo's told the Inquiry, *"If playgrounds need health and safety in place before children can use them, the online world should have the equivalent safeguards."*

Parentzone agreed, stating, *"We believe that a service that is aware of a child experiencing harm in this country should be required, by law, to report that harm. A child enjoying an online service should reasonably expect the same level of legal protection as a child enjoying a game in public or private play park."*

The Inquiry also heard that it was important that any regulation ensured the positives of social media were protected. Social media is an integral part of young people's lives and by overly restricting their use, it is a risk that they will be denied its benefits. In written evidence the Corsham Charity Institute advised that *"Self-regulation as a stand-alone solution, without any regulation from a higher body, is not a workable solution for the long term".* They advised that instead of prescriptive measures, the Government should focus on creating guidelines and ethical frameworks to support platforms in making decisions that benefit young people's wellbeing. Rather than limiting young people's freedom to use social media, they advised that any industry code of conduct should take specific care to encourage innovation and cooperation between companies to best promote young people's wellbeing, and focus on protecting users' privacy and ensuring platforms show a duty of care and remain transparent.

On the basis of evidence received throughout this Inquiry, the Internet Harm Reduction Proposal and building upon those recommendations set out in the Government's Internet Safety Green Paper[49] and by the Science and Technology Committee[50], **the APPG recommends that the Government in its forthcoming White Paper should introduce a statutory duty of care, including the definition of key harms for an independent regulator to focus on and supported by a code of conduct for all relevant service providers to address the defined harms. As a baseline, key harms would be identified in line with those set out in the Government's Internet Safety Green Paper[51].**

The code of conduct would set out an expectation that service providers will prevent reasonably foreseeable harms from occurring and this will therefore require social media platforms to take action before activity reaches the level at which it would become a criminal offence. In agreement with the Science and Technology Committee's recommendations, the APPG understands that it is essential such legislation is flexible *"so that it can straightforwardly adapt and evolve as trends change and new technologies emerge"*[52].

The APPG suggests that, along with those harms outlined in the Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, the following harms set out in the Carnegie UK Trust proposal[53],are reflected in the code of conduct:

- **Harmful threats**, including a statement of an intention to cause pain, injury, damage or other hostile action such as intimidation.
- **Psychological harassment**, including threats of a sexual nature, threats to kill, racial or religious threats known as hate crime.
- **Hostility or prejudice** based on a person's race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, or misogyny.
- **Economic harm**, including financial misconduct and intellectual property abuse.
- **Emotional harm**, including preventing emotional harm suffered by users such that it does not build up to the criminal threshold of a recognised psychiatric injury.
- **Harm to young people** such as bullying, aggression, hate, sexual harassment and communications, exposure to harmful or disturbing content, grooming and child abuse[54].

The code of conduct should also include specific protection against harms specifically to the mental health and wellbeing of young people using social media platforms including, but not limited to:

- **Self-harm;**
- **Disordered eating;**
- **Low-self-esteem;**
- **A lack of sleep;**
- **Over dependence on social media.**

Adolescence and early adulthood is a critical and potentially vulnerable time for social and emotional development and this, coupled with 91% of 16-24 year olds using the internet for social media[55], has led the APPG to recommend that **this duty of care should apply to any social media site with registered UK users aged 24 years and under, regardless of size or the number of users of the platform.** This is to ensure that all social media platforms take an appropriate level of care, regardless of the size or newness of a platform.

Furthermore, it is **important when developing a code of conduct that vulnerable young people are adequately protected**, including those who have experienced abuse, those on child protection plans and in acute or hospital settings, children and young people with disabilities, young carers, minority ethnic groups, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ+) young people, and those with poor mental health. This duty of care should also be extended as deemed appropriate by the regulator and the Social Media Health Alliance to protect all vulnerable social media users.

iii) Ofcom to assume responsibility for regulation

On the basis of evidence reviewed, **the APPG recommendations that the Government resources Ofcom to assume responsibility for regulatory duties.**

As summarised by Maeve Walsh, Carnegie UK Trust Associate, *"The regulator (would set out a harm reduction cycle involving civil society as well as companies at each consultative step. Companies would be required to measure and survey harm, produce plans to address these harms for public consultation and agreement with the regulator, then implement the plans. If the cycle does not reduce harms or the companies do not co-operate then sanctions could be deployed.[56]"*

The APPG recommends that a code of conduct, regulated by Ofcom, should take effect by 31 October 2019.

Prior to the implementation of statutory legislation, a Social Media Health Alliance would be established to work under the direction of Ofcom to advise on what harms are set out in this code of conduct.

5.4 Formation of a new body, the Social Media Health Alliance, to fund research, educational initiatives and establish clearer guidance for the public

Prior to the implementation of statutory legislation, a Social Media Health Alliance would be established to work under the direction of Ofcom to advise on what harms are set out in this code of conduct.

The objective of this Alliance would be to fund research and educational initiatives to address the harms associated with social media. The Alliance would be independent of industry, and would be independently constituted with representatives who have a shared interest in reducing the damage caused to young people's mental health and wellbeing from social media, across England, Scotland Northern Ireland and Wales.

The APPG believes that a Social Media Health Alliance would be well placed to regularly review evidence of the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Based on a polluter pays principle the Social Media Health Alliance would be funded by a compulsory 0.5% levy on the profits of social media companies.

The Alliance would seek to:

- Commission and review the growing evidence base on the impact of social media on health and wellbeing with a view to disseminating research and translating into further policy calls and changes to the Code of Conduct.
- To support the ambitions for a comprehensive digital education.
- Establish clearer guidance for the public.

The Alliance will be developed using a model RSPH has already found to be successful which has been established on public health priorities and creates a broad coalition. Examples of other such alliances include:

- Alcohol - Alcohol Health Alliance
- Obesity - Obesity Health Alliance
- Smoking - Smokefree Action Coalition

Recommendations

The APPG aims to work with the UK Government and devolved administrations to take the following recommendations forward:

Our recommendations

Establishing a duty of care for social media providers

- The Government should introduce a statutory duty of care for social media companies in the form of a statutory code of conduct for all relevant service providers, which includes the definition of key harms for the independent regulator to focus on.
- That the Government resources Ofcom to assume responsibility for regulatory duties.
- That the statutory code of conduct is upheld by all social media platforms with registered UK users aged 24 years and under, regardless of size, newness or the number of users.

Clearer guidance for the public

- A Social Media Charter is developed and implemented by Government to support young people, parents and those working with young people, to help mitigate some of the negative effects which social media can have on mental health and wellbeing, whilst promoting the positives.
- That the Government publishes evidence based guidance for those aged 24 and younger to avoid excessive social media use, that is use of *"websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking"*. Further research is also recommended to determine what constitutes "excessive use" and the extent to which this varies amongst different demographic groups

The establishment of a Social Media Health Alliance

Funded by a 0.5% levy on the profits of social companies, the Social Media Health Alliance will:

- Commission and review the growing evidence base on the impact of social media on health and wellbeing with a view to disseminating research and translating it into further policy calls and changes to the Code of Conduct.
- Support the ambitions for a comprehensive digital education.
- Establish clearer guidance for the public.

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Appendix 1

Organisations and individuals who provided evidence to support the Inquiry

Ali Hussain, Kings College London

Association for Young People's Health

Barnado's

Bart's Health (Clinical Nurse)

Bethany Phillips

Brad Gudger

British Association for Counseilling and Psychotheraphy

Cameron Wood

Centre for Longitudinal Studies, University College London

International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health, University College London

Children's Commissioner Wales

Children's Society and Young Minds

Chloe Kazantzis, NHS Youth Forum

CLOSER, University College London Institute of Education

David Presky

Dr Anna Lavis, University of Birmingham

Dr Lucy Biddle, University of Bristol

Facebook

Google

Healthwatch Essex

International Centre For Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health (ICLS), University College London

Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex

Internet Matters

Media Smart

Parent zone

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Samaritans

The Children's Commissioner for England

The Children's Commissioner for Wales

The Corsham Charity Institute

The Diana Award

The Warriner School, Bloxham

Tomorrow's Student

Twitter

University of Birmingham

Virgin Media

XenZone

Young National Children's Bureau

Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing

appg

The Royal Society for Public Health, Secretariat to the APPG on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing,
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