



House of Commons  
Education Committee

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# Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing

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**Fourth Report of Session 2023–24**

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

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## Summary

### Summary

Extended screen time has become increasingly normal for young children and teenagers. Research suggests a 52% increase in children's screen time between 2020 and 2022, and that nearly 25% of children and young people use their smartphones in a way that is consistent with a behavioural addiction. Screen use has been found to start as early as six months of age. One in five children aged between three and four years old have their own mobile phone, increasing to one in four children by age eight and to almost all children by age twelve. The amount of time those aged 5–15 years old spent online rose from an average of 9 hours per week in 2009, to 15 hours per week in 2018.

### The effects of screen time on children

There are ways in which screen time can be beneficial. Evidence from the NSPCC argued that there are significant benefits of being online for LGBTQ+ children including the opportunity to create communities and find support from others who may be going through similar experiences, and the use of screens has also been credited with a reduction in feelings of loneliness in some children and helping to sustain and build friendships through social media or online gaming.

However, the negative impacts of screen time are well documented. Research by the Children's Commissioner for England found that 79% of children had encountered violent pornography before the age of 18, with the average age that children first see pornography as being 13 years old. Images posted online can have a negative impact on children and young people's perception of themselves. Girls and young women are particularly affected by pressure to conform with the images of bodies they see on social media, however body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are rapidly rising in boys and young men too. We heard evidence that some 81% of girls, aged 7–21 have experienced some form of threatening or upsetting behaviour online. Children can also experience sexual abuse when using screens, and sexual crimes committed against children online has risen by 400% since 2013. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests that one in five children (19%) aged 10–15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three-quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time. Screen time can also have physical impacts through sedentary lifestyle and digital eye strain.

Some evidence suggests that online educational platforms can be beneficial to children. Research from the University of Cambridge argued that online learning had led to both increased student and parent engagement in mathematics. The BBC told us that online education could have tangible positive impacts on the educational outcomes of learners when driven by the recommendations of schools and teachers. Ofcom's annual media use survey highlights that the majority of children aged 12–15, as well as parents of this age group, think that being able to go online helped with school and homework.

However, we heard strong evidence that smartphones and computers disrupt pupils' learning both at home and in the classroom, as it can take up to 20 minutes for pupils to refocus on what they were learning after engaging in a non-academic activity such as

browsing the internet or noticing a notification on their phone. Recent research suggests that children who were exposed to longer than two hours a day of recreational screen time on smart phones and playing video games had worse working memory, processing speed, attention levels, language skills and executive function compared with those who did not. Screen time can also be damaging to a child's sleep pattern.

Children in care, care leavers, young carers, children experiencing poverty and children with additional needs are more susceptible to online harms. These groups were more susceptible either because of their increased use of screens in comparison to other children, or because of their decreased ability to approach and interact with social media in a self-protective manner.

Vulnerable children are also at risk of child criminal exploitation when using screens. During our previous work into child exploitation and county lines, Johnny Bolderson, Senior Service Manager in County Lines Support and Rescue for Catch22, described social media and online gaming as the "foundation of county lines recruitment" that have made it far easier for criminal gangs to contact vulnerable young people.

The overwhelming weight of evidence submitted to us suggests that the harms of screen time and social media use significantly outweigh the benefits for young children, whereas limited use of screens and genuinely educational uses of digital technology can have benefits for older children. For this reason, screen time should be minimal for younger children and better balanced with face-to-face socialisation and physical activity for older ones. For children and adolescents alike the rapid rise of the use of screens and devices has come at a substantial cost and Government needs to do more across departments to protect them from addiction, online harms and the mental health impacts of extensive use of devices.

### **Guidance on mobile phones in schools**

We strongly welcome the Government's decision to implement a tougher mobile phone ban in schools in England. We welcome the fact that this includes break times and sends a clearer message than previous guidance about the benefits of having phones out of sight and reach. It is clear that a ban can have a positive impact on the mental health and educational outcomes of children.

Initially introducing the ban on a non-statutory basis is the right approach, but the success of the ban will depend on its implementation and how widely it is taken up. We do not agree with the Government's approach of informally monitoring the mobile phone ban. Without a formal monitoring mechanism, the implementation and effects of the ban cannot be measured and it will be impossible to judge whether a statutory ban is necessary.

The Government should implement a formal monitoring mechanism to measure both the implementation and effects of the mobile phone ban. The results of this monitoring phase should be published and shared with schools. If results show that a non-statutory ban has been ineffective in twelve months, the Government must move swiftly to introduce a statutory ban.

We welcome the flexibility within the mobile phone ban guidance which allows schools to choose a process for implementation most suitable for them and the inclusion of exemptions for children with particular needs.

Government guidance must also set out the approximate cost of certain approaches, such as secure storage. The Government must also ensure parents are not prevented from being able to contact their children during their commute to school. The guidance should be changed by July to prevent schools from insisting mobile phones are left at home.

### **Support for parents**

Parents are unsure of what their children are doing online, lack confidence in being able to manage screen time, and want guidance to support them. The Government is wrong to conflate arguments about setting an exact time limit on screen time with the fact that some guidance and information would be useful for parents.

The next Government should work across departments including DHSC, DSIT, Education and the Home Office to produce guidance for parents on how to best manage and understand the impact of screen time on their children. A common sense approach would be to focus on aspects of screen time that are known to cause harm. For example, guidance should advise that children should not be able to access screens after they have gone to bed and should incorporate physical activity into their day to help balance time spent on screen. Guidance should also focus on the ways in which parents can monitor use of devices, the uses of parental controls and how to deal with problematic screen use including when to seek help.

Advice to parents of babies and young children should be revised to ensure it gives sufficient attention to face to face interaction and warns of the risks of screen time in reducing opportunities for this. Adults should be encouraged to minimise use of devices where possible when supervising young children at a formative age and the Department for Education should commission advice for parents through family hubs and children's centres on the healthy use of devices.

### **Guidance on online learning**

There are over half a million apps claiming to be educational within leading app stores such as the Apple App Store and Google Play, but no quality standards for educational content or design features that apps must align with to be included in the educational category. As a consequence, parents have little to no confidence in being able to correctly identify high quality versus low quality educational resources online. Many schools encourage the use of educational apps to support learning and engage pupils with subjects such as mathematics, but there is currently a poor evidence base regarding which are most effective.

The next Government must commission guidance for parents and schools on the educational value of purported educational websites and apps within a year. They should also support a kitemarking scheme for educational resources found online in the first year of the new Parliament to enable parents to quickly identify the best

educational resources online for their children. The Government should engage with tech companies to encourage them to introduce standards for the use of educational labels and to remove apps which do not offer educational benefit.

### **Digital literacy curriculum**

We welcome the inclusion of digital literacy in the curriculum. However, the curriculum is not structured well enough to keep children safe online. Digital literacy is split across numerous subjects with different focuses and teachers. Teachers must grapple with a topic that is constantly evolving and comprehend numerous guidance documents provided by the Government while often having no specialist knowledge of the topic themselves. As a result, the digital literacy capabilities of children in the UK remain generally poor.

The Government must provide additional training and support for teachers delivering the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum, particularly digital literacy. The Government should embed additional core content on online safety into the information and communication technology (ICT) training and early career framework for all teachers.

The Government should consolidate non-statutory guidance on digital safety and curriculum content to provide a clear guide for teachers which should be complementary to Keeping Children Safe in School. Once this consolidation is complete the Department should invest in subject knowledge enhancement courses to ensure it reaches the wide variety of teachers who could benefit from it.

We welcome inspections of PSHE as part of a routine Ofsted inspection. However, a subject as broad as PSHE, which covers so many different topics including digital literacy, cannot be adequately evaluated solely within the current personal development metric.

Ofsted must change the way in which PSHE is evaluated during inspection. Instead of being assessed through Ofsted's personal development metric, PSHE should be assessed through thematic reviews in the same way as other core curriculum subjects.

### **The Online Safety Act**

The Online Safety Act 2023 will undoubtedly play a role in keeping children safe from online harms. However, we are concerned that children will not feel the full protections of the Act until implementation is completed in 2026.

The next Government must work with Ofcom to ensure that there are no delays to implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 and set out how it is working with Ofcom to ensure children are protected during the transition period. Robust methods such as age verification should be implemented immediately on internet platforms and it is unacceptable that they continue to be widely ignored.

Although we welcome attempts by Ofcom to make platforms safer for children who use them, it is clear that the entire system surrounding the digital age of consent and how it is verified is not fit for purpose. Until there are robust age verification measures used on social media platforms, the digital age of consent will have little to no impact



on protecting the data of underage users. Now is also the time for a broader debate on the adequacy of the digital age of consent. The age of consent in the UK is 16, a child cannot drive until they are 17 and cannot vote in England until they are 18. We have heard no evidence to suggest that 13 is an appropriate age for children to understand the implications of allowing platforms access to their personal data online. Yet we know even with the digital age of consent currently formally set at the lowest possible level, it is widely ignored and not effectively enforced. This must change urgently.

The next Government must launch a consultation by the end of the year on whether 13 is a reasonable age of digital consent, or whether it should be raised. The next Government should recommend 16 as a more appropriate age. This approach should be cross-government and include research on the reasoning behind other countries having higher digital age of consents than our own.

Decisions made by the Government on the level of the digital age of consent must be effectively enforced. Ofcom need to be able to go further than simply naming and shaming those who breach age verification measures. The Online Safety Act 2023 allows for substantial fines or even imprisonment for executives of companies who breach its rules, and the Government should consider how this approach can be applied to social media companies who knowingly breach age verification requirements and expose children to addictive content which is not appropriate for them.

It is clear that children are exposed to online harms when using smart phones to access the internet and, in particular, social media platforms. We support calls for tighter controls on the sale of smart phones to children under 16 years old in order to protect them from harm.

The next Government should work alongside Ofcom to consult on additional measures regarding smartphones for children under 16 years old within the first year of the new Parliament. Measures to consider should include the total ban of smartphones (internet-enabled phones) for children under 16, parental controls installed as default on phones for under 16s, additional guidance for parents at point of sale, and controls at App Store level to prevent children from accessing or utilising age inappropriate content as well as controls at system level to prevent children uploading nude images.

The next Government should work with mobile phone companies and network operators to promote children's phones, a class of phone which can be used for contact and GPS location but not access to the internet or downloading apps.

There has been a huge increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in recent years by children. This leaves users at risk of encountering new types of online harms facilitated by the use of AI. Despite this, there is currently little to no regulation of the AI market.

The next Government must draw up legislation in the first year of the new Parliament on regulating AI or risk the technology developing faster than legislation can be drawn up to control it, ultimately causing additional harm to children. AI operators should also be held accountable for their use of children's data and it is essential that children's data is protected where they are below the digital age of consent.

### **Digitalisation of education**

The UK's edtech sector is the largest in Europe, and more schools in England are using edtech and AI than ever before. Although edtech has some benefits, we are concerned about the implications of edtech and AI on children's data and privacy. The Online Safety Act 2023 is exempted in school settings, AI is not regulated, and digital technology can harvest huge amounts of data from its users.

The next Government should produce a risk assessment on the use of edtech and AI in schools as soon as possible, and particularly on the extent to which it poses a risk to the security of children's data. The safety and reliability of edtech should also be assessed by Ofcom both it is introduced to schools, and periodically after it is brought into schools.

Since the pandemic, the Government has provided over 1.35 million laptops and tablets to schools, trusts, local authorities and further education providers for disadvantaged children and young people. Edtech has more malware than all other sectors combined, and therefore it is essential that these devices receive software updates and renewals regularly in order to keep them secure for longer and reduce our rate of e-waste.

Digital devices provided to schools by the Government must be maintained and kept secure through regular renewals and software updates. The Department for Education must set out a funding and renewal strategy for device management alongside a strategy for disposing of digital hardware that is no longer fit for purpose within the first year of the new Parliament.

# 1 Introduction

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## Our inquiry

1. This inquiry was launched in September 2023 to investigate the impact of screen time on children’s educational outcomes and wellbeing. We received 50 pieces of written evidence and held four oral evidence sessions with a range of witnesses. In our final session, we heard evidence from the Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Minister of State for Schools. To further inform our inquiry, we visited France and the Netherlands to observe how they had implemented mobile phone bans in their schools, and Sacred Heart High School in Hammersmith to learn about their use of phone pouches. We also visited Google to look into their digital literacy programmes.

## Children’s screen time

2. The Department for Education defines screen time as the time spent interacting with screen-based devices.<sup>1</sup> This includes time spent on mobile phones, tablets, televisions, and computers. Screen time can be broken down into two categories: active usage (such as posting pictures on social media) and passive usage (such as scrolling through a social media feed).<sup>2</sup> Advancing technology also means that screens are being used in increasingly diverse ways. While older screen-based devices (such as televisions) only support a small number of activities, modern digital devices (such as smartphones, smartwatches or tablets) can be used for an ever-increasing array of tasks. Devices are being used by children and young people for a variety of activities, including doing school work, using social media and gaming.<sup>3</sup>

3. Trends suggest that children are owning smart phones at progressively younger ages.<sup>4</sup> Screen use has been found to start as early as six months of age and the amount of time children and young people spend using screens is increasing.<sup>5</sup> Research commissioned by Ofcom, the UK’s communications regulator, suggests that one in five children aged between three and four years old have their own mobile phone. This increases gradually to age eight, when one in four children have their own phone. By age twelve, almost all children have their own mobile phone. Data from Ofcom shows that the amount of time those aged 5–15 years old spent online rose from an average of 9 hours per week in 2009,

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1 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

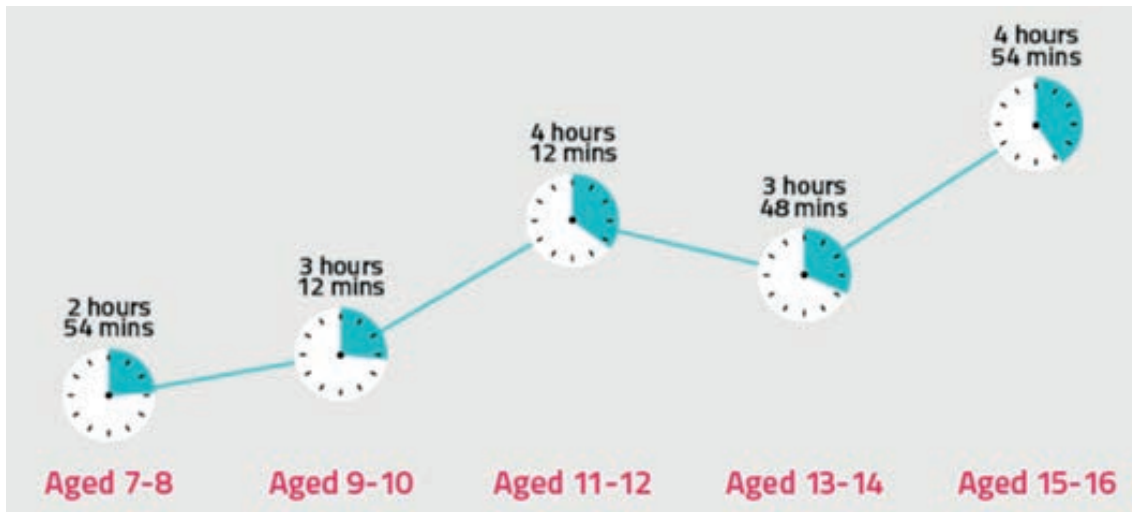
2 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

3 UK Parliament POST, [Screen use and health in young people](#), December 2020.

4 Ofcom, [Children and parents: media use and attitudes](#), March 2023.

5 UK Parliament POST, [Screen use and health in young people](#), December 2020.

to 15 hours per week in 2018.<sup>6</sup> Between September and November 2020, CHILDWISE asked children to estimate how long they spent online daily. The self-reported data can be seen below, and generally increased with age:



Source: CHILDWISE, [CHILDWISE Monitor Report](#), 2021

4. There is evidence that parents recognise screen time can have some benefits for children, such as bettering their educational outcomes through helpful educational content online.<sup>7</sup> However, throughout our inquiry it has become clear that parents have little idea of what their children are doing online and generally feel concerned about the effects of screen time on their children's development and wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> Research commissioned by Ofcom suggests a disconnect between children's exposure to potentially harmful content online, and what they share with their parents about their online experiences. A third (32%) of 8 to 17s say they have seen something worrying or nasty online in the last 12 months, but only 20% of parents of this age group report their child telling them they had seen something online that scared or upset them in the same time frame.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly concerning when younger age groups are factored in, with a third of children aged 5 to 7 using social media unsupervised and potentially exposed to online harms.<sup>10</sup> The 2019 Online Harms White Paper identified excessive screen time for children as an emerging concern, suggesting that it could have negative effects on physical and mental health.<sup>11</sup> These concerns were also discussed in a 2019 report by the UK Chief Medical Officers and a report in the same year by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee.<sup>12</sup>

6 Ofcom, [Children and parents media use and attitudes: annex 1](#), January 2019.

7 BBC ([ST0018](#)), NRIC University of Cambridge ([ST0001](#))

8 [Q37](#)

9 Ofcom, [A window into young children's online worlds](#), April 2024

10 Ofcom, [A window into young children's online worlds](#), April 2024

11 UK Government, [Online Harms White Paper](#), April 2019

12 UK Government, [UK CMO commentary on screen time and social media map of reviews](#), February 2019 and House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, [Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health](#), January 2019

## 2 Effects of screen time on children

### Mental health

5. Children and young people’s wellbeing and mental health has declined in recent years. NHS Digital data shows that 18.0% of children and young people aged 7 to 16 years had a probable mental health disorder in 2022 compared with 12.1% in 2017, 10.1% in 2004 and 9.7% in 1999.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, a report by the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) was commissioned to investigate the relationship between screen time and mental health problems in children and young people. The report found an association between the two but was unable to prove a causal relationship.<sup>14</sup> However, we have heard evidence to suggest that screen time has a generally negative impact on the mental health of children and young people.<sup>15</sup> Social psychologist Professor Jonathan Haidt has argued extensively that, between 2010 and 2015, there was a profound shift in the mental health of children and young people.<sup>16</sup> He argued that, as children traded in their flip phones for smartphones with social media apps, their time spent online soared while time engaging face-to-face with loved ones plummeted, which negatively impacted their mental health.

6. Children and young people are at risk of encountering online harms while using screens. Examples of online harms include cyberbullying, racism, misogynistic abuse, pornography, and material promoting violence and self-harm. Research by the British Board of Film Classification has found that children are coming across pornography online from as young as 7<sup>17</sup> and research by the Children’s Commissioner for England found that 79% of children had encountered violent pornography before the age of 18, with the average age that children first see pornography as being 13 years old.<sup>18</sup> We have heard evidence arguing that boys who regularly watched online pornography were significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes,<sup>19</sup> and research by the Children’s Commissioner found that, in 50% of cases of child sexual abuse that had been conducted by another child, the associated interview transcripts included words referring to at least one specific act of sexual violence that is commonly seen in pornography.<sup>20</sup> Ian Critchley, Lead on Child Protection at the National Police Chiefs’ Council, told us that interaction with online harms had resulted in a significant increase in the number of victims and offenders who were young people. “This is lifelong harm. This is not something that comes and goes. This has lifelong consequences.”<sup>21</sup>

7. Images posted online can have a negative impact on children and young people’s perception of themselves. Girls and young women are particularly affected by pressure to conform with the images of bodies they see on social media, however body dissatisfaction

13 NHS England, [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England in 2017](#), November 2018 and Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

14 UK CMOs, [Screen-based activities and children and young people’s mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews](#), February 2019.

15 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#)), Dr Sina Joneidy ([ST0036](#))

16 Professor Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, March 2024.

17 BBFC, [Children see pornography as young as seven, new report finds](#), September 2019.

18 Children’s Commissioner, [Young people and pornography](#), January 2023.

19 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#))

20 Children’s Commissioner, [Evidence on pornography’s influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children](#), May 2023.

21 [Q133](#)

and eating disorders are rapidly rising in boys and young men too.<sup>22</sup> According to research released by Meta, using Instagram made body image issues worse for 1 in 3 teenage girls who already faced body image issues from the UK and US.<sup>23</sup> Barnardo's told us that children and young people were less likely to critically analyse images and more likely to negatively compare themselves with unrealistic images seen online, resulting in unhappiness with their own appearance.<sup>24</sup> Barnardo's said that this is significantly associated with poor mental health amongst children and young people.<sup>25</sup>

8. Extended screen time has become increasingly normal for young children and teenagers, with a recent research review identifying a 52% increase in children's screen time between 2020 and 2022.<sup>26</sup> A 2019 study conducted by King's College London found that nearly 25% of children and young people use their smartphones in a way that is consistent with a behavioural addiction.<sup>27</sup> This was defined as including symptoms such as feeling panicky or upset when the phone is unavailable, finding it difficult to control the amount of time spent on the phone and using the phone to the detriment of other enjoyable activities.

9. The ownership of mobile phones amongst children and young people has enabled cyberbullying irrespective of geography, time or face to face contact and increased the number of bystanders who view or participate in cyberbullying.<sup>28</sup> Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests that one in five children (19%) aged 10–15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three-quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.<sup>29</sup>

10. However, there were also arguments to suggest that screen time could be used as a tool to improve mental health. Evidence from the NSPCC argued that there are significant benefits of being online for LGBTQ+ children including the opportunity to create communities and find support from others who may be going through similar experiences. This is especially important if they feel unable to talk to others and get this support from their friends and family.<sup>30</sup> Some children were able to learn additional skills through screens such as fitness, music lessons and cooking, which enhanced feelings of wellbeing.<sup>31</sup> The use of screens has also been credited with a reduction in feelings of loneliness in some children and helping to sustain and build friendships through social media or online gaming.<sup>32</sup>

11. Mixed results on the effect of screen time on mental health has been attributed in some research to differences in types of screen use. Studies have only recently started to differentiate types of screen use by, for example, comparing active usage (such as posting pictures on social media) and passive usage (such as scrolling through a social media feed). Some results for social media indicate that passive usage is more likely to be linked

22 Barnardo's, [Young people, social media and mental health](#), June 2019.

23 Meta, [What Our Research Really Says About Teen Well-Being and Instagram](#), September 2021.

24 Barnardo's ([ST0011](#))

25 Barnardo's ([ST0011](#))

26 Triple P UK and Ireland ([ST0033](#))

27 King's College London, [An estimated 1 in 4 children and young people have problematic smartphone usage](#), November 2019.

28 Dr Sina Joneidy ([ST0036](#))

29 Official for National Statistics, [Online bullying in England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#), November 2020.

30 NSPCC ([ST0037](#))

31 Rafe Clayton (University of Leeds) and Professor Carmen Clayton (Leeds Trinity University) ([ST0044](#))

32 Rafe Clayton (University of Leeds) and Professor Carmen Clayton (Leeds Trinity University) ([ST0044](#))



with lower levels of mental well-being, while active usage is more likely to be associated with higher levels of mental well-being.<sup>33</sup> However, Internet Matters found that children who are more active online (posting rather than passively scrolling) experienced more of both the positive and negative effects of digital tech than those who were less active.<sup>34</sup> They were more likely to see violent content, be contacted by someone they didn't know, see false information or receive abusive messages. The same report found that children in families experiencing financial difficulties, those with disabilities, mental health issues or special educational needs experience more negative effects on their wellbeing than those without these challenges.<sup>35</sup>

## Physical health and development

12. We also heard concerns about the physical impacts of screen time on children.<sup>36</sup> Rafe Clayton, Principal Investigator of New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain at the University of Leeds, told us that parents were significantly concerned that their children were becoming addicted to screens and had reported observing a physical change in their children. They were concerned that social networks exist online that prevent young people from meeting outside and undertaking physical activities together.

“We know what the physical impacts are of a sedentary lifestyle; that is very well established. We know that digital eye strain and close work can affect the myopia epidemic.”<sup>37</sup>

13. Small Steps Big Changes expressed concern that children were often sedentary when watching screens reducing their physical activity which was known to have a positive correlation with the development of motor skills.<sup>38</sup> Morrells Handwriting and Left n Write highlighted that excessive screen time had numerous negative effects on physical development, including hand and wrist weakness, grip and hand-pinch strength and sleep deprivation.<sup>39</sup>

## Education

14. Some evidence suggests that online educational platforms can be beneficial to children. Research from the University of Cambridge argued that online learning had led to both increased student and parent engagement in mathematics.<sup>40</sup> The BBC told us that online education could have tangible positive impacts on the educational outcomes of learners when driven by the recommendations of schools and teachers.<sup>41</sup> Ofcom's annual media use survey highlights that the majority of children aged 12–15, as well as parents of this age group, think that being able to go online helped with school and homework.<sup>42</sup>

33 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

34 Internet Matters, [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World](#), 2023.

35 Internet Matters, [Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World](#), 2023.

36 Dr Sina Joneidy ([ST0036](#))

37 [Q21](#)

38 Small Steps Big Changes ([ST0041](#))

39 Morrells Handwriting and Left n Write ([ST0049](#))

40 NRICH, University of Cambridge ([ST0001](#))

41 BBC ([ST0018](#))

42 Ofcom, [Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes](#), March 2023.

15. However, evidence from NASUWT, The Teachers' Union, argued that smartphones and computers disrupt pupils' learning both at home and in the classroom. They stressed that it could take up to 20 minutes for pupils to refocus on what they were learning after engaging in a non-academic activity such as browsing the internet or noticing a notification on their phone.<sup>43</sup> The Association of School and College Leaders told us that they were extremely concerned that it had become much more difficult for teachers to identify learning difficulties in pupils, as they could be masked or replicated by the effects of excessive screen use.<sup>44</sup> Evidence also suggested that prolonged screen use could contribute to a diminished capacity for sustained attention, heightened susceptibility to distractions, and challenges in regaining cognitive equilibrium after interruptions.<sup>45</sup>

16. A concerning study of children between the ages of 8 and 11 years highlighted that children who were exposed to longer than two hours a day of recreational screen time on smart phones and playing video games had worse working memory, processing speed, attention levels, language skills and executive function compared with those who did not.<sup>46</sup>

17. Screen time can also be damaging to a child's sleep pattern as unregulated screen usage may occur when a child should be sleeping. Rafe Clayton told us that:

“One of the issues that we have experienced is young people using screens late at night and as they go to bed, and even picking up their devices in the middle of the night, interacting with others, communicating with others. It is not just blue light disturbing their sleep, but the content they may be exposing themselves to, which is then interfering with their brain patterns as they try to go to sleep.”<sup>47</sup>

18. Dr Bernadka Dubicka, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Hull and York Medical School, added “Poor sleep can drive mental health problems such as depression. If someone is depressed, they cannot concentrate on their work, and that further impacts on education. Sleep is vital for many outcomes.”<sup>48</sup> CLOSER told us that late school day bedtimes predict poorer academic and emotional outcomes for children.<sup>49</sup> Even after controlling for other variables, they explained, social media use remained significantly associated with late sleep onset and wake times in adolescents. They found that very high social media users were roughly 70% more likely than comparable moderate users to fall asleep later than average. Low social media users were least likely to fall asleep late.<sup>50</sup>

## Screen time habits of parents

19. Evidence received throughout our inquiry showed that the screen time habits of parents also had an impact on the educational and developmental outcomes of children and young people. Some positive effects have been found when parents and children use

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43 NASUWT - The Teachers' Union ([ST0010](#))

44 The Association of School and College Leaders ([ST0039](#))

45 Dr Sina Joneidy ([ST0036](#))

46 Dr Sina Joneidy ([ST0036](#))

47 [Q24](#)

48 [Q25](#)

49 CLOSER, UCL ([ST0040](#))

50 CLOSER, UCL ([ST0040](#))



screens together while discussing their content. Parents felt that supervised co-viewing of content aimed at older children or adults allowed children to learn about mature issues, with opportunities to ask questions, which could aid children’s development.<sup>51</sup>

20. However, Internet Matters reported that parents’ phone usage frequency impacted children’s developmental wellbeing. The research found that the impact was most significant when parents were on their phones while their children were trying to communicate with them. Children who reported their parents or guardians being on their phones “all the time” or “quite a lot” during these interactions had notably higher negative scores compared to those reporting their parents never used phones during those moments.<sup>52</sup> The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists explained that the use of screens by parents might negatively impact children’s language development when it is a distraction which displaces opportunities for parent-child interaction.<sup>53</sup>

21. Rafe Clayton told us that:

“while parents are on screens, they are not looking at, supervising or observing their children. We heard a lot of guilt from parents regarding when they are looking at their screens and they have just ignored their child, or they have put their child on screens to act as almost a surrogate. These situations are ( ... ) very concerning.”<sup>54</sup>

## Vulnerable children

22. All children and young people are at risk of experiencing the negative effects of screen time on their mental health, physical health and educational outcomes. However, it is apparent that certain factors can make a child or young person more at risk of harmful effects than others. Barnardo’s told us that children in care, care leavers, young carers, children experiencing poverty and children with additional needs are more susceptible to online harms.<sup>55</sup> These groups were more susceptible either because of their increased use of screens in comparison to other children, or because of their decreased ability to approach and interact with social media in a self-protective manner.<sup>56</sup> For example, care leavers and young carers can be more susceptible to the negative impacts of social media as they are more likely to experience isolation from friends and family, or struggle to develop and maintain these relationships offline due to the possible transient or unsettled nature of their life.<sup>57</sup> Ian Critchley, Lead on Child Protection at the National Police Chiefs’ Council, told us that, generally, vulnerable children are more likely to experience bullying, violence and harassment online.<sup>58</sup>

23. Girlguiding UK expressed their concern at the rate at which young girls and women experience online harms. They found that 79% of young women had experienced online harm in 2021, and 81% of girls, aged 7–21, had experienced some form of threatening or upsetting behaviour online.<sup>59</sup> Children can also experience sexual abuse when using

51 Rafe Clayton (University of Leeds) and Professor Carmen Clayton (Leeds Trinity University) ([ST0044](#))

52 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

53 Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists ([ST0034](#))

54 [Q28](#)

55 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#))

56 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#))

57 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#))

58 [Q133](#)

59 Girlguiding UK ([ST0027](#))

screens. We were informed that sexual crimes committed against children online has risen by 400% since 2013.<sup>60</sup> Self-generated pornographic images, whereby a child is taking a photograph of themselves, is becoming increasingly prevalent at younger ages, with a 60% increase in images from seven to ten year olds.<sup>61</sup> This has been attributed to young children having immediate access to smart phones with cameras and a lack of age verification on websites with inappropriate content for children.<sup>62</sup> Sextortion, whereby a child is groomed into taking a pornographic image of themselves and then blackmailed, is also increasing.<sup>63</sup> Ian Critchley, Lead on Child Protection at the National Police Chiefs' Council, told us that unregulated AI can enable criminals to generate AI child sexual abuse images<sup>64</sup> and the Children's Commissioner informed us that children who had entered the virtual metaverse through an avatar had "virtually experienced being raped and sexually abused".<sup>65</sup>

24. Vulnerable children are also at risk of child criminal exploitation when using screens. During our previous work into child exploitation and county lines, Johnny Bolderson, Senior Service Manager in County Lines Support and Rescue for Catch22, described social media and online gaming as the "foundation of county lines recruitment" that have made it far easier for criminal gangs to contact vulnerable young people.<sup>66</sup> He explained that online platforms allow for grooming techniques such as the "giving of gifts" and "direct chats" which then escalates to "coercion and control" through threats.<sup>67</sup> We were also informed that recruitment advertisements that appeared professionally made were often found on social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram and were specifically geared towards young people.<sup>68</sup>

**25. We are extremely concerned at the level of harmful content children and young people can be exposed to online, and how it can affect their mental health, physical health and educational outcomes. This is exacerbated for certain vulnerable groups who are more likely to be negatively affected and exposed to child criminal exploitation online. The extent of exposure to online harms by young girls and women is also deeply concerning and is contributing to growing mental health challenges and eating disorders.**

**26. The overwhelming weight of evidence submitted to us suggests that the harms of screen time and social media use significantly outweigh the benefits for young children, whereas limited use of screens and genuinely educational uses of digital technology can have benefits for older children. For this reason, screen time should be minimal for younger children and better balanced with face-to-face socialisation and physical activity for older ones.**

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60 [Q124](#)

61 [Q129](#)

62 [Q129](#)

63 [Q129](#)

64 [Q157](#)

65 [Q186](#)

66 Education Committee, [Child exploitation and country lines](#), February 2023 (Q9)

67 Education Committee, [Child exploitation and country lines](#), February 2023 (Q4 and Q8)

68 Education Committee, [Child exploitation and country lines](#), February 2023 (Q10)

***27. For children and adolescents alike the rapid rise of the use of screens and devices has come at a substantial cost and Government needs to do more across departments to protect them from addiction, online harms and the mental health impacts of extensive use of devices.***

## 3 Guidance on mobile phones in schools

### International case studies

28. In 2023, UNESCO reported that almost one in four countries globally had introduced mobile phone bans in schools. Of those countries, 13% had the bans enshrined in law, and 14% used non-statutory policies or guidance.<sup>69</sup> When we launched this inquiry, the Department for Education had recently announced its intention to produce non-statutory guidance intended to back head teachers in restricting mobile phone use throughout the school day, including at break times, to tackle disruptive behaviour and online bullying.<sup>70</sup> In order to investigate how best to implement a mobile phone ban in schools, we undertook visits to both France and the Netherlands to investigate the reasoning behind, and efficiency of, their bans.

29. In September 2018, the French Government banned the use of mobile phones in schools. The law stipulates that children cannot use their mobile phones within school grounds (or at school-based activities outside of school such as sporting events or day trips) nor can they connect via any device to the internet. The ban allows for specific exceptions for SEND children where devices can be used to support their needs. Individual schools decide how to police the ban.<sup>71</sup>

30. During our visit to Paris, we met with the school community at Rodin Lycée. Teachers at the school informed us that it had been easier to enforce the mobile phone ban since it had been made law. They said that being able to point students to legislation reduced pushback from both students and parents and allowed them to feel supported when enforcing the ban.<sup>72</sup> We also met with Patrice Pineau, Deputy Head of the Office of Regulation and School Life at the Ministry of Education. Pineau told us that he felt enforcement of the mobile phone ban had gone smoothly but, because the French Government does not monitor the enforcement nor effects of the mobile phone ban, there was no specific data on its impacts.<sup>73</sup> At a meeting with the National Assembly's Cultural and Educational Affairs Committee, we heard strong cross-party support for the ban and for its place in legislation.<sup>74</sup>

31. In the Netherlands, a mobile phone ban was implemented in secondary schools from 1 January 2024. It will include primary schools from September. Unlike the French model, the Dutch mobile phone ban is non-statutory and schools can make their own arrangements with teachers, students and parents on how to implement the ban.<sup>75</sup> The Dutch model also allows for exceptions if needed. During our visit to the Netherlands, we met with the Dutch Initiative for Education Research (NRO) who told us that the implementation and impact of the mobile phone ban in schools would be monitored throughout 2024 and 2025. Monitoring would be conducted through surveys and group interviews and would be focused on the effects of the ban on learning and wellbeing as

69 UNESCO, [Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?](#), June 2023.

70 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

71 Reference to visit note in Annex

72 Reference to visit note in Annex

73 Reference to visit note in Annex

74 Reference to visit note in Annex

75 Dutch Government, [Use of mobile phones is not permitted in the classroom](#), January 2024.

well as any problems that had arisen. The aim was to consider whether a statutory ban of mobile phones in all school premises should be implemented, or whether a non-statutory ban on phones in the classroom was sufficient.

32. The NRO told us that, likely, a non-statutory ban would not be strict enough to yield positive results.<sup>76</sup> When we visited Rijnlands Lyceum Secondary School in the Netherlands, which has a non-statutory phone ban, we found that mobile phones were still widely recreationally used at break times and for educational tools such as class timetables.<sup>77</sup> At a discussion with pupils at the school, a pupil told us that when they did not have their phone with them in school, they struggled to think of what to talk about with their peers.<sup>78</sup>

## UK case studies

33. A study by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics investigated the relationship between mobile phone bans in schools and educational attainment in four cities in the UK.<sup>79</sup> They found that, following a ban, student test scores improved by 6.41%, so long as there was wide compliance.<sup>80</sup> The researchers also found that mobile phone bans had different effects depending on the type of student. Banning mobile phones improved outcomes for low-achieving students the most (by 14.23%) and had no significant impact on high achievers, so the study concluded that banning mobile phones could be a low-cost way for schools to reduce educational inequality.<sup>81</sup>

## Previous attitudes on a mobile phone ban in UK schools

34. The possibility of mobile phone bans in schools has been brought up numerous times in previous years by the Government. In 2019, then-Minister of State for School Standards, the Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, said that pupils should be banned from taking smartphones into schools.<sup>82</sup> In 2021, then-Education Secretary the Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP said that he favoured a ban on mobile phones during the school day.<sup>83</sup> However, in February 2022 the Department for Education said that intervention from the Government was unnecessary due to the majority of schools already enforcing mobile phone bans without formal guidance.<sup>84</sup> The most recent data held by the Department for Education on school mobile phone policies is the DfE School Snapshot Survey, completed in 2019. The survey found that that among secondary schools, 16% had outright bans, 33% had strict non-use policies, 48% permitted regulated use at specified points in the school day and 3% did not respond.<sup>85</sup> In primary schools 16% had outright bans, 59% had strict non-use policies, 2% permitted regulated use and the remaining respondents said this was not an issue as the pupils were too young.<sup>86</sup>

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76 Reference to visit note in Annex

77 Reference to visit note in Annex

78 Reference to visit note in Annex

79 Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, [CEP Discussion Paper No 1350](#), May 2015

80 Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, [CEP Discussion Paper No 1350](#), May 2015

81 Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, [CEP Discussion Paper No 1350](#), May 2015

82 BBC, [Ban phones in schools, says minister Nick Gibb](#), February 2019.

83 BBC, [Mobile phones should be banned in schools - Gavin Williamson](#), April 2021.

84 Department for Education, [Mobile phones in schools](#), February 2022.

85 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

86 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

35. In their written evidence to us, the Department for Education explained their intention to introduce a non-statutory mobile phone ban throughout the school day, including at break times, to tackle disruptive behaviour and online bullying.<sup>87</sup>

### Guidance on mobile phones in school

36. On 19 February 2024, the Government issued new non-statutory guidance on mobile phones in English schools.<sup>88</sup> The ban prohibits the use of mobile phones and other smart technology throughout the school day, including during lessons, the time between lessons, break-times and lunch-times.<sup>89</sup> . The guidance is clear that schools must make reasonable adjustments to the mobile phone ban when necessary for individual pupils (for example, disabled students or students with medical conditions).<sup>90</sup> Similar to the Dutch and French models, the Government has encouraged schools to develop and implement their own policies to prohibit the use of mobile phones and similar devices. One of the options given in the guidance is to use “secure storage”<sup>91</sup> to store phones and ensure that pupils are unable to access them throughout the school day. In order to observe this how this could work in practice, we visited Sacred Heart High School in Hammersmith. The school had enjoyed great success using secure, lockable phone pouches. Phones were locked in pouches during their first class of the day, in front of teachers, and unlocked only when leaving school premises at the end of the day. Feedback from both teachers and pupils was positive, as teachers were safe in the knowledge that phones could not be accessed, while pupils felt their phones were more secure than if they had to hand them in to teachers. The head teacher told us that previous attempts to ban phones without the aid of pouches had led to significant challenges with pupil behaviour and a great deal of staff time being spent on enforcing the ban, the introduction of pouches had led to improved behaviour. Staff noted that the small amount of time required to supervise the use of pouches freed up significantly more time over the course of the day when they would usually be confiscating phones.

37. Options such as pouches can saddle schools with additional costs. At Sacred Heart High School, they mitigated this through charging parents administration costs for pouches for all students except those on pupil premium. When asked about providing financial assistance to schools to support the implementation of mobile phone bans, Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Minister of State for Schools, said that “It is up to schools to decide ... how to do it and there are multiple different ways ... There are no grants, but there are also ways of doing it that do not involve spending money.”<sup>92</sup> However, John Hanson Community School told us that their school had just over 1000 students and the first year cost of implementing the ban had been £13,000 with an £8,000 cost each year following. The school argued that “If the Government is serious about banning phones in schools, they need to fund it.”<sup>93</sup>

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87 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

88 Department for Education, [Mobile phones in schools](#), February 2024.

89 Department for Education, [Mobile phones in schools](#), February 2024.

90 Department for Education, [Mobile phones in schools](#), February 2024.

91 Department for Education, [Mobile phones in schools](#), February 2024

92 [Q217](#)

93 John Hanson Community School ([ST0013](#))



38. Another option given by the Government to manage phone usage was for no phones to be allowed on school premises. The guidance states that a school:

“may decide that no mobile phones should be brought to school by its pupils, and they must be left at home or with parents. This policy provides a very simple boundary which is straightforward to enforce as any mobile phone found at school would be in breach of the policy.”<sup>94</sup>

39. Despite this, we have heard evidence to suggest that both parents and children feel that pupils should have at least a limited access to mobile phones for practical arrangements such as safety when commuting to and from school.<sup>95</sup> We raised this with Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP and he clarified that “The prohibition that we have talked about is during the school day. It is not to and from school. Of course, schools may decide to do something else or something extra, but it would be a minority and that is absolutely not what we require.”<sup>96</sup> The current DfE guidance appears to contradict this view as it clearly states that, if this policy were chosen, schools “must be left at home or with parents”.

40. As seen above, the French and Dutch approaches differed in their attitudes to monitoring implementation and effects. When questioned by the Committee about monitoring in England, Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP told us that the Department for Education was intending to informally monitor its mobile phone ban by “talking to headteachers, classroom teachers, and so on” and analysing quantitative data through sources such as the national behaviour survey.<sup>97</sup> The Minister confirmed that there would be no formal mechanism to monitor the implementation and impact of the mobile phone ban overall.<sup>98</sup> The Government has previously made clear that if schools failed to implement the new guidance, the Government would consider legislation.<sup>99</sup>

**41. We strongly welcome the Government’s decision to implement a tougher mobile phone ban in schools in England. We welcome the fact that this includes break times and sends a clearer message than previous guidance about the benefits of having phones out of sight and reach. It is clear that a ban can have a positive impact of the mental health and educational outcomes of children.**

**42. Initially introducing the ban on a non-statutory basis is the right approach, but the success of the ban will depend on its implementation and how widely it is taken up. We do not agree with the Government’s approach of informally monitoring the mobile phone ban. Without a formal monitoring mechanism, the implementation and effects of the ban cannot be measured and it will be impossible to judge whether a statutory ban is necessary.**

***43. The next Government should implement a formal monitoring mechanism to measure both the implementation and effects of the mobile phone ban. The results of this monitoring phase should be published and shared with schools. If results show that a non-statutory ban has been ineffective, the next Government must move swiftly to introduce a statutory ban.***

94 Department for Education, [Mobile phones in schools](#), February 2024

95 Dr Sarah Rose ([ST0015](#)), [Q48](#)

96 [Q224](#)

97 [Q215](#)

98 [Q216](#)

99 UK Government, [Mobile phone use to be banned in schools in England](#), October 2024

44. We welcome the flexibility within the mobile phone ban guidance which allows schools to choose a process for implementation most suitable for them and the inclusion of exemptions for children with particular needs.

45. *Government guidance must also set out the approximate cost of certain approaches, such as secure storage. The next Government must also ensure parents are not prevented from being able to contact their children during their commute to school. The guidance should be changed as soon as possible to prevent schools from insisting mobile phones are left at home.*



## 4 Support for parents

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### Awareness of online safety

46. Parents have reported that they have less and less awareness of what is being done by their children online.<sup>100</sup> Q3 Langley Academy told us that, even when parents check phones, acted proactively, restricted screen time, checked apps and monitored data usage, children were more than able to find ways to work around these restrictions.<sup>101</sup> There were widespread calls throughout our inquiry to strengthen support for parents and increase their understanding of how to approach and effectively manage the screen time of their children.

47. Schools have a vital role to play in supporting parents in understanding screen time and online safety. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) told us that schools do this through sharing information on their websites, in newsletters to parents, sessions held with parents around online safety and the digital literacy curriculum (which will be explored in the next chapter of this report).<sup>102</sup> However, schools reported that parent and carer attendance at sessions on online safety could be limited, and that those families who would potentially benefit from further support were often those not in attendance.<sup>103</sup> The NAHT therefore argued strongly that the Government should do more to raise wider public awareness and support parents and carers to understand the risks and benefits of their children's screen use.<sup>104</sup>

48. As part of our inquiry, we visited Google Headquarters in London. They informed us of their safety and well-being tools for children using their platforms, including Family Link. Family Link allows parents to set screen time limits, approve or block apps, protect their children's data by managing permissions for websites accessed through Chrome and locate their children on Google Maps.<sup>105</sup> Other tech companies such as Apple and Microsoft have similar parental control mechanisms designed to keep children safe online.<sup>106</sup> However, the Children's Commissioner told us that parents do not understand parental controls and that parental education on managing screen time must also be improved in order to see a tangible impact.<sup>107</sup>

### Guidance for parents

49. There was broad agreement across our evidence that the Government should commission official guidance for parents on the topic of screen time. Carolyn Bunting, CEO of Internet Matters, told us that:

“Parents play a hugely significant role for young people, and they are crying out for more support, easier access to information, and clearer guidance about what they should be doing and how they can help their young people.”<sup>108</sup>

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100 [Q37](#)

101 Q3 Academy Langley ([ST0008](#))

102 NAHT ([ST0020](#))

103 NAHT ([ST0020](#))

104 NAHT ([ST0020](#))

105 Reference to visit note in Annex.

106 Microsoft, [Microsoft Family Safety](#) and Apple, [Use parental controls on your child's iPhone and iPad](#)

107 [Q170](#)

108 [Q37](#)

50. In contrast, the Department for Education told us that “there is not yet sufficient evidence about the impact of screen time to support detailed guidelines for parents”.<sup>109</sup> Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Minister of State for School Standards, explained their reasoning:

“Even very small amounts of very harmful activity could be as bad as relatively large amounts of, say, educational or prosocial activity. For that reason, trying to come up with a magic number for a limit, I suspect, is nigh on impossible. When you recommend five fruit or vegetables a day, no harm can come from somebody eating five fruit or vegetables a day. If you were to say two hours a day online is okay, boy, a lot of harm could come. Also, many people will be online for more than two hours a day and no harm will come.”<sup>110</sup>

51. It is clear that a fixed time limit for children’s screen time may be difficult to prescribe. Nevertheless, much of our evidence countered the Government’s view.<sup>111</sup> Rafe Clayton, Principal Investigator of New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain at the University of Leeds, conceded that it is impossible to estimate an exact time limit after which screen time becomes inherently harmful. However, he argued that “we do not understand the exact impacts of one cigarette, or 10 cigarettes, on an individual. That does not stop us from offering guidance, or offering suggestions about what is appropriate for people’s healthy lifestyles.”<sup>112</sup>

52. Carolyn Bunting, CEO of Internet Matters, suggested potential content for guidance:

“We can give parents simpler guidance; for example, to address all the sleep issues, we can say that phones should be turned off before children go to bed, and children should not have them in the bedroom; and that there should be a balance with other online activities, and that screen use should not be detrimental to the social groups that children create at schools. It is more about giving parents some sensible principles, as opposed to saying that their child should only spend six or nine hours a day online. That feels too simplistic. The role of civil society is to ensure that children get all the benefits from technology, and to minimise the risks, and we should give parents the tools to do that.”<sup>113</sup>

53. Witnesses argued that future guidance on screen time for children need not “come up with a magic number for a limit”.<sup>114</sup> Instead, a common sense approach should be taken which could provide simple guidance for parents.<sup>115</sup> Evidence also suggested it might be worth advising schools to communicate with parents on how much screen time children were having during the school day, allowing parents to then use this information to help them decide screen time at home.<sup>116</sup>

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109 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

110 [Q245](#)

111 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

112 [Q14](#)

113 [Q38](#)

114 [Q245](#)

115 [Q38](#)

116 Parent Zone ([ST0016](#))

54. **Parents are unsure of what their children are doing online, lack confidence in being able to manage screen time, and want guidance to support them. The Government is wrong to conflate arguments about setting an exact time limit on screen time with the fact that some guidance and information would be useful for parents.**

55. *The next Government should work across departments including DHSC, DSIT, Education and the Home Office to produce guidance for parents on how to best manage and understand the impact of screen time on their children. A common sense approach would be to focus on aspects of screen time that are known to cause harm. For example, guidance should advise that children should not be able to access screens after they have gone to bed and should incorporate physical activity into their day to help balance time spent on screen. Guidance should also focus on the ways in which parents can monitor use of devices, the uses of parental controls and how to deal with problematic screen use, including when to seek help.*

56. *Advice to parents of babies and young children should be revised to ensure it gives sufficient attention to face to face interaction and warns of the risks of screen time in reducing opportunities for this. Adults should be encouraged to minimise use of devices where possible when supervising young children at a formative age and the Department for Education should commission advice for parents through family hubs and children's centres on the healthy use of devices.*

## Guidance on online learning

57. Access to the internet for children and young people is now virtually universal. This means that more children are able to access educational content online than ever before.<sup>117</sup> The BBC told us that online education content delivered via screens can, when well-made, provide a vital part of the UK's learning ecosystem and have a tangible, positive impact on the educational outcomes and life chances of learners.<sup>118</sup> UCL's Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities suggested that high-quality educational apps and websites can support children's learning.<sup>119</sup>

58. There are over half a million apps claiming to be educational within leading app stores such as Google Play and the Apple App Store.<sup>120</sup> Research conducted by the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities analysed the mathematical content of the Top 25 most popular commercial educational apps available on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store with the search term "maths" for children aged 5 years. Of these 25 apps, only one maths app had been empirically evaluated with positive impacts on children's maths outcomes, particularly for children identified as in need of additional support with their learning.<sup>121</sup> More concerningly, six of these Top 25 apps did not include any mathematical content at all. The research centre concluded that this was likely because there are no quality standards for educational content or design features that apps must align with to be included in the app stores or in the educational category. Instead, app developers can simply upload their apps with their chosen descriptions and key words.<sup>122</sup>

117 Ofcom, [Online Nation](#), June 2021.

118 BBC ([ST0018](#))

119 Dr Laura Outhwaite ([ST0021](#))

120 Dr Laura Outhwaite ([ST0021](#))

121 Dr Laura Outhwaite ([ST0021](#))

122 Dr Laura Outhwaite ([ST0021](#))

59. When asked whether parents have confidence in differentiating between high quality and low quality educational resources online, Vicki Shotbolt, Founder and CEO of Parent Zone, answered:

“Absolutely not. It is one of the most common questions that we get asked. I guarantee that every time we run a parenting session, one of the questions will be about how they find decent quality, whether we are talking about games, videos, or educational content [...] Some sort of kitemark would be excellent. Some sort of digital equivalent of book week would be fantastic, as would any kind of improvement in ratings system. I am thinking of something like the PEGI rating system, which could give indication of the quality of the education content in a game.”<sup>123</sup>

60. Other evidence we received also highlighted that parents would welcome guidance or rating systems for educational apps.<sup>124</sup> However, Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Minister of State for School Standards, told us “[A]s a rule, the DFE does not [...] Kitemark products, except where there is a very high standard of proof.”<sup>125</sup> Charlotte Briscall, Director and Chief Digital Officer for the Department for Education, added “[T]here is no current rating system. I do not even know whether parents would welcome that at this point anyway, so perhaps that is something we should look into.”<sup>126</sup>

**61. There are over half a million apps claiming to be educational within leading app stores such as the Apple App Store and Google Play, but no quality standards for educational content or design features that apps must align with to be included in the educational category. As a consequence, parents have little to no confidence in being able to correctly identify high quality versus low quality educational resources online. Many schools encourage the use of educational apps to support learning and engage pupils with subjects such as mathematics, but there is currently a poor evidence base regarding which are most effective.**

***62. The next Government must commission guidance for parents and schools on the educational value of purported educational websites and apps within a year. They should also support a kitemarking scheme for educational resources found online in the first year of the new Parliament to enable parents to quickly identify the best educational resources online for their children. The next Government should engage with tech companies to encourage them to introduce standards for the use of educational labels and to remove apps which do not offer educational benefit.***

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123 [Q51](#) and [Q53](#)

124 [Q51](#)

125 [Q251](#)

126

## 5 Digital literacy curriculum

### Existing school guidance and digital literacy curriculum

63. The Department for Education provides limited guidance to schools on online safety. The Department's statutory safeguarding guidance 'Keeping children safe in education' (KCSIE), last updated in September 2023, provides schools and colleges with information on what they should be doing to protect pupils and students online, including information about different types of abuse and harm.<sup>127</sup> This includes a statement that schools and colleges should ensure appropriate filtering and monitoring systems are in place to protect children whilst on the school's digital platform and that they regularly review their effectiveness. On 29 March 2023, the Department also published a set of filtering and monitoring standards, to help schools and colleges understand what they should be doing to meet their existing safeguarding duties to keep children safe online.<sup>128</sup> The standards were last updated in January 2024.

64. Online safety and media literacy are taught through compulsory curriculum subjects such as computing, citizenship, and relationships, sex and health education (RSHE). In RSHE, the statutory guidance sets out that pupils should be taught about internet safety and harms and online relationships. This includes content on the implications of sharing private or personal data (including images) online, harmful content and contact, cyberbullying, an over-reliance on social media and where to get help and support for issues that occur online. The guidance is clear that pupils should be taught the benefits of rationing time spent online, the risks of excessive time spent on electronic devices and the impact of positive and negative content online on mental and physical wellbeing.<sup>129</sup>

65. The computing curriculum covers the principles of online safety at all key stages, with progression in the content to reflect the different and escalating risks that pupils face. This includes:

- how to use technology safely, responsibly, respectfully and securely;
- how to keep their personal information private;
- how to recognise unacceptable behaviour;
- how to recognise inappropriate content; and
- where to go for help and support when they have concerns about content or contact on the internet or other online technologies.<sup>130</sup>

66. In citizenship, the curriculum is clear that pupils should be taught about safeguarding democracy and a free media to develop informed and responsible citizens, promoting understanding of the role of responsible journalism in democratic society, identifying mis-, dis- and mal- information and countering the effects of negative and harmful news, events and information.<sup>131</sup>

127 UK Government, [Keeping children safe in education](#), September 2023

128 UK Government, [Meeting digital and technology standards in schools and colleges](#), January 2024

129 UK Government, [Keeping children safe in education](#), September 2023

130 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

131 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

## Effectiveness of the digital literacy curriculum

### *Digital literacy levels of children*

67. The Department for Education told us that it “does not have any specific evidence on the effectiveness of digital safety education”.<sup>132</sup> However, it did provide us with a limited amount of data on the confidence of parents and children in the digital literacy curriculum:

- Around nine in ten (88%) parents of year 6 pupils were confident that their child’s school had taught them that people should not share personal details or images online that they or others would not want to be shared further.
- Three in five (58%) parents of year 6 pupils were confident that their child’s school had taught pupils to think about whether something found online is true and using other sources to check it.
- Pupils in year 7 to 11 were also asked about which media literacy and online safety topics they had been taught at school. Over nine in ten (94%) said they had been taught that people should not share personal details or images online that they or others would not want to be shared further. Three in five (59%) said they had been taught at school how to fact check media, by thinking about whether something found online is true, and using other sources to check it.<sup>133</sup>

68. However, when the digital literacy capabilities of children are measured, the digital literacy curriculum does not seem to be as effective as first thought. Tracking data from Internet Matters and Ofcom demonstrates that digital literacy capabilities of children in the UK are generally poor:

- Over one fifth (21%) of children aged 9–16 are not confident about how to stay safe online. 11–12- year-olds are the age group most likely to not feel confident about how to stay safe online (24%).
- Nearly a quarter (23%) of children aged 12–17 who claim to be ‘confident’ in their ability to identify what is real or fake online, cannot correctly identify a fake social media profile when presented with one.
- Only 41% of children aged 8–17 correctly identify the links at the top of a search engine page as sponsored ads.<sup>134</sup>

### *Problems facing the digital literacy curriculum*

69. As seen above, digital literacy education is split across multiple subjects including RSHE, citizenship and computing.<sup>135</sup> It is also provided to school children in other ways such as through:

- Form time: These sessions are generally short (e.g. 15 minutes), mixed-gender, and delivered by a non-specialist teacher.

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132 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

133 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))

134 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

135 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))



- Ad-hoc sessions: Extra-curricular sessions on online safety topics may take place in a planned way, for example to mark Safer Internet Day, and may involve external speakers (for example from industry, third sector, police or theatre companies).
- Safeguarding and behaviour responses: Sessions may also be delivered reactively, for example in response to online behaviour or safeguarding incidents in the pupil population.<sup>136</sup>

70. The inclusion of digital literacy education across many fields suggests the Government recognises the importance of children being able to navigate the digital world. However, we also heard that the fragmented provision of digital literacy education increases the risk that topics are taught inconsistently, poorly or not at all, especially as teachers grapple with tighter time constraints.<sup>137</sup> Teachers must make sense of numerous statutory and non-statutory guidance documents on the subject. For example:

Document	Status	Date published/last updated
National curriculum in England: computing programmes of study	Statutory	11 September 2013 (published)
Safeguarding devices: Information on content filtering and mobile device management to ensure devices are safe to use by young people and families	Non-statutory	19 April 2020 (published)
Teacher training: online relationships and media	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: internet safety and harms	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: being safe	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people	Non-statutory	23 December 2020 (published)
Harmful online challenges and online hoaxes	Non-statutory	12 February 2021 (published)
Support for parents and carers to keep children safe online	Non-statutory	22 February 2021 (updated)
Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance	Statutory	13 September 2021 (updated)
Safeguarding and remote education	Non-statutory	24 November 2022 (updated)
Teaching Online Safety in Schools	Non-statutory	12 January 2023 (updated)
Keeping Children Safe in Education	Statutory	1 September 2023 (updated)
Teaching about Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)	Non-statutory	Unpublished

Source: Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

136 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

137 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

71. Carolyn Bunting, CEO of Internet Matters, explained that the guidance would be more helpful to teachers if it were simplified or consolidated into one space by the Government.<sup>138</sup> We also heard that lessons and expertise based on old guidance could fall very quickly out of date, as the digital world continued to evolve.<sup>139</sup> Jonathan Baggaley, CEO of the PSHE Association, explained:

“I am sure you have heard this before but 18 months ago who was talking about ChatGPT? No one was. I certainly wasn’t. That might not be much of a standard but I certainly wasn’t. Now people are interested in AI and its influence on education. We do not know what we will be talking about in 12 or 18 months’ time either. It is moving so quickly. That creates a massive challenge for schools and teachers in navigating the issues. It is difficult. I do not think you are going to slow the pace of change.”<sup>140</sup>

72. Witnesses told us that many teachers were reliant on Government resources and guidance because they had no digital literacy, PSHE or RSHE specialism. NASUWT explained that very few RSHE teachers have a recognised RSHE qualification and that RSHE is most likely to be taught by class teachers as part of a tutorial rather than a subject specialist.<sup>141</sup> The School Workforce Census found that just 8.5% of those teaching Citizenship have at least a relevant A-level in the subject.<sup>142</sup> A lack of subject specialists in PSHE was also flagged by the Children’s Commissioner, who stated:

“Teachers should be able to specialise in RSHE as they do in other subjects given the nature and breadth of the topics covered. Poor quality teaching of these subjects is often worse than no teaching at all. Training for teachers on RSHE needs to be regular, high-quality and connected to local services.”<sup>143</sup>

73. Teachers reported feeling unconfident while teaching these parts of the curriculum.<sup>144</sup> Darren Northcott, National Official for Education for NASUWT, told us that teachers think that pupils have a “higher level of expertise” than them which can feel “intimidating” and stressed the importance of additional training for teachers on the subject.<sup>145</sup>

**74. We welcome the inclusion of digital literacy in the curriculum. However, the curriculum is not structured well enough to keep children safe online. Digital literacy is split across numerous subjects with different focuses and teachers. Teachers must grapple with a topic that is constantly evolving and comprehend numerous guidance documents provided by the Government while often having no specialist knowledge of the topic themselves. As a result, the digital literacy capabilities of children in the UK remain generally poor.**

**75. *The next Government must provide additional training and support for teachers delivering the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum, particularly***

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138 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))

139 Q3 Academy Langley ([ST0008](#))

140 [Q113](#)

141 NASUWT - The Teachers’ Union ([ST0010](#))

142 NASUWT - The Teachers’ Union ([ST0010](#))

143 Children’s Commissioner, [Children and RSHE](#), March 2023

144 [Q114](#)

145 [Q114](#)



*digital literacy. The next Government should embed additional core content on online safety into the information and communication technology (ICT) training and early career framework for all teachers.*

*76. The next Government should consolidate non-statutory guidance on digital safety and curriculum content to provide a clear guide for teachers which should be complementary to Keeping Children Safe in School. Once this consolidation is complete the Department should invest in subject knowledge enhancement courses to ensure it reaches the wide variety of teachers who could benefit from it.*

## Inspection

77. Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) is an umbrella term for a number of subjects and topics, some of which are statutory parts of the curriculum and others which are not. While PSHE as a whole is not statutory, it is explicitly part of Ofsted's inspection framework under the category of personal development. Schools have some flexibility to decide how they meet the various responsibilities within PSHE education, according to local priorities and need. Children may receive parts of their PSHE education in a timetabled class, which may include statutory and non-statutory elements, or outside of the classroom, such as in form classes or tutor groups, through assemblies, or in workshops with external facilitators.<sup>146</sup>

78. In September 2020, the teaching of Relationships Education (RE) was made compulsory for all children in primary education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for all children in secondary schools under the Children and Social Work Act. Health Education (HE) was made compulsory for all schools except independent schools, for which Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) remains compulsory.

79. The teaching of RSHE and PSHE is reviewed by Ofsted at inspection. PSHE is inspected through Ofsted's personal development metric, through which Ofsted inspectors make judgements on the personal development of learners. The personal development metric differs to the way in which other core subjects are inspected by Ofsted, through thematic review. Instead of an in-depth review of the subject as a whole, only the parts that are seen to contribute to the personal development of pupils are evaluated. Additionally, PSHE is far from the only subject being evaluated under this metric. Under the Ofsted framework, personal development includes curriculum subjects such as PSHE education (and statutory RSHE within it) and citizenship, while also exploring broader ways in which a school develops pupils' 'character'; SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural) development; British values; inclusion; extra-curricular opportunities; and—in secondary settings—Careers Information Education Advice and Guidance (CEIAG).<sup>147</sup>

80. We heard that it was difficult to examine that many topics, including digital literacy, taught under the PSHE umbrella under this metric and alongside so many other subjects. Jonathan Baggaley, Chief Executive of the PSHE Association, told us that he would like to see PSHE examined by Ofsted as part of a specific subject review:

146 Children's Commissioner, [Children and RSHE](#), March 2023

147 PSHE Association, [PD, or not PD, that is the question...](#), March 2023

“For us, PSHE is a subject like any other, where you should have a planned curriculum. It should be well-sequenced and should be assessing learning.”<sup>148</sup>

81. The Children’s Commissioner echoed Mr Baggaley’s concern:

“Why am I so worried about the school RSHE curriculum and why is it important? First, the adults that children often said they trusted to guide them on these things are in schools. They look to their teachers, and they look to their head teachers. Also, the things kids see influence their behaviour. I have shown that in my own research, where we looked at peer-on-peer abuse. We need to lean into a proper RSHE curriculum. Why did Ofsted do subject reviews on every subject but RSHE?”<sup>149</sup>

**82. We welcome inspections of PSHE as part of a routine Ofsted inspection. However, a subject as broad as PSHE, which covers so many different topics including digital literacy, cannot be adequately evaluated solely within the current personal development metric.**

***83. Ofsted must change the way in which PSHE is evaluated during inspection. Instead of being assessed through Ofsted’s personal development metric, PSHE should be assessed through thematic reviews in the same way as other core curriculum subjects.***

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148 [Q119](#)

149 [Q176](#)

## 6 Online Safety Act 2023

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### Overview

84. The Online Safety Act became law on 26 October 2023.<sup>150</sup> The Act is designed to protect children online by making social media platforms take responsibility for content they host and requiring them to:

- remove illegal content quickly or prevent it from appearing in the first place, including content promoting self-harm,
- prevent children from accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content including pornographic content, content that promotes, encourages or provides instructions for suicide, self-harm or eating disorders, content depicting or encouraging serious violence or bullying content,
- enforce age limits and use age-checking measures on platforms where content harmful to children is published,
- ensure social media platforms are more transparent about the risks and dangers posed to children on their sites, including by publishing risk assessments,
- provide parents and children with clear and accessible ways to report problems online when they do arise.<sup>151</sup>

85. In addition to protecting children, the Act also intends to empower adults to have better control of what they see online. It aims to provide three layers of protection for internet users which should:

- make sure illegal content is removed,
- enforce the promises social media platforms make to users when they sign up, through terms and conditions,
- offer users the option to filter out content, such as online abuse, that they do not want to see.<sup>152</sup>

86. Evidence received throughout this inquiry was broadly positive about the Act.<sup>153</sup> However, many voices also stressed the importance of effective implementation by Ofcom.<sup>154</sup>

### Implementation

87. Ofcom is now formally the regulator for online safety under the Online Safety Act 2023.<sup>155</sup> Ofcom's role is to make sure regulated services take appropriate steps to protect their users. It is not responsible for removing harmful online content and will not require companies to remove content or accounts. However, it is responsible for making sure

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150 UK Parliament, [Online Safety Act 2023](#), October 2023.

151 UK Government, [Government press release](#), October 2023.

152 UK Government, [UK children and adults to be safer online as world-leading bill becomes law](#), October 2023

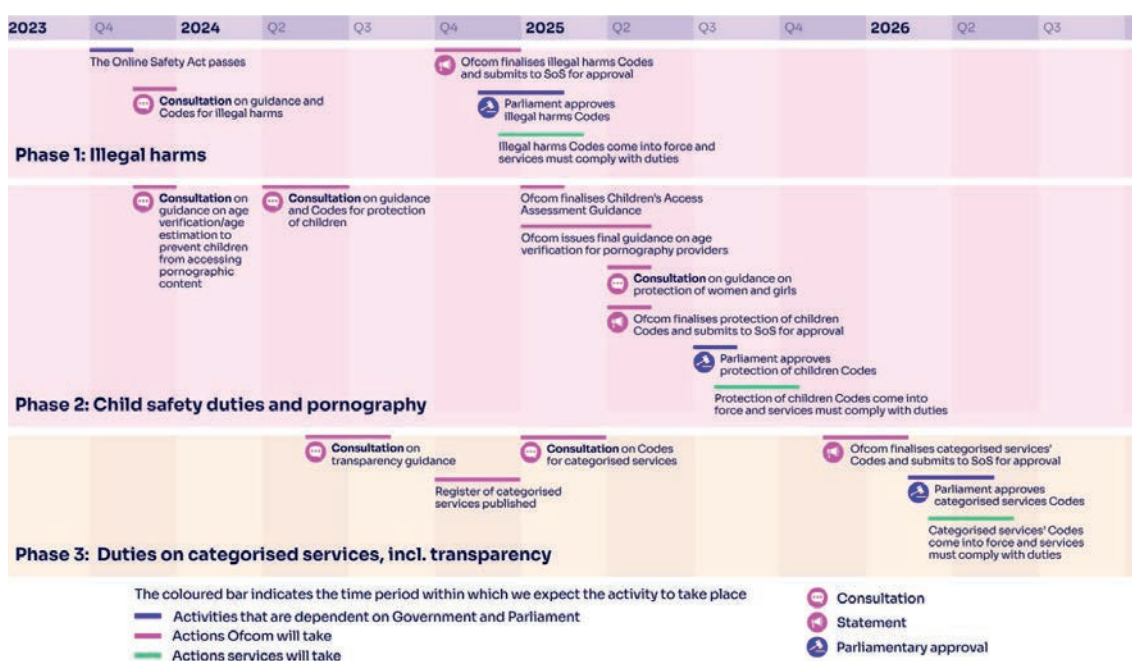
153 Place2Be ([ST0031](#)), Barnardo's ([ST0011](#)), NSPCC ([ST0037](#))

154 Place2Be ([ST0031](#)), Barnardo's ([ST0011](#)), NSPCC ([ST0037](#))

155 Ofcom, [Online safety](#), November 2023

firms have effective systems in place to prevent harm and protect people using their services. Ofcom intends to provide a range of tools to make sure services follow the rules—including codes of practice and guidance for companies falling under the scope of the new legislation. They are currently consulting on what this guidance will look like, and the new rules will come into force after the codes and guidance are approved by Parliament.<sup>156</sup> Under these new rules, Ofcom will have powers to take enforcement action, including issuing fines of up to £18 million or 10% of a company’s global annual revenue, whichever is biggest—meaning fines handed down to the biggest platforms could reach billions of pounds if implemented.<sup>157</sup>

88. Ofcom has voiced its intention to take a phased approach to bringing the Online Safety Act into force and wants to prioritise enforcing rules against the most harmful content as soon as possible. It expects its first new duties to take effect at the end of 2024. However, its final duties are not expected to be finalised until 2026.<sup>158</sup> Ofcom’s approach to implementing the Act is in three phases (below):



Source: Ofcom, [New rules for online services: what you need to know](#), February 2024

89. We asked Jessica Edwards, Senior Policy Advisor on Childhood Harms at Barnardo’s about the quality of Ofcom’s consultation process. She told us that “even charities find the consultations technical and long” and that the consultation on illegal online harms had reached “1,700 pages”. Edwards also stated her belief that the consultation process was “definitely not, at the moment, a system that children, young people and parents can engage with.”<sup>159</sup> In response, Mark Bunting, Director of Online Safety Strategy Delivery at Ofcom, told the Committee that:

“We have tried to make things simpler. We have published a summary of the approach. We have published summaries of each of the sets of measures

156 Ofcom, [Consultation: Protecting people from illegal harms online](#), November 2023

157 UK Government, [UK children and adults to be safer online as world-leading bill becomes law](#), October 2023

158 Ofcom, [New rules for online services: what you need to know](#), February 2024

159 [Q161](#)

that we recommend services take. We have also provided tools on our website to help people navigate the consultation and dive into the areas that are of particular concern to them. We can do more in this area.”<sup>160</sup>

90. Ofcom has projected that it will not finish implementing the Online Safety Act 2023 in full until 2026. They told us they “do not currently expect any delays”<sup>161</sup> to this deadline. We heard concerns from other witnesses that children would not have adequate protection online in the meantime. Ian Critchley, Lead on Child Protection at the National Police Chiefs’ Council, told us:

“[...] technology will change very quickly. We talk about AI as if it is something in the future. It is here now. We have seen the nudification from celebrities through to school children. We have seen a growing metaverse where we know there is harm being caused. You can go on app stores and get chatbots that will direct you into harmful behaviours, which will encourage you to commit suicide or commit sexual offences. You can get those quite easily downloaded from the app stores, so 18 months is a long time in terms of the harm.”<sup>162</sup>

91. 79% of young people have had an upsetting online experience.<sup>163</sup> Online harms such as pornography are often discovered by children accidentally while using the internet,<sup>164</sup> and some social media sites, including Twitter and Reddit, are still allowing pornographic content on their platforms, despite the minimum sign-up being just 13 years old.<sup>165</sup> The Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill found that 26% of children presenting at hospital with self-harm or suicide attempt injuries had accessed related content online.<sup>166</sup>

92. Mark Bunting, Director of Online Safety Strategy Delivery at Ofcom, told us that Ofcom has “sought to move as quickly” as they could in implementing the Online Safety Act 2023. In the meantime, Bunting told us that Ofcom was speaking to “thousands” of children and parents about their “experiences of online harm and their expectations of the new rules”. They were also “developing plans for more systematic ways of engaging children” in the consultation process and working with civil society organisations to “enable them to participate fully in the policymaking process”.<sup>167</sup>

93. Witnesses told us that the steps taken by Ofcom to include children and their parents in the consultation and implementation process were welcome but that if tried-and-tested methods such as age verification were implemented more swiftly, children could be protected earlier. Jessica Edwards, Senior Policy Advisor on Childhood Harms at Barnardo’s, explained that age verification such as those used for “online gambling and buying alcohol in a weekly shop” were “used across the board already” and that there would consequently be “nothing new in extending these regulations” to internet platforms.<sup>168</sup>

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160 [Q201](#)

161 [Q199](#)

162 [Q143](#)

163 [Q85](#)

164 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#))

165 Barnardo’s ([ST0011](#))

166 Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, [Draft Online Safety Bill](#), December 2021

167 [Q196](#)

168 [Q153](#)

94. **The Online Safety Act 2023 will undoubtedly play a role in keeping children safe from online harms. However, we are concerned that children will not feel the full protections of the Act until implementation is completed in 2026.**

95. *The next Government must work with Ofcom to ensure that there are no delays to implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 and set out how it is working with Ofcom to ensure children are protected during the transition period. Robust age verification should be implemented immediately on internet platforms and it is unacceptable that they continue to be widely ignored.*

## Age verification measures

96. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) includes an article that regulates the processing of children's personal data. The relevant passage states that "in relation to the offer of information society services directly to a child, the processing of the personal data of a child shall be lawful where the child is at least 16 years old".<sup>169</sup> In cases where the child is below the age of digital consent, the processing of data is deemed lawful only if the business operator has obtained parental consent. However, the GDPR gives flexibility to participating countries to lower their own age threshold provided that it is not below the age of 13. Accordingly, some countries have kept the digital age of consent at 16. In contrast, others have taken advantage of this flexibility and allowed the digital age of consent to be 13,14 or 15.<sup>170</sup> In the UK, the digital age of consent, meaning when a child can consent to having their data processed, is 13.<sup>171</sup> It is the same in Belgium and Estonia. However, other countries have higher digital ages of consent, such as Austria, France and Germany (14, 15 and 16, respectively).<sup>172</sup>

97. In any case, evidence shows that the digital age of consent is having little impact in stopping underage users from using social media and messaging platforms. In September 2022, the Children's Commissioner published findings from a survey of children and parents on online safety. The survey responses published were of 2,005 children aged 8–17 and it was also completed by their parents. It showed that:

- There are a large number of underage children on social media and messaging platforms (despite children reporting an accurate understanding of minimum age requirements). Two-thirds of 8–12-year-olds use social media.
- Children and parents think that platforms should enforce minimum age requirements. 70% of children (increasing to 75% of 16–17-year-olds) and 90% of parents think that social media platforms should enforce minimum age requirements.<sup>173</sup>

98. The survey showed that underage use of social media and messaging platforms is widespread. The platform with the largest share of underage users, according to the

169 EU Consent, [Digital age of consent under the GDPR](#), October 2021

170 EU Consent, [Digital age of consent under the GDPR](#), October 2021

171 UK Government, [Child online safety: Data protection and privacy](#), September 2021

172 EU Consent, [Digital age of consent under the GDPR](#), October 2021

173 Children's Commissioner, [Digital childhoods: a survey of children and parents](#), September 2022



survey, is WhatsApp (min. age 16) followed by TikTok (min. age 13) and Instagram (min. age 13).<sup>174</sup> The percentage of underage users, according to the survey, on each platform is shown below:

Platform	% of users aged 8 to 17 who are underage
WhatsApp	79
YouTube	50
TikTok	44
Snapchat	41
Twitter	39
Facebook	38
Instagram	36

Source: Children's Commissioner, [Digital childhoods: a survey of children and parents](#), September 2022

99. We heard that it was clear that current measures to enforce age verification across social media platforms were not working and, consequently, the digital age of consent was not protecting underage users from sharing their data with tech companies.<sup>175</sup> Although the minimum age for usage is clear at the point of sign-up for some platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, on others such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger it is not. In some cases, they do not ask for an age at the point of sign-up at all.<sup>176</sup> The regulation surrounding the digital age of consent currently only asks that online service providers make a “reasonable effort” to verify that parental consent has been given for underage users to share data.<sup>177</sup> Research conducted by LSE found that “if an underage child is prepared to lie” about their birth date, they can access online platforms “without restrictions, user limitations or warning boxes appearing”.<sup>178</sup> As put by the Children's Commissioner, underage users bypass age restrictions on online platforms simply “because they can”.<sup>179</sup> Although children may access social media platforms in order to connect with friends or use popular features, their use can ultimately lead to coming across online harms. The Children's Commissioner told us, “Children first see porn on Twitter. Then it is the porn companies. Then they see it on Snapchat and Meta.”<sup>180</sup>

100. During a meeting with Laurent Marcangeli, President of the Horizons parliamentary party, during our visit to Paris, we learnt that the French Senate had passed a law requiring social media platforms to properly verify users' ages in June 2023.<sup>181</sup> The new law requires sites to obtain explicit approval of a user's parent or guardian if they were under 15, using technical solutions that would comply with guidelines set out by the French Arcom regulator. Social media firms who breach the law face a fine of up to 1 percent of their global revenues. The law would also allow parents to request suspension of accounts belonging to their children under 15 and requires sites to offer tools to limit the time

174 Children's Commissioner, [Digital childhoods: a survey of children and parents](#), September 2022

175 LSE, [The digital age of consent, one year on](#), May 2019

176 LSE, [The digital age of consent, one year on](#), May 2019

177 LSE, [The digital age of consent, one year on](#), May 2019

178 LSE, [The digital age of consent, one year on](#), May 2019

179 [Q171](#)

180 [Q174](#)

181 Reference to visit note in Annex

children spend on the platform.<sup>182</sup> However despite the strong parliamentary support for this legislation it has not been able to come into force as the issues it deals with sit within the competence of EU institutions.

101. The Children’s Commissioner expressed interest in the French model:

“I will look at the French model and I want to see it implemented. It sounds like a great idea. I am positive about that. I want to see that it can work.”<sup>183</sup>

102. Mark Bunting, Director of Director of Online Safety Strategy Delivery at Ofcom, told us that “there is nothing magical about the boundary at 13”.<sup>184</sup> Instead of focusing on stricter age verification around the digital age of consent, he explained, Ofcom was prioritising “making services safe for all child users” and focusing on age verification for platforms that allowed pornography and other restricted content.<sup>185</sup> However, Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation*, argued that younger children and teens are much more likely to feel the negative effects of screen time and social media than older teenagers, and children should not have access to social media or smart phones of any kind before they turn 16 years old.<sup>186</sup>

103. We heard that age verification measures across online platforms were expected to improve in the near future. In May 2024, Ofcom launched their consultation on children’s online safety. One of their proposed measures is:

“Robust age checks—our draft Codes expect services to know which of their users are children in order to keep protect them from harmful content. In practice, this means that all services which don’t ban harmful content should introduce highly effective age-checks to prevent children from accessing the entire site or app, or age-restricting parts of it for adults-only access.”<sup>187</sup>

104. Ofcom has also voiced its intention to publish league tables showing which companies are implementing changes to protect children are which are not.<sup>188</sup> Consultation on Ofcom’s proposed measures will end on 17 July 2024, and they are intended to be finalised next spring.<sup>189</sup>

**105. Although we welcome attempts by Ofcom to make platforms safer for children who use them, it is clear that the entire system surrounding the digital age of consent and how it is verified is not fit for purpose. Until there are robust age verification measures used on social media platforms, the digital age of consent will have little to no impact on protecting the data of underage users. Now is also the time for a broader debate on the adequacy of the digital age of consent. The age of consent in the UK is 16, a child cannot drive until they are 17 and cannot vote in England until they are 18. We have heard no evidence to suggest that 13 is an appropriate age for children to understand**

182 NB The legislation was agreed unanimously in the Senate and the National Assembly; however, it is now being held up by the EU Commissioner who has said that the legislation is not compliant with EU standards.

183 [Q175](#)

184 [Q205](#)

185 [Q205](#)

186 Professor Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, March 2024.

187 Ofcom, [Our proposed measures to improve children’s online safety](#), May 2024

188 BBC, [Tech firms told to hide ‘toxic’ content from children](#), May 2024

189 Ofcom, [Our proposed measures to improve children’s online safety](#), May 2024



the implications of allowing platforms access to their personal data online. Yet we know even with the digital age of consent currently formally set at the lowest possible level, it is widely ignored and not effectively enforced. This must change urgently.

106. *The next Government must launch a consultation by the end of the year on whether 13 is a reasonable age of digital consent, or whether it should be raised. The next Government should recommend 16 as a more appropriate age. This approach should be cross-government and include research on the reasoning behind other countries having higher digital age of consents than our own.*

107. *Decisions made by the Government on the level of the digital age of consent must be effectively enforced. Ofcom must need to be able to go further than simply naming and shaming those who breach age verification measures. The Online Safety Act 2023 allows for substantial fines or even imprisonment for executives of companies who breach its rules, and the Government should consider how this approach can be applied to social media companies who knowingly breach age verification requirements and expose children to addictive content which is not appropriate for them.*

## The sale of smart phones to children

108. In February 2023, Brianna Ghey, a 16-year-old British transgender girl, was murdered in a premeditated attack by two 15-year-old teenagers. One of the teenagers had been accessing videos of torture and murder on the dark web before committing the murder herself.<sup>190</sup> Esther Ghey, mother of Brianna, has called for limitations on what kind of mobile phone children can own before they reach the age of 16. She has called for children's smartphones to be unable to access the internet and for additional parental controls to be the default.<sup>191</sup>

109. Ms Ghey's opinion is one shared by many parents. In March 2024, Parentkind conducted a survey of 2,496 parents of school age children in England and found that 58% of parents believe that the Government should ban smartphones for children under 16 years old.<sup>192</sup> Parents of primary school children felt even more strongly, with 77% backing a future ban.<sup>193</sup> The same survey also found that 38% of parents have felt pressure to provide their child with a smartphone at a younger age than they would prefer to.<sup>194</sup> Indeed, a UK study with 13 and 14-year-old children found that family connectedness can be impacted when young people feel they are not trusted to responsibly navigate the online world.<sup>195</sup>

110. Although access to smart phones and social media can undoubtedly expose children to online harms, we have also heard evidence to suggest that they can be beneficial in certain circumstances. Research from the University of Manchester reflects that children and young people often use the Internet as a first point of contact when seeking wellbeing

190 Sky News, [Brianna Ghey's mum says mobile phones should be made specifically for children under 16 to protect them from online harms](#), February 2024

191 Sky News, [Brianna Ghey's mum says mobile phones should be made specifically for children under 16 to protect them from online harms](#), February 2024

192 Parentkind, [Parent poll on smartphones](#), March 2024

193 Parentkind, [Parent poll on smartphones](#), March 2024

194 Parentkind, [Parent poll on smartphones](#), March 2024

195 The Digital Mental Health Research Group, University of Cambridge ([ST0022](#))

and mental health support.<sup>196</sup> Professionally moderated internet spaces can provide high quality responsive information hosted on the same platforms, support in peer forums and direct access to professionals for mental health support.<sup>197</sup>

111. We asked Ian Critchley, lead on Child Protection at the National Police Chiefs' Council, whether he would support additional protections at the point of sale of mobile phones to children. He responded:

“[...] point of sale is a huge opportunity. There is not enough advice and information. It is so difficult. [...] I support any requirements that put a further onus at the point of the sale to make sure that all safety requirements are in place for the user.”<sup>198</sup>

112. When asked whether such an approach was workable, Mark Bunting, Director of Online Safety Strategy Delivery at Ofcom, said that “[t]he campaigns that Esther Ghey and others have been developing in this area are thoughtful and thought-provoking. In the end, the matter is for the Government, not for the regulator. We are willing to support Parliament and the Government in any considerations that they might have.”<sup>199</sup>

**113. It is clear that children are exposed to online harms when using smart phones to access the internet and, in particular, social media platforms. We support calls for tighter controls on the sale of smart phones to children under 16 years old in order to protect them from harm.**

*114. The next Government should work alongside Ofcom to consult on additional measures regarding smartphones for children under 16 years old within the first year of the new Parliament. Measures to consider should include the total ban of smartphones (internet-enabled phones) for children under 16, parental controls installed as default on phones for under 16s, additional guidance for parents at point of sale and controls at App Store level to prevent children from accessing or utilising age inappropriate content as well as controls at system level to prevent children uploading nude images.*

*115. The next Government should work with mobile phone companies and network operators to promote children's phones, a class of phone which can be used for contact and GPS location but not access to the internet or downloading apps.*

## Artificial intelligence (AI)

116. In recent years there has been a huge increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, both in products available on the market and their use by consumers.<sup>200</sup> Ofcom tracked children's online and media usage, and found that 59% of 7–17 year old and 79% of 13–17 year old internet users in the UK have used a generative AI tool in the last year.<sup>201</sup> Snapchat's My AI was the most commonly used platform (51%). There was no difference by gender among child usage.<sup>202</sup>

196 Manchester Institute of Education at The University of Manchester ([ST0017](#))

197 Manchester Institute of Education at The University of Manchester ([ST0017](#))

198 [Q158](#)

199 [Q208](#)

200 Children's Commissioner, [The Children's Commissioner's view on artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#), February 2024

201 Ofcom, [Online Nation](#), November 2023

202 Ofcom, [Online Nation](#), November 2023

117. We heard evidence to suggest that children using AI might be exposing themselves to new risks of harm online. The Children’s Commissioner listed risks posed by generative AI platforms available to children and the incorporation of AI tools into platforms commonly used by children:

- Cyberbullying and sexual harassment: The use of AI-generated text or images to bully or sexually harass children.
- Generative child sexual abuse material (CSAM): AI alteration of CSAM to evade the detection systems used by platforms and law enforcement; AI-generated photorealistic CSAM; AI tools that allow perpetrators to generate CSAM material offline, where detection is not possible; and AI tools that can be used to generate CSAM images from images of real children (e.g., famous children, or children known to perpetrators).
- Disinformation and fraud: The use of plausible-seeming AI-generated text in the service of disinformation or fraud.
- Impacts on education: The use of AI tools that may undermine formal assessments and, ultimately, negatively impact on children’s learning.
- Privacy concerns: AI tools rely on large datasets and there are important implications for how children’s data is used and their privacy protected.
- Bias or discrimination: Bias in the design of systems or their underlying data leading to discrimination against some groups.<sup>203</sup>

118. There is some provision for AI in the Online Safety Act, including a provision for AI chatbots like ChatGPT and protecting users from harmful content. The Act also includes making and sharing deepfake pornography a criminal offence. However, the majority, including regulation, is not covered by the Act, leading the Children’s Commissioner to voice her concern that the UK was “once again lagging behind an issue”.<sup>204</sup> There have also been calls from inside Government to move quicker on drawing up AI regulation or risk the technology moving on without it.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, we heard, the increasing popularity of AI was already likely to be causing harm to children. As Ian Critchley, Lead on Child Protection at the National Police Chiefs’ Council, explained:

“AI tools, so artificial intelligence, again I think we need to get ahead of this very quickly. We are already seeing a huge increase in AI-generated child abuse material and the ease with which tools are now accessible to create that material.”<sup>206</sup>

**119. There has been a huge increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in recent years by children. This leaves users at risk of encountering new types of online harms facilitated by the use of AI. Despite this, there is currently little to no regulation of the AI market.**

203 Children’s Commissioner, [The Children’s Commissioner’s view on artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#), February 2024

204 Children’s Commissioner, [The Children’s Commissioner’s view on artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#), February 2024

205 Politics Home, [AI Minister Warns Regulation Must Move Faster Than Online Safety Bill](#), October 2023

206 [Q146](#)

***120. The next Government must draw up legislation in the first year of the new Parliament on regulating AI or risk the technology developing faster than legislation can be drawn up to control it, ultimately causing additional harm to children. AI operators should also be held accountable for their use of children's data and it is essential that children's data is protected where they are below the digital age of consent.***

## 7 Digitalisation of education

121. The COVID19 pandemic and subsequent school closures significantly disrupted the delivery of education in England and across the world, and “created an unprecedented need for remote teaching and learning solutions”.<sup>207</sup> During this period, 64% of schools introduced, increased or upgraded their technology, with 80% of schools using either new tools or a mix of new and old.<sup>208</sup> Tools included the use of online learning platforms, digital curriculum content tools and services, and technology to deliver both live remote lessons and pre-recorded lessons online.

122. Although schools have reopened, the digital transformation of education has continued to accelerate, with more and more teaching and learning moving to virtual spaces. Since the pandemic, educational technology (edtech) has become even more widely used. The UK’s edtech sector is the largest in Europe, and UK schools spend an estimated £900 million a year of educational technology.<sup>209</sup> Google Classroom was downloaded over 1.34 million times in the UK in 2021.<sup>210</sup>

123. It is difficult to assess whether digitalisation has had a positive impact on schools as edtech evolves faster than it is possible to evaluate it. We have received evidence to suggest that educational resources online can be beneficial to the learning of children and young people,<sup>211</sup> however, the Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 explained that edtech products change approximately every 36 months and most evidence on how useful edtech is comes from the richest countries.<sup>212</sup> In the UK, only 7% of education technology companies had conducted randomized controlled trials, and just 12% had used third-party certification. A survey of teachers and administrators in 17 US states showed that only 11% requested peer-reviewed evidence prior to adoption.<sup>213</sup>

### Trends and international approaches

124. The UN’s Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 *Technology in education: a tool on whose terms?* argued that the adoption of digital technology has resulted in many changes in education and learning, yet questions whether technology has transformed education. Instead, the report emphasises that the application of digital technology varies considerably by community and socioeconomic level, by teacher willingness and preparedness, by education level and by country income.<sup>214</sup>

125. Some countries made an initial commitment to mass digitalisation in schools, only to roll back to more traditional methods of teaching later on. The National Agency for Education in Sweden introduced a digital strategy in 2017 aimed at creating further opportunities for digitalisation in schools and achieving a high level of digital skills for children and young people.<sup>215</sup> However, in January 2024, the Swedish Government ruled that national tests and assessments support should no longer be digitised after receiving

207 UK Government, [Education technology for remote teaching](#), November 2022

208 UK Government, [Education technology for remote teaching](#), November 2022

209 House of Lords Library, [Educational technology: Digital innovation and AI in schools](#), November 2023

210 Parent Zone ([ST0016](#))

211 BBC ([ST0018](#))

212 UNESCO, [Global Education Monitoring Report: Technology in education, a tool on whose terms?](#), 2023

213 UNESCO, [Global Education Monitoring Report: Technology in education, a tool on whose terms?](#), 2023

214 UNESCO, [Global Education Monitoring Report: Technology in education, a tool on whose terms?](#), 2023

215 Swedish Government, [Government investing in more reading time and less screen time](#), February 2024

scientific evidence to suggest that children in primary schools learn best when using a pen and paper.<sup>216</sup> By February 2024, the Swedish Government had announced that the digital strategy would be abandoned and be replaced with a new focus on traditional methods of learning, with a new state subsidy for purchasing physical resources for schools such as textbooks.<sup>217</sup> The Swedish Government argued that their experience had shown that “basic skills” and “the ability to read, write and do arithmetic” were best acquired through “analogue activities in analogue environments”.<sup>218</sup> This return to more traditional methods of teaching by Sweden may be indicative of future trends, as UNESCO have predicted that schools all over the world have found a gap between the expected benefits of technology on education management and the reality.<sup>219</sup>

## Edtech and AI in schools

126. NASUWT, the Teachers’ Union, told us that developments in AI offered both opportunities and risks for schools. For instance, AI had greater scope for personalisation and inclusion of pupils such as those who have SEND or English as an Additional Language (EAL). However, complex technologies such as AI could widen the divide between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, with some schools having greater access and better resources, while others struggled with issues such as connectivity and the cost of up-to-date technology and did not see the same benefits.<sup>220</sup> Additionally, the use of edtech in schools could massively increase children’s screen time. Parent Zone advised that, while screens could be an effective tool for learning, it was important to ensure that screen-free learning in subjects such as Physical Education, Drama and Art was protected to encourage students to foster healthy habits.<sup>221</sup> They also argued that having this balance during school hours provided a model to parents and that without clear guidance on how much screen time students should have at school, and with companies such as Google and Microsoft promoting online learning, there was a risk that students could spend their whole day using screens.<sup>222</sup>

127. We also heard concerns on the use of edtech and AI in schools, principally regarding data protection and privacy for both staff and students. The Online Safety Act 2023 does not apply to education technology used in school settings. Baroness Beeban Kidron, CEO and Founder of 5Rights, told us that:

“[...] the age-appropriate design code does not apply in school settings and much of edtech does not adhere to its rules. The Online Safety Act is exempted in school settings. We have got into this rather ludicrous situation where the child on the way to school on the bus has more protections than it does at school in the classroom. I think that a wrong-headed assumption has been made that schools do safeguarding and that this is a safeguarding question. Teachers cannot possibly do the kind of work that the ICO or Ofcom do.”<sup>223</sup>

216 Swedish Government, [Government investing in more reading time and less screen time](#), February 2024

217 Swedish Government, [Government investing in more reading time and less screen time](#), February 2024

218 Swedish Government, [Government investing in more reading time and less screen time](#), February 2024

219 UNESCO, [Global Education Monitoring Report: Technology in education, a tool on whose terms?](#), 2023

220 NASUWT - The Teachers’ Union ([ST0010](#))

221 Parent Zone ([ST0016](#))

222 Parent Zone ([ST0016](#))

223 [Q72](#)



128. Professor Victoria Nash, Director and Senior Policy Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, warned that edtech and AI in education without a clear Government strategy puts “children at risk of significant harm”. She noted:

“Many digital services and apps harvest huge amounts of data from their users, often in lieu of payment, whilst the terms of service explaining this are painfully obscure. Navigating such data protection responsibilities is complex, and schools are poorly resourced to manage this, both in terms of expertise and infrastructure. Investment and training in data protection is definitely needed, as well as provision of more government support and advice.”<sup>224</sup>

129. The Department for Education has noted the potential risks of using generative AI in schools in its policy paper ‘Generative artificial intelligence (AI) in education’, including the privacy implications of AI storing and learning from any data it is given.<sup>225</sup> It adds that it will “continue to work with experts to consider and respond to the implications of generative AI and other emerging technologies” in schools.<sup>226</sup>

**130. The UK’s edtech sector is the largest in Europe, and more schools in England are using edtech and AI than ever before. Although edtech has some benefits, we are concerned about the implications of edtech and AI on children’s data and privacy. The Online Safety Act 2023 is exempted in school settings, AI is not regulated, and digital technology can harvest huge amounts of data from its users.**

*131. The next Government should produce a risk assessment on the use of edtech and AI in schools as soon as possible, and particularly on the extent to which it poses a risk to the security of children’s data. The safety and reliability of edtech should also be assessed by Ofcom both it is introduced to schools, and periodically after it is brought into schools.*

## Sustainability of digital devices

132. While visiting the UNESCO headquarters, we were also informed about the increasing rate of electronic waste (e-waste) as electronic devices are discarded after becoming out-of-date or obsolete.<sup>227</sup> According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), e-waste is the fastest growing solid waste stream in the world, with common items including laptops and computers.<sup>228</sup> For this reason, UNESCO is promoting measures to extend the lifetime of devices used in education. According to their estimates, the CO2 emissions saved by extending the lifespan of all laptops in the European Union by a year found it would be equivalent to taking almost 1 million cars off the road.<sup>229</sup>

133. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Government has provided over 1.35 million laptops and tablets to schools, trusts, local authorities and further education providers for

224 House of Lords Library, [Educational technology: Digital innovation and AI in schools](#), November 2023

225 Department for Education, [Generative artificial intelligence \(AI\) in education](#), October 2023

226 Department for Education, [Generative artificial intelligence \(AI\) in education](#), October 2023

227 Reference to visit note in Annex

228 World Health Organisation, [Electronic waste](#), October 2023

229 UNESCO, [Global Education Monitoring Report: Technology in education, a tool on whose terms?](#), 2023



disadvantaged children and young people.<sup>230</sup> When asked whether the Department for Education has the resources to maintain and keep secure the digital devices that have been provided to schools, Damian Hinds, Minister of State for School Standards, answered:

“... education is a people business. Machines play an important role in education. Hardware and software play an important role in augmenting and supporting great teaching and learning, but they will never replace the brilliant inspiration of a great teacher standing at the front of the class.”<sup>231</sup>

134. During our visit to the UNESCO headquarters in Paris as part of this inquiry, we were informed that edtech has more malware, including ransomware and hacking, than all other sectors combined.<sup>232</sup> When we visited the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science later on during the visit, they confirmed that their own education sector had had numerous issues with hacking.<sup>233</sup> In the UK, the National Cyber Security Centre has noted an increase in ransomware attacks on the education sector, in some cases resulting in the loss of student coursework and school financial records.<sup>234</sup> These attacks also cause schools to spend a significant amount of recovery time on reinstating critical services.<sup>235</sup> In order to keep our schools secure, it is essential that digital devices are well maintained with the latest security updates by the Department for Education.

**135. Since the pandemic, the Government has provided over 1.35 million laptops and tablets to schools, trusts, local authorities and further education providers for disadvantaged children and young people. Edtech has more malware than all other sectors combined, and therefore it is essential that these devices receive software updates and renewals regularly in order to keep them secure for longer and reduce our rate of e-waste.**

**136. *Digital devices provided to schools by the Government must be maintained and kept secure through regular renewals and software updates. The Department for Education must set out a funding and renewal strategy for device management alongside a strategy for disposing of digital hardware that is no longer fit for purpose within the first year of the new Parliament.***

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230 UK Government, [Get help with technology programme: conditions of device grants for technical support](#), February 2022

231 [Q263](#)

232 Reference to visit note in Annex

233 Reference to visit note in Annex

234 National Cyber Security Centre, [Alert: Further ransomware attacks on the UK education sector by cyber criminals](#), June 2021

235 National Cyber Security Centre, [Alert: Further ransomware attacks on the UK education sector by cyber criminals](#), June 2021

# Conclusions and recommendations

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## Effects of screen time on children

1. We are extremely concerned at the level of harmful content children and young people can be exposed to online, and how it can affect their mental health, physical health and educational outcomes. This is exacerbated for certain vulnerable groups who are more likely to be negatively affected and exposed to child criminal exploitation online. The extent of exposure to online harms by young girls and women is also deeply concerning and is contributing to growing mental health challenges and eating disorders. (Paragraph 25)
2. The overwhelming weight of evidence submitted to us suggests that the harms of screen time and social media use significantly outweigh the benefits for young children, whereas limited use of screens and genuinely educational uses of digital technology can have benefits for older children. For this reason, screen time should be minimal for younger children and better balanced with face-to-face socialisation and physical activity for older ones. (Paragraph 26)
3. *For children and adolescents alike the rapid rise of the use of screens and devices has come at a substantial cost and Government needs to do more across departments to protect them from addiction, online harms and the mental health impacts of extensive use of devices.* (Paragraph 27)

## Guidance on mobile phones in schools

4. We strongly welcome the Government's decision to implement a tougher mobile phone ban in schools in England. We welcome the fact that this includes break times and sends a clearer message than previous guidance about the benefits of having phones out of sight and reach. It is clear that a ban can have a positive impact of the mental health and educational outcomes of children. (Paragraph 41)
5. Initially introducing the ban on a non-statutory basis is the right approach, but the success of the ban will depend on its implementation and how widely it is taken up. We do not agree with the Government's approach of informally monitoring the mobile phone ban. Without a formal monitoring mechanism, the implementation and effects of the ban cannot be measured and it will be impossible to judge whether a statutory ban is necessary. (Paragraph 42)
6. *The next Government should implement a formal monitoring mechanism to measure both the implementation and effects of the mobile phone ban. The results of this monitoring phase should be published and shared with schools. If results show that a non-statutory ban has been ineffective, the next Government must move swiftly to introduce a statutory ban.* (Paragraph 43)
7. We welcome the flexibility within the mobile phone ban guidance which allows schools to choose a process for implementation most suitable for them and the inclusion of exemptions for children with particular needs. (Paragraph 44)

8. *Government guidance must also set out the approximate cost of certain approaches, such as secure storage. The next Government must also ensure parents are not prevented from being able to contact their children during their commute to school. The guidance should be changed as soon as possible to prevent schools from insisting mobile phones are left at home. (Paragraph 45)*

### Support for parents

9. *Parents are unsure of what their children are doing online, lack confidence in being able to manage screen time, and want guidance to support them. The Government is wrong to conflate arguments about setting an exact time limit on screen time with the fact that some guidance and information would be useful for parents. (Paragraph 54)*
10. *The next Government should work across departments including DHSC, DSIT, Education and the Home Office to produce guidance for parents on how to best manage and understand the impact of screen time on their children. A common sense approach would be to focus on aspects of screen time that are known to cause harm. For example, guidance should advise that children should not be able to access screens after they have gone to bed and should incorporate physical activity into their day to help balance time spent on screen. Guidance should also focus on the ways in which parents can monitor use of devices, the uses of parental controls and how to deal with problematic screen use, including when to seek help. (Paragraph 55)*
11. *Advice to parents of babies and young children should be revised to ensure it gives sufficient attention to face to face interaction and warns of the risks of screen time in reducing opportunities for this. Adults should be encouraged to minimise use of devices where possible when supervising young children at a formative age and the Department for Education should commission advice for parents through family hubs and children's centres on the healthy use of devices. (Paragraph 56)*
12. *There are over half a million apps claiming to be educational within leading app stores such as the Apple App Store and Google Play, but no quality standards for educational content or design features that apps must align with to be included in the educational category. As a consequence, parents have little to no confidence in being able to correctly identify high quality versus low quality educational resources online. Many schools encourage the use of educational apps to support learning and engage pupils with subjects such as mathematics, but there is currently a poor evidence base regarding which are most effective. (Paragraph 61)*
13. *The next Government must commission guidance for parents and schools on the educational value of purported educational websites and apps within a year. They should also support a kitemarking scheme for educational resources found online in the first year of the new Parliament to enable parents to quickly identify the best educational resources online for their children. The next Government should engage with tech companies to encourage them to introduce standards for the use of educational labels and to remove apps which do not offer educational benefit. (Paragraph 62)*

## Digital literacy curriculum

14. We welcome the inclusion of digital literacy in the curriculum. However, the curriculum is not structured well enough to keep children safe online. Digital literacy is split across numerous subjects with different focuses and teachers. Teachers must grapple with a topic that is constantly evolving and comprehend numerous guidance documents provided by the Government while often having no specialist knowledge of the topic themselves. As a result, the digital literacy capabilities of children in the UK remain generally poor. (Paragraph 74)
15. *The next Government must provide additional training and support for teachers delivering the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum, particularly digital literacy. The next Government should embed additional core content on online safety into the information and communication technology (ICT) training and early career framework for all teachers.* (Paragraph 75)
16. *The next Government should consolidate non-statutory guidance on digital safety and curriculum content to provide a clear guide for teachers which should be complementary to Keeping Children Safe in School. Once this consolidation is complete the Department should invest in subject knowledge enhancement courses to ensure it reaches the wide variety of teachers who could benefit from it.* (Paragraph 76)
17. We welcome inspections of PSHE as part of a routine Ofsted inspection. However, a subject as broad as PSHE, which covers so many different topics including digital literacy, cannot be adequately evaluated solely within the current personal development metric. (Paragraph 82)
18. *Ofsted must change the way in which PSHE is evaluated during inspection. Instead of being assessed through Ofsted's personal development metric, PSHE should be assessed through thematic reviews in the same way as other core curriculum subjects.* (Paragraph 83)

## Online Safety Act 2023

19. The Online Safety Act 2023 will undoubtedly play a role in keeping children safe from online harms. However, we are concerned that children will not feel the full protections of the Act until implementation is completed in 2026. (Paragraph 94)
20. *The next Government must work with Ofcom to ensure that there are no delays to implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023 and set out how it is working with Ofcom to ensure children are protected during the transition period. Robust age verification should be implemented immediately on internet platforms and it is unacceptable that they continue to be widely ignored.* (Paragraph 95)
21. Although we welcome attempts by Ofcom to make platforms safer for children who use them, it is clear that the entire system surrounding the digital age of consent and how it is verified is not fit for purpose. Until there are robust age verification measures used on social media platforms, the digital age of consent will have little to no impact on protecting the data of underage users. Now is also the time for a broader debate on the adequacy of the digital age of consent. The age of consent in the UK is 16, a child cannot drive until they are 17 and cannot vote in England

until they are 18. We have heard no evidence to suggest that 13 is an appropriate age for children to understand the implications of allowing platforms access to their personal data online. Yet we know even with the digital age of consent currently formally set at the lowest possible level, it is widely ignored and not effectively enforced. This must change urgently. (Paragraph 105)

22. *The next Government must launch a consultation by the end of the year on whether 13 is a reasonable age of digital consent, or whether it should be raised. The next Government should recommend 16 as a more appropriate age. This approach should be cross-government and include research on the reasoning behind other countries having higher digital age of consents than our own.* (Paragraph 106)
23. *Decisions made by the Government on the level of the digital age of consent must be effectively enforced. Ofcom must need to be able to go further than simply naming and shaming those who breach age verification measures. The Online Safety Act 2023 allows for substantial fines or even imprisonment for executives of companies who breach its rules, and the Government should consider how this approach can be applied to social media companies who knowingly breach age verification requirements and expose children to addictive content which is not appropriate for them.* (Paragraph 107)
24. It is clear that children are exposed to online harms when using smart phones to access the internet and, in particular, social media platforms. We support calls for tighter controls on the sale of smart phones to children under 16 years old in order to protect them from harm. (Paragraph 113)
25. *The next Government should work alongside Ofcom to consult on additional measures regarding smartphones for children under 16 years old within the first year of the new Parliament. Measures to consider should include the total ban of smartphones (internet-enabled phones) for children under 16, parental controls installed as default on phones for under 16s, additional guidance for parents at point of sale and controls at App Store level to prevent children from accessing or utilising age inappropriate content as well as controls at system level to prevent children uploading nude images.* (Paragraph 114)
26. *The next Government should work with mobile phone companies and network operators to promote children's phones, a class of phone which can be used for contact and GPS location but not access to the internet or downloading apps.* (Paragraph 115)
27. There has been a huge increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in recent years by children. This leaves users at risk of encountering new types of online harms facilitated by the use of AI. Despite this, there is currently little to no regulation of the AI market. (Paragraph 119)
28. *The next Government must draw up legislation in the first year of the new Parliament on regulating AI or risk the technology developing faster than legislation can be drawn up to control it, ultimately causing additional harm to children. AI operators should also be held accountable for their use of children's data and it is essential that children's data is protected where they are below the digital age of consent.* (Paragraph 120)



## Online Safety Act 2023

29. The UK's edtech sector is the largest in Europe, and more schools in England are using edtech and AI than ever before. Although edtech has some benefits, we are concerned about the implications of edtech and AI on children's data and privacy. The Online Safety Act 2023 is exempted in school settings, AI is not regulated, and digital technology can harvest huge amounts of data from its users. (Paragraph 130)
30. *The next Government should produce a risk assessment on the use of edtech and AI in schools as soon as possible, and particularly on the extent to which it poses a risk to the security of children's data. The safety and reliability of edtech should also be assessed by Ofcom both it is introduced to schools, and periodically after it is brought into schools.* (Paragraph 131)
31. Since the pandemic, the Government has provided over 1.35 million laptops and tablets to schools, trusts, local authorities and further education providers for disadvantaged children and young people. Edtech has more malware than all other sectors combined, and therefore it is essential that these devices receive software updates and renewals regularly in order to keep them secure for longer and reduce our rate of e-waste. (Paragraph 135)
32. *Digital devices provided to schools by the Government must be maintained and kept secure through regular renewals and software updates. The Department for Education must set out a funding and renewal strategy for device management alongside a strategy for disposing of digital hardware that is no longer fit for purpose within the first year of the new Parliament.* (Paragraph 136)

## Annex: Committee visits

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### Monday 22 January 2024 (Paris)

#### *Meeting with Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director General for Education at UNESCO*

The group discussed UNESCO's work in this area, and the impacts of screen time on concentration and focus. They also discussed in-person vs online learning; the use of technology to support children with learning difficulties; the regulation of AI; and the prevalence of malware in the EdTech sector.

#### *Meeting with Manos Antoninis, Director of the Global Education Monitoring Report*

The following themes were discussed:

Globally around one quarter of countries have some sort of ban on mobile phones – but blanket bans need to have caveats or exceptions based on student need.

There is concern that technology is being seen as a blanket solution to all problems in education. There is a long-term decline in PISA outcomes for many countries, and technology may have a role in this. Investment in technology can often be wasteful (of money or resources) or low impact. Many countries also do not consider the long-term cost of maintaining technology.

#### *Meeting with Patrice Pineau, Deputy Head of the Office of Regulation and School Life at the Ministry of Education*

The group discussed the process of introducing legislation to ban mobile phones in French schools, its implementation, enforcement and impact. They also discussed the process of exemptions to the ban.

### Tuesday 23 January 2024 (Paris)

#### *Meeting with MPs from the National Assembly's Education and Culture committee, chaired by its Vice-President Ms Géraldine Bannier*

The two Committees discussed many issues relating to the mobile phone ban including implementation, assessment of impacts, digital technology in schools, a national campaign to educate parents about the negative impacts of screen time, and the possibility of banning phone and tablet use for the under-5s.

The Committee also discussed gambling games and direct advertising towards young people, as well as fake news.



*Meeting at Rodin School with the headteacher, school teachers and parents*

The Committee met headteachers, staff and parents from Rodin School caters for pupils aged between 11 and 18. They discussed the mobile phone ban, including implementation, impact, teacher, pupil and parent views.

*Meeting with Laurent Marcangeli MP, President of the Horizons Party, at the National Assembly*

The Committee met with Laurent Marcangeli MP and discussed better online safety for young people in France, including issues regarding the digital age of majority and age verification.

*Wednesday 24 January 2024 (The Hague)**Meeting with Civil servants at the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science*

The Committee met with civil servants from the Dutch ministry for Education, Culture and Science. Topics discussed included the mobile phone ban and the digitalisation of education.

*Working lunch with Members of the Dutch Parliamentary Committee for Education, Culture and Science*

The Committee had a working lunch with the Dutch Parliamentary Committee for Education, Culture and Science. Topics discussed included: how the running and work of Committees differs between the UK and the Netherlands, opinions on the impact of screen time on children and feedback on the Dutch mobile phone ban.

*Rijnlands Lyceum Secondary School*

The Committee visited Rijnlands Lyceum Secondary School in Wassenaar. This comprised of a tour of the school and an informal roundtable with students to discuss their attitudes to the mobile phone ban and screen time in general.

*Meeting with the Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO)*

The Committee met with representative of the NRO, which was tasked with conducting a significant amount of research on mobile phone ban before one was implemented in the Netherlands. The group discussed this research and also plans for monitoring the ban's impact.

## **Monday 5 February**

### *Visit to Google Headquarters, London*

The Committee met with representatives of Google, and heard information about Google for Education/Google Classroom; the Be Internet Legends programme; and Google and YouTube online safety features for children.

## **Monday 12 March**

### *Visit to Sacred Heart High School, Hammersmith, London*

The Chair and Committee staff visited Sacred Heart High School and spoke to teachers and pupils about the implementation of the mobile phone ban in their school.

# Formal minutes

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**Wednesday 23 May 2024**

## **Members present**

Robin Walker, in the Chair<sup>236</sup>

Caroline Ansell

Andrew Lewer

Ian Mearns

## **Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing**

Draft Report (*Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 136 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

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

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

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

## **Adjournment**

The Committee adjourned.

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236 Elected by the House (Standing Order No. 122B); see Votes and Proceedings [18 June 2015].

## Witnesses

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

### Tuesday 21 November 2023

**Rafe Clayton**, Principal Investigator, "New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain", University of Leeds; **Dr Bernadka Dubicka**, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hull and York Medical School, University of York; and **Dr Amy Orben**, Founder, Digital Mental Health Research Group, University of Cambridge

[Q1–28](#)

**Vicki Shotbolt**, Founder and CEO, Parent Zone; and **Carolyn Bunting MBE**, CEO, Internet Matters

[Q29–65](#)

### Tuesday 9 January 2024

**Elizabeth Anderson**, Chief Executive, Learning Foundation and the Digital Poverty Alliance; **Baroness Kidron**, Founder and Chair, 5Rights Foundation; and **John McGee**, Senior Policy Advisor, BBC Education

[Q66–98](#)

**Jonathan Baggaley**, Chief Executive, PSHE Association; and **Darren Northcott**, National Official for Education, NASUWT - The Teachers' Union

[Q99–123](#)

### Tuesday 20 February 2024

**Deputy Chief Constable Ian Critchley**, Lead on Child Protection, National Police Chiefs' Council; **Jessica Edwards**, Senior Policy Adviser on Childhood Harms, Barnardo's; and **David Wright**, Director, UK Safer Internet Centre and CEO, South West Grid for Learning

[Q124–163](#)

**Dame Rachel de Souza**, The Children's Commissioner

[Q164–188](#)

### Tuesday 12 March 2024

**Mark Bunting**, Director of Online Safety Strategy Delivery, Ofcom; **Yih-Choung Teh**, Group Director for Strategy and Research, Ofcom

[Q189–210](#)

**Rt Hon Damian Hinds**, Minister of State for Schools, Department for Education; **Charlotte Briscall**, Director, Chief Digital Officer, Department for Education; **Kate Dixon**, Director of Pupil Wellbeing and Safety, Department for Education

[Q211–265](#)

## Published written evidence

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

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

- 1 Association of School and College Leaders ([ST0039](#))
- 2 BBC ([ST0018](#))
- 3 Barnardo's ([ST0011](#))
- 4 CLOSER, UCL ([ST0040](#))
- 5 Clayton, Rafe (Principal Investigator, University of Leeds); and Clayton, Carmen (Principal Investigator, Leeds Trinity University) ([ST0044](#))
- 6 Cole, Mr Jonny (Acting Headteacher, Trafalgar School at Downton) ([ST0006](#))
- 7 Common Sense Media ([ST0045](#))
- 8 Cranbourne School ([ST0012](#))
- 9 Department for Education ([ST0048](#))
- 10 Digital Mental Health Research Group, University of Cambridge ([ST0022](#))
- 11 Digital Youth ([ST0035](#))
- 12 Etchells, Professor Peter (Professor of Psychology and Science Communication, Bath Spa University) ([ST0003](#))
- 13 Ferguson, Professor Christopher (Professor of Psychology, Stetson University) ([ST0002](#))
- 14 Girlguiding UK ([ST0027](#))
- 15 Goodyear, Dr Victoria (Associate Professor in Sport, Physical Activity and Health, University of Birmingham); Pallan, Professor Miranda (Professor of Child and Adolescent Public Health, University of Birmingham); and Randhawa, Dr Amie (Research Fellow, SMART Schools Study, University of Birmingham) ([ST0028](#))
- 16 Hendry, Dr Alexandra (NIHR and Castang Foundation Advanced Fellow, University of Oxford) ([ST0004](#))
- 17 Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex ([ST0026](#))
- 18 Internet Matters ([ST0050](#))
- 19 Internet Matters ([ST0019](#))
- 20 Islington Council ([ST0023](#))
- 21 James, Dr Richard (Assistant Professor, University of Nottingham); and Hitcham, Lucy (PhD Candidate, University of Nottingham) ([ST0046](#))
- 22 John Hanson Community School ([ST0013](#))
- 23 Joneidy, Dr Sina (Senior Lecturer in Digital Enterprise, Teesside University) ([ST0036](#))
- 24 NAHT ([ST0020](#))
- 25 NASUWT - The Teachers' Union ([ST0010](#))
- 26 NRIC, University of Cambridge ([ST0001](#))
- 27 NSPCC ([ST0037](#))

- 28 Nicholls, Mrs Sharon (Head of School, The Warriner School) ([ST0005](#))
- 29 Outhwaite, Dr Laura (Principal Research Fellow, UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities) ([ST0021](#))
- 30 Parent Zone ([ST0016](#))
- 31 Place2Be ([ST0031](#))
- 32 Q3 Academy Langley ([ST0008](#))
- 33 Roche, Mrs C ([ST0047](#))
- 34 Rose, Dr Sarah (Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Child Development, Staffordshire University) ([ST0015](#))
- 35 Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists ([ST0034](#))
- 36 SWGfL ([ST0038](#))
- 37 Small Steps Big Changes ([ST0041](#))
- 38 Smith, Prof. Tim (Professor of Cognitive Psychology, Creative Computing Institute, UAL & Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development, Birkbeck); and Bedford, Dr. Rachael (Associate Professor & Head of the Bath Babylab, University of Bath) ([ST0029](#))
- 39 Smits, Sue (Director, Morrells Handwriting); and Stewart, Mark (Employee, Left n Write) ([ST0049](#))
- 40 Somogyi, Dr Eszter (Senior Lecturer, Associate Head of Department, University of Portsmouth) ([ST0030](#))
- 41 Speech and Language UK ([ST0042](#))
- 42 Taylor, Dr Gemma (Lecturer in Psychology , University of Salford); Kolak, Dr Joanna (Lecturer in Language Development, University College, London); Monaghan , Professor Padraic (Professor of Cognition, Lancaster University); Bidgood, Dr Amy ( Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Liverpool, John Moores University); and Galpin, Dr Adam ( Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Salford) ([ST0024](#))
- 43 The Centre for Development, Evaluation, Complexity and Implementation in Public Health Improvement (DECIPHer), Cardiff University ([ST0025](#))
- 44 The Hurst School ([ST0009](#))
- 45 The Hurst School ([ST0014](#))
- 46 The University of Manchester - Manchester Institute of Education ([ST0017](#))
- 47 Triple P UK & Ireland ([ST0033](#))
- 48 Understanding Society, UK Household Longitudinal Study, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex ([ST0007](#))
- 49 Yondr ([ST0032](#))



# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

## Session 2023–24

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	Ofsted's work with schools	HC 117
2nd Report	Teacher recruitment, training and retention	HC 119
3rd Report	Delivering effective financial education	HC 265
1st Special Report	Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils: Government response to the Committee's Seventh Report	HC 368
2nd Special Report	Ofsted's work with schools: Ofsted response to the Committee's First Report	HC 624
3rd Special Report	Ofsted's work with schools: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 689

## Session 2022–23

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity	HC 56
2nd Report	Educational poverty: how children in residential care have been let down and what to do about it	HC 57
3rd Report	The future of post-16 qualifications	HC 55
4th Report	Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance	HC 54
5th Report	Support for childcare and the early years	HC 969
6th Report	Appointment of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills	HC 1800
7th Report	Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils	HC 970
1st Special	Is the Catch-up Programme fit for purpose?: Government response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2021–22	HC 273
2nd Special	Not just another brick in the wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity: Government response to the Committee's First Report	HC 645
3rd Special	Educational poverty: how children in residential care have been let down and what to do about it: Government response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 854
4th Special	The future of post-16 qualifications: Government response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2022–23	HC 1673

5th Special	Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance: Government response to the Committee's Fourth Report	HC 1848
6th Special	Support for childcare and the early years: Government response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 1902

### Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it	HC 85
2nd Report	Appointment of the Chief Regulator of Ofqual	HC 512
3rd Report	Strengthening Home Education	HC 84
4th Report	Is the Catch-up Programme fit for purpose?	HC 940
1st Special Report	Strengthening Home Education: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report	HC 823

### Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	Getting the grades they've earned: Covid-19: the cancellation of exams and 'calculated' grades	HC 617
2nd Report	Appointment of the Children's Commissioner for England	HC 1030
3rd Report	A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution	HC 278
4th Report	Appointment of the Chair of the Office for Students	HC 1143
1st Special Report	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019	HC 668
2nd Special Report	Getting the grades they've earned: COVID-19: the cancellation of exams and 'calculated' grades: Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 812
3rd Special Report	A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report	HC 1310