children's charities' coalition on internet safety
10 Great Queen Street, London, WC2B 5DG

Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
4th Floor
100, Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

17th May 2018

Dear Secretary of State,

As a group of organisations working to support children and young people at risk of harm and abuse online, we urge you to take action and use the Internet Safety Strategy review to compel social networks to do more to protect young users.

Online technology can offer children a tremendous world of opportunity to play, learn, and experience wonderful new things. However, social networks were not founded or built taking account of child safeguarding principles and too often this has led to devastating costs in terms of children's wellbeing.

Rightly, we teach our children to be resilient online. We teach them to take steps to keep themselves safe, but we must also address why such teaching is necessary in the first place. Children face a gauntlet of risks on the social networks, apps and games they love - and yet, this could be prevented or substantially reduced if industry took greater responsibility.

Children and parents have told us about the significant harms young people face online. When surveyed by the NSPCC, parents and children reported that many sites expose children to violent, adult, sexual, bullying, or suicide related content.

Police records show that social networks are being used to groom children online. In the last nine months alone, 3,000 grooming related offences were recorded in England and Wales, including more than 1,800 offences of sending a sexual communication to a child. Online crimes against children now feature in the NCA's National Threat Assessment.

Despite the mounting evidence about the risks children face, social networks continue to refuse demands for meaningful transparency. The UK Council on Child Internet Safety, for instance, made repeated requests for information about the volume and nature of reports that are being made by children in the UK. In response to one such request Facebook said it would not disclose any information about child safety that it was not legally obliged to publish. Other companies have said they did not collect or could not collate this information in respect of UK children.

While some platforms have recently provided some limited information about their moderation practices, Facebook and YouTube still do not provide any useful data on the volume of reports relating to UK children, and the outcomes of such reports. Facebook expressly said it will not provide any data relating to the sexual endangerment or exploitation of children. Are these woeful examples the kind of transparency we can expect if we continue with self-regulation?

The effect of this lack of transparency is that social networks are not being held to account for the measures they take to protect children, nor are they held to account for whether these measures are effective.

There is therefore an urgent need to introduce mandatory safety standards for social networks and a statutory requirement for them to disclose information about child safety, including: how many reports of concerns they receive; how quickly they act on these; and how much content is being taken down. That must be backed by a regulator with full powers of investigatory disclosure.

Nothing else will deliver the culture shift that is required. For the past decade, self-regulation has failed and too many companies have consistently side-stepped their responsibilities to do what is needed.

We urge you to act now and legislate for a mandatory social networks code of practice, underpinned by an independent regulator. Safeguarding children online should never be an optional extra.

Yours sincerely,

John Carr OBE
Secretary

www.chis.org.uk

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John Carr OBE
Secretary
www.chis.org.uk
12th May 2018.