HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing, HC 118

Tuesday 9 January 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Mrs Flick Drummond; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 66 - 123

Witnesses

I: 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.

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Elizabeth Anderson, Baroness Kidron and John McGee.

Q66 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session, which is on screen time impacts on education and wellbeing. We will be taking evidence this morning from, online, 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. You are all very welcome and thank you for giving evidence to the Committee today.

My first question is to all the panel. Does digital technology have a positive or negative effect on children's developmental and educational outcomes? Is there a distinction in that respect between what should be taught in a classroom and what is best taught remotely online or at home? Baroness Kidron, would you like to come in first on that?

Baroness Kidron: Yes. Good morning and thank you very much for inviting me. I think the obvious answer to that question is that it is simply not binary. We know an awful lot about what children need to develop—it has been established over decades. We have less information about how digital technology interacts and impacts development, but there is no doubt that it is having an impact.

I think the most useful approach is to say that while for many, many years academics and child development professionals have talked about the three pillars of socialisation—family, school and peers—increasingly they have added technology as a fourth pillar. There is no doubt that something is happening.

I will go on to say that products that are largely created for profit and are not taking care of the development needs of children are impacting negatively. I find it very helpful to look at this from the point of view of early years because we, including myself in that group, do obsess a little bit about teenagers, but if you look at early years, you can see more purely that the child's interaction is not the thing that is making the difference. Research coming out of America shows that the under-fives spend too much time in passive engagement with technology and that it is impacting their speech and movement. Here in the UK, I am aware of work going on in Manchester where they are raising money to take dancers into schools because children are coming to school without any developed motor skills.

If you are starting to look at this from an early stage, I think you have to say yes, digital technology is having an impact and that it is not having a positive impact, but that is not inherent in the technology, it is inherent to the business model and the way technology is being used.

Q67 **Chair:** Part of what you are saying there is that when you look at the pillars of development, technology is no substitute for the other pillars of development and that it needs to be alongside the others, not replacing them.

Baroness Kidron: Absolutely. All the research we can get hold of—and I do understand and I did listen to the previous session you held at the end of last year and am very sympathetic to academics who say that we do not know enough—

Chair: You are more sympathetic than I am.

Baroness Kidron: Well, I am not very, very sympathetic. I was very involved with the passage of the Online Safety Act, and we fought very hard to access data for researchers and will say to the Committee that there is a second opportunity with the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill to get that access. However, we have a great deal of lived experience and I think I heard very clearly all the experts in that previous session saying that parents should protect with a precautionary approach. Regulators, the Department for Education and Government more broadly also need to act with a precautionary approach because we see the lived experience and the impact.

Q68 **Chair:** John, you are very involved in providing digital tools and not-for-profit. Do you want to talk about that as well in addressing the opening question?

John McGee: From the perspective of the BBC, I echo what Baroness Kidron has said. What we do in BBC Bitesize and BBC Teach is there to be supplementary and complementary to the other pillars of learning. BBC Bitesize has been going for 25 years and is a digital-first service. We have been supporting GCSE learners initially but more recently learners across the spectrum with high-quality content that is made with teachers, QA'd by teachers and written by educationalists.

We have also done quite a lot of research about the impact of that content. Work we have done with parents has shown that 90% of them are happy if kids are using screens for education and 66% feel that it can have a positive impact on creativity and communication skills if the right content is on there. It is inherent within what the BBC is as an organisation that the content is high fidelity, very heavily QA'd and is delivering against the curriculum. It is about what is on the screen rather than anything else and that is important for us.

To pick up on another point that Baroness Kidron made about early years that also talks to this, we make early years learning content through our series "Tiny Happy People", which is very much focused on parents rather than learners. It speaks to some of the things that Baroness Kidron was saying about kids who are just placed in front of screens and not getting high-quality content. This content is designed to demonstrate to parents, carers and grandparents how they can help to develop language skills and address the word gap with their kids in the home environment and outside. As the BBC, we very much think that there are important and useful roles that we as an organisation—and more broadly the digital education content and tools—can play, provided that they all sit alongside work in the classroom and other homework that is allocated by teachers.

Q69 **Chair:** Do you have any feel for what sort of market share you have in that space, the issue of for-profit versus not-for-profit? How far is the BBC reaching with those high-quality products compared with other channels that may not have quite the same focus?

John McGee: I cannot speak about others but I can say that our reach is around 1.5 million kids per week for BBC Bitesize, which is, by some distance, our largest digital product. BBC Teach, which is for classroom use—short-form clips to animate subjects the kids are learning—reaches around 300,000 kids a week. If we have a live lesson on there, particularly popular ones such as World Book Day or Internet Safety Day, we are touching on 0.5 million kids watching it in a classroom. "Newsround", which is a part of our services, reaches over 3 million kids a week. We are helping a lot of kids, a lot of parents and a lot of teachers. We do a lot with the rest of the commercial sector to make sure that we are not taking every aspect of the sector, but I would say that we are the biggest, although that is not to say that we are dominating the market.

Q70 **Chair:** I will come to Elizabeth Anderson now on that opening question about the distinction between what should always be taught in the classroom, what is better taught online or in the home and whether, overall, you feel that the rise of digital is having a positive or a negative effect.

Elizabeth Anderson: In many ways, it is horses for courses, and we must remember that for many children the classroom experience is not as positive as we would immediately imagine, particularly for those children who have special educational needs, for whom the opportunity to benefit from online learning, where they do not have some of the issues or stimulations or even bullying that they might experience in a school or classroom environment, can be very positive. On the other hand, we know that during the pandemic there has been an incredible impact on socialisation generally and on how particularly young children have been impacted by not being able to be in a classroom environment and around other children of their own age and, therefore, that interaction point, that human, real-life interaction point, is incredibly important. We also know that there is no educational attainment or outcome that is not directly improved by having access to some form of technology these days.

Part of our concern is that digital is not going away, so children who are coming up into the workplace will need access to digital skills. This needs to be balanced against what we hear about, for example, single mothers of six-year-olds who are sent home and expected to be able to download apps and sit perhaps for a couple of hours doing their homework online. We know that even immediately pre-pandemic, around half of all homework was set online. Therefore, when we are talking about screen time and education there very much has to be a distinction between whether this is around the use of digital in the classroom with teachers helping children to become familiar with essential digital skills and media literacy and how to curate and find information versus children being sent home to very much sit on a screen on their own, do their own thing and then re-emerge into the family after a couple of hours. That is a very

difficult balance to strike, especially for parents who might not necessarily be able to provide it.

However, in our view, digital has to play an important part in education in future because that is the way the world is moving now. It is not helpful to create some sort of artificial difference at a time when we see, for example, examination boards such as Pearson announcing that GCSE will be moving online. We must see that children are prepared for that digital world, but in a way that is safe and is complemented by parents and teachers being able to support that digital journey.

Q71 **Chair:** John, expanding on that last point and online qualifications in the future, what are the advantages of online learning that cannot be replicated in the traditional classroom? Elizabeth, do you want to speak to that first?

Elizabeth Anderson: Was the question directed at John McGee?

Chair: It was directed at John, as someone who is very much focused on the provision of online learning, but I am very happy for you to chip in on that as well. I was picking up on the point you just made, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Anderson: I am happy to defer.

John McGee: I think that the main advantage, certainly for us, is that learners can learn at their own pace. People—young learners—can find their own way through BBC Bitesize around the topics of interest to them that they are learning about in school and some of it will be allocated as homework. To us, allowing kids to learn at their own pace and at their own standard is the main benefit.

Baroness Kidron: There are two very important things. The first is the plan B, for when children cannot get to school—because of the pandemic, the floods—and secondly, indeed as Elizabeth Anderson just said, it is an important asset for children with long-term illness, SEN and so on. Another thing, which is underplayed, is that digital has this magical quality of being able to take you anywhere and let you be anyone. You can do space travel from the point of view of being the astronaut and with all the tools on Minecraft, you can build a castle.

I think the problem is that we do not have any quality control. Here we have this fantastic thing that, if it is an excellent tool, has the huge advantage that it can be reproduced infinitely right around the country. If it is a poor tool, that is also true.

Chair: The same thing applies.

Baroness Kidron: The same applies. If we are moving into an environment, which I believe we are, in which technology should, must and will play a part in education—and it is verging on mandatory for children—do we not have a duty to make sure that the efficacy, privacy and safety of that technology has been assured at a very high level? I am sure we will get to whose responsibility that is.

Chair: We must also understand where the data is going, particularly when children are involved.

John McGee: If I may follow up on that, Chair, another point is that the technology can speak to different styles. I know that both Elizabeth Anderson and Baroness Kidron have spoken about kids with SEN and different kids can learn in different ways. With all our content, we take a mixed-media approach. There are videos, images and, increasingly, podcasts for older learners. Some games, if they are done properly, can be very helpful, particularly for things such as maths practice, phonics and other aspects of the younger curriculum. In a digital environment, you can have something that speaks to different types of learners much more speedily and straightforwardly and in a value-for-money way too.

Q72 **Chair:** Elizabeth Anderson already touched on the impact of the pandemic and the growth of online learning during that time. Now that schools have returned, I am interested to know if you have seen any drop-off in the take-up of online products. Is there a balance there in the interest that children are taking in online learning since that period or have you seen it continue to grow?

John McGee: It would be remiss of me not to talk a little bit at this moment about what the BBC did in the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, given the circumstances we found ourselves in and the fact that teachers were new to the idea of teaching remotely, the work that we did through our Bitesize Daily and Lockdown Learning services were incredibly popular. I mentioned in a previous answer that we reach around 1.5 million children a week. During the pandemic, it was touching on an average of nearly 5 million a week. Those were very different circumstances where every kid is learning on a phone or a tablet, for example.

I would say that the numbers are similar to what we had before. The split, interestingly, has changed. There are more younger learners using BBC Bitesize. It was predominantly a key stage 3 and a key stage 4 service, whereas now the split is roughly the same. That was a good thing for us. We have invested more into content and games for that age group because we think that we have something to offer them. As we have talked about PSN, AQA and others moving towards digital examination, kids need to learn in a digital environment at a younger age. That is a trend that we have seen on our services.

Baroness Kidron: I think that it is important to remember that the edtech piece is not just remote learning. In 2020, we saw a 72% increase in edtech and there has been no going back. Globally it is quite astonishing. We have to think more broadly about what that means in the classroom. I am involved in the Digital Futures Commission, led by Professor Sonia Livingstone. It is LSE and 5Rights, and a number of people, including the BBC, have been commissioners—LEGO, Sesame Street, EY, and so on. Sonia did a piece of work that showed how much data from children was leaking out of ClassDojo and Google Classroom. I would be happy to give this report to the Committee if you are interested.

The Chair raised the issue of privacy. I want to make the point 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. One of the things you may wish to look at as a Committee is whether the education sector needs to benefit from the regulatory initiatives that this Government have brought forward.

Chair: That is a very interesting point. Thank you. I saw Elizabeth nodding in agreement to that last point around the balance in safeguarding. Of course schools do safeguarding, but their specialism is not online safeguarding and following data. I think that there is a valid point to be looked into there. I will bring in Mohammad. He has some further questions on this.

Q73 **Mohammad Yasin:** Thank you so much. The covid-19 pandemic highlighted the extent of digital exclusion, particularly within higher education. In the early days of the pandemic, locally-led initiatives scrambled to find laptops and other devices for children who desperately needed them for home learning. It was not just about access to devices but also to broadband. What is your assessment after the pandemic? Is the level of access to digital devices better now? Did you learn anything from the pandemic and lockdown?

Elizabeth Anderson: There is a common misconception that, coming out of the pandemic, the problem has been solved—that a great light was shone on the digital divide during the pandemic and the myriad initiatives tackled this problem. That is not a view that we share at the Digital Poverty Alliance. Recent research that we conducted with Deloitte—who did a piece of work for us pro bono—found that 20% of children still lack access to a device suitable for learning. We often talk to children who are trying to complete homework, coursework or A-level coursework on a shared smartphone. That is not a device that is suitable for learning. The lack of access to devices persists. At the moment we are in a cost of living crisis. Families do not have the disposable income they need to be able to purchase laptops or other keyboarded devices that are now almost essential for their children to complete their education.

Alongside that, as you mentioned, is access to broadband. There was a piece of work by Citizens Advice last year that found that up to 1 million households were turning off their broadband because of the cost of living crisis. Those on low incomes particularly tend to opt for mobile data and for a mobile data package that provides the least value for money. They go for the cheapest option that has the least data, get partway through the month and run out of data. Therefore, they are either paying over the odds to continue to access data or their children do not have access to the internet for the remainder of that month. This is at a time when, as everybody here will recognise, there has been a rush to move services

online, whether that is remote learning or homework. There is an expectation that you cannot complete that with pen and paper; you can only complete that online. We regularly hear about children who receive detention because their parents cannot afford to provide them with the tools they need to do the homework, so they are punished for not being able to do that homework. That is a continually growing issue.

Alongside that, we have all the issues around skills, motivation, trust, lack of technical support for devices. Devices that were handed out during the pandemic are now three to four years old. Many organisations would say that they would not use three or four-year-old technology, especially given that a lot of the technology that was given out was of low quality, low spec and not future-proofed for Windows 11. Those devices were incredibly helpful at the time, but now we are back to the problem with many more children coming through the school system who have not had the benefit of even those devices.

Q74 **Mohammad Yasin:** What help is available for those families?

Elizabeth Anderson: This remains incredibly limited. There are schemes run to help people get online. The Digital Poverty Alliance runs a scheme called Tech4Families. This is based purely on donations we raise from the public. One of our corporate partners takes donations from customers in store and we then buy laptops with those. We work in seven locations around the UK. There is a national device bank, but that only services adults. There is no national device bank yet that services children. There are initiatives to support schools. We work with some schools around the UK to take payment donations to help schools to purchase or lease laptops to help children. Other than the very few national initiatives such as Tech4Families or local initiatives commonly run sporadically by community groups or by some local authorities who are more forward thinking than others—but I could count those on the fingers of my hand—there is no nationwide focus to allow parents to get access to the technology that children need.

Q75 **Mohammad Yasin:** What is your definition of digital poverty, and what are the main factors affecting children's online learning tools?

Elizabeth Anderson: To answer the first question, the definition of digital poverty we use is the inability to access digital services when, where and how an individual needs. That is important because commonly there is a view that you could go to the library, for example. If you live in a city centre location and you have a central library, that is a fantastic resource. If you live in a rural or coastal community, which are often the most isolated and where we often see multiple types of deprivation, including digital poverty, library services tend to be a lot more limited. They might be run by volunteers. They might only be open, say, from 2 pm until 4 pm. That is not an answer to people being online.

On some of the main factors, as I mentioned, as well as devices and connectivity, it is the skills to be able to use online services, particularly as we look towards high-stake examinations moving online. Keyboard skills

will be incredibly important. Just because a child is proficient in using TikTok, for example, does not mean that they can use digital services fully. There is also the media literacy point—being able to critically evaluate information found online, which sits alongside trust and parental confidence in children having access and being comfortable with children having that access.

As I also mentioned, there are things such as technical support and accessibility of services—do they meet the needs of all users? Are they compatible with screen readers, for example? More widely there is the motivation of parents to get online. Do they see this as something that is important, or do they still have an inherent feeling that their family does not need to be connected to the internet?

Q76 **Ian Mearns:** You have raised a whole range of issues there, Elizabeth. I represent an urban constituency. I am literally, as the crow flies, a mile from Newcastle city centre across the river in Gateshead. Just because youngsters live in a town centre location, that does not mean they have easy access to a library or the computer services that might reside there. I know that in my own local library service, and the one in Newcastle city centre, quite often access to digital technology is limited to one-hour sessions. A one-hour session is nowhere near good enough to compensate a youngster for not having access to a computer at home.

I think that the last point you made about youngsters not actually being able to develop keyboard skills will become hugely important if, as we heard earlier, some exams at GCSE level will be put entirely online using digital devices. A youngster who does not have access to a keyboard will not have the keyboard skills or the speed to answer an online exam question on a level playing field. There is a whole range of things all mixed up within that. I was impressed by that set of statistics at the beginning—that 20% of youngsters do not have access to a device that is suitable for learning, and that a smartphone is not a suitable device. I think that is really powerful. Even in families that do have access to a suitable device, one between three or four is not enough.

Baroness Kidron: Just a small point. One thing that the young people I work with say again and again is that they do not have the space and the conditions in which to work. There is this beautiful idea of them with their laptop and their headphones on and so on, but actually that is not a reality. If it will be normative that children should access their education through a device that is not a phone, and that is how the rest of the class are working, we as an education system have to provide that device. If not, we have to provide alternative means of learning that do not discriminate against that child. I say that both ways around because I had a letter from a mother in Cornwall who said she would not let her child use Google Classroom for the very reasons we have already discussed, and that child was put with a teaching assistant separately, while the rest of the class carried on in Google Classroom. She of course gave in because it was punitive.

I think we have to have a holistic and authoritative decision about how we teach our children, and the technology has to come within that, rather than seeing it as an individual family choice or opportunity.

John McGee: If I may make a point about skills as well, it is not just about keyboarding skills. Increasingly, young people are required to be more conversant with computing skills for future careers. In the BBC, we invented a little codable device called a micro:bit about seven years ago and gave a million of those out to kids in year 7 across the UK. We are doing a second generation of that, working with the Micro:bit Educational Foundation and with Nominet, the guardians of the co.uk domain. We are giving out over half a million micro:bit units to schools across the country, training teachers—particularly primary teachers who are not particularly proficient with coding, machine learning and terminology like this—to help to upskill kids in the classroom with these little codable devices that do fun little games, so that they can learn a bit about it. They are devices going into classrooms that they can use to set them up for the world of work in the future.

Q77 **Mohammad Yasin:** Elizabeth, you mentioned quite a few issues there, but if you had to choose one policy response to digital poverty, what would it be?

Elizabeth Anderson: I would absolutely concur with Beeban that it is the access to a device that is the gateway. You cannot deal with skills, technical support or accessibility needs until somebody actually has a laptop sitting in front of them. If I could wave a magic wand, I would look to the school system to be able to provide a laptop to every individual child.

Baroness Kidron: I think that it is not only the device. My wish is for a more rigorous and holistic view of technology from the Department so that all these things fall into a coherent plan. I am sure we will get to it in the digital literacy piece. There are so many fragmented approaches to this. We either have to have local councils who can afford and are empowered to make sure that children are at school and have the devices they need to access the learning, or we have to do it school by school. There is a gap in the system. There is no one with the responsibility and there is no one with the money currently.

Q78 **Mohammad Yasin:** A number of local authorities are suffering from a lack of resources. They are finding it very difficult to help those schools.

Baroness Kidron: I do not think that I need to persuade this Committee that education is a core function of Government.

Q79 **Mohammad Yasin:** Absolutely. Thank you. John, we have previously heard evidence to suggest that parents want support to identify high quality educational resources. Can you talk us through what the BBC is doing to make sure that the resources they provide are high quality?

John McGee: Sure. It is an intense and rigorous process. Keeping BBC Bitesize in gear is a bit like painting the Forth bridge, if you will forgive my cliché. The curriculum changes constantly, social norms change and how

we represent different parts of the curriculum on our screens changes all the time. We go through an annual process to work out what needs freshening up. We have conversations with teachers and learners to understand which parts of our content—video or otherwise—need a change.

It is effectively a 12-month commissioning process for us. The first six months of that is a research phase, where the team in BBC Education work with educationalists, teaching consultants and learners themselves through focus groups and outreach sessions to understand what it is that they would like to see from BBC Education, to understand trends within the particular subject, and look at the most recent pedagogical and academic literature. That comes into a hefty pack of information so that we know everything about what the rest of the market is doing and the BBC can focus its funding in the right place.

That then goes out to a commission. We ask third parties to tender to the BBC. Some of them are SME education companies and some of them are independent AV companies who will make our content. They have to employ their own educational consultants, as do we in the BBC. Many of our team in the BBC and Salford are ex-teachers. A huge amount of QA goes into every piece of work we do to make sure it delivers against all the needs of the curriculum and that it is age appropriate.

As I mentioned before in answer to the Chair's question, we want to make sure that that is mixed media and that the content we are commissioning is age appropriate and in the best format to deliver against the learning outcomes they need. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes that is commissioning a game, sometimes it is a high-quality animation video or sometimes it is bringing in a well-known personality from the BBC family to explain historical or natural environment issues. It is a 12-month process within which we are led as an organisation and as a team by inputs from educationalists and learners to make sure it is high quality, high efficacy and will get used at the end.

Q80 **Mohammad Yasin:** We have often seen that parents struggle to identify which online educational resources are best for their children to use. What can be done to best assist them?

John McGee: That is a good question. The BBC would say that it is not the only organisation making good quality educational content. It would take a step back here and say that this is for teachers. They have agency to make sure that they are finding the right content that delivers the curriculum as they want it to. As an organisation, we are happy to link to third-party providers where we know that it is being well used in the classroom and is well thought of by the teacher community with whom we work. That is something that we can do.

Baroness Kidron: I would like to broaden that out a bit and commend the BBC for the quality of their education material. When I was looking at some of the evidence that has come to the Committee—the UCL evidence that looked at maths apps for under-fives—I was interested to note that of the

25 most popular, only one had been peer reviewed. Half of them did not fulfil what we consider to be learning circles of reinforcement and so on. Six of them had no maths whatsoever. We are in a situation where, when parents look for education apps, when teachers look on online, there is no quality control.

I was very interested to hear the Chair's comment that the DFE is congenitally against recommending products. However, I see no reason why the DFE should not have standards by which products are rated. I would urge the Committee. There is a review by Ofcom on the app stores. I am all for entertainment. Let them put some of those games and educational things as entertainment, but we must label education things with quality control, some sort of understanding of what it gives, otherwise we are outsourcing to parents what either tech companies or the Department should be doing. We have to push upstream into saying that things that parade as educational technology should do the sort of work the BBC just described.

Q81 **Ian Mearns:** A brief point on that. It seems as though there is a void here in making sure that the content is practical, fair and of usable quality. Is there any scope for the DFE, say in conjunction with the BBC—which is a not-for-profit organisation—to organise some industry-wide peer review of educational content? It is a daft idea, but if there was peer-on-peer review of educational content provided by different companies, would there be any scope for that? It might be an industry-wide agreement, given that all these companies, I guess, would proclaim that they are doing an awful lot of this output for entirely altruistic reasons.

John McGee: I think that it would be quite complicated within the BBC's objects to do that. We have to be careful, as you are no doubt aware, about offering recommendation and prominence as an organisation at all levels, including in education. We have really good working relationships with the DFE where it is appropriate and where we feel like there is common cause. I have mentioned early years, which is an area that is particularly nascent in its understanding of the impacts that screens can have, where there is not a huge amount of high-quality work. We are proud of the work that we have done. We know that the DFE has worked with some other providers such as the National Literacy Trust on good schemes.

Where there is a common agreement that there is a particularly strong reason for us to work in concert with the Department, we can and we have, but as a general rule of thumb, I think that it would be a complex position for the BBC to take to make recommendations.

Q82 **Chair:** The point Baroness Kidron made is that it is a role for academics. UCL was the example given there. Organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation or the NFER might have a role in that, rather than organisations in the public and private sector working together.

Baroness Kidron: Exactly. I think that where the DFE could use its influence is working with a certification scheme, as happens elsewhere.

Ian Mearns: A kitemark?

Baroness Kidron: Yes, exactly, a kitemark—"This is what we expect; that if you use it in schools, these are the areas that you will have looked at".

Q83 **Chair:** Out of interest, have you come across any jurisdictions where that is being done?

Baroness Kidron: Do you know what, I have not. I will think about that and write to you if I can see one. Nesta did a fantastic review of edtech and it could not have been more tech positive, but it found that 88% of edtech geared towards toddlers had advertising. I think there needs to be a few rules of engagement for something to be considered educational.

Chair: Thank you. I will bring in Caroline. We need to make a little more progress. We are going into great detail on every question, which is great, but we will run out of time.

Q84 **Caroline Ansell:** This is an important question, I think. We consider that our young people are digital natives and we are all on catch-up. Elizabeth made the point that just because they can navigate TikTok does not mean they can access the wealth of opportunities or are alive to some of the challenges and dangers, in actual fact. In that light, what is your assessment of the digital literacy of our children and young people in the UK?

Baroness Kidron: I would like to answer this by making two observations. The first thing is that children have a very low tolerance of adults who do not understand the digital world telling them how to be safe. That is my first observation.

My second observation, which I hope will be more useful, is to say that I have been struck—and this is experiential from a decade of working directly with children, running deliberative workshops that are quite complex—that those who have done e-safety recently or have been through industry-promoted education tend to make themselves responsible for the outcome. They tend to feel that it is their behaviour that determines the outcome for them online. Those that do the workshops with 5Rights and with myself, who understand data, algorithmic unfairness and AI, have a completely different attitude and they become gladiators for their own agency online, because they can see that they are being pushed and shoved about. The very last one that I did was about generative AI and LLMs for kids between 12 and 19 and at the end of the session they suggested rules for LLMs that mirrored almost exactly the White House framework blueprint for AI ethics. Almost exactly.

We do not have enough about the purposes, design and functionality of the system, and we have gone down the line on e-safety that many children are not ready to hear until after it is too late.

Caroline Ansell: Thank you. That is hugely helpful.

John McGee: We think exactly the same. Your first point made me chuckle, because that is absolutely what we have found. We think that it is important and incumbent upon us as the UK's biggest media organisation

to play a role in combating misinformation, fake news and ensuring that particularly teenage learners understand digital literacy. As you said, they are digitally native.

To go back to my point in answer to Mr Yasin's question, we have done an awful lot of work to think about what the right role is for the BBC. A lot of our conclusions have been that that there is a role, and we need to do it in a way that does not sound like uncool adults preaching to young people. We have a campaign that is a joint venture between BBC Bitesize and BBC News called Other Side of the Story. A huge amount of work has gone into that. It has come from the voice of young people. We have worked really closely, particularly with kids in disadvantaged areas, who research has shown are particularly susceptible to digital issues online.

We do a lot of outreach in schools. We reach about 1,000 kids a year teaching them about what fake news and misinformation is, giving them the tools to be interrogative, to understand news gathering and why sourcing is important, and to make their own news reports, their own podcasts and so on, to give them some practical skills that help them to identify issues online.

I mentioned that the voice is important. We are on the social media platforms that they use, such as TikTok, where we think it is important that the BBC has a presence with brands that they know. BBC Newsround and BBC Bitesize have a presence on those platforms specifically for this reason, to show content that is a ballast to some of the things that they may find there from a source that they know is trusted and high quality. When it is teaching them about fake news through the form of a young teenager doing a rap—believe me, that is a thing we commissioned that has had millions of views—they know what that is and they socialise it. It is important to us to be in that space. We think that we have an important role to play. To the point that Baroness Kidron made, you have to do it in a way that feels authentic.

Q85 **Caroline Ansell:** Understood. I would like to come back on that, as we are all uncool adults in the room. I will come to Elizabeth and then come back on a quick supplementary if I may.

Elizabeth Anderson: There is very limited research that addresses how many children have high levels of digital skills versus those who do not. For the adult population, the digital exclusion sector looks towards Lloyds Bank because they do regular research that shows how consumers are accessing technology. Around 11 million people in this country lack the ability to do the most basic things on a computer, such as turning it on or accessing the internet.

There is not that level of information for children. From the latest Nominet Digital Youth Index we know that over half of children have taught themselves. They self-declare that they have taught themselves their digital skills. This suggests to us that there is no programme out there ensuring that children have the digital and media literacy they need because they are figuring it out as they go along. From an online safety

perspective, the same report shows that 76% of young people have had an upsetting online experience. Again, we are not providing children with the level of safety, awareness and guidance that might be needed to protect people from that. Of course, again, that is children self-declaring that they found something upsetting. We know that upsetting things happen in the real world as well as the online world, but it does suggest that we should be doing more. We also know that statistic is growing year on year.

I flippantly referred to TikTok earlier on, but we know anecdotally that headteachers are reporting to us and to other bodies that children are fine when it comes to using a mobile. They are highly digitally literate if you need something done on a phone. If you need something done on social media, again they are right there. If you need a PowerPoint presentation designed, a Word document written, a CV done so you can move into work, or an essay crafted to go towards A-level coursework, this is where those digital skills are not coming through. These are the digital skills that will be needed as children coming through secondary school today enter the workplace. They will need to be able to use those Office suites, to be able to navigate the online world in a way that does not come across upsetting content and how to differentiate between fake news and reality.

Those are the skills that children are not generating. It is a bit of a myth that kids are fine, kids are digital natives. Just because they can use a smartphone, it does not mean that they have the digital skills and the digital maturity to be able to do that safely, productively, efficiently and effectively.

Q86 **Caroline Ansell:** That is rather reflected by an Ofcom study, which showed that nearly a quarter of young people between the ages of 12 and 17—who said they were confident in their digital skills—had been unable to correctly identify what was actually fake content. Another statistic that echoed what you shared earlier said that only 41% of younger children, aged 8 to 17 in this instance, correctly identified links at the top of a search page that were sponsored ads. Again, that is the profit drive you talked about. Given those statistics and what you previously shared, what more should schools do? You have described what you are doing on those platforms. You said you were working with schools where that was appropriate and clearly feeding into education, but what more can schools do in this context?

Baroness Kidron: If I might just cut across very quickly, I want to respond to the thing about fake news. Again, why are we asking the children? Government ducked mis/disinformation. Companies do not deal with mis/disinformation. We are now asking children to identify material to say whether it is fake. Sometimes that is above their reading age. Also, we are moving into an era of synthetic material, in which we will have to think much more carefully about how it is for any human being to identify. The reason I am saying this very particularly was that although I agreed with the vast majority of what Vicki Shotbolt said in your last session, I was really disturbed by the idea that Parent Zone works alongside Google because children trust it more than any other source. These are the

purveyors of the misinformation that we are asking children to trust. We may come again to branded digital literacy.

I am sorry, Caroline, it is slightly off, but I am saying that we must not ask schools to do what is not their job. I think that they need more support.

Chair: We will come back to that.

Q87 **Caroline Ansell:** I completely understand about that mission creep, particularly as a former teacher, but they are one of the pillars that was referenced.

Baroness Kidron: Absolutely.

Caroline Ansell: We probably need to move on.

Q88 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** To build on that, where are the gaps in the curriculum? Is it the teachers' responsibility? We have heard about all the organisations that are doing it too, which is great but presumably not all children have access to those organisations from a time point of view. Teachers are not trained in digital skills either. Should these gaps be filled by organisations or should we train up teachers to be able to do it in schools themselves?

John McGee: I do not think that is for me to say. The statistics of our content in this field probably bear out that there is a desire for high-quality content that fills this vacuum. I mentioned earlier that we have a live lesson we put out to primary learners and teachers every year on Safer Internet Day, and it is one of the highest-performing pieces of content that we do year on year on BBC Teach. Over half a million children watch that, which suggests that there is a need for teachers that is not being fulfilled.

We work closely with the UK Safer Internet centre, Childnet and Internet Matters—who I know you heard from in your last session—to make sure that that content is of great quality. We push that out to teachers as best as we can to try to get as many of them to use both that and the content that I was discussing on Other Side of the Story in our last answer. It feels like that is something that teachers want to know more about and understand better because it is clearly something that they want to be using in the classroom.

Baroness Kidron: I had a look at the Government's digital literacy framework in the run-up to coming here today and it is excellent, except there are five different areas of school teaching that have to deliver it, I think I counted 23 times where it says, "You could teach," and there are a lot of things missing. We hear from schools again and again that they do not have the time, the expertise or the teachers. They are doing a little bit and then pulling in alternative providers if they are lucky, which is a bit of a postcode lottery. I think that the answer is that that curriculum needs to be front and centre if we are going to be a country that lives alongside automated technology in a coherent way. We need this front and centre of our education system, and it is the DFE's role to do it. All this is not an excuse for companies to not provide safe and age-appropriate products.

Q89 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** At the moment, it is relationship, sex and health education—I have to look because it keeps changing—that is seen as the main means of addressing digital safety. Is that where it should be? I would not have thought so.

Baroness Kidron: I think your next session may well deal with the fact that they cannot manage all of it. When I challenge Government Ministers at the Dispatch Box, again and again they say, "The computing system, the computer course".

Chair: Which is being delivered to a very small number of children.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Exactly.

Baroness Kidron: That is the small number of children and also many teachers will say that is way too late. You need it towards the end of primary school. I think that we need staged coherent building information. I very much support what Elizabeth said about skills. I am trying to say that we need a social understanding and we need to prioritise some of the design things that are not coming through in the safety programmes—the "How does the algorithm work?" and "What does it know about you?" piece of it all.

Q90 **Ian Mearns:** This is a question to you all. Do you believe that the major tech companies are sponsoring digital literacy programmes without a conflict of interest occurring?

Chair: Beeban, I think you already made your view clear on that.

Baroness Kidron: I am happy to say that they cannot. Let us be fair here. If they want to put all that money into education and not be brand recognition and a programme of teaching children how to use their product, I see no reason why they could not put into a central fund delivered by an independent third party to support whatever efforts Government makes. But we are in the 21st century here, and if this is not a question for the DFE, I am not quite sure what is. Ofcom has just published a consultation—I have forgotten what it is called, but it is the piece where you get education by design within the system. I think that the companies could do a very good job there. Ofcom's principles are fantastic. It is a pity they are not mandatory.

Q91 **Ian Mearns:** Any thoughts, John?

John McGee: I do not feel that is really a matter for the BBC.

Ian Mearns: But you are an individual. You can surely venture an opinion.

John McGee: I am here to speak on behalf of the BBC, Mr Mearns.

Q92 **Ian Mearns:** Okay. Elizabeth, do you have anything to add?

Elizabeth Anderson: I very much agree with the Baroness, and I echo the Making Sense of Media consultation, which I think is the consultation that she was referring to. One of the calls that we have made is that there need to be universal standards, universal performance indicators and not

an industry-led, principles-based approach. If we are to reach a point where corporates are not looking at this from a self-interest or conflict of interest perspective, having firm rules that are shared, which everybody has to adhere to, even if there is some kind of differential between small business and big business, is the only way to ensure a consistent and safe approach for children.

Q93 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. How can private companies best ensure that algorithms designed to attract adults to content do not affect children?

Baroness Kidron: I commented earlier about extending the age-appropriate design code, which deals with extended use. We fought, and I have to say happily won, for one element of the Online Safety Act to talk about extended use and addictive qualities, but the real answer to the question is that it is a feature not a bug. This is how they are deliberately designed. There are many thousands of behavioural psychologists in Silicon Valley trying to attract our attention.

My view has always been that children should be exempt from the business model. That is why I introduced the age-appropriate design code in the first place, and that is why I think it has been picked up around the world in the way that it has, but we need rigorous enforcement, we need political will behind it and we need to extend it into the education tech space.

Q94 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. Anything to add, anyone?

John McGee: As an organisation, we have some broad principles for AI across the whole of the BBC. For us, where we use it, it is about acting in the interests of the audience. We prioritise talent and creativity. We want people to be making great quality content, whether they are stories or educational films, rather than for it to be made by generative AI.

We want to make sure that where we are using it, we tell people we are using it. In an education environment, that is probably about content recommendation and personalisation of our content for a learner—"Here are some questions that may stretch you. Here are some things that you got wrong last time." It is absolutely not making content using AI. The recommendation, if we were to use it within BBC Bitesize, which we are not currently, is that it would only be trained locally on the BBC's Bitesize content.

Q95 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you. Anything to add, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Anderson: The only point I will add is that in this conversation we forget about parents. There is a lot to be done in providing parents with the education, tools and awareness themselves to be able to curate the websites and services that children are accessing. When that is taking place in the home, parents need information on how to best approach talking to their children about what is being accessed, ensuring that children are not accessing content hidden away in their own room and that is being done in a family space where parents can keep an eye. Until parents understand the breadth of the skills that they need in media literacy, we are not

empowering them to be able to take the decisions about what they are comfortable with their children doing online.

Q96 **Ian Mearns:** Are there any incentives for companies to take a more age-appropriate approach to the use of algorithms to encourage digital media usage?

Baroness Kidron: I think the incentives are regulatory. There are business—

Q97 **Ian Mearns:** Do they exist now, though? I would guess from what has been said so far that they do not to a great enough extent.

Baroness Kidron: Yes. The Government should be commended for the passage of the Online Safety Act. It is imperfect and it does not cover everything, but we are going to have a children's code coming through from Ofcom later in the year and some of these things will be central to the children's code. I would like to see more action from the ICO on the addictive piece of the AADC.

You cannot overestimate, nor should we, the significance of the redesign in response to regulation and anticipating regulation, in a way that we have not seen for the last 20 years. Some of what we are seeking now is, as Elizabeth says, to have acceptable standards of design online that say that you cannot just hook a kid in for your own purposes. You cannot just pretend it is educational and use it as an opportunity to advertise to them. You cannot go into schools and train kids to use your product as they come out. We need to have a higher bar of what we think is developmentally appropriate. We have a lot of evidence for that.

Q98 **Ian Mearns:** Going back to what I was saying earlier, from your perspective, are there any very good international examples of regulatory frameworks that already exist in other countries?

Baroness Kidron: There have been some interesting advances in the edtech space and, again, I am happy to write with the precise examples. France and Denmark have a different privacy deal centrally with some of the education platforms. They have used the power of their education buy, their purchasing power, to renegotiate the relationship in a way that you cannot do school by school. There are some things coming out of Australia, Singapore and Argentina that are all interesting. In fact, I did bring a small gift for the Committee, or at least for the Committee Clerk. It is a very long book but it is a fantastic tome that UNESCO did, looking at edtech in the two years since covid.

Chair: Very good. I look forward to the Clerks reading it with great interest. It is worth picking up that you mentioned France and UNESCO. One of the things we are hoping to be able to do with this inquiry is to go to Paris to talk to UNESCO and the French education system about their approach to this. We are glad to hear that that is one of the areas that you think we ought to be focusing on.

I think we have covered the first panel in great depth. Thank you very much for your input today. If it is all right, I will ask you to hand over to

the second panel. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jonathan Baggaley and Darren Northcott.

Q99 **Chair:** We are going to move seamlessly on. I am delighted to welcome our second panel. We have Jonathan Baggaley, Chief Executive of the PSHE Association, and Darren Northcott, National Officer for Education at NASUWT, The Teachers' Union. Thank you very much for joining us.

I will start by asking Jonathan to talk us through how the current PSHE curriculum addresses digital literacy and online safety. To what extent is the PSHE online safety curriculum supplemented by other subjects and what is your view on that? That would be helpful.

Jonathan Baggaley: The starting point has to be that PSHE, personal, social, health and economic education, is about children's real lives. It is about their health and wellbeing, their relationships, their careers and their futures. As we all know, huge aspects of their lives and our lives are encased in digital technologies. They are mediated by those technologies. PSHE has to be preparing young people for a world in which these technologies are pervasive.

It has always been incumbent on us as an organisation to ensure that we are incorporating digital technologies throughout the curriculum. Historically, I think it is fair to say that the primary focus in the curriculum has been on one aspect of digital literacy, which is online safety. We have seen, over the last 15 years, a huge amount of focus on that in schools. I think it is fair to say that teachers see that as a primary responsibility within PSHE, and indeed surveys from the Office of the Children's Commissioner found that 83% of young people said that internet safety was the topic that was most covered in PSHE. We have a situation in which there is significant coverage.

There is then the question: does that mean that children are being effectively prepared for life in this world? We have made great strides in ensuring that young people have a sense of what some of those risks are online, but online safety is only one aspect of what we are talking about.

To give us a bit of a definitional framework to work with, I see it splitting into three pieces. First, as we have already talked about, there are the functional digital skills—using a keyboard and being able to use applications you might use in the workplace. That is, obviously, absolutely critical. Then there is a second strand, which I would see as the social, emotional and behavioural aspects, the ways in which the internet may have an impact on your safety or your health and happiness. That is very much the area that PSHE is and has been strongly focused on.

On the approach, we take it that wherever you are teaching PSHE—if you are teaching about drugs and alcohol education or you are teaching about vaping—you should be thinking about online influences. If you are teaching about balanced lifestyles, you should be thinking about the ways in which

digital technologies are balanced against other activities. If you are teaching about careers, you should be thinking about how you present yourself online, and so on. That is not necessarily the approach that is universal. There are some schools doing fantastic work, but there is still this primary focus on online safety.

There are those two strands and then there is the third, which we have already heard from Baroness Kidron, which I feel is a significant gap. That is about the purposes and designs of the platforms themselves. If we think about the education of the last 15 years, there has been a huge focus on what you might think of as things taking place on top of the platforms—people interacting with one another, bad actors and then the content young people might see. There has been very little focus on what takes place underneath, like how data is collected, generated and used, algorithms curating your experience, algorithms making decisions about you, persuasive design and all of those aspects.

That is an area where, as Baroness Kidron pointed out, if we do not equip young people with that understanding, there is the very real risk that we are responsibilising them. It is critical that you have an understanding of the ways in which you may find yourself in risky situations and things that might keep young people safer, and there are ways to teach that that are not about placing the responsibility on young people.

There are ways of doing that very badly. If we think about the teaching of nude image sharing, for instance, some of the early messages about that were very much, "If you have taken a nude image of yourself and sent it on, that is your fault and you should not have done that". That led to some really poor outcomes for young people. Prior to the PSHE Association, I was at the Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre, where we saw young people hiding things because they were afraid of police action. We cannot be in that situation, but there are also ways of doing that incredibly well. Rather than siloing the teaching of digital technology separately, "Here is a lesson on nude image sharing", it has to be integrated into a programme of relationships and sex education that is teaching all of the aspects, the real-world aspects and the online aspects as well.

Q100 **Chair:** That brings on the link to the whole difficult debate around what is age appropriate at what phase. You have talked about the curriculum as if it is a seamless process. Of course, there is a big challenge around what needs to be done in the primary phase and what needs to be done in secondary. Do you want to expand a little bit on that and how the PSHE elements around digital literacy can be linked to better relationships and sex education? I agree that they are fundamentally connected but, of course, as you will be aware, this Committee has taken a strong interest in how we ensure that that is done in an age-appropriate way, and there are significant pressures in that respect.

Jonathan Baggaley: Absolutely. I suppose there are two starting points. One is that PSHE education is preventive education. Just as if you are sending a child out to cross the road for the first time on their own, you would have taught them how to do it before they do it. There is a need to

embed skills and knowledge before young people experience the sorts of risks that they may face. At the same time, it is critical that it is age appropriate and developmentally appropriate.

If we look at how that is done well, it is about a sequenced curriculum that is building as young people grow. Just as we do not start teaching maths with compound interest, we start with basic numeracy, similarly we do not start teaching consent by teaching about sexual consent. We start teaching about sharing toys in nursery and these things build.

When we think about the digital world, again, as I am sure you will have heard, young people's exposure to online pornography—for example, according to the Children's Commissioner's research, 50% of 13-year-olds, and 10% of nine-year-olds having already seen it—is obviously deeply troubling. We have done a lot of work around the very real dangers to young people of exposure to online pornography. We need to have a sequenced curriculum that prepares young people for that in a way that is not instructional, is not even about pornography itself, but is about recognising that there may be things that you see online that, in the very basic things, where do you get help? How do you raise a concern that you have?

We have been doing high-quality, age-appropriate relationships and sex education for a very long time, since long before smartphones came out and increased the sheer amount of information young people might be exposed to. I do not see it as a significant challenge, provided we start with a strong understanding of safe and effective practices within PSHE and a strong understanding of where young people are at. We have to be alive to the experiences that young people are having and what we need to be teaching them about in the moment and preparing them for.

Q101 **Chair:** Thank you. Darren, I can see you nodding to a lot of that. Is there anything you want to add from the teacher's perspective on the growth in demand on teachers for providing this content alongside a very full curriculum?

Darren Northcott: And the extent to which teachers take this very seriously and want to get it right. There is a big demand out there. We heard earlier from our colleague from the BBC that when they produced materials around Safer Internet Day they got a huge amount of traffic. The appetite for doing this well is there. There are barriers, and some of them you have discussed this morning, but that intention to make sure that children can navigate the online world safely, effectively and in a way that exploits its potential is something that schools take seriously. They ask for support and help to do that effectively.

Q102 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Is it your assessment that at the moment digital literacy is not being very taught very well in schools?

Darren Northcott: I think it is an issue about, first of all, what we mean by digital literacy. You can go online and you can look at lots of different definitions of it. If we are talking about how well children can navigate the digital space, there are lots of reasons why perhaps those children are not

necessarily where we all might want them to be. Ofsted did a lot of work looking at digital literacy. Some of the evidence it cited was a bit out of date. It talked about, for example, this issue of not making an assumption that children are all digital natives. It warned about assuming that when you are engaging with children and young people. I think that is right, but a lot of that evidence is from 10, 12 or 15 years ago, and the pandemic changed a lot of opinions in that respect.

There are certainly things that we could do better. There is a debate around the impact of the move from ICT to computer science. Has that impacted upon digital literacy? Yes, I certainly think that every fair-minded person would say more still needs to be done to give children the ability to engage with this material and these resources effectively.

Q103 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Should that come from the classroom? I know a lot of children are turning to outside organisations—they are provided by charities and private organisations, particularly Google, as we mentioned earlier—despite being taught about digital literacy at school. Why do you think this is?

Darren Northcott: I think there are both. Digital literacy cannot completely be secured within the school space. Children, young people and their families always want to go out there and augment whatever they learn at school and the skills they develop at school. The challenge for us, knowing that people will do that anyway to develop their skills and understandings outside of the formal context of a school, is: what are we doing, what is the industry doing and what are the Government doing to make sure that can be done in a way that is safe, effective and coheres with the educational content that children engage with at school?

Q104 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** From a PSHE point of view, is it a risk if they are looking to augment their knowledge online rather than in the classroom?

Jonathan Baggaley: It certainly can be, depending on where they are looking. Certainly, if you are looking at some of the topics within PSHE, if you are looking at relationships and sex education and you are getting all your information from TikTok, there may be some very real questions to be asked. There are some influencers out there, I am sure, providing some useful information, but how are young people supposed to differentiate that?

If we take this seriously as a subject, we would not expect young people to go and learn algebra from TikTok. We would not expect young people to learn history augmenting it outside. Darren makes a very good point that PSHE is always a partnership with parents and carers. It is the one subject where you will be pulling in influences from lots of different places. However, we have to take seriously the responsibility that we have as a subject, and as teachers of the subject, to ensure that we are doing our utmost to provide young people with a strong, coherent programme of teaching that then can be augmented by other sources, but that is an augmentation. I think we have to put the emphasis, just as we would in any other subject, on supporting teachers and schools to do this well.

Q105 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Are there any advantages of online learning that cannot be replicated in the traditional classroom?

Jonathan Baggaley: I start from the perspective that simply because we are talking about digital literacy, we should not therefore assume that digital tools will be the most effective solution to how we teach it. As you have heard from the previous panel, it is complex. There are some high-quality, high-fidelity programmes out there and then there is a vast array of apps and other services available that are either taking huge amounts of data from schools or are just not shown to be educationally effective.

My question would be: in PSHE, what do we know about the effectiveness of using online tools for this type of teaching? Learning is a social process, no more so than in PSHE. Our emphasis is very much how we support, in the first instance, human teachers teaching human children with tools for which the starting point is not online.

None of that is to say that there cannot also be some fabulous tools to help young people explore those worlds, but if those tools are mimicking the jumpy, frenetic, intense environment that they are experiencing in TikTok, we should be asking very real questions. Shouldn't their school experience at least provide some respite from those sorts of experiences? Just because we are teaching about those does not mean we need digital technology to do it, but done well it can be helpful.

Q106 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** From your point of view, online teaching?

Darren Northcott: I think most teachers would say that the best place for children is in school, in a physical school, in a classroom. That is why the issue around school closures and all the rest of it became so contentious during the pandemic.

However, those online resources have an important role to play. For example, over the past few months, we have seen schools that have had learning disrupted because of the RAAC issue, and they have been able to transition very quickly to remote learning. That creates challenges but it does have a place. Some interesting work is being taken forward around children who perhaps find difficulty in attending school for all kinds of reasons. While you are addressing the issues and the barriers they have, you can sustain their educational entitlement through online learning.

Online is important, but a default principle is that online provision is the servant of in-school provision rather than a replacement for it.

Mrs Flick Drummond: That is a great way of putting it. Thank you.

Q107 **Ian Mearns:** What are the main challenges to the effectiveness of the PSHE/RSHE curriculum in improving digital literacy and online safety among children and young people?

Jonathan Baggaley: I would split this in two. There are the challenges in the general effectiveness of PSHE and challenges that PSHE faces.

We are in a far improved situation following the statutory guidance and requirements. We certainly, as an organisation, have seen a sea change in the provision of PSHE, which is fantastic. We are seeing far more of the things we want to see, which are timetabled lessons, an increase in teacher training and planned curriculums, not just leaving it to a series of assemblies. We are seeing great improvement. However, it is only three years since the guidance came out, two of those disrupted by covid. There is a road to travel to get to where we would like to see it across the board.

Challenges within PSHE, which then also affect our delivery of digital literacy, are, of course, teacher training. There are not the specialist routes that we would like to see. There is very limited time in initial teacher education. We are doing a lot of work around that. We have a network of initial teacher educators who are trying to meet the demand of young trainee teachers who want to teach this subject. There is a huge desire because, I think, of the understanding of just how critical it can be at this difficult time for young people. There is a teacher training piece.

On digital literacy specifically, as I am sure you will have heard, there is the challenge of the exponential pace of change of technology and how the curriculum, civil society or Government is meant to keep up with that. I cannot overemphasise that, because with the paradigm shift that has taken place in social media, for instance, we have a good understanding now of how that has changed the way in which people interact with some of the risks young people face. We have a good understanding of the designs and purposes of those technologies. That has not been translated into the curriculum yet, but I think we are in a good position to be able to provide some foundational knowledge and skills, regardless of what platform or app is out there.

Obviously, we need to think about the impact of generative AI and whether that creates a whole new set of challenges, but I would not be overawed by the challenge of the rate of change. Beeban talked about the lack of a coherent plan. There has been great improvement. There is quite a lot in the relationships and sex education guidance about not just online safety but data. However, it is very top-level and it is very hard for schools at an individual level to translate that into a meaningful curriculum. We do not have a clear sense of what we want young people to learn at different points. Then we do not have the sense of what competencies we want teachers to have. Even if we had the time in initial teacher education, even if we had specialist routes, have we outlined what they need to know to cover the bit that I am most concerned about, PSHE, but also the digital skills piece and the purposes and designs?

Q108 **Ian Mearns:** At the same time as getting the balance, we do not want to be over-prescriptive either, do we? Is that a tension? I am not sure.

Jonathan Baggaley: Anyone who has had training that has given them confidence and an understanding of that environment can then take that, act autonomously and have agency in the classroom to do it in ways that are creative and that are going to feed what we need teachers to be, which is excited and passionate about the subject. We do not need to set out a

massively granular framework, but we do need to have a sense of what we think teachers need to learn.

Darren Northcott: The balance is important. I would go with what Jonathan is saying there: that perhaps we have the balance not quite right between the top-line, very high level of generality that we see in some aspects of the guidance and teachers wanting a bit more guidance, a bit more support and a bit more structure about how they can take on some of these challenging areas of the curriculum.

Q109 **Ian Mearns:** If you detailed it down to granular instructions for how teachers should operate, that would be out of date within days, surely.

Darren Northcott: It would, absolutely. In this area particularly it would be out of date. Yes, you cannot have something that is too prescriptive. Teachers, as Jonathan says, must have agency. They have to be able to tailor the teaching to the needs and circumstances of the pupils they are working with.

However, I think that if you were to ask most teachers, they would say that a bit more detail, a bit more guidance and a bit more support would be helpful because some of these issues are complex. Teachers for the most part have not had any training, either when they were training to be teachers or subsequently, in how they can best engage with these issues. You are asking teachers to do a lot without perhaps the support they are entitled to.

Q110 **Ian Mearns:** Indeed. You have just referenced it as well, Jonathan. The Committee has heard concerns over the lack of recognised PSHE/RSHE qualifications among teachers and the teaching profession and teachers teaching PSHE/RSHE in classes themselves. How can this be best addressed and how may this affect the confidence of teachers?

Jonathan Baggaley: This is a subject where, clearly, if you do not have a basic level of safe practice and know how to handle some of these really sensitive issues, of course you are going to walk into the classroom feeling deeply underconfident and it will not be a subject you want to teach.

Q111 **Ian Mearns:** Do you think it is something that needs to be dealt with in initial teacher training now? Surely we also have a massive deficit in the existing teaching profession, which needs a big CPD retro programme.

Jonathan Baggaley: Inevitably we have to do both. In initial teacher education, there is quite a small amount of training that I think every teacher should have that would be quite straightforward to deliver, which is just about how you teach some of these sensitive topics in a safe way. How do you set up a classroom environment that enables you to create the right personal/professional boundaries around a subject, and enables you to ensure that you are not putting any young people on the spot who may have experienced the issues that you are talking about? That is relatively straightforward to implement for every single teacher.

Then there need to be specialist routes for those who want to go deeper. Of course we provide a huge amount of training to teachers in that early

practice—how you teach in the classroom and then leadership and management of the subject—but there needs to be greater access to it.

Q112 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you. Darren, anything to add?

Darren Northcott: I agree with all of that. CPD and professional development in this area is important but the Committee will have heard that CPD and professional development is an issue across the piece in the education system. Unfortunately, these areas of the curriculum and of teachers' professional skill are not exempt from what is a wider issue.

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** How can teachers grapple with providing high-quality lessons on online safety when the technology industry is advancing so quickly?

Chair: I think that is the point Jonathan made about the pace of change. How do we ensure that the CPD and the support that teachers are getting is sufficiently flexible to deal with that environment?

Jonathan Baggaley: It is a really good point. 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.

One way of thinking about it, and one way we have tried to think about it in supporting our members, is to say that if we are looking at what effective practice looks like, it is about the application of principles to whatever you are confronted by, whether it is a particular approach, pedagogical model or use of technology. How can we think through the implications of this for what we are here to do, which is to support children's progress and achievement?

One of those principles, which I think we set out in our evidence, and which I would commend, is that learning comes before technology—this point about which is the servant. The technology is the servant of the learning. Some of the poor practice we see in schools is where technology is acquired, because there is an understandable sense that this is modernity, this is the future, we must be here, we must get this kit, and then the conversation afterwards is, "How are we going to use this kit we have spent an awful lot of money on?" As a teacher, I have certainly been in that position back in the day with things such as interactive whiteboards. We were all given them and then we looked at them and thought, "Well, how are we going to use this?" In the end, you work out how you can use it effectively, but it is thinking about technology supporting learning and supporting children and sometimes that, in practice, is not the right way around.

Jonathan Baggaley: I think there must be a feedback loop in PSHE between what is going on in children's and young people's lives and the curriculum. A big part of our role as an organisation is trying to keep up

with, across the board, the different aspects of their health and wellbeing, their relationships, their careers that we might need to start to think about incorporating into the curriculum. I have made the point that I do not think we should be overawed by the exponential rate of change, but at the same time we do a lot of work trying to look at what the upcoming issues and risks are. We are doing a lot of work, for example, on child financial harms such as online scams, monetisation and video games, the fact that large numbers of children are investing in crypto. What does that mean for financial education?

Ian Mearns: We are doing an inquiry into financial education as well.

Jonathan Baggaley: There are these sorts of issues, and we have been thinking about generative AI for a couple of years on what it might mean for young people's critical engagement with it. We must do that piece and I think there is a question from a governmental perspective of: is there greater possibility of co-ordination of real expertise? We have looked to tech companies to say, "You have this expertise and this tech. Let's translate that into education." Well, there is expertise in technology far beyond tech companies as well, but maybe Government could think, "What should we be teaching about?" Also, we should not rush into teaching about a particular technology just because it is there. We need to think about what young people need to learn and what will be an effective way of teaching them about it.

Ian Mearns: As you have been speaking, I could not help but think that a previous iteration of this Committee made recommendations to the DFE about PSHE, about six or seven years ago, which have manifested themselves into policy, but there you go.

Q114 **Chair:** It is nice to know that Ian's superior institutional experience in this respect is always useful.

One more question, because this came up in the last panel as well: in your experience, particularly, Darren, from you and your members, what are teacher assessments of how children perceive the digital literacy lessons? In the point you made about bringing in the tech companies sometimes to provide these lessons, one of the arguments is that there is a higher degree of trust or engagement from the children because it is a brand that they know and so on and there is the concern about adults being seen in some way to talk down to children. How do your members experience that and what is the view of teachers about how they are perceived when delivering these lessons?

Darren Northcott: Most feedback we have had from our members says it is a particular challenge. One of the challenges you might have, perhaps as an older person, is that if you are speaking to someone you assume—and maybe that is a false assumption in many respects and very often it is—that they have a higher level of expertise than you have. That is quite daunting. Certainly, the experience of most teachers, and the expectation on most teachers, is that it is the other way around. You are the person

with the knowledge, the skill and the understanding and your job is to help pupils develop theirs. That can be quite intimidating.

It is addressable through good training, good support, good access to information, so that teachers have the confidence to engage with young people in a way that the young people find credible, that they find that the teacher knows what they are talking about. All of that is possible but I think we are always drawn back to this point about the support for the teacher in the classroom to do that effectively.

Jonathan Baggaley: When children are surveyed and in qualitative research, they tend to say that their digital literacy education is not reflecting the complexity of their digital lives and that some of it is an overfocus on a series of rules for online safety. I think it is critical. Again it comes back to we must have that understanding of what those lives look like and what the challenges are for them. For instance, we are doing a piece of research with an agency looking at young people's experiences on short-form video platforms such as TikTok and what we might want to teach them to enable them to have a more intentional engagement with platforms such as that.

It is important, again starting from the perspective of teachers, that they can create a classroom environment where young people are able to feel that they can discuss these issues in a way that they will be listened to, but they are also getting some strong educational content.

Darren Northcott: On the point about what is important is a list of permissions or a list of points that children need to understand that they should and should not do, something expressed in those kinds of terms. I get the point that is quite reductionist and perhaps it is not something best designed to attract, secure and maintain the interest of children and young people, but for many schools there is a good reason why they do that. The reason they do it is because the overarching responsibility they have, quite rightly, is safeguarding and the input that they are giving to children and young people about making sure that they are doing everything they can to keep themselves safe online. The stakes around safeguarding are very high. We all know that.

I think there is an incentive for schools to at least include something along those lines in their programmes to young people, because that seems to be the most direct way you can get across important messages. Those messages are important, but I think there is an interesting question about the extent to which they are internalised and then acted upon by children and young people having heard them. The incentive to provide some input in that form is relatively easily understood given the accountabilities that schools have.

Jonathan Baggaley: I agree that those messages are critical, but not enough.

Q115 **Chair:** Getting them through is the key thing, rather than just ticking the boxes to say you have done it.

Jonathan Baggaley: Those affecting behavioural change as well, and I think there are other mechanisms that are necessary to do that.

Q116 **Chair:** One of the things that we are looking at as part of this inquiry is the whole question of mobile phones in schools. There are multiple dimensions to that debate around disruption to lessons. I was quite struck by the point you made earlier, Jonathan, that giving children some respite from online media can be quite important in that respect as well. On the other hand, some schools will say having the devices enables them to teach about safety with those devices. What is the view of your respective organisations on that and as to whether there is an age line that makes a difference in that respect, an age-appropriate element to the issue of mobile phones?

Darren Northcott: Generally, the default position that my organisation has taken—and this is based upon feedback from members working day in, day out in classrooms—is that generally there really is not a place for mobile phones in classrooms. That is a view that you often hear. There are important exceptions to that, however. For example, for children who might have a special educational need or a disability, access to mobile-connected technology for them personally can be a very important part of removing the barriers that they might face to accessing their educational entitlement. That can be important. There can be a place around the teaching of online safety, of digital literacy, having those connected devices in classrooms, but it has been well reported and well established that there have been a lot of issues around bringing that technology into classrooms, the risks it creates, the violations of privacy, both of other children and of staff. Those are issues.

Some schools, as you know, have taken a view that they will have an absolute ban on that technology in their classrooms. They have the autonomy to do that and have chosen to do that. Others perhaps take a different approach. If I were fairly reflecting the feedback of our members, generally speaking the routine access to that technology in classrooms creates more problems than it solves.

Jonathan Baggaley: We are an organisation that is solely focused on the curriculum, so we do not have a policy on the wider issues, but it is very hard to see how having access to TikTok in your English class can be helpful and there is the point about respite. Our position is that it is critical that it must be a school decision because of the complexities of collecting 1,500 iPhones in a morning. As Darren said, it is hard to see that there are benefits to it, but there may be exceptions.

Chair: Thank you. I think that is quite clear.

Q117 **Andrew Lewer:** A slight change of emphasis to Ofsted now. The association has previously said that Ofsted inspections are now routinely placing more emphasis on PSHE education. Can you unpack why that is the case?

Jonathan Baggaley: We have certainly seen since the statutory guidance and incorporation of this within personal development that, as PSHE is now

inspected within personal development, it must be looked at in every school. We keep an eye on Ofsted reports and we have seen a significant increase in references to PSHE across the board. It is certainly being looked at. There is the forthcoming Ofsted review into personal development as well, but from the digital literacy perspective it also must be emphasised that this is one aspect of the personal development judgment within looking at character education, citizenship, careers, SMSC. The extent to which Ofsted is able to look into detail at the curriculum and how it might be meeting the needs of young people is likely to be quite limited in most inspections.

If we are thinking about the extent to which Ofsted could be a lever for improving digital literacy in schools, it feels as if we are looking through the wrong end of the telescope. If we do not have a clear sense of what we want young people to learn, if we do not have a sense of what skills and experience teachers should have, and given the sheer breadth of the current inspection framework, it feels that there are other places that we could start.

Q118 **Andrew Lewer:** The potential problem of Ofsted putting more emphasis on it but not knowing what they are looking for.

Jonathan Baggaley: That puts schools in the very difficult position of knowing what exactly we should be doing. We have seen a range of understandings. Again, what tends to come up in the reports is children being taught how to stay safe, including online. That is critical. That is important, but it is only one part of what we need to have.

Darren Northcott: Jonathan has summed it up very nicely. Part of what this Committee is looking at sits outside the personal development aspect of inspections. That draws us on to the way Ofsted inspections are focused. They reflect Government policy and are very subject specific. They sit within strict subject boundaries, and the evidence we have heard so far in this inquiry suggests that when we look at digital literacy we are transcending those strict subject boundaries. That is a challenge for schools because they are encouraged to look at things, maybe rightly, maybe wrongly—that is a debate—within those strict subject disciplines.

Q119 **Chair:** I think Ian Mearns was making the point that part of the reason why Ofsted increased its focus on PSHE is because this Committee pushed it quite hard to do so and recognising that. I had to give evidence to the House of Lords Committee when they were looking into citizenship, and what was very striking is that there seemed to be quite a big disconnect between the views when Ofsted came before them to talk about the importance of this being looked at as part of the personal development and the views of many members of that Committee, who felt it ought to be looked at as more of a subject deep dive-type issue, to take into account the breadth there. Do you think the personal development metric is the right prism through which to look at PSHE, or would you rather that Ofsted was doing a more thematic piece, as it has on other particular subjects, to look at this in the round?

Jonathan Baggaley: It is an excellent question. One of the advantages of it being within personal development is that it should always be looked at, but one of the disadvantages is it is not being looked at in the same light as other subjects in things such as intent and implementation of the curriculum. 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. Within personal development there is the risk that it is seen as a set of nice things you might be vaguely doing to improve young people's lives, alongside some extracurricular things rather than a coherent, structured curriculum. I am not saying that is how Ofsted is looking at it, but the risk is there.

Q120 **Chair:** You really want to see it as an essential part?

Jonathan Baggaley: I would like both, yes.

Chair: Okay. I will hand back to Andrew Lewer. Thank you.

Q121 **Andrew Lewer:** I want to ask Darren principally, but Jonathan may want to chip in as well. How confident do you feel teachers are about the way PSHE is inspected?

Darren Northcott: That sits within a broader debate about inspection generally. I do not think teachers separate that aspect of inspection from inspection more broadly. Perhaps teachers' perspectives relate to what we have just been talking about here, in the sense of the Ofsted inspection framework, and there are good reasons for why it looks the way it looks. Ofsted will tell you again and again, when they are asked, that they do not inspect subjects. They inspect the curriculum and then they undertake deep dives to test whether what they are being told about the curriculum by the school is the lived reality for children in classrooms. That is the model that we have.

I think what teachers would say, though, is that perhaps the way that schools are held to account does not take enough account of the pressures that they face and the responsibility of those beyond the classroom for ensuring a good RSHE or PSHE or citizenship offer. I think that is their concern, in the sense that they feel that they are being held responsible for outcomes that are not entirely within their control. That is the nervousness that schools have about the way they are held to account. There are others beyond the school—and we have heard about all of that this morning—who have a responsibility in this space. It is not just the individual teacher in the classroom who must prepare a child to keep themselves perfectly safe in the online world, and sometimes for teachers it can feel that that is the expectation.

Jonathan Baggaley: That is one risk of looking at it within the personal development context rather than as a subject. If you are looking for outcomes, if there are safeguarding issues that seem to be linked to a lack of knowledge and experience, that may well be because there is poor PSHE in a school, but at the same time we do not judge geography on the basis of whether you can drop a child on a mountain and they will find their way home. The evidence is very clear that PSHE supports physical health,

mental health, relationships, but should we be judging it on those outcomes in a specific school? I think that is a question.

Q122 **Andrew Lewer:** There is the challenge too about teaching how to think and what to think. Obviously if you are teaching geography, Rome is the capital of Italy and you need to know that, whereas "You must believe this" is a very different concept to teach people and has all sorts of appropriateness flags around it.

Finally, a recent review by Ofsted cited some assumptions that were made by schools of a strong level of digital literacy in pupils and that was a barrier because it was too much of an assumption. Do you think it is right about that? Could that be changed? That relates a little bit to what Darren said about covid earlier—that we have had some evidence that being digital natives is a wrong assumption—but we now think that perhaps post-covid it is less of a wrong assumption. How does that fit into what Ofsted has said about it?

Darren Northcott: Quite rightly, Ofsted has looked at issues around digital literacy and a lot of what it has said is good food for thought. One of the issues that may be implied in the work that Ofsted did is, as I said earlier, that a lot of the research it cites is quite old. For example, it talks about research that was done in respect of things such as the international computer driving licence, and that was 2014. There was some other research it cited from 2010 that made the good point that you should not assume that children are digital natives. It is not a very helpful term, but they are more comfortable and competent with technology than they might otherwise be and there are very good reasons for not making that assumption. Our colleague from the DPA was making some good points in that respect earlier.

I wonder if this is where more research is needed. To what extent do we still come across those assumptions? My feeling is—and this is anecdotal, but representing members during the pandemic—that teachers were acutely aware of the different level of not only access to technology but understanding of technology that their pupils had during the pandemic. They were confronted with the need to compensate sometimes for the lack of resource, the lack of space at home, or perhaps to provide more support to some children who were not able to manipulate an Excel spreadsheet or manipulate a PowerPoint presentation. I wonder if some of the concerns, coherent though they are, are perhaps a little dated, and maybe these days people are more aware of, particularly because of the pandemic experience, the fact that you cannot make those assumptions about what children know and do not know about the use of technology.

Q123 **Chair:** Equally, I think the point that was made by Elizabeth Anderson on behalf of the DPA is that we cannot assume just because lots of devices were given out that everyone has that access now. That is an ongoing challenge.

It may be an unfair question, but the resource available for technology within education is always going to be somewhat constrained, yet we can see the benefits of having a certain amount of technology available. I think

Darren has pointed out already some of the potential red herrings of things such as interactive whiteboards, iPads in schools and so on as a great solution here and the importance of putting learning first and foremost. How do you think the DFE ought to look at what priority it gives technology and investment in technology and devices versus the major requirement for school spending, which is people? That is very important and I very much agree and in fact was pushing back quite hard on the House of Lords when they had this argument around public sector workforce reform, saying that you could in some way substitute technology for people at some point down the line. I am not sure that is ever really the case. How do you ensure, when we have ever-growing demand for resource for people, which we do, that there is a sufficient investment in technology to close some of the gaps that the DPA was particularly concerned about?

Darren Northcott: It is a complex issue. An aspect of it is the school funding debate and how much money we are putting into the education system. You have had that debate and will continue to keep having it. It will always be finite and there will always need to be choices made about where that money goes or does not go.

What really struck me when listening to the previous panel was the point that was made around the expectation that we are moving towards online examinations, so we are moving away from paper and pencil examinations to online examinations using keyboards. That is quite interesting. I am no futurologist but will we be using keyboards in 10 years' time? I do not know. I meet a lot of people who do not use a keyboard at all and produce quite a lot of interesting text. If we are in that position, that is a core entitlement. A child's core entitlement is to access the qualifications that relate to their learning. If those qualifications require access to technology, it seems fundamental that they should all have access to that technology equally, so that some are not disadvantaged because they do not have that access. Lots of families will be able to provide that, and they do, but lots of families will not be able to do that.

The obvious thing then is you must turn to the state and say, "If you're responsible for the education system, you're going to have to make sure that every child has access to whatever that technology is". We are not there yet, and that may have significant investment consequences for the choices that are made about where public money is spent, but that seems compelling to me. That seems like it would be pretty high up a list of priorities, if that is what is needed.

Chair: One of the things we are going to have to keep a very close eye on is the development of those. My understanding was the initial suggestions of qualifications that could go online would largely focus on some multiple choice issues, rather than things that require you to type a lot of detailed answers. That is something that we want to keep a close eye on, because there is certainly that resource potential.

That has been a very useful discussion. We covered the ground. Is there anything else from the perspective of the PSHE Association or your members that you want to add? In that case, I will say thank you for your

evidence.