

Education Committee

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

Tuesday 12 March 2024

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns.

Questions 189 - 265

Witnesses

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

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Bunting and Yih-Choung Teh.

Q189 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session, which is about screen time impacts on education and wellbeing. We are taking oral evidence first from Mark Bunting, the director of online safety strategy and delivery at Ofcom, and Yih-Choung Teh, the group director for strategy and research at Ofcom. You are both welcome; thank you for giving evidence to us today.

First, does the Online Safety Act provide you with enough powers to keep children safe online?

Mark Bunting: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, Committee. The Online Safety Act does give us extensive powers to hold services to account for keeping their users safe. There is a lot of focus on our enforcement powers to levy fines and so on, but more important—particularly at this point early in the implementation of the Act—are our



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powers to provide codes of practice, which must set out steps that companies can take to comply with their duties, and our powers to request information. We have enforceable rights to require companies to provide the information to us that we can use to assess their compliance with the Act.

We are confident. It is a new regime. We are in its implementation but the Act sets out a strong suite of powers.

Q190 **Chair:** Over the coming years, would you want further powers to be granted in unregulated areas such as artificial intelligence?

Yih-Choung Teh: I might start by observing that AI is not completely unregulated. For example, in general, our existing regulatory frameworks, including the broadcasting code and the Online Safety Act, are focused on the services that people use rather than on the specific underlying technology. That already gives us powers to regulate AI when it is used as part of those services.

Since the Online Safety Act is essentially technology neutral, it captures risks associated with emerging forms of AI. To give you an example, if a user creates content with a generative AI tool but then uploads that to a service regulated under the Online Safety Act, it is the responsibility of that service to make sure that content that is illegal or harmful to children is suitably dealt with. In that sense, it captures AI-generated porn or nonconsensual intimate content.

Q191 **Chair:** It is interesting. You talk about it being technology neutral. We have heard quite a lot of evidence during this inquiry relating to concerns about the difference between the rules for broadcast and online content. Is it a sustainable position that there are those distinctions between what is legal to broadcast through traditional broadcast media and what is legal to put online?

Yih-Choung Teh: That is an important issue. We have the benefit of the Online Safety Act having been discussed by Parliament and it being more technologically neutral. The Broadcasting Act, as you will be aware, has amendments being discussed at the moment through a Media Bill that will ensure that it keeps up to date with viewing, which is increasingly moving online. Some areas for development there are important.

Q192 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** That moves us on. Are you satisfied with the level of engagement that social media companies and tech companies have with the changes? Do they engage with you and are you happy that they do what they are supposed to do?

Mark Bunting: Yes. We have been clear that we expect change. Not many services at all, if indeed any, take all the steps that we have set out already in our initial codes of practice for illegal harms.

We have engaged extensively with industry over the last few years, not just since the Act passed, but in the preparation of the legislation, and we



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have been regulating video-sharing platforms based in the UK for several years.

We have been pleased so far with the constructive engagement, but of course, the proof of the pudding will come when we are seeking to ensure that prompt action is taken. In some areas, we have taken enforcement action already. I mentioned the video-sharing platform regulation. We have brought several actions there to ensure that adult VSPs are using age-assurance to keep their content away from children.

Again, we want to bring services into compliance through constructive engagement where we can, but we do have those enforcement powers to back them up when we need to. So far, since the passage of the Act, overall, we have been pleased with the constructive response we have had.

Q193 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Is there enough ability for people to complain? Is there an easily identifiable complaints process for people who need to complain?

Mark Bunting: It is one of the areas where we have made proposals in the work that we have already done. Particularly relevant to this Committee, it will be an area that we focus on again in our forthcoming consultation on protection of children online. Even complaints systems that might be navigable for adults are not always suitable for younger users. That will be an area of focus for us.

This has two parts. One part is whether the complaints mechanisms are accessible and easy to use. We have provided some guidance already on what that might look like for services. Then, of course, there is the response that users get when they have used those complaints mechanisms. We have made some recommendations about services being better at acknowledging complaints and setting out what steps they will take to assess those complaints. It is an area for improvement in the industry.

Q194 **Chair:** Could I ask two follow-up questions to that? First, you mentioned you have already taken a number of enforcement measures. Do you publish, on a rolling basis, how many have been issued and in what context?

Mark Bunting: We publish a regular enforcement bulletin, which includes details of cases that have been through the enforcement process. We published one last week. I am happy to share details of that with the Committee.

We try to achieve compliance before getting to the enforcement stage and that will not always be a public process, because we focus on getting the right outcome for users. But where we have taken things through investigations, yes, we are transparent about that.

Q195 **Chair:** What is the timing of the consultation you mentioned specifically



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aimed at the protection of children?

Mark Bunting: That will come out in the spring, just two or three months away now. That will build on the work that we have set out in the illegal harms consultation, but we will take some areas further in light of the particular risks to children.

Q196 **Anna Firth:** We have covered a bit of this question. Ofcom has projected that full implementation of the Online Safety Act will not be completed until next year. How will you work with the Government, social media companies and parents to ensure that children are protected in the meantime?

Mark Bunting: It is a complex piece of legislation and, as you say, the road map we have set out envisages its implementation over a series of phases. That is driven by the approach that the Act took with different duties applying to different types of harm. We have sought to move as quickly as we could after the Act passed to bring forward proposals on illegal harms, but we will of course need to consult on those carefully. We are doing that now. The consultation closed a week or two ago. We will need to consider carefully the responses that we get. A process is involved to put the formal building blocks of the regulation in place. That will take some time.

In the meantime, we are doing two or three things. We are doing a lot to talk to children and parents about their experiences of online harm and their expectations of the new rules. We have spoken to thousands of children already. Again, we will publish more of that information with the consultation that we are due to publish in May.

We are developing plans for more systematic ways of engaging children in the work that we are doing so that we have ready access to the voice of the child throughout our policymaking process.

We also work closely with civil society. We have to do a lot to explain the Act to civil society organisations to enable them to participate fully in the policymaking process. We have had probably several hundred meetings over the last few months with civil society organisations to try to ensure that we understand those perspectives and that we reflect them where we can in our work.

Yih-Choung Teh: If I can build on Mark's answer there, that work with civil society and others is part of our media literacy programme. You have taken evidence from the likes of Internet Matters and Parent Zone and we work closely with organisations like that. Indeed, shortly we will publish research on children's online experiences, which will include cyber-bullying, violent content, suicide, self-harm and eating disorders.

As Mark said, we are getting on with our video-sharing platform regime. We completed two cases and published on Friday, platforms SoSpilt and Xpanded, which will now take on age-assurance duties as a result of the concerns we raised.



Q197 **Anna Firth:** Excellent. On Internet Safety Day this year, some of us heard from parents who have real worries about extreme breathing challenges on TikTok. They have contacted Ofgem about these and have not even received a reply. Has that fallen through the net? How should they engage with you and what are you trying to do at the moment?

Mark Bunting: We do have means for individuals to contact us. In these regimes, we are not empowered to adjudicate on individual complaints about whether particular items of content should be removed or not, but we have tools for people to notify us of those issues.

I am sorry to hear that those individuals have not had a response. I am happy to look at those individual cases if it would be useful, but we try to acknowledge everything that comes in. We have to be clear that that does not necessarily mean that we can immediately get on the phone to the company and require it to take things down, but we can use that as evidence for the engagement that we have with firms.

We talk to TikTok regularly. It is one of the services regulated under the video-sharing platform regulation. We talk to TikTok a lot about the tools it has to keep users safe, which is an ongoing process. TikTok makes commitments to us about the information it can share about how it seeks to improve its protections. That dialogue is ongoing. I cannot say much more about it but we are engaging with TikTok on that issue.

Q198 **Anna Firth:** Do you recognise that extreme breathing challenges on TikTok aimed at children should not be there?

Mark Bunting: I am not familiar with those cases but, clearly, we are concerned about ensuring that services use the right measures to try to prevent harmful content reaching children. Of course, that will not be a perfect science. As I say, we are interested to hear evidence that parents might have about where things go wrong.

Q199 **Anna Firth:** Thank you. I will take that one up afterwards. Does Ofcom expected any further delays in implementing the Act?

Mark Bunting: No. We have set out the road map that we published in October. As you rightly said earlier, it has a number of phases, which in total we expect to take about 18 months to put in place. Some parts are coming earlier, so we aim to submit our final codes of practice on illegal harms to the Secretary of State around the end of this year and they will then be laid before Parliament, after which they will be enforced. Some parts will come earlier. We do not currently expect any delays to the road map that we published last year.

Q200 **Chair:** In the context of your guidance on illegal harms, Anna's point about the extreme breathing challenges is one example of where something can suddenly pop up and become a thing. There will not necessarily be a consistent list of harmful content online. These things will develop over time.



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How flexible is your approach to taking account of things that might suddenly become fads or might suddenly emerge as risks that had not necessarily been thought about previously?

Yih-Choung Teh: This is an important class of risk. Research shows that 71% of secondary school children say that they have seen harmful content in the previous four weeks. At the top of that list, about 30%, are social media challenges, which, as you described, can be dangerous.

Why? It is in part about how viral content works and how the content recommendation engines feed and perpetuate that kind of viral content. Those issues fall within the harms that the Online Safety Act identifies, so we focus on that area with platforms.

Mark Bunting: Yes, absolutely. In the illegal harms proposals that you mentioned, we have recommended that services that use recommender algorithms should test to check that those recommender algorithms do not promote illegal content to users. Of course, illegal content under the Act should not be present at all, but sometimes it will arise and we want services to take steps to ensure that their recommender algorithms do not aggravate that.

That will be even more important in the protection of children work that we publish in the spring because, of course, that content is not illegal and, therefore, services may choose that they want to carry content that is inappropriate for children. We need to make sure that they then take steps to ensure that children are not generally exposed to that type of content. Those tests on recommended systems will be an important part of that.

Q201 **Ian Mearns:** We have received other evidence from people who have described Ofcom's consultation process as "technical and long". How do you ensure that children and parents can engage with that consultation process?

Mark Bunting: It is, unavoidably, a complex piece of legislation. We have to publish a great deal of detailed material to substantiate the proposals we make. That results in, admittedly, large quantities of material being published. I can appreciate that that is intimidating and hard to engage with not only for individual users, but potentially for a wide range of stakeholders.

We have tried to make things simpler. We have published a summary of the approach. We have published summaries of each of the sets of measures that we recommend services take. We have also provided tools on our website to help people navigate the consultation and dive into the areas that are of particular concern to them. We can do more in this area.

Ian Mearns: Please do.



Mark Bunting: We have done a lot to talk to younger users when developing our proposals, which will be a continued focus for us. Formal consultations will never be the best way for children and parents to tell us what they think, but we are committed to continuing to do that. We spend a lot of money on the surveys we do of children and parents and we will look to build on that further.

Yih-Choung Teh: Specifically on that point, ahead of our protection of children consultations that Mark has referred to, we are planning a series of focused discussions with children so that we can create a safe space to build their knowledge and understanding of the regime and then, of course, listen and get a sense from their real lived experiences of how that should shape what we do.

Q202 **Ian Mearns:** From my perspective, at the end of this are real people out there and real consequences when things go wrong. It is a question of what we can do to make sure that anything we can do from a technical perspective has that in focus and that in mind. There are real implications for real people, particularly children and young people, if we do not get this right. It seems that you have a key role in making sure that it does become right, or better than it certainly is now.

Mark Bunting: Yes, I completely agree. Hearing the personal testimony of people who have experienced online harms is always powerful. We have all seen the tragic cases that have arisen when things go wrong.

It is central to our job that we put the outcomes that we are trying to achieve for users right at the start of our process. It is a fair challenge to say sometimes that can be lost in formal consultation processes. If I think about what we have aimed to achieve in the work we have done so far, making sure that children are not exposed to sexual exploitation and abuse online is absolutely at the heart of the proposals we made about distribution of child sex abuse images and steps to prevent grooming in the consultation we have already published and, looking ahead, ensuring that children are not recommended content on topics like suicide, self-harm and eating disorders.

Q203 **Ian Mearns:** Violence in general is a real online harm, and having access to violent material can have detrimental psychological impacts for young people.

Mark Bunting: We are aware of that, particularly in the context of pornography, which the Committee has spent some time on previously. One of the many reasons that we are concerned about online pornography is that of course it can stray well beyond the bounds of what would be acceptable in other media into violence and extreme forms of pornography. The impacts of that on children are quite well documented. It is not the relatively market-friendly end of the pornography spectrum. It can be harmful and damaging and that is absolutely at the heart of our proposals.



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Q204 **Chair:** On that point, the Office of the Children's Commissioner has given us strong evidence on that. Do you work through the Office of the Children's Commissioner on your youth consultation and reaching out? It strikes me that she is well placed to co-ordinate some of that youth voice.

Mark Bunting: Yes. We have had several engagements with the Children's Commissioner. She and a number of children's charities wrote to us quite some time ago and we took forward a number of their proposals in the work we have published and will publish in the spring. Yes, it is an important relationship for us. We will be keen to build on that further as we come to implement the protections.

Q205 **Andrew Lewer:** France aims to introduce some strict age verification measures to attempt to address large numbers of users on social media. Should the UK adopt that approach? That is a bit obvious but, to add to that, do you distinguish between messaging services and wider social media providers?

It seems the greatest dissonance between people in rooms like this and people in regulatory bodies wanting to do something about this and reality is WhatsApp. Every child is on WhatsApp. I am not sure how they would cope if they were the only child in their class or group who is not on WhatsApp. That is a messaging service primarily rather than social media.

Is there an attempt like the French model at stricter age verification but also to draw some distinctions within what is available?

Mark Bunting: To tease apart the different strands of that, age verification has two aspects. The first, of course, is age verification at the 18 boundary between children and adults. The Act is clear, and we have been clear in the proposals we set out before Christmas, that services that allow pornography and other types of restricted content for adults must have highly effective means of distinguishing between over-18s and under-18s.

You also refer to enforcement of social media companies' lower age limits, which tend to be 13. They vary. We know from our own research that of course—no surprise—a lot of under-13s use services, whether social media or messaging services, which is a concern.

Our immediate priority will be making services safe for all child users. There is nothing magical about the boundary at 13. Making a service safe for a 13-year-old will help ensure that it is safe for under-13s who are there when they should not be. The immediate priority for us is making that focus on child safety front and centre for firms.

On the distinction between social media and private messaging, we have already, and will continue to recommend, different steps that different types of service should take. For social media, our focus will be on the



nature of the available content and how recommender algorithms promote that content to child users.

For messaging services, it is a bit less about the content and more about ensuring that they cannot be contacted by people who may wish them harm. Of course, harms can arise in groups of children as well, but our primary focus initially is ensuring that adults cannot approach children they don't know on messaging services.

Q206 Andrew Lewer: That is helpful, constructive and thoughtful; thank you. We have talked about France, but have you looked at any other international examples of online safety that are worthwhile? Can you draw a distinction between best practice, meaning more and stricter regulations, or smarter regulations and more sophisticated approaches that have the desired effect but do not enable companies to say, "We have done something because we have passed an encyclopaedia full of rules that no one will ever follow"?

Yih-Choung Teh: Those are good questions. The UK online safety regime is among the first in the world, so, in many respects, we find ourselves at the frontier or leading in some cases.

However, the services that we look to regulate are, of course, global in nature, so international engagement is absolutely core to what we do and to our success. That is partly about the need to build consistency so that you have scale, which drives better compliance incentives for the companies involved.

Specifically, in 2022, we co-founded the Global Online Safety Regulators Network, which is together now with other countries including Australia, Ireland, France, South Africa and South Korea. It is a genuinely global opportunity to share best practice, as you say.

We have other mechanisms as well. We participate in an informal international working group on age verification with a number of other European countries to ensure that video-sharing platforms have robust access controls in place to protect children.

To your second question about best practice, it is not necessarily about more. Trade-offs are important here. Innovation has benefits for new services, which we care about, and of course we want to protect freedom of expression. But a lot of the international collaboration we do is about trying to drive smarter regulation, as you say, and best practice.

For example, an area we have been working hard on is media literacy. As part of that Global Online Safety Regulators Network I mentioned, we have an education and awareness working group. As part of that, we shared our best practice of media literacy by design for platforms. We encourage the platforms themselves to put in place by design better safety measures, making it easier for users to alert and tag content that they think is harmful.



We put together a media literacy toolkit last year for evaluating interventions. What works and what does not work? Can we share that and help others? The French regulator, Arcom, has translated that into French and is making use of that. I was pleased that, last year, UNESCO recognised our work on media literacy with underserved communities, working in local communities with the likes of mental health organisations for neurodiversity. We were awarded second place in its global media literacy awards last year.

We are trying to contribute a number of things to build this international coalition so that we can be smarter about the regulation, not just put forward a greater volume.

Q207 **Ian Mearns:** Who got first place?

Yih-Choung Teh: That is an excellent question. I will need to check.

Ian Mearns: You eradicated that from your memory.

Q208 **Chair:** That is interesting. One of our colleagues who is not here today has been asking about devices and whether we should be looking at this through access to devices. Do you have any views on how realistic and workable that is? It is proposed that children under a certain age—say, 16—should be able to take out devices that are either not internet-enabled or have parental controls installed by default. Is that approach workable?

Mark Bunting: The campaigns that Esther Ghey and others have been developing in this area are thoughtful and thought-provoking. In the end, the matter is for the Government, not for the regulator. We are willing to support Parliament and the Government in any considerations that they might have.

We know that families and children attach a great deal of value and get a lot of benefit from the services that they use online. Our research shows that closely. We can do a lot to make the experience for children safer on the devices they use. There may be broader considerations, including screen time considerations that the inquiry works on here, but we can do a lot on that online safety angle to help make the online experience safer for children so that, when they do use those devices, they can be confident that they will be protected.

Q209 **Chair:** You mentioned that among your powers, you have powers to compel data from organisations. In the course of the inquiry, we have heard of a number of cases where—talking of the importance of parents and families—parents have wanted to get data but have not been able to and have struggled to get data about what children have seen online.

Will you as the regulator, when the Act is fully implemented, be able to help with that?

Mark Bunting: Yes. The Act gives new powers. Following a request from a coroner, we can require services to provide data they hold about the



use of a service by a child. Those powers will come into force shortly. We work closely with the Chief Coroner and the coroners to ensure they understand when they can use those powers and what they can be used for. The ongoing debate about the data protection legislation going through the Government at the moment might build on those powers. Yes, that will make a difference.

Of course, we all hope that we do not have to use those powers because they relate only specifically to the death of a child but, in that instance, which has been a cause for considerable concern to coroners and families in the past, the Act gives us new powers to take action.

Q210 **Chair:** To be clear, therefore, unless that bar has been met and unless a coroner's inquiry has been triggered, parents have no means to request the regulator access data?

Mark Bunting: That is correct, yes.

Chair: That concludes this session. The Minister has been patiently waiting so we will bring him on. Thank you for your evidence today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Damian Hinds, Charlotte Briscall and Kate Dixon.

Q211 **Chair:** Good morning. Welcome back. It has been a long week since we last saw you. We have the right hon. Damian Hinds MP, Minister of State for Schools at the Department for Education; Charlotte Briscall, director and chief digital officer for the Department for Education; and Kate Dixon, director of pupil wellbeing and safety at the Department for Education. You are all welcome.

Minister, the Department has previously described evidence on the effect of screen time on children as "mixed", but our inquiry has heard a huge amount of evidence on its negative effects and the risks. We were quite struck in our meetings by the fact that UNESCO had moved from pushing digital education to beginning to sound some alarm bells and to talk about the limitations and risks as well.

How concerned are you about the cumulative effect of screen time on children and young people?

Damian Hinds: It is right for all of us to be concerned and to be conscious and to keep looking at this. That has particular relevance in education but there is a wider set of considerations as well.

You mentioned that we said the evidence is inconclusive. It is not only us who says that. That is much quoted and much repeated. Quite a big part of the reason for that is that it is not one thing. You cannot say that this amount of screen time is good and anything greater is bad because it depends largely on what you do with the screen time. Relatively small amounts of viewing harmful content or engaging in harmful activity or being exposed to—even small amounts of that is bad. If you engage in



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prosocial activity and learning activity, it is different. You cannot disentangle totally the full range of things that screen times involves, so it is difficult to talk about benchmark levels.

That said, we do know some things. The OECD, among others, has used its PISA research, for example, to look at screen time and time online, whether for leisure purposes or for educational purposes. We know where the phrase “the Goldilocks effect” came from originally, but in this context it may have come from an earlier academic study. If you track internet use against mathematical attainment, for example, which is not the only thing to track against but it is pretty easy to quantify, you see a curve that goes up and then goes down. The Goldilocks effect is not too much and not too little. Relatively small amounts seems to have some positive effect. I do not have the graph in front of me. It is about an hour. But then, after one to two hours, it comes down and has a negative effect.

An earlier OECD study from the 2015 PISA cycle reported in 2017 and looked at relationships between extreme internet use and various measures of happiness. Probably unsurprising to everybody, extreme use tends to be associated with unhappiness in almost every country studied with one exception. A couple of big countries were not involved.

That is quite a long answer but it is quite a big question.

Q212 **Chair:** It is a big question and, in fairness, a lot of what you said chimes with a lot of what we have heard from the academic experts about different types of screen time and so forth.

I guess we are concerned here partly about the cumulative impact and partly about the fact that all these pieces of research take a long time to produce and tend to be based on data from some time ago.

Damian Hinds: The world has changed. You are absolutely right.

Chair: And in the meantime, everybody carries around access to the internet on digital devices. One in five children in the UK aged three to four has their own mobile phone. At age eight, that rises to one in four. Does the Department have a view, or is it forming a view, about what age it is healthy for children to have a smartphone?

We visited a school yesterday as part of this inquiry to look at the use of Yondr devices to control mobile phone use. They said a small minority of their year 7 girls did not have phones. Certainly, it has become normal for primary-aged children to have phones.

Is that safe or reasonable, given what we have heard from Ofcom about the number of children under the age of 13 accessing social media that are not legally supposed to be doing so? Is it perhaps time to have more of a debate about that?

Damian Hinds: It is definitely a good time to debate it, Chair. You are right. Close to everybody gets a mobile phone now between year 6 and year 7. Ofcom and others have reported in the past on something of a



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rite of passage about that. You are also right that some children will get a phone or a smartphone quite a lot earlier.

The Government do not tell parents the appropriate time to do that. These are decisions for families. They are decisions for parents when bringing up their children. To be clear, I welcome the debate around this. Having it in the public sphere and having commentators, journalists, academics and politicians talking about it is helpful.

I will make my subsequent answers shorter, but we are opening up big and expansive topics. You mentioned earlier the point around the research being a bit old. That is true. An awful lot of the research on social media relates to Facebook because its dataset is the most easily accessible. That is all but irrelevant to today's teenagers. Most of the research that you look at on the spread of fake news or hatred relates to Twitter, which is not particularly relevant to most of the people we are talking about today. There is a danger that by the time you get the results of a full-scale trial, experiment or analysis, the world has moved on.

A precautionary approach is wise. A lot of people in society would agree with that and would say intuitively that of course we should be careful about these things.

Q213 Chair: To your point that this is not something you should specify, a point that has been raised with me—I appreciate that this is not really in your brief, although it touches on it—is that the early years foundation stage includes an element on digital. A number of nursery leaders and early-years practitioners have said that they deliberately do not do that because they know they get it at home. I wonder if that needs reviewing.

If practitioners feel that the content there is not appropriate because they know that children get exposure to digital at home, maybe we should take it out of the curriculum for the early years foundation stage because two and three year-olds do not need digital literacy. Surely we ought to try to limit the amount of cumulative screen time they receive.

Damian Hinds: Look, even more generally than that, it is true to say that there is a limit to the extent that it is necessary to introduce children of all ages now to technology. Quite often, the challenge is the reverse.

You are right that the early years foundation stage is not in my portfolio and it would be wrong of me to comment in detail. But we can say that the earliest years are the one part of childhood for which there is internationally stronger analysis and a WHO recommendation, which does not exist for older children at a WHO level, not on having no screen time at all, by the way, because there can be some benefits, but on restricting screen time quite a lot.

Q214 Mrs Flick Drummond: Yes. Looking at the bit that you can control, in February the Government issued non-statutory guidance on mobile phone



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use in schools. Are there any plans on this, or at what stage would the Department consider making a mobile phone ban statutory?

Damian Hinds: Schools take heed of the non-statutory advice that they have. We are trying, first, to recognise that most schools have restrictions. In fact, I am sure all schools have some degree of restriction on using mobile phones. Nowhere is it allowable to pull out your phone in the middle of maths and start doing something. Of course schools have restrictions. A lot of schools have much more restrictive restrictions than that.

We are trying to create a new norm. We deal with many things as Members of Parliament that are not a problem in most cases but which can still be an issue. A large part of what we do is to deal with those. We want to create a new norm that makes the entirety of the school day—including break and lunchtime, because of the prevalence of electronics in children's lives, and in adults' lives as well, by the way—free of mobile phones and all that comes with that: the social media and so on. It is not only about lesson time. It is also about making sure that there are not those distractions. We know from surveys that children report there sometimes being such distractions. Also, in break and lunch, we want children being with each other and enjoying being children together—talking, playing, doing sport and all those sorts of things.

We have never pretended that mobile phones are not already severely restricted in most schools, but we want to create, as I say, this new norm. Pretty much everybody welcomes that norm. I do not anticipate a problem implementing this but, if there were, the option remains to make it statutory.

Q215 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** How do you monitor it, and how do you also look at the impact of the education of pupils?

Damian Hinds: We have multiple ways of monitoring. The first and most obvious one is we hear from people. I spend quite a lot of time—as do officials—talking to headteachers, classroom teachers, and so on. More informally, we do quantitative research. For example, the national behaviour survey asks specifically about mobile phones. There are ways of monitoring these things.

Q216 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Do you have a formal mechanism where you ask all schools to feed in what they are doing about it?

Damian Hinds: No, and we wouldn't. That is not normally how we would go about this.

Q217 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** My colleagues yesterday went to a school that has these pouches that you put the phones in and they magnetically undo at the end. They cost in the region of £11. Could the Department give any financial help to schools that want to go down that route?



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Damian Hinds: It is up to schools to decide on this, as on so many things. It is up to schools how to do it and there are multiple different ways. You can do a phone prohibition. You could have lockable lockers—sorry, obviously they would be lockable. You can have a hand-in system. You can have a not-seen, not-heard policy—in other words, they are at the bottom of your bag where it is never apparent. Some schools—probably quite a small number—do outright bans, including before and after the school day. It is entirely up to schools how they go about that.

Q218 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Are there any grants to help them implement the ban in any way from the Department?

Damian Hinds: There are no grants, but there are also ways of doing it that do not involve spending money.

Q219 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** The guidance does not provide a complete list of what exemptions and adaptations can be considered. Should schools assume that exemptions should be made only in exceptional circumstances such as medical reasons, or should they be more flexible?

Damian Hinds: Again, we tend not to think that from a building in SW1, you can account for every situation of every child in every classroom in 22,000 schools across the country. I sometimes use the parallel of school uniforms. It is a norm across our school system that schools will have a uniform. There are lots of benefits, but we do not specify the policy on earrings or individual aspects.

Similarly with this, schools know their children. Some children may have certain medical conditions and will need access to a device. In the case of disability, it is a legal duty not to disadvantage those children. You could not write a good policy document that would cover all those circumstances. It is far better to put schools and headteachers in charge.

Chair: Can I bring Andrew in? He had a supplementary.

Q220 **Andrew Lewer:** I welcome what you are saying. It relates to what I was going to ask about the memento mori effect or the slave behind the Roman emperor whispering in his ear and reminding him that he is human and fallible. Headteachers are making over £100,000 a year. I remember when the school-wear guidance came through. I pushed back against it quite a lot, because it looked like we were nationalising the school rules.

Throughout all these initiatives and pressure from colleagues and politicians to say, “We have banned this. We have stopped this”, is there a mechanism, other than your own common-sense approach, to remind the Department that it is there to help and support schools, rather than to tell incredibly well-qualified and well-paid people what to do in minute detail?

Damian Hinds: Andrew, I understand the point you make, but to speak for the officials in the Department for Education and, indeed, for



Ministers, we all think that the quality of the people running the schools is most wonderful. It is intuitive and natural. It comes to officials naturally not only to appreciate that, but to realise how fortunate we are and to make absolutely the best of it. We end up with a better school system and a better education for children by not thinking we can manage every single detail of schools centrally, but by letting all that creativity and diversity bloom.

Q221 Mrs Flick Drummond: But do some headteachers like to have the rules so that they can show parents why and blame the Government rather than the headteacher?

Damian Hinds: They do. That is the point. Why are we doing this? We are doing it because it is a new norm. Headteachers are in charge of their schools and always have been, and people absolutely recognise that. This adds to that and creates this new norm but without getting into specifying the micro-detail of exactly how you do it, because we are not the people best placed to do that. They are.

Q222 Mrs Flick Drummond: Internationally, places like France, the Netherlands and so on have reported issues with students being unable to access digital resources such as timetables when a mobile phone ban was implemented. Has the Department considered the impact that a mobile phone ban will have on the students' ability to access essential education resources such as timetables?

Damian Hinds: We have thought about timetables. To be honest, it is not insurmountable to copy out a timetable. Access to digital learning resources is a bigger question. Typically, a phone is not the best way to do that; you need a bigger screen. The way you sit at a computer is different from the way you sit when you use a phone.

But on some of the points about timetables and so on, no, of course not. In setting homework policies, of course, schools will think about how to accommodate all children. That, by the way, does not change as a result of a mobile phone prohibition. They have always had to think about that. As the prevalence of technology has increased, it has evolved with it.

Q223 Mrs Flick Drummond: Would you expect them all to print out their timetables? I am looking—we have some students behind you, and I am sure they use their phones to find out when their next lectures are.

Damian Hinds: That may well be so. I cannot speak for them. All of us—Members of Parliament, people working in industry—have taken photographs of shopping lists when, in days gone by, we would have copied them out. Ian Mearns has not, but everybody else has done something like that. That does not mean that we cannot copy out a shopping list again as we used to.

Q224 Mrs Flick Drummond: Okay. We have heard concerns from parents that if children are unable to take their phones to school, they have no way to communicate with parents in an emergency during their commute to



school, for example. Do you anticipate that many schools will choose to ban all phones from school premises, or will you expect them to be put in the lockers that you mentioned or the pouches we heard about?

Damian Hinds: Those would be real concerns for parents, and sometimes there have been occasional misunderstandings about what we are talking about. The prohibition that we have talked about is during the school day. It is not to and from school. Of course, schools may decide to do something else or something extra, but it would be a minority and that is absolutely not what we require. I get the point about travel to and from school, and so on.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Particularly when school buses do not turn up.

Damian Hinds: Yes, absolutely.

Q225 **Ian Mearns:** Data from Ofcom shows that nearly a quarter of 12 to 17-year-olds who claim to have strong digital literacy skills are unable to properly identify fake content online. Why are the digital literacy skills of children still poor when digital safety education is being taught in schools?

Damian Hinds: This is a very important area. Mr Mearns, candidly, the digital literacy skills of adults are not necessarily perfect. In a previous job I did, we looked a great deal at online fraud, which has become the single biggest category of crime. Criminals go out of their way to dupe us and get into our confidence. People run—the popular culture term is “fake news” but it is a bit more sophisticated than that—information operations, again designed to rile people and so on. What we broadly call digital literacy is one way we help to protect ourselves and others against that.

We also address those things at source, particularly on fraud—for example, there was the Global Fraud Summit yesterday. And obviously on information operations, we expect social media platforms to do more to identify faux and automated accounts, and that sort of thing.

But digital literacy is the last line of defence and it is incredibly important. We do more on that in schools than ever we have before. It is part of computing; it is part of citizenship; it is also part, indirectly, of RSHE. Yes, we are doing more but, yes, it has become a bigger issue in the modern world and no doubt will continue to grow in salience and importance.

Q226 **Ian Mearns:** The Department has told the Committee in its written evidence that it does not have any specific evidence on the effectiveness of digital safety education. Given what you have said, and given some children’s low digital literacy skills, will the Department consider reassessing its effectiveness?

Damian Hinds: We always want to reassess effectiveness, but intuition also has a role here. I do not necessarily need a formal assessment of the



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outcomes for children who have learned how to protect themselves online. I know it is important for children to learn how to protect themselves online. We want to enhance that over time and we want to learn more about how to do that best, but it should not stop us doing it—and we do.

Q227 **Chair:** Can I ask a follow-up? After hearing the list of subjects you just responded with—computing, citizenship and RSHE— it struck me that we had quite a similar conversation last week about financial education, where an awful lot of content is crowded into subjects on which most secondary pupils do not spend much time. To expand on that, we know that computing is a valuable and useful minority GCSE. It is much more focused on a small group of people than perhaps the old IT one was. I totally recognise the need for changing from one to the other, but a smaller category of people take it. Many students engage with both citizenship and RSHE for as little as one lesson a week or through assemblies rather than necessarily lesson time.

Is it a challenge that increasingly important subjects and themes, like digital literacy and financial literacy, get crowded into a smaller corner of the curriculum when it comes to taught time in secondary school? Does that perhaps need some long-term strategic thought?

Damian Hinds: I should say, first, that it is not only secondary school and, secondly, it is not only about GCSEs. I think we also talked last week about GCSE computer science, which is a growing subject and I welcome that, but there is also a much larger group of children doing computing. They may not take it to GCSE, and by the way, they are also doing it in primary school, where it is important.

On the point about these subjects becoming small parts of multiple timetable subjects, Chair, if you have an important topic dispersed around different areas of the curriculum, there will always be an argument for putting it all together into one thing. It is also true that when you have everything together in one thing, there is an argument that says you have to weave it throughout the entire curriculum.

It is important that you cover these things. We are always open to learning. We are always open to improving, but we have that balance and we continue to evolve. By the way, we are supported by some fantastic outside organisations and third sector organisations helping on online safety, for example.

I am conscious that only I have spoken so far and I wanted to check—I do not know if Kate wanted to add anything.

Kate Dixon: Yes. The point I wanted to make was that particularly relationships, sex and health education—you know that we are looking at the guidance at the moment—has provision for teachers and school staff to respond to what is happening in the school. A number of the topics in there are evolving quickly. More is being looked at on these issues, which



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are changing all the time. I know from my personal experience that every year I am brought in as the parent of secondary school children to hear what they will learn about in the curriculum, which has a massive section on online safety and safeguarding. I feel quite confident that teachers and school leaders respond to what is happening.

The point I want to make is that Oak is looking at its curriculum materials. Some stuff is out there already on computing and on relationships, sex and health education. They are starting to work on the second tranche of that now. It will be available next autumn and there will be another opportunity to put extra things in and respond to what has been coming up, as well as the new guidance on relationships, sex and health education when that is published.

Q228 Ian Mearns: Concerningly, though, we have also had evidence that relatively few teachers who teach PSHE or RSHE have a relevant qualification in those areas. The Children's Commissioner has expressed the opinion that a national professional qualification or other relevant qualification on the subjects would prove vital in helping teachers to deliver lessons on those subjects much more effectively. Do you have a view on that?

Damian Hinds: Having up-to-date knowledge is important, and we can do that.

Q229 Ian Mearns: But Damian, we are expecting schools to deliver those things as part of the curriculum, yet relatively few teachers have a qualification in PSHE or RSHE. Therefore, does the Department need to draw attention to that to make sure that it is more effectively delivered across all schools?

Damian Hinds: Ian, if we talk about something like online safety or, indeed, a parallel discussion related to this on financial education, what somebody who had gone through initial teacher training 10 years ago learned about online safety was great but would not be very relevant today. We have good teachers—

Q230 Ian Mearns: No, it is a starting point from which professionals, if they have a good programme of continuing professional development, can update themselves. At least they have a starting point.

Damian Hinds: Yes. Look, we do have ways—indeed, we have some of those third-party programmes that I mentioned—to keep schools and individual teachers up to date with some of the most recent issues.

Most importantly—you know this, Ian—a good teacher can teach. If you talk about specialist science, for example, you will need to have done some things to higher education level. But if new material comes along that enhances what we practise, in terms of helping children and young people to protect themselves online, a good teacher can convey that to those children.



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Kate Dixon: We ran some extra webinars last year on some emerging topics from relationships, sex and health education, and we will certainly think about doing that again in the gaps.

Q231 **Ian Mearns:** A webinar is not the be-all and end-all. The Children's Commissioner says a qualification might be useful. You would not even consider that?

Kate Dixon: I have heard her say that before.

Ian Mearns: Yes—and?

Kate Dixon: She was a life skills teacher. It is a good question, among all the other teacher qualifications we have, and we are promoting—

Q232 **Ian Mearns:** It is something to contemplate. Anyway, how can schools best teach up-to-date digital skills when technology constantly evolves and, to be fair, old skills are potentially becoming obsolete?

Damian Hinds: May I bring in Charlotte on that?

Charlotte Briscall: This is about keeping digital skills up to date in schools. We published some technical standards for schools in 2019 and—

Q233 **Ian Mearns:** That was five years ago.

Charlotte Briscall: Yes, but that was the publication of the strategy that outlined the standards that we expected schools to follow. One of those was around continued professional development and ensuring that schools put enough focus within their leadership team on having a single person responsible for technology within the school and responsible for making sure that everyone is upskilled.

Within my team, I have research teams that spend a lot of time with schools and colleges. They go out on the frontline and find out what they do. On one hand, we have schools that were part of our technology demonstrator programme and are mature in their use of technology in the classroom and are looking at the evolution of the learning experience as a result of integrated technology. Then other schools, because of their particular community context, have not done that because they know their students and their families best. We spend time with those schools to understand how they use technology and what skills they require, and we work them to develop them.

We also do a lot of work with technology companies. I recently attended a roundtable at the BEC Conference with Google about how it is developing AI tools for the education sector. We make sure that we are working not just with the schools, but with the technology companies to make sure that they develop best-in-class solutions and products for our education system.

Q234 **Ian Mearns:** Do you constantly review the 2019 guidance?



Charlotte Briscall: It is a framework and we constantly review the standards in it. A set of services underpin that strategy. Schools can log on to our service called get help buying tech. I am responsible for that service. They can find out how to procure the best technology and get advice on the best technology for them. We have services around data protection. We build digital services for all schools to access to support them. They always evolve.

Q235 **Ian Mearns:** When you look back at that 2019 guidance, does it need to be rewritten or updated significantly?

Charlotte Briscall: The foundations of it remain, but the content underneath needs to be continually reviewed, which we do annually anyway as part of our business planning cycles.

Q236 **Andrew Lewer:** Thank you. Ofsted—I don't think we have mentioned that for a while—currently assesses PSHE through the personal development metric, but it is such a broad subject and covers a lot of topics. Is assessing it that way less ideal than doing it through a thematic subject review?

Damian Hinds: Ofsted looks at personal development. It also looks at quality of education. Both are relevant here. I know—again, we talked a bit about this last week—that there are always arguments for having Ofsted look specifically at this or that aspect of a child's education and report on it separately. Sometimes, the arguments are very good, but the problem is that when you add them all up, you have a completely different system. As you were alluding to, you then change the balance of individual autonomy for running a school and so on.

Ofsted is currently doing a thematic report on personal development. We are waiting to see what is in that, but clearly, in this day and age, online safety and RSHE are big aspects of personal development in children, and I would expect them to feature significantly.

Q237 **Andrew Lewer:** That is spot on. I have written down here, "Danger of overprescribing teacher knowledge, skills and autonomy." I suppose the challenge, though, is that because so many parts of the curriculum are prescribed, unless you prescribe this bit as well, people think they have to concentrate on the bits that are prescribed because they are scored on those. Within that, how do we allow for teachers' particular interest areas and skills to have some space and be communicated to pupils?

Damian Hinds: The curriculum is not as prescribed as a lot of people think. The national curriculum is a framework with quite a lot of scope, but I understand the point you make. Relationships education and health education in primary and relationships and sex education in secondary is compulsory. Citizenship is a statutory part of the national curriculum in secondary school.

In general, schools are in the business of giving children knowledge and skills. They are in the business of developing children and helping to



prepare them for their adult life, part of which is about the content of the work they will do, but there are many other aspects as well. In my experience, schools absolutely do not need to be told that it is important for children to learn about these key aspects of life. They want to do that. They want to have the best materials, the best support and so on to do that.

Q238 Chair: On the point about knowledge and skills, I think we all agree about the importance of both. In the process of looking at different parts of the United Kingdom, the Scottish system sold a great curriculum for skills and, by most accounts, it has not been a great success. It has not led to an improvement in attainment, but can we learn anything from that? Can we take any positives out of what they have done in the digital space? It would be interesting to know if anyone is monitoring outcomes on that front.

Damian Hinds: I will address your question indirectly. Knowledge is important. Knowledge helps you develop skills—it is difficult to develop skills without any knowledge.

The PISA tests are effectively the same tests run in multiple different countries—different languages, different traditions, certainly different histories and all those kinds of things. They are effectively tests of 21st-century skills but it turns out that jurisdictions that have knowledge-rich curricula tend to perform better. That has been the case if you look, in the United Kingdom context, at England against Scotland or Wales. Having “skills” or “modern” or “21st century” or whatever in the title of something does not necessarily mean that it will deliver the best.

I fear we are perhaps drifting slightly off the core content here, but it is relevant.

Q239 Chair: It is important. Also, it is worth having a look to see if there are any aspects—whether it is online safety or digital literacy—where that approach has helped rather than hindered. I totally accept your analysis of the overall picture, and the PISA scores paint that out, but maybe we could still learn from other jurisdictions that have taken a more digitally focused approach and we could pull out some positives.

Damian Hinds: I am not sure how much more. I am always keen to learn from other jurisdictions. In the last decade and a half, we have tried to do that extensively in the Department for Education. When we have found something somewhere in the world that works well, like maths mastery particularly in some east Asian jurisdictions, we pick it up and do it. That has served us well.

I will be more sceptical about saying that we should find a jurisdiction that has more digital content in children’s lives and see if that has helped them learn about digital literacy. Following what I said earlier about being precautionary, I struggle to be persuaded that we have a lack of electronica in this country.



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Q240 **Anna Firth:** On to guidance for parents, please, Minister. The Department has previously stated that there is insufficient evidence to support providing guidance to parents on screen time. However, we have heard a lot of evidence as part of this inquiry including from academic experts, who have told us that that should not be a barrier to introducing much-needed guidance. We heard from Carolyn Bunting, CEO of Internet Matters, that parents are crying out for more support. Indeed, we heard that from parents on internet matters day in a separate session.

Will you commit to commissioning guidance on screen time limits for children from the chief medical officer and other experts?

Damian Hinds: I do not speak for the chief medical officer. You are right indirectly to identify that this is a health question. It is also an education question because there are questions about the effect, of course, of computer use on school attainment, as well as on general child wellbeing.

Q241 **Anna Firth:** Sure, but on this specific point, is there any barrier to you as an Education Minister asking for that guidance from the chief medical officer?

Damian Hinds: We have no barrier to asking each other all sorts of searching and important questions. You mentioned who you had heard from earlier. You also heard from Dr Orben, I believe, who talked about the point I made earlier that you need to distinguish what it is—it is not one thing. I think she said, “It is not the screen; it is what is on and around the screen that matters.”

Q242 **Chair:** Given the cumulative evidence we have heard, given some of the risks we are all well aware of and also—let us face it—given that we have been through what could be described as the controlled experiment of giving children an awful lot of exposure to digital in their lives, and the mental health outcomes have not been great, is there a case, perhaps more than there was five or 10 years ago, for looking at what is a healthy limit to screen time?

Damian Hinds: Robin, you will not find me unsympathetic to your analysis and I am genuinely not trying to dodge your question. It has not been a controlled experiment, by the way. That is part of the issue. You can look to no other country in the world and say, “There they have not had this particular development in handheld technology.”

Chair: I was thinking more of the pandemic and the period when we shut children away and left them with devices for their main communication.

Damian Hinds: I see. Okay, there were varying effects, but I am not sure to the extent of having a subject group and a control group. The fundamental point is that there are two sets of reasons why we particularly worry about screen time. The first is about the harms that can come as a result of using technology, but that do not have to come from using technology—things like children’s exposure to pornography, exposure to self-harm-related material, the insecurity that can come for



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children and teenagers from the quest for likes and popularity, from body image comparisons and from the oppressive—

Anna Firth: Minister, if I may interrupt you, we are asking questions here and we have heard a lot of evidence on all of those points.

Damian Hinds: I would like to finish, but carry on.

Q243 **Anna Firth:** By all means, but I want to bring you back to the question. We have heard a lot of evidence about all the harms that you have adumbrated and we totally agree. That is why we are doing this screen inquiry.

The Department has no duty to implement any guidance that it has from the chief medical officer. There are two processes. At this stage, we are asking whether the Department would ask for that guidance from the chief medical officer. What happens to that guidance is another question. This is an important question, it is part of our inquiry, and we would appreciate it if the Department would commission that guidance on screen time limits from the chief medical officer.

Damian Hinds: I am not sure what you mean, Anna—you mean commission guidance for whom?

Q244 **Anna Firth:** For children. We would like the chief medical officer's opinion on what is a safe level of screen time for children. We would then, as part of our inquiry, want to look at that and discuss it with you, no doubt, at another session.

Damian Hinds: Indeed, the academic community is rightly concerned with these matters. Earlier on, I talked through some of the research on educational outcomes, but there are wider questions. I would like, at some point later, to finish answering the question I was answering before, because it is important. You have asked me specifically if we can have guidance about screen time—

Q245 **Anna Firth:** No, I am asking you if you would please commission guidance from the chief medical officer. Would you ask for guidance from the chief medical officer that we can discuss, and discuss no doubt with you, as part of the other evidence as to whether it would be appropriate for that guidance to be handed on to schools, or whether it would need to be added to or detracted from? It would be part of the evidence we gather.

Damian Hinds: Candidly, I am not sure I quite understand the distinction. I thought you were asking, regardless of who asks it of whom, whether guidance should be given to parents on a limit on how much time children should spend online. The underlying principle at the heart of that I do not disagree with at all, but what I said right at the start remains true. Even very small amounts of very harmful activity could be as bad as relatively large amounts of, say, educational or



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prosocial activity. For that reason, trying to come up with a magic number for a limit, I suspect, is nigh on impossible.

When you recommend five fruit or vegetables a day, no harm can come from somebody eating five fruit or vegetables a day. If you were to say two hours a day online is okay, boy, a lot of harm could come. Also, many people will be online for more than two hours a day and no harm will come.

That is why I hope, at some point in this session, that I might be able to come back to this, because we particularly care about screen time for two key groups of reasons. I was about two thirds of the way through the first one, which is about the direct harms that come.

The second one is about displacement and what does not happen because of being online. Sleep is the first thing you hear sometimes about from headteachers, but there is also the displacement of physical activity, sports and games, and interpersonal time. I know that sometimes screen time is a version of interpersonal communication. Intuitively, many of us would say face-to-face communication has a benefit and so on. Then there is also distraction and that can include distraction from schoolwork in or out of school. All of it is in a vicious cycle of reinforcement, if these activities have compulsive or addictive design features. We worry about these things, the harms that come, the bullying, the exposure to harmful material and so on, and as a result of a time spent online, what children are then not doing that might be a gap in their education and in their wider child development.

Q246 **Anna Firth:** They are all well-documented health issues and are all reasons why guidance from the chief medical officer would be extremely helpful.

Damian Hinds: With respect, the first part of what you said is correct. I am not sure from what I said that it is possible to say that, therefore, the correct time limit to have on the internet is X. We can say—

Q247 **Chair:** We can say that it is not good for children to be on devices during their break times at school, which you are saying.

Damian Hinds: Correct—in the part of the domain that is school, absolutely. That is why we want to have this new norm. We do not go about telling parents how to bring up their children, but we do emphasise the importance of turning up to school having slept well. We do have an expectation that we should do a decent amount of PE a week and we want children to do extra physical activity, including walking or cycling to and from school, outside of school. We absolutely need to bear down on those harmful activities and exposures to harmful content.

I realise that this has turned, in parts, into a long composite answer—

Anna Firth: I have more questions.



Damian Hinds: But ultimately, parents are in charge. Of course, parents will rightly set rules and boundaries for their children, and the world in which they do that has now changed. People were once worried about television. This is now much more expansive and multifaceted than television. It is the new set of things to worry about.

Ultimately, you want children themselves as they grow up—they cannot do this when they are very young—to develop their own sense of a healthy limit to how much time they will spend online, because they want to be doing sport and want to be face-to-face with their friends. There will come a day at 16 or 18, or whenever, that they are out into the world.

Q248 **Anna Firth:** All right. Can I come on now to the next thing? I am working with two parents, both of whom have lost their children and both blame, to a greater or lesser extent, online challenges. One is Hollie Dance and one is Lisa Kenevan; they work with Internet Matters. They have highlighted that there is a lack of guidance at year 7, when the children transition from primary to secondary school, and they have identified that that is the time when, if children do not already have a smartphone, they will get one. That is the right moment to advise parents of the dangers of smartphones.

Both of their children were in their early teens and had just gone to secondary school when they lost their lives. Internet Matters is completely backing their campaign and is funding them to make a hard-hitting film to be shown in primary schools. These two parents in Essex are leading the way. They have proved to me and to other MPs on Internet Safety Day that the advice parents get at the end of primary school in our schools around the country is inconsistent.

Do you agree that it would be desirable and helpful if we made sure that all primary schools in the country give parents some advice at that crucial transitioning moment?

Damian Hinds: Anna, first let me say that I do not know the details of those two cases but I am desperately sorry to hear about them. There have been too many tragedies from different aspects of what children have been exposed to online. Our thoughts are with those families.

I will let Kate say something on this in a moment, but as I said at the beginning, there does seem to be something about that transition from primary to secondary. It is understandable because children will be travelling longer distances to school, getting the bus for the first time in some cases—all sorts of things, as well as that point about everybody else doing it. So it becomes a sort of rite of passage. A lot of children will have their device earlier, but for those who do not, that seems to be the moment. That is why it is so important that we have this type of education in primary school, as we do. Schools often give such advice to parents as well. Let me bring Kate in.



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Kate Dixon: Thank you. We talked yesterday about the roles of schools and parents. Clearly, you are thinking about that as well.

Two pieces of our guidance refer to schools talking to parents, although perhaps not in the detail that these two parents are campaigning for, so it would be interesting for me to understand more about that. However, “Keeping children safe in education” and the guidance that we pulled together on teaching online safety in schools both talk about making sure that parents are aware of what is being taught in school, but extending that to asking parents to think about the healthy behaviours and habits at home as well.

My children’s secondary school clearly tells me that it is my phone—I am funding the phones that are in the hands of my children. It is my responsibility to know what is going on and I should be creating a culture where I can look on that phone whenever I want, that it is not a private thing. Schools do go some way to impress on parents the need for a greater sense of safety and responsibility, but it would be interesting to know more about the detail, particularly at that boundary point.

Q249 **Anna Firth:** The question is not around what schools are doing. All good schools, I am sure, are doing as much as they can and understand the issues. The question is about consistency. Is the Department doing anything to ensure that the guidance is consistent across the country?

Kate Dixon: Our mechanisms are Ofsted inspections. We do not have proactive reporting back against those bits of guidance that flow through.

Q250 **Anna Firth:** I am sorry to interrupt. One of the things we heard from the Children’s Commissioner—which she put in her latest report published a couple of weeks ago—is that it should be a requirement for Ofsted to specifically review the guidance to parents on online safety.

Damian Hinds: It is worth saying that “Keeping children safe in education”, which Kate referred to, is the pre-eminent statutory guidance for schools on all things to do with safeguarding, including online safety. Maybe you would write to me with more detail of the campaign that those families are doing. I would of course look at it.

Q251 **Anna Firth:** With great pleasure. I have two very quick questions. Would the Department consider providing guidance on a rating system for apps that claim to be educational? The other end of the telescope.

Damian Hinds: This is tricky. I will let Charlotte come in in a moment. I understand why you would ask that, and I get the motivation behind it. There is a lot of stuff out there, a lot of material and a lot of choice. There are also significant hurdles in doing something like this because things change so often. It is not as simple as an age barrier. It is relatively straightforward to assess the PEGI age thing for games. Looking at the efficacy of an educational product is less so.



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As a rule, the DFE does not mandate, dictate or whatever the other word is, which may come to me in a moment. We do not Kitemark products, except where there is a very high standard of proof. Educational programmes such as phonics, for example, are in a different bracket. The EEF—the Education Endowment Foundation—exists to evaluate programmes to help schools, particularly on pupil premium but more broadly on how to procure, what to procure and what to focus on. The problem with some of the edtech products is that by the time you have done your randomised control trial, there is a new product on the market, or the existing one has changed so much. There are challenges, but I do understand the motivation of what you say. I will hand over to Charlotte.

Charlotte Briscall: I think you have covered everything well.

Damian Hinds: Have I?

Charlotte Briscall: There is no current rating system. I do not even know whether parents would welcome that at this point anyway, so perhaps that is something we should look into.

Q252 **Chair:** We heard from parents' groups that they would, but we also heard concerns that a very high proportion of the edtech products out there on the market, particularly in the app space, are not educational, and there are concerns about direct marketing being delivered through them. I guess the questions are whether we are comfortable with that space being a complete wild west, and whether some degree of regulation is needed for products that advertise themselves specifically as educational.

Damian Hinds: The industry has an interest in self-regulation to solidify trust. For example, there is a market-based solution called EdTech Impact.

Schools often recommend things. We must be a bit careful because just having a high market share does not necessarily mean that a product is good, but people can sometimes take a bit of comfort from having heard—that product X or product Y is good. We will all have come across some of those big volume things that seem to be very popular. Ultimately, I think it the school's own recommendation is the single most important, Good Housekeeping seal.

Q253 **Anna Firth:** I have one final point, moving completely away from the dangers of children who have too much tech to the other end of the spectrum and the children who do not have any access or enough access to tech for educational purposes. To what extent is the Department working to narrow the digital divide that exists for some children and some families?

Charlotte Briscall: You will probably be aware that during the pandemic we supplied 1.95 million devices to schools, particularly those in the educational investment areas. We asked schools to prioritise which children received those laptops and tablets. Those devices still exist, and we are working with schools to make sure that they are maintained



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appropriately and kept up to date as best they can be. We give schools autonomy to decide how they invest in technology. We do not mandate that; they make that decision. However, we do allow pupil premium, for example, to be spent on devices. One of the schools on our technology demonstrator programme has a bring-your-own-device policy where every student at the school must have a device and the school rents devices to pupils on meal vouchers, for example. That is how they are approaching the digital gap.

Ian Mearns: In a nutshell, schools are left to their own devices.

Q254 **Anna Firth:** You are saying that there are devices in schools to ensure that children have access.

Charlotte Briscall: Yes. We have evidence of a high percentage of children in secondary schools, in particular, having access to devices.

Q255 **Anna Firth:** Is the issue of the digital divide that was such a worry a few years ago much less of a worry now for the Department?

Charlotte Briscall: The Ofcom 2023 survey asked parents if their child had adequate access to a digital device outside of school to complete homework. Six out of 10 parents felt their child had adequate access, not necessarily to a one-on-one device, but adequate access, possibly to a shared device, for them to be able to appropriately complete homework.

Q256 **Chair:** However, 40% is quite a high proportion without adequate access.

Damian Hinds: It is less than 40% in secondary schools. Within the group that does not have consistent access, as per the survey wording, the next biggest category is those who share access with somebody else.

Q257 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** We have covered the digitalisation of education and talked about displacement of other subjects. Does the Department have any plans to ensure that screen-free periods within the school day are protected, or are we allowing the schools, as you said before, to have autonomy over that?

Damian Hinds: Schools have autonomy, but I have never come across a school that does not have some screen-free time. I would struggle to imagine that any would ever wish to.

Q258 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Sweden has decided that it has a lack of digital skills and has now increased the digitalisation. The challenge is to get the balance right when you can now do practically everything on a screen, apart from physical activity.

Damian Hinds: Almost everything. Look, here we are talking to each other, personally—call me old-fashioned.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Endlessly picking up our screens.

Damian Hinds: Sometimes you go to meetings these days and feel like you are just talking to the backs of laptops, but I think there is still



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something valuable about having this kind of discussion, and there is something unique about a book. There is something special about a newspaper as well.

Q259 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** You can get those on your digital devices.

Damian Hinds: There are degrees, aren't there? There is something important about news brands that we trust, including newspaper brands. Sorry, I am drifting away again, but if you have been used to looking at a newspaper on your tablet and you get hold of an actual newspaper again, it is a slightly different experience.

To come back to education, when you are learning to write, the experience of making the shapes on paper is different from pushing a button.

Q260 **Chair:** There is good evidence that, cognitively, we engage differently when writing something versus tapping it into a device. I know a number of members of the Committee are concerned about proposals for some exams to go online. Should we, as a system, be concerned about the potential development of online testing? The multiplication test at the early stage is designed to be done digitally, but I think there are now early proposals for GCSE exams to be conducted online some years down the track. Are you wholly comfortable with digital online approaches given the cognitive differences in engagement between writing on the page and tapping into a screen, as well as all the risks that we are aware of, such as security, cyber and so on?

Damian Hinds: You have raised some important points. For as long as the technology has been there, children with certain special educational needs, for example, have been able to use whatever system of adaptive technology is appropriate for them, and that is absolutely right. Some types of tests have also long had an online element. I think the GMAT, for example, is entirely online. Even the essay is done online. I know there are arguments in favour of having greater online assessment, to do with all sorts of things—the assessment itself as well as efficiency, integrity, security and so on.

I think it is also true that there are, as you have alluded to, some important benefits to having traditional written exams. Ofqual is currently doing some research and analysis about that. These will be important considerations to have in mind.

Q261 **Andrew Lewer:** I want to commend to the Minister and put on the public record the work of Sam Strickland, the headmaster of The Duston School in my constituency. He has written and researched this in some detail, and points out the severe drawbacks of moving away from conventional examination methods, particularly for families with less access to technology, less household income and so on. His work on this is quite extensive and well worth looking at.

Damian Hinds: I will take a look. Thank you, Mr Lewer.



Q262 **Chair:** Thank you. On another, more technical point, we have heard evidence that the Online Safety Act specifically does not cover edtech used in school settings. Baroness Kidron told the Committee that that means a child on the bus on the way to school has more protections than the same child has in the school classroom. Do you think that criticism stacks up, and if not, why not?

Damian Hinds: Maximum respect to Baroness Beeban Kidron, who has long been an effective campaigner on aspects of child safety.

The reason why the Online Safety Act does not apply in the same way in schools is different. It is that there is already a set of statutory requirements around child protection, child safety and safeguarding in schools. There is already a much fuller regime because it includes in-person inspection by Ofsted. In formulating the Online Safety Bill, as it then was, the Government were seeking to have a proportionate regime that did not double up on regulatory aspects. Schools are covered in that way. There is a specific point—Charlotte may come in at any moment and gently correct me—around the ICO's age-appropriate design code, where there is a bit of unclarity around how it is related to edtech products.

Charlotte Briscall: Yes. We are working with the ICO on the age-appropriate design code to understand how it impacts edtech. The Netherlands Government made some interventions on a similar level with some of the technical products used in schools. We talking to the ICO about the impact the design code has on the tech used in our schools.

However, our tech standards include robust outlines on the use of filtering and monitoring, for example. Every school should be using filtering and monitoring software to ensure that they can track everything that a young person is accessing through the school network. Of course, that technology is continually evolving. We have to keep on top of that and make sure that schools are kept up to date on how they can best manage it. We also have robust cyber security standards for schools to follow; they are embedded in the "Keeping children safe in education" standards. There are things in place that I believe—from an access point of view and a content point of view—are keeping children safe while in school, if those standards are adhered to and followed.

Q263 **Chair:** Where standards are adhered to and followed and where there is sufficient resource to make sure of that.

That brings me to my next question. We have discussed lots of devices being given out to children during the pandemic. There is more hardware, in one form or another, both in our schools and across the population, than there probably has been at any time before now. And yet, for perhaps understandable reasons, the Department has increased the proportion of school spending on people versus everything else—I think that I am right in saying from about 75% to 82%—as part of its guidance. Is there sufficient resource to maintain and keep safe all the hardware across the education piece? Do we need to have an increasing



dialogue about the need to maintain and update the hardware and software to protect the security of the school estate and children's safety?

Damian Hinds: If the proportion of resourcing went on things other than people and the statistic you just mentioned went in the other direction, I think that you would rightly have words to say to me because education is a people business. Machines play an important role in education. Hardware and software play an important role in augmenting and supporting great teaching and learning, but they will never replace the brilliant inspiration of a great teacher standing at the front of the class.

I am not sure your question is entirely answerable. Any question about whether there is enough can always be answered with, "There should be more", but we have accumulated expertise in managing hardware and we have the guidance that goes out to schools—I should probably let Charlotte pick this up.

Charlotte Briscall: Initiatives such as Connect the Classroom, which improved schools' connectivity and our roll-out of fibre, and get help with buying tech for schools were all born from different areas of the Department. They have now been brought together into a single digital data technology strategy, for which I am solely responsible. That has been a recent change to ensure that we can make a holistic set of priorities against everything we need to do for the sector. We believe that by doing that, we will be able to drive efficiencies. I do not have a specific answer to whether we need more, but I am confident that we are approaching things more effectively and efficiently for the future.

Q264 **Chair:** You have mentioned the late lamented—or unlamented, depending on who you ask—EdTech Demonstrator Programme.

Charlotte Briscall: Yes, which has now stopped, but has been replaced with a blueprint programme that we are trialling in Blackpool and Portsmouth. It has evolved. We stay in contact with those demonstrator schools because they were spearheading how technology could be used in the learning environment.

Q265 **Chair:** You mentioned two specific pilots. Is that as part of the education investment area programme?

Charlotte Briscall: Yes, that's right—it is.

Chair: Flick Drummond mentioned Sweden. I think Sweden has had a bit of a U-turn in their digital strategy recently and moved away from exams online, for instance, as part of recognising some of the challenges of going too far, too fast down the digital route. In conversations we have had with UNESCO, I was struck that it had gone from being an organisation that had been very much promoting and driving the uptake of technology, particularly in the developing world, to one that was beginning to sound some notes of warning about digital wastage and the sustainability of running costs in that space, as well as some of the issues of risk, distraction, mental health and so on. It is interesting to note how



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that dialogue seems to be changing internationally, and that needs to be closely followed by the Department for Education and any work that we are doing in this space, recognising that we all want the UK to be a leader in digital skills and digital technology. Striking the right balance here strikes me as being an important part of all our jobs.

With that, Minister, I think that we can say that we are done.