



Communications and Digital Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Media literacy

Tuesday 29 April 2025

3.30 pm

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Members present: Baroness Keeley (The Chair); Viscount Colville of Culross; Lord Dunlop; Baroness Fleet; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Lord Knight of Weymouth; The Bishop of Leeds; Lord McNally; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge; Lord Storey; Baroness Wheatcroft.

Evidence Session No. 7

Heard in Public

Questions 101 - 126

Witnesses

I: Vicki Shotbolt, Chief Executive Officer, Parent Zone; Matteo Bergamini MBE, Chief Executive Officer, Shout Out UK; Alistair Barfield, Director and Founder, Deflect and Protect.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Vicki Shotbolt, Matteo Bergamini and Alistair Barfield.

Q101 **The Chair:** I am pleased to welcome our second panel of witnesses. Thank you very much for joining us today; a couple of you were actually here for the first session, so thank you for doing that. Could I start by asking you to introduce yourselves?

Alistair Barfield: I run an organisation called Deflect and Protect. We specifically look at media literacy with SEND students—special needs students—and people who work with them. I spend a lot of time talking about countering extremism, but a big proponent of mine is to understand the content that they engage with.

Vicki Shotbolt: I am the founder and chief executive of Parent Zone. We are a social enterprise with a mission to improve outcomes for children, which we do by supporting parents and families directly and indirectly with all the challenges and complexities of digital family life.

Matteo Bergamini: I am the CEO and founder of Shout Out UK. We are a social enterprise that focuses on political and media literacy programming in secondary schools and colleges. We also do a lot of digital campaigns for parents, carers and adults.

Q102 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** At least two of you were here during the last session and heard a lot about what goes on in schools and what does not. However, I would like to start by asking if you think there are already some means—I suspect you are providing some of them—outside the traditional schools to get media training across to individuals and their carers, sharers, parents and those who can influence them.

Alistair Barfield: The first thing that we have to acknowledge is how much time young people spend engaging with media. It is a tremendous period of time. We were looking at lengths of time for popular streamers and we are talking of seven or eight hours a go, so it is an endless drip feed of content. So, instead of chastising young people for engaging with this, we have to understand their lived experiences and why they enjoy this content.

They are going to talk about it, particularly in spaces where they feel comfortable, such as youth clubs. Sports coaches regularly contact my organisation and ask for help, because their young students are discussing content that they have engaged with online. Parents groups are crying out for help; I do a lot of work with parents and carers organisations as well. So there is a myriad of ways outside of schools that we can challenge this, because it has such a tremendously influential impact on our young people.

Q103 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** You mentioned that there are all these organisations, some of which approach you but, presumably, the majority do not. Where are they getting their information from?

Alistair Barfield: Traditional media news sources is the honest truth. The vast majority of their understandings of young people's online dealings seems to be through discussions with one another or traditional media news sources. Often this can be sensationalised, and it tends to miss what is really happening because it moves so incredibly rapidly. How fast this is going was a theme of the last session.

Vicki Shotbolt: I will pick up the parents' or adults' side of the question. The immediate and straightforward response is that they are not getting very much media literacy information. They are consuming an awful lot of content, but they are not equipped with many sources to get a good way to navigate through all that content. If you are a provider like us, who tries to take media literacy messages to those audiences, the easy-to-say and difficult-to-do answer is that you have to take it to where they are. We have delivered media literacy training in supermarkets, asylum seeker accommodation and domestic violence units: you have to go out to all those places where you will find parents.

It has become an awful lot more difficult because parent support structures were reduced radically under the Conservative Government. Under the 1997 Labour Government, we started to have a little bit of an infrastructure to support parents, but that infrastructure is not really there anymore, so we are left with all of the places that you might catch their eye. I suppose that is the best way to put it.

Q104 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Can you give an example of what you did in supermarkets? I am finding it quite hard to envisage.

Vicki Shotbolt: It is hard to imagine. It is interesting because, actually, it is not that wild or difficult when you put it in context. When we are working with adults, we find that they want really practical information. They do not want theory; they do not want theoretical kind of "If a man met a man". They want to know how media literacy skills might improve their lived daily lives. If it is about avoiding a scam, being able to sign up for a card that gets you a discount in Asda or any of those things, they suddenly start to engage and you can start to talk about things like, "Why do you think they are able to discount the prices so much? What's so valuable about your data?" You can open up a conversation. We do that through a programme that DSIT funded called Everyday Digital, where we try to root media literacy skills in people's everyday lives.

Q105 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Matteo, if you would like to add anything to that, please do. Could I ask, because you have already delivered your programme both in schools and to parents, if you had to make the judgment of Solomon and decide how resources could best be spent on building media literacy, how you would go about deciding?

Matteo Bergamini: There are a number of factors to that. One thing that is important, in terms of resources, is to acknowledge that different groups and individuals need things to be delivered in different ways. For example, if we take parents and carers, or parents in general, one consistent characteristic is that they tend to be quite time poor; as

someone who has a four year-old and a three month-old, I can definitely relate to that. This often means that, in terms of putting resources in—we have had this experience before—such as doing evening classes or long-form trainings, you often do not get a healthy number of parents attend those purely because time constraints do not permit them, so they do not care. It is just time.

Q106 Baroness Wheatcroft: What about the difference between a five year-old and a 13 year-old? How important is it to get to them really young, rather than at 13?

Matteo Bergamini: I would say that it is incredibly important. When my organisation delivers to young people, we often do it from secondary school onwards, just because that is our expertise, but I would definitely advocate for it starting younger. Realistically, it is the same as this example: if you wait for when a young person is ready to go out on their own before you start to teach them about stranger danger or how to cross the road properly, you have kind of lost that fight already. You almost need to do that before they are able to go outside on their own properly. The same logic needs to apply to when kids are going online—and kids are going online younger and younger so, realistically, if we do not get there first, an influencer or someone else might. It is important at least to start those conversations and acknowledge that they do not necessarily always have to be negative ones.

A lot of our work tends to be with hard-to-reach individuals and in places with people from low socioeconomic backgrounds but, in general, social media and the online space have brought a ton of benefits.

Acknowledging the dual nature of all of this and delivering it young is, I think, definitely the answer in a lot of ways.

Q107 Lord Knight of Weymouth: I am interested in the opportunity of school as an entry point for parents and intergenerational learning, as well as the extent to which there may be examples of that working well—or, indeed, whether you have tried it and it did not work. Is intergenerational learning something that we should be pursuing?

Matteo Bergamini: One hundred per cent. We have an example of this in a project that we did on the Home Office's "Preventing Radicalisation" framework; we did it with, I believe, West Sussex. It was interesting because, obviously, young people are in a mindset to learn. That is the time in their lives when they are in school, and they understand that learning is a part of their lives. There is—this is not generalising everybody—an ego that sometimes comes with being an adult, where you think that you know everything you need to know to get on with life so you do not really need to learn. One of the things that we found works really well in engaging with parents and carers is that, if you frame it as, "You're helping your children learn", they often have the spillover benefit of learning themselves.

In that project, for example, we delivered a series of workshops and trainings for young people, but we also developed a workbook and a

guide for parents to do at home with their kids. Again, it varied depending on parents' time, but this was quite successful because, again, parents wanted to help their children. They wanted to help their children navigate online spaces better and be less caught out by misinformation, but, at the same time, they were learning with their kids. We were removing the barrier that sometimes comes along with adulting, for lack of a better term.

Alistair Barfield: When I do media literacy interventions from the schools' perspective—I tend to do them in SEND schools—I will not do them if I do not do a parent session. I tell the schools that. There is no point in equipping young people if we cannot equip the parents to help them discern that content; I think that we spend a tremendous amount of time telling young people to stay safe online but do not discern the content itself.

When I am talking to young people about content, which is what I spend most of my time doing, I ask them four simple questions: "Who made the content? Why was it made? What is it designed for you to think and feel? Who is the target audience?" If I can empower young people every day to think about that and then to encourage their parents to discuss that with them, the obfuscation of the screen dissolves. I find that the second there is a screen in front of a child, we are a bit hesitant to engage with that world.

Q108 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** You have all covered an area that I was going to ask you about: how well equipped are parents and carers to help young people build media literacy at home? I am particularly interested in how young you think parents should start that, because they are the first educators. As we know, children are already looking at screens from the age of two, I believe. I would like all of your opinions on that; let us start with Ali.

Alistair Barfield: If we were to look at the UN's—the WHO's—guidance on screen time, we would say that a child under the age of five should have no more than 20 minutes a day anyway, but we understand that there are realities and recommendations. On "young", I tend to go to eight because I think, partly from my background as an educator, that that is when interesting discussions can happen, from a young person's perspective. It could be younger, though, but I definitely think primary school; I do a lot of work in primary schools, particularly with years 5 and 6.

Q109 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** Vicki, in terms of your experience, you have already talked about trying to bring adults into learning in all different environments. We were told that, if you say, "Oh, you've got to be better at media literacy", that is not really the way forward. It is better to say—as you, Matteo, were saying—"It's about helping your children to be safe or to learn more". You must have lots of new techniques that would be helpful to the committee.

Vicki Shotbolt: I have a couple of thoughts. We recently completed an early scoping project with the Nuffield Foundation, looking at media literacy in the early years. It is very striking that there is no adequate definition of media literacy in the early years, given that that is the point at which you have the most engaged parents and the parents who are most likely to be receptive to how you set effective, good ground rules for understanding technology and the media literacy environment.

You can start to embed this. A fantastic researcher called Faith Rogow talks about the ways in which you can encourage parents to read storybooks with their children in a way that will promote positive media literacy behaviours. That is how you do it: you start in preschool by embedding good techniques with parents. Throughout all those moments when you are helping your child learn to read and helping them to make sense of the world, that is when we need to have media literacy coming from parents.

Then you move into primary school. Since 2018, in partnership with Google, we have done a large-scale programme in primary schools called "Be Internet Legends". There, you are moving much more into the partnership approach, where you are sending children home with knowledge and skills that they are excited by, which can start to prompt conversations at home about what good media behaviour looks like.

By the time you get to secondary school, this is where intergenerational learning becomes much more difficult to pick up—this point was made earlier—because we still suffer from an awful narrative around digital natives and digital immigrants. Parents believe that their children know more about technology than they do, and that is very often the case. Parents and professionals have woefully low levels of understanding of what media literacy is, but you have to be so careful that you do not reinforce that view, because what parents lack in understanding about technology they have through lived experience. They have a certain amount of cynicism and life skills that young people do not have, so you have to land that message very carefully.

Equally, when you are working with teenagers—again, we run a programme in secondary schools called "Hit Pause", which works directly with the 14 to 16 year-old age group—they do not believe that adults have credible things to tell them because they recognise that we live in two different digital worlds. There, you have to speak very directly and authentically to young people of that age group.

So, there are really significant challenges in building programmes for these different age groups and thinking about your opportunities to influence behaviour.

Q110 **Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:** Matteo, would you like to tell us about some of your experiences in terms of what works best?

Matteo Bergamini: Definitely. Obviously, I mentioned the intergenerational project, which worked incredibly well. I would also say that digital campaigns have a part to play here because, again, adults

spend a lot of time online as well and it is often the older generations—not necessarily the younger ones—who are potentially spreading misinformation. We have all been in that family WhatsApp group where the odd uncle or auntie is sharing one bit of information or another.

One of the things that we did for the general election, with Ofcom and the Electoral Commission, was to run a campaign called Dismiss. We ran that again for UNESCO's Media Literacy Week and then for the Welcome to Your Vote Week for the Electoral Commission. The main focus of that was on political disinformation; it was a series of short-form videos and bits of information around understanding troll farms and what bot habits look like—those really small titbits of information. The aim was micro-dosing education about the things you come across when you are scrolling online on whichever platform.

There is no one silver bullet to deal with this. Training in schools with parents and young people, or intergenerationally, all has a part to play in the puzzle. Digital campaigns are just another element of that to ensure that we try to grab people in every different way possible, because we need to take a whole-society approach.

I have one last thing to say. We are coming to a bit of a worrying trend, which we saw at the height of the "Adolescence" series and afterwards, when there were strengthening calls to ban technology, to stop young people from using their smartphones and so forth. I understand one aspect of that, but part of me fears that we are going down the route of satanic panic. We are almost saying, "Well, this is terrible, so let's just ban everything". Of course, that just does not help anything. If you stop a young person from going outside until they are 18, they will be just as clueless but 18 as opposed to 12.

It does not resolve anything to have this negative view of technology; actually, we should be encouraging parents to go online with their kids. If you do it when they are a young age on something like YouTube Kids or whatever, you not only demystify the online space for parents but make it a topic of conversation at places like the dinner table or wherever else. Now, you tend to see that the digital world is for young people and young people only: they do not talk about it with their parents; parents do not ask, so happy days. Of course, that does not really quite work.

Q111 Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: That is a very good point. Ali, what kind of reaction do you get from the parents who you insist come and attend your classes?

Alistair Barfield: I sell them. I am a salesman at heart, and I agree with the things that we have been saying this morning, as well. To get parents on board, the trick is to explain why it is relevant to them because they are so time poor. The reaction I get is, "Help". A lot of my time is spent saying, "Look, I'm an autistic man. My primary form of socialisation was the internet because of my disability, fundamentally. The way I grew up was through the guise of a screen". That is okay, but there are positive ways to encourage this and communication that needs

to happen. Once we break that down, I find that parents are super on board. They want to learn and to understand.

I am with Matteo on the fear of satanic panic. We saw this in the periodic tables of emojis that were shared post "Adolescence". I think that, once we chastise any form of digital interaction or the internet for young people, we fail them, because it is how they are going to communicate with the world.

Q112 Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge: To what extent do children who have been educated on media literacy still choose to engage with extreme content or negative behaviour? Is there a cognitive dissonance here?

Matteo Bergamini: It is tough to know for sure, I would say. The one thing we have seen is that, when you build up a young person's critical thinking skills, their emotional resilience and their knowledge of what we class as media literacy terms, they become more resilient. Is that a vaccine that will definitely guarantee that they will not go down that road? No, of course not, and nothing will.

We did a project during the pandemic where we interviewed conspiracy theorists who had gone into a conspiracy and who came out the other end. Quite often, a multitude of factors send them along that extremist line and a multitude of factors drag them back into reality. It can be life at home—a girlfriend, a boyfriend or whatever—or societal events. But, quite often, emotional resilience or the lack of it plays a massive part. When you come across a bit of content and it makes you incredibly angry because you know that it is probably by design, that ability already changes the power dynamic between you and whoever is trying to influence you. It is not a silver bullet, but it massively helps.

Alistair Barfield: I agree with Matteo. The thing to note is that somebody who is engaging with extremist content is engaging with it for a multitude of factors. There are things at play in their life, particularly with young people. They may have negative experiences with figures of authority, SEND or whatever it might be. There are a number of factors to consider. This is an aspect of helping them to discern the content, but there are other things to consider.

When we are looking at how prevalently the autistic community engages with content, we have to consider that we are the largest, least employed disabled group in the country. We have to consider autistic representations in the media. There are a multitude of additional factors, but this is an aspect.

I find this from just opening the door to engaging. Obviously this is just anecdotal but, from the schools where I have delivered, I have a number of testimonies from teachers saying, "I've had a child who was going down that route, and they have come around after meeting you, after your guidance or after we had discussions with them in the classroom with social workers", and things like that. So I think it is a start.

Matteo Bergamini: I will add one quick example of why adult education becomes really important and key in this. Often signs can easily be missed, when they appear to be positive. To give you an example, a young person who is being radicalised towards extremist misogyny can, for instance, often start with the idea of self-improving their body, going to the gym more or being exposed to that content. It is like the saying, "The path to hell is paved with good intentions". It is the idea that it might look quite positive—living a healthier lifestyle is positive—but where does that lead and what is the motivation behind the thing they are doing?

Q113 **Lord Storey:** I am interested in how you engage parents who have children who live in a disadvantaged community. They are the hardest parents to get to come into school. Look at reading: we encouraged parents to share a book with their child when the child was very young, to read with their child and to get children to read. It was a massive effort to get parents, single parents or carers to come into school and do that work. It will be doubly hard to talk about media literacy. How will you get parents from particular groups who need that support and attention to do what you are suggesting? You have particular projects, but that is different to making it universal.

Alistair Barfield: They are asking for help. Parents want help here. It is different from reading a book, which is kind of nebulous. As educators, we know that it can help, but they are asking for help. They are saying, "My child is engaging with a world that I do not understand. Please, please help me". Getting them to engage is nowhere near as difficult as it could be. I am sure that Vicki can talk about this, but parents want help. They want to come in and to talk about the thing that they see every day.

I hear this story often: their child comes home, says, "Hello, Mum; hello, Dad", sits behind the computer for nine hours then goes to bed. What is happening behind that screen? The parent says, "I am not equipped to understand it and I am worried". There is already a need there. They are already crying out for help, so getting them to engage is not that hard.

Lord Storey: It is not a problem.

Alistair Barfield: I am sure it is to some extent, but not in my experience. I have hundreds of parents signing up and I get emails every week, and I am one dude in the middle of Nottingham. So I would say that it is not difficult at all.

Vicki Shotbolt: Do you think there is an absolute truth that it is almost impossible to get parents into schools, particularly now that both parents are working and they are very busy? School hours are challenging enough for parents. I suggest that treating school as one of the many avenues to parents is a better way to go than treating school as somewhere that parents need to go into to develop media literacy skills.

It is also worth keeping in mind that this is not just about parents developing skills to keep their children safer; it is parents developing

skills that they need themselves. They are interested in avoiding scams and not falling foul of misinformation. All these skills are critical for democracy, for their careers and for their bank accounts. These are critical skills for adults, so talking about them in a way that allows parents to understand why they might be interested, so they therefore pass them on well to their children, gives you cut-through.

On the point about harder-to-reach communities—I am sorry but it is an expression I really hate. Those communities are not hard to reach; they are just expensive to reach because you have to go to them, and we do not have the infrastructure to go to them as easily as we used to be able to through family information services, libraries, social services, job centres—all those places where you used to be able to go, hang out on a Wednesday afternoon and meet a group of parents. So we just have to work that much harder and it is more expensive.

- Q114 **The Chair:** To add to that question, then, what other avenues are there for reaching children if they are harder to reach through school? If we are not reaching them through school, are there other avenues to reach them that work as well or better?

Vicki Shotbolt: I always say that the most obvious way to reach children is through their parents. Parents are the single biggest unpaid workforce that we have, and they are the people that look after children for all the hours that children are not in school. So, if you focus on the parents, you will in effect reach children more directly. There are other routes. There are the sports clubs that you talked about, the out-of-school activities and the breakfast clubs. There are other places. Obviously, for children who are known to the state and are in social services, we ignore those children too much as well. So there are other routes, but the single biggest care force that we have for children is parents, so that should be the place that we focus our attention.

- Q115 **Lord Dunlop:** I will ask about the role of tech platforms. Obviously, big tech has deep pockets to fund media literacy, and there are certainly an array of initiatives out there. But there is also the issue of a tension between media literacy objectives and commercial objectives. I will just quote from an LSE evaluation of Google initiatives, which argued that Google “cannot currently consider that funding to be an adequate countermeasure to the vast impact it has on people’s daily lives as a commercial entity”. So my question really is: in the overall media literacy landscape, what is the significance of these tech platform initiatives and how effective are they?

Vicki Shotbolt: There is a lot in that question. I will start at the top: is doing a good media literacy initiative enough to offset any harm that you might do as a platform? Of course not, and I do not think anybody would suggest that it was—I would hope they would not. On the initiatives that some tech platforms run, we deliver two, one with YouTube and one with Google, and I can compare and contrast those initiatives to work that has been funded by DSIT, for example. It is very good work—it has had an excellent evaluation—but the funding lasted for a year and then it was

pulled. In effect, that has almost done more harm than good, because those communities where we were starting to build relationships and they were starting to rely on the provision have now had that provision taken away from them, which is not good for developing an intervention.

Compare and contrast that to an intervention such as Be Internet Legends that has been running since 2018, which has had multiple experts involved in developing it, from CEOP through to Sonia Livingstone from the LSE, with many experts contributing to making sure it was good, and an independent evaluation. Would I stand behind that media literacy initiative? Yes, I absolutely would. What is challenging is that it is not a statutory provision. We should not rely on these companies to be the largest provider of media literacy in schools; that is bonkers. But actually, in truth, if you compare it to other provision, it has been there longer, it is bigger and more sustained, and it has a better evidence base. So, right now this minute, I would say yes, it is the best we have got. Is it perfect, ideal and what it should be? I would say no. Absolutely, tech companies ought to be doing high-quality, independently evaluated, well-designed media literacy programmes, because their customers need them, but we should also have excellent statutory independent provision. The problem at the moment is that we do not have that healthy ecosystem.

Matteo Bergamini: When we ran the Dismiss campaign, we ended up partnering with X on that campaign. What it ended up providing was something called a timeline takeover, a bit of advertising that allows the bit of content to be seen by everyone on the platform that accesses it for 24 hours. That got us around 6 million views within those 24 hours alone, which is something that we probably would not have got with additional funding from Ofcom, which funded the campaign to begin with. So I would say that there is a role for these tech platforms to play. Advertising is the name of their game, and that is something that they could provide in spades for media literacy organisations to allow those messages and educational tools to go out there into the general public.

There needs to be caution when companies are then providing media literacy services. You cannot regulate yourself, and when you are providing media literacy which is meant to critically analyse the information that is essentially on your platform, there is a potential conflict of interest there in the same way that a newspaper, for example, cannot really create impartial media literacy resources because it is in the business so it cannot be completely independent. So, there is a role to play for those tech platforms, but it should very much be in supporting schools to deliver this properly and supporting third-sector organisations to get the message out there and to enhance education. But, as you said, it should be for third- sector organisations and government to do this.

Alistair Barfield: I agree with almost everything Matteo said. He stole the words from me.

Q116 **Lord Dunlop:** Picking up on what you said, Vicki, does Ofcom have the

powers it needs to get what it needs from tech companies? Obviously, we have the Online Safety Act and the provisions in that. Are those sufficient to achieve where we want to get to?

Vicki Shotbolt: The honest answer is that I do not know, and I do not think we know yet. We need to see how those powers are used and implemented. There is real potential. I am interested to see, as we start to see companies do risk assessments, to what extent they recognise that developing their consumer base's media literacy skills is one way of mitigating the risks that their platforms present. So potentially the answer is yes, but I do not think we quite know.

Alistair Barfield: I am not a proponent of the Online Safety Act, personally. I do not think it addresses some concerns. It spends too much time focusing on prohibition of access to the internet, when we know prohibition never works for anything. IShowSpeed is the world's second-largest streamer. He has just had a tour of China. His entire content is banned in China; he was swarmed by teenagers the entire time he was there—tens of thousands of them. China has the most controlled internet in the world. The focus should be on funding tech platforms to be appropriately regulated and to empower their users to understand content, not on prohibiting the internet.

Q117 **Lord Dunlop:** I have a quick point about design and how that impacts on media literacy. Ofcom has published best-practice design principles for media literacy, but that is voluntary. Do you think that is sufficient or is something stronger needed?

Vicki Shotbolt: It is difficult, is it not? I am not sure that Ofcom is well placed to design people's platforms. There is a limit to what it can do. That said, there are some things, such as mandating that you need to have terms and conditions that children can understand. There is other regulation like the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act, which is all about subscriptions—weirdly—and making it as easy to cancel a subscription as to take out a subscription. That would be a really tangible, practical kind of approach—every platform should be mandated to do that—but that is not coming from Ofcom but from the digital markets Act. I suppose my point is that I would not just stop with Ofcom, partly because I do think it is difficult to design other people's platforms; with principles such as, "It should be as easy to cancel a subscription as take one out", you start to see some digital change.

Matteo Bergamini: We see a lot of similarities to the banking sector when you are attempting to help people not get caught out by fraud. When you do a transfer, you get all these questions about how someone got you to share this or if someone got you to send this money, blah, blah, blah. As you say, it is not designing other people's platforms, but having those, frankly, pretty easy and straightforward things to follow in terms of when you are sharing a bit of content, receiving a message to say, "Have you checked and verified it again?" Some people will read it, some will not. Some of those messages on those banking apps, for example, will have stopped someone from getting caught out by fraud,

and it will not stop the next person. But it is that kind of multitude of different things that, if they happen in tandem, will then make us in general a more resilient society. But it remains to be seen, at the moment.

Q118 Baroness Fleet: I have a quick question that follows on from Lord Dunlop's interesting discussion with you. Perhaps we could start with Vicki. It is really just a one-word answer. If you represent your view, if it is different from your organisation—it is probably not—at what age do you think children should be given access to phones with social media?

Vicki Shotbolt: I am really sorry but I cannot answer that in one word. The truth is, I do not know. Had you asked me two years ago, I would have said 13 was right. Now is the time for us to revisit that question, because I am no longer convinced it is right.

Baroness Fleet: Higher or lower?

Vicki Shotbolt: Higher, potentially.

Alistair Barfield: How are we defining social media? Is it a very broad understanding of the term?

Baroness Fleet: I think we all know what that means. So rather than a block phone, a phone with multiple content with access potentially to harmful content.

Alistair Barfield: As Vicki said, it is hard, but I would say earlier. They are going to be exposed to it regardless. As somebody who spent a lot of time in secondary schools, I would say year 6, at ages 10 or 11.

Matteo Bergamini: I am probably not going to be very helpful here because I think we are going to disagree. For me personally, if I had to get pushed to give an answer, I would probably say 12. But realistically, focusing on the age is not necessarily solving the problem. If you take 10 different 15 year-olds in a room, they are all going to be very different in terms of their maturity and what they are interested in. Actually, I would say that the focus on age can sometimes be distracting almost to the real question, which is: we should not be scaring people or pushing people away from accessing this stuff. What we should be doing is encouraging parents and saying to them, "You should be going online with your children, and if you are not, why not?" In the same way, for example, there is nothing wrong with an eight year-old going on, say, YouTube Kids with their parents. That is probably healthier and more constructive because they will become more aware of that space in a healthy manner than, say, a 15 year-old who has never gone on with their parents or received any media literacy training.

Baroness Fleet: You say it depends on the child but, as we all know, children tend to move in peer groups. Their year is doing X or Y. I am fortunate enough to have grandchildren who are teenagers, and the older ones all say, "I would not have let my younger brothers and sisters access social media until they were 16." That is what they all say. I am interested in what people who are involved in this world say—and I

absolutely understand the importance of gradually introducing media literacy, but that requires a lot of parental responsibility. That is why I am asking a rather blunt question. But thank you for your answer.

Q119 Viscount Colville of Culross: Good afternoon. I want to start by asking Vicki a question. Just now you called for statutory provision of media literacy. There is the online media literacy strategy. Could you be clear in what you think the problems with that strategy have been, and have its shortfalls been demotivating for the people providing media literacy programmes?

Vicki Shotbolt: Are you thinking about Ofcom's or DSIT's media literacy strategy?

Viscount Colville of Culross: Ofcom's.

Vicki Shotbolt: It is good that it exists. It is disappointing that we also had one in government that DSIT produced when I was on the Media Literacy Taskforce. It had its own media literacy strategy that fell by the wayside. Does DSIT have another good enough media literacy strategy? We lack one. Jon in his session prior to this one, described it as a national emergency. It really is. If this is not a time for Government to step forward and have a coherent strategy, then I do not know when is. Yes, it is important for the regulator to play its part but I do not fundamentally think that that is the right place for the national media literacy response to be coming from. It needs to be a joined-up, cross-government strategy that recognises the role that the Home Office has, particularly when we are thinking about things like: Prevent, radicalisation and extremism; the role that the Department for Education can play within statutory education; and the role that Health can play. That is why it is so critical that it is a government strategy that recognises that all of Government are going to have to work together.

Q120 Viscount Colville of Culross: Do we need a single figure who is driving this? In the end, you only get co-operation across Government if you have some person at the very top who maybe has Cabinet access who can do that.

Vicki Shotbolt: Absolutely we do. We need somebody with ministerial-level responsibility for it. That may not be necessary long-term. One would hope that we would get to a better place. But right now, this minute, we need somebody with that level of authority to drive it forward across Government.

Q121 Viscount Colville of Culross: Matteo, do you have anything to add to that?

Matteo Bergamini: I definitely agree. There needs to be a lot more collaboration, especially. In the last couple of weeks alone, we have spoken to DSIT, which has a role here, as does Ofcom. The Home Office has a framework and is looking at it from a counterextremism perspective but media literacy still very much plays a healthy part in a lot of those projects. There is also—it is not technically the housing

department; what are the initials? MHCLG. Then there is DCMS, which is doing the youth review and talking as well about media literacy. I remember being in a conversation with a couple of those departments, and they had no idea that the other side were doing X, Y, and Z. There are all these different conversations going on, and I see why all these different departments are doing what they are doing but it needs to be so much better. It should not be down to the third sector to help government departments talk to each other. Additionally, pilots are great but we have been running them since I started this in 2015. At a certain point, we need eventually to make a decision and start to do some long-term funding, because three-month stints are not how you solve this problem.

Q122 Viscount Colville of Culross: Have there been some pilots that you have been involved in that you think could be scaled up across the nation and could be very effective in this space?

Matteo Bergamini: Definitely. I am sure others have got their own examples but there were two things that we did with Ofcom, for example. In one, we were asked to train 500 teachers across England and Wales on media literacy using the EU digital competence framework. We ended up getting massively oversubscribed and delivered to about 1,600 teachers. That could easily be scaled up to the point whereby all teachers across England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were able to be comfortable and confident in delivering these kinds of conversations in schools and, by extension, their parents.

The Dismiss campaign, for example, was run during the general election and then run again a few other times. Having a more coherent approach could be a nationwide campaign backed by all government bodies, for example. I remember, when I was younger, we had the campaign with the hedgehogs for safer crossing the street. Do you remember, "Stop. Look. Listen"? That, for example, was the Government putting their money and backing to help people become more aware of how to cross the road properly and how to be safe when crossing the street. The young people of today are going to be the parents of tomorrow. So we should invest and look ahead not just in five-year cycles, but look at generational cycles.

If you invested in a massive awareness campaign now to young people, you are not only dealing with young people now but potentially helping them when they become parents one day. It is almost a no-brainer—"Of course I'm going to teach my kids to go online safely". Then all of our jobs suddenly become so much harder. But that requires a much longer approach than we sometimes care to admit.

Q123 Viscount Colville of Culross: What effects are this short-termism and these endless pilots having on the providers of media literacy?

Matteo Bergamini: It is closing some down, to put it bluntly. I remember that when I first started this, the pool was a lot bigger and it is shrinking fast. You cannot really run an organisation on three-month

stints. It is hard. It is tough. If we do not come up with a solution to make something a bit more sustainable, by the time we do, we are going to find that we are very much out of options.

Q124 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Ali, are you concerned by the by the short-termism and lack of co-ordination that there is?

Alistair Barfield: Absolutely. We have to embed this across the entire Government. We need a national strategy that offers long-term funding. My organisation exists because I used to work for a charity where we received funding for the Ofcom media literacy training, and we were so oversubscribed that I made my own organisation to carry on the work, because this is needed from everywhere. Everyone is crying out for help. If we had longer-term goals, we could look at it from a much longer perspective. We could understand how this works, because at the moment I am bouncing around the country, mostly in underserved communities such as my own hometown of Grimsby. These small little pockets are dealing with situations. I hear the same stories every day from the same job roles that people have. If we could have a national strategy where everyone could talk to one another, where we could have a three or four-year programme pilot, that would be wonderful.

Q125 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** You obviously run your organisation, which is, as you said, on a small scale. Are there other examples of good practice that you think could be scaled up?

Alistair Barfield: Absolutely.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Give us an example.

Alistair Barfield: It would be hard for me to give a specific example but yes, there are examples of good media literacy practice throughout the country. There are lots of organisations like my own, like Matteo's, like Parent Zone. There are loads of people out there trying but I feel like we are fighting against a tide and it would be lovely—that is northern for me to say "lovely"—if the Government could get on board, because this is not going anywhere. Fundamentally, the more time young people spend online, the more time we need to understand what they are engaging with.

Viscount Colville of Culross: The Government say they are on board. What do you mean they are not on board?

Alistair Barfield: If we had longer-term funding, if we had a Minister for Media Literacy, if we could embed it in the curriculum, the youth justice service or whatever it might be, or local government, and if the Home Office could provide greater amounts of funding for anti-radicalisation strategies, that would be nice. At the moment, we are still looking at bids that are short-term in length, involving 20 to 40 sessions. It would be nice if we could have 100 or if we could go and knock out the whole of the north.

Vicki Shotbolt: Perhaps I may pick up on the issue of whether the Government are on board. In the programme that we ran, Everyday

Digital was funded by DSIT. We were able to train, for example, local champions for all of Kent. We had entire geographical areas and 42 local champions around the country, independently evaluated. We reached over 60,000 parents in a year, and the funding stopped because the strategy was closed. The Government said, "It is okay because media literacy is now part of the digital inclusion task force". It has moved over there and it is not a bad thing that it has done so but it is not the same as it having its own focus. That is what happens again and again with media literacy. It becomes a subset of something bigger and more important, which means that it does not have the focus and the long-term planning that it should.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Explain what you mean by that. What is the bigger thing that it has become a subset of?

Vicki Shotbolt: The bigger strategy is a digital inclusion strategy, which has cross-government participation at ministerial level. It is a very good strategy. But it is all about getting people online, getting them connected and allowing them to unlock the potential of digital access—all good. There is an acknowledgement in that strategy that media literacy will be important, too. But that is not enough. It is a facilitator of media literacy. But because of where we are, it cannot just be another paragraph in another strategy. It needs to be the strategy. It needs to be a priority.

Q126 **The Chair:** Before we before we leave the question of the Government and government departments, Matteo, you mentioned a list. You said DSIT, the Home Office, MHCLG and DCMS are all talking about some aspect of media literacy. You did not mention the Department for Education. Have you had engagement with it?

Matteo Bergamini: I would like to say yes, but no, we have not. We did take part in the curriculum review. My organisation also sits as the secretariat for the APPG on Political and Media Literacy. As the APPG, we submitted evidence to the curriculum review. But that is the department, believe it or not, that we speak to least.

The Chair: Despite the involvement with teachers.

Matteo Bergamini: Yes. Not by our choice.

Vicki Shotbolt: Same.

Alistair Barfield: Same. It is the elephant in the room right now, is it not?

The Chair: This question of collaboration is very important, is it not?

Matteo Bergamini: Massively.

The Chair: I think we get the message about short-term funding, pilots, closing things down and shuffling things across. It makes life difficult for all of you. Anyway, that has been a wonderful session. Thank you. We are feeling our way to really understanding this issue and you have really helped us to do that, so thank you for your time.