

Caroline Nokes MP  
Committee Chair,  
Women & Equalities Committee  
Houses of Parliament,  
London,  
SW1A 0AA

Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020

Dear Ms Caroline Nokes MP,

Thank you for providing Cassianne and Dr Marc Bush the opportunity to give evidence on behalf of YoungMinds to your inquiry into body image on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2020. I am writing to provide further information and respond to questions that were unable to be asked in the policy evidence session.

**Have you had any engagement with social media companies on improving body image and mental health of young people?**

During July 2019, YoungMinds worked with Instagram to understand how young people use social media, with a particular emphasis on 14-25-year-olds that had lived experience of self-harm, self-injury, suicidal thoughts and/ or eating disorders. For some of the young people that had lived experience of eating disorders, making comparisons between themselves and other users, or viewing their lives as being ‘better than theirs’ was highlighted as a concern.

The young people that were involved with the project told us that social media is designed to show the ‘best and not the rest’ and young people are at a loss for what’s real, what’s not, and what they should be expecting from their own lives and journeys of recovery. When combined with the culture of competition on social media platforms, this can make young people hold themselves to unattainable standards and as a result impact on their self-esteem.

To address this, Instagram introduced new policies last year aimed at reducing misinformation being published on its platform. This includes removing content that promotes weight loss products that make ‘miraculous claims’ and restricting posts for users under 18 years old that promote the use of certain weight loss products or cosmetic procedures and that have an incentive to buy or includes a price. We would encourage other platforms to also consider how they manage misinformation around products that may impact on how young people see their bodies.

In addition, the young people involved with the project told us that social media can feel more like a shouting match than a conversation, and not being able to make themselves heard can have a big impact on their self-esteem. ‘Extreme’ content - whether extreme in views, body image or how negative or shocking the post is - is seen to garner the most likes and we heard multiple experiences of ‘recovery’ accounts becoming increasingly more negative (seemingly in a bid for followers) and transforming into the darker and more controversial ‘venting’ accounts.

**What action is needed from social media companies to ensure their platforms aren’t damaging young people’s body image?**

It is important to note that social media allows young people to connect with others with similar experiences, identities and interests. Young people tell us that this can have a positive impact on their mental health. Notably, social media can play an important role in young people feeling less lonely<sup>i</sup> through the connection with like-minded peers. However, the young people that we work with often tell us that social media can simultaneously have positive and negative impacts on their lives and how they feel about themselves.

During the insight work that we conducted to inform our response to the Committee's inquiry, we consulted with young people about their experiences of using social media platforms. They told us that following a search for content related to body image or eating disorders, either out of curiosity as to what is on the platform or when looking for supportive content, they noticed that they were being suggested more, and sometimes more extreme, content. This potentially damaging characteristic of social media should be considered when thinking about young people's mental health and the impact of content on body image and how young people see themselves. Importantly, social media companies must ensure that the algorithms that are built into their platforms are not promoting harmful content to young people.

An approach that has been taken by some social media companies is to remove content based on words in the post within clear cut triggering categories such as; graphic images of self-harm and suicide, descriptions of self-harm and suicide methods, pro-ana and pro-mia content and thinspiration. Young people that we have worked with viewed bans on harmful key words as a positive step towards feeling safer on social media platforms. However, it is important to note that whilst some of this content needs to be removed, this approach can miss opportunities for support and resources, and are a blunt tool for a nuanced problem. Often, the difference between triggering and non-triggering is less fixed and more dependent on a whole host of personal factors; whether that's their stage of recovery or simply their mood that day. In these instances, young people felt that a focus on clear reporting guidelines is key, both for the safety of the reporter and the reported.

In addition to this, social media companies (including smaller social media companies) should commit to following the newly created Samaritans guidelines on managing suicide and self-harm content online<sup>ii</sup>. Their guidance provides guidelines to manage self-harm and suicide content safely and sensitively, allowing users to access the benefits from the online environment whilst minimising the potential for harm. This includes establishing clear accountability mechanisms, having a robust policy for addressing self-harm and suicide content, effective moderation of user-generated content including through artificial intelligence and taking steps to support user's wellbeing and mental.

We would welcome equivalent guidelines for social media companies on managing content related to disordered eating and body image. Like the Samaritans guidelines, these should be co-created by the industry, mental health experts and young people with lived experience.

**Currently you need to be 13 years old to access most forms of social media. Do you think this is the appropriate age and how might this be better enforced?**

The minimum age requirement for most social media companies is currently set at 13 years old. This is based on US legislation in the Children's Online Privacy Protection 1998 Act (COPPA), which mandated restrictions around the usage of online services by children under 13 without 'verifiable parental consent'. Given the complexity of obtaining parental consent

via social media, many of the US-based companies decided to introduce a minimum age requirement of 13 and applied this globally. Therefore, nearly all other social media services require users to be at least 13 years of age to access and use their services. This includes TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook.

In 2017, in partnership with the Children's Society and Alex Chalk MP, we undertook an inquiry into the impact of cyberbullying on young people's mental health<sup>iii</sup>. Whilst the inquiry did not explore age requirements in detail, a survey that was conducted with children and young people revealed that 61% of children first created their social media account before the prescribed age limit of 13.

The work also suggested that trying to restrict children under the age of 13 from using social media platforms by date of birth checks are not effective, as children are likely to find a way around such restrictions, or move on to other platforms with lower thresholds of safety features. We heard repeatedly throughout the inquiry that, beyond age-identification approaches, it is important for social media platforms to establish age-appropriate design and communication for children – and in particular younger children – to reflect the reality of under-13s using these platforms.

### **Will the protections introduced in the Online Harms White Paper protect people from harmful content around body image?**

Findings from our research and participation activity have demonstrated that the voluntary approach to regulation has not successfully protected children's rights online. In addition, there are insufficient safeguards to ensure that these rights are upheld and that children and young people can navigate online environments in a safe and positive manner.

Therefore, we welcome the proposals in the Online Harms white paper to create a regulatory framework for online safety alongside a statutory 'duty of care' to ensure that technology companies take action on cyberbullying and other harmful content. Alongside this, we believe that the creation of an independent regulator alongside a code of practice which sets out how companies are required to fulfil the requirements of the new legal duty and oversee and enforce the duty of care are an important and welcomed step. Importantly, the code of practice must be meaningfully informed by young people and focus on their digital rights. To ensure that social media companies take action to reduce the availability of harmful content and uphold young people's rights online, the Government must make faster progress in developing an Online Harms Bill.

However, our research has shown that it is impossible to fully limit young people's exposure to harmful online content. Therefore, to help young people navigate the online world safely, digital resilience should be embedded in children's education so that young people can respond to the risks that social media and the internet can have. Importantly, the Government needs to build digital resilience by teaching children and young people to be safe and responsible online and to help them to develop the emotional and social skills to mitigate online risks.

There has been progress in this area through the new Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum that began to be delivered across England in September 2020. Additionally, this content covers issues that may impact on young people's body image and how they feel about themselves. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers do not perpetuate

stigmatising views that negatively impact young people's body image when delivering the content.

Additionally, parents play an important role in supporting their children to use the online world and social media platforms safely and positively. It is therefore important for parents to talk about digital resilience<sup>1</sup> with their children from a young age and help them to have an awareness of sharing personal information online. To assist this, parents may benefit from targeted campaigns or programmes to improve their digital literacy and awareness of digital safety.

### **5) What other action would you like the Government to take to reduce poor body image for young people today?**

An important part of ensuring that negative body image does not lead to the development of mental health concerns is ensuring that young people can access advice, guidance and support. This is particularly important when young people first begin to struggle with their mental health and it is therefore important that the Government prioritises prevention and early intervention that is accessible to all children and young people.

For this reason, we are calling for the Government to roll out a network of open access mental health drop-in services for young people. Open access hubs offer easy-to-access, drop-in support on a self-referral basis for young people who don't meet the threshold for CYPMHS or with emerging mental health needs, up to age 25. They can be delivered through the NHS, in partnership with local authorities, or through the voluntary sector depending on local need and existing infrastructure.

Previous evidence from the UK, Australia, Denmark and Ireland demonstrates that open-access mental health hubs:

- Reduce psychological distress amongst young people<sup>iv v</sup>,
- Attract young people that are less likely to engage with NHS mental health support including young men and young BAME people.<sup>vi vii</sup>
- Save costs to a range of services across the health system and more widely<sup>viiiix</sup>.

A mix of clinical staff, counsellors, youth workers and volunteers provide a range of support on issues related to wellbeing while additional services can be co-located under one roof; offering wrap-around support across, for example, psychological therapies, employment advice, youth services and sexual health. Depending on the existing provision in the local area, the hubs could also facilitate preventative and early intervention approaches such as peer support programmes focused on helping young people with improving their self-esteem and how they feel about themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Digital resilience is the ability to understand when you are at risk online, knowing what to do if anything goes wrong, and being able to recover from difficulties or upsets. UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS)

If you would like to discuss the responses to these questions further, then do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Emily Dobson  
Policy and Parliamentary Officer  
YoungMinds

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<sup>i</sup> Royal Society for Public Health (2019) New Filters to manage the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Available at:

<https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/23180e2a-e6b8-4e8d-9e3da2a300525c98.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Online\\_Harms\\_guidelines\\_FINAL\\_1.pdf](https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Online_Harms_guidelines_FINAL_1.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2189/pcr144b\\_social\\_media\\_cyberbullying\\_inquiry\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2189/pcr144b_social_media_cyberbullying_inquiry_full_report.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20180308b\\_arewelistinging\\_report.pdf](https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20180308b_arewelistinging_report.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> <https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Evaluation-of-headspace-program.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://archive.headstrong.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Final-version-IJPM-Paper.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Evaluation-of-headspace-program.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> The Legal Problems and Mental Health Needs of Youth Advice Service Users: The Case for Advice, Balmer, N.J., and Pleasence, P., Youth Access, 2012

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.headspace.dk/en/about-us/documentation-and-reports/economists-without-borders>