

Supplementary written evidence submitted by internet matters

27 November 2023

Oral evidence session follow-up

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the recent opportunity to give evidence to your Committee as part of your inquiry into the impact of screen time on children's education and wellbeing.

I am writing to provide some additional detail on our research into the **online experiences of children receiving Free School Meals (FSM)**. I trust our findings will be of interest to the Committee in its final report.

Our report on the digital lives of children with FSM status – '[Digital wellbeing on a budget: exploring the online lives of children receiving free school meals](#)' – was published in August 2023, and we attach a full copy for the Committee's convenience. The research drew together two of our large-scale, nationally representative datasets:

- **The Digital Wellbeing Index (DWI)**: Established in 2021, the DWI is a pioneering measure of both the positive and negative impacts of connected technologies on children's lives. The DWI is based on responses to a survey of **1,000 children aged 9-15 and their parents**, alongside in-depth qualitative interviews with six families. The Index is grounded in a four-dimensional model, developed with the University of Leicester, which classifies 'digital wellbeing' into four components: developmental, emotional, physical and social. One of the key advantages of the DWI is its ability to shed light on the experiences of different groups of children. In previous annual reports - 2022¹ and 2023² - we have looked at the online lives of children with **special education needs and disabilities (SEND)** and those with **mental health problems**, showing that children who are vulnerable in their 'offline' lives are also more likely to experience the negative impacts of digital technology than their peers.
- **Digital Tracker survey**: We conduct a twice-yearly, nationally representative tracking survey with **2,000 parents and 1,000 children aged 9-16**. The tracker enables us to analyse trends over time and compare responses by children's age, gender, vulnerability factors, and more.

Drawing these datasets together provided us with considerable and unprecedented insight into the digital lives of children at the acute end of financial disadvantage – a previously under-explored topic. This includes new findings around the way that children with FSM status:

- Access and use digital technologies,
- Experience the benefits and harms from being online,
- And the type of parental support they experience, including how their parents/caregivers approach conversations about online safety.

¹ Internet Matters, 2022, Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Index Report 2022. [Link](#).

² Internet Matters, 2023, Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World Year Two Index Report 2023. [Link](#).

Our key findings from this research are as follows:

- **Families receiving FSM face greater difficulty in accessing digital devices**, as a result of financial pressures.
 - Nearly one-in-five (19%) of parents in these families say that they cannot afford to buy or replace all of the digital devices they need. A similar proportion (18%) say that they have been donated devices for their children.
 - These families do, however, see the value in digital connectivity, with a third (34%) cutting down on other expenses to afford their online subscriptions and accounts.
- **Children receiving FSM are more likely to participate in high-risk activities online**, including livestreaming (17% compared to 12% of peers) and frequent posting/commenting on social media (21% compared to 11% of peers).
- **Children receiving FSM are more likely to be exposed to online harms**, as well as to have **worse digital wellbeing than their peers**.
 - Three quarters (74%) of children receiving FSM report experience of at least one online harm, compared to 60% of peers not receiving FSM.
 - 14% of children receiving FSM say that being online makes them sad, compared to 4% of peers, while 17% of children receiving FSM say that being online makes them worried about their appearance, compared to 8% of other children.
- **Parents of children receiving free school meals are more likely to look for help in supporting their child online**. More than six-in-ten parents (61%) say that they seek out information about how to talk to their child about online safety before starting a conversation with them on it, compared to less than half (44%) of parents of children not receiving free school meals. This perhaps reflects the greater frequency and severity of harms that these children experience, and their parents' concerns as a result, compared to peers without FSM status.

As discussed during my evidence session, our research reveals that there are two separate but interconnected issues at play: **children in financially disadvantaged circumstances lack access to digital technologies, and, when they do, are more likely to experience the harms of being online**.

The debate around digital inclusion is often centred around how to most efficiently get devices, data and WiFi into people's hands – but as our research illustrates, it is crucial to reflect on how safety is factored into these efforts. We should consider digital inclusion initiatives as an opportunity to 'set up safe' and to educate children and caregivers on the benefits and risks of being online. Some examples of projects we have led with partners in this space include:

- A partnership with The Good Things Foundation and the National Digital Inclusion Network on a pilot programme to provide online safety training webinars and resources to support individuals accessing the network to improve their digital skills. This included providing 'set up safe' leaflets and resources to families participating in the Digital Poverty Alliance's Tech4Families scheme.
- A partnership with the Digital Inclusion team at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to integrate digital poverty packages aimed at care leavers with peer-delivered media literacy and online safety advice.

We have seen how rapidly previous projects have provided devices to digitally excluded groups, for example during the pandemic, which is hugely welcome. However, we must do so responsibly, and ensure that digitally excluded and/or vulnerable groups are given the information they need to be safe online.

Finally, it is worth touching on the fact that industry efforts and safety by design are also clearly very important in all of this. However, in this submission we are focussed on the role of education, given the inquiry's terms of reference.

I look forward to following the inquiry as it develops and to reading the Committee's final report. Please do get in touch should you have any further questions.

November 2023