

**Written evidence submitted by The Children's Society
(OSB0245)**

1. Introduction

1.1. The Children's Society welcomes the Joint Committee's continued scrutiny of the draft Online Safety Bill and is pleased to submit evidence to this inquiry.

1.2. The draft Bill in its current form outlines proposals that will substantially improve protections for children online. The Children's Society supports the Government's ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world for a child to go online. This response therefore identifies where there is scope for substantial change to be made to protect children and young people online.

2. The Children's Society

2.1. The Children's Society's work transforms the lives of vulnerable children and young people facing abuse, exploitation, and neglect across the country. We provide specialist support that empowers young people to make positive changes. Through The Children's Society's services and projects, including its Prevention Programme, The Children's Society directly supports thousands of children and their families each year. In particular, we hold expertise in supporting children that are victims of child criminal exploitation, which are known to take place through online platforms.

3. Evidence of Online Grooming

3.1. The true scale of child criminal exploitation (CCE) is not known, because many children who are being exploited or groomed fall through the cracks of statutory support and therefore are not identified in official statistics. The Children's Commissioner estimated that at least 27,000 children are at high risk of gang exploitation.

3.2. One of the areas with a lack of protections is online grooming in relation to child criminal exploitation. Research on grooming for child criminal exploitation reveals that it does not necessarily involve physical contact, but rather can occur through online '*remote mothering and online collateral*' on smart phones and social media as well as through popular culture.

- "**Remote mothering**": the ability to monitor where someone is, what they are doing, and who they are with at all times via locations tags, GPS tracking, pictures and video calling.
- "**Online collateral**": the use of incriminating images, videos, screen shots of messages, and voice notes to ensure compliance, especially among subordinate gang members and girls.

3.3. There is an emerging area of evidence which focusses on ways children are groomed through the use of digital technology for the purposes of criminal exploitation. The research suggests that a range of digital platforms may be used to target young people for recruitment and digital technologies are being used to

monitor their whereabouts during drug running episodes and online banking for money laundering purposes.

- 3.4.** Children under the age of 18 are often contacted through online gaming platforms or social media platforms by perpetrators. During the first and second wave of the Covid 19 pandemic The Children's Society's practitioners reported a notable increase in CCE perpetrators grooming children through social media sites and gaming sites. In the context of CCE, young people are often contacted by individuals or in a group context with 'promotional material' about lifestyles they could lead and advantages of 'working' within a gang. Children are then asked to do 'jobs' in exchange for money or status with this new group.
- 3.5.** Practitioners shared anecdotal examples of organised groups running virtual 'recruitment' campaigns grooming children for criminal exploitation. The research found evidence that older gang members were grooming younger boys for participation in instrumental gang activities, initiating contact then outsourcing tasks and errands via social media that got progressively more difficult or risky.
- 3.6.** During their focus groups, for example, young people showed WhatsApp instant message that invited recipients to 'call if you want to make some money,' connected to an image of a pile of cash. Calling the number listed 'links you up with someone who will help you start shooting (selling drugs)', explained one boy (Male, 13, Group 12). Obviously, the gang already knew the recipient(s) because they had his or her telephone number, but in light of the 'quasi-celebrity' status gang members occupied in the community, the excitement young people felt in receiving an invite such as this was palpable.
- 3.7.** The researchers found similar messages and memes on Twitter and even a profile picture on YouTube that doubled as an advertisement for making 'quick and easy money' from drug dealing. Gangs monitor online spaces much like physical territory, for instance, ensuring taunts or acts of disrespect are responded to without losing face.

4. Existing Legislation

- 4.1.** Currently, there is a better understanding and addressing of online grooming in child sexual abuse cases but insufficient focus in relation to criminal exploitation. The Children's Society knows from practice that there are many children who experience multiple forms of exploitation at the same time, which is why it is crucial to be able to identify and respond to CCE grooming happening online.
- 4.2.** Existing legislation recognises grooming of children under 16 for offences under a series of Acts:
 - Section 14 and 16 of The Sexual Offences Act 2003 recognises arranging to meet a child for sexual purposes.
 - Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 recognises coercive and controlling behaviour in intimate or family relationships.
 - Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 recognises sexual communication with a child under the age of 16 as an offence.

4.3. Online behaviour is not specifically mentioned in this legislation but there have been cases where evidence from messages and online behaviour has been used as evidence in court.

4.4. The Children's Society's practitioners have found that the typical age of children being criminally exploited is **from 14-17 years old**. Crucially, children aged 16 and 17 are **not** covered by the above legislation and there are **no specific provisions** recognising online grooming for criminal exploitation.

5. The Children's Society's recommendations for the Draft Online Safety Bill

5.1. The draft Online Safety Bill is an opportunity to strengthen legislation on online grooming for the purpose of children criminal exploitation, addressing existing gaps and ensuring that children are properly protected.

5.2. The Children's Society would recommend that the Bill includes specific provisions to recognise online grooming and child criminal exploitation online.

5.3. The Children's Society believe the draft Bill should expand the regulator (Ofcom's) powers to investigate child criminal exploitation across platforms. At present, the draft legislation does address the requirements to consider cross-platform risks. Given the evidence pointing towards grooming taking place across a multitude of platforms, greater powers should be introduced to be able to investigate this.

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