

Written evidence submitted by Vodafone UK (COR0167)

Introduction

1. Connectivity is now more important than ever and we are focussed on keeping the UK connected. We are working hard to support all our customers, whether that is other providers of critical national infrastructure, the public sector including the NHS, businesses both big and small, and our many mobile and broadband customers.
2. Our technology and ability to move fast mean we can play an instrumental role in this crisis. We can offer all the connectivity tools and services people need to continue communicating, doing business and remote learning, from broadband to superfast 5G connectivity, videoconferencing to cloud hosting, virtual private networks to internet telephony.
3. However, with an increased reliance on the internet during this crisis, the risks posed by the online world have equally grown. This has been particularly the case when it comes to the potential use of the internet to share illegal, harmful and misinformed content, to harass other users and to harm vulnerable people, children and young people.
4. Vodafone has been at the forefront of keeping our customers safe online for many years and we welcome the Government's interim response to the Online Harms White Paper. We are keen to work closely with Government, the future regulator and industry to deliver on the shared ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. To do this it is crucial that all parts of the digital ecosystem play their full part in delivering the networks and services of the future at the same time as taking the appropriate responsibilities for protecting people from potential harm.

Responsibility to keep people safe online

5. To meet our long-standing commitment to keep people safe online, we have a number of measures in place. For example, we have robust parental controls to protect children from seeing inappropriate content, including providing as standard an age-restriction content bar on our network.
6. As an active member of the Internet Watch Foundation, we work closely with them on removing child sexual abuse content through their blocking list. In the period from 23rd March to 30th April 2020, we have recorded over 1.2 million hits against child sexual abuse URLs across our mobile and fixed networks.
7. Vodafone also supports families, young people and children to navigate the challenges posed by the online world through the publication of our Digital Parenting Magazine, which is now in its eighth edition, with more than seven million copies distributed on demand. Alongside the [Digital Parenting website](#), it provides parents with information on topics such as fake news, sexting and self-esteem so their families can navigate the online world safely.
8. Earlier this year we launched a new, free online safety tool – [Vodafone's Digital Family Pledge](#)

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– a web based app that helps families learn about the key issues and have positive conversations about technology and the internet. In addition, we have partnered with leading digital education organisation, Digital Awareness UK, to host a series of workshops throughout this year, to help equip parents with the skills and confidence they need to keep their families safe online, focusing on disadvantaged communities across the UK. Prior to lockdown, we held 20 workshops reaching around 1000 parents. We are committed to continuing this work and are putting plans in place to resume these as soon as possible, or deliver them digitally if not in person.

9. Going beyond our regulatory responsibilities and technical aspect of our operations such as blocking inappropriate content, we believe that giving people the knowledge and resources they need to make good decisions about their internet use has a key role to play. This should be borne in mind when looking at new regulation in this area to ensure that industry, charities and Government are playing their most effective roles.

10. More broadly on regulation, we fully support the role of regulation in protecting people from online harms. However, since the debate about internet safety began, much of the burden of that regulation has fallen on those who are running the networks over which internet services are provided with measures such as network-level blocking often being turned to as preferred solutions.

11. It has been recognised for some time that those companies providing the platforms on which content is widely shared and consumed also have a crucial role to play. We fully support the Government's plans to bring these providers into the scope of regulation to protect internet users from harms. However, we would welcome further action to level the regulatory playing field between those who invest in the networks and infrastructure to provide the connectivity that makes the internet possible in a relatively unprofitable market and those who use those networks to run profitable businesses.

Disinformation and fraud

12. During the COVID-19 outbreak, as an industry we have seen a lot of misinformation posted online about 5G in relation to human health. This has resulted in several attacks on Vodafone masts across the country, which has impacted the network in these areas and a loss of service for customers in some cases. We have also had engineers verbally abused whilst they are working to maintain our networks. We welcome the strong stance and support the Government and law enforcement agencies have given to us on this. We also continue to feed into the Government's Disinformation Unit which works closely with the platforms to remove content.

13. In response to the crisis, we are working closely with the Government to deliver key public messages via SMS to all customers. Following the commencement of the Government communications campaign in March advising people to stay indoors, we saw a spike in fraudulent text messages. Working across the mobile, banking and finance industries, along with the National Cyber Security Centre, we have developed a solution to prevent fraudsters sending COVID-19 related scam text messages.

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14. These examples demonstrate that it is crucial that all parts of the ecosystem, including industry and Government, work together to combat the risks posed online and ultimately make the UK the safest place to be online.

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