



Meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media

Monday 9th November 2020: “Launch of APPG Inquiry Selfie Generation: What’s behind the rise of self-generated indecent images of children?”

(held via Zoom 3pm-4pm)

Attendees:

Chris Elmore MP, Chair of the APPG on Social Media
Rt. Hon. Jeremy Wright QC MP
Victoria Atkins MP, Minister of State for Safeguarding
Lucy Cserna, (Office of Sarah Champion MP)
Alexandra Landes, (Office of Chris Elmore MP)

Speakers:

Victoria Atkins MP, Minister of State for Safeguarding
Susie Hargreaves OBE, CEO Internet Watch Foundation and UK Safer Internet Centre Director
Tamsin, Deputy Hotline Manager, Internet Watch Foundation

External Attendees:

Steve Bailey, Barnados
Olivia Robey, Centre for Social Justice
Victoria Green, Marie Collins Foundation
Becky Foreman, Microsoft
Hugh Millward, Microsoft
Henry Turnbull, Snap
Rosie Luff, Google
Nick Newman, PA Consulting
Patrick Cronin, PA Consulting
Karl Hopwood, INSAFE
Katy Potts, Islington Borough Council
Laura Higgins, Roblox
Sally Thomas, National Education Union
Rachael Bishop, DCMS
Chloe Templeton, DCMS
Charlotte Adams, DCMS
Katie Ferson, DCMS
Piers Harrison, Home Office
Chandni Vaghela, Home Office
Abbie Gillgan, Home Office
Michelle Shotton, Department for Education
Kate Rothwell, Welsh Government
Julie McFenton, Welsh Government

Jay Harman, Ofcom
Martha Kirby, Ofcom
Dan Mount, Ofcom
David Austin, BBFC
John Nixon, Ofsted
Lizzie Reeves, Children's Commissioner
Beccy Shortt, Children's Commissioner
Rhiannon Sawyer, National Police Chief's Council
Charles Yates, National Crime Agency
Dan Baker, National Crime Agency
Marie Smith, National Crime Agency
Tink Palmer, Marie Collins Foundation
Simon Mason, Marie Collins Foundation
Victoria Green, Marie Collins Foundation
Claire Levens, Internet Matters
Andy Burrows, NSPCC
Laura Randall, NSPCC
Vicki Shotbolt, Parentszone
Giles Milton, Parentszone
Iryna Power, Children's Society
Tony Stower, 5Rights
Laura Hamzic, Brook
Poppy Wood, Reset
Michael Walsh, Lucy Faithful Foundation
Chloe Setter, We PROTECT
Fiona Spargo-Mags, Daniel Spargo Mags Foundation
Gina Martin, Campaigner
Ben Bradley, Tech UK
Rowena Schoo, Nominet
Andrada Dobre, Tik Tok
Richard Pursey, Safe to Net
Manjet Sareen, Natterhub
Caroline Allams, Natterhub
Maeve Walsh, Carneige Trust
Julia Ridpath, Britain Thinks
Ruby Wootton, Revealing Reality
Damon D'Ionoo, Revelaing Reality
Lorna Woods, University of Essex
Maggie Brennan, Plymouth University
Lillian Edwards, Newcastle University
Victoria Nash, Oxford Internet Institute
Sonia Livingstone, LSE
Andy Phippen, University of Bournemouth
Julia Davidson, University of East London
Emma Bond, University of Suffolk
Karen Cooper, University of Edinburgh
Titus Duckworth, Lexington Communications

Secretariat:

Michael Tunks, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Manager, IWF and UK Safer Internet Centre

Tess Leyland, Policy and Public Affairs Assistant, IWF and UK Safer Internet Centre

David Wright, SWGfL and UK Safer Internet Centre

Will Gardner, Childnet and UK Safer Internet Centre

Emma Hardy, Communications Director, IWF

Apologies:

Dr Lisa Cameron MP

Aaron Bell MP

Bambos Charalambous MP

David Linden MP

Damian Hinds MP

Martyn Day MP

Luke Evans MP

Owen Thompson MP

Jamie Stone MP

Baroness Stroud

Lord Taylor

1. Introductions and Opening Remarks- Chris Elmore MP

The Chair welcomed everyone to the launch of the inquiry. He expressed the gravity and sensitivities of the crimes that the APPG would be exploring in the coming months.

He also said that he was pleased to welcome the Minister, Victoria Atkins to open the inquiry, who needed little persuasion to come along and speak to the APPG.

The Chair also welcomed Jeremy Wright who did so much to progress the online harms agenda when he was Secretary of State for DCMS along with Margot James.

2. Minister of State for Safeguarding, Victoria Atkins MP-

Opened by thanking Chris for setting the scene so well about the importance of dealing with Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. She thanked the IWF for bringing this issue to the attention of the Government and for the APPG for conducting an inquiry into this important area.

These are difficult issues that have a real impact on children and their families. It is good to see that there is cross-party determination to tackling this issue and ensure better policing of the internet to ensure these images are not allowed to circulate in the first place.

This meeting is timely. The National Crime Agency (NCA) has assessed that the threat to children has increased during lockdown and the expect this trend to continue at least in the short-term.

They have highlighted three areas of concern:

1. Live streaming
2. Dark Web
3. Self-Generated Indecent Images of Children

It is, however, important to recognise that most children have positive experiences online. The internet has been hugely central to their education during the pandemic and in many ways has transformed their lives for the better.

But there are those who use the internet to harm children and Government is extremely concerned by this threat.

Last year the tech industry reported 69 million images and videos, up 50% on the previous 12 months, which include images of self-generated indecent images of children to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the United States.

Originally, Self-Generated Indecent Images was defined by sexualised images shared between children which would then be onwardly shared without their consent. The great risk this type of imagery poses to a child or young person is obvious. Once an image is shared on the internet it becomes permanent.

The fear of an image being shared further can inflict great psychological harm with feeling of embarrassment and distressed which can be further exacerbated through bullying.

The online CSE/A threat evolves quickly, and the issue is now much more complex. Some images are created by children, where offenders encourage children to carry out sexualised behaviour online to receive 'likes' or attention on social media platforms and of course some adults may seek to coerce, groom or blackmail children into producing self-generated indecent images of themselves, usually via a live stream or via webcam.

The scale and complexity is increasing; offenders are becoming more sophisticated, and many children may never know that they are victims of these crimes if they are victims of capping. These images are then reshared within offender networks.

'Capping' is a slang term used to refer to the capturing of images and videos of children. Offenders will often portray themselves as children using fake or bait videos to contact other children. This can be footage of other children who have been exploited by other offenders and shared or hidden on the dark web or downloaded from fake webcam sites.

This is a multi-dimensional problem. The IWF is seeing younger and younger children appearing in self-generated indecent images because of coercion online. 95% of these victims are girls. I commend the work of the IWF in bringing this issue to the attention of Government and Parliament.

This year they have seen a 44% increase and I absolutely support the need to find out what has been behind the rise in these self-generated indecent images. I have met the extraordinary people that do this extremely difficult job assessing content that many could not imagine in their very worst nightmares and praise all of those in law enforcement and elsewhere that must view these images day in day out.

1. Education and Awareness is vital.

Understanding the importance of healthy relationships education is important, but when children do make mistakes, which of course they will do naturally it is vitally important that any illegal content they generate themselves can be removed.

2. Report/Remove.

Is an innovative and world-leading initiative currently in development between IWF and NSPCC. This will enable children to self-refer images which can be hashed, given a unique digital fingerprint by IWF and can be provided to internet companies which can then be prevented from further onward distribution.

The NSPCC's Childline service ensures the relevant safeguarding measures take place and processes have been agreed with law enforcement to ensure children are not criminalised as a result of self-referring.

This project is currently in a pilot phase and subject to how that progresses, I believe this could be a really important tool.

3. Social Media companies.

We need social media companies to understand that there is a clear moral obligation to put in place policies that tackle the sharing of self-generated indecent images as well as stopping grooming and capping.

The Online Harms Bill proposes a duty of care overseen by an independent regulator with higher levels of protection for children.

There will be an expectation that companies deploy proportionate tools including:

Age Assurance and Age Verification Technologies that will go further than previous proposals in the Digital Economy Act. We want companies to address the fact that adult material is too readily available to children online. The scope of the white paper will include both adult providers and social media providers.

The interim code of practice will also ensure that companies are taking a proactive approach to keeping children safer. We don't want companies to wait for legislation and the voluntary code will assist in driving improvements in the interim.

We will also be bringing forward a national CSE/A strategy which will consider the whole system response to CSE/A and this will complement the violence against women and girl's strategy.

Both strategies will look at online and offline offending and seek to drive down all forms of sexual offending.

Finally, this is an issue which transcends party politics. I look forward to the inquiries recommendations and I want to continue to work with the APPG to tackle CSE/A offending whether self-generated or not.

Scope of the Inquiry- Chris Elmore MP

The Chair thanked the Minister warmly for her contribution and said all MPs were committed to tackling the issue.

The Chair set out the scope of the inquiry covering three major areas:

1. Scale of the threat
2. Where and how the imagery is produced; to understand the sophistication of offenders and the impact of gaming, streaming and other services and platforms used by children
3. Understanding the current initiatives in place and where further improvements can be made.

He explained a key ask of all those present was to submit evidence to the inquiry, either verbally or in writing as it was the APPG's ambition to provide as much information to the Government as possible with a view to providing genuinely constructive and helpful evidence and recommendations.

Presentation from the Internet Watch Foundation / UK Safer Internet Centre: Susie Hargreaves OBE and Tamsin, IWF Deputy Hotline Manager

Susie opened by thanking the Minister, Chris and Jeremy Wright for their important contributions in this space and for holding this inquiry.

The IWF support wholeheartedly the UK's ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online. We want to share our data and insights to help inform the legislation.

We need a three-pronged approach:

1. The legislation must be effective
2. Technology solutions need to be deployed to tackle the issue
3. Education and Awareness raising initiatives such as those carried out by the UK Safer Internet Centre are vitally important parts of addressing the issue.

Susie said the IWF had been first concerned about Self-Generated Images since 2012 and praised the role of industry (Microsoft in particular) for funding research in this area and in a forthcoming campaign.

Susie also mentioned the Report/Remove project in partnership with NSPCC and had also received funding from Facebook towards the project.

Susie further explained that we are encouraging our members to contribute to this inquiry as we all need to work together to address the problem.

Susie then introduced Tamsin, IWF's Deputy Hotline Manager to outline the problem.

Tamsin explained she would set out what she experiences daily, where the imagery appears, the impact this has on victims, share how we safeguard children and explain more about the current trends.

She said the IWF defines Self-Generated Indecent imagery as sexual content involving children, sexual images produced by children depicting themselves. This is a definition established through the Luxembourg Guidelines.

Such images have been created through sharing with peers and "sexting" or through "capping" as the Minister mentioned.

Tamsin stated that it was a myth to think all this content was on the dark web. All the content the IWF removes is available on the open internet. These Self-Generated images are harvested from their

original upload location and then placed on forums, image hosting boards and cyberlockers. There are also sites solely dedicated to the hosting and distribution of this imagery which are very popular.

We don't have any conclusive evidence of where these images are originally generated, but these images are extremely popular with offenders and there is no doubt this is a global issue.

We also see offenders exchanging information about victims on messaging boards including the types of platforms a victim might be active on and exchanging information about the victim's social media profiles.

The victims quite often, generated these images in the family home; in bedrooms and bathrooms whilst other family members are present in the house.

We must remember that each individual image is that of a victim, we need to be careful not to blame them for the generation of such imagery and many will have no idea their image has been captured, shared, uploaded, and downloaded thousands of times.

Victims regularly contact the IWF about the removal of their imagery and we also proactively look for clues to safeguard children.

In one example, from October 2020, IWF received a public report of imagery hosted in a cyberlocker. The member of the public also informed us of discussions taking place on an image board about the victim. The image was confirmed to be Category B imagery and offenders were asking for information about the victim's social media handles. After identifying her social media handles the analyst was able to identify her by a picture in her school uniform. Evidence was packaged up to law enforcement, the imagery was removed, and social services and police became involved.

Finally, throughout this year we have been tracking the impact of the Covid pandemic. Everyone is spending more time online and this has increased the threat to children.

We have already seen a 44% rise in self-generated content, and we predict that will grow further as we near the end of the year. This predominantly affects young girls in the 11-13 age range, but all ages, genders and ethnicities are impacted.

The Chair thanked the IWF for contributions stating it was difficult not to be moved by the evidence.

Question and answer-

Jeremy Wright: Asked what more could the platforms do to prevent this imagery being uploaded in the first place and what sort of confidence could we have in ensuring the system proposed through the online harms proposals would solve the problem? And for an update on timescales for legislation.

Susie: A tricky question, but the 5 eyes voluntary principles, interim CSE/A Code of Practice are examples of driving industry engagement on the issue. The industry is already taking proactive steps to remove the imagery and detect it before it becomes available, and this makes up many reports to NCMEC through the mandatory reporting system.

Minister Atkins: The full Government response will be available shortly, but we want companies to act now. Minister Brokenshire did a huge amount of work on the Voluntary Principles which Facebook, Snap, Google, Microsoft, Twitter and Roblox have all adopted.

Olivia Robey: Definitions are important. A survivor mentions recently that Self-Generated implied the victim was complicit in the act. Could we look at this as part of the inquiry?

Chris Elmore: Agree it is awkward and to look at it.

Tony Stower: We must focus on children at various stages in their development and better understand that. We also need to do more to tackle the offender side of this problem who wickedly exploit children.

Claire Levens: questioned the scope of the inquiry. Given that less than 1% of this content is found on social media is it incomplete to just focus on social media or will the inquiry be broader than that?

Chris Elmore: Whilst this is the APPG for Social Media, I and other members recognise the problem is broader than that and certainly the remit of this inquiry intends to hear from as many people as possible, it wont just be limited to the role of social media providers.

Chloe Setter: Will the inquiry look at End to End Encryption and the impact that this will have particularly because this will hamper the fight against the identification of such images? Secondly, We PROTECT has an international project looking at Latin America and Eastern Europe, is their scope to look at international best practice?

Chris Elmore: Absolutely, it is a global problem, and we need to learn from others.

Will Gardner: Education and Awareness important. We need to relay messages to children and young people and adapt and change that messaging for this specific issue. It is quite shocking that many children are simply unaware that they are victims of these crimes

David Wright: The wider of the role of the UK Safer Internet Centre is important. Through the helplines we provide to the children's workforce, we know they aren't getting enough support. 41% of schools are not training their staff appropriately in online safety. Content doesn't have to be illegal to be harmful to children. The Duty of Care will be important, in education there is lots of precedent to look at in how that changed the landscape which could be applied here.

Nick Newman: We PROTECT Global threat assessment, highlighted a real level of differences here in the behaviour of children, I agree with the previous point made about age-appropriate messaging. Does more need to go into culture shift as well as pursuing offenders?

Victoria Atkins: This is a very similar situation in the domestic abuse space. Young people need to realise this isn't a normal healthy relationship and they need to have the confidence to respond to this. We PROTECT has a role to play in this internationally. In the UK in October changes to the RSE programme in schools is a welcome change. This is also relevant to my work in tackling gang culture where harmful sexual behaviours are also apparent.

Legislation can help as can schools but mums and dads also have a role in this. In a decade's time we need to look back and say how did we allow this to happen?

Victoria Green: Asked about the scope of the inquiry to investigate recovery services?

Susie: Scope deliberately broad, please do raise it in the submission.

Steve Bailey: Really welcome the inquiry, we see the impact in our services. Recovery and support for children and victim and survivors post abuse is important. What are the barriers to identifying perpetrators in the international sphere? Educational approaches also need to be considered, make them aware of their rights, how adults around them can help them and avoid a victim blaming approach. We also need to ensure we aren't blaming parents and carers as well.

Chris Elmore: Really encouraged by all the contributions. Please do contribute to the inquiry.

Submissions to inquiry:

Chris Elmore: Please submit written evidence by 31 January. Please keep submissions to four sides of A4 if possible. We will then hold four oral evidence sessions in the new year with a view to producing a final report around May/ June time.

The Chair brought the meeting to close by thanking the Minister, Susie and her team and Alexandra Landes for setting the meeting up.