All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children in Wales

Tuesday 2nd June 4.00 – 5.00pm, Portcullis House, Westminster

Meeting Minutes

Context

Children are growing up in an age of rapid technological change, with many risks, opportunities, benefits and challenges. Coinciding with the Government's ongoing national consultation 'Growing up in an online world', join us for expert presentations and a lively discussion to understand more on how technology is impacting children's well-being in Wales, and the steps Welsh MPs and Welsh members of the Lords can take to better safeguard children and young people online.

In attendance (MPs/Peers) - Andrew Ranger MP, Gill German MP, Llinos Medi MP, Baroness Carmen Smith, Becky Gittins MP, Alex Davies-Jones MP, Ann Davies MP and parliamentary staff for other members.

In attendance (Speakers/Secretariat) – Cecile Gwilym & Dr Ruth Mullineux (Policy leads, NSPCC Cymru) with two members of their Youth Advisory Group; Dr Rebecca Anthony (Research Associate, DECIPHer, Cardiff University); Sean O'Neill (Secretariat, Children in Wales)

1. **Welcome from the chair: Andrew Ranger MP / Gill German MP**
   Gill German MP opened the meeting and welcomed both speakers and attendees. Gill provided the rationale for the meeting, in the context of the increasing recognition of rapid changes in technology and growing concerns around some of the risks posed to children and young people's wellbeing.

2. **Scene Setting**
   Sean O'Neill outlined the background to this meeting and the contributions the distinguished speakers will make to help inform Members consideration of the current UK Government 'Growing up in an online world' public consultation. Sean highlighted some of the priority issues within this theme which have emerged to date to help shape the discussion.

3. **Cardiff University School Health Research Network (SHRN)**
   Dr Rebecca Anthony's presentation 'Children in the Digital Era: Welsh Insights on Screen Time and Social Media' drew on recent evidence of the rise in the use of social

media amongst children and adolescents, and the increasing understanding of the relationship between social media and mental health. Drawing on published Welsh research using school data captured through the School Health Research Network, Rebecca set out the topics and questions gathered through the survey with students in primary and secondary school settings, and the methodology applied.

In relation to social media use amongst students, the research highlighted that 81.5% of students reported connecting with their closest friends at least once a day and 27.8% reported being available 'almost all the time throughout the day'. Students also reported frequently communicating with their larger group of friends online, with 52.4% reported doing so daily, while 34.9% of students reported online communication with virtual friends made online. In this study, 12.5% of students reported at least one instance of cyberbullying victimisation online, and 4.3% reported being the victim of at least three instances of cyberbullying. Students were also asked whether they used social media to escape from negative feelings, with 39.8% reporting that they had used social media as a form of escapism.

Key findings from the study included

- More social media use → poorer mental health
- Talking to family online → better wellbeing
- Talking to friends online → smaller or mixed effects
- Girls more affected by social media use

References

Publications: Young people's online communication and its association with mental well-being: results from the 2019 student health and well-being survey - Anthony - 2023 - Child and Adolescent Mental Health - Wiley Online Library
News pieces: New Survey Reveals High Rates of Problematic Social Media Use Among Adolescent Girls in Wales - The School Health Research Network
SHRN Survey: Enhancing learner health and wellbeing | Education Wales

4. NSPCC Wales/Cymru with young advocates with lived experience

The speakers emphasised the importance of engaging with young people as being experts in their own lives, and who have direct experience of the harms and benefits of online use yet carry too much responsibility for staying safe. The presentation set out ways in which NSPCC Cymru are amplifying children and young people's voices to help shape decision making and influence government policy, sharing a number of recent examples of their involvement in Wales and through the recent 4 nations roadshow.

A number of key priorities and findings emerged from the session with young people in Wales. These included

i. What young people like about being online

- Seeing friends' and families' lives
- Greater social connectivity with people with shared interests
- Creating *"safe spaces for minority communities"*

- Self-development:
- *"Endless access to free education"* and study resources
- Forming their identity, self-expression
- Staying informed on current affairs/world events
- Broadening of world view:
- Exposure to other opinions, culture and life stories

ii. What young people dislike about being online

- Poor behaviour of other social media users:
- Cyberbullying, catfishing, trolling and grooming
- Adults in spaces meant for young people
- Negative impact on mental health and wellbeing if *"chronically online"*
- Social pressure, judgement and comparison
- *"everyone is on there"*
- AI:
    - Concerns about environment
    - Too much generated content
    - Can exacerbate difficult feelings
    - Misinformation, propaganda, *"echo chambers"*

The workshop sessions also considered which apps were considered most to least risky, and concerns were raised around their addictive design features such as frequent notifications, pressure to 'like' and the use of online tools for education as well as for leisure. It was also noted that some pre-existing controls can be bypassed

iii. What adults should know

- Adults need greater awareness of how young people use social media, so they can effectively guide and support young people
- Don't oversimplify, as this leads to misunderstanding of the scale of issues children face
- *"listen to us"*
- Social media is embedded in daily life
- View of restrictions mixed, but:
    - Oppose blanket bans = ineffective and unfair
    - Support some targeted limits, e.g. on specific features or age groups
    - Shift responsibility from users to platforms!
- *"Don't blame young people"*

Speakers called for a tougher approach to regulation, evidencing the high levels of online harms and counselling sessions by Childline. They further called for the root causes of harm to be tackled and the age-appropriate design and safety by design principles should underpin next steps.

Finally, the NSPCC's position is:

- Focus on stronger, system-level protections — not just a social media ban
- Safety by design – harmful content blocked across platforms, devices and AI
- Age-appropriate services – platforms must prove they are safe before children can access them
- End addictive design – ban features that drive excessive use (e.g. endless scrolling)
- If these actions aren't taken, a ban may be necessary as a last resort

5. **Q&A/Discussion**

Gill thanked the speakers for their contributions, notably the two young people who drew on their lived experiences and demonstrated the value and importance of speaking and listening to children and young people to inform current and future policy decisions.

Gill highlighted a local online safety campaign she ran in Clwyd North, with nine secondary schools and over 300 pupils involved. Both Year 10 and Year 12, pupils highlighted significant risks linked to harmful content, weak moderation, and platform accountability, with a call for stronger safeguards and a negative view of a blanket ban on social media – echoing arguments we heard today.

Members discussed the potential issues with a blanket ban

- Children will still find a way through the cracks and keep what they do online a secret.
- Kids don't believe adults in their lives understand what they're doing online, so can't guide them effectively online.
- Vulnerable teenagers may not have the opportunity to access support outside of social media like others do.
- Nobody supporting a social media ban has clearly defined 'social media', so questions remain about what exactly would be included in such a ban.

Members raised a number of questions with the speakers and a discussion ensued to help inform members future decisions.

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