The Government’s response to the consultation on parental internet controls

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Introduction

1. The internet provides children and young people with a wealth of opportunities for their entertainment, communication, education and enrichment. But there are also risks of harm through the deliberate online behaviour of others, and through exposure to age-inappropriate content. As children live their lives in an increasingly digital world, they need to be as aware of the risks they face in the online world as in the offline world.

2. These issues have been considered in depth in recent years, in reviews for the Government by Professor Tanya Byron in 2008 and 2010, which led to the creation of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), and Reg Bailey in 2011 in his review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood\(^1\)\(^2\). Both reviewers were clear that parents must be given the lead in taking decisions about their children's online safety, and that businesses and Government need to do their utmost to support parents in that role.

3. The Government agrees. Children will typically have their first experience of the internet in their own homes through the family PC, laptop or tablet, or through a parent's smartphone, or a games console. As they get older, it is likely to be parents who purchase the services and devices through which children access the internet: often these will be devices such as mobile phones, tablets and games consoles used outside the home.

4. Parents have just as much responsibility for keeping their children safe when they are online as when they are offline, and the basic principles of avoiding harm are the same. In the offline world, parents teach their children the essentials of safety, making them aware of the risks and showing them how to stay safe. Warning signs, water wings and lifeguards are all useful aids to safety in swimming pools, but they don't prevent all accidents by themselves, and children still need to have swimming lessons and be alert to possible dangers. In the same way, there are content filtering solutions that can help manage risk on the internet but on their own they are insufficient. Typically, they work to filter out certain kinds of internet content, but they do not prevent the problems caused by other people's behaviour, such as online bullying ("cyberbullying"), sharing personal sexual content using technology ("sexting") or online grooming. Nor do they prevent children from putting themselves at risk, for example by sharing personal information online with people they don’t know. Nevertheless, there have been calls for internet service providers (ISPs) to provide broadband connections into homes with filters already in place as the default setting to block access to pornography\(^3\). Adults who wanted these

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\(^3\) Independent Parliamentary Inquiry into Online Child Protection, 2012
filters removed from their service would have to tell their ISP they wished to ‘opt in’ to these sites.

5. The Government has been working with UKCCIS and its members on these issues. Its aim is to make sure that everyone with an interest in children’s use of the internet works together to make sure parents and children have the information and tools they need for children to be safe online.

6. This approach has made good progress, including:
   - Through the autumn of 2011 and spring of this year, Ministers chaired a series of roundtable meetings to help progress the active choice approach with desktop, laptop and tablet manufacturers, and with the mobile phone industry. Many of largest manufacturers such as Dell, Lenovo, Samsung, and Toshiba responded positively to the request to install parental controls on their devices, and several prominent high street names such as Argos, Dixons, John Lewis and Tesco committed to point of sale activities that would ensure parents are made aware of parental controls when they purchased a device.
   - The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) has led work to create the UKCCIS advice on child internet safety. This advice is evidence-based and comprises a single set of authoritative messages that UKCCIS members can use when offering advice to parents and children.
   - Widespread support for Safer Internet Day every year. The theme for 2012 was ‘Connecting generations’: Safer Internet Day 2013, which falls on 5 February, has “Connect with Respect” as its theme.
   - The UKCCIS evidence group has produced summaries of the latest child internet safety research which can be found at www.saferinternet.org.uk.

7. Although the Government and UKCCIS members have worked across a number of fronts to improve online safety, much of the focus has been on parental controls on home broadband services. Over the past 18 months, the UKCCIS work on parental controls has been shaped by one of the recommendations in Reg Bailey’s report Letting Children be Children to make it easier for parents to block adult and age restricted material from the internet. The recommendation called for the internet industry to ensure that customers must make an active choice over what sort of content they want their children to access. This approach is often referred to as ‘active choice’. Following the Bailey review, the four main fixed-line ISPs - BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media - were the first to commit to this approach for broadband connections. They published a code of practice in October 2011, which said that all new customers would have an active choice about parental controls by October 2012, a target which they all met.

8. In May, the Prime Minister suggested that the Government should consult on all the options: default filtering of internet services; customers choosing the parental controls appropriate for their children; and a combination of these two approaches. That
consultation was held from 28 June to 6 September 2012 and sought the views of businesses, charities and voluntary organisations concerned with parenting and children's safeguarding, and parents and young people themselves.
Summary

How the consultation was conducted

9. The members of UKCCIS, whether individuals or organisations, represent a wide range of interests connected with children’s online safety. Many of the member organisations are the very businesses which have the greatest potential to develop and bring into use the kind of tools that help parents keep their children safe on the internet, or the individuals and organisations that can provide the authoritative information and advice that parents and children need.

10. Consequently, the Ministerial co-chairs of the UKCCIS Executive Board wrote to all the members of UKCCIS to seek their views and advice on parental controls, and through them, to other individuals and organisations with an interest. The consultation was hosted on the Department for Education website so it was accessible to parents, young people and other members of the public.

Summary of responses by respondent type

11. There were 3509 responses to the consultation document, broken down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of total responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member of public not described below</td>
<td>2413</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent/Other family member</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic/Researcher</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary and Community Sector</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information/Communication business</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. MPs)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young person under 18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3509</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. A majority of respondents (69 percent) identified themselves as members of the public not otherwise identified\(^5\) (e.g. not parents, academics, businesses, voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations etc). These respondents were mainly evident in answering questions 4 and 5 (about the ISP code of practice), question 6 (responsibility

\(^4\) All percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

\(^5\) Hereafter, identified in the as “members of the public” and in the figures showing responses as “Others”
for online child safety) and question 10 (parental control options). They appear to have answered other questions in very small numbers.

13. The next biggest group of respondents were those who identified themselves as parents (22 percent of all respondents). Parents’ views are well represented in the responses to all the questions 1 to 15. Grandparents and other family members constituted 3 percent of respondents.

14. Similar but smaller numbers of academics, VCS organisations, and businesses also responded.

Key findings

15. The key headlines from the consultation responses are:

- Respondents very clearly said that children’s online safety is the responsibility of parents or a shared responsibility between parents and businesses. A majority of parents think that it is their responsibility solely, and parents are more likely than other groups (with the exception of VCS organisations) to think it is a shared responsibility with business.

- A large majority of respondents, including parents, said that they did not like any of the three options for parental controls the consultation invited responses on. There was marginally more support for default filtering at network level (14 percent of respondents) than for the other options - parents choosing controls (9 percent of respondents) and a combination of default filtering and parental choice (7 percent of respondents).

- When prompted to say what kind of harmful things on the internet they know their children had been exposed to, parents chose a mixture of content and behavioural issues from a list of possible issues. The issues that parents chose, by size of response, were:
  - pornography
  - sexual messages
  - gambling
  - violence
  - alcohol and drugs
  - bullying
  - personal abuse on social networks
  - self-harming
  - anorexia/bulimia
  - religious and political radicalisation
  - suicide
  - grooming.
• Parents also recognise that their children are more likely to be worried by other people’s behaviour on the internet, such as bullying, than by inappropriate content.

• Pornography is the issue that parents are most likely to say they want help with to protect their children online, with bullying, violent content and grooming other key concerns. However, nearly a quarter of parents say they don’t need help with any of the issues the consultation asked them about.

• Parents say they would like to be made more aware of parental controls and to have more information about how to use them.
The Government’s response

16. The consultation elicited a wide variety of views. However, there was considerable agreement in a number of key areas.

17. It is quite clear that parents feel that it is their responsibility, with the help of industry, to keep their children safe online.

18. It is also clear that in accepting that responsibility, parents want to be in control, and that it would be easier for them to use the online safety tools available to them if they could learn more about those tools. They also want information about internet safety risks and what to do about them. There was no great appetite among parents for the introduction of default filtering of the internet by their ISP: only 35 percent of the parents who responded favoured that approach. There were even smaller proportions of parents who favoured an approach which simply asked them what they would like their children to access on the internet, with no default settings (13 percent) or a system that combines the latter approach with default filtering (15 percent)\(^6\).

19. To date, the Government’s approach has been based on expert advice that default filtering can create a false sense of security since:

- It does not filter all potentially harmful content: given the vast amount of material on the internet, it would not be possible to identify all the possible content to be filtered, and very large numbers of websites are created each day.
- There is also a risk from “over-blocking” – preventing access to websites which provide helpful information on sexual health or sexual identity, issues which young people may want information on but find difficult to talk to their parents about.
- It does not deal with harms such as bullying, personal abuse, grooming or sexual exploitation which arise from the behaviour of other internet users.
- It does not encourage parents to engage with the issues and learn about keeping their children safe online. There is a risk that parents might rely on default filtering to protect their children from all potential online harms and not think about how their children might want to use the internet, the kind of content that is appropriate for each child according to their own circumstances, and the risks and harms their children might face.

20. The Government has therefore been working with all parts of the information and communication industries through UKCCIS to promote the approach recommended by Reg Bailey, “that the internet industry should ensure that customers must make an active choice over what sort of content they want to allow their children to access … those providing content which is age restricted, whether by law or company policy, should seek

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\(^6\) The full results are in Annexes 1 and 2, but note that the options described here were set out in three separate questions and were not, therefore, mutually exclusive: parents could have answered “yes” to all three options, and the large majority of parents who chose “no” for each option suggests that is the case.
robust means of age verification as well as making it easy for parents to block underage access.”

21. The internet is a constantly evolving and dynamic facility with ever-expanding content and uses. The numbers of people using it continue to grow, and the activities they use it for, and the technologies through which they access it, are constantly evolving. For these reasons, the Government keeps its approach to children’s online safety under continuous review. Having considered the responses to the consultation, which are set out below, and reviewed the progress to date, the Government believes that the approach to child internet safety needs to evolve.

22. The consultation elicited a wide range of views and little consensus emerged. There were, however, some clear messages, set out above, which suggested the ways in which that evolution should take place: supporting parents in their desire to be responsible for their children’s safety; and making it easier for parents to choose what is right for their own children.

23. Although there was only minority support among parents for the three options consulted on, the Government does not believe parents are uninterested in their children’s safety online: the very high percentages of parents who think they have the responsibility for their children’s safety suggests otherwise. However, the offer to parents should be reformulated in a way that ensures that children can be given the levels of protection their parents think is appropriate for them, reduces the risk of uninterested parents avoiding online safety issues, and does not impose a solution on adult users or non-parents.

24. Our approach to child internet safety should therefore evolve in ways so that it:

- actively helps parents to make sure they have appropriate safety features in place when their children access the internet and also encourages them to think about issues such as grooming, bullying and sexting as well as potentially harmful or inappropriate content
- covers existing ISP customers as well as new ones
- prompts or steers parents towards those safety features
- makes it easier for parents to take charge of setting up the internet access their children will have, and less likely that they will abdicate this responsibility to their children

25. The Government is now asking all internet service providers to actively encourage people to switch on parental controls if children are in the household and will be using the internet. This approach should help parents make use of the available safety features without affecting internet users aged 18 and over who can choose not to set up controls.
26. Internet service providers have made great progress to date in implementing “active choice” controls where all new customers are asked if they want to switch on parental controls. The Government is urging providers to go one step further and configure their systems to actively encourage parents, whether they are new or existing customers, to switch on parental controls. The Government believes providers should automatically prompt parents to tailor filters to suit their child’s needs e.g. by preventing access to harmful and inappropriate content. We also expect ISPs to put in place appropriate measures to check that the person setting up the parental controls is over the age of 18. This builds on the child internet safety approach already established by the four main ISPs by steering parents towards the safety features and taking responsibility for setting up those that are most appropriate for their own children. It will also help parents think about the knowledge and skills children need to prevent harm from the behaviour of other people on the internet: we are clear from the consultation that parents are conscious of these risks as well as those posed by age-inappropriate content.

27. This is only one part of the approach which the Government is pressing for. All of the information and communication industries, including retailers and device manufacturers, should work to develop universally-available family-friendly internet access which is easy to use. The Government wants to see all internet-enabled devices supplied with the tools to keep children safe as a standard feature.

28. Industry has already made progress on this. The four largest internet service providers - BT, Sky, TalkTalk, and Virgin are all now offering parental controls to new customers. Large retailers like Argos are giving away free parental control software. Nevertheless, everyone with a stake in the internet can do more.

29. A particular area for action is for industry to do more to raise awareness and understanding of how to deal with internet safety issues such as grooming and cyberbullying, which is children’s number one concern online. Businesses in particular need to go further and to make sure that the really good information about internet safety which is already available actually reaches parents.

**How this will be taken forward**

30. Ministers will now work with industry, charities and experts in relevant fields through UKCCIS to bring about the desired approach described in paragraphs 24 to 27. Government will not prescribe detailed solutions, but we will expect industry to adapt the principles of this approach to their services, systems and devices so that their customers, and particularly parents and children, have highly-effective, easy to use and free tools that facilitate children’s safety online. Industry also needs to make every effort to engage parents and children in online safety issues, not just at the point of sale or commencement of a service, but through persistent, accessible, ongoing education,
advice and support. Government will look to industry for innovative ways in reaching parents with different needs, such as those who have poor reading skills. This combination of parental tools and education will be needed in order to deal with the twin problems of harmful content and harmful online behaviour.

31. The consultation also highlighted the need for action in other areas. Ministers will therefore also explore with UKCCIS what more can be done to:

- define which children are most likely to be vulnerable online.
- improve online protections for the more vulnerable children, including making it easier for parents and carers to find out what kinds of controls can allow these children to use the internet safely and how children in families where their safety is a low priority can be helped to have positive experiences of the internet;
- define inappropriate content and improve the means for identifying it online, starting with an exploration of “community regulation”
- establish clear, simple benchmarks and classifications for parental control solutions, so that parents can more easily understand what those tools will help them with and how various products compare; and
- encourage a deeper understanding of the reasons why parental controls are not taken up by more parents.

32. Additionally, Ministers will ask UKCCIS to investigate how a person’s age can be verified effectively in order to limit children’s access to harmful content.