

Witness Name: Kate Davies

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Exhibits: KD1 – KD58

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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

MODULE 8

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KATE DAVIES

I, Kate Davies of the Office of Communications (“Ofcom”), Riverside House, 2A Southwark Bridge Road, London, SE1 9HA, will say as follows:

1. I am Ofcom’s Public Policy Director, a role I have held since 2021. Prior to that I was Director of Strategy at Ofcom for four years. With effect from 1 September 2025, I will become Ofcom’s Strategy and Research Group Director. Module 8 of the Covid-19 Inquiry is examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I am giving this witness statement in response to a Rule 9 request dated 25 March 2025 for a corporate witness statement from Ofcom.

Structure of this witness statement

2. The remainder of this witness statement is in four sections as follows:
 - a. Section 1 – Introduction to Ofcom’s role
 - b. Section 2 – Harms and trends
 - c. Section 3 – Misinformation/disinformation
 - d. Section 4 – Decision making and impact on children
3. It includes the following Annexes, which are provided separately:
 - a. Annex 1 – summary of key individuals
 - b. Annex 2 – Ofcom organogram for key individuals March 2020 – July 2021
 - c. Annex 3 - List of key meetings
 - d. Annex 4 – Schedule of exhibits
 - e. Annex 5 – Table identifying responses to Rule 9 questions

Section 1: Introduction to Ofcom's role

About Ofcom

4. Ofcom is a statutory corporation established by the Office of Communications Act 2002.
5. Ofcom is the independent regulator for the UK communications industries, including post, telecommunications, network security, broadcasting, on-demand programme services, and radio spectrum. Ofcom is also the regulator for online services, pursuant to the Online Safety Act ("OSA") 2023.
6. Ofcom's principal duty, as set out in s.3 of the Communications Act 2003, is to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters; and to further the interests of consumers in relevant markets, where appropriate by promoting competition.

Structure of Ofcom

7. Until September 2020, Ofcom had nine groups, each led by a Group Director, who was a member of Ofcom's Senior Management Team. The structure was as follows: Competition Group, Consumer and External Affairs, Content and Media Policy, Corporate Services, Economics, Legal, Spectrum, Strategy and Research, Technology.
8. Thereafter, following a major organisational design exercise, Ofcom adopted a structure of eight groups. There were three industry and regulatory groups (Broadcasting and Online Content, Networks and Communications, and Spectrum) and five cross-functional groups (Corporate, Economics and Analytics, Legal and Enforcement, Strategy and Research, and Technology).
9. In April/May 2023 Ofcom made two further changes: Online Safety regulation moved out into its own policy group, and the functions of the Technology Group were absorbed into other groups. The structure today is as follows: four industry and regulatory groups (Broadcasting and Media, Networks and Communications, Online Safety, and Spectrum) and four cross-functional groups (Corporate, Economics and Analytics, Legal and Enforcement, and Strategy and Research).

The regulatory framework for online safety

10. In the following description of the regulatory framework for online safety, I have not discussed broadcasting (radio and television) or on-demand programme service regulation, as this appears to be outside the scope of the inquiry. For completeness, I note that broadcast services and on-demand programme services can, however, be provided via the internet.

Prior to 1 November 2020

11. Prior to 1 November 2020, there was no regulatory regime in the UK for online safety.
The general law applied, for example data protection and criminal laws.
12. A self-regulatory scheme existed (and continues to exist) for non-broadcast advertising.
This is overseen by the Advertising Standards Authority.
13. Ofcom had a duty under section 11 of the Communications Act 2003 to promote media literacy. It required Ofcom to take such steps, and to enter into such arrangements, as appeared to us calculated:
 - a. to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, a better public understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of the electronic media;
 - b. to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, a better public awareness and understanding of the processes by which such material is selected, or made available, for publication by such means;
 - c. to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, the development of a better public awareness of the available systems by which access to material published by means of the electronic media is or can be regulated;
 - d. to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, the development of a better public awareness of the available systems by which persons to whom such material is made available may control what is received and of the uses to which such systems may be put; and
 - e. to encourage the development and use of technologies and systems for regulating access to such material, and for facilitating control over what material is received, that are both effective and easy to use.
14. The EU's Audio-Visual Media Services Directive was amended from 18 December 2018 and required Member States to implement a new regime for regulating video-sharing platforms ("VSPs") by 19 September 2020 (I say more about this at paragraphs 17-33 below). The regime was made law in the UK on 1 November 2020, which was earlier than all other member states.
15. The UK Government published its Online Harms White Paper in April 2019 (KD/01 - INQ000606810). At that stage, it had not decided what body would be the regulator, but Ofcom was one of the options. The paper began a process of policy development in which Ofcom provided technical advice to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as it devised and drafted the legislation. In February 2020 the Government indicated that it was minded to appoint Ofcom as the forthcoming online safety regulator.

16. Therefore, from around 2018, Ofcom was preparing for a future in which there would be regulation of the internet and had begun to factor this into the planning of media literacy work. More broadly we had also already identified the importance of online services when thinking about media literacy in the round. Throughout the period of the pandemic, Ofcom was supporting the Government in its development of the new regulatory regimes, and preparing to implement them, where appropriate.

1 November 2020 to 28 June 2022

17. From 1 November 2020 until 28 June 2022 (and beyond), there has been a regulatory regime for VSPs which fall to the UK's jurisdiction. The regime is set out in Part 4B of the Communications Act 2003 which implemented the relevant provisions of the Audio-Visual Media Services Directive into domestic law.

18. A VSP is one whose principal or essential purpose is the provision of videos to the public on a commercial basis, where the provider does not have general control over the content of the videos themselves but does have general control over how they are organised and presented to the public.

19. Broadly speaking, it is my understanding that such a provider falls to be regulated under this regime if it is established in the UK, or if a group undertaking of the provider is established in the UK and the provider does not fall to be regulated by an EEA state under the Audio-Visual Media Services Directive. From 6 April 2021, providers within scope were required to submit a formal notification of their service to Ofcom. The number of notified providers changes from time to time but we reported on 20 October 2022 on the first year of VSP regulation (KD/02 - INQ000615274) and at that time there were 19 notified VSPs (see page 4). They included providers of services such as TikTok, Snapchat, Twitch and OnlyFans. However some of the biggest and most well-known services were not within the UK's jurisdiction for the purposes of VSP regulation.

20. The regime covers the following broad areas:

- a) Regulated VSPs must protect all users from relevant harmful material, defined as video content likely to incite violence or hatred against protected groups, and content which would be considered a criminal offence under laws relating to terrorism; child sexual abuse material; and racism and xenophobia.
- b) Regulated VSPs must protect under-18s from videos containing R18 or unclassified material, and other material that might impair their physical, mental, or moral development.
- c) Regulated VSPs must also uphold standards around advertising where the advertising is marketed, sold, or arranged by the VSP provider.

21. Schedule 15A of the Communications Act 2003 lists measures that, pursuant to section 368Z1 of that Act, VSP providers must take, if appropriate, to fulfil their duties to protect users from harmful material. They include:
- a) Having, and effectively implementing, terms and conditions for harmful material;
 - b) Having, and effectively implementing, flagging, reporting or rating mechanisms;
 - c) Applying appropriate access control measures to protect under 18s, such as age assurance and/or parental control measures;
 - d) Establishing easy-to-use complaints processes; and
 - e) Providing media literacy tools and information.
22. Section 368Z1(4) sets out that a measure is appropriate for a certain provider if it is practicable and proportionate for that provider to implement it, considering factors including the size and nature of its platform; the type of material on the platform and the harm it might cause; the characteristics of users to be protected, the rights and legitimate interests of users, and any other non-Schedule 15A measures already implemented on the platform.
23. However, the duty to take appropriate steps was subject to sub-section (3). During the specified period, this said that the duty was not to be regarded as imposing on a provider of a VSP service a general obligation as described in the E-commerce directive. This directive established that online service providers were not under any general duty proactively to look for illegal or harmful content or activity on their platform.
24. This regime is still in force but the UK is now in a transition period between the VSP regulatory regime and a new regime, set out in the OSA. It is for the Government to decide when the VSP regulatory regime will be repealed. I understand it intends to do so on 25 July 2025.

Ofcom's work on VSP regulation

25. Ofcom was confirmed on 12 February 2020 by the UK Government as the regulator for VSPs in the UK. Ofcom began preparing for its new regulatory responsibilities by building the team and developing the regulatory framework to support the new rules. We consulted on guidance to help providers understand the complex scope and jurisdictional criteria of the legislation (KD/03 - INQ000615275), and issued publications to provide clarity on what the new framework would mean for providers in scope – such as the 'quick guide' to the new regulations (KD/04 - INQ000615276).
26. Ofcom began engaging with VSP providers to understand existing approaches to user protection in early 2020 and published a Call for Evidence in July 2020 to gather a range

- of evidence and information relating to the requirements of the regime (KD/05 - INQ000615277). This evidence base was used to inform the drafting of guidance for VSP providers about protection measures to protect users from harmful material, published for consultation in draft form in March 2021 and finalised in October 2021 (KD/06 - INQ000615278).
27. This first-of-its-kind guidance also drew on research conducted and commissioned by Ofcom into the harms that VSP users experience, including their awareness of, and engagement with, platforms' protection measures (KD/07 - INQ000615279). I understand that Ofcom also worked with experts at the Alan Turing Institute and the Institute of Connected Communities at the University of East London to produce reports respectively on online hate (KD/08 - INQ000615280) and protection of minors (KD/09 - INQ000615281).
28. Throughout the implementation period we collaborated with a wide range of stakeholders and third sector organisations to further our understanding of harms and best practice and deliver good regulatory outcomes. Given the global nature of the platforms in scope, and the fact that the VSP regime derives from an EU Directive, working closely with international regulators was key to share learnings and align approaches where possible to ensure the greatest protection for UK users across industry.
29. Ofcom's first VSP report, published in October 2022, (KD/02 - INQ000615274) set out our key findings from the first year of regulation, running from October 2021 to October 2022. We used our statutory powers to issue enforceable information requests to all notified VSPs to inform the report. Overall, we found that all platforms had safety measures in place, including rules on what kinds of video material are allowed. However, VSPs generally provided limited evidence on how well their safety measures were operating to protect users. We reported that more robust measures were needed to prevent children accessing pornography and some VSPs were not prepared or sufficiently resourced for regulation.
30. To provide context to the protection measures examined in Ofcom's 2022 VSP Report we issued alongside it a research report analysing the VSP landscape in the UK (KD/10 - INQ000615282). This brought together a wide variety of data sources, including a commissioned study into how parents, guardians and carers of children engage with guidance designed to keep their child safe online (KD/11 - INQ000615283), as well as findings from our VSP Trackers which have been collecting quantitative data on users' awareness of, and experiences of using VSPs since autumn 2021 (the most recent wave of surveys was done in 2024) (KD/12 - INQ000615284).
31. Ofcom's December 2023 report exploring how popular VSPs are protecting children from accessing potentially harmful videos may be of interest to the inquiry (KD/13 -

INQ000615285). The report includes sections on parental controls, content labelling and minimum age enforcement approaches.

32. Finally, and again outside the stated period of interest, Ofcom has undertaken enforcement activity under the VSP regime, relating to the protection of children. On 10 January 2023 we opened an Enforcement Programme (KD/14 - INQ000615286) into adult sector VSPs in scope of the regime following findings in our 2022 report that many platforms specialising in videos containing pornographic material did not have robust measures to stop children accessing such material. The programme has seen in scope VSPs introduce and/or improve their age assurance measures which we continue to monitor.
33. In 2024 I understand that we entered a period of compliance remediation with Twitch UK Limited (KD/15 - INQ000615287), following concerns that it may not have sufficient measures in place to protect under 18s from Restricted Material. The assessment was completed in March following significant changes made by the service provider including restricting access to content with certain content classification labels.

The Online Safety Act 2023 - overview

34. The OSA received Royal Assent in October 2023, giving Ofcom new powers to regulate companies that provide three categories of internet service: user-to-user services, search services, and pornography services. These regulated services are required to take proportionate steps to keep all users safe from illegal harms and protect children from content that is legal but harmful to children including suicide/self-harm content and pornography. Unlike the VSPs regime, the OSA regulates providers who provide services to a significant number of UK users, for which the UK is a target market, or which are capable of being used in the UK by individuals and present a material risk of significant harm to individuals in the UK, regardless of where in the world the service is based (section 4).
35. The general purpose of the OSA is set out in section 1: making the use of regulated internet services safer for individuals in the United Kingdom. The duties imposed on providers by the OSA seek to secure (among other things) that regulated services are safe by design and designed and operated in such a way that a higher standard of protection is provided for children than for adults, users' rights to freedom of expression and privacy are protected, and transparency and accountability are provided in relation to those services.

The Online Safety Act 2023 – all regulated user-to-user and search services

36. The OSA requires regulated user-to-user services and regulated search services to carry out risk assessments in relation to illegal content and content harmful to children, and to comply with safety duties which, speaking very broadly, require them to take proportionate steps to mitigate those harms. (See, for user-to-user services: section 9 (risk assessment – illegal content), section 10 (safety duty – illegal content); section 11 (risk assessment – children), section 12 (safety duty – children); for search services section 26 (risk assessment – illegal content), section 27 (safety duty – illegal content); section 28 (risk assessment – children), section 29 (safety duty – children).)
37. The scope of the harms covered is broad. For the purposes of the illegal harms duties well over 100 offences are “priority” offences, covering terrorism, child exploitation and abuse, threats, abuse, hate and harassment, suicide, drugs and psychoactive substances, firearms and other weapons, illegal immigration, human trafficking, adult sexual exploitation, extreme pornography, intimate image abuse, proceeds of crime, fraud and financial services offences, foreign interference, animal welfare and the inchoate offences associated with each of these (Section 59 and Schedules 5, 6 and 7 OSA). Other criminal offences could give rise to “non-priority” offences. The duties on providers to protect users are greater for priority offences than for non-priority offences.
38. For the purposes of the protection of children duties, there are three types of content. “Primary priority content” is defined in section 61 of the OSA and relates to pornography, suicide, self-injury, and eating disorder or behaviours associated with an eating disorder. “Priority content” is defined in section 62 of the OSA and relates to abuse and hate, bullying, violence, harmful substances and dangerous stunts and challenges. Other content harmful to children is known as non-designated content harmful to children. The duties on providers to protect children vary depending which category of content is concerned.
39. The OSA does not give Ofcom any powers to regulate in relation to the amount of time children spend online. Functionalities which tend to increase the amount of time spent online are relevant to the extent they tend to increase exposure to harm.

The Online Safety Act 2023 – pornography providers

40. Providers of online services that publish or display pornography must take steps to ensure children cannot normally access this content (sections 79 to 81 OSA).

The Online Safety Act 2023 – categorised user-to-user and search services

41. There are additional duties for providers of certain kinds of regulated user-to-user and search services, known as “categorised services”. These relate to user empowerment

(section 15), content of democratic importance, news publisher content, journalistic content (sections 17 to 19), fraudulent advertising (sections 38 to 40), compliance with the provider's own terms and conditions of service (sections 71 and 72), and transparency (section 77).

42. Finally, other than where it is fraudulent, paid-for advertising is not caught by the OSA unless it is user-generated content.

The Online Safety Act 2023 – media literacy

43. The OSA also clarified and added specificity to Ofcom's media literacy duties with effect from 10 January 2024. The duties now require Ofcom to take such steps, and enter into such arrangements, as we consider most likely to be effective in heightening the public's awareness and understanding of ways in which they can protect themselves and others when using regulated services, in particular by helping them to—

- a) understand the nature and impact of harmful content and the harmful ways in which regulated services may be used, especially content and activity disproportionately affecting particular groups, including women and girls;
- b) reduce their and others' exposure to harmful content and to the use of regulated services in harmful ways, especially content and activity disproportionately affecting particular groups, including women and girls;
- c) use or apply—
 - i. features included in a regulated service, including features mentioned in section 15(2) of the Online Safety Act 2023, and
 - ii. tools or apps, including tools such as browser extensions, so as to mitigate the harms mentioned in paragraph b;
- d) establish the reliability, accuracy and authenticity of content;
- e) understand the nature and impact of disinformation and misinformation, and reduce their and others' exposure to it; and
- f) understand how their personal information may be protected.

44. Ofcom must also take such steps, and enter into such arrangements, as we consider most likely to encourage the development and use of technologies and systems for supporting users of regulated services to protect themselves and others, including technologies and systems which provide further context to users about content they encounter; help users to identify, and provide further context about, content of democratic importance present on regulated user-to-user services; and signpost users to resources, tools or information raising awareness about how to use regulated services so as to mitigate relevant harms.

The Online Safety Act 2023 – provisions relevant to crisis response

45. Section 175 of the OSA creates a power for the Secretary of State to give a direction to Ofcom if the Secretary of State has reasonable grounds for believing that circumstances exist that present a threat to the health or safety of the public, or to national security.
46. There are two possible kinds of section 175 direction. The first is a direction requiring Ofcom, in exercising our media literacy functions, to give priority for a specified period to specified objectives designed to address the threat.
47. The second is a direction requiring Ofcom to give a 'public statement' notice to specific regulated service providers or to regulated service providers generally, requiring them to publish a statement, by a date specified in the notice, about steps the provider is taking in response to the threat.
48. Ofcom may also require a provider of a regulated service to provide Ofcom with such information as we may require for the purpose of responding to that threat.

Ofcom's work on online safety regulation – user to user and search services

49. In this section I briefly summarise the work Ofcom has been doing to implement the OSA. The documents I mention run to thousands of pages, so on behalf of Ofcom I have exhibited them only where Ofcom's view is that they are sufficiently relevant to be helpful to the inquiry.

Illegal content

50. Shortly after the OSA received Royal assent, on 9 November 2023, Ofcom consulted on our first suite of regulatory products required to bring the new regime into effect, i.e.
- a. Illegal harms Register of Risks,
 - b. Illegal harms Risk Assessment Guidance including Risk Profiles,
 - c. Illegal content Codes of Practice for user-to-user and search services,
 - d. Record keeping and review guidance,
 - e. Enforcement Guidance,
 - f. Illegal content judgments guidance, and
 - g. Guidance on content communicated 'publicly' and 'privately' under the OSA.
51. On 16 December 2024, having considered responses, Ofcom published our final decisions. This included our final illegal harms Risk Assessment Guidance (KD/16 - INQ000588880) the publication of which triggered the beginning of a three month period for regulated service providers to carry out their first illegal content risk assessment. The illegal content Codes of Practice came into force on 17 March 2025 (KD/17 - INQ000615289) and (KD/18 - INQ000615290).

52. Meanwhile, Ofcom has been carrying out a significant programme of work to prepare for compliance with the OSA, including making regulated providers aware of their obligations under the OSA, helping them understand what they have to do and establishing regulatory relationships with those we consider a priority.
53. On 9 April 2025, Ofcom announced the opening of our first enforcement case under the OSA, which relates to the provider of an online suicide discussion forum. We have opened a number of other investigations since.

Protection of children

54. The second phase of work was on protecting children against harmful content. Our consultation was published on 8 May 2024 and covered:
- a. Children's Register of Risks,
 - b. Children's Risk Assessment Guidance including Risk Profiles,
 - c. Protection of children Codes of Practice for user-to-user and search services,
 - d. Guidance on content harmful to children,
 - e. Children's access assessments guidance, and
 - f. Guidance on highly effective age assurance.
55. Having considered responses to the consultation, Ofcom published its final decision on the children's access assessment guidance on 16 January 2025, which triggered a three-month period for providers to carry out their children's access assessments.
56. On 24 April 2025, again having considered responses to the consultation, Ofcom published our final decisions. This included our final children's Risk Assessment Guidance (KD/19 - INQ000615291) the publication of which triggered the beginning of a three month period for regulated service providers to carry out their first children's risk assessment. We expect that the protection of children Codes of Practice will come into force on 25 July 2025 (KD/20 - INQ000615292) and (KD/21 - INQ000615293).

Pornography providers

57. Ofcom consulted on 5 December 2023 on our proposals about the steps that Part 5 services (i.e. pornography providers) should take to ensure that children are not normally able to encounter pornographic content, together with our draft Part 5 Guidance.
58. On 16 January 2025, we published our final decisions on these documents (KD/22 - INQ000615294) and (KD/23 - INQ000615295).

Technology notices

59. Under section 121 of the OSA, there is a specific power for Ofcom in certain circumstances to issue notices to providers requiring them to use technologies proactively to detect terrorism or child sexual exploitation and abuse content.
60. On 16 December 2024 Ofcom published a consultation on our proposals for:
- a) minimum standards of accuracy for these content identification technologies, and
 - b) guidance to providers on how we would exercise our powers to issue technology notices to providers, once we are able to do so.
61. The consultation closed on 10 March 2025 and we are considering the responses.

Violence against women and girls

62. Ofcom consulted on 25 February 2025 on proposals for statutory guidance to providers on content and activity that disproportionately affects women and girls. The consultation closed on 23 May 2025 and we are considering the responses.

Consultation on additional safety measures

63. On 30 June 2025, Ofcom consulted on a package of additional proposals for recommendations of measures to keep users safe online I have exhibited the main consultation document (KD/23A – INQ000648913) and our proposed Codes for user-to-user services for illegal harms (KD/23B - INQ000648914] and protection of children (KD/23C - INQ000648915). (The full consultation, which is available on our website, also includes a number of other Annexes.) Our proposals include a crisis response measure, which I describe in more detail in paragraphs 95 to 98 of this statement. The consultation will close on 20 October 2025.

Duties for 'categorised' providers

64. On 25 March 2024, Ofcom published our advice to the Secretary of State for DSIT on the thresholds for providers to be 'categorised' under the OSA. If a provider is categorised, extra duties apply to it under the OSA. The Online Safety Act 2023 (Category 1, Category 2A and Category 2B Threshold Conditions) Regulations 2025 (SI 2025/226) came into force on 27 February 2025.
65. Ofcom aims to consult in the first quarter of 2026 on our proposals for the regulatory documents which are needed in relation to the duties on categorised providers.

Ofcom's work on media literacy

66. The Communications Act 2003 establishes a duty on Ofcom to promote media literacy. As a result, media literacy has been a key area of Ofcom's work since its inception. The Online Safety Act 2023 ('the OSA') clarified and added specificity to our media literacy duties in relation to online media. Alongside the overall duty to promote media literacy, these duties include:

- a. Building awareness of how people can protect themselves online. We must also focus on groups disproportionately affected by harm (including women and girls), and build understanding of dis and misinformation, helping people to reduce their and others' exposure to it. We must also heighten the public's awareness of how their personal information may be protected.
- b. Encouraging the development and use of technologies and systems so users may protect themselves online. This includes technologies and systems which help provide further context to users about content they encounter, including content of democratic importance.
- c. Publishing a media literacy strategy and including a media literacy statement in our annual report. We are also required to produce a statement recommending ways in which others, including providers of regulated services, might develop, pursue and evaluate activities or initiatives relevant to media literacy in relation to regulated services.

67. In October 2024 we published 'A Positive Vision for Media Literacy', Ofcom's first three-year media literacy strategy, setting out how we will fulfil our duties, in relation to both traditional and online media (KD/24 - INQ000615296). We set out three central elements of our work: 'Research, Evidence and Evaluation', 'Engaging Platforms' and 'People and Partnerships'.

68. The rationale for each element is as follows: Research, Evidence and Evaluation builds on our heritage of research and evidence gathering about the daily realities of adults and children, as well as our well-received evaluation resources. Engaging Platforms focuses on online platforms and services, alongside broadcasters, as they are a primary conduit for communications and media consumption. They have a significant role to play in encouraging media literacy for their audiences. People and Partnerships, because media literacy is about people, and impact is best achieved through local trusted partners, who are experts in delivery. We have said that media literacy is everyone's business, and our strategy emphasises the importance of collaboration and convening a wide variety of stakeholders.

69. In terms of the work we have carried out over the period of inquiry, between 2015 and 2019 we began taking a wider policy lens relating to our media literacy duties, focusing in particular on the online environment. We started to develop a focus on evaluation of the media literacy sector in order to encourage a “what works” approach with media literacy stakeholders. We convened a major conference at the British Library in July 2019 that marked the start of our renewed policy focus.
70. During the period of the pandemic 2020-2022, we further developed our planning for a number of policy areas including a focus on online platform engagement and work with grassroots communities, which we set out in our Approach to online media literacy in 2021 (KD/25 - INQ000615297). Specifically in relation to children, our activities during the pandemic were (a) our website resources about Covid-19 and how to talk to children (see paragraph 87); and (b) our bespoke research projects that explored the views and experiences of children online, (see paragraphs 106 to 110). In June 2019, we created the Making Sense of Media Advisory Panel, comprising experts on media literacy and industry representatives. We met the panel periodically throughout this period to discuss our media literacy work (KD/25A to KD/25N - INQ000649914, INQ000649915, INQ000649919, INQ000649920, INQ000649921, INQ000649922, INQ000649923, INQ000649924, INQ000649925, INQ000649927, INQ000649928, INQ000649929, INQ000649930, INQ000649931).
71. Since 2022, we have delivered a range of activity in addition to our research programme. Our Annual Plans in 2023 and 2024 (KD/26 - INQ000615298 and KD/27 - INQ000615299) provide further details of our work, and some of the core areas are below. They outline the way that our approach is to be a catalyst/convenor for media literacy, working with platforms and local delivery organisations to effect change, and amplifying “what works” wherever possible via our emphasis on evaluation:

Convening and outreach

- Expansion of our Network to over 600 members and providing a regular Bulletin of updates about our own and others’ work.
- Refresh of our Advisory Panel of experts on media literacy issues, along with a range of expert working groups offering input and feedback about our work
- Major London conferences in 2022, 2023 and 2024, as well as annual events in the nations during the same period.

Platform engagement

- Publication of Best Practice Principles to encourage online platforms to consider media literacy design in their services – Pinterest, Roblox, The Lego Group, and Google Search, have pledged to adopt the principles.

Evaluation materials

- Publication and provision of training about our Evaluation Toolkit, designed to help smaller organisations develop robust evaluations of their projects using a Theory of Change approach.
- Publication of an Outcomes Bank of a range of key measures of media literacy

Media literacy intervention support

- Commissioned 13 organisations to deliver media literacy interventions across the UK, amplifying their lessons learned and evaluations.
- Commissioned 3 training courses for teachers, social care workers and mental health professionals that are supporting children or vulnerable adults.
- Commissioned the Good Things Foundation to add media literacy into their 'Learn my Way' offer for digitally excluded people.
- Commission geographically-based programmes in Glasgow, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Birmingham.
- Development of a programme – Untold Stories – for older people in Scotland and children and young people in London and Manchester on local news production and how to counter mis/disinformation.

Section 2: Harms and trends

72. Ofcom is an evidence-based regulator and so market research about the habits and attitudes of UK consumers and citizens is an important part of our work. We work with independent market research agencies to conduct research among consumers of all communications services and have a number of longitudinal and research programmes to understand the media and online habits of children and young people, as follows:

- a. The Ofcom's Children and Parents: Media Use and attitudes tracker survey has been running for over 20 years and covers a range of issues, including take-up and use of different types of online platforms and services, and children's attitudes, experiences, and beliefs about an array of media. The survey also asks parents a number of questions about their children's media use and attitudes. We talk directly to 8-17 year olds, and ask questions of parents about their 3-7 year olds.
- b. The Ofcom's Children's Media Lives research is a longitudinal research project. It follows, as far as possible, the same group of 21 children aged 8 to 17, conducting annual interviews about their media habits and attitudes. We began this research in 2014 as a way of providing a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys. In 2020,

Ofcom commissioned an additional wave (KD/28 - INQ000560788), to get an insight into the media lives of children during the Covid-19 pandemic and the months spent in lockdown.

- c. Ofcom established a new Online Experiences Tracker in 2021, having previously established a Potential Online Harms Survey in 2019, and a VSP usage and experience of harms survey in 2020 (KD/29 - INQ000615301). The new Online Experiences Tracker was established to gain a deeper understanding of internet users' attitudes towards and use of the internet, and their experiences of potential harms online. While this survey is primarily aimed at adults, there is a c.500 sample of 13-17-year-olds, from which we can get an indication of the potential harms children experience online.

73. Below, I have set out some of the key findings of our relevant research for the three time periods the Inquiry requests: (a) 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2019; (b) 1 January 2020 to 28 June 2022 ('during the pandemic'); and (c) 29 June 2022 to date. As with all research, there may be a lag between the carrying out of the fieldwork on which the report was based, and the publication of our research.

74. Time spent online:

- a. In the period 2015-2018, our research (KD/30 - INQ000615302) shows that children were spending more time online, and less time watching TV – watching content on video-sharing platforms like YouTube, gaming or using other online platforms. Between 2016 and 2017, there was an increase in use of YouTube. From 2017 to 2018, the estimated time spent watching television on a TV set (whether broadcast live or on-demand) in a typical week decreased by about one hour for 3-4s, 8-11s and 12-15s. The same year, time spent online increased among 3-4 year-olds (by 1 hour) and time spent gaming had risen among 12-15s (by 1.5 hours). For the first time, 8-11s joined 12-15s in spending more time on the internet than watching TV on a TV set.
- b. The time children spent online increased considerably among children in the period 1 January 2020-28 June 2022 compared to before the pandemic. (See KD/31 - **INQ000560772**). Children's use of video-sharing platforms (VSPs) was nearly universal. A majority said they were using VSPs more during the pandemic than before, and 97% of 5-15s watching content on a VSP in 2020. Parents also found it harder to control their children's screen time during the Covid-19 pandemic. Up to half of parents of children aged 5-15 said they had to relax some rules about what their child did online during 2020, and fewer parents overall than in 2019 felt their child had a good balance.

- c) Ofcom research (KD/32 - INQ000615304) suggests that high levels of time being spent online has continued past the pandemic period. In 2023 a third of 8-17s who go online believe their screentime is too high, rising to 38% for those aged 13-17. Half of parents of children aged 13-17 say they find it hard to control their child's screentime.

75. Children's access to technology:

- a) Between 2015 and 2019, Ofcom research (KD/33 - INQ000615305) found a 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of 5-15s who own a smartphone (from 35% in 2015, to 45% in 2019). In this period there was also an increase in those who use a tablet, a mobile, a games console or a smart TV to go online.
- b) In the period of the pandemic, virtually all children aged 5-15 years old were going online (see KD/31 - INQ000560772). Laptops, tablets and mobiles were the most common devices for going online in 2020, used by seven in ten of these children. However, one in five children who had been home schooling did not have access to an appropriate device for their online home-learning needs all of the time.
- c) Since 29 June 2022, Ofcom research indicates that children are first accessing technology at an increasingly young age. In 2023 we see an increased presence of 5-7s online (KD/32 - INQ000615304), furthermore in 2024 we saw an increase in 3-5s using social media (KD/34 - INQ000615306). Additionally, this period saw use of smartphones overtaking use of tablets to go online among 5-15-year-olds.

76. What activities children carry out (see KD/28 - INQ000560788, KD/30 - INQ000615302, KD/32 - INQ000615304 and KD/33 - INQ000615305):

- a) In the period 2015-2019, children were diversifying their online activities. There was an increase between these years in 5-15s who play games online (45% in 2015 and 59% in 2019). 2019 saw an increase in the proportion of 12-15s who use social media to support causes and organisations by sharing or commenting on posts (18% in 2019 vs. 12% in 2018).
- b) During the pandemic, activities online centred around socialising, whether that be check-ins or gaming with friends. Our Children's Media Lives qualitative research, conducted in May-July 2020 (KD/28 - INQ000560788), indicated that in the absence of face-to-face socialisation during lockdown, children developed new routines and behaviours to socialise online, including regular check-ins or gaming as a way to catch-up with friends, and most were regularly 'multi-screening' (using multiple devices simultaneously, for example

to talk to friends either while gaming or using social media). In addition to socialising, during the pandemic children often posted their own content, some for financial gain or popularity. Over half of 5-15s said they posted or shared content on VSPs during 2020, with 39% of 5-7s and 75% of 12-15s doing this (KD/35 - INQ000560780). Making and posting videos was one of the online creative activities that children were most likely to do in 2020. Our Children's Media Lives study during this period found children were livestreaming their own videos on websites like Discord or Twitch with the intention of making money, and another participant was broadcasting her personal dramas and feuds online for views and attention (KD/35 - INQ000560780).

- c) In the period since 29 June 2022, our research has found that children are moving increasingly towards passive consumption of online content, rather than actively posting on social media. In 2024, three in ten (29%) social media users aged 8-17 were 'active' (meaning they shared, commented and/or posted things on social media). The remaining 70% were passive users, and among that group 41% mainly used social media to 'like' posts and follow accounts, and 29% only read or watched content. This trend was matched with comments from some participants in Children's Media Lives (KD/32 - INQ000615304) during this period expressing increased caution about what they shared online, with social interaction increasingly confined to chat apps and gaming. Children in the study were particularly reluctant to share content they had created themselves with larger circles of people but found ways to share content more selectively. For example, they preferred to share posts temporarily, with smaller circles or they reshared other people's posts as a way of sending signals to other people (KD/36 - INQ000560776). Another key activity children are carrying out in this period is consuming hyper-stimulating and nonsensical content online, known as 'brain rot' (KD/37 - INQ000615309). Additionally, this period saw the introduction into the mainstream of Generative AI, which subsequently has shown to be being increasingly used by children. Between 2023 and 2024 we have seen an increase in children aged 8-17 using AI tools, from 46% to 51%. The most common reasons for children saying they use AI are for learning and school purposes (KD/34 - INQ000615306).

77. What services children use (see KD/28 - INQ000560788, KD/30 - INQ000615302, KD/31 - **INQ000560772** KD/32 - INQ000615304 and KD/33 - INQ000615305):

- a) In the period 2015 and 2019, children increasingly used a variety of services. There is a significant change in what 12-15s consider their 'main' social media/messaging app, with Facebook declining in favour of Instagram and Snapchat. In 2019, WhatsApp gained popularity, as did newer platforms such as TikTok and Twitch. TikTok was used by 13% of 12- to 15-year olds – up from 8% in 2018 – while Twitch was used by 5%. YouTube however remained dominant in this period. Our Children's Media Lives study during this period suggests that there was a growing desire among children for personalised services and content. YouTube and Netflix viewing gave children in the study greater control – not just over what they watched, but when they watched it. Children also reported these services feeling more personalised; children could more easily navigate to programmes and content they like, that are aimed at them, and content was specifically tailored to their interests (KD/38 - INQ000574242).
- b) During the pandemic, VSP use increased and TikTok exploded in popularity. Almost half of 5-15s used TikTok in 2020, and use of VSPs became nearly universal among children (KD/31 - **INQ000560772** Just over half of 5-15s used social media sites or apps, rising to 87% of 12-15s. The range of sites and apps used remained diverse; around a third of 5-15s used Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. Two-thirds of 5-15s used messaging and chat sites and apps– increasing to 91% among the older children (12-15s). Among these, two-thirds of the 8-15 year-olds also said they had used messaging and chat sites and apps more often in 2020 than before the pandemic period. WhatsApp was clearly the preferred messaging and chat platform, with 78% of 12-15s and 53% of 8-11s using it. Smaller numbers used other messaging and chat platforms: a quarter used Facebook Messenger, and around one in ten used other services like Skype, Discord and HouseParty.
- c) In the period since 29 June 2022, YouTube has remained the most-used site or app across all ages of children (3-17). Among children overall, use of the other apps and sites about which we ask is largely unchanged since 2023. The five most-used apps are YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. YouTube is by far the most used for younger children, and use of the other four apps increase as children reach their teenage years.

78. Exposure of children to the Harms:

- a) In the period between 2015 and 2019, Ofcom research (KD/29 - INQ000615301) suggests that a considerable proportion of 12-15s who go online have been exposed to potentially harmful content. In early 2019, we found that 4 in 5 (79%) 12-15-year-old internet users claimed to have had at least one potentially harmful experience online in the past year: 71% relating to interaction with other people/content, 39% relating to data privacy and 26% relating to hacking/security. 12-15 year olds are most likely to have experienced offensive language (39%), spam emails (33%) and unwelcome friend requests (28%), and 23% have experienced or seen bullying. Evidence in our Children's Media Use and Attitudes study indicates children were seeing more hateful online content than they previously had. (KD/31 - **INQ000560772** In 2019 half of 12-15s said they have seen something hateful about a particular group of people in the last year – up from a third in 2016. A third of 12-15s said they have seen something worrying or nasty online, making them almost twice as likely as 8-11s (18%) to see this type of content (KD/33 - INQ000615305).
- b) During the pandemic, our research found there were similar levels of exposure to different types of harm as seen in the previous period. In October/November 2021, four in five 12-15s claimed to have been exposed to potentially harmful content online within the previous 12 months (KD/29 - INQ000615301). We therefore do not have evidence to suggest that the pandemic necessarily caused any acceleration, exacerbation or increase in children's exposure to online harms. However, as set out in paragraph 74(b) there is evidence of an increase in time spent online, and from our more recent work we know that the greater the time spent on services by a child, the higher the risk of encountering any harmful content that may be present on that service (see paragraphs 15.10 to 15.12 of KD/39 – INQ INQ000615307).
- c) In the period 29 June 2022 to the present day, our research shows that the majority of children aged 13-17 are regularly being exposed to potentially harmful content online (KD/39 - INQ000615307). In January 2025, six in ten (59%) teenage children aged 13-17 reported encountering potentially harmful content online over a four-week period. One in five (21%) 13-17-year-olds reported that over the four-week period prior to the research, they had seen or experienced 'hateful, offensive or discriminatory content that targets a group or person based on specific characteristics like race, religion, disability,

sexuality or gender identity. Seven per cent of 13-17-year-olds reported seeing or experiencing 'persistent bullying online', 5% recalled seeing content encouraging or assisting serious self-harm, and 4% recalled seeing content encouraging or assisting suicide within the four-weeks prior to the research.

79. Impact on children due to time spent online and/or exposure to the Harms:

- a) According to our research, time spent online can have both positive and negative effects on children's mental wellbeing. In Ofcom research conducted in 2018, the positives centre around feeling closer to their friends, and the negatives are around feeling a pressure to look/be a certain way online in fear of backlash. Children aged 12-15 who use social media or messaging sites/apps were aware of some of the social pressures and negative associations with this use, with 78% feeling a pressure to look popular and 90% saying that people are mean to each other on social media, at least 'sometimes'. On the positive side, 91% said using social media made them feel happy at least sometimes, and the same proportion said it helps them feel closer to their friends (KD/30 - INQ000615302).
- b) In the period between 2020 and 28 June 2022, Ofcom research indicated that in 2021 89% of 12-15 year olds felt pressure to look popular online (KD/31 - **INQ000560772**). However, overall, more children were likely to feel positive than negative about their online use saying it was overall good for their mental health. A vast majority (8 in 10) in this period used online apps specifically to support their wellbeing (KD/40 - INQ000615308).
- c) In the period from 29 June 2022 to the present day, children continue to use online apps specifically to support their health and wellbeing (7 in 10 reported doing this in 2023) (KD/32 - INQ000615304). However qualitative evidence from our research suggests that there may be times when a child's use of health/wellbeing-related content online may not be helpful to them. One participant reported watching 'self-improvement' content, for example telling viewers 'how to grow taller' or 'how to get a defined jaw' (KD/32 - INQ000615304). Another participant told researchers that she had engaged with accounts on social media platforms that showed eating disorder content which was tagged as 'recovery' but which, in her opinion, was not about recovery (KD/41 **See KD/37-INQ000615309**). Qualitative evidence from late 2024 also indicates that children are noticing negative impacts of the content they are watching, with several Children's Media Lives participants expressing negative feelings around spending excessive time online and engaging with nonsensical or hyper-stimulating content, although others were less reflective

or worried. Those that were concerned reported feeling dizzy, grumpy, or unable to focus on longer-form content. (KD/37 - INQ000615309).

80. In 2022, Ofcom commissioned a study into risk factors that may lead children to harm online. This research (KD/42 - INQ000615310) indicated that children's lives are increasingly enmeshed in the online world, with a difficulty disengaging from online platforms. Many children are spending a significant amount of time online, consuming large amounts of content. The severity of online harm varies, from minor emotional upset to psychological and physical harm. Routes to harm include: isolated exposure, cumulative passive exposure and cumulative active engagement. Risk factors appeared to overlap on the journey to harm and included circumstances and characteristics of the child (e.g. pre-existing vulnerabilities or the media literacy of the parents), design features and functionalities of platforms as well as content that children were exposed to online.
81. Our Registers of Risks will inform service providers' risk assessments under the OSA. We concluded in our children's Register of Risks (KD/39 - INQ000615307 paras 1.24 to 1.30) that the impacts of viewing harmful content are wide-ranging and can be severe – at worst, harmful content can contribute to loss of life. Children along with other groups with protected characteristics are also more likely to be affected by illegal content, as explained in our illegal harms Register of Risks (KD/43 - INQ000588877, page 6). Our work to prepare the Registers of Risk focused on harm as defined in the OSA (i.e. physical and psychological harm), but we noted evidence of impacts on education from child sexual exploitation and abuse, intimate image abuse, trafficking and drugs (KD/43 - INQ000588877 paragraphs 2.49, 6.29, 6.32, 9.24, 9.40, 13.12); as well as from hate and bullying, violent content and body stigma content (KD/39 - INQ000615307 para 5.31, 6.25-6.26, 6.55, 7.25, p.231). We noted evidence of negative impacts on social development from child sexual exploitation and abuse, (KD/43 - INQ000588877 para 2.49; 5.29) misogynistic content, pornography, and hate and abuse (KD/39 - INQ000615307 2.27-2.32, 5.34, 5.39-5.40).
82. Ofcom published a general research paper on how harms are identified online on 14 September 2023 (KD/44 - INQ000615312), which explains that harms may typically be identified by proactive technology such as AI-based 'classifiers' identifying potentially violative items, or reports by end-users or third-party organisations who have seen the content. (Other forms of proactive technology not discussed in the report are user behaviour based, content matching and simple keyword searches.) Although the model we set out in the report is common, a range of models exist, which we say more about in the section of KD/42 - INQ000615310 entitled 'Key ways in which some services differ from our stylised account', starting on page 20.

83. Our illegal content Codes of Practice contain a series of recommendations on complaints handling (section D of our Codes). They recommend the use of a particular form of content detection technology, perceptual hash matching, to detect known child sexual abuse material and URLs (measures ICU C9 and C10 for user-to-user services and measure ICS C7 for search services).
84. Many different factors affect the spread of harm online. They include for example the type of harm, user behaviour, the type of platform and its functionalities including whether or not it uses recommender systems and how easy it is to share information onward from the same or other platforms. We carried out a specific case study on an item of misinformation, explained further at paragraph 86 below, and more generally our Registers of Risk set out the risks for each type of harm set out in the OSA.

Section 3: Misinformation/Disinformation

85. In the initial months of the pandemic, Ofcom's principal concern around misinformation and disinformation online was the vandalism including arson targeting 5G infrastructure and harassment of telecoms engineers, stemming from conspiracy theories incorrectly linking 5G to the spread of the virus. We published content to debunk this misinformation on our website and social media channels (KD/45 - INQ000615313).
86. In the first months of the pandemic, colleagues in Ofcom's Strategy and Policy team also undertook a piece of internal horizon scanning work to understand work that online platforms had undertaken in response to the pandemic, and consumer and industry trends. This work resulted in a Board workshop on how mis- and disinformation spreads online (KD/46 - INQ000616980).
87. In response to the pandemic, in 2020, we also decided to publish links to external fact-checking services alongside other materials to help adults including parents in deciding what to trust. Along with information about fact-checkers, we also provided links to charities offering support to children and parents, official sources of medical information, and information about initiatives from platforms (KD/47 - INQ000615315).
88. We did not uncover in our research any particular mis/disinformation that was targeting or engaging children. We carried out research in July 2024 regarding the impact of misinformation and disinformation, and ways to mitigate exposure to such content (KD/48 - INQ000615314).

A future crisis involving mis- or disinformation

89. It is difficult to provide a view on what would happen in the event of mis- or disinformation in a future pandemic or other civil emergency since it would depend on what the emergency was. However, the recent violence in the aftermath of the attack in

Southport provides another example of a case in which content online was of concern in the context of a civil emergency. The duties under the OSA were not yet in force at the time, but our Chief Executive Dame Melanie Dawes wrote to the Secretary of State on 22 October 2024 (KD/49 - INQ000615316) setting out the steps we took, which as set out in that letter included a public statement (KD/49A – INQ000587901) followed by publication of an open letter to regulated services (KD49/B – INQ000587902).

90. In any crisis situation it is likely that the most immediate regulatory response would be based on Ofcom's existing relationships with regulated providers and the scope of our regulatory responsibilities as determined by the OSA.
91. The existing regulatory regime does not explicitly identify mis- or disinformation as harms that need to be addressed by providers of regulated online services. However, such content may be indirectly caught if it (1) also falls within the definition of the types of content which are regulated. Or (2) if a categorised provider chooses to include provisions in its terms of service dealing with mis- or disinformation.
92. First, mis- or disinformation is not necessarily illegal content or content harmful to children as defined in the OSA. However, any content (including mis- or disinformation) is illegal content if it amounts to fraud, illegal threats or abuse, a hate offence, foreign interference or the false communications offence. Content may be priority content harmful to children if it is abusive and targets certain characteristics, if it incites hate because of certain characteristics, if it promotes or provides instructions for an act of serious violence against a person, or encourages a person to ingest, inject, inhale or in any other way self-administer a physically harmful substance. For example, mis- or disinformation which incites hatred due to disability would be priority content harmful to children.
93. The risk assessment duties in the OSA mean that all regulated providers will need to have considered the risk of such illegal content on their services. Providers of services likely to be accessed by children will need to have considered the risk of priority content harmful to children on their services.
94. They will also need to comply with the relevant safety duties. Our existing Codes of Practice for regulated user-to-user and search services recommend that they resource their moderation functions having regard to the propensity for external events to lead to a significant increase in demand for moderation on the service (see recommendations ICU C6 in KD/17 (INQ000615289) and PCU C6 in KD/17 (INQ000615289) (user-to-user services), ICS C5 in KD/18 (INQ000615290) and PCS C6 in KD/18 (INQ000615290) (search services). Our protection of children Code for user-to-user services recommends that potential priority content harmful to children is excluded from or given a lower degree

of prominence in children's content feeds (see recommendation PCU E2 in KD/20 - INQ000615292).

95. As mentioned in paragraph 63, we are consulting on a further proposed recommendation relating to some providers having and applying crisis response protocols. (See KD/23A – INQ000648913 pages 259 to 276). The inquiry asked Ofcom to comment specifically on how this would take account of a future emergency in the event that children are required to spend more time online, for example because of a move online or lockdown which limits in person social interaction. As explained at paragraph 39, our powers relate to regulated types of content, rather than to time spent online per se, but time spent online may be relevant if it increases exposure to harmful content. We have not carried out specific research or published background papers for the purposes of this work, but drew on our existing body of research described in this witness statement. Our proposed measure would not necessarily apply in relation to a pandemic situation. It would depend on whether the situation led to significant increases in content of concern.
96. Specifically, the proposed measure relating to crisis response would, if implemented, recommend that providers in scope of the measure prepare and apply an internal crisis response protocol and conduct and record a post-crisis analysis. The providers in scope would be those providing user-to-user services which are either large and at medium risk, or any size and at high risk, of the harms specified in the measure in relation to illegal content or content harmful to children. The measure would also recommend that providers of large services which are in scope of the measure implement a dedicated communication channel by which law enforcement agencies can contact them on crisis related matters, during a crisis. The proposed measure includes our proposed definition of 'crisis' for the purpose of the measure, which is 'an extraordinary situation in which there is a serious threat to public safety in the United Kingdom either as a result of a significant increase in relevant illegal content or relevant content harmful to children on the service or which has caused or is highly likely to cause a significant increase in relevant illegal content or relevant content harmful to children on the service'.
97. 'Relevant illegal content' is defined for the purpose of the proposed measure as content associated with the priority illegal harms of terrorism, threats, abuse and harassment (including hate), and the foreign interference offence. 'Relevant content harmful to children' is defined as the priority content harmful to children related to hate and abuse, and violent content.
98. As with all measures recommended by Ofcom in codes of practice, providers could choose to take alternative measures to comply with the safety duty but would still need to secure that users were appropriately protected (see section 49 OSA).

99. Second, section 72 OSA provides that providers of category 1 services must operate the service using proportionate systems and processes designed to ensure that if the terms of service indicate (in whatever words) that the presence of a particular kind of regulated user-generated content is prohibited on the service, the provider takes down such content. This section is not yet in force, but assuming it is brought into force then a provider which prohibits mis- and disinformation in its terms of service will risk regulatory action if it does not apply those provisions consistently.
100. The Secretary of State could also give a direction to Ofcom under section 175 of the OSA, as set out in paragraph 45.
101. If appropriate, we could also seek advice from the Online Information Advisory Committee, a body we have, as required, recently established under Section 152 of the Online Safety Act to provide advice related to misinformation and disinformation. It is a matter for the committee to determine its plan of work, which is subject to approval by the Ofcom Board, and its primary responsibility is to advise Ofcom.

Section 4: Decision making and impact on children

102. As explained, Ofcom has had media literacy duties since 2003, as set out in section 11 of the Communications Act 2003.
103. It should be noted that with the exception of our Covid Tracker, where our results were published on a weekly basis, much of the research we carry out has lead times which mean it is less feasible to use it as an immediate barometer for online harms.
104. Our media literacy activity during the pandemic focused in particular on providing an evidence base, and monitored what children and adults were doing and how they were feeling, especially in relation to their online activity.
105. DCMS published a media literacy strategy in August 2021. We published our Approach to Media Literacy in December 2021, which set out a number of new initiatives (KD/25 - INQ000615297).
106. In the early months of the pandemic, we decided to commission a number of one-off extra pieces of research to understand how children and adults were experiencing the pandemic, in particular in relation to news and information consumption and the extent to which people were coming across misinformation. We commissioned an ongoing tracker of 2,000 adults and young people (16+) on a weekly basis, reducing this to every month as the pandemic continued. We also commissioned an additional wave of our Children's Media Lives research (KD/28 - INQ000560788), to capture children's experience of lockdown. This was published in August 2020, and covered the period from May to July 2020.

107. As part of our 2020 News Consumption in the UK study (KD/50 - INQ000615317), we asked around 500 12-15-year-olds about their use of, and attitudes towards, news content across different platforms during the Covid-19 outbreak between 1 and 20 April 2020. This period corresponds approximately with weeks three and four of the first UK 'lockdown'.
108. Between 24 November and 7 December 2020, we asked another 500 12-15 year-olds about their use of and attitudes to news content as the Covid-19 pandemic continued (KD/51 - INQ000615318). In November/December 2020 93% of 12-15s said they accessed news and information about Covid-19 in the last week, a small decrease from April 2020 (96%). On average, 12-15s were using fewer sources for news about Covid-19 (3.7) than in April (4.5). 56% of 12-15s said they got news and information about the pandemic from their family (vs 67% in April), 27% used BBC TV (vs 49% in April) and 17% used ITV (vs 30% in April). Only 'school or teacher' saw increased usage from April (17%) to November/December (37%). Just over half of 12-15s (54%) agreed that there was too much in the news about Covid-19, up from 43% in April, and 62% agreed that they found it hard to know what was true and what was false about the pandemic, up from 52% in April.
109. In November/December 2020 we asked 12-15s whether they relied on the media and official sources or people they know (such as friends or family), including on social media, for news about the pandemic. 42% said they relied completely/mainly on media or official sources, 26% relied equally on media and official sources, and people they know, and 31% relied completely/mainly on people they knew.
110. We carried out a number of online events in order to socialise and discuss our research findings with a range of relevant stakeholders.
111. In summary, our view is that the impact of the pandemic upon children's online lives was mixed: there was variability in access to technology resulting in digital divides for some children trying to do schoolwork at home; being online provided a core social lifeline for children unable to see friends; and it created challenges given the sheer amount of time that children were online, not least with parents and other family members needing to work and unable to spend time with them during the working day.

Other steps we took which may be of interest to the inquiry

112. In response to the pandemic, we worked with telecoms companies to make sure they had the right policies in place to deal with vulnerable consumers, for example dealing with debt and disconnection, and removing or increasing data caps and allowances.
113. We also supported the Government's work with telecoms providers on zero-rating (where the data used by certain websites or apps is not counted towards a customer's

overall data allowance). The initial priority was to zero-rate access to NHS websites in March 2020, and then the focus moved onto abuse charities in June. Some providers made unilateral moves on educational websites – for example, BT partnered with BBC Bitesize.

114. We issued five notes to broadcasters in the context of the pandemic (KD/52a-e - INQ000615320, INQ000615321, INQ000422743, INQ000615323, INQ000615324) and brought a number of broadcast content standards enforcement cases in relation to pandemic-related programming.

A future crisis – enabling children to use technology safely and protecting them from harm

115. As set out above, it is difficult to provide a view on what should be done differently to protect children in the event of a future pandemic or other civil emergency since it would depend on what the emergency was.
116. The regulatory picture is, of course, very different now. When the pandemic began there was no online safety regulation or regulator. Now there is. This new regime, operating in a business as usual way, should improve safety outcomes for everyone, including children. Providers will need to have considered the risks of all the types of harm the OSA regulates. The full suite of recommendations in our Codes should make services safer.
117. Particularly in relation to crisis circumstances, our risk assessment guidance both for illegal harms and for protection of children says that providers should carry out retrospective analysis or a 'lessons learned' of incidents of harm in order to learn from them. Our recommendations on moderation and on recommender systems, described at paragraph 94 above, may be of particular relevance where a crisis is associated with harmful content online.
118. If our proposals on crisis response protocols (see paragraphs 95 to 98 above) are included in our Codes of Practice following consultation, we would expect them to have an impact on provider responses in relation to crises meeting the definition in those proposals. Specifically, we consider that the proposed measures, when implemented alongside the existing measures relevant to crisis response, would ensure that service providers can act promptly and effectively in reducing the spread of relevant illegal content and relevant content harmful to children on their services and, where relevant, mitigate and manage the risk that the service will be used for the commission or facilitation of a priority offence as defined by the OSA.
119. In addition, we have established and will continue to build on strong relationships with many regulated providers, including regular contact. In the event of a future crisis,

this will enable us to engage informally and rapidly to understand and influence their responses. We would expect to monitor what was happening closely.

120. Finally, I would note that, in my opinion, technology does much good as well. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, access to technology and online services was crucial to enabling many activities that otherwise would not have been possible including access to education and communication with family and friends.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Personal Data

Signed

Dated: 17 July 2025