

Witness Name: Vicki Shotbolt
Ref: M08-PZONE-001
Exhibits: VS/01 - VS/16
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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Vicki Shotbolt on behalf of Parent Zone

I, Vicki Shotbolt, will say as follows: -

Our organisation

1. Parent Zone sits at the heart of modern family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they embrace the online world.
2. We conduct research projects with parents and guardians to inform policy and practice, working with governments, industry and not-for-profit organisations.
3. Our education and support programmes reach millions of families every year around the world. We have extensive experience of representing parents and guardians at the highest levels including as members of the United Nations International Telecommunication Unit, We Protect Global Alliance and the UK Government's Media Literacy Taskforce.
4. In outline terms, Parent Zone is split into three units: 'Programmes', 'Studio' and 'central'. Our Programmes unit comprises research and development, policy and practice (delivery of resources and events).
5. The Parent Zone Studio is responsible for developing resources used within our individual programmes, including content, design and production. The central unit provides finance, management and digital functions which support the whole organisation

Parent Zone's work during the pandemic

6. Although some of the work we do at Parent Zone has changed as a result of the pandemic, our core mission – improving outcomes for children through effective parenting – has remained the same.

7. The pandemic saw an acceleration in the adoption of digital in services and in the home – online education, video calls, flexible working, greater volume of screen time, increased use of subscription services, and a growing digital divide. Recognition of this fact has meant that some of our work necessarily changed, for example reinforcing messaging and advice around screen use, or the shift from physical delivery to online delivery for certain programmes.

8. In short, COVID impacted families in many varied ways and that continues to develop post-pandemic, so we must recognise and acknowledge that in our work, but our core principles and mission remain the same.

9. During COVID Parent Zone conducted research with parents to understand how families had navigated the lockdowns and how they experienced the impact on their children's education. These two pieces of research were our 'Left Behind in Lockdown', **VS/01 - [INQ000642992]** and 'Digital Poverty' **VS/02 - [INQ000643005]** reports.

10. Parent Zone applied to the UK 'Business-led innovation in response to global disruption fund' to deliver online parenting surgeries and brief professionals on adapting to changing parenting needs – we were not successful in our application for funding and therefore were unable to develop this proposal further. We also coordinated a series of calls between organisations in our sector at the start of the pandemic to share understanding, coordinate responses and collate available online resources for families into a shared directory. The aim of this was to avoid duplication and focus resources to meet rapidly changing needs.

11. We also produced articles and guides for parents and professionals on addressing certain issues related to the pandemic. For example, an article on how to celebrate special occasions in lockdown, as well as a guide to 'video chatting' for parents. As a result of restrictions, our delivery and outputs pivoted to online – our Be Internet Legends programme with Google is one such example.

Online harms during the pandemic

12. Parents we worked with expressed concern about the impact that COVID was having on their children. Common issues raised included not being able to see friends, a fear of returning to school, or a growing anxiety surrounding health, family members and broader world affairs.

Children may also have been exposed to certain increased risks or harms online due to extended time online during lockdown.

13. Likewise, children (and parents) may have had less access to professional support than they previously (i.e. pre-pandemic) did. Certain risks and harms may have been underreported because of this. A lack of early intervention may have increased the scale of risk and harms or increased their impact. For more detail on issues and concerns, please see paragraphs 17 - 19.

Identification of harms

14. Broadly speaking, harms are identified by research and analysis of data. Data (e.g. of a specific harmful outcome, like lower levels of mental wellbeing) can lead researchers to look further into the causes of said harm. Alternatively, investigation of a specific area (e.g. online gaming) can reveal the existence of harms. Harms can 'spread online' through the interaction of online users (i.e. 'user-to-user') or through the way that a user interacts with the design of a platform or service (i.e. 'dark nudge' techniques that compel someone to make a purchase).

15. A widely referenced model for categorising online harms is the 4Cs model These are:

- Content, including images, text, video, audio, and the platforms where this content is hosted
- Contact, which refers to the interactions between individuals online
- Conduct, which relates to the behaviour of individuals online – which can include the sharing of content and personal information, or the harassment of others
- Commerce, which relates to the financial and/or commercial nature of the online world

16. At a high level, these mechanisms for the identification and spread of harm remain the same over both prior, during and since the pandemic.

Our research relating to children's online activity

17. We know that many younger children play online games. In 2017, 64% of 6-10-year-olds were regular gamers, **VS/03 - [INQ000642995]**. We have no independent data around how much time children spend online, although we do know that 87% of parents of 3-4 year-olds say their child goes online at home or elsewhere, **VS/04 - [INQ000642996]**. Activities include interacting with screenless technologies like smart speakers and internet-connected toys **VS/04 - [INQ000642996]**; gaming **VS/03 - [INQ000642995]**; use of streaming platforms to watch content **VS/05 - [INQ000642997]**; making purchases **VS/06 - [INQ000642998]**; communication with others **VS/04 - [INQ000642996]**; homework, research and learning **VS/05 - [INQ000642997]**; creating and uploading material and self-expression **VS/07 - [INQ000642999]**.

18. Categories of services children use are: social media services, messaging services, smart devices (e.g. Alexa), mobile apps, games, TV and streaming (including live-streaming), shopping and financial services (e.g. app stores and Crypto exchanges) **VS/06 - [INQ000642998]**, educational sites **VS/02 - [INQ000643005]**, and search engines **VS/05 - [INQ000642997]**. Some of our research indicates that time spent on connected devices may be a contributing factor to deteriorating mental health during the period 1 January 2020 to 28 June 2022 **VS/01 - [INQ000642992]**. Restricting time online in response to concerns about excessive screen time may also limit access to beneficial activities like educational content, skill development, and social interaction **VS/08 - [INQ000643000]**. This could be considered a harm in and of itself.

19. 'Exposure to harm' is a very broad term because harms themselves are enormously varied. Unsupervised or excessive spending and losing money (e.g. through scams) is a financial harm **VS/09 - [INQ000643001]**. Being online (e.g. spending time gaming) can also result in harms like bullying **VS/06 - [INQ000642998]**. Spending time on social media platforms may also result in harms like harassment and trolling **VS/07 - [INQ000642999]**, oversharing of personal information **VS/11 - [INQ000643002]**, or viewing harmful content like pornography or misinformation **VS/07 - [INQ000642999]**. Using AI applications can also be harmful, for example 'nudification' apps **VS/06 - [INQ000642998]**. Our research referenced above extends across, collectively, the years prior to, during, and after the pandemic.

Government, industry and investigating authorities recognition of harms

20. We maintained some contact with DCMS, DfE and HO across all three relevant periods. This was primarily structured around the UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) of which Parent Zone CEO Vicki Shotbolt was an executive member and the UKCIS Digital Resilience Working Group of which she was co-chair. Contact during this period indicates that these departments were aware of the changing landscape and that the prevalence of certain harms may be changing with it.

21. Parent Zone has no view on these harms being understood by the Scottish Government specifically. Parent Zone has no view on these harms being understood by the Welsh Government specifically. Parent Zone has no view on these harms being understood by the Northern Ireland Executive specifically.

22. Parent Zone worked in partnership with NCA-CEOP from 2015 to provide the 'Parent Info' service. Through this partnership, NCA-CEOP had a good understanding of many of the online risks and harms that families and children can face.

23. Parent Zone has no view on these harms being understood by the police specifically.

24. The social media companies and online platforms that we ran partnership projects with – including Google, YouTube, Meta, and TikTok – had a general understanding of certain online risks and harms. Our programmes and resources which stemmed from partnership with these companies were typically centered on areas like improving media literacy or online safety skills and behaviours. Our Be Internet Legends programme with Google, for example, recognised the changing children's lived experiences (and need to help address harms) by pivoting to online delivery during the pandemic.

Trends in the data relating to children's use of the internet

25. Relating to general wellbeing, some parents report that time spent online positively correlates with a deterioration in their child's mental health **VS/06 - [INQ000642998]** data of this sort is not enough to draw causal trends, particularly of a robust sort and our experience working with parents paints a much more mixed picture.

26. We are increasingly concerned about child financial harms. Our initial research on skin gambling in 2019 **VS/10 - [INQ000647312]** and recent polling on child financial harms in 2024 **VS/06 - [INQ000642998]** hasn't seen any reduction in harm and an increase has been observed through our work with professionals and families as access becomes more mainstream. We do not however have enough data to

accurately plot trends relating to specific harms longitudinally **VS/09 - [INQ000643001]** Our research in this space is ongoing.

Parent Zone's research into the trends

27. We have summarised our relevant research into the trends in the data relating to children's use of the internet below:

28. 'A problem hiding in plain sight' - **VS/09 - [INQ000643001]** summary: this research involves surveys and focus groups with young people aged 11-18, exploring children's online financial activities as well as the financial harms they may be experiencing, including scams and gambling.

29. 'Early years digital media literacy review' - **VS/04 - [INQ000642996]** summary: this research focused on digital media literacy for children at the 'early years' (0-5) and notes that whilst research exists on the effects of digital media on child development and wellbeing, it often focuses on potential negative impacts. The report aims to improve understanding on how digital media literacy can help children and families navigate both opportunities and challenges.

30. 'Everyday Digital Evaluation Report' - **VS/05 - [INQ000642997]** summary: This report evaluates Parent Zone's Everyday Digital programme, which provided media literacy resources and training to professionals and then parents to help them support children online. While this report is focused on the programme's effectiveness, it draws on parent feedback which reveals concerns about online safety, children accessing harmful content, and the difficulty parents face in communicating about risks.

31. 'PZ Digital Poverty Report' - **VS/02 - [INQ000643005]** summary: this research involved phone interviews with parents of children aged 17 and under across Great Britain. It examines issues related to digital poverty and its impact on families and children, including whether COVID amplified issues relating to digital poverty and exclusion.

32. 'Building online resilience' - **VS/11 - [INQ000643002]** summary: This research paper, commissioned by Parent Zone and Virgin Media, explores how young people aged 14-17 can be supported to build resilience online. It looks at 'traditional' online risk categories (content, contact, conduct). It concludes that nurturing resilience is vital for constructive online engagement and managing risks.

33. 'Ordinary magic for the digital age' - **VS/07 - [INQ000642999]** summary: This paper focuses on defining and promoting digital resilience in children. It puts forward

the argument that relying on technical tools like filters is insufficient for safeguarding and that limited exposure to risk is necessary for children to learn to make judgments. It highlights pervasive risks like bullying or harassment as a cause for concern and discusses resilience as a dynamic process that helps children deal with online experiences.

34. 'Parenting in the digital age' - **VS/12** - **[INQ000643006]** summary: This research conducted by Parent Zone in 2017 involves a survey of 1000 children aged 12-16. The research touches upon various issues like privacy and screen time and parental responses.

35. 'Skin gambling' - **VS/10** - **[INQ000647312]** summary: This research focuses specifically on the issue of skin gambling, a form of online gambling that is undertaken by, and affects, children and young people. It involves a survey of 1001 UK children aged 13-18, asking about their engagement with skin gambling. It raises concerns about independent platforms facilitating skin gambling for under-18s, and notes research linking loot boxes to problem gambling.

36. 'The perfect generation' - **VS/13** - **[INQ000643004]** summary: This research examines the relationship between being online and young people's mental health. It includes a literature review and findings from surveys and focus groups with young people and schools. It explores whether the internet is undermining mental health, noting that while young people have nuanced views, some highlight pressures and potential downsides. It discusses the complex relationship between time online/social media use and mental health difficulties.

37. 'The rip-off games' - **VS/03** - **[INQ000642995]** summary: This report focuses on children's engagement with in-game monetisation. Based on a survey of children aged 10-16 alongside focus groups, the report expresses concern about children being targeted by coercive, dark nudge techniques like loot boxes, and links this to the adolescent brain's susceptibility to risk-taking. It directly addresses a specific financial issue within gaming affecting children.

38. 'Short changed and out of time' - **VS/06** - **[INQ000642998]** summary: This report investigates 'child financial harms' online from the perspective of parents of children aged 7-18, using polling and focus groups. It explicitly details parents' worries related to child financial harms, including loss of money, mental health impact, illegal activity, and identity theft. It also highlights the emerging financial risks associated with AI applications.

39. 'Online safety tools – a false hope?' - **VS/08** - [INQ000643000] summary: This paper discusses Parent Zone's concerns regarding the effectiveness and implications of relying heavily on technological tools (like parental controls) to mitigate online harms. While the tools are intended to address harms, the paper focuses on the challenges of using tools like their complexity or volume.

40. 'Your Digital Family - The Listening Project' - **VS/14** - [INQ000643003] summary: This research gathered perspectives from family organisations and parents on various online topics. It highlights parental worries related to age gating/verification, privacy, anonymity, and online content like adverts, misinformation, and scams. It also discusses concerns about data security and safety, including identity theft and platforms using or selling children's data.

Impact of the pandemic on children's use of the internet

41. Our research found a very mixed picture. Families with resources – financial and emotional – fared reasonably well whilst others were facing very significant struggles. The closure of schools put enormous pressure on families disrupting routines, limiting access to support and fundamentally changing the way education is delivered, **VS/01** - [INQ000642992].

42. Our research found that “one in three parents (32%) said their child’s mental health and wellbeing had worsened since lockdown started on 23 March 2020”, **VS/01** - [INQ000642992] with children between the ages of 12 and 15 suffering the most according to parents. Notably, 48% of parents felt the decline in mental health and wellbeing was as a result of too much time on connected devices. In attempting to continue education it is possible we overlooked the impact of long periods of time working in isolation in front of a screen. We do not have more granular data on exposure to specific online harms.

Mitigations taken by relevant government departments and social media organisations

43. Google moving the Be Internet Legends partnership programme online was a recognition of continual need for the programme but the changing context of the pandemic. In this sense, recognising and attempting to fulfil a need may be seen as a mitigation of harm.

44. Pre-COVID, The UK government recognised the importance of digital resilience, seen in their establishment of the UKCIS Digital Resilience Working Group. This was not continued during Covid. We did not receive funding for our proposal to the UKRI

COVID response fund. Albeit this is still a welcome move from the government to support innovation and to mitigate harm.

45. We are not aware of any government departments taking additional practical steps to support parents during Covid in order to mitigate harms to children. All of the support we provided during this time was funded through corporate partnerships including with Google and Meta and our own reserves.

Parent Zone's work with partner organisations to support children during the pandemic

46. Parent Zone provided support through the delivery of virtual training experiences to over 1 million children during the pandemic. We provided support to parents through online parent sessions and professionals via training events.

47. In addition, we tailored some of our online advice and support content to the ongoing pandemic. Some of our most popular site articles, for example, covered topics like celebrating special occasions during lockdown, looking after families' mental health when 'stuck indoors', and tips for starting difficult COVID-related conversations with children.

48. Parent Zone CEO is co-chair of the UK Council for Internet Safety Digital Resilience Working Group that developed and published the Digital Resilience Framework – a 'dynamic personality asset' that is developed through online activities in safe, managed environments. This role was taken on during the pandemic and this group allowed us to continue important conversations around children's online safety.

Government decision making

49. The pandemic had a significant impact on education at all key stages. Lessons became virtual with parents taking the role of educator, particularly for younger children. The closure of schools put enormous pressure on families disrupting routines, limiting access to support and fundamentally changing the way education is delivered. The pandemic acted as a catalyst in the digitisation of education with EdTech being adopted at speed and Government supporting initiatives like the Oak Academy to develop free, digital teaching resources.

50. However, continuation of education is not the same as maintaining the quality or replicating the benefits of school. Children missed out on vital play opportunities in the early years which in turn impacted school readiness and speech development. Parents were acutely aware of these challenges. The above measures around education show that, to an extent, children were considered in relation to harms resulting from a lack of connectivity and education.

51. However the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide – many families with multiple children only had one connected device, resulting in children having to take turns doing their schoolwork. We heard from schools that didn't make the transition to digital learning that their reasoning behind this was that it would further the divide, promoting inequality among pupils who weren't able to get online and stay connected. This has led to a massive disparity in the quality of education that children have received during the pandemic, and indicates that the circumstances of some children were not adequately considered, or, if they were, were not acted upon.

52. Our interaction with government departments was limited to working with the DfE to support the development of the internet safety elements of the curriculum. We worked closely with the CEOP command of the National Crime Agency to deliver Parent Info and as previously detailed with Google and Meta.

Lasting impact of the pandemic

53. Unsurprisingly, use of the internet, social media and other online tools and resources increased during the pandemic.

54. There were significant increases in children and young people using digital devices, including for longer periods of time, **VS/15 - [INQ000560788]**. Our research showed that being online and using digital provided many benefits to families: things like remaining connected with family members in different 'bubbles', socialising and playing with friends, education and learning and remote working – allowing some parents to spend more time at home and with their children. 77% of parents reported to us that connected tech had helped their family navigate periods of restrictions, and 85% of these parents suggested that this tech had helped them educate and spend time with their children, **VS/01 - [INQ000642992]**.

55. However, our research also found that nearly half (48%) of parents suggested too much time on connected devices had negatively impacted their child's wellbeing, **VS/16 - [INQ000642994]**.

56. Concerns about social media and internet access for children and young people have grown since the pandemic with a growing number of parents campaigning for 'screen free childhood' and an increase in the age of digital consent from 13 to 16. Whilst there isn't any direct causal evidence, we believe that one of the reasons we are hearing this from parents is that they found it close to impossible to reassert digital boundaries after the pandemic. Post-COVID we continue ongoing consultations with parents and stakeholders as part of our general work.

57. Longer term, the pivot to digital learning remains with limited evidence as to its efficacy. In the UK we have a growing 'screen free childhood' movement – a clear push back to the rush to digitalisation of education. Other countries are reversing the trend including Sweden which has decided to 'de-digitalize' education completely. The pandemic will have a long lasting impact on children and young people's education if it results in a move to a form of education that is inadequately researched and poorly supported.

58. There was also a profound and noticeable gap in support for parents during the pandemic and that continues post-pandemic. Unless remedied there is every likelihood that we will continue to reach for limits established at a state level which in turn risks diminishing the opportunities technology can bring (and must bring) if we are to reap the rewards of a technically forward looking nation.

Recommendations in the event of a future pandemic

59. We would suggest that the current statutory framework and regulatory regime would not be adequate to do so.

60. Currently we see many examples of online harm that children face even with the introduction of new regulation like the Online Safety Act. If harm is not 'sufficiently mitigated' now then it is unlikely that in the event of a pandemic this would improve.

61. Our interactions with parents and professionals showed that a lack of a national parenting strategy and effective parenting support was felt acutely during the last pandemic. As no real change has occurred in this sense we can expect, in the event of a future pandemic, this lack of support to similarly have a detrimental effect.

62. In order for children to be able to engage safely with online technology in the event of a future pandemic and/or other civil emergency, there should be a plan to support parents if schools close and families need to rely on technology to continue education at home.

63. This should include appropriate emergency safeguarding measures so that children have access to external support if they need it. It should consider practical measures including the distribution of appropriately setup devices with pre-set parental controls and, where appropriate and necessary, free access to broadband. Finally, measures and interventions should consider how to provide support for parents who are unfamiliar with technology and therefore unable to support their children to use it safely and confidently.

64. Higher levels of media literacy and digital skills would allow children to navigate increased time spent online (in the event of another pandemic) in a way that would help minimise exposure to certain risks and harms, and would also allow individuals to maximise the benefits of certain pieces of tech (e.g. supplied devices for home use). These skills cannot be developed overnight however, so interventions cannot be ‘knee-jerk’ and responsive to a pandemic, they should be recognised as vital preventative programmes that build societal resilience to such events.

65. Parents should also be able to access balanced, evidenced information around the impact of digital technology on their children – in the UK we have a growing ‘screen free childhood’ movement which we believe to be partly driven by the lack of a recovery plan to help parents return to a more normal level of technology use for children after the pandemic. Without parents being suitably informed and aware of the positive applications of tech and digital – and how to achieve sensible levels of technology use – it is unlikely that children will be able to use such tech in a way that is both safe and healthy.

66. Finally, a national parenting strategy alongside funding for infrastructure and systems that support parenting would be one way to improve outcomes for children (and to help minimise the impact of harm) in the event of a future pandemic.

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.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 3rd July 2025