Briefing for Members Debate on Encouraging Cyber-Resilience among Young People

Key points:

- The internet is a place of **opportunities and risks** for children and young people;

- Vulnerable young people may be particularly likely **to lack opportunities to develop the skills** to manage online experiences;

- We need to **encourage open conversations** about the internet and talk to young people about their concerns – not just what adults worry about;

- **Schools are one vehicle** for supporting children around their internet behaviour – this is not only about lessons, but also how other school structures effectively respond to internet behaviour;

- **Professionals report a lack of confidence** around handling internet behaviour, and need more guidance and consistency of structures.

We welcome this important debate on Safer Internet Day and congratulate Gillian Martin MSP for securing it and her wider work to raise awareness of these issues.

The internet as a place of opportunity and risk

Practitioner and public debate about the internet often divides between talking about the internet as a place of **opportunity or risk for young people: in reality it is both.** Findings from EU Kids Online suggested that while children and young people who did more online were (sometimes) more likely to encounter online risks, those who spent less time online reported being more upset by those experiences and having fewer skills to cope.

Carnegie UK Trust's *A digital world for all?* noted that while young people are often assumed to be 'digital natives', actually **young people can lack basic digital skills**. Children and young people who are vulnerable, particularly those at points of transition (e.g. in care, in secure accommodation) are at particular risk of digital exclusion, and a lack of opportunity to develop digital skills can mean a lack of opportunity to learn how to deal appropriately with the online behaviours of others **and to build resilience**. It is vital that we engage in discussion around the internet that considers building young people's online skills and resilience as well as online risks.

Encouraging young people to talk about their on and offline world

Barnardo's Scotland supports Safer Internet Day (SID) which falls today, in its aims to **encourage conversations between children and young people**, parents and professionals about the internet. The UK Safer Internet Centre reported that 68% of 8-17 year olds who heard of SID had a conversation with someone in their family about using the internet safely as a result. 46% of teachers who were involved said this led to disclosures about potential safeguarding issues online, with one stating: **"This creates an environment where the conversation is okay, which is vital".**

Public debate about children online can often focus on 'stranger danger', ideas that the dangers of the internet lie in adult perpetrators and child victims, and sexual risks. Yet children and Young People report concerns around dealing with peer behaviour, such as risks that arise in their everyday chat with people from school (EU Kids Online); analysis of recorded crime statistics suggested that cyber-enabled forms of particular sexual crimes were **more likely to be carried out by 'acquaintances' than strangers;** and those carrying out cyber-enabled forms of these crimes tended to be younger, with a median age of 18.

Children and young people also report a wider range of problematic situations on the internet – for example concerns around violent as well as sexual content. EU Kids Online also noted that the **risks that children encounter are not necessarily the same as the harm they experience** – while relatively few children report being bullied online, a higher proportion reported being upset by this than by seeing sexual content. Our conversations with young people must take place in the terms of their experiences to engage effectively.

High quality, age appropriate school input around health and wellbeing is one vehicle for supporting conversations around online as well as offline experiences. Arenas such as relationships, sexual health and parenthood education and mental health education must deal with the **full range of young people's worlds,** ie online and offline. But this is not just about lessons. We are aware for example of situations where schools have struggled to deal with young people carrying out abuse against others in the same class or school. Having a great lesson about healthy online relationships must be in the context of, for example, **school policies that support professionals to effectively respond to problematic behaviour**.

Supporting professionals to engage confidently in relation to the internet

Our 2016 report with CYCJ *Over the internet, under the radar* found that **professionals lacked confidence in handling internet behaviour,** and identified a need for more guidance for professionals and more opportunities to share good practice. We were therefore pleased to see action 11 in the National Action Plan on Internet Safety for Children and Young People, published April 2017: to develop guidance for professionals, including on self-produced sexual images. **We would welcome information on when this guidance is likely to be ready, as we believe this is a matter of urgency.**

We identified particular issues for professionals where children do not fit neatly into boxes for 'perpetrator' or 'victim' – for example where a child sends an unsolicited image to another child, causing them distress, but did this because they themselves

were bullied into it. Professionals expressed concerns about a **lack of clarity and consistency about the interface between child protection and criminal justice systems**. This clarity is necessary to ensure that professionals can confidently and robustly respond to problematic behaviour, without inappropriately criminalising young people.

We would highlight the need for **professionals to provide trauma informed responses** to young people's experiences in online as well as offline settings, as identified in the [Transforming Trauma](#) framework. We still have much to develop in our understanding about the particular impacts of online abuse, for example particular fears a young person may have about disclosing that indecent images have been shared of them because this may mean that parents or professionals would see those images. **Professionals must be upskilled to respond effectively to disclosures** about, and to consider issues around, online as well as offline experiences.

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