



Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety

Digital Inclusion Consultation Team
Department for Communities and Local Government
E3/G10
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

12th January, 2009.

Response to the Consultation on Delivering the Digital Inclusion Action Plan

CHIS welcomes the opportunity to comment on 'Delivering Digital Inclusion: An Action Plan for Consultation.'

There is little doubt that changes and advances in technology are opening up important new opportunities for individuals and for society as a whole. However, we also agree with the consultation document where it identifies potentially increasing levels of exclusion for those who do not use the internet and related technologies. This manifests itself in terms of a potentially higher cost of living, a lack of access to a broad range of services and discounts, and a potential loss of employment opportunities.

Given our work with children already experiencing poverty and exclusion from the mainstream it is of paramount importance to us that we seek to prevent a further divide opening up for children and young people on the basis of technology i.e. between those who have access to the internet and those who do not. We believe that such a divide would have a damaging impact on the children and families subject to this digital exclusion which is unacceptable. We need no convincing as to the potential advantages of most of the new technologies and that is why we strongly supported the DCSF Universal Home Access initiative to ensure that every child of school age within England has ready and appropriate internet access at home. It is essential that the work outlined in this Action Plan is thoroughly linked into the work of the DCSF initiative and the safety commitments made under that programme of work, as well as the wider safety work of the new UK Council.

As the consultation document notes, one million children currently have no access to the internet in their homes. That number is far too high. A key issue, however, as the consultation document also rightly identifies at several points, is that while convenient, ready access to physical devices which enable a person to connect to the internet are a necessary condition to enable internet access, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure that people in fact engage with the internet, much less that their engagement produces beneficial, desirable outcomes. In Chapter 3 the consultation document helpfully outlines a series of barriers to successful engagement with the technology: the lack of motivation to learn, nervousness in relation to new technology, which is often seen as expensive and easily breakable, and the lack of properly user focused sources of support.

Whilst we strongly support the development and delivery of the digital inclusion action plan (as we did the Universal Home Access initiative) we do think that greater thought should be given within the digital inclusion plan and within any further consultations on the same topic to the particular safety needs of children who are currently excluded from the new technologies. Given the correlation between digital exclusion and other forms of disadvantage, many of these children who are to be reached through this programme are likely to lack one or more of the social supports and safety nets that would otherwise help to protect them from risk.

We would like to see an approach which specifically addresses the needs of vulnerable children, for example children with learning difficulties, children in care, and children who are experiencing problems at home or at school. The consultation rightly acknowledges that technology can have particular value for hard to reach groups, for example helping children who are outside mainstream school by providing more innovative and tailored learning solutions. We would agree with this and also that new technologies can be enormously enabling for people with other disabilities such as deaf and/or disabled children. However, the consultation document also needs to acknowledge that children outside the mainstream or those with disabilities are often more vulnerable to online risks – may be more susceptible to adults who attempt to target them and are likely to have an even greater need for safeguards and for support. We would like to see greater focus on this issue within the consultation and a reiteration of an intention to sustain and monitor the safety commitments made under the DCSF scheme cited above. Any roll out of the technology must continue to include safety as a key component including an individual assessment of related needs for any new beneficiary under the scheme, and follow up work where necessary.

The consultation document appears to recognise the role of education in challenging the barriers to exclusion and indeed we see it is as integral to initiatives of this nature. For us this is particularly true when seeking to engage some of the more disadvantaged or marginalised groups. However, in considering education we do think that greater emphasis could be given not only to increasing technical knowledge and confidence in using the devices but also in developing more effective and more sophisticated media literacy programmes for adults and for children. This involves improving the depth of understanding and engagement with the media and its possibilities as a whole. Professor Sonia Livingstone's research into children and young people's activities online identified a digital divide not only in terms of using the devices themselves but also in terms of different levels of experience. If this is not addressed there is a very real danger that more socially excluded children will

have a significantly narrower and poorer internet experience even when they do find the means to go online.

In addition whilst we appreciate the clear and reasoned economic arguments for digital inclusion we consider that the plan tends to focus on the benefits to the economy in a very instrumental way and should also acknowledge the potentially broader social and developmental opportunities provided by the internet. This links to the issues relating to media literacy in so far as, given the right kinds of education (rather than simply technical advice) on how to explore and benefit from the media, the internet has the potential to help children explore, experiment and develop as individuals. This can have emotional and social benefits for children which are not solely related to academic or economic goals.

Given the particular vulnerabilities that may be faced by excluded groups we consider there to be a crucial role for technical safeguards to be integrated into the roll out of new technologies. It is not in our view sufficient to rely on mainstream education programmes to provide this safety knowledge. For this reason, within the Universal Home Access initiative we were very keen to emphasise the importance of ensuring that adequate technical measures that provide a sound safety and security framework were put in place by default, prior to any new equipment or connectivity service being supplied to a beneficiary under the scheme. This was not in any sense meant to be as an alternative to, much less instead of, personal tuition on appropriate and safe usage of the internet delivered directly to the child. Equally, it was not meant to be as an alternative to engaging directly with the parents or carers of any child benefiting under the scheme so as to help them learn how they can help their child make the best and safest use of the technology.

Technical safeguards such as preinstalled and preconfigured safety software on all new computers can supplement the necessary education and awareness programmes that are made available to children and parents. Indeed they can provide the initial starting point for a discussion about online safety.

Technical measures can never wholly replace education and awareness measures. However, we are aware that over the many years we have been trying to tackle this problem there is still, as yet, little or no concrete evidence to show the effectiveness of various approaches to or types of education and awareness initiatives. For this reason we believe, in relation to the digital inclusion initiative foreshadowed in the consultation document, it is extremely important that we actively monitor the effectiveness of education and awareness measures to ensure that they are appropriate in ambition and scope and that they are successful. For example, simply putting up a web site and handing out leaflets without any follow through seems to us to be a long way off what is needed.

The importance of this safety dimension cannot be over stressed. We very much agree that safety message must be handled sensitively and in ways which do not cause unnecessary or undue alarm. However, if parents and children are to get the most out of the internet they need to feel that they understand it, can use it confidently and a key part of that must entail them knowing how to use it in ways that will not imperil their personal safety or cause them harm in other ways.

We will be pleased to enlarge on these points should you require us to do so and trust that you will find a way to engage the new UK Council on Child Internet Safety in any further work in this area.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Carr', written in a cursive style.

Secretary

85 Highbury Park
London N5 1UD
www.chis.org.uk
johnc1912@msn.com