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NEW MOBILE TRACKING SERVICE FOR CHILDREN MUST HAVE WATERTIGHT SAFEGUARDS

At a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children this afternoon the Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety (CHIS), which includes Barnardos, ChildLine, NCB, NCVCCO, NCH, NSPCC and The Children's Society, will call for a radical overhaul of the laws governing the online marketing, promotion and provision of goods and services to children. They will use the example of mobile phone tracking services to illustrate their point.

Tracking services provide people with the ability to track the whereabouts of children and others using mobile phones. The children's charities have been urging mobile phone companies to put watertight regulations in place to stop new tracking facilities getting into the wrong hands and putting youngsters in danger.

NCH's new technology advisor and CHIS spokesperson John Carr, commented as follows:

"We say the mobile phone companies are under a legal obligation to verify who will be using these tracking services, what their relationship is to the child they are tracking, and to verify that the child's parents have given their permission for the child to be tracked. The mobile phone companies reject this proposition although they say that, in practice, they will get very close to doing all of these things. We wait to see what proposals they finally bring forward, but what about the next set of companies that come along and try to market similar services? A new breed of location services based on satellites (GPS) is about to come to market and these new services need not be sold by or through the mobile phone networks at all, yet they will be even more accurate when tracking someone."

The charities are particularly worried about the difficulty of confirming the identity of people registering to use tracking services online, or who pay using cash – or using another hard-to-trace payment mechanism.

And there is a danger that, if watertight safeguards are not put in place, tracking services could, for example, inadvertently expose the location of a family fleeing domestic violence or other family breakdown situations.

CHIS also raises questions about what these services might mean for family life. If a parent is so worried about where their child might be from day-to-day they feel they need to put them on an electronic leash, maybe there are other issues that need to be addressed. It hardly speaks of trust or confidence. Alternatively, given that for the service to work properly the child must have a mobile phone that is switched on, CHIS asks why the parent can't simply ring the child and check that everything is fine? Family relationships are hardly likely to be improved by allowing people to check up on each other covertly, and that is exactly what these services do.

CHIS has today (July 7) written a letter outlining their demands for changes in the law to Lord Falconer, Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs. The letter points to other weaknesses in the existing codes governing marketing and the collection of information from children online e.g. the Direct Marketing Association's code says that children aged 11 or under may not even be asked a question, of any kind, without their parents first giving permission, yet no practical advice is offered to help companies determine what age a child actually is, or whether or not their parents have in fact given permission. CHIS acknowledges that these are difficult issues but they are not helped by ignoring them. They ought to be faced and a modern solution should be found.

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Notes to Editors

1. CHIS stands for the Children's Charities Coalition for Internet Safety. CHIS members are Barnardos, ChildLine, NCB, NCVCCO, NCH, NSPCC and The Children's Society.
2. A person can move between radio cells and in and out of range of cells several times. This information is recorded by the mobile phone network and it can be pinpointed to geographical locations. In this way the mobile networks have the power to track people's movements and whereabouts.
3. Typically in urban areas a person's location can be tracked within 30 metres and in rural areas slightly less. But with the next generation of services, accuracy will increase dramatically – to potentially within a few metres.
4. NCH runs more than 500 projects for the UK's most vulnerable children, young people and their families and in doing so, supports over 140,000 people. For further information visit www.nch.org.uk.