Dear Norman,

We are writing today as our departments publish the Online Harms White Paper, setting out proposals for a regulatory framework for online safety. We would like to thank you personally, and the rest of the Committee, for your work, contributions and advice on this issue.

Our proposals are far reaching, going well beyond the issue of young people’s health and wellbeing. This type of holistic and comprehensive response is necessary to drive up standards across the numerous harms that occur online, and we have now set out clear standards for what we expect from tech companies.

A full response to the final report of your Committee’s inquiry into the “Impact of social media and screen-use on young people’s health” will be sent shortly. In the meantime, this White Paper marks a major milestone in the Government’s work to deliver on a priority objective and addresses many of the recommendations of your Committee. We would welcome the Committee’s ongoing support for the delivery of a new regulatory framework.

Your Committee identified the need for a comprehensive, joined-up and principle based approach to address the negative effects of being online. Our White Paper delivers this in setting out proposals for establishing an overarching statutory duty of care to make clear the responsibility that companies have towards their users in taking proportionate steps to protect them. Our White Paper sets out clear expectations for companies to tackle both illegal and harmful but legal content and activity on their platforms. These will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator.

The regulator will be responsible for developing codes of practice for different harms, outlining the steps companies are to take in fulfilling their duty of care. This will include steps to ensure clear reporting and moderating mechanisms as recommended by your Committee. Reflecting the threat to national security or the physical safety of children, the government will have the power to direct the regulator in relation to codes of practice on terrorist activity or child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) online, and these codes must be signed off by the Home Secretary. Companies will be expected to take particularly robust action in relation to such harms.
We agree with the Committee that any such regulator will need sufficient power and resources to ensure that regulation is rigorously applied. The White Paper outlines a range of potential enforcement powers, from issuing fines, improvement notices and demands for more information. Given the global nature of many online services and the weak economic incentives for companies to change their behaviour, we are also considering additional powers including senior management liability and ISP blocking. In relation to your recommendation for a Digital Services Tax, the Treasury have recently consulted on their own proposals. We will continue to work closely with them regarding the funding of a future regulator and are consulting on this issue.

Your Committee rightly points to the inconsistent evidence base around the prevalence and impacts of online harms. While this does not preclude us taking action on a precautionary basis, developing a framework of transparency, trust and accountability is one of our key proposals. The regulator will have the power to require annual transparency reports from companies, alongside overseeing the fulfilment of companies’ commitments to improve the ability of independent researchers to access their data, subject to appropriate safeguards. These measures will help address the current information asymmetry between tech companies, the government and researchers. The government, meanwhile, continues to commission research on this important issue to inform its policy making - including commissioning through the Centre of Expertise on Child Abuse (CSA Centre) and UKCIS Evidence Group a literature review into adults’ experience of online harms which will be published shortly.

The White Paper also includes an ambitious package of measures, in line with your Committee’s recommendations, to promote the role of technology in tackle harms, and to empower users to manage their safety online. Raising education and awareness is critical to protecting users from harm online. The Government has already taken steps to embed digital literacy at the heart of the school curriculum, but we will go further in developing a new online media literacy strategy, through broad consultation with stakeholders. While companies are supporting a range of positive education initiatives, there is insufficient transparency about the level of investment and the effectiveness of different interventions. The new regulator will, therefore, have the power to require companies to report on their education and awareness raising activity.

We now intend to consult widely on our proposals, ahead of introducing legislation. It is amongst the Government’s highest priorities to build a society with an open and vibrant Internet, alongside a thriving digital economy, where citizens are confident that they and their families can enjoy the full benefits the Internet can bring without coming to serious harm.

We look forward to your future support, and the support of your Committee, in delivering on this vision.

Yours sincerely,
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Home Secretary