

OPEN LETTER

This letter accompanies a formal submission in response to the call for evidence for the Curriculum and Assessment Review (Department for Education, Published September 2024)

The UK Government has committed to reviewing the curriculum in England, seeking to make sure it is *‘fit for purpose and meets the needs of children to support their future life and work’*, giving them the knowledge and skills to allow them to *‘adapt and thrive in the world and workplace of the future’*.

Before we can do that in a meaningful way, we need to think carefully about what the future currently looks like following the explosion in online and digital connectivity, and what we think our children need to thrive in this environment.

There risks being a profound mismatch between those two things because insufficient thought has been given to the profound impact of the digital world on every aspect of young people’s lives and their development. Whilst change may not be easy, it is urgently needed. The time has come for us all to raise our eyes and look at this from a new, and broader, perspective. If we fail to do so, we will do nothing more than paper over the ever-widening cracks.

We have the statistics, what we need now is moral insight to drive change and reduce digital harms.

In a recent discussion, Justin Webb (Radio 4 Today) said, when talking about children’s online experiences -

“it feels like kind of an experiment doesn’t it, to see if a whole generation of children are affected by this, and how they are affected?”

“Our children are being failed and our children deserve better”

Dame Rachel de Souza (Childrens Commissioner)

In a recent interview, Baroness Beeban Kidron, who has long fought for better online protections for children, said, when talking about the harms -

“we’ve built a society where we think that’s ok”

They are affected. They are being failed. It is not ok.

There is a fundamental misalignment between the values we profess to hold dear that talk of protecting children's rights and realising their potential, and the world which we are allowing to be built around them and in which they are now immersed. Even those with voices and platforms in this area are struggling to be heard.

We are faced with a choice - we can sit back and accept the trajectory we appear to be on and allocate more and more resources to picking up the pieces, or we can try and do what we can to reclaim some power and make a positive change for this generation and generations to come.

Our children deserve to have safe, happy childhoods and to be supported in reaching their potential. They are our future police, politicians, leaders – their experiences matter and will shape them, and our society, for many years to come.

This Review is an opportunity to make improvements to the curriculum but we need something more.



We need to think bigger;



We need to act bolder;



We need to reframe conversations and reimagine our children's futures away from a world of exploitation and manipulation.

The education of our children is profoundly and inextricably linked to their life experiences and separating those things risks rendering attempts to make improvements redundant.

None of this is easy. The challenge has become almost too great to comprehend. The power imbalance has become almost too great to comprehend.

But acceptance and indifference legitimises.

We do not accept and we are not indifferent.

This is not moral signalling; it is about the real lives of real children.

Our Social Conscience

In the 18th and 19th centuries, during the British Industrial Revolution, children were used as cheap, expendable labour, working long hours in dangerous conditions.



Lewis Hine (Public Domain)

Centuries later, when we look back to that time, and the experiences of so many thousands of children, most of us feel a sense of moral outrage.

We are now going through another revolution.

The **Fourth Industrial Revolution** of the 21st century has seen rapid technological advancements such as big data and artificial intelligence. Adults and children alike are immersed in a digital world where technology is ubiquitous, connectivity embedded, and our data is being collected and used on an industrial scale.

All areas of our lives are, in some way, touched by this enormous shift and few would dispute that this new revolution presents many opportunities and benefits.



But there is a much darker side to this world.

Rarely a week goes by without a news story about the realities of this revolutionary world for our children

!	mental health crisis	!	suicide
!	self-harm	!	child pornography
!	violence	!	radicalisation
!	bullying	!	sextortion
!	abuse	!	grooming
!	racism	!	misogynism
!	extremism	!	deepfakes

It is challenging for adults to navigate these issues. It is even more challenging for children who are at the beginning of their emotional and intellectual journeys. The experiences they have now will impact the rest of their individual and collective lives, as well as the lives of all of us.

Just as we look back in horror at the reality of children's lives in the industrial revolution, we believe that in centuries to come, people will look back at the reality of our children's lives today against the backdrop of this new revolution with the same sense of moral outrage.

During the British Industrial Revolution, it was the ***shift in social conscience***, and the creation of broad social alliances, involving individuals across society including authors, charities, philanthropists, politicians and the public that led to meaningful change.

We need a shift to *our* social conscience in the context of children in this Fourth Industrial Revolution.

If we do not make that shift –

- ! Children will continue to die**
- ! Children will continue to be hurt, and will hurt others**
- ! Children will continue to be bullied, and will bully others**
- ! Children will continue to suffer poor mental health**
- ! Children will continue to suffer poor physical health**
- ! Children will continue to suffer developmental delays**
- ! Children will continue to struggle with relationships**
- ! Children will continue to be radicalised**
- ! Children will continue to be exploited**

Despite the shocking realities of this trajectory, we risk becoming increasingly desensitised to and accepting of the harms, and feel disempowered to do anything about them. At the same time, there are growing pressures and demands on mental health services and law enforcement.

If roads near a school are dangerous, our response is not simply to invest in a fleet of new ambulances and paramedics – we try to make the roads safer.

We need the same approach for our children in the digital world.

There is a wealth of experts who have contributed thoughtfully and passionately to these discussions. By referencing some of them in our submission as we have, we want to highlight the tragic apathy we seem to be afflicted with but also the unique opportunity that we now have as a society to set a new course. These rich resources need to be the fuel for change, not left to languish.

We want to:

- ⌚ Make a call for solidarity and collective action to ensure our children can thrive in the digital world.
- ⌚ Highlight the trajectory we appear to be on and what that means for our children, our society, and our future.
- ⌚ Remind ourselves that the trajectory is not set. There is an alternative.
- ⌚ Encourage a 'whole child' view where education reflects the wider realities of children's lives and is framed against the wider social, emotional, safeguarding and public health issues.
- ⌚ Support reform of the curriculum to provide children with an education that is relevant and fit for purpose in the digital era.
- ⌚ Encourage a reclaiming of power through social alliances to articulate and encourage a positive, nurturing and safe vision for our children's future.
- ⌚ Better understand the role we must all play in the manifestation of that vision.
- ⌚ Resist building a new framework around our children designed to bend to the exploitative and harmful environment without putting at least as much effort into trying to build something better.
- ⌚ Actively encourage honest conversations about the nature of the harms and the potential long-term impacts. Harmful content is not just there for children to find, it is *actively seeking them out*.
- ⌚ Appeal to us all not to become immune or indifferent to the heart-breaking stories of young people coming to harm and the pleas of the families and experts for us to do better.
- ⌚ Remove some of the burden from parents/carers/teachers who are already overwhelmed. Profound matters of child safety and wellbeing are a societal responsibility.
- ⌚ Look realistically at our expectations around legislation. Laws matter but are often reactive – waiting for people to complain (when harms are already done). Law enforcement is already overwhelmed. Illegal content is harmful, but so too is some legal content, particularly for the young and vulnerable in our society.
- ⌚ Think carefully about where we allocate resources. If we do not take steps to prevent harms, more and more money will need to be spent on enforcement and mental health provision.
- ⌚ Ensure that where expert reports are published, and recommendations are made, these are proactively and expeditiously coordinated and actioned.
- ⌚ Remind ourselves that the children of today will shape the future for us all. We have a duty to them and to ourselves.

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