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Children in Wales
Plant yng Nghymru

29th September 2014

William Powell AM
Chair Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Dear William

re : Petition P-04-630 Facebook Regulations for Looked After Children

Children in Wales is the national umbrella organisation in Wales for organisations and individuals from all disciplines and sectors working to promote the rights and well-being of children and young people. We also have a close relationship with both Voices from Care Cymru and Tros Gynnal Plant through the 'Cymru Ifanc-Young Wales' initiative which aims to have the voices of children and young people heard by Government Ministers and policy makers. From this work we know young people have told us that online safety and bullying are one of their key concerns. Indeed it is one of their six most important issues across Wales. They worry for themselves as well as for their younger brothers and sisters.

We therefore consider it as a top priority for action for the whole child population. To this end we raised our concerns back at the time of the murder of little April Jones. At that time it was to pressure the search engine companies to take on more responsibility for protecting children online. Both Welsh Government and UK Government endeavoured to put pressure on but clearly many risks still remain.

Children in Wales subsequently brought the Director of 'Wise Kids' which specialises in online safety into Wales to speak at a conference we held last year. We aim to do further work with them in Wales to upskill professionals and parents/carers as well as children.

The speed of the developments in social media is however a major challenge and young people use a new and ever changing variety of social media platforms. Indeed Facebook for some young people is regarded as rather out of date and used as a route for parents/carers to see what young people are up to and so they have moved on to other platforms to have privacy with their friends.

The issue of giving false ages, false identities etc is a challenge across social media users as a whole.

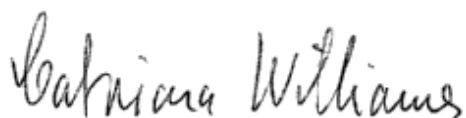
The general principle of creating a safe environment for children and young people is to regard the online world in the same way as the real world. Parental/carers knowledge, skills and parenting practices as well as the knowledge and skills of children and young people themselves are critical in creating a safe environment for children online. Great investment in public campaigns, training and PSE curriculum in schools would all contribute to a better outcome for all children and young people. Young people tell us through 'Young Wales' that what they receive in school through PSE is insufficient.

In preparing this response, with particular regard to 'looked after' children we have consulted some of our members who have some experience in online safety. The common conclusion is that children 'looked after' should not be singled out as a special case. This is particularly because they often feel stigmatised compared to their peers because of their 'looked after' status in a range of other ways. For this reason making it a statutory duty is not the answer.

However, we do agree with the petitioner that more should be done and local authorities must make sure that the children in their care have appropriate parenting in relation to online safety. There is in our view a long way to go in relation to local authorities being effective in delivering their 'corporate parenting role'. It is important for all parties, including the IRO to cover all aspects of children's well-being and this includes their emotional and physical safety as a result of online activity. It is also important that those directly looking after children and the children and young people themselves are equipped with up to date training that will inform them of the online dangers and give them the tools to avoid danger.

Online activity is here to stay and clearly has many benefits. We will continue to campaign for pressure to be put onto providers such as Google to keep children safe, however, the online world must be regarded in the same way as safety in the real world and therefore parenting skills need to be kept up to date to deal with the real online world that children live in. More information and advice needs to be given to all parents/carers and to children and young people themselves.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Catriona Williams".

Catriona Williams OBE
Chief Executive