7-point briefing
Key insights from "I've seen horrible things online: children's experiences of the online world"

1. Background
Between September 2023 and January 2024, the Children's Commissioner consulted over 250,000 children and adults on their experiences of online harms.

The Online Safety Act 2023 sets out specific content types which online platforms must protect children from. Children who participated in the consultation were still reporting many of these content types as concerns.

2. Vulnerabilities
Children who were most likely to report feeling unsafe online were:
- Girls
- SEND
- Older (13+)
- Attending state school
- Living in mental health hospitals or supported accommodation

Many older children reported feeling safer online than they do in offline spaces.

3. Harms on the face of the Act
These were the most reported concerns raised by children that fall within the remit of the Online Safety Act 2023 as harmful or illegal content:
- Child sexual abuse material
- Pornography
- Suicide, self-harm and eating disorder content
- Abusive content and bullying
- Hate content
- Racism and swear words
- Sexism

4. Other harmful content
Children also listed concerns about harms that are not referenced in the Act:
- Content promoting a harmful perception of their own bodies, such as 'beauty' filters when taking photos
- Influencers who promote unrealistic lifestyles and beauty standards
- Misinformation – this is included in the Act, but it only requires companies to follow their own terms and conditions.

5. Non-content harms
These are concerns that are based on the way that online platforms operate, rather than specific posted content:
- Algorithms and recommended content, which may produce unsuitable results that are not what the child is looking for. Algorithms may also be circumvented, e.g. by hiding harmful content within a video that looks appropriate for children
- Addictive behaviours, e.g. overuse of gaming leading to a reduction in offline activities

6. Impacts
Children expressed a range of concerns about the impact of being exposed to harmful content online, including:
- Violence against women and girls being normalised through pornography
- Fear from the prevalence of child sexual abuse material
- Feeling unsafe at school due to cyberbullying and harassment that continues both on and offline
- Poor mental health and disordered eating, linked to influencers, misogynistic content, and photo filters that change the subject's face
- Difficulty in distinguishing between real and fake information

7. Next Steps for educators
- Children have requested more education on online safety, including how to report issues and how to identify fake content.
- Respondents also noted that it's important that parents and teachers stay up to date with emerging online safety concerns to ensure information given is relevant.
- Children are accessing harmful content at younger ages and need to be informed about the dangers in an age-appropriate way.

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