



Rt Hon Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

Dear Chancellor,

A few days ago, I wrote to the Prime Minister to express my concern that the UK was sliding backwards on online safety, and that unless the Government committed to a strengthened and reworked regulatory framework, the result would be a wave of preventable harm happening on this Government's watch.

I know that you will share my view that one of the primary responsibilities of any Government is to protect children from harm. However, I am increasingly concerned that as we see a fundamental strategic recalibration in the priorities of large technology companies, there will be clear representations made to the highest levels in Downing Street and the Treasury arguing that stronger online safety regulation is incompatible with, indeed a barrier to, this Government's mission for economic growth.

With that in mind, and in light of the Technology Secretary's own admission that the Online Safety Act is 'uneven and unsatisfactory', I'm writing to you to seek assurances that the children's online safety will have unimpeachable primacy in the Treasury's approach. I also encourage you to clearly and unambiguously commit to three overarching principles that should guide the approach of your Department.

Firstly, it is vital that the Treasury explicitly and comprehensively rejects the false dichotomy that stronger online safety regulation is somehow in conflict with economic growth. That is a nonsense peddled by technology lobbyists over many years. If tech platforms are explicitly making threats not to invest in the UK, Treasury officials should reject this inappropriate influence for exactly what it is.

Many of us working in online safety were utterly dismayed by the decision of the US House Speaker, Mike Johnson, to frustrate the passage of crucial online safety legislation that had received overwhelming bipartisan support in the Senate. Many commentators, including on Fox News, put it to him that his decision has been steered by Meta's decision to break ground on a \$10 billion AI data centre in his home state. While we obviously cannot comment on the veracity of these allegations, I believe the overarching majority of parents here would be unsurprised but horrified if tech

companies were not attempting similar horse-trading here. You should reject any such approaches out of hand.

Secondly, I strongly encourage you to recognise that an ambitious, pro-online safety agenda is unashamedly not only good for society, but also good for your mission to achieve economic growth. Putting to one side the talking points of industry lobbyists, DSIT's own highly conservative economic modelling suggests that a 1.3% reduction in exposure to online harm could generate a £345 million annualised economic benefit. In turn, this suggests that a more ambitious, outcome-driven regulatory model, for example one that was capable of reducing exposure to online harm by 15%, could stand to deliver much greater annualised economic benefits, potentially in the order of almost £4 billion per year.

Thirdly, I encourage you to recognise that a stronger, reworked regulatory model is good for wider society, and indeed for the missions and priorities of this Government. The business model of large technology companies is fundamentally premised on externalising harm caused by the commercial and design decisions onto families, communities, law enforcement and our NHS. Our analysis suggests that the annualised economic cost of preventable deaths by suicide among young people aged 10 to 19, where technology plays a role, is fast approaching £0.5 billion; while England's hospitals receive over 200,000 self-harm admissions every year, putting further unacceptable strain on A&E departments and on our vital CAMHS facilities that already struggling to meet surging demand.

As a bereaved father, I will always measure the impact of online harm in the loss of my daughter – the missed birthdays, the milestones we didn't celebrate and the empty chair at the Christmas dinner table.

However, I refuse to cede the economic argument that progress on online safety is only something we can justify when it is affordable; nor blindly accept the claim that fundamental and urgent reworking of our online safety regulatory model is only something that can be achieved within the context of trade-offs around investment and growth.

I therefore strongly encourage you to send a clear and unequivocal message that your Department and this Government will reject the flawed assumption that online safety comes at an unacceptably high economic cost. The decisive and ambitious strengthening of our online safety regulatory model will be good for our economy and our society; it can contribute towards economic growth but also protect the long-term life chances and economic potential of a generation; and perhaps most crucially of all, it will be warmly endorsed by families across this country who are rightly impatient to hear that meaningful and effective change is on the way.

Yours Sincerely

Ian Russell

Chair, Molly Rose Foundation

Cc Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology
Chief Secretary to the Treasury