# Ukie response to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry on Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Online Harms)

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**Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Online Harms)**

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**Response from UK Interactive Entertainment (Ukie) to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Online Harms)**

**About Ukie**

1. Ukie is the trade body for the UK's games and interactive entertainment industry. A not-for-profit, it represents more than 480 games businesses of all sizes from start-ups to multinational developers, publishers and service companies, working across online, mobile, console, PC, esports, virtual reality and augmented reality.

2. Our industry considers the safety of our player community as paramount, and it recognises its continuing responsibilities during this time. Now more than ever protecting our players is crucial as people turn to interactive entertainment to maintain social connections, keep entertained, and look after their mental wellbeing during this period of social isolation. With over 2 billion players worldwide, it's crucial to our industry to create a safe environment and provide information and tools to allow parents, carers and players to enjoy a safe, fun, fair and inclusive playing experience.

**Online harms during the Covid-19 period and steps taken to protect players**

3. Research is showing that games are helping provide a source of fun and social connectivity at this stressful time. Michelle Colder Carras, a public health researcher at Johns Hopkins University has said that games can help with mental recovery and Mark Griffiths, Professor of Behavioural Addiction, Nottingham Trent University said that "Friendship, social support, and being in a like-minded community are just some of the reasons that online gaming is going to be so popular at a time when we are being asked to stay indoors as much as possible[1]

4. It as a result comes as no surprise that our members are experiencing an increase in playtime and number of users. Video games offer a safe way to both be entertained and stay in touch with friends, whilst remaining socially distant. We understand there are concerns from some quarters that this may lead to an increase in harms to which our players are exposed.

5. Our members have indicated, however, that there is no evidence to suggest this is the case. Despite increased playing time, the proportion of complaints/incidents has remained consistently low.

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[1] https://www.vgr.com/gaming-helping-people-cope-covid-19-lockdown/ [vgr.com];
https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-making-friends-through-online-video-games-134459 [theconversation.com])

6. This is, no doubt due to the fact the industry has continued its proactive approach to protecting its players in this period. Safety is at the core of our industry, ranging from game and device features, moderation, content ratings and information and advice (whether provided direct to our players and/or the public more generally), to developing cutting edge and innovative solutions including using AI to detect and prevent harms.

7. Safety features that are currently deployed in games and at platform level make the experience one of the safest and most sophisticated online environments. They include:

   - Parental control over sharing a child's personal information.

   - Pre-emptive prevention of personal information being posted.

   - Community codes of conduct (often incorporated into terms of service and user agreements) (e.g. https://www.playstation.com/en-gb/get-help/help-library/my-account/grief-reporting/community-code-of-conduct/).

   - Chat filters restricting profanity, abuse and other harms.

   - Providing educational automated feedback after a player tries to use profane language.

   - URL blocking based on lists compiled by third parties (e.g. Symantec's Rulespace) with the ability to add and remove websites to the list as they are reported by users.

   - The ability to mute and block other players in a game or to block friend requests (e.g. https://www.playstation.com/bg-bg/get-help/help-library/my-account/access-and-details/how-to-use-your-playstation-4-to-block-or-unblock-a-playstation-/).

   - Ability to turn off graphic content.

   - Ability for players to report in game behaviour or content shared in game, content created or shared outside of a game or something in a user's profile (e.g. https://www.playstation.com/en-gb/get-help/help-library/my-account/parental-controls/how-to-file-a-complaint-against-another-playstation-network-user/).

   - Review of reported content and conduct by trained moderators, in some cases, with the ability to quarantine illegal content for review by specially-trained staff to determine if the content needs to be reported to the police.

   - Enforcement of Terms & Conditions and community standards including the suspension or banning of users (e.g. https://www.playstation.com/en-gb/get-help/help-library/my-account/grief-reporting/banned-and-suspended-consoles-and-accounts/).

- Removal of content found to be in breach of Terms & Conditions and codes of conduct.

- Endorsement systems to encourage positive and discourage negative player behaviour.

- Incognito and offline modes to enable people to play games in complete privacy.

- Pre-screening software to prevent sharing of abusive content.

8. In addition, the industry continues to engage with law enforcement agencies and Government to protect its players. During (as well as prior to) lockdown, the industry has been in discussions with the National Crime Agency on how to best protect users from online abuse, as well as the Home Office and CEOP on how it can communicate effectively on key digital safety topics.

**Digital literacy and Player Wellbeing**

9. Whilst the games sector has led the way in developing technological safety features, parental controls and robust moderating mechanisms to ensure player safety and welfare, the importance of digital literacy cannot be understated.

10. The games industry has always taken a proactive approach to raising awareness and education around parental controls and responsible play. Our approach has overseen a long history of responsible self-regulation which has led to the development of sector leading online safety initiatives. This approach has been strengthened and bolstered during this lockdown period.

11. At the beginning of the year we launched a major campaign, Get Smart About P.L.A.Y., which we have amplified in response to the current situation. Our campaign provides guidance for parents and caregivers on how to help set parameters around play, and includes advice on effectively utilising safety controls in order to limit potentially harmful interactions. We have invested additional funding in this period into strategically targeted digital advertising to ensure our safety messaging is reaching more parents and caregivers as the nation spends more time indoors, and online.

12. This campaign exists in addition to the industry funded www.askaboutgames.com resource and parents' guides, operated by the Video Standards Council, another example of how we ensure parents, players and carers are kept informed. AskAboutGames has specifically developed advice for families on safe online play in lockdown. On top of this, it has also been commissioned by ParentZone to produce advice on finding suitable games for families, including tips on only accessing age appropriate content which will be released during the Covid-19 period.

13. The industry also launched the [Family Game Database](#) in the early period of lockdown. The database provides information for parents on games suitable for families, whilst also linking back to key tips on activating family controls on devices to limit spending, screen time, online chat, and age inappropriate content.

14. The games sector is equally concerned about the mental wellbeing of its players, especially during the Covid-19 period. That is why we have worked with the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) to produce resources on [how to play with friends online](#) during this period safely both to reduce loneliness, and to offer practice advice on avoiding harmful interactions.

15. Of course, supporting the physical wellbeing of players during this time is also imperative and that is why the industry has been working together alongside the UK government and international bodies do to so.

16. Leading games companies have been working with the UK Government to promote public health messaging within their games, social media platforms, and online tournaments to millions of players, as well as encouraging players to take breaks and exercise.

17. On top of this is the global #PlayApartTogether campaign. Over 60 games companies have agreed to share key public health guidance from the World Health Organisation to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Under this umbrella is also crucial support for the mental wellbeing of players in lockdown. Companies such as Jagex have developed advice in collaboration with mental health charities on how players can maintain their wellbeing in lockdown.

18. We look forward to working with the Committee and Government in the continued development of Online Harms legislation and stress the importance of clear, coherent and cohesive evidence based policy making from the numerous Governmental departments and regulatory bodies active in this space. For it to be as effective as possible, it is crucial to avoid overlapping and contradictory pieces of legislation.