

Government urged to impose ‘tech tax’ on social media firms that fail to help tackle children’s mental health crisis

The UK government should consider introducing a duty on social media firms who do not do enough to mitigate the negative impact of social media platforms on young people’s mental health, argues think tank ResPublica in a new report.

Amid mounting concern that social media sites operated by firms such as Google, Twitter and Facebook can have a devastating impact on the well-being of some children, the ResPublica report urges the Government to work more closely with the multi-billion pound technology giants to create a special fund based on voluntary contributions.

In *Class of 2017: Reshaping support services for young people in the new Parliament* and compiled with help from the children’s charity Barnardo’s, ResPublica recommends that Government and social media companies should jointly invest in technological mental health support and help young people take control of their mental health.

“If this collaborative approach proves unworkable, Government should instead consider imposing a levy on the turnover of such companies, which could then be earmarked for this purpose,” ResPublica says.

Technology giants are already under pressure to exhibit greater social responsibility. Mike Barton, the chief constable of Durham police, recently called on internet firms to re-invest some of their “eye-watering” profits into efforts to stamp out child abuse images online.

Recent research, including a report by the Education Policy Institute in June *, has shown that social media platforms can negatively affect the emotional wellbeing of children and young people – though they can also provide an important forum for advice and support.

ResPublica argues that, by collaborating with these companies Government can expand its existing investment in digital tools which offer opportunities for young people to manage the mental health support they receive, as well as supporting local authorities to develop online counterparts to physical support services (for example seen in the YouthSpace programme in Birmingham).

In its wide-ranging report, ResPublica also calls on the Government to create a dedicated personal fund, worth £1,000 per child per year, to empower children in care to invest in their own development. It calculates the annual cost at about £70 million.

“In recognition of the particular and intense difficulties faced by children in care, this fund would pay for measures which could proactively prevent these difficulties such as mental health support, tutoring for help with school work, or participation in extra-curricular activities,” the study says.

“The fund should be managed by the young person in question, in partnership with the adults responsible for their care and the local authority’s corporate parenting board (where applicable) ... We recommend the value of this fund be set at £1,000 per child per year, at a total cost of around £70 million.”

The think-tank urges the Government to better support early action on children’s mental health through in-school counselling and relevant training for all carers and professionals working with young people. This, it says, would develop wider workforce capacity and help reduce pressures on the NHS.

It calls for the Government to “expand provision of counselling services to all primary and secondary schools in England, with looked-after children able to receive priority access”.

The report, which has won praise from MPs including a former Children’s minister and the shadow minister for Youth Affairs, calls for support built around early, proactive intervention; service providers as equal partners in service design and delivery; and young people shaping the support they receive.

It says these steps need to be at the heart of the support offered to young people in England to ensure that young people have the best possible chance of overcoming the disadvantages they face and achieving their full potential.

The report’s other conclusions and recommendations include:

1. Government should introduce a ‘duty’ to require local authorities to promote collaborative working between all relevant stakeholders in designing and delivering support services for young people, alongside a standardised impact model to facilitate this aim.
2. Government should allow further devolution deals, in line with the Greater Manchester model, to enable other regions to undertake radical public service reform at the local level.
3. Government should provide long-term funding certainty to local authorities, alongside ring-fencing of central funding for frontline services for looked-after children and young people with mental health difficulties.
4. The new What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care should look into best practice and innovation in engaging young people in service design and delivery.
5. Government should establish an Innovation Fund to explore the potential for new technology to engage young people in public services.
6. Government should review the funding required for local authorities and service providers to work together to offer universal 0-19 service provision in children’s centres.

Tim Loughton MP, the former Children’s minister, said: ““I strongly welcome this report from ResPublica, which rightly draws attention to the increasing pressure which support services for children are being put under and offers valuable thoughts on how this trend can be reversed in the interests of achieving a more just society.

A cross-party inquiry into children’s social care which I chaired earlier this year uncovered the unintended consequences of funding cuts to children’s services and the targeting of support towards those young people whose needs are greatest. We know that appropriate early intervention means better outcomes for children and their families, as well as saving the taxpayer money in the long-run, but our inquiry found that preventative activity is being increasingly sidelined in order just to meet immediate and critical need. The effects of this can already be seen in the continuing rise in the number

of children being taken into care.

A nationally-led focus on high-quality early intervention will be crucial to ending the postcode lottery in the approach to and quality of children's social care seen across the country, and I urge the Government to consider carefully the policy and structural changes outlined in this report in that regard. As a society, we can no longer afford to overlook the needs of our vulnerable young people and I echo this report's call for Government to make addressing their needs a top priority for this Parliament.""

Cat Smith MP, Shadow Minister for Voter Engagement and Youth Affairs, said: "I welcome this report which calls on the Government to deliver an ambitious domestic agenda that enables young people to realise their full potential.

"The report highlights the vital role charities and other service providers play in supporting the younger generation and the importance of involving young people as stakeholders in this process. The report also raises serious concerns about the long-term viability of local government funding for children and youth services. I hope this Government will consider the proposals put forward in this paper when developing their delayed youth policy statement.

"It is vital that this Government does not lower its domestic policy ambitions in light of the complexities presented by Brexit. However, without a Minister responsible for youth policy it is currently not clear what strategy is in place to ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people get the support they need from government.

"I look forward to working with ResPublica and Barnardo's in the future to address these issues so we can build a country that works for the many, not the few."

Javed Khan, Chief Executive, Barnardo's, said: "I sincerely welcome this policy paper from ResPublica, which astutely and incisively draws attention to the crucial role of support services for young people, and the organisations like Barnardo's which deliver them, in building a country which can offer all our children a real prospect of happiness, health, and prosperity.

"It sets out a clear-sighted picture of how the help we provide as a country to our most vulnerable children and young people will need to change in the coming years. I call on the institutions of national and local government to seize this opportunity and accompany us as we undertake the task of converting its ambitions into reality."

Phillip Blond, Director, ResPublica said: "We must face up to the fact that, as a country, our provision of support for our most vulnerable young people - and future fellow citizens - is in crisis.

"The recent distressing case of Girl X ** was a wake-up call, demonstrating to the public at large what those working in mental health support for children have known for some time - that we have failed to pay sufficient attention to the needs of young people facing emotional difficulty or to the scale of that need across that demographic, and that we have under-invested in the help we offer them as a result.

"The record numbers of children in care meanwhile - over 70,000 in England at the last estimate - contrasts sharply with declining resources for children's social care, and means that we risk being unable to properly provide for the needs of those children who need the state's support most.

"Charities and civil society more broadly have a crucial role to play in supporting the state to address this crisis, and this report offers a vision of how their resources and knowledge can best be harnessed by government at a national and local level, in the interests of securing better outcomes for vulnerable children and young people."

Report author Duncan Sim, Research Associate, ResPublica, said: "This report outlines both structural and policy changes which we believe are necessary to help our society's most vulnerable children and young people to make their fullest possible contribution to the UK's future social and economic prosperity, and to themselves share in that prosperity. It is only through closer working between national government, local authorities, the voluntary sector, and other relevant stakeholders - including, in the case of young people's mental health, social media companies - that we will achieve the outcomes we wish to see for those young people."

"Social media platforms should not be made scapegoats for the increasingly well-documented mental health difficulties faced by young people - indeed, as the report recognises, they can be a crucial source of advice and support for young people in distress. However, in light of growing evidence of the negative effects of social media on young people's wellbeing, we believe it is incumbent upon these companies to express their social responsibility by working with government on this vitally important issue."

"Yet this collaboration represents only one piece in a much larger puzzle and will not be enough in isolation to safeguard young people's wellbeing. This is why we are calling on the Government to prioritise measures which can prevent mental health difficulties presenting or escalating among children in the first place, such as an expansion of in-school counselling, as well as putting in place the long-term funding arrangements which give local authorities the confidence and freedom to invest in high-quality and accessible support services."

"Young people's voices must be heard in this debate too, and we urge Government to invest in research into the potential for digital technology to allow young people to engage more fully in how support services are designed and delivered."

Notes to editors

The ResPublica Trust is an independent non-partisan think tank. Through research, policy innovation and programmes, ResPublica seeks to establish a new economic, social and cultural settlement. In order to heal the long-term rifts in this country ResPublica aims to combat the concentration of wealth and power by distributing ownership and agency to all, and by re-instilling culture and virtue across the economy and society.

Making young minds matter: Reshaping support services for young people in the new Parliament is supported by Barnardo's, the UK's largest children's charity which last year supported 272,000 children, young people, families and carers. All conclusions and recommendations contained in the report are independent of Barnardo's.

The report is available to download from the ResPublica website. For further details and to request a copy of the report contact Sara Badawi at sara.badawi@respublica.org.uk or on 020 3857 8310. Spokespeople from ResPublica and Barnardo's are available for interview.

For ResPublica, contact Sara Badawi on 0203 857 8314 or sara.badawi@respublica.org.uk
For Barnardo's, contact the 24-hour press office on 0208 498 7555

*The Education Policy Institute report can be found at:

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Social-Media_Mental-Health_EPI-Report.pdf

**Details of the case of Girl X can be found at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40814824>