

17th August 2022

Dear Conservative Leadership Candidates,

We write to you as survivors of online child abuse and the families of young people who have faced tragedy as a result of exposure to harmful content on social media.

We are just some of the parents whose children have taken their own lives having been bombarded with suicide and self-harm material recommended to them by algorithms.

We are just some of the thousands of young people who have been groomed on social media and the families of children who have been subjected to horrific sexual abuse online.

Though each of our experiences is different, we have all felt we had no voice, felt ignored by social media companies and isolated when speaking up.

Some of us have experienced abuse for years before we felt able to find support. Some of us are still battling with companies who won't acknowledge the harm they have caused.

But all of us know that what we have been through should not have happened, was avoidable, and, crucially, it must not be allowed to happen in the future.

We have long campaigned for laws to better protect children online and were frustrated and disappointed to see the Online Safety Bill delayed rather than pass through Parliament last month.

It was upsetting to see opponents of the Bill rejoicing at this delay and calling for the legislation to be scrapped altogether.

The Online Safety Bill would begin to hold tech companies accountable for the harm we have suffered that should never have happened in the first place.

It has been years in the making and would finally turn the tide towards keeping children safe in a place where they spend so much of their lives.

And it is needed now more than ever.

With every month the legislation is delayed we will see more than 3,500 online child sexual abuse crimes against children.

These offences have increased tenfold in just a decade. And bullying, pro-anorexia posts, harmful self-harm and suicide content continue to fill children's streams.

This level of harm against children would not be accepted in any other industry which is why the next Prime Minister must make the Online Safety Bill a national priority and pave the way for urgent regulation to begin.

But we know tech companies will be using their power and the current delay to lobby for weaker rules.

However, any watering down of the Bill would be unacceptable and break the commitment made to children and families in the Conservative Party manifesto to deliver the strongest possible protections for children online.

There can be no more important mission for Government than to keep children safe from preventable abuse and harm.

The Government has consistently acknowledged this by saying they want the UK to be the safest place in the world for a child to be online.

We have supported this goal and worked hard at making sure our voices are heard in how it is being delivered. It's also received huge backing from the public and the majority of MPs.

Now is the time to make that goal a reality.

Should you become the next Prime Minister, we urge you to keep the promise made to children and families and deliver a robust Online Safety Bill in full and without delay.

We know how isolating it can feel to suffer sexual abuse online. How speaking up about harmful online content feels like a small voice crying into a violent storm.

A strong Online Safety Bill that has children at its heart can change this and finally give future generations the protections and support we needed but were denied.

Yours sincerely,

Lucy Alexander, Lucy is an online safety campaigner. Her son Felix died by suicide after being bullied online.

Danielle Armitage, Danielle is an online safety campaigner. She was groomed online by an older man who then abused her multiple times in real life.

Elaine*, Elaine is an online safety campaigner. She was groomed online when she was 13 by a 31-year-old man before he sexually abused her in real-life.

Frida*, Frida is an online safety campaigner. She was groomed online and exploited for sexually explicit images by a man in his 30s. This lasted many years before Frida attempted suicide.

Jane*, mother whose daughter was 9 when a man groomed her online then blackmailed her into sending sexually explicit images.

Mariano Janin, father of Mia.

Jasmine*, Jasmine is an online safety campaigner and a victim of peer-on-peer image-based abuse.

Lorin LaFave, Breck Foundation. Lorin is an online safety campaigner. Her son was groomed online and then murdered by his perpetrator.

Louise*, Louise is an online safety campaigner. She was 12 when she was groomed online which resulted in many years of serious online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Ruth Moss is an online safety campaigner. Her daughter Sophie died by suicide after viewing harmful content online.

Rachel*, is an online safety campaigner. Her son was groomed on Facebook and sexually exploited by a paedophile ring over Skype and other platforms.

Ian Russell, Molly Rose Foundation.

Abi Sharpe, Abi is an online safety campaigner. She was groomed online and sexually exploited multiple times. The NSPCC supported her after her experience.

Andy and Judy Thomas, parents of Frankie.

**Names have been changed to protect identities*