REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

UNCORRECTED

At Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Monday 19 May 2025

The Committee met at 9:15.

PRESENT

The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine (Chair)

The Hon. Susan Carter
The Hon. Taylor Martin

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Anthony D'Adam
The Hon. Sarah Mitchell (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. Bob Nanva
The Hon. Emily Suvaal

* Please note:
[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.
[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.
[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the second hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders, past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples, and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

My name is Sarah Kaine. I am the Chair of the Committee. I ask everyone in the room to turn their phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses located in Australia in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

Dr HANNAH TONKIN, NSW Women's Safety Commissioner, affirmed and examined

Ms ZOË ROBINSON, Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

Ms CHANEL CONTOS, CEO and Founder, Teach Us Consent, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you, all, for making time to come along today and give evidence. Before we start with questions, would any of you like to make a short opening statement?

HANNAH TONKIN: I will, thank you. I believe that Chanel also will. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today. I would also like to acknowledge that we're on unceded Gadigal land and pay my deep respects. My role as the Women's Safety Commissioner is a relatively new role. It's dedicated to addressing domestic, family and sexual violence, particularly in relation to women. I provide leadership across the whole government in New South Wales. Also, I work closely with the non-government sector and the broader community to improve women's safety. All of my work is informed by people with lived experience. I'm increasingly hearing concerns from across the community about children's early exposure to pornography, particularly violent and misogynistic pornography. We hear a lot about these issues from adults, but it's critical that we also hear directly from young people themselves. That's why I'm so pleased to appear today with Zoë Robinson and Chanel Contos, who can talk about what they're hearing from young people.

We know that exposure to pornography is happening at younger and younger ages. The average age, as I'm sure the Committee is aware, is now 13 for boys and girls, but many children are seeing it much younger than that, particularly boys. Some are encountering porn inadvertently on social media or gaming platforms. They might be shown it by their friends, while others might be searching for it out of curiosity. Curiosity is natural and healthy. It's part of how we learn about the world. We certainly don't want to approach this with any sense of shame or stigma. It's important to recognise that even mainstream porn often depicts violence against women. It usually shows men being dominant and women being submissive. Children are watching this at a critical time in their lives, when they're developing their attitudes, their values and their understandings of sex, relationships and gender norms. As the Women's Safety Commissioner, I am concerned about the impact on children and young people, but also what this could mean for our progress more broadly around improving women's safety across the community. There's no single solution; we need a whole-of-community response. All of this must be informed by the voices of children and young people themselves.

CHANEL CONTOS: Good morning, Chair, Deputy Chair and other Committee members. At Teach Us Consent, we believe porn is a form of entertainment and it must not be used as a substitute for sex education, yet porn currently is the main form of sex education for young people across the country. Intentionally or incidentally, young Australians are watching more porn than ever, earlier than ever. This means that years before children can independently explore their sexuality, they're being exposed to extreme sexual acts, limiting ideas about their sexual roles and the roles of others through porn. A recent inquiry into gender dysphoria in children in the UK urged the government to investigate the link between this and porn consumption. The latest Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that child sexual abuse perpetrated by male adolescents is increasing and that a teenage boy is now the most likely perpetrator of child sexual abuse. As to why, the study hypothesises societal pressures, gender norms and, increasingly, the unprecedented rates at which young Australians are accessing pornography, including violent pornography.

Mainstream porn fails to depict consent and frequently eroticises male domination and female subordination. Of the top mainstream porn videos, as many as nine in 10 show acts of physical aggression or violence. Ninety-seven per cent of the targets of that violence are women, who almost always respond neutrally or with pleasure. Around 50 per cent of young Australians have engaged in "choking", or strangulation, during sex. Research has found that the more pornography someone watches, the less likely they are to believe that consent is required to strangle someone during sex. Research also shows that the more pornography someone watches, the less likely they are to intervene as a bystander to a sexual assault.

Young men are facing increasing mental and physical health concerns because of consumption of pornography. One in 10 teenage boys say they have an addiction, and studies have found an alarmingly high prevalence of erectile dysfunction in young men, suggesting significant association with problematic porn consumption. The digitisation of pornography means porn has never been more accessible for young people, and mainstream pornography fetishises dangerous stereotypes about gender, race, and forms of abuse such as stepsibling-parent content and teacher-student content.

Without the porn literacy and media literacy required to critically view pornographic content, young people are viewing porn as truth and scripts for sex. The consequences are incredibly dangerous. That is why

young people deserve access to porn literacy education as part of comprehensive sex education, a porn and media literacy campaign should be rolled out on a national scale, and age-verification software must be mandated on porn sites to prevent early childhood access. Our regulatory and educational responses must move quickly. The most important thing I can say to you today is that young people must be involved in helping us understand the problem and formulate a solution. In a world of ever-changing technological developments, the only people who truly understand the predicament that young people are presently in are themselves.

The CHAIR: Ms Robinson, have you got a statement, or are you happy to just take questions?

ZOË ROBINSON: Happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Brilliant, thank you. If I could start with you, Ms Contos—thank you both for being here at this probably inhospitable hour and also for your submission and the work that you've been doing generally. I wanted to just ask a few questions. You recommend defining the term "harmful pornography". I note that I don't get a sense from your submission that you're anti-pornography altogether, but that you want to be clear about categories and how it's used. Correct me if I'm wrong on that. You talk about harmful pornography. How do you define that?

CHANEL CONTOS: I believe we need further evidence into that to understand exactly what the parameters of this inquiry mean. I think consultations with advisory bodies on defining what that means—it's critical to do so because of how polarising this topic can be. That's also why our submission focused on the access of pornography for young people, because it's obviously very different to how adults consume content. I think that, in general, "harmful" may be defined by how frequently it's being accessed and the types of acts that are being depicted. Also, if this is being accessed in a way that is being understood as truth and as education, that is then going to be, in general, harmful to young people.

The CHAIR: There's a couple of things in your submission, and more generally across submissions, that have come out. One of them is age verification as one of the tools that could potentially be used. I note in your submission some of the young people were a bit sceptical, particularly about privacy aspects or data aspects. I wondered if you could talk a bit more about that? There's two questions here. The other question that's tech associated is this idea of the deepfakes and the AI-generated as tech-facilitated abuse. You're highlighting that as quite a different thing. I wondered if those are two different issues, but sort of with technology-related aspects.

CHANEL CONTOS: With age verification, speaking realistically, I think older teenagers will probably find ways around whatever restrictions we put on. There will always be loopholes like VPNs or whatever it is. I think age restrictions are really there to protect our younger children, our younger teens who often access pornography accidentally, or it's being targeted to them in certain ways or they're doing a Google search for something else or perhaps they have a question about their own bodies and they come across this sort of content. We feel as though that's where age verification software can be most useful. There's obviously a stark difference between an 11-year-old accessing pornography and a 17-year-old accessing pornography and the effects that that might have on the individual.

In terms of deepfakes, the non-consensual creation and sharing of intimate AI-generated images is an emerging trend. It is something that I've been speaking about for years in schools. Only in the last 18 months have I been getting questions about it, and increasingly so. It's clearly something that young people are facing. It's something that they're not really sure how to navigate, especially because deepfakes aren't always necessarily created in an explicitly sexual way. Sometimes they're created as a form of bullying or a joke rather than for personal consumption and use.

I think that young people are very confused where boundaries are and what they're supposed to do about these things. Obviously it's a very embarrassing topic to approach parents about, particularly with AI getting increasingly good at realistic depictions of female bodies specifically. More education, clarity and law is needed around that. Another thing I want to point out about deepfake technology is that applications to create these sorts of images are being advertised to young people in applications like TikTok, and they're being advertised to [audio malfunction] mainly. The way it's being advertised says, "Be anyone you like," except it's a hypersexualized video of a woman that often gets targeted to men on these apps. There is clearly a gender divide here in terms of perpetration and victimhood as well.

The CHAIR: I wondered if I could ask you a question, Ms Robinson. You've previously identified the risks of social media, and we were just talking about the ads that get targeted to young people. Can you talk us through what you think? Is there a relationship between social media and harmful pornography?

ZOË ROBINSON: It's worth noting at the beginning, obviously, that we have conversations with young people this afternoon, so what I would be speaking to is some of the quantitative data that we have where young people have talked about where they're getting content. We haven't had specific conversations about pornography.

Young people do still talk about, however, that they are getting some of their information around respectful relationships from social media and their friends. Also, there is that balance, as we've talked about, in terms of social media and making sure that we are cautious and conscious of the fact that, for some people, that is a community where they can find positive, helpful information that will assist them.

We also need to flag in some of this stuff—and we've got the data around it—people who are in metro areas versus regional areas as to where they might be getting their information from. I think we need to listen to young people and where they're saying they're getting information. That's where we need to work with some of those bigger companies. I know there's lots of work going on. Credit to the eSafety Commissioner for her never-ending fight around that. If they are getting information from social media, then we need to be working in spaces to ensure that there is good, positive, helpful—again, credit to Chanel and the Teach Us Consent—material available that is based on the voice of young people, is based on evidence, and is based on making sure that it is a positive, helpful conversation.

I think we still need to respect the fact that young people are saying they're going to social media for some of this information, but also that they're talking about their friends. So we need to make sure we're giving friends that tool. The other thing I do want to flag—and it's perhaps the consciousness I have of coming here—is that obviously the inquiry doesn't just talk about young people. We need to recognise that there is adult behaviour that we need to be addressing and that there is work that needs to be done in that. Also we need to continue to create a space—as the data says and as Chanel has so eloquently said—for young men to feel safe to come to and seek out information that can assist them.

I am conscious of making sure that, when we're having these conversations, we're not polarising groups of young people and we're not excluding young people from the conversation, solution or outcomes that we're trying to achieve. That's why I think there is a power and a benefit in social media still playing a part, because if you are a young man, you might not feel, as Chanel said, confident to go to an adult to have that conversation. If there is positive material that can assist you online, then we need to think about that as well as creating that space.

The CHAIR: I've got a quick follow-up question before I pass to my colleague. You mentioned something about the difference between metro and regional, which I've got to say struck me. I would have thought, with social media, that there would be the same way of accessing information wherever you are. Could you explain a little bit about that?

ZOË ROBINSON: I'm happy to provide the data as well from our strategic plan tracking.

The CHAIR: That would be fabulous.

ZOË ROBINSON: In terms of sources of information about sexual consent or respectful relationships, in terms of how it goes, they talk about social media being the first and then friends, school, university and your own experience. And in "your own experience", of that data, 44 per cent of those were living in regional areas. That's what I'm saying. It's making sure we understand that there might be differences in terms of how they are receiving information. I'm happy to provide that data to the Committee.

The CHAIR: That would be very useful. Thank you very much.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Are parents not a source of information about respectful relationships?

ZOË ROBINSON: They came in after "your own experience", so they are there.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: What sort of rough percentage?

ZOË ROBINSON: Of the people who participated in our survey, 31 per cent. I would say that, because this is the year-on-year strategic plan tracking, that has gone down since 2021.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Interesting.

ZOË ROBINSON: I would say that parents are still places where they're going to have conversations, but in this particular data they came in at fifth.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Interesting, thank you. I wonder, Dr Tonkin, if I can ask you a question? You indicated in your opening statement that there is no single solution. I think the Committee is very well aware of that. Have you got any parts of the solution that you could offer to us?

HANNAH TONKIN: Yes, I can. May I just add one thing in relation to the last question? First, Jesuit Social Services, as you would know, releases The Man Box. There will be some talk of that, I'm sure, at this inquiry. Later this year they will be releasing The Adolescent Man Box data. One finding in that is that less than 20 per cent of children and young people feel comfortable revealing vulnerability to a parent—less than 20 per cent. That's just something to flag as well that I think would be really relevant to the previous question. In

terms of solutions, it's very complex and you need solutions across a wide range of areas. Certainly, first and foremost, it is those regulatory solutions and looking at what more the big tech companies can do, looking at things.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: When you say regulatory solutions, what are you thinking about exactly?

HANNAH TONKIN: Age verification mechanisms, as Chanel discussed, we definitely need to be looking at that and looking at the results of the pilot. I agree that will be most effective for children or young people who are accessing pornography inadvertently.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: What are other regulatory solutions other than age verification?

HANNAH TONKIN: I think that's the primary one in this area, but—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Secondary would be?

HANNAH TONKIN: More generally, I'm in favour of placing a greater onus—and I know this is what the eSafety Commissioner is looking at—on digital platforms to regulate their content more generally. Regulating harmful material more generally, including things like misogynistic influencers, that sort of thing.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Have you got any insight into difficulties with extraterritorial enforcement with that sort of regulation?

HANNAH TONKIN: It's incredibly difficult, absolutely. Part of this is also about public relations. It's a wideranging area. That's what the eSafety Commissioner is working on at the moment, because the actual regulatory framework for global companies is very difficult. I know the eSafety Commissioner has been looking at global solutions. She's been in Europe a lot. We are looking at the global perspective, coming from Australia, but it's very difficult. We can be looking at things in Australia as well, like the age verification pilot and obviously there's the social media ban. There are all sorts of things in train. In a few other areas, there's the education piece that we've talked about a little bit already, which is critical, both in schools but elsewhere as well; comprehensive digital literacy from a young age; respectful relationships; consent education, all age appropriate; and starting from a young age, in an age appropriate way.

I know my education colleagues will be giving evidence before this inquiry. I'm sure they'll talk to what's underway in more detail. I definitely support more investment in that. It has to be evidence based and tailored to particular groups, not a one size fits all. Also, as you've said, more support for parents and carers—they do continue to play a critical role. We can't place all the burden on parents, but they are still essential. What support do they need? Generally, I'd say parents need to be having conversations much younger than they realise. They often leave it far too late. There are great resources already from the eSafety Commissioner and elsewhere, that teaches consent. It's wideranging.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Ms Contos, you talked about the importance of teaching porn literacy so that young people can recognise what they're seeing is somebody else's fantasy, perhaps, rather than truth or truthful relationships. If we have children who are accessing porn from certainly under the age of 12, maybe from as early as eight, is it too young to introduce universal porn literacy to children at eight?

CHANEL CONTOS: It's a good question. This is why the two-pronged approach is so important, to have those regulations on preventing the young people—which would hopefully take a large chunk of this serious problem out. Another thing to add is a lot of porn websites advertise on gaming websites that are clearly for children, so fines around that or banning that more explicitly could also be a good intervention. I don't this is the same with consent education. It doesn't need to be taught in a sexual way. We can teach media literacy skills, which is probably one of the most important things in this day and age, with algorithms and social media, from a really young age. In the same way as when you're watching James Bond or *Fast & Furious* with your parents, you understand that is not how people drive in real life. You don't need to explicitly have those conversations with young people, because they see you drive in real life and they know that's not how it's done.

There are opportunities to start teaching media literacy in a way that's not explicit towards pornography. I understand the ethical issues of the fact that, realistically, porn literacy needs to be taught in schools much earlier, and probably in high school, but that a lot of people access it before then. That's where a national campaign on awareness for parents and support for parents to have these conversations with kids come in for those younger children, to feel as though that's more of a family issue. I would recommend bringing explicit porn literacy into the curriculum from high school, when sex education is involved in the curriculum.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Would it be accurate to summarise your view as we need some form of age verification, age limitation that minimises exposure for very young children, but then in high school we need

continuing age limitation accompanied by education, so young people can understand and process what they are seeing in a broader context?

CHANEL CONTOS: Exactly, yes.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: You also mentioned—and I'm happy for you to take this on notice—a study in the United Kingdom that explored whether gender dysphoria is connected with porn consumption. If you could provide details of that on notice, we'd be very grateful.

CHANEL CONTOS: I can send you a follow-up. It was an inquiry into gender dysphoria. A recommendation from the inquiry was to look into pornography as an avenue to that experience. I'll send you that link.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I think you also mentioned a study that indicated teenage boys had now become the most common assailants in matters of child sexual assault?

CHANEL CONTOS: Yes, that's the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. That's from Queensland. Ben Mathews is the lead researcher in that study. It is groundbreaking research that shows adult perpetration of child sexual abuse has, thankfully, decreased slightly because our prevention efforts in that space are working. We have got safeguarding practices, education, a decrease in shame. That is incredible, and we should continue and scale that. Obviously adult-perpetrated child sexual abuse is particularly insidious. But what's happened, as that has decreased, is that child sexual abuse being perpetrated by other children, specifically male adolescents known to the victim or current or former partners, has increased. The exact why is yet to be determined fully, scientifically and academically, except it was heavily indicated and assumed that pornography was likely a contributing factor to that, alongside gender norms and societal pressures.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If you could give us details of that study, I'd be very grateful too.

CHANEL CONTOS: I'll send that too.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: That's alarming, especially if you've got teenage boys being educated in scripts by their use of pornography and then seeking to act them out with vulnerable groups in our society. I find that really alarming.

CHANEL CONTOS: It is really alarming, but if we put the resources in the right place, we can also see it as an opportunity. It is significantly easier to prevent another child perpetrating sexual assault than it is to prevent an adult. It shows an opportunity that if we pay attention to the right places, we can have a significant impact on statistics.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: In your submission, you indicated that young men typically access online pornography 2.3 years before their first sexual experience, and girls two years before their first sexual experience. To what extent do you think pornography is teaching our girls and boys how they should behave sexually and what to expect in a sexual relationship?

CHANEL CONTOS: I personally think, to a large extent, the increase in sexual strangulation or choking is very indicative of that. That is a largely generational difference. If you look at a study across age groups, it's something that's really common in young people and really uncommon in older people. It's an act that traditionally existed on fringe BDSM culture, which is often centred around concepts of consent. It's quite worrying, the way it's crept into the mainstream.

What best describes how it is shaping and distorting the sexual landscape for young people is, one, they don't believe that specific consent is needed for these acts because, for them, it's one and the same; and, two, the fact that there is a form of consent, because of this desire to perform in a way that has been seen online and what you think will satisfy a partner. I hear the main reason that young women agree to sexual strangulation is in order to satisfy the desires of their male partner. Just looking at that case study specifically, it's always going to be hard to distinguish those things. But there is evidence that it's having a significant impact on the landscape for young people.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: It's challenging for consent, then, isn't it? If your ideas of consent are actually being framed by pornography rather than understanding who you are as a person and what you wish to consent to, that must make understanding the concept of consent very challenging for our young people.

CHANEL CONTOS: I think it is always a challenge, particularly for women, to distinguish between desire to satisfy a male partner in a world that is obviously shaped by male sexual gratification and entitlement—I'm getting too deep into my feminist thoughts here. But it does murky and confuse the waters of consent, particularly and most importantly because mainstream pornography and free pornography, which is what is almost always accessed by young people in Australia, almost never depicts consent. We never get to see that act play out.

The Hon. TAYLOR MARTIN: I might pick up on what Ms Carter was just raising there. Ms Contos, something that I identify with, and you raise, is the real generational differences. I'm not anymore but I was the youngest member elected here for a long while. One thing I found, coming into this place, was some significant gaps in the knowledge and education of more experienced people about what the younger generations have had normalised for them. I want to thank you for raising that, and I particularly want to thank you for your advocacy for years in this space more broadly. In your opening statement, you talked about how some of this material normalises power imbalances. I think you mentioned—correct me if I'm wrong—teacher/student dynamics, and step-parent dynamics. Is it fair to say that, over time, what some people might think are taboo subjects actually become more normalised? Is that fair to say?

CHANEL CONTOS: I don't know. It's very difficult because another thing I want to highlight here is that there isn't hardcore, conclusive evidence on the link between pornography and sexual assault or abuse. What I was referring to in the opening statement about the power imbalances is that, for many years now, the most common themes on mainstream porn websites include things like teacher/student, step-sibling, step-parent or MILF porn or whatever it is—all these different topics that fetishise acts that are explicitly abuse. We don't have conclusive evidence about direct correlation between consumption and acts. But what we do know is that when you add layers on top of each other—if you have a young person who is experiencing abuse themselves or has addiction problems or is in a situation of poverty or extreme financial strain, and they're watching extreme pornography—that is where more extreme or disastrous acts happen.

I think enough of the world has watched content, unfortunately, that depicts acts that we as a society deem not okay. Yet that doesn't mean that that many people have acted them out, so it's not as if there is a direct correlation. But I feel as though there probably is some form of normalisation and maybe reducing the seriousness, which, again, for adults is a hard thing, because if you're a consenting adult and you know what you're watching—I don't want to speak to that. But I think that when we're looking at what that means for young people, it can be used as a really heavy normalisation tool or even a grooming tool in some senses.

The Hon. TAYLOR MARTIN: In one of your answers you just gave to one of Ms Carter's questions, you talked about strangulation and those sorts of violent acts that were once—I think in your words—on the fringe of the BDSM movement and that have effectively become a bit more mainstream. Is it fair to say that as young adolescents are exploring this material, they're finding that what was once fringe behaviour is right there, front and centre? And then years later they're exploring their own intimate sides with partners and unfortunately they go into it with a different mindset versus previous generations who saw them as fringe acts? Is that fair to say?

CHANEL CONTOS: I'm going to speak anecdotally here instead of evidence based. I speak to people a lot. I speak to my peers a lot—particularly men—about their pornography consumption habits and how those have changed over time. There almost seems to be a trend that once young men reach adulthood—men are much more quick to acknowledge the harms that porn can cause than women are. That is what I've noticed through my conversations. Whilst there is probably some sort of distortion in what people believe that they're into, for lack of a better word, a lot of young men tend to grow out of it and then regret it. I think that it is an injustice for young men as well in this space for what they're experiencing.

Again, this is where I really cannot emphasise enough how much young people need to be consulted on these topics. I know it's a really hard conversation to have. I know there are ethical dilemmas. But even speaking to 18- to 25-year-olds about what's going on and what happened a few years ago, they have quite a clear head and a good reflective ability about these topics. But I think that these are acts that people tend to do in the early stages of their sexuality and then, as they get to know themselves better, just statistically, they're probably not actually into it. They grow out of mimicking those scenes as they get better educated and understand and actually experience intimacy and what that looks like for them and what they enjoy.

ZOË ROBINSON: Can I pick up on two things that have come through Ms Contos's evidence, which I think are relevant for both. Obviously, she talked then about young people who are experiencing poverty and other things. Again, with a number of the conversations we're having right now about things that are impacting on young people, we are looking at one end of it versus all of the things that we could be doing at a different end to help assist in change. The other thing, in terms of some of the questions that Ms Carter had, is seeing consistent conversations about what good looks like around you as a young person: What is a respectful relationship? What does it look like for your peers? What does it look like for an adult? I think it's really important.

You can have the formal education that teaches consent, and others do. But, not taking away from the seriousness of all of this, I was in the Northern Rivers working with primary-aged kids, talking to them about teamwork, gratitude, support and all of that, in a very different program. That's all about how you relate to each other and how you support each other. We need to make sure that we don't only think it has to be at one end. There is a lot of work that we can do at this end that consistently shows young people and adults—again, just flagging

that there are adults who need to have these conversations as well—what does good look like. How do we constantly arm our young people to be able to know their space, who they want in the space and what that can look like? That happening in a consistent way, as soon as you're starting in an environment where it's not just your people around you, is really important. I didn't want to miss the opportunity to also flag that Chanel has raised some things about poverty and other things that we could be looking at.

The CHAIR: In listening to your response, Ms Robinson, I'm now thinking about some of the evidence we took for our loneliness inquiry and about some of the things we need to be doing to build community connections and the interrelatedness of what you were just talking about.

ZOË ROBINSON: And there is that beautiful work that Movember has just done that talks about young men and where they might be going. But there is also an onus on all of us to lift up the really good, strong voices that exist in this world, who are doing really great things in a lot of spaces, as opposed to giving light to some particularly not helpful voices in this. It's probably unhelpful but, again, I'll give the data. In terms of where they're going for sexual consent or respectful relationships, in our data of people who participated in this survey, pornography is very much down the bottom. Again, we'll share that with you. It doesn't feature in the top 10.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Thank you all for giving your evidence this morning. I wondered, in wrapping up, whether each of the witnesses, perhaps starting with you, Dr Tonkin, could let us know—and please be as specific as you possibly can—what your top recommendation would be for the Committee to consider in addressing the much-needed reform in this space, given that so much of this and what we've been hearing this morning is in the Federal realm.

HANNAH TONKIN: My top recommendation is about education, digital literacy, media literacy and taking a strengths-based approach, which comes back to what was just said, especially for boys and young men. Often there's a lot of narrative that shames or demonises them. So it's really important to motivate people, to show them what good looks like, have good role models and good examples of positive, respectful relationships and positive masculinity. So, digital literacy education, but also a really strengths-based approach and evidence-based approach there.

ZOË ROBINSON: Young people themselves have talked about making sure that they have access to the learning that can assist them with understanding information, misinformation and what's going on in the social world. So I think, obviously, investing in that kind of stuff. And perhaps one that I think everyone can take, that doesn't require any kind of Federal or State law, is actually the language that we're using and how we're having these conversations with our young people but also with adults and creating spaces where it is comfortable to be vulnerable together and figure those things out. So I think there is a big piece about media and language and how we're talking about this, to ensure that young people are feeling like they can come to safe spaces. But also, as adults, what is our responsibility to demonstrate good relationships?

CHANEL CONTOS: My recommendations would be echoing education for porn literacy and digital literacy as something the New South Wales Parliament can introduce through curriculum change; a porn and media literacy campaign for parents to understand that this is a topic they need to speak to their young people about—this is needed nationwide, but New South Wales can be pioneers in it—and resources that that campaign can then direct parents and teachers to, somewhere that posts resources for them to understand how to have these conversations and, obviously, how to implement that curriculum properly; and, honing in on the point that, when figuring out the solution and trying to fully understand the problem, speaking to young people is the only way that we're going to find a solution that actually works in how to prevent harm for them.

The CHAIR: That brings us to the end of our session this morning. I just wanted to take the opportunity to thank you all again for participating in the inquiry, both in the submissions and evidence, and assisting with the round tables we'll have this afternoon. And, Ms Contos, I particularly want to thank you. As the mother of a daughter who, when she found out you were going to be here, just said, "She's an absolute legend—the work she's been doing for us", I wanted to convey that message to you. Thank you all very much for being here today.

CHANEL CONTOS: Thank you. Tell her I say hi.

The CHAIR: I will.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms JENNIFER QUINCEY, Executive Director of Women, Family and Community Safety, Strategy, Policy and Commissioning, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

Mr MARK FOLLETT, Executive Director, Policy, Reform and Legislation, Law Reform and Legal Services Division, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

Adjunct Professor DALE TOLLIDAY, Senior Clinical Advisor on Children and Young People's Sexual Safety, NSW Ministry of Health and the Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for joining us today for our hearing. We also have some members online who may ask some questions. Would any of you like to make a short opening statement?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Yes, I would. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people as the traditional owners of the land we're meeting on today and pay my respects to Elders past and present. I'd also like to thank the Chair of this Committee for making this opportunity available, and other Committee members. Early exposure to pornography by children and prolonged exposure to harmful pornography, including violent and extremely explicit sexual content, by children, young people and adults can have significant health implications. Harmful pornography contributes to a high demand for health services across the State, including services for children and young people who have displayed problematic and harmful sexual behaviours, and sexual assault services.

This is occurring on such a scale that in some districts we have a significant delay in being able to deliver services. To ensure adequate and targeted New South Wales Government responses, it's crucial that pornography is understood through a gendered-violence lens. Women and girls are overwhelmingly represented as both the subjects of violence in pornographic content and as victims of practices such as revenge pornography, sex trafficking, coercion in pornography and image-based sexual abuse, including deepfake and AI-generated materials.

The CHAIR: I wonder if we might begin, Mr Tolliday, with you. Could you explain a bit what your role is? I must confess I didn't know about it, and I'd just like to know a bit more about the work that you do.

DALE TOLLIDAY: Certainly. NSW Health has a range of programs and services for children and young people from zero to 17 who have displayed or engaged in problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. The two particular programs are the Safe Wayz program, for children up to the age of 10—and there are people in every health district who lead those actions for those districts; I can speak more to that in a moment, or I might take up all of the time if I went into detail—and the New Street Services, which began in 1998, in New South Wales, which are now present in every health district in New South Wales, which are for children and young people aged 10 to 17 years who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour and who are not being managed or responded to in the criminal justice system. The Sydney children's hospital has a unit, which I head, of clinical advisers who provide clinical support and strategic input to those services. We also provide support to the New South Wales Ministry of Health in relation to the development of policy and responses. I sit a day a week at the Ministry of Health and four days a week at the Sydney Children's Hospitals Network.

The CHAIR: I'm not sure if you were here for our previous witnesses, but we heard evidence from, I think, some research in the UK about the increasing prevalence of sexual abuse being perpetrated by children or young people on children. I think it was a UK example that was given. Is that something that's supported in the work that you do, that increase?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Absolutely. In fact, it's not new. We provided evidence to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The final report, of course, was nearly eight years ago now. Our evidence was that we estimated, by looking at the available research at the time, that children and young people under the age of 18 were responsible for at least 50 per cent of the sexual abuse of children.

The CHAIR: I'm just trying to understand whether that's something that's been increasing—or you're saying it's always been there.

DALE TOLLIDAY: Our best estimate was that it was at least 50 per cent. The more recent study looking at this is the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which has shown that this is increasing over various age cohorts. We've spoken with the principal researcher, Ben Mathews, about that data, and we are very interested in whether that study is going to be able to reach down into younger ages more explicitly, in terms of people's experience under the age of 10 and in their early teen years. The research showing the uplift or the increase in sexual harm by high school age young men—adolescent young men—is extremely concerning. Our services are seeing a slightly different population in that our average age we're working with is younger and more likely to be directly connected and familiar to the children who have been harmed.

The CHAIR: Has that age cohort that you're dealing with changed?

DALE TOLLIDAY: In terms of new street services, it has increased slightly. A decade ago, the average age was about 13.5 and it's now just under 14 years. It has not really moved much.

The CHAIR: I wanted to ask Mr Follett, with the work that DCJ does, is that largely on the enforcement end with regard to child sex abuse material or deepfakes? Can you give us an overview of the work that your area does?

MARK FOLLETT: Certainly, Chair. I might ask Ms Quincey to jump in as well, because it's a bit of a dual effort. In DCJ, in our area in law reform and legal services and the policy reform and legislation area, we would provide advice to government on the policy settings of the relevant criminal and civil settings and to deal with emerging trends that may be developing in the community. One such example, as I think a previous witness talked about, is an increase in strangulation occurring. For example, our department would give advice to the government of the day around what could be done to increase the justice response to strangulation and make it easier to prove. In that case, there was a change to the offence type to make strangulation a simpliciter offence, which would make it easier to prove in the court. That's the work that we do at that end around child abuse crimes and intimate image offences. Jen's area does other programmatic work.

JENNIFER QUINCEY: In addition to what Mark has described happens within his space, within women's, family and community safety, we think about strategic reforms, policy development and some program delivery for preventing and addressing sexual violence. We have some actions within the NSW Sexual Violence Plan and I also look after the function that does the coordination and delivery of the New South Wales Pathways to Prevention primary prevention strategy. One of the key projects we deliver is around the New South Wales Sexual Violence Project Fund as well, which is funding some prevention and early intervention activity to help address sexual violence.

The CHAIR: I'd like to know a little bit more about some of the programs that already exist. The summary that you have just given also makes me want to ask about that. You provide policy and advice and, apart from strangulation, what are you saying now? What do we need to know? If you're tracking trends, what do we need to be looking at? What do we need to be considering in our recommendations? Maybe I should start with that. For both of you, you are keeping the Government abreast of what's happening, but it would be really helpful to know what you are saying.

MARK FOLLETT: Thank you for the opportunity. I think the evolving technology of AI is something that is very confronting for policymakers in numerous ways and across numerous areas. As the submissions to this Committee and the work of this Committee has shown, this emerging deepfake pornography challenge and how the law will grapple with AI now and into the future is certainly something that we're cognisant of. Legislation can be a very static instrument to evolving technologies, and that's something that we've seen the Commonwealth recently act on in that space.

Whether there's more to do from a New South Wales perspective to ensure full coverage is something that we are grappling with and something that I think is yet to really play out in the courts. Some of the work we would do is to respond to how, essentially, the justice system is responding to these wrongs and then how it's playing out in the court. Where the Committee goes in terms of having a look at these emerging technologies and the use of emerging technologies like AI for harmful pornography is something that I think is really front of mind for us from a policy perspective.

JENNIFER QUINCEY: From the program delivery perspective, what we're seeing or learning is in train at the moment. Some of the key ways that we've seen that we want to address in this space is through education, both education of children and young people but also of community groups and parents and adults as well. Some of the projects that we're funding within the Sexual Violence Project Fund really target that and target resources for different people to use and also within different communities. There are two-year projects and they're being evaluated as well. We're really keen to see what works in this space. I think that's one of the things that the focus is on. Absolutely, education is required, but also knowing exactly what works in which communities and for which cohorts is really important. That's what we're trying to build some evidence on, with what we're delivering at the moment.

The CHAIR: Before I pass on to my colleagues, can I just follow up on that? When you say you've got some programs there, what specifically? We hear a lot about education, and obviously getting people across issues is important. But what specifically does that look at? Are we talking about porn education for parents to talk to children? What specifically is it?

JENNIFER QUINCEY: For the ones that I'm referring to, the information is online and we can provide more information. But, briefly, there are five projects within the Sexual Violence Project Fund, which was a

two-year fund partly funded by the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments. Those five projects are doing slightly different things. One of them is around youth-led sexuality and gender diversity workshops, so increasing young people's understanding. We've got a project that's thinking about respectful relationships education that is co-designed with victim-survivors of domestic family and sexual violence. That's being delivered by NAPCAN and the Institute of Child Protection Studies. We've got a project around sex and sexuality awareness, education and resources for people with disability and disability support workers. That's being delivered by Northcott Society.

There's also some fantastic work—all of this is fantastic work—by Women's Health NSW around non-fatal strangulation. That's resources for the community and for practitioners as well to understand what it is, what the risks are and then how you respond. And then also one is being delivered by Rosie's Place, which is around capacity building to identify early signs of child sexual exploitation. What you'll see from those projects is really that they are around the resources and upskilling and capacity building and understanding, but with different cohorts and with a different focus. All of those projects are coming together and we're doing an evaluation of them individually but also combined to see what works so we know where to focus efforts going forward.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you all for being here. Professor Tolliday, could you perhaps give us some understanding of what is captured by problematic and harmful sexual behaviours and the type of children who are addressed by the programs that you oversee?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Certainly. The distinction between problematic and harmful sits in a modelling of another layer which is developmentally expected sexual behaviour. Children are sexual beings and develop over the course of their life span, hopefully in a healthy and harm-free way. Problematic behaviours are behaviours that are outside of the developmental ability or scope of a child that may cause the child problems and may raise concerns for those around them. They may be an indication that they themselves have been harmed, but they are not necessarily harmful towards self or others. They may be a display of a typically expected behaviour in an inappropriate place, like in a school or a public space, or it may be an inappropriate interpretation of a message of how to speak with another person or how to interact in a sexual way.

Harmful sexual behaviours are behaviours that are clearly out of scope and occur causing harm to others. They may also cause harm to the child. At the high end of harmful sexual behaviours there's violent and aggressive behaviour, but there are behaviours there that do not match children in terms of ability and understanding in order to be able to have an informed consent which is appropriate to their age or stage of development.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Could you give us an example of what would fall into the harmful category and the problematic category of behaviour—things that would flag children that would be brought to the attention of your program?

DALE TOLLIDAY: In the problematic category, I gave one example of a child engaging in a sexual behaviour, perhaps touching their own private area or genitals in a school, or even being unclothed or appearing to be comfortable being unclothed in a public place at an age or stage when that's not typically present. It may be a child displaying a sexual knowledge well beyond their years—and this more typically applies for children under the age of 10. Harmful behaviour would be a behaviour where a child is seeking sexual interaction with another person and is aiming to achieve that with a range of strategies, of which negotiating appropriate consent is not generally a part. There may be inequity between the children in terms of age development capacity, there may be elements of coercion, and clearly consent is not present.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: At what point would DCJ or other bodies become involved with children in the harmful category?

DALE TOLLIDAY: For DCJ to be involved, there would be a report made that would need to meet the criteria of the mandatory reporters guideline, which is a tool available online, that harm is being caused and that there are concerns about inequity, coercion and absence of consent.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: You indicated that there is significant delay in children being able to access these programs. Which districts are the most impacted by these delays, and what is the length of these delays?

DALE TOLLIDAY: I mentioned the Safe Wayz program and the New Street program. I think I really should speak to the sexual assault services to start with. There are over 50 locations that NSW Health delivers sexual assault services. In 2016-17 there were 49,305 occasions of service delivered by those sexual assault services. In 2023-24 there were 75,089 occasions of service delivered by those sexual assault services, so a significant impact that is being felt in the health system is just an enormous uplift. There are challenges across New South Wales, particularly in regional areas, to recruit to positions of sexual assault worker, to recruit to positions of Safe Wayz clinicians and New Street clinicians.

There are issues there in relation to whether there's enough workforce available, perhaps to do with the conditions or the perception of conditions around engaging in this work. NSW Health does provide a 24/7 response for all sexual assaults that have occurred in the last seven days in every district. That's a psychosocial integrated medical and forensic response. Because of the need to meet those situations, people who are needing a response that requires counselling over a period of time that might relate to behaviours or experiences that occurred some time ago are likely to have a lower priority out of those existing resources.

In relation to New Street services, as a part of the benefit delivered by the New South Wales Government to provide additional funding through its response to the recommendations of the royal commission, New Street services have been established as a specialist response in every rural local health district, which were prioritised to ensure that rural New South Wales children and families had access to services. Most of the private providers were and remain in the Sydney metropolitan area. There are two services in the Sydney metropolitan area that cover six local health districts. Neither can come close to meeting the demand for services at the moment. Waiting lists are not kept at those services, and part of the actions of those services are to try to facilitate, possibly through consultation, a referral to another provider for those children and young people.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If waiting lists aren't kept, what happens to the children who are referred to those New Street services?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Those New Street services provide a level of consultation to the referring agent and work with them to try and find the next best available option, which may be a generalist service that is provided with some input. It fits with the public health framework that we have in place through Children First, which is our framework for responding to problematic and harmful behaviour.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: For clarity, are the New Street services directed at children who have been the victims of inappropriate sexual behaviour, or are they children who may have initiated inappropriate sexual behaviour?

DALE TOLLIDAY: The latter—children who have engaged in those behaviours.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So we've got children who've been identified, who've engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour, and we're not confident that they are being referred in a timely fashion to people who can engage with them appropriately?

DALE TOLLIDAY: I think it's more that the volume of requests for service are greater than what our specialist services can meet, and the next phase, or part of what we're doing, is to try and find the next best option for them.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: But do we keep statistics so we can identify the scope of the problem, so we are able to work out ways of addressing this waiting list or mismatch between service demand and service provision?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Yes, we keep statistics of all referral requests made and the details of those requests.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Does anybody follow up whether the referral is able to be met?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Only at the at the front end, unless there's an ongoing role for NSW Health.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Are you able to furnish this Committee on notice any statistics about demand in local health districts and delays or any obstacles to providing services to everybody who is referred to that service?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Yes.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: That would be very helpful. And the younger service, the street—

DALE TOLLIDAY: Safe Wayz?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you. What are the access issues in Safe Wayz?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Safe Wayz is a program as opposed to a specialist service. So 1.6 FTE providers have been landed in every local health district, and their role is to facilitate a level of knowledge and confidence in the primary children's health services in those districts to include working with children presented with problematic, harmful behaviour. If a child is a client, say, of a child mental health service, those workers are to support the child mental health service to deliver services that include addressing the harmful behaviours.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If you've got—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I need to check in with other members and we will divide the time. I have another question. One of the places I wanted to take us back to was about the submission stating that the Sydney Children's Hospital Network notes that the problem of children and young people being exposed to pornographic material has worsened over the years, with increasing numbers of children being affected and at increasingly younger ages. I am reconciling that with the questions I asked earlier about whether you are seeing more and at what age. Given that that's in your submission, do you have any data that you can share on that? What information generally is being used to determine that there has been this worsening exposure to pornographic material for children and young people?

DALE TOLLIDAY: In terms of younger children, we're putting the data systems into place right now because this program has been rolling out just in the last two years. In relation to the New Street services, data in relation to exposure to pornography is collected at the point of referral. As an identified issue, that figure sits at around 20-something per cent. Once we engage with those children and young people, we find that figure lifts to about 95 per cent. It's not visible at the very beginning in those numbers, but it's an element in virtually all of the matters we're seeing.

The CHAIR: So it's something that gets revealed as you start working with the children.

DALE TOLLIDAY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I do have a question from Ms Emily Suvaal online.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: I wanted to ask you the same questions I asked the previous witnesses, which were around recommendations for the Committee. If you can be as specific as possible, that's helpful, but also feel free not to be specific, if that's easier for you. In terms of top-level recommendations for reform in this area, what would each of you individually recommend the Committee do in terms of making recommendations for the State Government to be able to assist?

MARK FOLLETT: I might go. It's a little difficult for us, as public servants, to make—

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: I know. I tried to phrase that in a way that wasn't asking you for an opinion. But what is the top, most pressing issue that we could address by way of reform?

MARK FOLLETT: Perhaps I'll answer it this way: From our perspective, in looking at the legislative settings, the Committee's work in relation to how the existing settings are dealing with emerging technologies like AI is probably the most pressing from a policy perspective, from my point of view. I don't know whether my colleagues want to jump in.

DALE TOLLIDAY: I made a reference to Children First, which is our framework for prevention and response in New South Wales. I was fortunate enough to be at the national symposium on problematic sexual behaviour of youth in the United States at the beginning of 2023, and it was recognised in the opening address that New South Wales is the only jurisdiction internationally which has adopted a public health framework for the prevention and response to these concerns. Part of that framework is a prevention strategy called *Talking About It*. We've completed the first phase of that strategy. We haven't yet had the second phase endorsed or funded, and that would be significant. There's a lot of anticipation of what could be in that in terms of further prevention activities and educational-based activities—things similar to what's been mentioned here at the table this morning.

JENNIFER QUINCEY: To build on those comments from my colleagues, with reviewing the submissions and hearing the presentations, it's the gaps that we have in our understanding: where we do need to focus on research of understanding what does work but also what the harmful impacts are. That's something that my area is focused on from a research agenda perspective. Any advice from the Committee around that would be duly noted by us.

The CHAIR: That brings us to the end of our time today.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Can I ask one question to be taken on notice?

DALE TOLLIDAY: Certainly.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Professor Tolliday, perhaps you could take on notice and provide the Committee with a bit more of an understanding of the Safe Wayz program and whether that actually deals with children who have those behaviours or whether it empowers other people in the health system to work effectively with those children, and the type of people that it trains, and any particular supports that are provided to a child who it has been notified falls into that age group and that category.

DALE TOLLIDAY: Certainly.

The CHAIR: That brings our time to an end. You have taken a couple of things on notice, and we appreciate that. The secretariat will be in touch with details of when we would like the responses. There also may be some supplementary questions when we go away and think more about the interesting things you have told us. We very much appreciate you making yourselves available today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Professor MICHAEL SALTER, Director, Childlight, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor Salter, for joining us today. Just to let you know, before we begin, we have two Committee members in the room, myself and the Hon. Susan Carter, and three Committee members online, so you will be getting questions from a range of places. Would you like to start by making a short opening statement?

MICHAEL SALTER: That would be great. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you all today. I appear today as the director of the Childlight East Asia and Pacific Hub. We are a partnership between the University of New South Wales, the University of Edinburgh and the Human Dignity Foundation. Our mission is to build the evidence base to drive coordinated action to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse. We made a submission to your inquiry because we are deeply concerned about the growing body of evidence linking the largely unregulated availability of online pornography to increased risks of sexual harm to children. Children are being exposed to pornography at increasingly younger ages, often before they are developmentally equipped to understand or process what they are seeing. This early exposure is associated with harmful sexual behaviours between peers, the normalisation of sexual violence into adulthood, and the grooming tactics that are being used by adult offenders on children.

We are particularly alarmed by the prevalence of pornography that depicts incest, coercion and actors who appear to be children. This material not only breaches community standards but also breaches Australian law. Yet this content remains widely accessible to children and to adults alike. Our submission also highlights how pornography business models, especially on subscription platforms, are influencing children to create and sell their own sexual content. This is part of a deeply troubling trend towards the financialisation of child sexual exploitation. Our world-first child sexual abuse perpetration prevalence survey has demonstrated that excessive and deviant pornography consumption is a significant risk factor for sexual offending against children, to such an extent that a reduction in the availability of pornography would likely reduce rates of child sex offending in the community. We believe that stronger regulation, age verification and public education are urgently needed. This is not just a moral issue; it is a public health and child protection imperative. Thank you very much, and I'm very happy to take any questions on our submission.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Professor Salter. We appreciate your submission and that opening statement. There are a couple of areas that I wanted to understand a bit more. You have done some really interesting research that I don't think we've heard about, or similar, from other sources. I wonder if you could talk a bit about your submission where you indicate research into children emulating behaviour of adult pornography creators. I wonder if you could talk a bit more about that research. Is that research that captured that content creation aspect, or is that some different kind of data you had?

MICHAEL SALTER: Just to clarify, is the question in relation to children emulating pornography content creators?

The CHAIR: Yes.

MICHAEL SALTER: It's not research that we've undertaken. The Stanford Internet Observatory, over the past couple of years, has been surfacing networks of accounts, particularly on Instagram, that appear to be run by minors who are selling sexual material at request. The Instagram algorithm functions in such a way as to link those kids together and also make them particularly visible to adults who are the kinds of adults that would buy that content. What we're seeing for these kids who are on Instagram and TikTok is that they are becoming very used to seeing and interacting with content creators who are trying to drive traffic back to OnlyFans. The way for a pornography content creator to garner traffic is that they have to keep a very active profile on social media.

What we are seeing over the past five or 10 years, as the notion of selling sexual content for money has become increasingly normalised in the community—and a very apparent dynamic on social media, and a very popular dynamic on social media—is that kids are also learning these lessons. There needs to be more research into this, certainly in Australia and overseas, but we feel very strongly—and this is also true for our colleagues in child protection—that we're increasingly seeing teenagers for whom there's a very simple equation here, which is that there is a market for their images and videos, and they have learnt how to solicit that market through observing and mimicking pornography content creators on social media.

The CHAIR: I think in some of our submissions there is a suggestion that there isn't a lot of or as much research as we need. How confident are you as a researcher about the causality? We've heard today about the maltreatment study from Queensland, I think it was. How confident are you about that causality between increased

exposure to the volume of pornography but also extreme pornography and what seems to be this changing behaviour in younger people and potentially those harmful behaviours?

MICHAEL SALTER: I think at this point it's indisputable. I think 10 years ago, when we were looking at reviews around the harms of pornography for kids, it was a bit of a struggle in terms of data. When we look at the really significant change in sexual behaviour across the community, for adults and for children, I don't think we have any explanation available to us other than the unprecedented availability of pornography at a young and early age. I think where this is very, very clear is the research on sexually harmful behaviour—so a rapid increase, particularly in adolescent boys, committing sexual offences against typically adolescent girls—and also the nature of that offending.

Essentially, children's sexual vocabulary has significantly expanded over the past 20 years. Even for kids 20 years ago and 30 years ago—and there were many teenage boys that harmed teenage girls 20 or 30 years ago; this is not a new thing—their sexual vocabulary was relatively limited simply because the sexual acts that they were aware of were relatively limited. That is also what's changed. It's not only that sexual violence is more common, but the nature of sexual violence has shifted towards much more egregious and invasive activity, which has been learnt through exposure to mainstream pornography.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that answer; that's very helpful. Obviously, a clear emphasis of your submission is about regulation and what could be done. Could you talk a bit about that? I have a follow-up or related question about the claim on page 7 of your submission where you've been able to calculate a reduction in risk of child sex offending if there was a reduction in exposure to pornography. I'm fascinated about how you've come to that. But perhaps the first part of that is what are your recommendations for reducing that exposure through regulation or other means?

MICHAEL SALTER: I think the first important point is age verification, which obviously the Commonwealth Government has committed to. Implementation would be really critical. One of the most popular ways for kids to get access to pornography is not through pornography sites but actually through social media. Age verification of pornography is not a simple matter but really important. It certainly pushes against the social media business model, because pornography is very salient content on social media. It drives a significant amount of traffic across a number of social media sites that you wouldn't normally associate with pornography. I think age verification is really critical.

I think a much more serious regime in relation to content regulation has been a challenging discussion for the community, to talk about what's the sort of pornography that's okay and what's the sort of pornography that's not okay. I think within very broad parameters, there's been a tendency just to, frankly, keep hands off because nobody wants to get too involved in the details of this discussion. From our point of view, the persistent emulation and performance of incest and child sexual abuse on mainstream adult pornography is a direct risk to children in multiple ways, including simply just the normalisation of child sexual abuse, but also the creation of material that sex offenders can use to groom children. To my mind, to think about how content and how pornography is regulated—to think about certain genres of pornography as being unacceptable and illegal.

I think the emulation of incest, according to Australian law by certain interpretations, is already illegal. I think this is a very important area for us to consider. In terms of the perpetration prevalence survey, we undertook a survey of about 2,000 Australian men. This is a nationally representative survey. We asked them a wide range of questions, including their pornography use, frequency of pornography use, type of pornography use. We asked about sexual interest in children, and we also asked about sexual offending against children. That includes sexual offending both online and offline. In our data, what we found is a direct relationship between frequency of pornography use and risk of sexual offending against children.

This doesn't mean per se that the more somebody looks at porn, the more likely they are to abuse children. What it does mean is that someone who's more likely to look at porn more frequently presents more of a risk to children. The reason for this, as far as we can surmise when we look at the literature and the clinical research on sex offenders, is particularly around this sexual preoccupation. Men who abuse children tend to be very sexually preoccupied and they tend to have quite broad arousal patterns. We see this in our data as well. For men who abuse children, the sorts of pornography that they're looking at tends to be more violent, tends to be more extreme, tends to be more deviant.

The relationship in our data between sex offending against kids and viewing pornography is dose dependent. What it suggests to us is that there is some causal role that pornography plays in terms of overall public health and public behaviour, such that the regulation of pornography and the removal of some of this content from circulation would very likely reduce the risk to children. That's not just the risk to children offline; it's also the risk to children online as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you for being here today, Professor Salter. I'm interested in your discussion about the way the algorithm works on social media and drives people to certain sites. We've heard evidence this morning that young people in particular are often driven to pornography through ads or pop-ups that appear in gaming sites. I understand if this is outside your particular area of expertise, but are there things that can be done to regulate the way the algorithm works so that people aren't being driven to particular porn sites, for example?

MICHAEL SALTER: It's a great question. It is an issue that has attempted to be tackled in the UK through their Online Safety Act, where they have started to look at how do we police algorithms. That includes, for example, simply that children under the age of 16 or under the age of 18 cannot be targeted by algorithmic processes on social media. Whether this is a good or a bad thing, I'm not so sure. I think that if we have an algorithm that is designed to deliver child-appropriate content to children, then that's a positive development. I'm not anti-algorithm, per se.

The issue that we have with algorithms is that, overwhelmingly, they are designed to drive engagement and they are designed to deliver content to users that keeps them engaged. That becomes very problematic when a significant proportion of your audience on social media—a significant proportion of your consumer base—is sexually interested in children. The algorithm can and will detect that sexual interest, and it will start to curate sexual content or users that this individual is likely to find appealing. We have similar challenges in relation to how algorithms are engaging with children. I do not think that it is beyond the scope of the law for us to think about how we draw up a regulatory regime that starts to determine safety by design principles for algorithms. It's certainly within scope for the technology sector.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Apart from the United Kingdom, are you aware of anywhere else where people are thinking about this safety by design and may have made attempts, or some examples that we could look at?

MICHAEL SALTER: I'm afraid not, no—not outside the UK.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I'm interested in your comments, and I wonder if you could expand a little bit more about OnlyFans. I don't have a lot of experience of that site, personally, but is it only a pornography site or is it used by a range of other people? For example, might a parent be comfortable with their 15-year-old accessing OnlyFans for some purposes? If you could talk a bit more about that, I'd be grateful.

MICHAEL SALTER: OnlyFans is a content subscription site, so users create an account and then individuals can subscribe to that account for a certain amount per week or per month in order to access their content. OnlyFans certainly insists that it is available for a variety of uses, and certainly you can find different sorts of users producing non-adult content on OnlyFans. But, overwhelmingly, pornography is the OnlyFans business model. That's where it generates most of its revenue, and that's where its most wealthy users are situated.

Over the last five or six years, and particularly during COVID-19, we saw a significant uplift in the number of content creators on OnlyFans providing material. Those users are then obliged to be very active on sites like Twitter—X—or Reddit. That's really where, essentially, they're advertising their content and driving traffic back to OnlyFans. OnlyFans is not, in and of itself, a social media site. It's not somewhere for content creators to generate a consumer base.

On sites like Instagram and TikTok, we'll often see OnlyFans content creators. It's much more wink-wink, nudge-nudge, because they can't technically post adult content to those sites. This is where we see kids just really getting used to the presence of content creators selling images and videos of themselves. As I said earlier, there is a certain obvious logic to a 13- or a 14-year-old who realises that they can sell an image or a video for $100, as opposed to spending several hours pushing trolleys around the car park at Woolworths to earn the same amount of money.

In my conversations with my law enforcement colleagues, and also speaking with colleagues who work in financial intelligence in the banks, they are detecting this activity with increasing frequency. The banks are now intervening and shutting down accounts of teenagers because they're seeing this irregular pattern of payment. OnlyFans has had issues in the past in which minors have been selling content through OnlyFans, but they've been doing that, generally, with a complicit adult because they need an adult bank account and other sorts of identity verification. Kids are then looking at other systems, more informal systems, through social media and through other payment rails in order to advertise their material and also take payment.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Thank you for appearing. You mentioned the Online Safety Act from the UK, and many of the issues that you're describing about safety by design were a theme that came up consistently in the social media summit that the State Government held recently. My understanding is that a lot of the

legislation is Federal or Commonwealth legislation but, to your understanding, are there steps that we can take as a State to try to regulate or enforce the need for safety by design to be embedded within these programs?

MICHAEL SALTER: I think it is a really good question. Given the way the technology sector is structured at the moment, it becomes really challenging. It's quite challenging for Australia to oblige the technology sector to deliver services and products to us that conform with our community standards or legal obligations. I think this starts to raise questions about digital sovereignty—about the capacity of a sovereign State like Australia to determine how the technology sector operates within our own borders. These are questions that I don't think we've really grappled with, and we're not the only country where that's a challenge.

I do think that there is a really important role at a State level about how we also empower educators and parents, how we start to draw that line and how we start to articulate things as basic as "Incest pornography is not okay." It's interesting that that is not a statement that we've actually heard very often in the public domain, so I do think inquiries like this are really important. I recognise the challenge that we face at a State level in terms of how do we actually leverage change. I think that's also a challenge that confronts us at a national level as well.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I'm sorry if you touched on this before I had the chance to join, but I was interested in that part of your submission where you were talking about the relationship between exposure to pornography and increases in harmful sexual behaviour. There was a line where you said that the rate of sexual violence against adolescent girls by other adolescents who are current or former romantic partners has doubled in a single generation. Can you talk us through a little bit of the data about where that's come from and whether you think there's a key link between increased access to pornography and those statistics?

MICHAEL SALTER: The data comes from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, and the specific paper that summarises that data is provided in the reference list. If you're familiar with the ACMS, it's a retrospective survey of 8,000 Australians—a really very rigorous, gold-standard public health study looking at all forms of child abuse and maltreatment, including child sexual abuse. The study paid very close attention to questions around who was perpetrating. What the study has found is that the youngest cohort that filled out the survey is the most likely to report sexual violence from other children—that, in fact, over time, in terms of contact offending, there's actually been somewhat of a decline amongst adults sexually abusing children and contact offending. Unfortunately, there's been a significant increase in them abusing children in other ways online.

If we were to look at the last 20 years and if we were to look at the really substantive increase in sexual violence, particularly committed by teenage boys against teenage girls, there's a real question there around what's changed in the last generation that would have such a dramatic impact on sexual practice in particular. I'm not the only person; it's certainly the view of the study leads for the ACMS that pornography is a leading explanatory factor there.

We can look at other changes in youth mental health, in depression and anxiety and other behavioural problems. It's notable that many of those problems are also linked to the social changes associated with technological change over the last 25 years. I wouldn't want to suggest that pornography is the only issue. It's important to recognise that teenage boys have always been among the most physically and sexually violent cohort in the community. They've always committed a significant proportion of all sexual offences, but this rapid increase over the last 20 years correlates very directly with the unprecedented commercial availability of online pornography.

The CHAIR: I have one question which follows on from the discussion particularly of teenage boys. We have to talk about the realities, but also then the welfare of that particular group as well. I'm always concerned that we don't leave them out of the discussion. I note in your recommendation that you talk about an unmet need for services for boys and men concerned about their use of pornography. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that?

MICHAEL SALTER: In our data on really excessive pornography use and in other areas of our research, what we find is a cohort of boys and men where their pornography use is just excessive—hours and hours and hours a day—and also their arousal patterns are not normal. The content that they find arousing is not normal. At the moment, for a boy or a man who notes that he's engaging in that sort of behaviour, there's really nowhere for him to go. Most psychologists are not trained to treat these sorts of sexual problems. Often, in fact, he needs to commit an offence before he's going to receive any support. We've been waiting for some years for the Commonwealth tender for Stop It Now!, which is an early intervention service for people concerned about their sexual feelings towards children. That is supposed to be a $10 million national service but, unfortunately, it's been held up at the Commonwealth level for a long time.

In terms of what we could do at a State level, it would be fantastic to think about workforce development and also reaching out to boys and men about their pornography consumption because I think the data's quite clear

that for men and boys who are really sexually preoccupied, they're consuming pornography content that is concerning. If we're able to help them identify that that's unhealthy and if we can support them into early intervention—to just talk with someone about what's going on for them—to manage that behaviour, that is going to reduce risk to children and also is likely to reduce sexual risk to adults as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. It just strikes me, when listening to your evidence and reading your submission, it's almost this is one of the last frontiers of stigma or reticence to be explicit, ironically, about what is not okay. What you're saying is we don't hear things like, "That is not okay". To have "That is not okay" available is not something that we've yet come to public acceptance and we can talk about so that we can say, "That is not okay for that type of porn to be available." Thank you for that. It's a really interesting way of thinking about it. I will just check with my colleagues whether there are final questions.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: No. Many, but I'm good.

The CHAIR: That being the case, I just want to thank you, Professor Salter, for making yourself available and for your submission. It may be that we do have further questions for you, some supplementary questions, and the secretariat will be in touch about those. I don't think you took anything on notice; but if you did, we'd also get in touch about those. We very much appreciate your time and expertise. Thanks so much.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Ms REBECCA BUTTERWORTH, Principal, Hunter Valley Grammar School, Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (NSW), before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Ms LOURDES MEJIA, Principal, Montgrove College, Chair of Student Wellbeing and Learning Committee, Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (NSW), before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

Mrs LORRAE SAMPSON, Principal, Nowra Anglican College, Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (NSW), before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to the next session of our hearing today. Thank you very much for joining us. I note that all the witnesses are online. We also have some of our Committee members joining us online, so our witnesses may get questions from both in the room and online. Would any of you like to make a short opening statement?

LOURDES MEJIA: We all belong to AHISA, which is the Association of Heads of Independent Schools. We just want to comment that we agree that education plays an important role in giving skills to students to not engage with harm or harmful pornography. However, we think that just work in the classrooms is not enough and would recommend more like a whole-school approach where we can engage parents and try to equip them with skills, such as helping their own children to stay safe on the internet while they're at home, and also to be able to have meaningful conversations with their children on this topic.

The CHAIR: You're all principals. I wondered if you had any experiences that you'd like to share that are relevant to the types of issues we've been discussing throughout this inquiry, such as particular behaviours in the playground or classroom?

LORRAE SAMPSON: Yes. I've seen an increase in the impacts of increasing viewing of pornography on our young people, and I've seen an increase in the objectification of our young girls, in particular, in a sexual way by some boys. I'm also seeing that girls are becoming less empathetic towards each other and they're becoming more anxious, particularly when they get up into years 9 and 10. They are less able to negotiate difficult situations with each other as well. That's really concerning with girls. I'm seeing girls and teachers as well having to put up with boys making inappropriate sexual inuendoes or noises. That's an increase that I've seen in my time as a principal.

The CHAIR: How are you suggesting that there's a connection to pornography or pornography use?

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: I think one of the things that I'm noticing is that, at a younger and younger age, students are having access to social media in a fairly unregulated way. Then what we're seeing is things like the sharing of images that are sexualised images between students, for instance. I'm actually quite surprised by the age sometimes. It has started in our school, sometimes around year 6 and then accelerates in year 7. The connection with pornography, I think, we're seeing through the nature of the images that students are seeing and the kinds of videos that they might be accessing and screenshotting and then sharing amongst themselves. I would also add in the other thing that I'm seeing that's a cause for concern is increasing focus on body image, not only for girls but for boys as well, and, as they get older, an increasing regulating of their body image, a hyper masculinity, sometimes starts to emerge, bodybuilding. Whether or not there's a direct link to pornography, but certainly to some of the more masculinised things that they're accessing through social media and particularly influencers on things like Instagram as well.

LOURDES MEJIA: I would also agree that I've seen much younger instances of children, as young as year 2 or year 1. You can see that they have had some access to pornography from perhaps the stories that they tell or even sometimes the drawings or things that they write, little notes that they pass to each other that I have seen recently that have quite surprised me.

The CHAIR: How frequent? One of you mentioned also female teachers being subjected to different types of behaviours. How regular is this kind of behaviour or how normal, for want of a better term? And what are you able to do? What are you doing about it? What's your approach to this in your schools currently?

LORRAE SAMPSON: It's unacceptable in our codes of behaviour that our students follow, so we always address the students. A teacher will let someone like their head of department or an executive member know, and we address that. We take it very seriously, so we would probably suspend students if they were doing things like that. But probably at least once a week I will read something on our behaviour management system where a staff member can say this happened in the classroom, and that's just ones that have reported it, but it's happening in the playground or maybe a comment in the classroom or maybe one of the other students has reported they've heard another person say that.

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: In our context, it's localised within particular groups of boys that we identify. One of the things that we're looking at is both the consequences, but how we actually redirect and educate the boys into thinking differently, so looking at a multi-pronged approach of working directly with the boys concerned and their families—importantly, their parents have to be with us on the journey—then also looking at some interventions that we can bring in that are quite targeted to those groups as well. So it's kind of a multi-pronged approach that we try and do, but I'm finding that it's localised to particular groups of students and clusters of boys but then it amplifies throughout the year level, and particularly for our younger female teachers as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you all for being here. Very helpfully you've provided in your submissions some resources that you've found very useful in schools. They appear to be education resources. I'm just wondering whether you have any experience of any software or other programs, because we've heard evidence that children are seeing images at school, sometimes on either their BYOD or school devices. We've also heard evidence that they're clearly accessing it on the school bus on the way home. I mean, there's an education response, but have you got any experience of any blockers that actually work?

LOURDES MEJIA: That's a big question. I think we all employ some kind of filtering. I don't know what you use. We use Linewize, and we're aware that it has limitations, that the students can use their own methods to sidestep our security and, although our students aren't allowed to have their mobiles with them, I'm sure they find ways to be able to use their hotspots so that they're off our network. We try our best, but we are aware of the limitations. I mean, we all have IT teams that constantly try to research. They go to conferences to see what better products there are out there.

LORRAE SAMPSON: In our school, sometimes it's the ad within the app that's being used, so even though we have filters on the apps, you can't block all of the ads that pop up. When you increase the level of security, then you accidentally stop the good side of it, of allowing the children to get onto the apps that you need to get onto as well.

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: Yes, and I would agree that the issue is less their laptops and more their smart device and the triangulations through hotspotting off their phone. Most of the firewalls in schools will block—ours is fairly rigorous, so it will block a lot of things. Then we can usually pick up, usually through teachers monitoring in class, when a student has snuck a phone in and is trying to hotspot. It does come back to, though, the smartphones and the fact that younger and younger children have smartphones or smart devices, and that is causing quite a problem in schools with fairly unregulated access at home that then comes into the school context. Hence our statement that partnership with parents is really important.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: With your discussions with parents, do you think that some parents are overconfident because they have blockers on the internet at home? Do you think that parents are fully aware of everything that their children are accessing online?

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: Definitely not. We have to speak to this too, but we have the full gamut of parents, from those who highly regulate at home to those who actually believe that their child needs to be on social media and needs to have a smart device in order to be socially connected. So there is a lot of work that we try and do with our parents to help them understand what their child might be accessing, but I would say that a number of parents are not aware of what their child is doing on their smart device.

LORRAE SAMPSON: I also don't think they're actually understanding the images and the content that their children are viewing, and they get a bit of a shock when they find out that this is what they've been looking at.

LOURDES MEJIA: And sometimes we think it's even just basic parenting skills of being able to say no, being able to take their phones away, those basic things that some families—not all the families in the school, but you only need a few people to bring it into the school who access these things at home. So we even think if some resources could be put into a broader educating of parents on how to help them to help their kids regulate their internet use and their device use. It's a question that I think a lot of schools are trying to tackle as well.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I wanted to ask something that followed on a little bit from that line of questioning. Just in terms of the parent piece, you all said that you think there's more that can be done to help parents navigate through this and, as a parent, I would agree with that. I'm just wondering are there any sort of programs that you're aware of that maybe you've run in your schools that also have parent components or things that we should be looking at recommending the Government consider supporting that might help tackle these issues for families?

LOURDES MEJIA: Yes. A lot of the ones that we listed there in the paper do have a parent component. I just don't have in my head at the moment what the name is, but we were looking at a program that parents can

use at home to help filter what kids see at home and also to restrict the time that they are on the internet. I just can't remember what the program is called.

LORRAE SAMPSON: There are also lots of good programs, like Triple P parenting, but they're not actually targeted at pornography. But it's good setting boundaries for children. We had a man come and speak with our parents who was very helpful. He made me realise that it's actually the way that we even put phones in the hands of one- and two-year-olds just to keep them occupied and quiet while the parents go and have a coffee or go to the gym or whatever. I think we're setting our parents up for problems later in life because their children demand the use of the phone. They need to have the boundaries put in a lot earlier. When you get to the age of, say, 12 or 13, they're already used to looking at a phone for three or four-plus hours a day just to keep them socially quiet on there. That's a tricky thing to overcome. When they get to become a teenager and the parents are then saying, "No, you can't have this," then they really struggle to enforce that.

LOURDES MEJIA: Yes, I would just add one thing there, that I think the pornography piece comes after the damage has been done a little bit, where students or young people and children are having access to smart devices and online, and so then the pornography slips into an unregulated environment for them. In answer to your question around good programs, I think that's actually something that would be good to investigate further. I think we'd all tap into them. What we're finding is we're not getting the turnout of parents when we do run events, so we get the converted rather than the people who we'd really like in the room.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Do you think some parents are maybe just not aware? Some of the data that we've got through this inquiry—particularly how young some children are accessing or seeing these images for the first time. Is there a piece there around not just parent engagement but also awareness that, actually, this is something you should be thinking about, even if your children are in primary school? Would that help?

LOURDES MEJIA: Yes, I would agree with that. There was another point made that certain families from a different cultural background, or recent migrants who haven't grown up with any of this kind of thing, they think that they're exempt or "This is never going to happen to my child." I'm seeing more instances of that where these children are accessing hours of this and the parents are completely "How could that possibly happen?" because it just wasn't part of how they were brought up and their own values.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: In terms of the responses of parents where issues do arise, obviously there is a really important parental piece around developing attitudes about relationships and gender roles. Have you noticed any sort of shift, given your vast experience around parental attitudes, towards modelling respectful relationships and talking about respect and healthy models of masculinity, particularly to their sons?

LORRAE SAMPSON: I think our parents do speak to their children, perhaps not enough about—and having those really direct conversations. I think they need some training in how to have those good conversations with their young people—just to help the parents to have better skills in having conversations is really important.

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: I would add that there's a little bit of a generational piece here as well, where parents assume that maybe the way in which their own parents worked with them would actually translate into raising young people now too. I think, particularly for some of our senior school parents, it's navigating the way to reach out to their child and talk about questions of consent and gender roles in a way that resonates, and a way that their child will listen to that, too. There is a lot of support, I think, that parents are looking for. They will usually turn to schools to get that support or hope that we will do that work for them.

The CHAIR: You are here also representing the association. The association has quite a number of members. I presume that captures a variety of religious schools as well. Is that correct?

LOURDES MEJIA: Yes.

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: Yes.

LORRAE SAMPSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: We've had the examples that you've given but I'm wondering, across the range of your members, how uniform is the approach to education around consent and pornography? I note that you mentioned several external providers but I wondered, is there a uniform approach within your membership? Are there gaps that we should be considering that school might not be the place where this information is being shared?

LORRAE SAMPSON: It's captured in the PDHPE syllabus but different schools can place different emphases on different parts of that syllabus. I know in my school that our PDHPE staff do speak about respect, consent and respectful relationships. There's a big emphasis on that. I think most of the schools in our association would have that same approach, but different schools can have a slightly different take on that.

The CHAIR: But not explicitly pornography, or just whatever is captured within the current curriculum.

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: I wouldn't be able to speak to all of the schools, but I would suspect that questions of respectful relationships, even pornography, would come up through PDHPE because it's part of the frame of reference in terms of what they're looking at. The level of comfort, I will say, from families in terms of what they want us to be talking about in PDHPE can really vary, though, as well. Some families would prefer that they do the talking around education around consent, relationships and so on, so we do sometimes get into a tricky space in that regard.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: My question was around the amount of work that has now been done online and, in particular, the amount of homework for your school. In your experience, would you say that there is an average figure that you could give us on in terms of, per week, how much homework students at your school are being sent home to do? Obviously it varies but in particular I'm interested in the proportion that is online. We hear a lot about the need for us to better regulate what children are being exposed to. But, in terms of how in practice we do that, I'm just curious as to how much time our students are spending on online.

LOURDES MEJIA: I think this really does vary from school to school. I know that some schools are trying to pull back on how much they do online at home—like, two hours at the most, or the age that they start having more online work might be more year 9 and up, just increasing that age when they really start doing work online. But that would differ from school to school. We did actually look at an article just now—I think it was in *The Australian*—that showed that, in Australia, something like 10 per cent of students had 80 hours or more of screen time, which we thought was a lot.

LORRAE SAMPSON: I also see in my school in the primary school and in the junior areas we really focus on not doing homework online. It's all either doing handwritten work as well or allowing our young people to be involved in lots of activities with environmental outside play. In the senior school they do a lot more, but it's an increasing amount. I don't expect any year 7s to be doing as much online work as a year 12 student, for example.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: But online homework is now a part of the curriculum. If parents aren't able to supervise at all times what their child is doing online, then there is a reasonable risk even in that. I suppose what I'm trying to get at is that there is an inherent risk with doing anything online. We are now expecting and requiring not only parents but families to do a proportion of their schooling and their homework online. Would a better model not be to, in all circumstances, make the online space a safer space? How would you suggest that we, as a State committee, make recommendations to do that?

REBECCA BUTTERWORTH: It's a tricky question actually. How social media companies and other people regulate is a big thing, and I know the eSafety Commissioner has done a lot of work on that. It's a really tricky question, I think, because we have our safeguards and our firewalls in schools. I think the other piece is what sort of safeguards families can put on their devices at home alongside regulating the amount of access that a child has online at home as well. We can do our part at schools in terms of the work we set for kids to take home, to make sure that it's appropriate for the age and appropriate in terms of the amount of online time that a student may have.

LORRAE SAMPSON: Homework should be revising what you've learnt at school for the day. The important thing is what's happened in the day at school. It's not that you do nothing during the day and then you do your work at home. That's not what we do at all. It's consolidating the learning through the day. What I would say is that at home the students are multitasking. They've got their phone on next to their computer. The computer might be what they're working on, but every time that device pings, it takes away their attention. That's what's creating a lot of time.

Research that I've come across from the Black Dog Institute from 2024 says that our children are spending over 4.5 hours of screen time a day that's not related to school. So it's all about the social side. I think it's really alarming that our young people are spending so much non-school time on phones and other devices. I would recommend that parents insist that children do their homework or their online work in a public space in the house. They just can't take their phone into their bedroom and have a free-for-all. They really need to have a break from the constant messages that come. It's hard for parents to know that they can set those boundaries and put the phone in the kitchen.

LOURDES MEJIA: Taking the phones out of their beds at night.

The CHAIR: Were there any other questions from our online Committee members? No? That being the case, we've come to the end of the session today. I thank you all very much for making the time to appear. We appreciate that you must have very busy work days, so we appreciate you taking the time out and for making your submissions. I don't think there were any questions taken on notice, but there may be some supplementary questions that follow. The secretariat will be in touch if that is the case.

LORRAE SAMPSON: Thank you to you too for giving us this opportunity.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Ms MAREE CRABBE, Co-founder and Director, It's time we talked, affirmed and examined

Ms KRISTY TURNBULL, Practice Specialist, Relationship and Sexuality Education, Interrelate, affirmed and examined

Ms STEFANIE KENDALL, Senior Educator, Interrelate, affirmed and examined

Ms NICOLA PALFREY, Head of Clinical Practice, headspace, affirmed and examined

Mr MATT TYLER, Executive Director, The Men's Project, Jesuit Social Services, sworn and examined

Ms GEORGIA NALDRETT, Manager, Stop It Now!, Jesuit Social Services, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank witnesses for joining us today. We have a large panel for this session but we do have extra time, so feel free to answer fulsomely. We'll try to make sure we hear from everyone. I understand there's a specific order that we're going to take opening statements in, so I will cede control of that to you.

MAREE CRABBE: I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to Elders past and present. Thank you to the Committee for the invitation to give evidence here today. My name is Maree Crabbe and I am co-founder and director of It's time we talked, a violence prevention initiative focused on preventing pornography's harms to children and young people. We support parents, schools, other professionals from a wide range of sectors who work with children and young people and their families, and policymakers to understand and address pornography's influence. This issue has been the focus of my work for the last 16 years.

There are four key things that we need to understand about pornography and young people. The first is that children and young people are being exposed to pornography, both intentionally and accidentally, at very high rates and often from very young ages, with a significant portion of young people, particularly among young men, exposed frequently, weekly or more often. The second is that the pornography that children and young people see—that is mostly free, online, mainstream pornography—frequently depicts a wide range of deeply problematic themes, including gendered aggression and hostility, incest themes, childlike themes, racism, homophobia, transphobia and sexual violence. Much of what is conveyed through mainstream pornography is the antithesis of what we would want children and young people to learn about relationships and sex.

The third thing is that pornography is impacting on children and young people in a whole range of ways, and its impacts are overwhelmingly negative. Pornography has become a key source of information about sexuality for young people, and there is evidence that it's impacting on their attitudes and understandings and behaviours, including through, as we've heard, its contributions to an increase in problematic, harmful and violent sexual behaviours. Finally, we need to act. We cannot continue to allow the porn industry to have unfettered access into children and young people's lives. We need coordinated, complementary measures to prevent and limit their exposure to pornography, and also to reduce its harms when exposure occurs.

I think the first of these four points is pretty uncontroversial. There is widespread agreement and acknowledgement that children and young people see pornography. But I'm conscious that there are some who seek to downplay both the problematic nature of mainstream pornography and its harms to children and young people and, instead, sometimes prefer to focus on the potential for pornography to play a positive role in children's lives. I don't think that these more positive and optimistic readings of pornography and its influence on children and young people are well founded. They're contrary to the bulk of evidence and to the insights of many children, young people and the people who work with them on the ground, as, again, we have heard through this inquiry. There is more to learn and to understand, but the evidence of its harms is compelling, and I look forward to opportunities to respond to your questions.

KRISTY TURNBULL: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. Interrelate's submission to this inquiry is grounded in its extensive work for over 90 years in relationship and sexuality education. We deliver this education to students from year 3 upwards. We are a team of educators delivering curriculum-aligned programs to students face to face and online. We see and hear firsthand the impact pornography is having on their development, relationships, language and wellbeing.

Pornography, whether accessed deliberately or just stumbled across, is often viewed long before young people have the skills to critically interpret it. We see pornography shaping expectations about consent, intimacy, self-worth and sexual experiences. We have observed rising rates of misinformation about healthy sexual relationships, greater normalisation of aggression, coercion and increasing levels of anxiety, shame and confusion among young people. Importantly, these impacts are not limited to mental health alone. They extend into their emotional resilience, relationship dynamics and physical safety.

We've listened to speakers in this hearing frame pornography education as a sensitive topic. We feel this is often a projection of adult discomfort, not a reflection of the child's needs. Young people are encountering pornography, often without the guidance or framework they need to make sense of what they see. There's an issue in regard to lack of adult confidence, skills and education in responding to questions appropriately and honestly. When we avoid these conversations under the guise of sensitivity, we leave children and young people to navigate complex messages alone.

If we stop centring adult discomfort and start prioritising the rights of children and young people to have access to clear, factual and age-appropriate information about bodies, relationships, consent and digital media, then we can begin to have an emotionally intelligent generation who display critical thinking skills. Our key message to the Committee is that proactive, age-appropriate, evidence-based, collaborative education is vital. Young people need safe spaces to discuss what they're encountering and form healthier attitudes on consent, respectful relationships and intimacy. We welcome your questions and we look forward to contributing to the conversation.

NICOLA PALFREY: I too would like to acknowledge we're meeting today on the lands of the Gadigal people, and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I'm head of clinical practice at headspace national, and I'm here today representing the views of young people that we consulted very widely for our submission from our youth reference group, our family reference group and also the experiences of those that run our services across the country, including 52 centres in New South Wales.

Our submission was committed to sharing the insights off the back of the quality of the research that exists with my fellow panellists that has been submitted as well. We really wanted to bring the voice of young people here today because we tend to, over and over again, have conversations about young people without them being present, and so they are the voices that I hope to bring today. Some of the key insights that young people bring to us and when they talk about the impacts of pornography on them is that they are willing and unwilling recipients of this content and they want to be able to be supported to make sense of it, to navigate relationships safely and to be able to seek help or assistance without shame or stigma. I think "the last bastion" is a very good way of putting it. We shut down these conversations, and I think the decentring of adult discomfort is a very vital point to this conversation.

Staff and family members, as you've heard already today, are welcoming and are daunted by this topic and really want help and assistance in how to have these conversations with their children. There is a generational divide, and the shock when people see not just the age but the lack of understanding of the content that young people are exposed to is a real issue that we need to be on the front foot about. Apart from that, I will hand over to my colleagues as we want to leave some time for questions. Thanks for having us today.

MATT TYLER: Thank you, Chair, and your parliamentary colleagues for holding this really important inquiry. I'd like to join others in acknowledging the lands we're meeting on, the land of the Gadigal people, and pay respects to their Elders past and present. I'd also like to acknowledge any victim-survivors of all forms of violence and abuse, including any that are with us today, either in person or online. Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation working to build a just society, and we've engaged with boys and men in particular for almost 50 years. This includes building on the strengths of communities in Mount Druitt in New South Wales to address disadvantage since 2008. Our contributions to this inquiry are informed predominantly by the work of the Men's Project, which includes engaging with hundreds of schools each year, delivering prevention programs at sports clubs and also delivering a helpline to prevent child sexual abuse, Stop It Now!, for adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts or behaviours towards children.

I'll share some brief reflections based upon some of our research and practice and then pass to Georgia, who will focus specifically on the links between pornography and child sexual abuse. We share the New South Wales Government's concerns about harmful pornography. Consider these statistics from our 2024 Man Box research, completed in partnership with Respect Victoria, based on a nationally representative sample of over 3,500 Australian men. Two thirds of respondents to that survey shared that they had viewed violent pornography in the last six months. Men with the highest levels of endorsement of stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a man were more likely to use pornography, especially true of violent pornography, and these same men were also more likely to have perpetrated violence and hold violent-supportive attitudes.

Moving to separate research, and this is captured in our paper *Pathways to onset of harmful sexual behaviour* written with colleagues at the University of Melbourne, pornography features prominently as a driver and amplifier of harmful sexual behaviour amongst young people. According to the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, which was of course referred to earlier, child-on-child sexual abuse accounts for 50 per cent of all child sexual abuse that's experienced by young Australians, and pornography appears to be playing a significant role in this. The reality is that many young people will not seek help from an adult regarding pornography or sex due to

shame or a range of other fears. There's currently no online early intervention service in Australia to work with children worried about their sexual thoughts and behaviours that enables them to seek help. We're working to address this gap and are happy to share more about that as part of any follow-up questions.

GEORGIA NALDRETT: I'd like to join my colleagues in acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land, the Gadigal people, and pay my respect to their Elders, past and present. I also acknowledge any victim-survivors here with us today and joining us online. As we heard from Michael Salter earlier, Jesuit Social Services has conducted research in partnership with the University of New South Wales to understand the prevalence of the perpetration of child sexual abuse. Based on the survey of almost 2,000 men, we found that one in five had experienced sexual feelings towards children or had committed a sexual offence against a child. This includes 6.7 per cent of men disclosing that they had accessed child abuse material online in their lifetime.

We found that of those men who pose a risk to children, they were 11 times more likely to access violent pornography and 26 times more likely to access pornography depicting bestiality. Our staff working on the Stop It Now! helpline often report that early exposure to pornography, as well as escalation in use of pornography and harmful content, can play an important role in understanding why some people commit child sexual abuse offences. We hear in practice and in research, and we've already heard today, that a lot of individuals come across child sexual abuse material for the first time by accident, often when they are children and young people themselves.

Our recommendations outlined in the submission—and given the time constraints, I won't go into great detail—highlight the need for a more proactive approach to education, including better equipping our teachers to have these conversations; strengthened regulation; placing positive duty on tech companies for the content that is housed on their websites; age restrictions; and, finally, the establishment of an anonymous support service for young people that is promoted online, where we know young people are engaging. We look forward to hearing your questions and going into more detail.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for those statements. I've got a number of questions, but I might start with the ones raised by your opening statements. I might start with Ms Crabbe. It feels like I'm jumping straight into things, but we've had the morning session and I know that many of you have been here. Forgive me if we jump straight in. You note that in submissions and some of the evidence there is discussion about the potential positive aspects of pornography. It is something that has been consistent across the submissions—that for particular cohorts, particularly of young people, the only exposure to sexual education that might be of a diverse character is through accessing pornography and that can be a helpful mechanism for learning and appreciating their own desire. What do you say to that aspect—that that's a legitimate place for those people to go to learn?

MAREE CRABBE: In our own interviews with young people, many LGBTQ young people do talk about pornography being a place where they see themselves represented. They lament the lack of access to sexuality education and relationships education that does feel appropriate and relevant for them. But sometimes that's where the discussion about pornography and its role in LGBTQ young people's lives ends. If you go on to ask them more about their experiences of that, they often describe some of the very same kinds of dynamics around incest themes, around childlike themes, around large age differences and around gendered aggression, where, regardless of the genders of those depicted, they describe—and research also describes—a replication of those same kind of dominant masculine characters and submissive, more feminised characters.

Young people talk about feeling that pornography is not a good place for them to learn about sexuality and that, in some ways, it leaves them more vulnerable to types of harm because it kind of grooms them into models of sexuality that are not about respectful, mutual, consenting, equal relationships. I think that we need to acknowledge that pornography, for many young people, is the only place that they can see anything that is more overtly expressive of LGBTQ sexuality but that often we also see gendered aggression, homophobic language and transphobic language. Those things impact on their sense of self and their sexual socialisation in similarly problematic ways and, in some ways, some amplified ways than in heterosexual, cisgender young people.

The CHAIR: If I could go to Ms Turnbull and Ms Kendall, Interrelate is very much in the education space. You talk about delivering curriculum-aligned programs. One of the key themes that keeps coming up is education, education, education. Is that saying to us that you can align your content to the curriculum, but is the curriculum doing the job it needs to do?

STEFANIE KENDALL: We go into schools focusing on the PDHPE curriculum, and we talk to children about their bodies. One of the big things we talk about is puberty. We can start those conversations off on something that's very relatable to them and that does meet the curriculum. We can talk about how to show respect to their bodies. We can talk about consent around their bodies, how to keep themselves safe and have protective behaviours in place, where they can go to and who they can talk to if they ever find that something's

happened to them. But our conversations lead off from curriculum in our discussions. We allow our students to ask us questions face to face on anything we've talked about, but we also leave question boxes. That's where we sometimes go off curriculum in terms of our students feeling safe enough to be able to ask us questions that might not be in the curriculum for that stage or for that age.

We take that opportunity to be able to answer those questions for them in a safe place. We give age-appropriate answers that give them information that can help them understand. One of the questions that we continually get now, and have done for the last few years, is what is pornography? What is porn? What is a porno? If we're able to answer that question for them, in a way, it's like, "Okay, I understand that. I can move on from that now," or, "I don't need to keep listening to what other people are bringing to the conversations because I now know that this is what it is. It's not appropriate for me to be watching it. If I do accidentally watch it or if I'm shown it by somebody else, what can I do?"

We provide them with strategies that can support them if they do come across pornography, whether they're images or whether they're videos. It helps them to go, "All right. Stef said that. I understand that now and I can move on." We do move then with the other conversations. It's not that we spend a great deal of time talking about it, but we can answer that for them. We then encourage them to go home and talk to their trusted adults. We encourage them to have those conversations with the people that are important to them, so then they can instigate the conversations with their grown-ups, who quite often are finding this an uncomfortable conversation to have or don't know how to have it.

The CHAIR: The question I'm asking is—and this is to the whole panel—we often point to education as the thing we need to do in lots of things, like in other inquiries and other policy areas. We've got a curriculum there. We've got some good providers going in. We've got teachers trying their best, yet I'm sensing that that's not cutting it at the moment. What is it that needs to change? We have got education programs there. We've got great people going in and those conversations happening, but I seem to be hearing that that's not at scale or that something is not cutting through. I wonder if you've got any responses. Maybe we could start with headspace, informed by the conversations you've had with young people.

NICOLA PALFREY: The conversations that young people are having around this is very much aligned with your summary. There's bits and pieces of information, but it's often restricted or shut down by the discomfort of adults. You can't come in and talk about that at school or can't open up that conversation, whereas they're saying very clearly, "We're exposed to this. We want to understand how to navigate it. We want to see if there's any benefits to it. Can it teach us anything?" or actually, "What do I do when I'm distressed about it?" It's not at scale. It's not front and centre.

The prevalence of exposure is in no way matched to the prevalence of discussion around other harm minimisation strategies that we would be having. That's what young people are talking about: responsibility for the providers. In their words, "Other people get in trouble if they provide us with alcohol, cigarettes or those sorts of things, but there's no repercussions for the people that are pushing this content towards us." There's also no open and shame-free forum for us to discuss what is seen as a normal and natural part of exploration in a way that is safe and protective for them. Young people are very clearly saying, "We've got nowhere to go to talk about these things." We've got research that demonstrates the need for it, but it is not being rolled out.

People don't come to headspace and say, "I'm here because I've seen porn." They don't come saying, "I'm here because I'm distressed by porn." They might come and discuss, most frequently, the sharing of images between people and the repercussions of that, for example. That's kind of where it ends, I think, in adult discussions as well: "Don't send nudes." We're not setting up families and carers to have the conversations, because often the response will be, "Just don't do that." That's not enough for young people to be able to navigate it when they're not even seeking it out, necessarily, all the time; or they're seeking it out and it's coming to them and is introduced in their lives in a way that they have no support to scaffold how they manage it.

The CHAIR: Any other responses? Mr Tyler?

GEORGIA NALDRETT: I think there's a holistic approach to any issue, and education plays a really important role. I will let Matt talk to that more in a moment. What we are hearing from children and young people is that, because of the shame and because of the stigma—and also the adult shame and stigma—they don't want to talk to their parents. They don't want to talk to their teachers. This is a sensitive topic for adults. That is being felt by children and young people.

What we're doing at Jesuit Social Services is working to develop an online resource and anonymous helpline for young people who are concerned about pornography and who are concerned about sex—for example, addressing the questions: "I came across it by accident, and I don't know how I feel. I saw something that doesn't make me feel comfortable. Who can I talk to? Where can I go?" To date, there has been no funding for a service

specialised in this area. As we heard from Nicola, there is a barrier for young people to go to someone like headspace because it feels so—shame and stigma. We're developing a specialised approach. One of the things that we think the Committee could advocate for is funding for a service like this. There isn't one here in Australia, but there is internationally.

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide us, on notice, with information about the international examples?

GEORGIA NALDRETT: I'm happy to share some information now. Stop It Now UK and Ireland, where I previously worked, as well as Stop It Now! USA, have developed services specifically for children and young people. The US version is called WhatsOK, and the UK one is called Shore, which I worked to develop when I was in the UK. It is an online resource, as I said, addressing those questions around sex, pornography and also child sexual abuse material—we know that harmful sexual behaviour is the fastest growing form of abuse—and answering young people's questions about intimacy, consent and concerning sexualised thoughts. They've been running for several years now. We're working closely with them to share learning to help embed it in the development of our program as well.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Can I just—

The CHAIR: Sorry, both of us want to jump in. We'll jump in and then ask you to keep going. Mr Tyler, could you also, when you're answering, think about the fact that we're talking a lot about young people today, but we're not exclusively looking at that in this inquiry; there's also where that educational piece fits in with older people—if you could do that. Ms Carter, you can jump in and add your bit.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I was just going to ask if, on notice, you can provide us with any evaluations of those programs that have been running overseas.

The CHAIR: That's a great idea.

GEORGIA NALDRETT: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Mr Tyler?

MATT TYLER: I just want to build on one aspect of what Georgia has shared, and it goes to evaluation. I think it's worth the Committee being aware that, as it relates to the work in the UK with Shore, the fourth highest number of users in terms of country of origin hail from Australia. It's clearly a need that is currently not being met by an approach that's fit for purpose for Australia. Noting the work that Georgia has touched on, there's a significant amount of translation and learning from those other jurisdictions to translate into our context that's needed to actually land on something that's fit for purpose for young people in Australia.

More generally, Chair, going to the question you posed, it's really important to say that the efforts that are currently underway shouldn't be downplayed. It's just the prevalence, scale and, to be frank, the relative recency in the course of history of this challenge. We're still grappling with that. It's important to start with the somewhat obvious statement that the efforts that are underway shouldn't be downplayed or disparaged. It's just to say there is more to do. Starting in the context of schools, we work with hundreds of schools each year, particularly with teachers but also directly with young people and some work with parents. I'd say that, both as it relates to schools and also more generally across our community, the fear that's been touched on on the part of adults is significant.

If you think about the pressure that school leaders are under, the fears of parents oftentimes act as a really significant constraint on what is possible with regard to what takes place in the classroom. That's not specific to any type of school. Whether it's State, independent or Catholic, we see that across the board. We are oftentimes being asked by school communities to come in and lead conversations with parents on their behalf. I would say that where you've encouraged us to focus, in terms of the work that's required of adults, is a really significant and important part of what is needed. I'd also say that, as it relates to both conversations on pornography as well as respectful relationships more generally, there is work to do to equip teachers to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to effectively engage with young people on some of these topics.

We work with teachers deliberately because we know that an organisation like ourselves will come and then we will go. The teacher will be there and have a sustained potential impact on those young people's lives. This varies by State, but the reality is that there is not enough being put into equipping teachers to support them to lead these conversations. That's both training and in-classroom observation as well as the use of digital materials so that teachers can draw on lesson plans but also can observe someone delivering a lesson like this before they go into the classroom. That's something that we're taking a modest step towards in partnership with ClickView, so that, at scale, we can deliver teacher training that is accessible in all parts of New South Wales and all parts of Australia.

The CHAIR: Ms Crabbe, I'll give you the opportunity to respond and then I'll hand over to my colleague.

MAREE CRABBE: Thanks, I'd love to respond. I echo the responses that we shouldn't downplay what is already happening, but that it's just nowhere near sufficient to address the issues that we see before us. I think there are two broad approaches that we need to take. One is to try to prevent exposure and access, and the other is to try to minimise the harms when exposure occurs. I recently wrote a guidance note for the Council of Europe to offer guidance and support to their member states around measures that they can take to safeguard children from pornography and its impacts. There were six things that I outlined in that. I can share with the Committee that guidance note if that's helpful.

The CHAIR: Yes, please.

MAREE CRABBE: They're broadly around providing proactive, coordinated and considered leadership; establishing an appropriate regulatory and legislative framework; educating and equipping parents and caregivers; educating and equipping professionals, including education professionals and also all the other sectors that work with children, young people and their families; educating and supporting children; and supporting research and innovation. Across those different areas, there's a great deal of work to do on each of them. Some of them are more relevant for a State government. But they're all gaps and until we implement strategies that are commensurate with the size of the problem, it's not surprising that we're seeing schools feeling ill equipped, parents feeling ill equipped and regulations that are utterly inadequate for addressing the reality before us.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I was by no means downplaying. I'm just grappling, as we all are in this Committee, with what are the practical things we can suggest at a State level in an area that has Federal jurisdiction. Please accept the questions in that spirit rather than any suggestion that you're not doing excellent work.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: This is a question for the panel, starting perhaps with Ms Crabbe but also for whoever is comfortable with answering. Thinking about the leadership piece—and, frankly, listening to everything we've heard today, especially from this panel—we have children and adults regularly accessing pornography that has incest themes, actual or simulated under-age sex, non-consensual sex, hyper-masculine gender norms, violence connected with it, that has everything that we would call out in every other aspect of society, but we are strangely mute when it comes to pornography. Is there a place for us to say we should not have pornography that doesn't show consent, or we should not have pornography that glorifies violence or suggests that women should be passive recipients of sexual violence directed towards them by men? I hear those statements occasionally for music videos, but I don't hear them for porn.

MAREE CRABBE: I think it's a really important question. There was recently a report released in the UK where proposals were made around more coherent legislation and enforcement of legislation that does prevent the distribution of pornographic content that depicts, for example, strangulation. I note the comments earlier from people about strangulation and the increase in strangulation. It is really a case in point. What wasn't mentioned was that evidence from the US and from Australia does point to pornography being the most significant influence shaping that, in both contexts. There certainly is a case to be made that the kind of content that explicitly depicts illegal themes—and our laws in different jurisdictions do talk about it. Even if it's a depiction of incest and they're not actually siblings or they're not actually a parent and child, that is a depiction of an illegal scenario and that is problematic. But it's not enforced. So, yes, I think there's a strong case to be made.

We do need to be more courageous about calling out that pornography has, for too long, had a free pass. There's a kind of common hesitancy around critiquing anything sexual. It's seen as an individual sexual desire and that's out of bounds; you can't critique that. But pornography is the product of a multi-billion dollar global industry that has become the default sexuality educator for children and young people. We need to be able to name that its depictions are creating harm and that it is not an okay thing. It's arguable that some of those depictions are too problematic for adult consumption as well. There's a lot of pushback about that, because people want individual freedom to consume what they want to consume. But, in the context of a global public health crisis around gender-based violence and sexual violence, we need to ask those hard questions about what does someone's freedom of expression and consumption mean for someone else's freedom from violence?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Any other comments?

NICOLA PALFREY: Quite briefly, I think that your question about leadership is a really good one. First, we need to understand who young people see as leaders. They're not probably going to listen to people of my age as much as they would—we know who influences young people in their views. We also know that young men in particular are struggling to know how to be in this world and how to be good young men. The influences from pornography, as well as other—toxic masculinity, or whatever language you want to use. But we don't seem to draw the bow back to porn. We're willing to have a debate about the Andrew Tates of this world and his

behaviours, but the fact that he brags about committing sexual violence and the link back to pornography and so forth—it doesn't seem to stretch that far.

There's an opportunity for us to be braver around, when we're using influencers, whomever they may be, that young people look up to, the respectful relationship conversations need to be less euphemistic and more specific about going into the inputs that young people are receiving and trying to make sense of. There's definitely an opportunity to do that, because we kind of stop right at the edges. We talk over here about family and domestic violence, but not really about sexual violence. We talk about masculinity and those sorts of things, but to actually draw those things together, which is what young people are trying to make sense of, is a big opportunity—whether it's public health campaigns or things the Government could do in terms of putting this on the table for an open conversation. When we do that, we know that starts to reduce stigma and opens up conversation. We've seen that more broadly in the mental health sector.

GEORGIA NALDRETT: In regards to the question around regulating harmful pornography, it's something we see a lot in Stop It Now! Australia from service users who call us. They are often men concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviours towards children. We hear from some of those callers that they've begun accessing mainstream pornography. From that there was an escalation, in terms of frequency and also content. That's where we talk about incest themes coming in, which comes up on the home screens of pornography websites now. From a very early age, often children, when they started accessing pornography, are being introduced to incest themes. This began to normalise sexual relationships with children and in time they began accessing child sexual abuse material. I want to be clear that there is still accountability for their behaviour. In no way is there a suggestion that pornography leads to this type of behaviour or excuses this type of behaviour. But it is important to understand that the themes individuals are coming across on mainstream pornography sites are playing a role in the prevalence of child sexual abuse material offending.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you all for being here today and also for your in-depth submissions. They were great and went into some detail, so thank you for that. I have a couple of questions which pick up on themes that all of you have touched on in some ways. I'll direct it to whoever wants to answer as opposed to specific witnesses. I want to ask about challenges around body image and what we're seeing. In the interim late submission, you talk about what some young people are saying about women's physical appearances and things that they're seeing, presumably through pornography, that doesn't match reality. How big an issue do you see that becoming? What can we recommend around that space to counter that appearance that people think is real versus what is actually real?

KRISTY TURNBULL: We interviewed a group of young people and put together a pornography specific program for high schools, which, coming back to the curriculum, we have really struggled to get off the ground because it's not in the curriculum. Schools are struggling to get anything in their spaces around it. When we talk to young people about what they would want to see in a pornography specific program, one of the major answers was around "What's the difference between porn sex and real sex?" and "How do I know?" They said things around "How do I actually ask for consent? What are some verbatim things that I could say?" When pornography is the number one sex educator and there is simply no discussions around consent, then we're not giving them the education they need.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Does anyone else want to comment on that?

MAREE CRABBE: Thanks for the question. I would add that part of what we've done is interview pelvic health physiotherapists around some of these themes. Sometimes they comment on their patients' body image and pornography's connection to that, including with regard to removal of pubic hair. The literature shows an increase in intervention such as breast augmentation and labiaplasty, with many people, including plastic surgeons, making the connection between the mainstreaming of pornography and those increases. But when we interview pelvic health physiotherapists, they also talk about a rise in painful sexual conditions among young women and in faecal incontinence because of the kinds of sexual practices that young women are being expected to engage in, often from their male partners who are consuming pornography. That includes aggressive anal sex leading to faecal incontinence and painful conditions such as vaginismus. Vaginismus is often from sex that they're not enjoying. It's not pleasurable; it's painful. And then that becomes a pattern that can lead to those sorts of pain conditions.

I just raise those because there is the question around how we support health services to understand that these might be things that they're seeing, to be able to ask the questions and to offer supportive, shame-free, caring support to their clients. As you can imagine, and as one of the pelvic health physios that we interviewed described, it's very challenging for a 14-, 15- or 16-year-old girl who has those kinds of health conditions to engage in schooling and the regular social life of a 15-year-old girl. It's incredibly shame inducing and challenging, as well as the obvious physical challenges around that. I think there's a whole piece of work to do around equipping

sectors such as the health sector to understand the various ways that pornography can be impacting on the individuals that they're working with.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think that's a good point, because we don't really know how widespread some of the issues are, and they can present themselves literally in physical ways, particularly for young women. It's useful to think about it in that context. I wanted to move now to the headspace submission, so I'll direct my question to you, Ms Palfrey. Thank you for some of the quotes, particularly from young people and providers. It was good to have that in context. This follows on a little from my earlier question. Around AI, fake images, fake porn and extreme sorts of behaviours that aren't actually real, is your team seeing more concern raised about this, and more of those extreme images, and are you trying to teach young people particularly the difference between what is real and what is fake and how we combat that?

NICOLA PALFREY: Thanks for the question. It's fair to say that we haven't got live data on that. We work very closely with the eSafety Commissioner around a lot of this work. Certainly, there is that and the increase in chatbots—I'm going to get the terminology wrong. Also, young people engaging in relationships that often go quite quickly into sexual relationships is massively increasing over the last couple of years. I think sexploitation was the theme of a couple of years ago, and this is the thing that the eSafety Commissioner certainly is very concerned about, including its disproportionate impact on neurodiverse young people. It goes with the same theme, which is engaging in online sexualised behaviour and sexual depictions that aren't constrained or restrained in any way and certainly aren't aligned with what we would prefer to see in terms of mutually respectful, pleasurable interactions between young people.

That's what we're hearing from our work with partners. We haven't got live AI intel coming through on that. But we are certainly hearing from young people that it's a constant moving beast, if that makes sense—what they're exposed to or what the challenges are of real versus unreal, both in terms of both AI and in terms of expectations. To your previous question, in our submission we've got some quotes from young people about body image, including that unrealistic body images are perpetuated and make young people feel inadequate, both in terms of physical enhancements and in terms of performance and expectations. I think that dominant behaviour that we've been talking about—the strangling and really violent and aggressive sex—and expectations for young people to be able to engage in that is, from both perspectives, incredibly daunting and overwhelming for young people, as well as damaging, as previously mentioned.

MATT TYLER: Ms Mitchell, just to build on reflections related to the creation, sharing and viewing of artificially generated images, I think this does sit firmly in an area where the New South Wales Government could make an important contribution. The first thing to say, just reiterating the point, is that we don't know enough about the prevalence of this type of offending and the number of young people who are creating AI-generated images and who are sharing them and viewing them. We see this come in fits and starts through the media, where a particular school will have an incident that comes to the public's attention. It's highly likely that it's just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the scale of the problem. I think there's a need to better understand prevalence and also underlying motivations as they relate to adolescents specifically.

Nicola Henry and Gemma Beard did some really important work on a scoping review as it relates to adults and found that there were four motivations. Those motivations tie quite tightly to aspects of a good, respectful relationships curriculum. Firstly, these images are created, shared and viewed oftentimes because of the social rewards. Men think it's funny and, somehow, to get a spot in the alpha male group, you've got to engage in this sort of perpetration of image-based abuse. The second is the desire to humiliate and exert power over the victim. The third is sexual gratification and, finally, there is retaliation. Somehow, the perception is that it's a proportional response because the victim has wronged the perpetrator, which is, of course, never right. I note that that work was with adults and there have been prevalence studies with adults. There's a real need to better understand these motivations and prevalence amongst adolescents and then embed that into respectful relationships curriculum and teacher training, as well as parent engagement in a much more purposeful way.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I have one more question. You sort of answered it, Mr Tyler, in your answer then, but I'd be interested in comments from any of the other panel members as well. One of the things I'm conscious of is how we find that balance between making sure—and this is in the context of young people—that they don't feel that sense of stigma or shame if there's genuine curiosity around sexual behaviours, and that's the way that they maybe get some questions answered or talk to their friends about things that they see through pornography, versus it being that symptom of more highly sexualised, problematic behaviour, which goes to some of the issues you just raised then. How do we, as a Committee, grapple with that balance around making sure that young people aren't afraid to talk about or explore sexuality and sexual practices versus where it becomes harmful? Is there a balance that we can look to find?

MAREE CRABBE: I might start. Part of what we need to do is take an approach to relationships and sexuality education that is warm, supportive and open, where we affirm curiosity, we affirm sexual interest as normal and healthy, and we affirm sexual pleasure. But at the same time we need to be able to have conversations about what the good messages are about relationships and sexuality, and what the problematic ones are. We need to support them to think critically, including critical media literacy about pornography and digital literacy about the way that algorithms and the attention economy work so that we're creating a space where we can support them to feel good about their sexuality and about pleasure, but also to think critically about how pleasure, in itself, is not the only thing that matters in sex. I think there's been some other submissions or discussion around that, if young people are having pleasurable experiences of pornography, there's this acceptance that that therefore means that it's a positive experience. But, if pleasure is associated with masturbating to incest themes or childlike themes or gendered aggression, then I want to suggest that that's not a positive experience.

We need a more complex, nuanced understanding of what's positive, and we can support children and young people to develop those nuanced understandings, while being really affirming of their curiosity and of their sexual interest. I think that's how we have the balance, and one of the key elements in that is, of course, having staff who feel comfortable and confident and able to do that work and to do it well. We're talking about an area of expert teaching, and we need to treat it with that sort of knowledge. We don't expect general teachers to deliver maths curriculum with expert maths knowledge. We equip them, and we take seriously the role of equipping them. We need to do that around addressing pornography as well.

It's time we talked has developed comprehensive online training for teachers and other professionals. I've also delivered professional learning to many, many thousands—tens of thousands—of teachers and other professionals over the years in Australia and around the world, including work with pre-service teachers. The evidence from working with pre-service teachers, which is where there's been more research done, is that teachers, when they have access to good-quality professional learning or in-service training, do begin to feel more comfortable and confident about addressing these issues. I understand that there's a hesitancy, that young people don't want to talk to adults about these issues because it's uncomfortable. It's partly uncomfortable because those adults have not been well equipped. And, when they have expert teachers of any age, they often do feel comfortable to have those conversations.

NICOLA PALFREY: I wouldn't mind adding, we've got much to learn from other sectors as well. A lot of my work has been in the field of trauma-informed care, which has come a long way in the last decade, and we were having exactly these conversations about understanding the impacts of trauma on young people. And now it is well established in New South Wales. There's been a massive amount of work done to ensure that we're providing trauma-informed educational settings and health settings. And again, around digital literacy in the wider social media ban that went down federally and is still to come in, young people are saying, "It's not going to work, because we can get around it." And this is very much the same for banning of pornography, for example. They can get around it.

They don't want bans. They want to be part of the conversation, to understand how they develop the critical skills to understand what is real, what is not real, to reflect on what the impact of exposure to any type of harmful content is doing for them. And, exactly as Maree says, we need to be able to scaffold and support people to respond to that. We need to look more innovatively, I think, in terms of how this is being delivered and thinking about how you get these messages and conversations in a safer space. It's probably, again, getting an army of young people to talk to young people. So 19-year-olds can reflect very well on how things felt for them when they were much younger, much better than 29-year-olds or 39-year-olds can.

I think it's about thinking about how we support those, as we say, support the educators to be able to do the day to day and scaffold them and understand it, because we really don't want kids being—kids are making sly, sexist, misogynistic comments. I don't really want them being suspended. With all due respect, I want them to engage in a conversation around what that is and why that's going on and how that impacts other people around them, because we know, from trauma-informed care, banning kids from schools when they're not behaving in ways that are appropriate, rather than seeking to understand why, doesn't help.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I'll just check in with my other colleagues online to see if there are any last questions. I can't see or hear them jumping in at the moment. That being the case, that brings to an end our session here this afternoon. I just want to thank you so much for your time and for your submissions and for the really important work that you're doing. And we might have asked you to take things on notice. You might have volunteered some extra information. There might also be supplementary questions that we might get back to you with as we digest the important information you've given us today. Thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr IAIN CORBY, Executive Director, The Age Verification Providers Association, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, Mr Corby. Thank you for joining us. Before we begin, just letting you know we have members here in the room but also online who are joining us today. Do you have a short opening statement that you'd like to begin with?

IAIN CORBY: Thank you for that opportunity. The essence of age verification is proving your age online without giving away your identity. And so, in effect, what we're trying to do is simply apply the same norms of the real world to the online world. And we have come up with a huge range of innovative ways to do that. The earliest ways to do it were perhaps to use a passport and take a photograph of that or a driver licence and then compare that to a selfie to make sure it belongs to you. We can read the chip in the passport and check your age and calculate that exactly. We could also look to authoritative databases like banks or mobile operators. Or we could check how you've been using your mobile phone number or your email address, because you often use that to check things like mortgage interest rates, and not many seven-year-olds check a mortgage interest rate.

If you do enough things like that online, we can get a good idea of how old you are. We've also done facial age estimation, where an algorithm just assesses your age based on the looks of your face, as well as voice estimation. And there's even one which can estimate your age based on how you move your fingers on a webcam. We have a number of international standards that we've created for the industry: IEEE 2089 and the ISO 27566. And those not only talk about the accuracy levels of each of those methods, but they also look at the data security and privacy aspects of those, because we've always taken that very, very seriously. And the way we achieve privacy is through data minimisation.

Once we've assessed your age by any means that I've just described, we simply say yes or no to a website as to whether you're over 18 or not. We destroy all the personal data that was used in that process. And then we only remember that you as a user are over 18 or whatever the actual age may be in question.

More recently, some of the regulators have wanted to make that even more secure. We've been used to using zero knowledge proof techniques for when you want to prove to an organisation you're over 18 and make it utterly impossible for them to trace back as to who you are. We've been looking at different options around the technical stack as well and whether we can therefore move the age verification from the website perhaps to the app store or the device, although one of the troubles with that has been how we allocate liability when things go wrong. As you may be aware, there's a big trial going on in Australia, which I'm also involved with, with some 50 different age assurance providers of one sort or another demonstrating what they can do. That will be reporting in the middle of August, as I understand it. With that, I'm happy to take any questions you may have.

The CHAIR: We appreciate you being here and your submission. We have heard a lot about age verification being suggested as something that's required. You mentioned a few of the methods in your introduction and you certainly cover some of them in your submission as well. I wonder if I could go to one of the questions or issues that has been raised. We've received evidence saying that verification technology can be relatively easily circumvented. Again, I know you try and address this in your submission, but maybe you could speak a bit to that.

IAIN CORBY: Yes, I think people might say that, but we've been doing this now for about six years. As an industry, we did a billion age checks last year. We've seen the attempts to get around the technology in various forms. Most of those technologies, when they're looking at the individual, will be checking out for AI based fakes. Whether that's a fake of your face or a fake of a document, we're very good at spotting those fakes. We're actually better than the human eye would ever be at spotting a documentary fake. Things like the use of VPNs, for example—first of all, we always point out to the digital services that just because a child might be using a VPN, that doesn't exempt them from their obligation to keep the child off their platform. They ought to be looking out for people who use VPNs. Of course organisations like Netflix do that all the time these days to stop people logging into Netflix in a different country from their home country.

There's plenty of technology around to help figure out where a user might be. You could say, "Oh, I'll just borrow the face of my older brother in order to verify myself." That will work once. Obviously you have somebody having to collude with you on that. It's quite hard to stop collusion, but what we would generally suggest is you require them to be rechecked on a periodic basis, whether that's once a month, every three months or every week. In France I think they've suggested every 45 minutes and you check that it's the same person who is using the device that had done the age check. It might work for a little period of time, but it doesn't work the whole period of time. We would never claim what we do is 100 per cent successful, because that would be extremely inconvenient for adults. You would end up having to prove your age on a minute-by-minute basis. But we do think we can stop most harmful things being seen by most children most of the time.

The CHAIR: I'm a little bit sceptical about the VPN stuff and Netflix. My family doesn't claim to be particularly tech savvy but members of my family, when we're overseas, manage to do that pretty easily with very little capacity in that area, I've got to say. I'm not intending to focus on the negative, because I think there is, as we've heard, lots of potential around age verification. But I do have in front of me an article which you probably have seen from, I think it was, Friday, maybe, in the conversation online going through some of the other issues and referencing the trial you were talking about with the 50 providers or so. One of the key issues that was raised in that article was that, with whatever we might do in terms of innovation, doesn't it require the willing involvement of the large platforms and tech companies so that we could develop a whole range of things over here? But if there's not an active involvement and willingness by the large platforms, then that's going to mean that it might not be as successful as we would like.

IAIN CORBY: There is a question as to whether they will comply with Australian law or the law in your State, and that comes down to how good your enforcement measures are. In the UK, Ofcom has powers not only to block access to sites but also to block services to intervene and to prevent them receiving payments or being hosted or having adverts from an advertising network, which are very effective means to force a platform to comply. We probably need to talk industry by industry. Obviously your inquiry is described as being around pornography. That's one industry. There will be different considerations if we were looking at social media or the sale of alcohol or cigarettes online, for example. There are different ways of enforcing these measures.

Just to go back to the point about location, in the US, some US states allow online gambling and others don't. If you put one foot across the border between one state that does and one state that doesn't and try to place a bet, you can't do that. You have to prove where you are to a very high degree of certainty in order for them to accept your bets, because the penalties are so high if they allow you to bet in a state like California where that's not permitted. They do that, for example, by looking at which cell towers you can access, which wi-fi you might be on or your GPS on your phone. There are multiple ways to figure out where you actually are. Maybe you've been lucky with Netflix, and perhaps the Australian Netflix isn't quite so worried as some of the other countries. Certainly, when it really matters, they can absolutely figure out where you are.

The CHAIR: I don't want anyone listening to this to blame me if Netflix tightens up their VPN access. I've got some more questions, but I might pass over to my colleague, Susan Carter.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you for being here today. There have been different propositions about the age at which we should be requiring verification—for example, 16 plus or 18 plus. Your submission seems to talk more generally about adults and children. Is it possible, with a high degree of reliability, to specify 12 plus, 14 plus, 18 plus or 59 plus?

IAIN CORBY: In theory, the technology works for any age you want. But there are some practicalities about the source of the age data. It's generally easier for adults because they have a bank account and they have a credit report. There are various databases. They vote, so there's an electoral report. There are places you can go and find that data in a public way. With kids it's a bit more difficult. If you want to have a precise age rather than just a broad age—perhaps assessed through estimation—then it would probably be necessary for government to help with that and to provide access to, for example, schools data. This can always be done on a one-way blind basis, where the age verification provider knows the age the child is claiming to be and then simply asks the school to confirm if that is true or not, rather than having unfettered access to all of that data. That's the way you would handle that.

Ironically, we created the estimation because we couldn't do the age verification for kids because they didn't have a driving licence, for example. But the reality is estimation is much better for somebody like me proving I'm over 18 or 13 because, even with the margin of error, which might be a year or two either side of my real age, it's never going to get it so wrong that it thinks I'm under 18. But if you want to have a precise age for kids, then we're probably going to need a verification method. I think you will see some of those conclusions coming out of the trial in Australia when that reports, as to which methods are suitable for which age groups and which use cases.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Is it possible, without specifying the method, to give an indication of what additional cost is involved in age verification? Is that typically borne by the provider? How is that cost managed?

IAIN CORBY: At the moment it's the digital service that you're accessing that pays for that. Trade associations get into lots of trouble if they start to get involved in pricing conversations. What I can report is the UK Government estimates it to be 10 UK pence. I apologise for not being able to do an easy conversion. I think that might be 20¢.

The CHAIR: About 20¢—it's about double in our money.

IAIN CORBY: But it also makes the note—and we would agree with this—that through interoperability or the ability to do one check on one site and then use the same check on multiple other sites, which is something we've developed with the European Union here, or reusability or having a digital ID on your phone, for example, and just selectively disclosing your age over and over again, they would expect that price to fall going forward. We would agree that that is the likely trend of pricing in the industry. But if you put 20¢ in your mind as a benchmark, you would be not far wrong.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So, it's unlikely to be significant or prohibitive?

IAIN CORBY: No. I mean, it's the cost of doing business. If you've got things that are harmful on your platform to children, then there is a safety cost, like health and safety in any other industry.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: The other argument that I frequently hear in relation to age verification is that it intrudes on people's privacy. You're confident that there are enough security protections around the data that you access or that you collect?

IAIN CORBY: Indeed. As I said, we don't keep any data. The first rule of how to make a non-hackable database is don't have a database in the first place, so we don't keep any data. The data we are processing is only temporarily for a few seconds process. There are some providers who actually do all the processing on your own device, so in the palm of your hand. For example, they can do an estimation on your phone. These are very powerful devices, of course, these days. You don't need to send your image anywhere. And even if you do send that image, it's not actually a photograph; it's a mathematical map of your face, which, by the way, you could never turn back into a photo or re-identify an individual with. We're also now dealing with some very demanding regulations from the French data protection, the Italian data protection, where they've wanted these double-blind, zero-knowledge, proof-based technologies, and those actually guarantee your privacy. And so it would be up to a regulator in Australia or anywhere else to decide just how far they want to take that.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: In the first line of your submission, in the summary, you say it's relatively straightforward to use age-assurance technology to impose any prescribed minimum age for accessing adult websites. While our inquiry is not just focused on young people, it does tend to be a common theme. If it's easy to do, why are these companies not doing it already? Do you think it's because it does need to be mandated in a stronger way than we're doing here in Australia?

IAIN CORBY: Yes, they are certainly very resistant. We spent a lot of time in court in the US battling, where they bring first amendment claims. We're waiting for the Supreme Court to actually judge once and for all, which hopefully will settle it in favour of saying that age verification is a legitimate thing to impose upon adults in order to protect children. The internet was never designed for kids, and there was never any attempt originally to discriminate between the ages of people online. But as we spend more and more time online, I think we just have to accept that we want—in the real world, we treat adults and children very differently, and we protect them from harmful things. Why wouldn't we do that online as well?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: As you say, to buy alcohol or for other things you need to show your proof of age. But it seems to just not be as regulated online, particularly with some of the free sites and things we're hearing. That was my only question.

The CHAIR: I wondered—and this is just an opinion from you, Mr Corby. You have obviously engaged across jurisdictions and across time on these issues. You talk about the type of technology that is available—breaking down our faces into mathematical algorithms or whatever to identify us. Do you think part of the reticence about using this type of technology is that for us, as laypeople, we don't really understand how that works, and so assuring us of our privacy and that our information won't be used in other ways or collected et cetera—because, as a layperson, you're telling me this, but I don't know. It seems like everything we hear can be hacked or be used or whatever. Have you found that is part of the problem?

IAIN CORBY: It's a lot easier to reassure people in countries like Australia and Europe where you have a data protection regime. It's much harder to do that in the US, for example. I think this is why there's such an issue globally, because obviously a lot of technology is dominated in the US, where they don't have any concept of data protection and they trade your personal data every which way you can imagine. The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner has been paying very close attention to the trial. Those standards I mentioned have a very high privacy requirement built within them.

What you can do as a regulator is require platforms to only use certified solutions which have been audited independently against those standards by Standards Australia or conformity assessment bodies. There are ways and means to add further confidence for users. I also think there's a lot of education to be done. We're just in the run-up to introducing age verification for pornography in the UK. On 25 July I think we're bringing it in finally for every site. Ofcom, the regulator here, is planning a big public information campaign to try to persuade

people— "This is happening. This is why we're doing it. You can go and check with the regulator on this webpage how these things are being managed and how you're protected."

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: There are a number of different methods by which age verification can be conducted. Is there a more reliable model, or is there a preferred model, or do you think it would be a matter of each service provider looking at which model was most appropriate for the service that they're providing?

IAIN CORBY: If I was in charge—thankfully, I'm not; that's your job—from a policy perspective, I would always set the outcome in terms of what the statutes should say. So, "We want, as the UK has done, highly effective age assurance for pornography, maybe a slightly lower level for accessing social media, and an even lower level still, perhaps, for age-appropriate design, so that a seven-year-old has a different experience from a 10-year-old or a 14-year-old", which can all be achieved with age-assurance technology through estimates. I think that in the legislation you should set the benchmark for the outcome, and then you should leave it to the regulators to figure out which technology meets that requirement. They could, however, as regulators, lean on these international standards as a sort of shortcut to describing what they mean. There are some standardised levels of accuracy and assurance that we specify in that IEEE standard.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have a quick follow-up. On notice, would you be able to provide us with a copy of those standards or a reference to where we can find them?

IAIN CORBY: I do have to get those bodies to approve that because they guard their copyright slightly jealously, because that's obviously how their commercial basis is. But what I could do is send you a summary of them both on notice, if that's okay.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: That would be great.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: While you were answering that question, Mr Corby, I thought of one more about how frequently the technology improves and updates, in terms of the facial recognition or age verification. As legislators, that's something we need to be conscious of—that if we make decisions around certain platforms, it could be outdated within a month or a week or a year. How quickly is it moving, and how much better is it getting over time?

IAIN CORBY: I'd always just correct you, if I may, and say we do facial estimation, not facial recognition. If we talk about recognition, people panic and think we're doing ID. It's only ever estimation.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Sorry. Feel free to correct me.

IAIN CORBY: Excuse me for pointing that out. It is getting better month by month. The National Institute of Standards and Technology in the US is doing independent assessments on a rolling basis, and you can see the improvements every time they publish a report. The best in class on the estimation is now accurate within a year and one month, on average, either side of the actual age. I'm sure that will get better and better. It will never be good enough to tell you that yesterday was your birthday, so it will always be a broader attempt. As I say, it's fine if you put what we call a buffer age and you say you've got to be at least three years over the legal age, and then we're happy to use estimation because we know that's outside of the margin for error. That's really where you would probably end up using the estimation. And then the fact it's getting better and better doesn't matter, except you could potentially start to reduce that buffer when you have the confidence that the technology is better.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And that would be something you could do via how you regulate it, and those people who are in charge of the enforcement of it.

IAIN CORBY: Exactly. I think one of the points about the trial is to give regulators good information about the level of accuracy in the state of the art today so they can make reasonable requirements of the platforms, rather than asking them to do something that the technology cannot deliver today.

The CHAIR: I will just ask one final question. You have alluded to it a bit, but just so I completely understand the process and the business model—you have age verification providers in a place where it's mandated that a platform or a website requires age verification, then currently that platform or whatever it is engages one of these third-party verification providers to perform that function, and they pay them according to volume. Is that how it works?

IAIN CORBY: Yes, although there's now an increasing trend for interoperability—different providers working with each other—and there are models to do that. The one I'm involved with is called euCONSENT. We put a little token on your device when you've done an age check with one provider, and when you go to another website using a provider within that network, they can just re-use that token and actually pay a commission to the original provider for re-using an age check that's already been carried out. Over time, this is becoming even more convenient. I would still argue that most of these checks take 10 or 20 seconds to complete, but they'll actually be

moving to a point where it will take a millisecond to just re-prove your age until we ask you to re-authenticate every so often, which is the term for just double-checking that it's still you using that computer or that device and you haven't handed it off to a child, for example.

The CHAIR: That's helpful. Thank you. In terms of the business model of the age verification, a tech company is paid by—it could be a range of platforms, but they're paid by them.

IAIN CORBY: By the digital service, yes, exactly, which is typical generally for digital identity anyway. The relying party, as we call them—the person who's relying on that proof—is the one who pays for the privilege of doing so. Certainly, in the age verification industry, we're not charging the consumer at all.

The CHAIR: And there is a group—you're part of the association, and you're the ones that abide by a particular set of standards. Just out of interest, are there verification providers that are less reputable or sit outside those standards? How easy would it be for a platform or a smaller website to use a verification service that isn't as reputable?

IAIN CORBY: That's a good question. In a completely free market, they would be looking to make their own purchase decisions. I would always signpost them to, say, check if somebody's got a certification from a conformity assessment body approved by Standards Australia, so it's built into that system, or regulators could require you to use certified solutions as well, if they want that extra level of assurance that the solution complies with privacy laws, for example. But remember that the loss of reputation, if there's a loss of data, is enormous to any website, so they will use a lot of due diligence in who they appoint to do their age verification. So, actually, the consumer doesn't have to worry too much about it because the website should be doing the due diligence to decide which system they're going to use.

The CHAIR: Yes, I hear you. That's a good explanation. I have less confidence in any tech companies being overly worried about reputational damage, but I appreciate that's part of it, and having certified bodies is an important part in doing that.

IAIN CORBY: My members also worry about their reputation, of course.

The CHAIR: Yes, of course.

IAIN CORBY: It's not just the Metas and the Googles of this world.

The CHAIR: Yes, I accept that. Any further questions from the other Committee members?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have just one question, if I may. Mr Corby, when you were talking about tailoring the experience online and the role of age verification—so seven-year-olds and 10-year-olds, and excuse my total technical ignorance—does that mean that the age verification process has the capacity to interact with the algorithm so it filters what's appropriate and what's not?

IAIN CORBY: No, it will always be up to the digital service to decide what they show to people of what ages. I think that's one of the really good reasons why they have to do the age verification rather than trying to shift it onto the app store or the device or to push that off somewhere else, because the only people who can ever actually know what the content on their platform is are those sites themselves. Others don't have a chance to do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Corby. As I said, because it's been such a recurring theme, it's really important that we have the views you gave us today and in your submission.

IAIN CORBY: Thank you for having me.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 14:15.