



Consultation response

Response to the UK Government Media Literacy Inquiry, April 2025.

About Parent Zone

Parent Zone is an organisation that sits at the heart of digital family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they navigate a digitised world. Founded in 2005, we have collaborated with many organisations who share our vision, remaining responsive to the continually developing nature of digital technologies, and how they intersect with family life. We recognise the enormous opportunities whilst understanding the challenges that accompany them.

You can find the call for evidence on media literacy, [here](#).

1. What are the overall aims of delivering media literacy in the UK?

- a. How would you define media literacy? What would 'good' media literacy look like?
- b. What are the risks and consequences of not achieving these aims?
- c. What indicators or evidence would demonstrate improvement?

Parent Zone has been delivering media literacy interventions since 2004. Our work is focused on the impact of technology on family life and the potential it has to improve outcomes, whilst also recognising and addressing risks and harms. We use an adaptation of the Ofcom definition of media literacy in our work, simplified for consumer understanding. Our definition covers: Content, Data, Environment, Consequence and Positivity

In developing our programmes, we also draw on work done in Finland where they include 'personal growth' and 'being part of society and culture' in their definition of media literacy. The individualistic nature of the UK definition misses this crucial element, thereby placing responsibility solely on individuals.

Good media literacy should empower people with skills and knowledge to understand how media works and to be able to apply that knowledge to changing environments. But it should also be more ambitious than that. It should support social cohesion, enhance democracy and help diverse societies to flourish. It should not simply be a passive set of

personal skills – it should be a national priority and collective ambition. The risks associated with not achieving these aims have already manifested themselves in tragic incidents like the Southport murders and national votes like Brexit. Research done by Dr Marco Bastos of City St George’s University showed that during the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership, a ‘Twitterbot’ network was active during the campaign, spreading misinformation and boosting political messages.¹ The network closed after the referendum. It isn’t possible to say with certainty that this kind of activity directly impacted the result, but it clearly demonstrates the need for citizens to have high levels of media literacy in order to preserve their own autonomy and by extension, protect the democratic process.

In our work with families, we see the risk to individuals of poor media literacy skills. Health choices that are based on Instagram stories; financial loss for both parents and children, many of whom regard being scammed as the price of being online. We hear from parents who are navigating an information landscape with their children that includes extreme misogyny and radical views and from educators who are alive to the fact that trust in adults is at an all time low. Research conducted by Public First found that overall “trust in adults, parents and teachers declines as students’ progress through secondary school, with those who “completely trust” their teachers dropping from 27% of 11–12-year-olds to 17% of 17–18-year-olds.” Instead, young people are placing their trust in online influencers, with only 29% saying they don’t trust online influencers compared to 35% saying they don’t trust the government.²

Improving media literacy should be a national priority. Measuring success should include more than individual evaluation of programmes – important though those are. The model created by the European Policies Initiative for the Media Literacy Index is an existing example that could be expanded or adapted.

1

<https://www.citystgeorges.ac.uk/research/impact/case-studies/social-media-bots-used-to-boost-political-messages-during-brexit-referendum>

2

<https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/teachers-need-urgent-support-to-tackle-conspiracy-theories-in-the-classroom-landmark-study-finds.html>;

https://counteringconspiracies.publicfirst.co.uk/Commission_into_Countering_Online_Conspiracies_in_Schools.pdf

2. How well are existing UK media literacy initiatives working, and how could they be enhanced?

- a. How are responsibilities currently split between different stakeholders, such as the Government, industry, and civil society, and could improvements be made to these arrangements?
- b. Which other actors (including online platforms) have a role to play in improving media literacy in the UK?
- c. Are there examples of good practice on a local or regional level that could be scaled more widely across the UK?

As providers of media literacy interventions at scale, we have worked with technology companies, local government and national government to design and deliver programmes. Each brings a different value to the work, and when they do that well, there is potential to make progress.

Technology companies bring credibility, particularly to young people. These global consumer brands that families interact with every day are familiar and embedded across society. They are well placed to deliver at scale and, as partners, they leverage marketing knowledge – and budgets – that are simply not available elsewhere. Concerns about the independence of the programmes companies support are important questions to ask, but they can be dealt with through evaluation and robust expert input. For example, we have worked with over 20 organisations and experts in the course of developing the Be Internet Legends programme in partnership with Google. This includes academics, psychologists and other organisations. The programme was independently evaluated in 2021 by Ipsos Mori with findings showing that:

“Understanding how to spot at least one clue that something may be suspicious, misleading or a scam online, increased threefold amongst children who received Google training.”

Working in partnership with YouTube, we collaborated with the Poynter Institute to localise a media literacy curriculum they created with input from Stanford University and experts around the world. These models of cross-sector collaboration demonstrate success and also offer a positive alternative to less robust approaches from industry that can suffer from tokenism and inadequate investment.

Our Everyday Digital media literacy programme was funded through the DSIT Media Literacy Taskforce fund. There are striking differences between this and our work with industry partners, including the limited and short-term nature of the funding. Everyday Digital works with local professionals to become ‘Local Champions’ trained by Parent Zone to deliver the programme. We provide resources, support and training to reach local families who often experience additional challenges including, for example, newly arrived refugees and people who have experienced domestic violence. This capacity-building approach was an iteration of a previous programme – Parent Zone Local – that involved providing ‘Local Guides’ employed directly by us to deliver the programme to families. Both models were evaluated, and both were highly effective. The evaluation of Everyday Digital showed that parental confidence scores increased by 27%, with notable improvements in understanding media literacy (45%), internet use (33%), and discussing online safety with children (32%). The Everyday Digital programme is scalable, effective and needed.

However, the short-term funding means that it will no longer be available to local areas. Having started to build a network of Local Champions and develop their skills such that they can deliver to some of the most vulnerable families in our communities, the funding has come to an end. As a result, the work will have to be radically scaled back. Government funding supports innovation and targeted interventions. It helps to engage with local government and adds strategic weight and importance to the programme. However, as long as it continues to be “stop, start”, it also brings frustration to local professionals who need long-term support and planning. It can erode trust in central government initiatives and may reduce motivation to engage with media literacy programmes in the future, thereby increasing future costs and causing a diminishing return on investment.

Finally, we have also worked directly with local authorities. In response to local need, professionals find small pockets of funding – often as little as £10,000 – to commission work where they see the need is greatest. However, this hyper-local approach relies on us having resources that have already been developed and tested. For example, we are currently working with Southwark to deliver a localised version of Everyday Digital. Clearly, scrabbling together end-of-year underspend to ‘do something’ is no substitute for a long-term strategic approach, and it risks commissioning programmes that do not have an evidence base and are not adequately resourced.

There are ways to improve the current situation. The Government could play a role in setting the strategic direction and encouraging companies to invest in developing the media literacy skills of their users. It could also require local government to have local media literacy strategies with guardrails in place to ensure that only programmes that

have been adequately evaluated are commissioned. Finally, it could use its limited resources to support the development of those programmes. To test and iterate what works so that programmes – like Everyday Digital – are available for local commissioning as proven, cost effective and ready to deploy initiatives. Crucially the Government could connect policy across departments to break down current silos that include DSIT, the Home Office and the Department for Education seemingly having disparate approaches but similar concerns.

3. How will media literacy need to evolve over the next five years to keep up with changes in the media landscape and technological advancements?

There is no question that the media landscape has become more complex in a short space of time, with no signs that this pace will slow. Our specific concerns relate to AI, XR and child financial harms. The first will bring new challenges that go beyond simple ‘is this content AI generated’. Whilst clearly a concern, existing approaches to media literacy can be adapted to a world in which identifying whether something is real or AI generated is a daily task. Indeed, to some extent that need could drive a routine questioning of content that might bring benefits. However, other forms of AI including digital assistants and relationship chatbots will pose new questions and concerns, particularly for younger people. There are already too many cases of young people forming relationships with chatbots that make them vulnerable to sextortion, suicide and self-harm. The ‘media’ is no longer simply content – images and words. It manifests now as a relatable friend. A trusted guide and companion. Media literacy will need to address relationships in new ways that match the new interfaces.

XR and wearables are technologies that suffer from ‘false dawn’ syndrome. We have anticipated the mainstreaming of both for years and neither has reached the level of usage that smartphones, laptops and tablets have achieved. In the next five years, that seems likely to change not least because of AI. Meta’s partnership with Rayban and ongoing developments of immersive experiences point to a clear product roadmap that seems likely to disrupt current models. The media literacy challenges that come with that don’t necessarily change the media literacy fundamentals, but they do make it significantly harder for users to exercise their skills in environments designed to deceive the senses.

Finally, we are concerned by the growing scale of child financial harms. Our research shows that 96% of young people in the UK aged 13-18 have made an online purchase and collectively spend an estimated £50m+ per week online.³ Children are also earning, trading and losing pseudo-currencies and digital goods at a similar scale. Children are exposed to financial risk at multiple points in their daily digital lives. Gambling-like mechanics saturate online gaming, pseudo-currencies obfuscate real costs, and subscriptions trap users in exploitative deals. Yet, child financial harms are not adequately addressed, leaving families to cope alone. 62% of parents agree that financial harm online is a relevant issue for their children and family that needs to be dealt with.⁴ Financial and digital literacy are increasingly intertwined, and both are crucial for navigating the digital landscape, especially when we consider the evolving nature of online financial harms such as live-shopping, AI-powered sextortion, and immersive exploitation. Online financial harms must be recognised as a distinct and intersectional issue if we are to ensure children, parents, and professionals have the necessary skills to manage the evolving media environment.

4. How does the UK's approach to media literacy compare with that of other countries? What international best practice could be adopted or adapted here?

The UK has been talking about media literacy for decades. However, action has been sporadic and short-term. In 2004, Tessa Jowell, in her role as Secretary of State at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, predicted: "In the modern world, media literacy will become as important a skill as maths or science." Little real progress has been made since then.

The UK has actually fallen behind. It is troubling to note that we have dropped behind other countries over the period that Ofcom has been given new responsibilities for media literacy and the DCMS published its Media Literacy Strategy. We are moving too slowly and in the wrong direction. By contrast, countries like Belgium, Iceland and Latvia have made positive steps forward. Other organisations are better placed to analyse our

3

<https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/A%20problem%20hiding%20in%20plain%20sight%20-%20PZ%20report%20Nov%202023.pdf>

4

https://parentzone.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Short-changed-and-out-of-time_A-Parent-Zone-Report.pdf

national failings. What Parent Zone can contribute is an observation from practice. In 2024, we partnered with the British Embassy in Iceland to translate our self-guided media literacy tool – DigiWorld – into Icelandic. The tool was created with funding from the Norwegian state-owned telecoms company Telenor and primarily used in their Asian markets. The British Embassy in Iceland worked with the Ministry of Education and Children to ensure school authorities made DigiWorld homework for all children aged 7-9 to be completed with their parents. They then sent in the certificate to their teacher as proof of finishing it. This is a small example of how a strategic approach is taken in other countries. It is something that is currently unimaginable in the UK because of the fragmented nature of provision, which inevitably limits progress.

5. How adequately is the UK's regulatory and legislative framework delivering media literacy?

- a. What is your assessment of Ofcom's media literacy strategy?
- b. What further action is needed from the Government, if any?
- c. Are changes needed to legislation, for example the Online Safety Act 2023 or the Media Act 2024?

The Ofcom media literacy strategy contains many important proposals. We were particularly pleased to note that the strategy recognises the important role of turning to professionals and educators and places a critical focus on evaluation and developing the evidence base. We also welcome its ambition and the degree to which it reflects the complexity of the challenge. However, whilst Ofcom is well-placed in some regards to lead national efforts to improve media literacy, it will be powerless and limited without central government leadership. Only the government can coordinate efforts between departments, mandate action at a local authority level and place media literacy in the curriculum. It is highly regrettable that DSIT's Media Literacy Taskforce has been disbanded, and whilst we were pleased to see media literacy included in the national Digital Inclusion Strategy, that isn't enough to provide the level of strategic leadership needed.

This sidelining of media literacy follows a repeated pattern of false starts. Media literacy was removed from the Online Safety Act, which, despite early indications that it might, contains no protections from mis- and disinformation. This could be corrected with the

addition of specific protections for harmful mis- and disinformation, including that which relates to health.

6. What is the role of formal education in relation to media literacy?

a. How effectively is media literacy being taught in schools at present? How can critical thinking best be taught?

b. What interventions are needed to support the delivery of media literacy education in schools, for example changes to the national curriculum and to teacher training?

c. How should approaches to media literacy education vary according to age group?

d. What are the opportunities to engage children and young people in media literacy programmes outside formal education?

Currently, there is minimal media literacy education in schools in England, with many schools doing little or no work in this area. It features in some parts of the curriculum such as citizenship or media studies, but its provision is fragmented with no clear guidance for teachers, no assessment and no oversight. When we make media literacy programmes available to schools, we find there is significant demand particularly for any provision that can be delivered by external specialists. However, we find through our training offer for teachers a major gap in their knowledge that makes them, rightly, extremely cautious about teaching media literacy.

We have piloted media literacy sessions in youth clubs and found excellent levels of engagement. However, as a route to scale there are obvious limitations with limited numbers of young people attending sessions and other activities including sport, gaming and arts being scheduled in the precious available time. This is not only understandable, it is important given the lack of provision for that type of activity in schools. That said, media literacy should be everyone's business – it should be available wherever people need it online and off. It should not become a deficit model with access predominantly skewed towards people 'who need it' rather than a universal provision.

7. What are the barriers and challenges to teaching media literacy to adults?

a. How could these be overcome?

Media literacy is poorly understood and seen to be largely irrelevant by adults unless it relates specifically to their daily lives. As a general life skill it is severely undervalued. Research from the Behavioural Insights Team in 2023 showed that:

“only 3 in 10 (28%) thought they would benefit from learning about sharing content and communicating with others online in a safe, responsible, and positive manner.”⁵

There is no single reason for this undervaluing. Some individuals may be overconfident in their own skills, for example when it comes to recognising disinformation. Others may believe that it is the role of companies and organisations to keep them safe, rather than any sort of personal responsibility.⁶ Critically, there is an enormous underemphasis on breaking down ‘media literacy’ into actual, tangible benefits like saving time doing simple online tasks, saving money when looking to make a purchase, being able to block someone on a platform or game their child uses, controlling feeds to see less upsetting or irrelevant content, or even muting annoying notifications at the device level. Approaches which fail to recognise multiple obstacles to motivation and instead rely on an over-use of semi-abstract terms like ‘democratic engagement’, ‘autonomy’, or ‘personal data’ are themselves barriers to teaching media literacy.

In delivering our media literacy programmes we also find that it is often conflated with online safety by professionals who have heard far more about online safety than media literacy. The evaluation of Everyday Digital showed that prior to our training, only 4% of professionals felt confident they understood what media literacy meant compared to 87% after the training.

We have a perfect storm of challenges. Local professionals have limited knowledge of media literacy. They have limited capacity in the face of extremely busy workloads and local leadership does not always prioritise media literacy. Alongside those challenges we have an adult population that doesn’t see the value of enhanced media literacy skills, are time poor and have limited access to support. Finally, we have erratic funding that

⁵

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6511619206e1ca000d616116/media_literacy_uptake_among_hard_to_reach_citizens.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

doesn't match the scale of investment needed to adequately move the dial. There are ways to overcome many of those challenges but none of them offer a quick fix. Media literacy needs to become a national priority. Government must set the agenda and ensure that it is a priority in local areas. Kent, for example, has started to embed media literacy into workforce upskilling which over time will make a difference for both those professionals and the adults they interact with.

Digital resources are an effective way to reach families with bitesize information. The Everyday Digital widget contains media literacy information that directly relates to people's daily online activities and is currently embedded in 96 websites. A relatively small number, but a 220% increase on the planned number driven by demand we did not want to turn away. Our delivery takes place where adults are. In workplaces, asylum seeker hotels, domestic violence units, schools, libraries and even supermarkets. Any effective media literacy strategy will need to happen in similarly diverse spaces.

All of this needs to be done at scale and needs sustained effort.