

I am writing to you about the proposed merger that you are currently considering a making a decision on. As this decision, and this merger affects families like ours, and I fear not enough people know about the decisions being made around the companies that deliver the crucial element of their children's life, which is the basic human right to communication.

[X] has Rett Syndrome, she was diagnosed [X]. As a parent the news was and is devastating.

She could die young, she could develop seizures. she will need a feeding tube, she can't walk, talk, use her hands, she could develop scoliosis, the list goes on.

The one thing, indeed the only thing that gave us any hope whatsoever was the fact that Rett UK were doing an eye gaze project where we could have a loan device for six weeks after attending one of their communication courses, fast forward seven months, just seven months, and [X] is blowing everyone away with her eye gaze device, her eye gaze device that has demonstrated to all the healthcare professionals, indeed all the professionals involved in her care, that she is actually way more developed than they originally thought. That she is potentially the same as any other child her age, intellectually, it is just her body that lets her down.

We would never ever have known this without access to the eye gaze device, which I currently rent privately from Tobii, as we wait for the NHS to commit to letting us have one.

I also attended a course with Smartbox as [X] uses the exceptional Grid 3 software, and we have done all this with no support from the NHS or from anywhere else, other than Rett UK, both companies are exceptional with their support and this needs to continue, it might not if you make a decision that they can't merge that could massively affect so so so many families on all levels.

[X] can talk, tell me when she is uncomfortable, happy, sad, hungry, thirsty, when she wants to play with other children, and when she wants to go to bed, read a book, sing a song, talk to me her mummy or play games, it is her voice, her way of communicating and her window into our world, and our window into hers.

I think it is really important that I say that anyone who has a child with complex needs, indeed a child with Rett, has been given a gut wrenching diagnosis and will cling to any hope, and then you have eye gaze, that isn't just fruitless hope, it is real and tangible and aids a quality of life for children who are just being dealt hand after hand of devastating news.

What I am trying to say is that this market is an exceptional one in terms of the impact it has on families and how closely the companies work with those families, we have a brilliant eye gaze device being rented at a really affordable cost, with software that is exceptional and support that is really good and familiar,

This market is a really specialised one, but those in it know it inside out, and know the different it makes to their child, as in [X] would have been written off as severely

profoundly mentally disabled if it hadn't been for eye gaze, and it being affordable that a normal family like ours with two young children could access it and change [🗑️], and our life,

It is important you know this because that care and attention and understanding of such a specialised market as eye gaze and AAC and children with complex needs who are the key customers has to be understood when making a decision that could impact those children and impact those families, such as ours.

I know you need to think about making it competitive and not creating a mammoth company who have the monopoly and who have the power to just exploit a captive market, I get that. However, yes if you are talking about massive conglomerates etc, but this is a market where families work with the companies, help develop products, the understanding from Tobii and Smartbox is there, and if there is an assurance prices won't be driven up by this merger, then surely it has to go through.

Because the danger of bringing someone else in with no understanding of the market, and no understanding of the customers, by that I can profoundly disabled children and their families, is that less and less people will get access to these life changing devices, and then it will become all about profit and not about care, and then we are back to locked in children with no voice, rather than empowering children despite the NHS because these devices and the software are pretty accessible and affordable as it is,

I think it is really important that a wider conversation and understanding is known about this, how have you consulted with families? which charities have you targeted to find out what users think? what coverage of this potential acquisition has there been? in layman's terms? in language that parents already fighting on all fronts for their babies, understand?

[🗑️] I think you really need to take into consideration the implications of not letting this merger go through in terms of letting someone else take over Smartbox could mean Grid 3 gets eradicated, profit comes before care, no understanding of the market and the parents and children already using this system which is key to their communication, being massively impacted in a hugely detrimental way,

For some families, certainly for us, eye gaze and its accessibility was the only positive thing that kept us going when the news was bleak and has actually transformed the way the NHS, certainly where we live, are treating and dealing with [🗑️]. Because it was affordable accessible and delivered by a company that understands the markets and sensitives involved. That could all change if you let Smartbox go somewhere else, to a company that just does not understand this market.