

Children's Commissioner's Proposals to keep children safe online

The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) has come up with a series of policies to support keeping children safe online.

What children told us

The online world is an integral part of most children's daily life. Children use a wide variety social media, messaging and gaming platforms to connect with friends and family, and to develop new interests and a greater sense of identity outside of school and home. Children from marginalised groups, in particular, told us that social networks can provide vital refuge and a source of understanding and inclusion. As one child said: 'Social media has helped me more than my own family. I wouldn't be in a happy relationship without social media. I wouldn't have half of my friends without social media' *Non-binary, 17*.

But children also told us that the online world often does not feel safe. Children spoke about the threat of being contacted by strangers. They also wrote about stumbling across distressing content without warning or context, which left them feeling ashamed and upset. This includes graphic depictions of violence, pornography, and self-harm, but also heavily filtered images and extreme dieting and body-shaming content. As one child said: 'Online safety. Just a few days ago some person pretended to be one of my friends online and started saying rude stuff' *Girl, 12*. And another said: 'I was pressured into watching horrific pornography that effects how young boys behave towards and think they can treat women. As a boy myself, I was unable to understand the everyday struggle of the girls in my class, then one day I did. I was ostracised for not cat calling girls in the class, watching pornography or sexually assaulting any girls' *Boy, 16*.

Children also told us about the immense social pressure of growing up online. Digital devices collapse boundaries between 'real' and 'virtual', and between home and the outside world. Children spoke about the burden of carrying bullies home in their pockets and of the constant pressure to live up to unobtainable standards of 'perfection'. As we heard: 'Social media as it pressures us all to be perfect; have a perfect body, perfect face, perfect health and perfect life in general' *Girl, 15*. And from another child said: 'Social media because it surrounds us it constantly is in our brain and will always be around and it puts everyone down' *Girl, 13*.

What this means for policy now as we come out of lockdown

We want children to be free to explore and express themselves online without fear of harm. The UK Parliament is poised to pass ground-breaking legislation which will reset the contract between tech firms and their youngest users. The Online Safety Bill will hold tech firms accountable for the risks that children face online each day.

We want to ensure that the regulatory regime is effective as it can possibly be. Below is a series of proposed measures which the CCO believes will enhance the provisions already set out in the Bill.

The policies we think will benefit children now

In anticipation of the Bill's passage and implementation (earliest 2023/4) we believe there are steps which can be taken in the interim to enhance children's online safety. This includes implementation of effective age-checks on commercial porn sites, and a long-term funding agreement for the UK Safer Internet Centre.

- 1) **Improving the use of age verification and age assurance technology by commercial porn sites and platforms hosting harmful content.** Age verification and age assurance aren't

silver bullets which will prevent all children from exposure to all harmful content. However, better use of age verification and age assurance online would make it significantly more difficult for children to access inappropriate content, such as pornography, and lessen the likelihood of children stumbling across it accidentally.

Although there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to age verification and age assurance, there are certain broad principles which these systems should meet. For example, we want to see systems which are: effective and anticipatory, transparent, privacy focused [age assurance should *not* be used as an excuse to collect unnecessary information from users], accessible and inclusive.

- 2) **Guidance for parents on supporting children with their online lives and relationships.** There is already a wealth of high-quality information available to parents about keeping their children safe and well online, provided by organisations such as Internet Matters, ParentZone, the NSPCC and more. Alongside this, some of the most brilliant insights for parents are likely to come from young people themselves. The CCO is going to work with young people aged 16-21 to produce advice on what they would have liked their parents to have known about their online lives as they grew up. The themes covered by the guidance will be identified through consultation with young people, parents, and charities, but will likely include healthy relationships, positive self-image, pornography and cultures promoting sexual harassment among teens.
- 3) **Funding for the activities of the UK Safer Internet Centre.** The UK Safer Internet Centre is a partnership of three leading children's internet safety charities – the Internet Watch Foundation, Childnet and SWGfL. Together they provide education, advice and support for parents, professionals, and children, including those who have been victim to online abuse. This includes a service which removes large volumes of child sexual abuse material from the internet, including that which is shared by children and young people themselves. We would like to see continued support for the vital work of the UK Safer Internet Centre, including funding for activities like Safer Internet Day.

Recommendations for the Online Safety Bill

- 1) **Age verification and age assurance.** It is not yet clear whether the legislation will require platforms to employ age verification and/or age assurance systems. The Bill should give Ofcom the power to direct companies to use proportionate age verification/assurance technologies on platforms which pose risk to children.
- 2) **Access to commercial pornography.** Under the current approach, websites which do not host user content or enable users to interact appear to be out of scope of the duty of care. This means that some commercial pornography sites are currently out of scope. The Bill must ensure that all commercial pornography sites are captured and subject to the duty of care.
- 3) **A dedicated complaints route for children.** Children tell us that they want immediate support when things go wrong online. But far too often nothing happens when they report incidents of abuse and harmful content directly to platforms. As the largest vulnerable user group on the internet, it is right that children should have direct access to share concerns and complaints with the regulator. The Bill should make provision for Ofcom to establish a child-facing aspect of their regulatory function, to address specific complaints made by children and gather evidence of new and emerging risks.
- 4) **Private messaging.** We strongly welcome the decision to include private messaging platforms within the scope of the duty of care. We know that the direct messaging channels convey a high proportion of online child sexual exploitation and abuse – including abuse by peers. However, Ofcom's power to direct companies to use technology to identify child abuse

could be stronger than the current plans allow. The Bill should grant Ofcom the power to direct companies to use accurate software to scan for child abuse and grooming.

- 5) **Cross-platform abuse pathways.** It is rare for peer-on-peer sexual abuse to be committed on a single platform. It is common for a young person to be coerced into sharing a nude image on one messaging platform, from which it is downloaded and shared rapidly across multiple social media networks, messaging and video sharing sites. The content spirals immediately beyond the victim's, perpetrators and original platform's control. The Bill should address the cross-platform nature of peer-on-peer sexual abuse by mandating a centralised, industry-wide approach to taking down child abuse content, and place a duty on platforms to share information about known offences.
- 6) **Enforcement of the duty of care.** We welcome the range of sanctions which will be available to Ofcom, including fines of up to £18 million or 10% of annual global turnover, disruption of business activities and ISP-blocking. However, the power to impose criminal sanctions on senior managers will only be issued when platforms fail to share information with Ofcom. The Bill should give Ofcom power to impose criminal sanctions on senior managers in response to any serious breach of the duty of care, not just when platforms fail to share information. It's crucial that children are fully informed when platforms have breached their duty of care, and understand the actions being taken to ensure their safety online. The Bill should require companies which breach their duty of care to communicate the breach, and actions they are taking in child-friendly language.