



Briefing to MPs on the Online Safety Bill

Next week is the Second Reading of the Online Safety Bill. As Children's Commissioner, I have convened the 15 leading children's rights organisations and internet safety experts in the UK to tell you about our thoughts on it. I am writing to all MPs with views on the Bill from – **the Children's Commissioner, 5Rights, Action for Children, Barnardo's, the BBFC, the Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE), Childnet, the End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition, Internet Matters, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), John Carr OBE, the Marie Collins Foundation, NSPCC, Parent Zone and the PSHE Association.**

These groups represent children's rights and parenting organisations, internet safety experts, and Violence Against Women and Girls campaigners. This briefing sets out why the Online Safety Bill is so important to children's wellbeing and what we would like to see from it.

Our big picture view on the Online Safety Bill

- Fundamentally this Bill is about protecting children – we need to make sure the internet is a safer space for them.** 1-in-5 internet users in the UK are children. The internet is deeply embedded in the fabric of children's lives, but most online platforms are not designed with their interests or welfare in mind. Children should be able to use online platforms to play, learn and connect without experiencing harm.
- At the moment, children are being exposed to harmful content and activity online – this has profound impacts on children and young people's mental health and self-image.** From the Everyone's Invited movement, to tragic losses of young life following exposure to self-harm and suicide content, the case for the Online Safety Bill is strong and clear. The latest Cybersurvey report found that 31% of children aged 11-16 saw content about suicide, 27% content about anorexia, and 26% saw unsought nude images in 2020.¹ Algorithms amplify and expand the reach of this content while addictive and harmful features such as live streaming put children at great risk. The IWF has seen self-generated indecent images of children explode during the pandemic, up 374% in just two years and now accounts for 72% of all child sexual abuse material they remove from the internet.² Many of these harms disproportionately impact upon girls and young women, especially those with intersecting protected characteristics, making it far harder for them to participate safely online.
- The case for the Online Safety Bill to protect children is strong and clear – we need this legislation to make sure children are not exposed to harmful content and activity.** Self-regulation of online platforms has failed, and children have paid the heaviest price. Now is the time for change.

¹ YouthWorks, *Cybersurvey: Locked down and online*, 2021, [link](#).

² IWF, *Call for lawmakers to act quickly as new data shows child sexual abuse reports are soaring in wake of pandemic*, 2022, [link](#).

What children and parents want from the Online Safety Bill and why it is needed:

- **Parents and children want safe spaces for children online.** Almost three quarters (72%) of parents employ monitoring and safety tools, yet two thirds worry about harmful content which their child may be exposed to online.³ Parents' fears are not unfounded; over a third of children aged 8-13 and almost half of those aged 14-17 have seen harmful content online in the last month.⁴ And as one child said in The Big Ask, the largest-ever survey of children: *"Technology and social media are constantly developing so why aren't our laws and protections for children on these platforms updating with it?"* Girl, 14.⁵ The burden cannot lie with parents to protect their children in systemically unsafe spaces. Heavy-handed parental controls which lock children out from the digital world are not the solution.
- **Parents and children want effective and privacy-preserving age assurance on social media platforms.** 90% of parents and 70% of children think that platforms should have to check their ages before they sign up for social media and messaging accounts.⁶ Parentzone and the Children's Commissioner will be exploring parents' and children's attitudes to age assurance in greater detail, including how technologies should protect children's rights to privacy and inclusion. We heard from one child why they thought this was needed in a Children's Commissioner's office focus group: *"I'll be seeing kids like six years old on here...I'll see year 7 will be posting videos of themselves, and in the comments will be older boys... and they will be in the comments like 'oh what's your name darling'"* – Girl, 16.
- **Parents and children want there to be age verification on pornography sites.** Currently, there is no legislation requiring pornography sites to check viewers' ages before they are shown explicit content.⁷ A recent study found that 1-in-8 videos shown to first-time viewers of the UK's most visited pornography sites depict sexual violence.⁸ Many commercial pornography sites also feature acts which would meet the definition of a sexual offence, such as rape, up-skirting and incest; this content would not meet BBFC standards for R18 classification.⁹ 70% of adults agree that pornography which would be illegal on DVD should also be illegal online.¹⁰ As one boy told the Children's Commissioner: *"I was pressured into watching horrific pornography that affects 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, 14.¹¹
- **Reliable reporting systems are needed to hold tech companies accountable.** Children also want accountability from tech firms when they see or experience harm. Yet many children describe feeling despondent and sceptical about platform reporting systems. In a recent survey, 40% of children told the Children's Commissioner they had seen harmful content on social media platforms, but only half had reported this content to the platform.

³ Children's Commissioner's Office, national representative data from recent survey, 2022.

⁴ Children's Commissioner's Office, national representative data from recent survey, 2022.

⁵ Children's Commissioner, *The Big Ask*, 2021, [link](#).

⁶ Children's Commissioner's Office, national representative data from recent survey, 2022.

⁷ In spite of being passed in 2017, Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act was never brought into force. This would have introduced age verification for pornography sites. The government claimed that the Online Safety Bill would supersede the DEA and it must do so.

⁸ Dr Fiona Vera-Gray and Prof. Clare McGlynn, *Sexual violence in mainstream online pornography*, 2021, [link](#).

⁹ BBFC, *Classification Guidelines*, 2019, [link](#). P.28

¹⁰ Barnardo's, *Almost 70% of UK adults support tighter controls on online pornography content*, 2022, [link](#).

¹¹ Children's Commissioner, *The Big Ask*, 2021, [link](#).

The Children's Commissioner's office heard from one child: '[Bait-out pages] will write children's names and what they are doing, maybe having sex with someone, or giving head or something... They don't get taken down, and if you report it they make another account. If you report it, it has already been sent around.'" – Girl, 16. Ofcom's powers to require transparency reports will be key for reassuring children, parents, and policymakers that the Bill is creating a safer world for children – these reports must be made accessible to all users.

The Online Safety Bill

The Online Safety Bill must protect children in the digital world to be a Bill worthy of its name. A strong Online Safety Bill will:

1. Place a duty of care on platforms and hold them accountable when children experience harm. Robust transparency reports and binding Codes of Practice will be key to this.
2. Require all platforms likely to be accessed by children to be in scope of the Bill so children are protected everywhere they are online.
3. Require risky platforms to establish which accounts belong to children and offer higher levels of protection to them.¹²
4. Cover all pornography sites and services and require these companies to implement robust, privacy-preserving age verification.
5. Align 'online' and 'offline' laws and protections.
6. Empower children's voices and rights in the digital world.¹³

Signed:

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Will Gardner OBE, CEO, **Childnet**

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Victoria Green, CEO, the **Marie Collins Foundation**

Sir Peter Wanless, CEO, **NSPCC**

Vicki Shotbolt, CEO, **Parent Zone**

Jonathan Baggaley, Chief Executive, the **PSHE Association**

¹² Platforms should be required to implement privacy-preserving, inclusive, and effective age assurance technology, proportionate to the level of risk they carry. Safe services should not be required to introduce age assurance.

¹³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, *General comment No.25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, [link](#).