

Online Safety Bill Briefing: Consideration of Lords Amendments – House of Commons

The Online Safety Bill is a landmark child protection measure. Once introduced, it will transform online safety regulation in the UK by imposing new duties on tech companies, requiring them to take action to protect children on their services.

The NSPCC strongly supports the Online Safety Bill. **We urge MPs to pass this Bill to deliver world leading regulation that will finally protect children from unprecedented levels of grooming, sexual abuse, and harmful content online.**

For more information, briefings, and advice, please contact Rani Govender, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer – rani.govender@nspcc.org.uk or 07455203361.

Why is the Online Safety Bill important?

Online child sexual abuse and grooming have rapidly increased over the last decade and have now reached record levels.¹ Online platforms account for a growing number of new images being produced, with abusers using social networks to coerce children into producing images, or to perform sexual acts on livestream sites. Online child sexual abuse has reached unprecedented levels, growing in scale and complexity.

- NSPCC recently shared [new data](#) showing that **online grooming offences have increased by 82% over the last five years**, with almost 34,000 online grooming crimes recorded by UK police since 2017.
- Internet-facilitated abuse has seen a **trend towards more serious sexual offences against children**, and the average age of children in child abuse images – particularly girls – is trending younger.²
- There is **strong public support** for tackling these harms through the Online Safety Bill. YouGov polling, commissioned by NSPCC, found 86% of UK adults want companies to have to understand how groomers and child abusers use their sites to harm children and take action to prevent it by law.³

“I’m in a serious situation that I want to get out of. I’ve been chatting with this guy online who’s like twice my age. This all started on Instagram but lately all our chats have been on WhatsApp. He seemed really nice to begin with, but then he started making me do these things to ‘prove my trust’ to him, like doing video chats with my chest exposed. Every time I did these things for him, he would ask for more, and I felt like it was too late to back out. I feel so stupid for even going this far. I thought I knew how to keep myself safe but clearly I don’t. This whole thing has been slowly destroying me and I’ve been having thoughts of hurting myself.”

Snapshot from a call to Childline from a Girl, aged 15

However, online child abuse is not inevitable. Online grooming and child abuse image offences have reached these levels because **social media companies have rolled out platforms and services which are fundamentally unsafe by design for children.** Poor design features and commercial strategies

have often ignored child safety and failed to respond to calls to address the major risks children face on their platforms.

What will the Online Safety Bill do?

The Online Safety Bill will introduce a vital regulatory framework to ensure that **companies can no longer overlook the risks that their platforms pose to children** through requiring them to meet new safety duties. Regulated companies will need to assess the risks children face on their platforms, including the risk of child sexual abuse and exposure to harmful content. Companies will then need to put mitigations in place to address these risks, and Ofcom will hold them accountable for delivering on these changes.

The Online Safety Bill is a **strong and workable piece of legislation** which effectively balances the fundamental rights of all users, including children who require a higher standard of systemic protection. There is **strong support in Parliament – across political parties and both Houses** – for passing this legislation and getting it on the statute book. Through the efforts of the Government and a broad range of MPs and Peers, the Bill has been strengthened during the Parliamentary process to ensure it effectively responds to the child safety threat online.

In the House of Lords, important amendments were made to the Bill by Government.

Changes welcomed by the NSPCC include:

Senior Manager Liability

Senior tech managers can be held criminally liable where they fail to deliver on instructions from Ofcom to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as children's exposure to harmful content. Importantly, this will ensure that Ofcom has the powers to drive a culture change across technology companies to give children the protections they need and deserve. This type of power has proved effective in financial services and health and safety legislation.

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

Ofcom must produce **best practice guidance on tackling harm faced by women and girls online**. Women and girls face significant risks of harm and abuse online, with girls facing a dual vulnerability due to their age and gender. For example, our [research](#) has found that 4 in 5 victims of online grooming offences are girls. This change ensures there will be clear guidance about the types of design-led interventions that can help reduce online VAWG.

Age assurance

Measures to ensure companies are using **effective age assurance tools to protect children** have been significantly strengthened. In the codes of practice, Ofcom will need to set out what good age assurance looks like based on key principles. The Bill also makes it clear that companies will need to use the strongest age assurance measures to protect children from the most harmful content online (such as pornographic, self-harm, suicide and eating disorder content).

Addressing risks on app stores

App stores were previously out of scope of the Bill, despite having an important role to play in preventing children from accessing age-inappropriate platforms. Ofcom will now need to undertake research into the use of app stores by children, and the Bill makes provisions about steps the Secretary of State can take to regulate app stores following this research.

Access to date for bereaved families and coroners

Important amendments have been introduced to help parents and coroners access data held by technology companies in cases where a platform may have played a part in a child's death. They ensure that Ofcom has the necessary powers to obtain information from services to respond to a notice given by a coroner in these tragic cases.

What does the Online Safety Bill mean for private messaging?

Private messaging is the frontline of record levels of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) online. Data from [ONS](#) shows that 74% of approaches to children by someone they do not know online first take place via private messaging. Abusers exploit the design features of platforms, namely end-to-end encrypted (E2EE) services, to commit child abuse.

“Basically **I am being blackmailed** by someone I met on Wizz, an app for meeting new friends. This person, who claimed to be a 16-year-old girl from America, **told me to go on WhatsApp and send her explicit pics** of myself. Now she is **threatening to post the pics to my friends on social media unless I pay her £50**. She thinks I'm on my way to getting the money but I'm not, I don't have that much. **I'm really scared**. Is there anything you can do?”

Snapshot from a call to Childline from a Boy, aged 17

Importantly, the Bill provides powers to ensure Ofcom can hold companies accountable for tackling abuse taking place in private messaging and E2EE environments. The Government have confirmed that this power will only be used in extreme circumstances, as a last resort. But it is a vital tool which is rightly applicable to all services to ensure that all platforms are held accountable for meeting their safety duties – including those where children are at greatest risk.

Recent YouGov [polling](#) commissioned by the NSPCC found overwhelming public support for measures to protect children from abuse in private messaging. The polling found that seven in ten UK adults think Ofcom should have the powers to require platforms to use accredited technology to identify CSEA in E2EE messaging apps if a significant risk to children has been identified.

MPs can champion child safety online by supporting the passage of the Online Safety Bill.

The NSPCC can support you with further information about the Bill and the impact of online harm on children. Please contact Rani Govender, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, rani.govender@nspcc.org.uk or 07455203361.

¹ NSPCC analysis of new Home Office crime data found a tenfold increase in online child sexual abuse offences recorded by police in England and Wales over the last decade. The data shows 42,503 Obscene Publication (Child Abuse Image) and Sexual Grooming crimes were logged in the year to March – up from 3,706 just ten years ago.

² Salter, M., and Whitten T. (2021) A Comparative Content Analysis of Pre-Internet and Contemporary Child Sexual Abuse Material. *Deviant Behaviour*, 1-15.

³ NSPCC YouGov Polling, 2022.