The Online Safety Bill represents an urgent and necessary child protection measure designed to prevent and respond to the unprecedented levels of grooming and child sexual abuse we are seeing online.

It is welcome that the DCMS Secretary, Michelle Donelan, has committed to bolstering child protection in the Online Safety Bill and ensuring the legislation clears the House of Commons before Christmas. Any review of the Bill and its current balance between freedom of speech and protecting users from harmful content must guarantee that children’s safety remains front and centre of this legislation. The NSPCC stands ready to work with the Culture Secretary to ensure her strong words result in strong action.

The NSPCC has been campaigning for a legal duty of care to hold companies accountable for keeping children safe since 2017. We strongly support the ambition of this legislation, and four years after their initial commitment to introduce the Online Safety Bill, we urge Government to progress the Bill as a matter of national priority and keep the promise made in the Conservative Party manifesto to protect children and families from preventable harm online.

For every month that the Bill is delayed, further harm occurs on social media platforms and gaming sites—more than 3,500 online child abuse crimes will take place for every month without action. With any further delay, children and families are being left to carry the considerable cost of industry inaction.

1 – The Online Safety Bill is an urgent and necessary child protection measure

The scale and extent of child sexual abuse online has been steadily increasing.

NSPCC research has shown a tenfold increase in online child sexual abuse offences recorded by police in England and Wales over the last decade. There are now nearly as many crimes being recorded a month as there was in a year, ten years ago.

The data shows grooming is increasingly a cross-platform problem, with police recording 70 different apps and games involved in grooming crimes in the last 12 months alone. Multiple social media sites were often used in the same offence.

“The abuse that I experienced started ten years ago when I was 13. It is sickening that since then the number of young people being abused online has grown dramatically. Being groomed has had a horrific impact on my life and I want no other young person to endure that.

I know this delay to the Online Safety Bill will see more young people like me experience harm when it could have been prevented, and that is devastating.”

Frida* is a survivor of online abuse who volunteers with the NSPCC

“I am feeling sick with fear. I was talking with this guy online and trusted him. I sent him quite a lot of nude pictures of myself and now he is threatening to send them to my friends and family unless I send him more nudes or pay him. I reported it to Instagram, but they still haven’t got back. I don’t want to tell the police because my parents would then know what I did and would be so disappointed.”

Call to Childline from Holly*, 14

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR
Concerningly, 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. With 4 in 5 victims of online grooming being girls, the impact of online abuse is disproportionately impacting girls.

Online grooming has reached record levels because the self-regulation of social media companies has failed to respond to the child abuse threat. Urgent action is needed to ensure that platforms prioritise child protection and safety. The Online Safety Bill will provide the necessary framework for regulation. Any delay in reaching a regulatory settlement will mean that more children experience abuse that could have been prevented.

2 – The Online Safety Bill is a workable and well-designed piece of legislation

The core principles of the Online Safety Bill reflect a systems and processes approach, and the legislation has been crafted to tackle the drivers of online harms rather than seek to remove individual pieces of content. As a result, the structure and scope of the Bill provides a strong, well-designed, and proportionate response to the nature of the online child abuse threat.

The design and principles in the Online Safety Bill command broad support from MPs. The Bill has been analysed and strengthened by various Committees of MPs – the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill, the DCMS Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation, the Petitions Committee enquiry into tackling online abuse and the Commons General Committee at Committee stage of the Bill’s Commons passage – and is championed by MPs from across the House.

“I have a really big problem. I run a fitness page on Instagram, but I get a lot of direct messages from weird people. One guy said he’d pay me a lot of money to do a ‘private show’ for him. He video called me, and I agreed. He made me take all my clothes off which made me incredibly uncomfortable. By that point, I was too deep to quit. He now messages me almost every day asking for more explicit videos and I’m scared that if I don’t do what he says, then he could leak the footage around and my life would be ruined.”

Call to Childline from Ed*, 17

“We welcome the introduction of legislation that has been a long time in the making. That the Government has listened to our concerns shows the real value of our pre-legislative scrutiny.”

Julian Knight MP, chair of DCMS Select Committee

“We welcome the principles of the Online Safety Bill. We welcome the Bill’s overall aim that the safety of children should be at the heart of this regulation.”

Lucy Powell MP, Shadow DCMS Secretary

The Bill will benefit from continuing its Parliamentary passage and will be strengthened by further debate.

However, the design and principles of this legislation provide workable solutions to respond to harms experienced online, modelled on other regulatory sectors. This structure should be maintained as a fundamental building block for a regulatory system that works proactively and preventatively rather than after online harm has occurred.
3 – There is a strong public support for the Online Safety Bill to be brought forward

The NSPCC commissioned YouGov to ask 2500 adults in the UK for their views and the results show broad support across region, political party, and age for strong measures to systematically disrupt online grooming to be introduced through the Online Safety Bill.

- 72% of people want there to be a legal requirement for social media companies to protect children from abuse taking place on their site.
- 82% think social media companies should have a legal duty to work with each other to prevent online grooming happening across multiple platforms.
- 86% want companies to have to understand how groomers and child abusers use their sites to abuse children or share child abuse material and take action to prevent it by law.

This strong public support for the Online Safety Bill sits alongside the broad support from MPs across the political spectrum set out above.

Government must keep their manifesto promise to families and children and the Online Safety Bill must be brought forward as a matter of urgency to ensure children have the protection they need online, and companies take responsibility for proactive harm prevention.

4 – The Bill must adopt a strengthened approach to tackling harmful content for children

“Just as Molly would have wanted, it is important to seek to learn whatever we can and then to take all necessary action to prevent such a young life being wasted again.”

Ian Russell, Molly’s father

This must be a turning point. Further delay or watering down of the legislation that addresses preventable harm to our children would now be inconceivable to parents across the UK.

Any review of the duties in the Bill protecting adults from harmful content must not impact the safety duties protecting children, and we want to see a strengthening of the protections in the children’s safety duties, by ensuring they apply to all services in scope of legislation, not just services likely to be accessed by children.

Robust regulation can and should deliver a cultural shift towards compliance. The Government can show global leadership in achieving this and protecting children online by strengthening the Online Safety Bill and getting it onto the statute book without delay.

“Call to Childline from Olivia*, 15

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 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 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.”

Coroner Andrew Walker, Inquest into the death of Molly Russell

“It is likely that the material viewed by Molly Russell, already suffering with a depressive illness and vulnerable due to her age, affected her mental health in a negative way and contributed to her death in more than minimal way.”

The need for stronger online protections to prevent children from being exposed to insidious harmful content online was thrown into stark relief by the inquest into the death of Molly Russell.

The coroner concluded that social media companies – and the content that was pushed to her through algorithmic recommendations – contributed to Molly’s death in more than a minimal way. The inquest highlighted the disturbing disconnect between what Silicon Valley executives consider safe for children to view, and what parents and families expect their children to be protected from.
The Culture Secretary Michelle Donelan has vowed the Government will strengthen the Bill so that it stops “Big Tech chipping away at young innocence” and protects children. This could be achieved by:

1. Adopting a strengthened approach to addressing harmful content for children.
2. Introducing a statutory user advocacy body to protect children’s interests online.
3. Hardwiring the safety duties to deliver a culture of compliance in regulated firms, through senior manager liability and the publication of risk assessments.
4. Introducing duties for platforms to tackle cross platform child abuse and grooming pathways.
5. Addressing significant child abuse risks in private messaging, through the Codes of Practice.

The NSPCC can provide statistics, case studies, Childline data and further briefing on any of these points above.

Please contact Hannah Ruschen, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, at hannah.ruschen@nspcc.org.uk

Notes
1. NSPCC data on a freedom of information request to police forces in England and Wales, August 2021.
2. The following snapshots are based on Childline counselling sessions. All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the child or young person. Quotes are created from real Childline service users but are not necessarily direct quotes from the young person.
3. 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.
4. NSPCC data on a freedom of information request to police forces in England and Wales, August 2021.
6. NSPCC data on a freedom of information request to police forces in England and Wales, August 2021.
7. Julian Knight, Chair of DCMS Select Committee, March 2022.
8. Lucy Powell MP, Shadow DCMS Secretary, April 2022.
10. Molly Russell inquest – coroner’s conclusion in full | The Independent We are also anticipating a ‘Report to Prevent Future Deaths’ in due course following the result of the inquest.
11. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/molly-russell-instagram-north-london-meta-london-b2175324.html
12. The children’s access assessment in clause 31 of the Bill means that only in-scope services that have a ‘significant’ number of child users are required to implement the children’s safety duties.