

New measures will go further in tackling child sexual abuse online than ever before

Greater powers to tackle child sexual abuse online will be introduced through an amendment to the Online Safety Bill, the Home Secretary announced today (Wednesday 6 July 2022).

The amendment will give Ofcom extra tools to ensure technology companies take action to prevent, identify and remove harmful child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) content.

Ofcom, the UK's regulatory authority for telecommunications, will be able to demand that technology companies such as social media platforms roll out or develop new technologies to better detect and tackle harmful content on their platforms. If they fail to do so, Ofcom will be able to impose fines of up to £18 million or 10% of the company's global annual turnover, depending on which is higher.

Home Secretary, Priti Patel said:

Child sexual abuse is a sickening crime. We must all work to ensure criminals are not allowed to run rampant online and technology companies must play their part and take responsibility for keeping our children safe.

Privacy and security are not mutually exclusive – we need both, and we can have both and that is what this amendment delivers.

The National Crime Agency estimate there are between 550,000 to 850,000 people in the UK who pose a sexual risk to children. In the year to 2021, there were 33,974 obscene publications offences recorded by the police, and although some improvements have been made, it is still too easy for offenders to access harmful content online.

Access to such content online can lead to offenders normalising their own consumption of this content, sharing methods with each other on how to evade detection, and escalation to committing contact child sexual abuse offences.

Digital Minister, Nadine Dorries said:

Tech firms have a responsibility not to provide safe spaces for horrendous images of child abuse to be shared online. Nor should they blind themselves to these awful crimes happening on their sites.

Rob Jones, NCA Director General for child sexual abuse, said:

Technology plays an extremely important part in our daily lives and its benefits are undeniable.

But it is also a fact that online platforms can be a key tool in a child abuser's arsenal. They use them to view and share abuse material, seek out and groom potential victims, and to discuss their offending with each other.

Identifying these individuals online is crucial to us uncovering the real-world abuse of children.

We are taking significant action in this space and, alongside UK policing, we are making record numbers of arrests and safeguards every month.

While this will always be a priority, we need tech companies to be there on the front line with us and these new measures will ensure that.

Sir Peter Wanless, NSPCC Chief Executive, said:

We need urgent action to protect children from preventable online abuse. Our latest analysis shows online grooming crimes have jumped by more than 80% in four years.

The Online Safety Bill is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure children can explore the online world safely.

This amendment will strengthen protections around private messaging and ensure companies have a responsibility to build products with child safety in mind. This positive step shows there doesn't have to be a trade-off between privacy and detecting and disrupting child abuse material and grooming.

The amendment will support innovation and the development of safety technologies across the technology industry and will incentivise companies in building solutions to tackle CSEA which are effective and proportionate.

The government-funded Safety Tech Challenge Fund is demonstrating that it is possible to detect child sexual abuse material in end-to-end encrypted environments, while respecting user privacy.

You can also read the [Home Secretary's op-ed for the The Telegraph](#).