

# Online Safety Bill: Home Secretary's op-ed for The Telegraph

Nothing is more important than the safety of our children and we need to do everything we can to keep them safe online, just as we do in our communities and on our streets.

Child sexual abuse is an unimaginably wicked crime. Tackling this online is a global problem, requiring global solutions. We all need to play our part.

That is why we are joining with countries across the globe to demand tech companies do more. Together with international partners, child safety organisations, and survivors of child sexual abuse, the government is making sure the industry shoulders its responsibility for keeping children safe online.

In 2021, global technology companies reported more than 29 million suspected instances of child sexual abuse material on their platforms, amounting to 85 million images and videos of child sexual abuse.

As a result of these reports, UK law enforcement arrest or interview on average around 800 suspects each month, safeguarding around 1,000 children.

Some of these children are as young as six months old. I have heard in bone-chilling detail the lifelong impact such abuse has on them. It is vital that we do everything we can to stop it.

The Online Safety Bill, new legislation intended to make the UK the safest place to be online, is currently before Parliament. The bill has been designed to protect both the safety of users as well as their right to privacy and freedom of expression. We do not want to censor anyone or restrict free speech, but we must do more to combat these foul, hugely destructive crimes.

Things like end-to-end encryption significantly reduce the ability for platforms to detect child sexual abuse. The Online Safety Bill sets a clear legal duty to prevent, identify, and remove child sexual abuse content, irrespective of the technologies they use. Nobody can sensibly deny that this is a moral imperative.

We intend to amend and strengthen the bill to ensure that the onus is on tech companies to develop or source technology to mitigate the risks, regardless of their design choices. 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. This will therefore support innovation and drive the development of effective safety technologies across the industry, so that offenders have nowhere to hide online.

The UK government wholeheartedly supports the responsible use of encryption technologies. They are widely used by banks to protect financial information

and to stop it being accessed or misused when UK citizens bank or make purchases online. However, the implementation of end-to-end encryption or other technologies in a way that intentionally blinds companies to abhorrent child sex abuse happening on their platforms will have a disastrous impact on child safety.

The National Crime Agency leads the UK law enforcement response to child sexual abuse. By working collaboratively with regional and local police forces, and with technology companies that currently detect and report instances of suspected child sexual abuse on their platforms, the agency relentlessly pursues those who groom and abuse our children.

If end-to-end encryption is implemented without the relevant safety mitigations in place, this will become much harder. It will significantly reduce tech companies' and law enforcement's ability to detect child sexual abuse happening online. This is obviously unacceptable.

We, and other child safety and tech experts, believe that it is possible to implement end-to-end encryption in a way that preserves users' right to privacy, while ensuring children remain safe online.

We have already worked with child protection organisations and technology companies to shape the bill. And we will continue to listen and to engage. But the safety of our children is of paramount importance, and I make no apology for doing whatever it takes.

Our changes to the Online Safety Bill will help to ensure that tech companies, working in partnership with governments, child protection organisations and law enforcement, provide the best possible protections to children from those who prey on them, while maintaining our privacy.

Tech companies now need to stand up and use their resources and engineering expertise to build on the innovation from that fund. The safety of our children from the most evil predators demands it.