

Government clampdown on the abuse of British courts to protect free speech

The Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab will today set out proposals that take aim at so-called Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). These range from strengthening legislation to introducing new court checks to curb this type of activity.

These lawsuits typically involve wealthy people or large businesses using the threat of endless legal action and associated costs to pressure their opponents under defamation and privacy laws. This tactic is increasingly being used to intimidate journalists, authors and campaigners to stifle legitimate criticism and prevent the publication of critical stories and books.

The government is now seeking views on a range of proposals which will be introduced as soon as possible. These could include amending the Defamation Act 2013 to strengthen the 'public interest defence' which protects people who publish private information from being sued if it was done for the public good.

Ministers are also considering capping the costs that claimants can recover with the aim of stopping the super-rich, such as Russian oligarchs, from 'weaponising' the high cost of litigation to stifle free speech. Changes could also introduce a specific requirement for claimants to prove 'Actual Malice' by a defendant in libel cases in order to deter spurious claims.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

The ability of a free press to hold the powerful to account is fundamental to our democracy and as a former journalist I am determined we must never allow criticism to be silenced. For the oligarchs and super-rich who can afford these sky-high costs the threat of legal action has become a new kind of lawfare. We must put a stop to its chilling effect.

Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary Dominic Raab said:

The Government will not tolerate Russian oligarchs and other corrupt elites abusing British courts to muzzle those who shine a light on their wrongdoing.

We're taking action to put an end to this bullying and protect our free press.

Other measures would enable courts to throw out claims using these tactics earlier in proceedings and impose Civil Restraint Orders to prevent people from bringing repeated legal challenges.

Meanwhile, the Solicitors Regulation Authority has already issued new guidance on conduct in disputes, identifying SLAPPs as an example of 'pursuing litigation for improper purposes' and reminding solicitors of their duty to report misconduct.

These moves come as the High Court this month dismissed a libel claim against the British journalist, Tom Burgis, brought by a Kazakh-owned mining firm for his book 'Kleptopia: How Dirty Money is Conquering the world', but often the purpose of SLAPPs is to suppress publications without a case ever coming to court and being reported. As a result, Ministers will be assessing the evidence to understand how widespread the problem is before deciding the best course of action.

Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) said:

The NUJ warmly welcomes the commitment by the government to tackle the scourge that is the deployment of SLAPPs and other forms of lawfare cynically designed to stymie journalistic investigations and reporting by the rich and thin-skinned.

We have long campaigned for low-cost arbitration solutions to settle genuine disputes and would welcome any moves to level the playing field and ensure journalists and media outlets no longer have to face prohibitive costs and deliberate intimidation by wealthy litigants with the deepest of pockets. For too long the super-rich have got away with abusing the law to bully journalists and undermine media freedom.

The NUJ will consider the detail of these plans, and looks forward to participating in the government's consultation on its package of measures.

Dawn Alford, Executive Director of the Society of Editors said:

At a time when the vital role of journalists in holding power to account and exposing wrong-doing and corruption have never been more important, the Society welcomes the Government's consultation on measures to tackle the use of SLAPPs.

Deployed by powerful individuals and companies in an effort to silence and intimidate critics and deter legitimate public interest journalism, SLAPPs not only have a chilling effect on the public's right to know but they pose a grave threat to media freedom. It is essential that laws are strengthened and practical deterrents are put in place to ensure that journalists – as well as campaigners,

academics and authors – are able to fulfil their role in keeping the public informed without fear of intimidation or harassment.

Today's announcement follows the recently passed Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act which includes strengthened powers to crack down on corrupt elites and ramp up pressure on Putin's regime. The Deputy Prime Minister visited the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague this week to offer extra practical support from the UK to help prosecute Russian war crimes.

Notes to Editors

[More than 370 museums and galleries eligible for DCMS/Wolfson Fund](#)

- £4 million of new funding will improve displays, protect collections and make exhibitions more accessible
- Fund has provided more than £48 million to over 400 projects over the past 20 years

Museums and galleries across England are being encouraged to apply for a share of £4 million of new funding to improve displays, protect collections and make exhibitions more accessible to visitors.

The cash boost has been added to the joint DCMS/Wolfson Fund as the fund marks 20 years of the two organisations working together to support the arts and culture.

Both DCMS and the Wolfson Foundation will contribute an extra £2 million through their partnership as the government ramps up its plans to level up access to the arts and culture by improving collections and exhibitions in museums and galleries across the country.

Over the last 20 years the fund has awarded £48 million to over 400 projects at museums and galleries, with organisations including Manchester Museum and the Oriental Museum in Durham receiving grants to improve entrances and display exhibits in accessible ways.

Arts Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay said:

This is a brilliant example of what can be achieved when public funding and private philanthropy come together. I encourage organisations from every part of the country to apply so we can support even more museums and galleries to make sure everyone has access to the incredible benefits of art and culture.

Chief executive of the Wolfson Foundation, Paul Ramsbottom said:

The collections of our outstanding museums and galleries tell us so much about our shared history and heritage. For over 20 years, we have worked with DCMS to support an impressive range of institutions to improve access to fascinating objects and art.

We are delighted to continue our longstanding partnership with DCMS and to announce another round of funding. This support will allow museums and galleries to enhance the display and interpretation of their collections, giving greater access and enjoyment for visitors.

Commissioner for Cultural Recovery & Renewal, Lord Mendoza said:

Museums and galleries work hard to serve communities across the country. This enduring and exemplary partnership between a leading charity and government provides a specially targeted £4 million to help museums and their professional staff improve collections, interpretation and access. It is heartening to see the effects of the last round on a broad range of recipients from Tullie House in Carlisle to the Sunderland Museum to SS Great Britain in Bristol.

The partnership has led to fascinating collections previously not on display being shown. Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery in Carlisle recently received £252,500 to conserve and display 40 outfits for the first time as part of a fashion exhibition looking at styles from the 18th century.

The fund has acted as a catalyst to encourage people to learn about their local history. In 2005, Strangers' Hall in Norwich received £31,000 to develop an interactive exhibition for school children on the Tudors. Thanks to its success, the museum secured further funding which led to it being able to extend its opening hours and increase visitor numbers.

Reyahn King, Chief Executive, York Museums Trust said:

DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund grants have supported us to carry out transformative work to our museums and galleries. At the Yorkshire Museum, the installation of 'Jurassic Yorkshire' enabled us to mount a high quality, interactive and technologically creative suite of new permanent galleries that attracted more visitors than at any time since York Museums Trust was founded in 2002. Support for York Art Gallery's redevelopment in 2013 assisted us to hugely increase our display and exhibition space and establish CoCA, the Centre of Ceramic Art. We also received support towards our permanent 'Shaping the Body' exhibition at York Castle Museum, which examines our costume and social history collections through the contemporary lens of body

image.

Sarah Newman, Manager, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, said:

At the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, a Victorian villa overlooking the Bournemouth coast, we were awarded £115,174 by DCMS/Wolfson which enabled us to leverage further funding and deliver a major project to redisplay and reinterpret three historic rooms (two bedrooms and our unique 1920 Japanese museum-in-a-museum). We have been able to create a new way of interacting with these once forgotten and out of date rooms. Visitors now appreciate these rooms for their original function and glorious views and regularly compliment us on it. It is no exaggeration to say that it has transformed our visitor experience, delivering a fitting and compelling experience, beyond even our expectations. It is wonderful that this particular funding stream has been renewed as it enables museums to make significant, sustainable capital improvements which can be step-changing in their impact.

Kat Nilsson, Director of Museums & Cultural Programmes, UCL said:

Thanks to the DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund, we now have a new entrance to the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology. It creates an accessible route in by giving context to this stunning collection.

Professor Stephen Toope, Vice-Chancellor, University Of Cambridge said:

On behalf of the University of Cambridge, I am delighted to celebrate the renewal of the DCMS-Wolfson Museums & Galleries Improvement Fund. The extraordinary collections in UK museums and galleries are vital in helping us understand both ourselves and our place in the world. From our Museum of Zoology's invaluable record of life on earth to the remarkable collection of modern and contemporary art at Kettle's Yard, the University is committed to contributing to this store of knowledge. Renewing the Fund ensures this national heritage reaches the widest possible audience.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- More details on the most recent [DCMS/Wolfson Fund award winners](#).
- Museums and galleries interested in applying for the DCMS/Wolfson Fund, please visit the online [guidance](#).
- The fund is open for applications from May 9th. More than 370 museums

and galleries across 130 museums/museum groups are eligible to come forward.

- The [Wolfson Foundation](#) is an independent charity with a focus on research and education. Its aim is to support civil society by investing in excellent projects in science, health, heritage, humanities and the arts. Since it was established in 1955, some £1 billion (£2 billion in real terms) has been awarded to more than 12,000 projects throughout the UK, all on the basis of expert review.

World-first online safety laws introduced in Parliament

- Online Safety Bill will be introduced in Parliament today
- Parliament to approve what types of 'legal but harmful' content platforms must tackle

Internet users are one step closer to a safer online environment as the government's new world-leading online safety laws are brought before parliament today.

The Online Safety Bill marks a milestone in the fight for a new digital age which is safer for users and holds tech giants to account. It will protect children from harmful content such as pornography and limit people's exposure to illegal content, while protecting freedom of speech.

It will require social media platforms, search engines and other apps and websites allowing people to post their own content to protect children, tackle illegal activity and uphold their stated terms and conditions.

The regulator Ofcom will have the power to fine companies failing to comply with the laws up to ten per cent of their annual global turnover, force them to improve their practices and block non-compliant sites.

Today the government is announcing that executives whose companies fail to cooperate with Ofcom's information requests could now face prosecution or jail time within two months of the Bill becoming law, instead of two years as it was previously drafted.

A raft of other new offences have also been added to the Bill to make in-scope companies' senior managers criminally liable for destroying evidence, failing to attend or providing false information in interviews with Ofcom, and for obstructing the regulator when it enters company offices.

Digital Secretary Nadine Dorries said:

The internet has transformed our lives for the better. It's

connected us and empowered us. But on the other side, tech firms haven't been held to account when harm, abuse and criminal behaviour have run riot on their platforms. Instead they have been left to mark their own homework.

We don't give it a second's thought when we buckle our seat belts to protect ourselves when driving. Given all the risks online, it's only sensible we ensure similar basic protections for the digital age. If we fail to act, we risk sacrificing the wellbeing and innocence of countless generations of children to the power of unchecked algorithms.

Since taking on the job I have listened to people in politics, wider society and industry and strengthened the Bill, so that we can achieve our central aim: to make the UK the safest place to go online.

In the UK, tech industries are blazing a trail in investment and innovation. The Bill is balanced and proportionate with exemptions for low-risk tech and non-tech businesses with an online presence. It aims to increase people's trust in technology, which will in turn support our ambition for the UK to be the best place for tech firms to grow.

The Bill will strengthen people's rights to express themselves freely online and ensure social media companies are not removing legal free speech. For the first time, users will have the right to appeal if they feel their post has been taken down unfairly.

It will also put requirements on social media firms to protect journalism and democratic political debate on their platforms. News content will be completely exempt from any regulation under the Bill.

And, in a further boost to freedom of expression online, another major improvement announced today will mean social media platforms will only be required to tackle 'legal but harmful' content, such as exposure to self-harm, harassment and eating disorders, set by the government and approved by Parliament.

Previously they would have had to consider whether additional content on their sites met the definition of legal but harmful material. This change removes any incentives or pressure for platforms to over-remove legal content or controversial comments and will clear up the grey area around what constitutes legal but harmful.

Ministers will also continue to consider how to ensure platforms do not remove content from recognised media outlets.

Minister of State for Security and Borders Damian Hinds said:

As a society and as individuals, the internet has broadened our horizons and given us new opportunities to connect globally. But

alongside this, the most depraved criminals have been given fresh avenues to exploit vulnerable people and ruin lives, whether that be by stealing the innocence of children or destroying finances.

Our utmost priority is to protect children and ensure public safety. The trailblazing Online Safety Bill will ensure social media companies are finally held to account and are taking ownership of the massive effect they have on all of our lives. Fraudsters will have fewer places to hide and abusers will be ardently pursued to feel the full force of the law.

Bill introduction and changes over the last year

The Bill will be introduced in the Commons today. This is the first step in its passage through Parliament to become law and beginning a new era of accountability online. It follows a period in which the government has significantly strengthened the Bill since it was first published in draft in May 2021. Changes since the draft Bill include:

Dame Melanie Dawes, Ofcom Chief Executive, said:

Today marks an important step towards creating a safer life online for the UK's children and adults. Our research shows the need for rules that protect users from serious harm, but which also value the great things about being online, including freedom of expression. We're looking forward to starting the job.

Ian Russell, Molly Rose Foundation, said:

The Molly Rose Foundation and Molly's family urge Parliamentarians to deliver a safer internet for all, especially our young. The first reading of the Online Safety Bill in Parliament is another important step towards ending the damaging era of tech self-regulation. Increasingly, we are all reminded of the appalling consequences created by harmful online content.

Even nations and governments can struggle to protect themselves from the damaging use of digital technology, so we must do more to safeguard the lives of our young and vulnerable. It is time for the laws, regulations, and freedoms of our offline democracies to be reflected in the digital domain.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

Further improvements to the Bill confirmed today:

Criminal liability for senior managers

The Bill gives Ofcom powers to demand information and data from tech companies, including on the role of their algorithms in selecting and displaying content, so it can assess how they are shielding users from harm.

Ofcom will be able to enter companies' premises to access data and equipment, request interviews with company employees and require companies to undergo an external assessment of how they're keeping users safe.

The Bill was originally drafted with a power for senior managers of large online platforms to be held criminally liable for failing to ensure their company complies with Ofcom's information requests in an accurate and timely manner.

In the draft Bill, this power was deferred and so could not be used by Ofcom for at least two years after it became law. The Bill introduced today reduces the period to two months to strengthen penalties for wrongdoing from the outset.

Additional information-related offences have been added to the Bill to toughen the deterrent against companies and their senior managers providing false or incomplete information. They will apply to every company in scope of the Online Safety Bill. They are:

- offences for companies in scope and/or employees who suppress, destroy or alter information requested by Ofcom;
- offences for failing to comply with, obstructing or delaying Ofcom when exercising its powers of entry, audit and inspection, or providing false information;
- offences for employees who fail to attend or provide false information at an interview.

Falling foul of these offences could lead to up to two years in imprisonment or a fine.

Ofcom must treat the information gathered from companies sensitively. For example, it will not be able to share or publish data without consent unless tightly defined exemptions apply, and it will have a responsibility to ensure its powers are used proportionately.

Changes to requirements on 'legal but harmful' content

Under the draft Bill, 'Category 1' companies – the largest online platforms with the widest reach including the most popular social media platforms – must address content harmful to adults that falls below the threshold of a criminal offence.

Category 1 companies will have a duty to carry risk assessments on the types of legal harms against adults which could arise on their services. They will have to set out clearly in terms of service how they will deal with such content and enforce these terms consistently. If companies intend to remove, limit or allow particular types of content they will have to say so.

The agreed categories of legal but harmful content will be set out in secondary legislation and subject to approval by both Houses of Parliament. Social media platforms will only be required to act on the priority legal harms set out in that secondary legislation, meaning decisions on what types of content are harmful are not delegated to private companies or at the whim of internet executives.

It will also remove the threat of social media firms being overzealous and removing legal content because it upsets or offends someone even if it is not prohibited by their terms and conditions. This will end situations such as the incident last year when TalkRadio was forced offline by YouTube for an “unspecified” violation and it was not clear on how it breached its terms and conditions.

The move will help uphold freedom of expression and ensure people remain able to have challenging and controversial discussions online.

The DCMS Secretary of State has the power to add more categories of priority legal but harmful content via secondary legislation should they emerge in the future. Companies will be required to report emerging harms to Ofcom.

Proactive technology

Platforms may need to use tools for content moderation, user profiling and behaviour identification to protect their users.

Additional provisions have been added to the Bill to allow Ofcom to set expectations for the use of these proactive technologies in codes of practice and force companies to use better and more effective tools, should this be necessary.

Companies will need to demonstrate they are using the right tools to address harms, they are transparent, and any technologies they develop meet standards of accuracy and effectiveness required by the regulator. Ofcom will not be able to recommend these tools are applied on private messaging or legal but harmful content.

Reporting child sexual abuse

A new requirement will mean companies must report child sexual exploitation and abuse content they detect on their platforms to the [National Crime Agency](#).

The CSEA reporting requirement will replace the UK’s existing voluntary reporting regime and reflects the Government’s commitment to tackling this horrific crime.

Reports to the National Crime Agency will need to meet a set of clear standards to ensure law enforcement receives the high quality information it needs to safeguard children, pursue offenders and limit lifelong re-victimisation by preventing the ongoing recirculation of illegal content.

In-scope companies will need to demonstrate existing reporting obligations

outside of the UK to be exempt from this requirement, which will avoid duplication of company's efforts.

Facilitating a path towards fair and independent elections in Libya

Thank you Mr President. I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo, Ambassador Tirumurti and Dr Shaiter for briefing the Council today. Tensions in Libya have risen since we last met on this subject, so today's discussion is particularly timely. I will make three points.

First, I would like to echo the Secretary-General's call for de-escalation. All actors, internal and external, should refrain from any moves that could undermine stability or deepen divisions in Libya and threaten to undo the hard-won progress achieved over the last two years. The United Kingdom strongly supports Special Adviser Stephanie Williams and urges those on both sides of the current impasse to accept her offer to facilitate dialogue.

Second, as we've heard today, 2.8 million Libyans have made their aspiration for elections clear. We support Special Adviser Williams' efforts to mediate between the House of Representatives and High State Council to establish a constitutional basis for elections. Libya's political leaders must set aside narrow interests and engage seriously to address the underlying conditions that prevented elections from going ahead last December. Whilst Libya lurches between political crises, it's Libyan people who continue to suffer from a lack of proper service delivery, an unstable economy, and fragile security.

Third, we call on all Libyan parties to protect the independence, integrity and reunification of public institutions. The National Oil Corporation should not be politicised and must be able to fulfil its duties without interference – attempts to shut down oil production are concerning and are only to the detriment of the Libyan economy and its people. Libyan public institutions are there to serve the whole of Libya and should be empowered to do so.

To conclude, Libya is at a crossroads. There is a real risk of dangerous escalation that could unravel the hard-won ceasefire and threaten Libya's stability. It is now incumbent on all of us to facilitate a path to the elections the Libyan people are waiting for. Thank you, Mr President.

PM meeting with the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman: 16 March 2022

Press release

Prime Minister Boris Johnson met the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, in Riyadh today.



The Prime Minister met the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, in Riyadh today.

He set out the UK's view that we are facing a fundamentally changed world order following Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, which requires countries to work together to improve energy security and reduce reliance on Russian hydrocarbons.

The Prime Minister and Crown Prince agreed to collaborate to maintain stability in the energy market and continue the transition to renewable and clean technology.

They also committed to boost cooperation in defence, security, trade and culture, welcoming a new UK-Saudi Strategic Partnership Agreement and a major investment announced today by the alfanar group in green aviation fuel in Teesside.

The Prime Minister praised progress against Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, including on women's empowerment and employment, but raised the UK's concerns about ongoing human rights issues.

The leaders also discussed key regional issues and agreed to stay in close contact as the crisis in Ukraine evolves.

Published 16 March 2022