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Chair, Communications and Digital Select
Committee
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Chi Onwurah MP
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The Rt. Hon the Baroness Kidron
Deputy Chair, Digital Regulation and
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House of Lords, London, SW1A 0PW

By email only

Dear All,

Online Safety Act Update

As you will know, robust age checks are a cornerstone of the Online Safety Act. Today Ofcom has published [guidance for industry](#) which sets out how we expect sites and apps to introduce highly effective age assurance to prevent children accessing harmful content, particularly pornography. Today's publications are the next step in our work to implement the Online Safety Act and ensure a safer life online for people in the UK, particularly children. They require all service providers which allow pornography to implement highly effective age assurance to ensure that children are not normally able to encounter pornographic content. Today's announcement follows on from the tough industry standards, that we finalised last month, to tackle illegal harms online, and come ahead of broader measures to protect children which we will publish in the Spring.

What have we announced today?

Today marks a milestone in protecting children from encountering harmful content online, particularly pornography, building on our December illegal harms statement. Today's announcement includes:

- **All services that allow pornography must have highly effective age assurance in place by July 2025 at the latest** to prevent children from accessing it. Our approach to highly effective age assurance is consistent across all services that allow pornography. While the Act imposes different deadlines on different types of provider, today's announcements are the first step in ensuring that by July all services that allow pornography must have a highly effective age assurance solution in place to protect under 18s. This is the case whether a service publishes its own pornographic content or allows user-generated pornographic content. User-to-user services that allow pornographic content must follow the full suite of provisions in the Act, including: completing the risk assessment for illegal harms by March 16th, the codes for illegal harms, which include extreme pornography.

- **Services that display or publish their own pornographic content** (“part 5” services), including certain Generative AI tools, **must begin taking steps immediately to introduce robust age checks.**
- **Ofcom is opening an Age Assurance Enforcement Programme to monitor and assess compliance with these duties**, starting with Part 5 services.
- **Children’s access assessments:** all user-to-user and search services in scope of the Act must assess whether their service, or part of it, is likely to be accessed by children. **From today**, these services have three months (**by 16 April 2025 at the latest**) to complete their children’s access assessment. Unless they are already using highly effective age assurance, we anticipate that most of these services will need to conclude that they are likely to be accessed by children within the meaning of the Act. Under the Act, services likely to be accessed by children must comply with the children’s risk assessment duties and the children’s safety duties.

What does highly effective age assurance mean?

Highly effective age assurance is a key element of the Act. Today we set out our conclusions on what we consider to be ‘highly effective age assurance’. These decisions include:

- Confirming the criteria that age assurance methods must meet to be considered highly effective: they should be technically accurate, robust, reliable and fair;
- Setting out a non-exhaustive list of age assurance methods that we consider are capable of being highly effective, including mobile network operator age checks, credit card checks, digital identity services and certain age estimation methods;
- Confirming that less effective methods of age assurance – including self-declaration of age and online payments which do not require a person to be 18 – are not compliant with the requirement to have highly effective age assurance;
- Stipulating that harmful content must not be visible to users before, or during, the process of completing an age check; and
- Making clear that services should not host or permit content that directs or encourages children to attempt to circumvent age and access controls.
- Setting expectations that services consider the interests of all users when implementing age assurance – affording strong protection to children, while taking care that privacy rights are respected.

Services must assess for themselves whether their approach to age checks meet our criteria and we will hold them to account for doing so. Our approach to age assurance is designed to be flexible, tech-neutral and future-proofed, with the protection of children at its heart.

Enforcement and compliance

Protecting children from accessing pornography and illegal sexual content

We expect all providers to take a proactive approach to compliance and meet the deadlines set out above.

In light of the commencement of the first of these age assurance duties (on Part 5 services) on 17 January, **Ofcom is opening an enforcement programme to monitor and assess compliance with the requirements to implement highly effective age assurance for pornography.** We will first focus our attention on Part 5 services that display or publish their own pornographic content, extending the programme to include all relevant Part 3 services as soon as the broader children’s safety duties come into effect. We will contact a wide range of adult services – large and small – to advise them of

their new obligations and monitor their compliance. We will not hesitate to take enforcement action against services that do not comply.

Our range of supervision and enforcement powers

The duties set out in the Act are mandatory – services must comply. Our teams will be closely monitoring compliance across the range of services in scope. This includes:

- **Gathering information:** We have the power to [request information](#) from services to help us fulfil our functions as online safety regulator, including monitoring compliance and to support our ongoing policy development.
- **Supervisory engagement:** Our supervision team are engaging a range of services to ensure they act quickly to protect users online. This includes some of the largest platforms as well as smaller ones that present a high risk to users online. We will review services' risk assessments carefully to ensure they have adequately addressed the biggest risks with a particular focus on the areas identified above. We will work with services to ensure they comply with their duties but will not hesitate to take formal action where they don't meet our expected standards.
- **Opening enforcement programmes:** We will use cross-sector enforcement programmes to monitor and assess compliance on specific issues across a range of services. These could result in formal enforcement action. As well as the programme we've announced today, we expect to open more programmes in 2025.
- **Taking formal enforcement action:** Where there is a risk of serious harm to users - especially children - we will take enforcement action where service providers fail to comply with their duties, which may include issuing significant financial penalties and/or requiring them to make specific changes. In the most serious cases, we can apply to the courts for business disruption measures that disrupt non-compliant providers' commercial operations or block their sites in the UK.

What happens next?

The spotlight is now on services, who must take action and make sure users in the UK have a safer life online. We are closely watching how industry reacts to the new rules, with a particular focus on sites and apps that pose the greatest risk, whether because of their size, or the nature of their service. While we are ready to act wherever we see breaches of the rules, we expect specific improvements in 2025 in five areas:

- **Stronger governance and accountability:** Every app and site must effectively assess the risks posed by their service and act quickly to mitigate those risks. We will ask an initial set of services to disclose their illegal harms risk assessment to us by 31 March 2025 so we can check they are suitable and sufficient. We will do the same for children's risk assessments once we've published final guidance on this in April. Services will also need to appoint a senior named individual responsible for safety in their organisation.
- **Highly effective age checks to protect children from harm:** Services must stop children encountering pornography and other content that is harmful to them (for example, suicide, self-harm, and eating disorder content). After we've finalised our protection of children codes, we'll ask more services about their use of age assurance methods, how they have assessed that they are highly effective for protecting children, and how their impact is being monitored.
- **Tackling child sexual abuse material and preventing grooming:** This is a high priority for Ofcom, and services must take steps to stop the online proliferation of child sexual abuse material and prevent online child grooming. Services must mitigate these risks, including

through using hash databases and our recommended access controls (where relevant). We'll be first focusing on making sure higher-risk services are taking action quickly.

- **Effective and properly resourced content moderation to tackle illegal harms:** Services must have a content moderation function in place to quickly take down illegal content. We also expect services to make sure they have the right resources and training in place to operate effective content moderation. This will help prevent all kinds of online harm, including hate, terror, illegal suicide material, fraud, and non-consensual intimate image content. We'll be assessing the effectiveness of a selection of services' reporting and takedown processes.
- **A big change in what children see and experience online:** We will publish our Protection of Children Codes and children's risk assessment guidance (along with other guidance) in April 2025. Once we've finalised our protection of children codes, we'll be looking into how services test algorithms, including to check that children are not recommended harmful content like suicide and self-harm material.

I would like to thank you again for the ongoing engagement we have had from Parliamentarians and other stakeholders. We look forward to continuing to work with you as we build upon these protections in the future. Our goal is for everyone in the UK to live a safer life online and we want to ensure that 2025 is a year of action for industry to make this happen.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Davies". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kate Davies