

The Online Safety Act 2023

TREVOR GORDON AND DAN HULL





Topical Digest

The Online Safety Act

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This topical digest provides a reading list to assist in understanding and scrutinising the Online Safety Act 2023. It includes links to the legislation and its passage, as well as coverage of commentary and debates around its effectiveness, both in Northern Ireland specifically and more generally across the UK. The digest also includes some of the guidance, consultations and codes of practice published by Ofcom in relation to the legislation.

Front cover image by [PickPik](#)

This topical digest contains references to topics some readers may find distressing.

1 Introduction

The [Online Safety Act 2023](#) establishes a new regulatory regime with the intention of addressing illegal and harmful content online. It imposes legal requirements on the following¹:

- Providers of internet services which allow users to encounter content generated, uploaded or shared by other users ('user-to-user services');
- Providers of search engines which enable users to search multiple websites and databases ('search services'); and
- Providers of internet services on which provider pornographic content (pornographic content that is published by a provider and is not user-generated) is published or displayed.

The Act also confers new powers on the Office of Communications (OFCOM), establishing them as the online safety regulator. This role includes overseeing and enforcing the new regulatory regime, as well as producing various sets of guidance and codes of practice which have been consulted on and then published throughout 2024 and 2025, continuing into 2026.

Key milestones in this process have been the enforcement of child safety duties from 25 July 2025. By this date, services likely to be accessed by children are required to have completed a 'suitable and sufficient' children's risk assessment and to have implemented required safety measures, including age verification to prevent children from accessing pornography, or content which encourages self-harm, suicide or eating disorder content.

One of the major developments which is still awaited (as of the date of this Topical Digest) is the publication of final guidance on protecting women and girls online. This guidance is expected to be published by the end of 2025.

Some stakeholders have continued to campaign for changes to the Online Safety Act, including on issues such as whether the Act overly restricts freedom of expression, whether age verification systems present a risk to the privacy of individuals, a perceived lack of clarity on what constitutes harmful content, and whether enforcement measures where providers of online platforms transgress are proving effective. Some organisations have proposed that the emerging threat of so-called 'deepfake' images, or sexual digital forgery, also now needs to be addressed more specifically in legislation in Northern Ireland.

¹ Online Safety Act 2023: [Explanatory Notes](#); see also the summary set out in Section 1 of the Act.

2 Legislation

- [Online Safety Act 2023](#) (October 2023)
- [Bill passage page](#): provides access to key documents and records produced during the Bill's passage through Parliament, including all official documents, debates, and supporting materials related to the development, scrutiny, and passage of the Online Safety Act 2023.
- [Hansard references](#): dates and Hansard references for each stage of the Act's passage through Parliament.

3 UK Government guidance and news releases

- News release: [Online safety laws to strengthen to protect people of all ages from devastating self-harm content](#) (8 September 2025)
- News release: [Keeping children safe online: changes to the Online Safety Act explained](#) (1 August 2025)
- UK Government, [Online Safety Act](#) (Collection of relevant information) (24 July 2025)
- Guidance: [Online Safety Act: explainer](#) (24 April 2025)
- News release: [First UK-US online safety agreement pledges closer co-operation to keep children safe online](#) (10 October 2024)

4 Ofcom publications

- [Consultation: Online Safety – additional safety measures](#) (30 June 2025)
- [Online Safety Act Explained: Q&A](#) (28 May 2025)
- [Statement: Protecting children from harms online](#) (24 April 2025)
- [Consultation: Guidance – a safer life online for women and girls](#) (25 February 2025)
- [Helping small services navigate the Online Safety Act](#) (24 January 2025)
- [Age Assurance and Children's Access Statement](#) (16 January 2025)
- [Time for tech firms to act: UK online safety regulation comes into force](#) (16 December 2024)
- [A third of children have false social media age of 18+](#) (updated January 2024)

5 Department of Justice

- Department of Justice, [A Consultation to Criminalise Sexually Explicit Deepfake Images](#) (July 2025)

6 UK Parliament

Committee Reports and Parliamentary Inquiries

- House of Commons Public Accounts Committee: [Preparedness for online safety regulation \(2024\)](#) This report assesses Ofcom's readiness and the challenges of implementing the Act (21 February 2024).
- Science, Innovation and Technology Committee: [UK's Online Safety regime unable to tackle the spread of misinformation and cannot keep users safe online, MPs warn](#) (11 July 2025)

Committee Oral Evidence and Events

- [Online Safety Act – Committees – UK Parliament](#) Committee portal where oral evidence sessions, publications, and news related to the Act are published.
- House of Lords [Communications and Digital Committee session with Ofcom](#) (14 October 2025)

UK Parliament research and information services

- House of Commons Library, [Implementation of the Online Safety Act](#) (25 February 2025)
- Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, [Violence against women and girls in schools and among children and young people](#) (7 August 2025)

7 Northern Ireland Assembly

Assembly Questions

- Assembly Questions on the topic of the Online Safety Act 2023 can be accessed via this [link](#), or by navigating to the [AIMS Portal](#) on the Assembly website.

Plenary debates

- [Tackling Online Violence Against Women and Girls](#) (14 January 2025)

Oral Answers to Questions

- [Online Abuse](#) (9 September 2024)

Research and Information Service (RaISe)

- Research Paper: [Online Trolling and Abuse](#) (June 2021)

8 Advocacy groups

- Molly Rose Foundation, [Children's exposure to suicide, self-harm, depression and eating disorder content on social media](#), Research Briefing (October 2025)
- 5 Rights Foundation: [Joint statement on the children's online safety regime](#) (13 April 2025)
- Joint Civil Society Briefing: [Implementation of The Online Safety Act](#) (February 2025)
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY): [OFCOM consultation: Protecting Children from Harms Online](#) (August 2024)
- NSPCC: [The Online Safety Act: what it means for children and professionals](#) (November 2023)
- The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI): [Growing Up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland – an Evidence Report](#) (October 2023)

9 Civil liberties groups

- Big Brother Watch: [Five things you need to know about the Online Safety Act](#) (16 September 2025)
- Open Rights Group (ORG): [How to Fix the Online Safety Act: A Rights First Approach](#) (15 May 2025)
- The Constitution Society: [The Online Safety Act: scrutiny, safeguards and civil liberties](#) (1 December 2023)
- Article 19: [UK: Online Safety Bill is a serious threat to human rights online](#) (25 April 2022)
- Liberty UK: [Liberty's Briefing On The Online Safety Bill For Second Reading In The House of Commons](#) (April 2022)

10 Legal opinion and analysis

- Kang and Co Solicitors, [Understanding the Online Safety Act 2023](#) (28 August 2025)
- Chambers and Partners, [The Online Safety Act 2023: nine new criminal offences come into force](#) (1 November 2024)
- 5RB Media and Communications Law, [Net Benefit? The Online Safety Bill receives Royal Assent](#) (3 November 2023)
- Muckle Commercial Law, [Royal Assent received for the Online Safety Act 2023: What happens next?](#) (23 November 2023)

11 Commentary

- Games Industry.biz, [The Online Safety Act is causing some studios to rethink in-game features, says law firm](#) (16 September 2025)
- Tech Radar [Fixing the Online Safety Act: look to betting, not to bans](#) (16 September 2025)
- Devdiscourse, [Wikipedia faces regulatory challenges: UK Online Safety Act in focus](#) (12 September 2025)
- ALOR blog, [Censorship by proxy: a critical analysis of the UK's Online Safety Act and the erosion of free expression](#) (August 2025)
- Brit Brief, [Wikipedia challenges UK's Online Safety Act in High Court over free speech concerns](#) (11 August 2025)
- The Daily Sceptic, [The Online Safety Act is a censor's charter](#) (30 July 2025)
- The Register, [UK Online Safety Act 'not up to scratch' on misinformation, warn MPs](#) (11 July 2025)
- Online Safety Act Network, [Ofcom's draft guidance on protecting women and girls](#) (2 April 2025)
- The Financial Analyst, [UK's Online Safety Act sparks tech industry backlash](#) (17 February 2025)
- Disinformation Social Media Alliance (DISA), [An assessment of the Online Safety Act's suitability for its intended purpose](#) (16 February 2025)
- Care, [Critics question whether online safety regulations will suffice](#) (21 November 2024)
- O Brown and A Cork, [What is the Online Safety Act and why have riots reopened debates about it?](#), The Conversation (14 August 2024)

- Online Safety Act Network, [Disinformation and disorder: the limits of the Online Safety Act](#) (10 August 2024) s
- The New Statesman, [Will the Online Safety Act protect us or infringe our freedoms?](#) (17 November 2023)
- Media and Information Literacy Alliance, [Online Safety Bill completes its passage through Parliament](#) (5 October 2023)
- Clean Up The Internet, [The long road to the Online Safety Act 2023](#) (21 September 2023)
- A and L Goodbody, [The Online Safety Act in focus: key challenges, implementation, and navigating Ofcom's approach](#) (2023)
- Clean Up The Internet, [The long road to the Online Safety Act 2023](#) (21 September 2023)

12 Academic research papers

- E Abrusci, [The UK Online Safety Act, the EU Digital Services Act and online disinformation: is the right to political participation adequately protected?](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 440-467 (2024)
- E Bechtold, [Regulating online harms: an examination of recent developments in the UK and the US through a free speech lens](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 358-389 (2024)
- B Farrand, [How do we understand online harms? The impact of conceptual divides on regulatory divergence between the Online Safety Act and Digital Services Act](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 240-262 (2024)
- E Jutson, [The Bypass Strategy: platforms, the Online Safety Act and future of online speech](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 336-357 (2024)
- U Kohl, [Toxic recommender algorithms: immunities, liabilities and the regulated self-regulation of the Digital Services Act and the Online Safety Act](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 301-335 (2024)
- S Law, [Effective enforcement of the Online Safety Act and Digital Services Act: unpacking the compliance and enforcement regimes of the UK and EU's online safety legislation](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 263-300 (2024)
- E Lomas, [A Critical Review of the Online Safety Bill](#) UCL (2022)
- C McGlynn, [Pornography, the Online Safety Act 2023 and the need for further reform](#) Journal of Media Law, 16(2), pp. 211-239 (2024)

- C McGlynn and R Tuna Toparlak, ['The 'new voyeurism': criminalizing the creation of 'deepfake porn'](#)", Journal of Law and Society, 52(2), pp. 204-228 (2025)
- V Nash and L Felton, [Treating the symptoms or the disease? Analysing the UK Online Safety Act's approach to digital regulation](#) Policy Internet, 16, pp. 818–832 (2024)
- T Sachdeva, [The Online Safety Act 2023: A New Era for Digital Regulation or a Threat to Freedom of Expression in the UK?](#) Lawful Legal Law Journal, (July 2025)
- H Schmidt, [The online safety act 2023](#) Journal of Media Law, 16 (2), pp. 202-210 (2024)

13 News articles

- ['Tamed' algorithms and plummeting pornography views: Impact of new online safety rules revealed one month on](#) Sky News (26 August 2025)
- [Wikipedia loses challenge against Online Safety Act verification rules](#) BBC News (11 August 2025)
- [The unintended consequences of the Online Safety Act](#) The Guardian (7 August 2025)
- [Ofcom launches investigations into 34 sites under new Online Safety Act age-check rules](#) Manchester Evening News (2 August 2025)
- [Ofcom cracks down on non-compliant porn sites under Online Safety Act](#) Financial Times (31 July 2025)
- [Starmer defends Online Safety Act as 'child protection'](#) The Independent (25 July 2025)
- [Two porn sites investigated for suspected age check failings](#) BBC News (9 May 2025)
- [Ban children from social media if Online Safety Act watered down, children's commissioner says](#) Sky News (3 April 2025)
- [Charities urge Government to target smaller websites under Online Safety Act](#) The Independent (15 October 2024)

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