



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport

Caroline Dinenage MP
Minister for Digital and Culture
4th Floor
100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

www.gov.uk/dcms
enquiries@dcms.gov.uk

Caroline Nokes MP
Chair
Women and Equalities Committee

womeqcom@parliament.uk

MC2021/14048/DC
16 July 2021

Dear Caroline

Thank you for your letter of 10 June to myself, the Minister for Safeguarding and the Minister for Schools following the Committee's oral evidence session on changing cultures underpinning male violence against women which took place on 28 April 2021. I am responding to the concerns raised in your letter on addressing the impact of harmful media and pornography.

The Online Safety Bill

Since the oral evidence session took place, the government published the draft Online Safety Bill outlined in the Queen's Speech. The Bill will deliver a ground-breaking new system of accountability and oversight of tech companies. For the first time, tech companies are going to be accountable to an independent regulator to keep their users safe. We are also taking action now to improve online safety for women and children ahead of the passage of the Online Safety Bill.

The strongest protections in the new regulatory framework will be for children. All companies in scope of the legislation will need to assess whether their service is likely to be accessed by children and, if it is, deliver additional protections for them.

The online safety regime will capture both the most visited pornography sites and pornography on social media. This covers the vast majority of sites where children are most likely to be exposed to pornography. We expect companies to use age verification technologies to prevent children from accessing services which pose the highest risk of harm, such as online pornography. If not through verification technology, companies would need to demonstrate that their alternative approach delivers the same level of protection for children, or face enforcement action by the regulator.

In addition to protecting children, companies will need to take swift and effective action against illegal content. Services in scope of the framework will need to have effective systems in place to minimise and remove priority illegal content, such as illegal revenge pornography, extreme pornography, illegal sexual abuse or harassment, and illegal deepfake pornography.

High-risk, high reach platforms, such as major social media companies, will also need to address legal but harmful content for adults. Following consultation with Ofcom, priority categories of legal but harmful content for adults will be set out in secondary legislation. These are likely to include some forms of online abuse, including sexist abuse targeted at women. Users will be better able to report abuse and should expect to receive an appropriate response from the platform. This might include removal of harmful content, sanctions against offending users, or changing processes and policies to provide better protection online. If a company fails in these duties, it could face an investigation and enforcement action from Ofcom, including large fines.

My Department is currently working to develop the list of priority harms, ensuring that the prevalence and impact of offences against women and girls is reflected. Revenge pornography is likely to be a priority illegal harm. We also expect that the list of priority categories of harm to children will include pornographic and violent content, and the priority category of legal but harmful content for adults is likely to include violent or abusive content.

Interim Measures

We are also taking action now to protect children, before the Bill comes into effect. Along with the Education Secretary, the Culture Secretary recently wrote to the Children's Commissioner for England, seeking her support on how to work with schools, parents and charities to support them around building strong social norms against underage access to pornography and children using the internet safely. Also, the Culture Secretary recently wrote to popular social media platforms asking for greater transparency on how they enforce their stated minimum age policies for their platforms. Officials have held follow up meetings with each of the main platforms and we are currently exploring where the focus of our next steps in this space should be.

It is important that the criminal law keeps pace with changes in technology and DCMS has sponsored a Law Commission review of harmful online communications. This review is considering whether the law needs updating to account for online abuse, such as pile-on harassment and cyberflashing which is frequently targeted at women. The Law Commission will issue final recommendations later this year.

Platform design can directly impact the likelihood of harm occurring. A safety by design approach, which embeds safety as a core consideration in the design and development of an online platform, has an important role to play in creating safer online spaces for women and girls. DCMS published voluntary guidance for SMEs and startups in June this year. This voluntary guidance sets out clear principles and guidance to help companies make safer design choices. In addition, it is expected that platform design choices will be considered as part of the risk assessment required of companies by the Bill.

DCMS is working with the UK tech sector to grow the UK and international market in 'safety tech' - products and services that help deliver safer online experiences for citizens. Many of these technologies tackle harms that disproportionately affect women and girls, for example child sexual exploitation, grooming, harassment, cyberbullying and eating disorder content.

We know that users want support to help manage their online safety. My Department will be publishing the Media Literacy Strategy later this year. This will be an important vehicle to ensure a coordinated and strategic approach to media literacy. The Strategy will educate and empower users with the skills they need to make more informed and safer choices online. This will include support for those experiencing disproportionate levels of online abuse, including women and girls.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Caroline Dinenage". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

Caroline Dinenage MP
Minister of State for Digital and Culture