

Written evidence submitted by Premier Christian Communications (OSB0093)

Premier Christian Communications is a leading platform for Christian voices in the UK. We are a not-for-profit media company and our flagship radio station, Premier Christian Radio, has an audience of over a million regular listeners and our news website and publications are popular with Christians across the UK and internationally.

In 2013, we launched a campaign “Safety Net: Protecting Innocence Online” which called for better safeguarding measures for children using the internet. We were pleased that the campaigning efforts of our listeners and readers had helped bring about age verification measures in the Digital Economy Act to protect children from casual access to explicit pornography online.

However, the Government has decided not to enact Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act (approved by Parliament in 2017) and instead gave assurances that equivalent provisions would be written into the new Online Safety Bill.

We were disappointed to learn that the draft Bill fails to contain the necessary provisions for age verification.

We have seen already the damage that the prevalence of online porn is doing to our children, normalising sexual objectification and even leading to sexual harassment in our classrooms.

Thousands of children have been exposed to harmful images of hard-core pornography since the safeguarding provisions were supposed to be enacted in 2018 and thousands more will continue to be exposed until age verification controls are imposed.

Every day, children and young people are accessing pornography on the internet, including the most hardcore, violent and abusive images. Evidence clearly shows pornography has a detrimental impact on children and young people including, premature sexualisation, negative body image and unhealthy notions about sexual relationships.

The problem is widespread. A study by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) showed that more than half of 11-13 year olds had seen online pornography and two-thirds of 14-15 year olds had said the same.

Internet Service Providers have improved parental controls and computer filters in the home since we launched our original campaign Safety Net: Protecting Innocence Online back in 2013. However, the explosion of social media and internet browsing on mobile phones means that new safeguards are needed. The Government must not miss this opportunity to put robust measures in place to prevent porn appearing on screens of a child’s mobile phone.

It is difficult to get a complete picture of the extent of the damage to a child’s social, sexual and psychological development that can be caused by exposure to images of pornography online because of the ethical issues involved in conducting such research with children.

Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence showing a link between exposure to sexually explicit material and harmful attitudes to sex and relationships.

According to psychologists who work with children and teenagers, the effects of pornography include:

- 1) more boys sexually harassing girls.
- 2) both boys and girls learning about sex without any connection to relationships or emotion.
- 3) addictions to viewing explicit adult content developing from a young age.

Parents are increasingly alarmed at the ease of accessing hardcore pornography online. The BBFC polls showed 83% of parents support age-verification controls.

We cannot understand how the Government has omitted age verifications from the draft Bill given that:

- (a) Age verification has long been promised by the government and was a Conservative Party manifesto policy commitment from 2015 and;
- (b) Technology now exists for age verification checks while allowing for the privacy of site visitors.

We understand the government believes that the new online safety proposals will supersede Part 3 of Digital Economy Act. Yet, the proposals in the Online Safety Bill focuses on platforms which host user-generated content and age verifications will not apply to all commercial pornography sites.

As it stands, this Bill would mean less safeguards against exposing children to harmful online pornography than what we have on the statute books at the moment.

We urge the Joint Committee to amend the Online Safety Bill so that it includes Age Verification measures unless the Government is able to commit to a deadline before the end of this year for enacting the provisions in Section 3 of the Digital Economy Act.

September 2021