# UK government advances Ofcom’s new mandate for stricter online safety and age verification



The UK government has set forth a policy paper, “Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety,” which outlines extensive requirements for Ofcom, the regulator tasked with enforcing the Online Safety Act. This document calls for a range of measures, including increased censorship and surveillance, alongside mandatory online age verification protocols. Although the stipulations in the paper are not legally binding, Ofcom is required to consider the strategic priorities when performing its regulatory duties, explaining its decisions regarding the implementation or rejection of these guidelines.

At the forefront of these priorities is the concept of “Safety by Design,” which aims to initiate enhanced accountability for social media platforms—this follows a recurring narrative that associates digital platforms with events like the Southport riots. Such an approach suggests that the government is intent on addressing the perceived dangers presented by social media, rather than delving into the more complex societal factors that contribute to such incidents. Additionally, the proposal pushes for advanced age verification systems to ensure that children are safeguarded from harmful content.

The government contends that the Online Safety Act not only serves to protect children but also provides some adult users with necessary safeguards against potentially harmful, albeit not illegal, content. This shift in focus could usher in a new era of digital governance where platforms are obligated to adopt “robust” measures to mitigate the spread of misinformation perceived as a risk to national security and public safety. Such measures are crucial, given the increasing sophistication of AI technologies and the concerns associated with their use on social media platforms.

Another core focus of the document is “Transparency and Accountability.” Here, the government seeks forward-looking, outcome-oriented advice from Ofcom’s Online Information Advisory Committee concerning misinformation online. This reflects a growing recognition of the dangers that misinformation poses to societal stability and individual safety. Moreover, the government aims for Ofcom to stay abreast of technological advancements with an eye towards regulatory agility, allowing it to appropriately respond to new digital threats as they emerge.

As part of its regulatory strategy, Ofcom is also charged with identifying risks associated with smaller digital services. These platforms will be monitored closely for the dissemination of illegal misinformation and harmful content, including misogynistic material. This goes hand in hand with the government’s overarching goal of fostering an inclusive and resilient online environment through proactive research and intervention options facilitated by Ofcom.

“Technology and Innovation” serves as another critical area within the strategic priorities, highlighting the need for sophisticated age verification tools as part of the government’s broader agenda to combat online harms. Increasingly, there are calls for government-backed third-party solutions to support platforms in effectively protecting their users.

While advocates of the Online Safety Act hail it as a necessary measure to protect children and vulnerable adults, critics warn that it represents an expansion of government power over digital spaces, potentially leading to widespread censorship. Recent statements from Ofcom's chief executive, Melanie Dawes, underscore the urgency of these changes, particularly regarding the need for stringent age verification measures. With a push for immediate compliance from adult websites to prevent under-18s from accessing harmful materials, the emphasis is more than ever on safeguarding young users from the dangerous parts of the internet.

As these strategic priorities begin to take shape, the balance between ensuring online safety and protecting freedoms will likely remain a contentious issue. The government's approach may ultimately shape how platforms operate and how users experience the digital landscape in years to come.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: Sources [[1]](https://reclaimthenet.org/uk-online-safety-act-strategic-priorities-ofcom-censorship-surveillance-age-verification), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety/draft-statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://reclaimthenet.org/uk-online-safety-act-strategic-priorities-ofcom-censorship-surveillance-age-verification> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety/draft-statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety> - The UK government has published a policy paper titled 'Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety,' outlining key priorities for online safety regulation. The document emphasizes the need for Ofcom to consider these priorities when exercising its regulatory functions, aiming to enhance online safety through various strategic approaches.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer> - The Online Safety Act 2023 is a new set of laws designed to protect children and adults online. It imposes new duties on social media companies and search services, making them more responsible for their users' safety. The Act requires platforms to implement systems to reduce risks of illegal activity and to remove illegal content when it appears.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-online-safety-priorities-for-ofcom-and-launch-of-study-into-effects-of-social-media-on-children> - The UK government has outlined new online safety priorities for Ofcom, focusing on areas such as safety by design, transparency and accountability, agile regulation, inclusivity and resilience, and technology and innovation. These priorities aim to enhance online safety and address emerging challenges, including the impact of social media on children.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-sets-first-codes-practice-tech-firms-online-safety-regime-2024-12-16/> - Britain has launched its online safety regime, mandating social media firms like Facebook and TikTok to address illegal activities and prioritize safety on their platforms. Ofcom, the media regulator, has issued its first codes of practice targeting illegal harms such as child sexual abuse and incitement to suicide. Companies have until March 16, 2025, to assess and mitigate risks posed to users, with required measures including better content moderation and easier reporting mechanisms.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/74181f71-a13f-4446-9e32-0a3d8293c270> - A new set of rules established by the UK media regulator, Ofcom, mandates stringent age verification measures to prevent under-18s from accessing pornography websites. These measures may include photo ID matching, facial age estimation technology, and credit card checks. The new rules require adult websites to implement robust age checks immediately, while social media platforms hosting pornographic content must comply by July. Ofcom's chief executive, Melanie Dawes, emphasized that many online services have ignored the issue of children accessing harmful material.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety/draft-statement-of-strategic-priorities-for-online-safety> - The UK government has published a policy paper titled 'Draft Statement of Strategic Priorities for Online Safety,' outlining key priorities for online safety regulation. The document emphasizes the need for Ofcom to consider these priorities when exercising its regulatory functions, aiming to enhance online safety through various strategic approaches.