

MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

The Online Safety Act: public support for a stronger approach

Policy briefing – March 2025

Online safety is at the top of the political agenda. With just days to go until the Online Safety Act takes effect, Molly Rose Foundation (MRF) has warned that Ofcom's implementation has proven disastrous – and that a strengthened and reworked Act is urgently required.

Meanwhile, the Southport attack has shone a spotlight on the disturbing risks being driven by fluid ideologies. Fluid ideologies are where no clear ideology is identified in those committing or coercing others into violent or sadistic acts. These risk archetypes are now driving disturbing new online threats, including children being groomed by online groups for the purposes of suicide and self-harm – and are now on the leading edge of the suicide and self-harm threat being faced by children and young people.

This briefing presents the results of new representative polling of UK adults, and shows:

- **Clear public concern about the online risks being faced by children and young people:** there is overwhelming public concern about the risks being propelled by fluid ideologies, with 91% of adults concerned about children being groomed for the purposes of suicide and self-harm acts.
- **Overwhelming support for a new Online Safety Act:** four in five adults support a new Act that strengthens online safety regulation for children, rising to 85% of parents. Three quarters (77%) of adults would support the Prime Minister making a personal promise that children will be better protected from online harm during his premiership.
- **A clear view that Government, regulators and tech firms should be doing more:** only 9 per cent of UK adults think the Government is doing everything it can to protect children's online safety, and one in ten (11%) think the regulator Ofcom is doing all it can.
- **A clear steer from the public not to prioritise tech investment over children's safety:** by a 9 to 1 margin, the public supports policies that prioritise children's safety, even if this means tech firms invest significantly less in the UK. In the US, Meta has faced allegations that it successfully used investment decisions to scuttle landmark online safety legislation in Congress.

Methodology

YouGov surveyed 2,275 adults in February 2025. This includes a sample of 452 parents with at least one child aged 18 or younger. Fieldwork was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Results

1. Significant concern about online safety risks, including those being driven by fluid ideologies

There is significant public concern about online safety risks being faced by children and young people. An overwhelming majority of UK adults (83%) say they are concerned about the current online safety of children and young people (89% of parents with a child aged under 18.)

High levels of public concern are consistently found across political affiliation, age, class and geography.

There is strong public concern about threat types being driven by fluid ideologies and high-risk social media design features. Almost nine in ten adults report being concerned about the availability of content featuring extreme violence (87%), and 89% are concerned about children and young people being recommended violent content by social media algorithms.

Meanwhile 91% of adults are concerned about children being groomed leading to self-harm or suicide acts, with two thirds (67%) stating they are very concerned.

MRF is increasingly concerned about online groups that are being propelled by fluid ideologies and that result in children being groomed as victims and perpetrators of extreme and violent acts, including acts of self-harm, suicide and child sexual abuse.

Despite public advisories being issued by the FBI,¹ Royal Canadian Mounted Police,² and more recently Europol,³ Ofcom largely neglected these risks in its Register of Risks on illegal content⁴ and also failed to include any targeted measures covering suicide and self-harm in its Illegal Safety Code of Practice.⁵

Axel Rudakubana viewed violent videos online in the moments before murdering three children in Southport and pleas to social media companies to remove the content have fallen on deaf ears.⁶

1 FBI (2023) Violent Online Groups Extort Minors to Self-Harm and Produce Child Sexual Abuse Material: Public Service Announcement

2 RCMP (2024) RCMP reminds Canadians about violent online groups targeting youth

3 Europol (2025) The rise of online cult communities dedicated to extremely violent child abuse

4 Ofcom (2024) Register of risks for illegal content

5 Ofcom (2024) Code of Practice for illegal content

6 In January 2025, the home secretary Yvette Cooper wrote to social media platforms asking them to remove violent material viewed by Axel Rudakubana shortly before the Southport attack. A week later, she told Laura Kuenssberg 'many of those materials [...] are still available online.'

The recent case of Cameron Finnegan shows the broader threat posed by radicalised, violent young people. Finnegan, 19, was part of a group first warned about by the FBI in 2023 where a melting pot of fluid ideologies come together and lead to children being targeted for a range of horrific acts, including self-harm, suicide and child sexual abuse. He was jailed for an array of offences including child sexual abuse and encouraging suicide.⁷

Our results show broad-based concerns about other suicide and self-harm risks facing children and young people, including the algorithmic recommendation of suicide and self-harm content. In 2022, a coroner found that exposure to harmful content contributed to the death of Molly Russell in a more than minimal way.⁸

Nine in ten adults (89%) say they are concerned about young people being recommended suicide and self-harm content by social media algorithms, with two thirds (66%) stating they are very concerned about this risk.

Previous research has found similarly high concern about related types of content, including highly depressive content. Extensive research has found that multiple categories of content, including suicide, self-harm, depression and eating disorder material, can result in substantial harmful effects for some young people, particularly when these content types are algorithmically recommended in large amounts.⁹

2. The public overwhelmingly feel the Government, regulator and tech firms aren't doing enough

Our findings show that UK adults feel neither the Government, the regulator nor tech firms are doing enough to protect children from online safety risks.

Fewer than one in ten adults (9%) think that the Government is doing all it reasonably can to protect the online safety of children and young people. Nearly nine times as many (78%) think the Government should be doing more.

An overwhelming majority consider that social media platforms are not doing enough to protect children from online harms. Almost nine in ten (87%) think that social media services should be doing more to protect their child users.

The regulator, Ofcom, is also seen to be lacking in its response to online safety risks. Just one in ten UK adults (11%) think the regulator is doing everything it reasonably can to protect children from online harm.

While it is important to point out that the majority of Ofcom's powers under the Online Safety Act are yet to take effect, our results suggest a deep dissatisfaction with the regulator so far – and a pronounced skepticism about whether the current iteration of the Act can realistically deliver meaningful change.

7 Cameron Finnegan was sentenced for six years in January 2025, following an investigation led by Counter Terrorism Policing South-East.

8 The Prevention of Future Death Report issued by Senior Coroner Andrew Walker in October 2022

9 Ofcom has also endorsed this assessment in its draft Protection of Children measures

In MRF's assessment, Ofcom's first iterations of its Codes of Practice lack much needed ambition and are simply not commensurate to the scale and complexity of the online threats in scope of the Act. Last week, a Government minister told a parliamentary debate that Ofcom 'spend a long time consulting on its codes to ensure they are as JR-proofed as possible'¹⁰ i.e. to minimise the risk of a successful Judicial Review. This led to accusations that the regulator was attaching greater weight to the risk of litigation than it is to the importance of protecting vulnerable users'.¹¹

While Ofcom's CEO has publicly stated that tech firms will have 'no place to hide',¹² 23 civil society organisations recently supported a joint statement expressing substantial concerns about the regulator's approach. It read: 'the investment of time and resources by civil society groups, and the supply of evidence to Ofcom to support their concerns, over the past 12 months has made little impact - except to take up space in the footnotes.'¹³

3. Strong support for a new Online Safety Act

Deep dissatisfaction with the Government and regulator's current approach unsurprisingly translates into strong support a new Online Safety Act to increase regulation of social media platforms for young people.

Four in five adults (80%) support a new Act being introduced, with half of adults (50%) strongly supporting strengthened legislation.

Among parents with a child aged under 18, support for a new Online Safety Act rises to 85%. Research undertaken last summer found that nine in ten parents who support a new Act wanted to see this introduced in the first two years of this Parliament.

Our polling suggests that UK adults would like to see the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, personally take further action on to address online safety risks. Four in five adults (81%) would support the Prime Minister introducing new online safety legislation. Over three quarters (77 %) would support the PM making a personal promise that children will be better protected from online harm during his premiership.

There is growing pressure on the PM to personally intervene. In January this year, Ian Russell wrote to Sir Keir warning that the UK was going backwards on online safety. Without a swift commitment to a strengthened and reworked Online Safety Act, Ian warned that 'preventable harm would be happening on [his] watch'.¹⁴

10 Comments made by the AI Minister Feryal Clark in a Westminster Hall debate on February 26th

11 Comments made by Monica Harding MP in the same debate.

12 Interviews given by Dame Melanie Dawes to coincide with the publication of Ofcom's illegal Codes of Practice

13 Online Safety Act Network (2025) Statement on Ofcom's Illegal Harms Codes of Practice

14 Letter sent to the Prime Minister by Ian Russell

4. Tech firms must not be able to water down safety policies with ‘quid pro quo’ promises of economic investment

There is strong public support for further action on online safety, even if this comes at the expense of further investment from the tech sector in the UK.

By a nine to one margin, UK adults believe the Government should pursue policies that prioritise the online safety of children and young people, even if this means tech companies invest significantly less than in the UK. Almost two-thirds of adults (64%) believe that children’s safety should be prioritised, while just 7% believe that policies promoting investment from technology companies should take priority.

There is a compelling economic case that a strengthened Online Safety Act would not only ensure children and young people are better protected from preventable harm but could also deliver a substantial annualised economic return. Recent analysis from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology shows even according to highly conservative estimates every time exposure to online harm is reduced by 1.3%, suggest the UK stands to receive an annualised economic benefit of £345 million.¹⁵ A strengthened Online Safety Act that was capable of achieving a 15% reduction in online harms could therefore be expected to deliver at least £4 billion pounds in annualised economic return.

MRF has written to the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, encouraging her to commit to giving online safety unimpeachable primacy in the Treasury’s approach¹⁶ - and to recognise that an ambitious, pro-online safety agenda is not only good for society, but also actively contributes to the Government’s primary mission to secure economic growth.

In the United States, many commentators, including on Fox News, suggested that House Speaker Mike Johnson’s decision to frustrate a floor vote on the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), which ultimately meant this vital legislation failed to pass into law, may have been in part driven by Meta’s decision to break ground on a \$10 billion AI data centre in his home state.¹⁷

¹⁵ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2024) Online Safety Act Enactment Impact Assessment

¹⁶ Letter to the Chancellor Rachel Reeves issued in January 2025

¹⁷ Speaker Mike Johnson refused to bring the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) to a floor vote after it had cleared Congressional Committees. The Senate version of the Bill passed by 91 votes to 3.

For a briefing and discussion about how we can work together to tackle preventable harm, please contact Andy Burrows: a.burrows@mollyrosefoundation.org

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