

Reference: 02247530

Information Requests
information.requests@ofcom.org.uk

13 August 2026

Freedom of Information request: Right to know request

Thank you for your request for information about age verification, extortion and harm to vulnerable groups.

We received this request on 22 July 2026 and we have considered your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ("the FOI Act").

Your request & our response

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I am requesting access to recorded information held by your authority concerning age verification / age assurance policies, standards, and guidance developed under or in relation to the Online Safety Act.

Specifically, I request copies of the following recorded information:

1. *Empirical Research on Sextortion, Identity Leaks & Abuse: Any impact assessments, expert reports, empirical studies, or internal risk analyses evaluating the security risks of age verification mechanisms—specifically concerning data breaches, identity theft, sextortion, blackmail, and the illicit sharing or creation of intimate images.*

We do not hold information in scope of this request.

However, our [Age Assurance and Children's Access Statement](#) summarises a range of stakeholder comments on age assurance in response to our consultations on Guidance for service providers publishing pornographic content (December 2023) and Protecting Children from Harms Online (May 2024). Specifically, page 166 discusses concerns raised by stakeholders regarding potential data leaks. Pages 61-62 outline concerns relating to identity theft, blackmail and extortion.

We have also published in full the non-confidential responses to the above consultations on our website ([December 2023](#) and [May 2024](#)).

2. *Psychological Harm & High-Risk Vulnerabilities: Any research, submissions, or recorded assessments held regarding extreme harms associated with extortion or data leaks arising from age verification systems, including suicide or self-harm risks, and specific safety impacts on vulnerable demographics (specifically women, girls, domestic abuse survivors, and victims of sexual violence).*

While we hold information in scope of this request, we are unable to disclose this information as we consider that its disclosure is exempt under the FOI Act. In particular, under section 44 of the FOI Act, information is exempt from disclosure if its disclosure is prohibited by or under any enactment. The enactment that prohibits the disclosure of this information is section 393(1) of the Communications Act 2003 ("the Communications Act"). Under this section, we are prohibited from disclosing information with respect to a particular business that has been obtained in the exercise of

our regulatory functions, unless that business consents or one of the statutory gateways under section 393(2) of the Communications Act is met, neither of which apply here. Section 44 of the FOI Act is an absolute exemption and therefore is not subject to the public interest test.

3. *Governance, Audit & Legal Accountability: Any policy, guidance, or internal legal notes detailing the accountability framework, oversight mechanisms, and legal liability/audit procedures designed to handle security failures, data leaks, or victim harm resulting from mandated age verification systems.*

We do not hold information in scope of this request.

4. *Stakeholder Consultations: Minutes, written submissions, or summaries of consultations held with cybersecurity experts, privacy advocates, domestic violence charities, or women's rights organizations regarding age verification risks.*

While we hold information in scope of this request, namely an internal summary of a meeting held with a stakeholder, we are unable to disclose this information as we consider that its disclosure is exempt under the FOI Act. Section 36(2)(b)(ii) and (c) of the FOI Act provide that information held by a public authority is exempt from disclosure if, in the reasonable opinion of a qualified person, disclosure of the information: -

- would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation; and/or
- would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs.

Section 36 is a qualified exemption, which means that Ofcom is required to consider whether or not the public interest in disclosing the information you have requested outweighs the public interest in withholding the information. In this case, we consider that the public interest favours withholding the information for the reasons set out in **Annex B** to this letter. In **Annex A** of this letter, the qualified person, the Corporation Secretary for Ofcom, has confirmed that the exemption applies.

Yours sincerely,

Information Requests

Request an internal review

If you are unhappy with the response you have received to your request for information, or think that your request was refused without a reason valid under the law, you may ask for an internal review. If you do, it will be subject to an independent review within Ofcom. We will either uphold the original decision, or reverse or modify it.

If you would like to ask us to carry out an internal review, you should get in touch within two months of the date of this letter. There is no statutory deadline for us to complete our internal review, and the time it takes will depend on the complexity of the request. But we will try to complete the review within 20 working days (or no more than 40 working days in exceptional cases) and keep you informed of our progress. Please email the Information Requests team (information.requests@ofcom.org.uk) to request an internal review.

Taking it further

If you are unhappy with the outcome of our internal review, then you have the right to [complain to the Information Commissioner's Office](#).

Annex A

Freedom of Information: Right to know request

Section 36 exemption

I am a "qualified person" as referred to section 36(2) of the Act and duly authorised by a Minister of the Crown for the purposes of that section. In my reasonable opinion, disclosure of the relevant information requested

- would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation; and/or
- would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs.

In applying this exemption, I have had to balance the public interest in withholding the information against the public interest in disclosing the information.

I have set out in Annex B the exemption in full, as well as the factors I considered when deciding where the public interest lay in relation to the information concerned. If you have any queries about this letter, please contact information.requests@ofcom.org.uk.

Corporation Secretary

Date: 13 August 2026

Section 36: Prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs

Section 36 exempts information whose disclosure would, or would be likely to, have any of the following effects:

- inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation, or
- otherwise prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.

Key points:

- Section 36 can only be used if, in the reasonable view of a "qualified person", disclosure of the requested information would have one of the specified effects.
- In this case it is considered that disclosure would inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation, and prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.
- The application of section 36 is subject to a public interest balance.

Factors for disclosure	Factors for withholding
• Ofcom recognises that its approach to age assurance under the Online Safety Act 2023 is a matter of interest to the wider public. Releasing such information could be said to increase transparency in our work and allow for discussion in a public forum.	• The documentation in relation to which the exemption is claimed is an internal summary reflecting a meeting between Ofcom and a relevant stakeholder. • In order to fulfil its regulatory functions effectively, Ofcom needs to be able to engage internally and externally in frank discussions, and engage with stakeholders relevant to our functions as the online safety regulator. • Disclosure of information about such discussions would inhibit free and frank discussions in the future and this in turn would likely lead to less robust decision making, and less effective regulation. • Ofcom needs to be able to produce contemporaneous records of such engagement to ensure that these can be used to inform the exercise of our powers. Such records facilitate the free and frank exchange of views which needs to be able to take place internally following discussions with stakeholders. This allows Ofcom to ensure that any points raised are properly considered and taken into account in our work as appropriate to ensure we take decisions that are as well-informed as possible.

	Given the above, disclosing such records would also prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.
Reasons why public interest favours withholding information	
- At this time, Ofcom is withholding the requested information. The public interest test has been applied on the basis of disclosing information which would reveal regulatory discussions or engagement with external stakeholders. - We consider that the public interest in withholding outweighs the public interest in disclosure. - This is because the disclosure of this information would prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs, as it would affect Ofcom's ability to engage with stakeholders relevant to our functions as the online safety regulator, and to have free and frank internal exchanges of views for the purposes of deliberation following such engagement. - Whilst there may be some weight attached to the public interest in disclosing to enable the public to understand how Ofcom is facilitating its role as online safety regulator, we consider this is limited, and that significant prejudice would be caused by such a disclosure.	