



Consultation response form

Your response

Question	Your response
<p>Question 1: Do you have any comments on our proposed approach to 'content and activity' which 'disproportionately affects women and girls'?</p>	<p>The four harms which you prioritise are major ones and it is welcome for them to be receiving further attention beyond the limited measures in the illegal content and children's codes.</p> <p>However, as Ofcom itself notes there are other harms which disproportionately affect women and girls which are not prioritised here – you highlight child sexual exploitation and abuse, modern slavery and human trafficking, sexual exploitation of adults, and eating disorder content. You argue that "These harms are addressed in our Illegal Content statement, and proposals on Protection of Children". We are not convinced that the measures in the illegal content and children's codes are sufficient to drive a significant reduction in these harms, and believe that they too could have benefited from additional attention in this guidance.</p> <p>At the very least we would urge you to keep progress in reducing these additional harms under active review and move fast to propose additional good practice steps if and when the measures in the Illegal Content and Protection of Children codes prove inadequate.</p> <p>Confidential? – N</p>
<p>Question 2: Do you have any comments on the nine proposed actions? Please provide evidence to support your answer.</p>	<p>The focus on safety by design is welcome, and the 9 proposed actions are all welcome. However, we are concerned that this structure may not adequately capture, or challenge, the pervasive impact that platforms' business models have on design choices, in ways which ena-</p>

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	<p>ble harms which can disproportionately impact women and girls.</p> <p>To offer two examples:</p> <p>1) platforms' recommender algorithms are designed to maximise users' time on the platform in order to maximise ad revenue. This includes recommending content which is harmful to women and girls, for example eating disorder or self-harm content. But it also frequently includes actively recommending misogynistic and abusive content to boys and young men, amplifying toxic figures, entrenching harmful gender norms and promoting misogyny.</p> <p>2) platforms' approach to account and user profile creation is designed to maximise the number of users a platform can claim, and minimise friction in accessing the service. This includes a laissez-faire approach to accounts which use concealed or deceptive identities to perpetrate harm, and to "phoenix accounts" where perpetrators are able to circumvent blocks or bans through instantly setting up a new account.</p> <p>We are also concerned that beyond brief references to abusability testing and red-teaming, the guidance makes little reference to the perpetrators of the abuse. More attention should be paid to perpetrators – e.g how and why they are on the platform, what features and functionalities are they exploiting, what role has the platform played in normalising their misogynistic or abusing behaviour. Encouraging platforms to better understand the ways perpetrators interact with their platform would encourage a greater focus on prevention.</p> <p>Confidential? – N</p>
<p>Question 3: Do you have any comments about the effectiveness, applicability or risks of the good practice steps or associated case studies we have highlighted in Chapter 3, 4 and 5? Are there any additional examples of good practices we should con-</p>	<p>Clean Up The Internet has conducted a great deal of research into the harmful misuse of fake and anonymous accounts, and we welcome the inclusion in the good practice steps of "4.40(b) Allow users to verify their identity" and "5.15(c) Allow users to filter out content from all users who have not completed identity verification."</p>

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<p>sider? Please provide evidence to support your comment.</p>	<p>These measures are in line with our proposals to reduce the harms associated with fake and anonymous accounts by focusing on the ways such accounts are misused, and by offering users more choices and controls to identify and avoid such accounts - whilst avoiding an outright ban on anonymity, which could disproportionately affect some users' freedom of expression.</p> <p>We have a few suggestions on how these steps could be strengthened.</p> <p>Firstly, alongside offering users identity verification and options to filter out non-verified accounts, "Allow all users to easily see which users have, and haven't, completed identity verification" should be added as a complementary step. This would offer all users additional information about accounts which would empower them to make more informed choices about their safety, and would reinforce the media literacy objectives within this guidance by providing users with additional, highly relevant information about a piece of content's likely source.</p> <p>Visibility of verification status to all users would also serve to increase the prominence and effectiveness of verification options, increasing uptake of both verification and of the filters on non-verified accounts. Given platforms' continued reluctance to implement such measures up to this point, we see a genuine risk that platforms may seek to "hide" such options deep within their interfaces, so that they are able to subsequently justify dropping them on grounds of lack of uptake.</p> <p>Secondly, as with many of these steps, the way in which verification is implemented would be critical to its uptake, and to its effectiveness as a safety feature. Verification systems which are insufficiently robust, or are not accessible to a wide enough range of UK users, or which fail to properly protect users' security and privacy, would risk being ineffective or even themselves be abused to perpetrate harms. Control over these outcomes cannot safely be left to platforms who for years have had it in their power to make their services safer and yet have made informed decisions not to do so.</p> <p>We laid out in more detail our suggestions for how Ofcom could approach setting out guidance for user</p>

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	<p>identity verification in our submission to the Illegal Harms consultation, in March 2024.</p> <p>We anticipate that Ofcom will argue that detailed Guidance on how platforms could implement verification is beyond the scope of this VAWG guidance, particularly given Ofcom will later produce user identity verification guidance for Category One services under Section 65 of the Act. We note you make this point in the current draft guidance, stating in footnote 205 that you will be “considering the details of identity verification further in a future consultation so providers who implement this may wish to review this in due course”. There are risks in this approach, not least that this S65 guidance does not yet exist, has been delayed, and may not now be in force until 2027 at the earliest. The inclusion of user verification as a good practice step here makes it all the more critical that there are no further delays in implementation of this part of the Act.</p> <p>At a minimum, in the meantime we suggest a slight amendment to 4.40, to set broad expectations for platforms to follow. We suggest clearer wording could be “4.40 Offer users a choice of highly effective, accessible, and privacy-respecting options to verify their identity”. This would still leave platforms immense flexibility to devise their own schemes, but set some principles verification must follow, and align the language with that of age verification measures.</p> <p>Given the welcome recognition by Ofcom here that, properly implemented, user identity verification can be a safety feature which can help protect women and girls from harm, it will also be crucial that the team charged with drafting the S65 Guidance adequately considers the ways in which perpetrators of VAWG misuse fake and anonymous accounts, and the principles which verification systems would need to adhere to in order to reduce these risks.</p> <p>Confidential? – N</p>
<p>Question 4: Do you have any feedback on our approach to encouraging providers to follow this guidance, including our proposal to publishing an</p>	<p>We understand the constraints of the OSA within which this guidance has been created, and the need to distinguish between measures which Ofcom can enforce via the Illegal Content and Protection of Children duties, and</p>

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<p>assessment of how providers are addressing women and girls' safety? Do you have any examples or suggestions of other ways we could encourage providers to take up the 'good practice' recommendations?</p>	<p>those which can merely be encouraged. However we still worry that the "good practice" steps will be seen by platforms as being without teeth. This has not been helped by hearing some Ofcom staff, verbally, reference them as "voluntary". We have had far too many years of relying on platforms taking voluntary action to address harm, and the OSA stemmed from a recognition that voluntarism does not work with these companies.</p> <p>Publishing assessments of providers' performance is a welcome step, but only if Ofcom has the courage to be sufficiently critical where needed. It would help to set benchmarks for what level of reduction in VAWG platforms are expected to deliver. For example, given that it is UK government policy to halve VAWG in a decade, surely Ofcom should be setting a similar level of ambition for VAWG on in-scope platforms, and should be assessing progress against this target.</p> <p>Confidential? – N</p>
<p>Question 5: Do you have any comments on our impact assessment, rights assessment, or equality impact assessment? Please provide any information or evidence in support of your views.</p>	<p>Confidential? – Y / N</p>
<p>Question 6: Do you agree that our draft Guidance is likely to have positive effects on opportunities to use Welsh and treating Welsh no less favourably than English? If you disagree, please explain why, including how you consider the draft Guidance could be revised to have positive effects or more positive effects, or no adverse effects or fewer adverse effects on opportunities to use Welsh and treating Welsh no less favourably than English.</p>	<p>Confidential? – Y / N</p>

Please complete this form in full and return to OS-Section54@ofcom.org.uk.