

# Readout from February 2026 stakeholder roundtable on content harmful to children

On 25 February 2026, Ofcom's Protection of Children team held a roundtable with a range of experts, to inform the first statutory report on content harmful to children.<sup>1</sup> Discussions focused on how content harmful to children is currently categorised under the Online Safety Act ('the Act'), and on whether additional kinds of content should be added to the primary priority content (PPC) and priority content (PC) categories in the Act.

**External attendees:** NSPCC, 5Rights Foundation, Mental Health Foundation, Samaritans, Barnardo's, Internet Matters, UK Safer Internet Centre, Children's Commissioner for England, Children's Commissioner for Wales, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

## Key takeaways

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- There was consensus among attendees that the kinds of harmful content currently included in the PPC category are appropriate because of the severe harm they can cause to children.
- Attendees suggested that it may be appropriate to add certain kinds of PC (such as hate and abuse, and violent content) to the PPC category due to the severity of harm such content can cause to all ages of children.
- Attendees thought that body stigma and depression content (which we identified as non-designated content (NDC) in the [April 2025 Protection of Children Statement](#)) should be added to the PPC or PC categories in the Act.
- Some attendees highlighted that exposure to harmful content is often higher among vulnerable children, raising questions about whether vulnerability is adequately reflected in current categories in the Act.
- Attendees noted that persuasive design features of online services can heighten exposure to harmful content leading to cumulative harm. Attendees suggested this should be considered alongside the categories of content in the Act.
- There was consensus that AI-generated content and interactions with AI chatbots could introduce new kinds of harm for children.
- Attendees identified several other kinds of harmful content that could be added to the Act, including mis/disinformation, misogynistic content and sexualised content.

## Summary of discussion

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### Existing kinds of PPC and PC included in the Act

Attendees discussed the appropriateness of the current PPC and PC categories. While most agreed they are useful, some raised concerns about the classification of certain kinds of content.

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<sup>1</sup> See section 63 of the Online Safety Act (2023).

### **Summary of discussion:**

- There was support for the existing kinds of content categorised as PPC, and no suggestion that any kind of PPC should be re-categorised.
- Some attendees questioned whether certain kinds of PC should be changed to PPC, particularly:
  - Abuse and hate content, on the basis that it can be harmful for any child to see and is at risk of becoming normalised. Attendees also noted a link between abuse and hate content and radicalisation. Attendees raised concerns about the frequency with which children encounter racist and misogynistic content online.
  - Dangerous stunts and challenges, which have been connected to offline harm.
  - Violent content, which some attendees felt should be subject to the same duties as PPC.
- There were other views on PC more broadly:
  - Some attendees expressed that some kinds of PC content, such as certain hate and abuse content, can be as harmful as PPC and children should not encounter them at all.
  - Attendees noted that certain kinds of PC (such as content promoting ingestion of harmful substances or promoting dangerous stunts and challenges) can overlap with kinds of PPC (such as suicide and self-harm content).
  - Others expressed broad support for the current PC category, emphasising the importance of preparing older children for adult life and avoiding a “cliff-edge” at 18. They emphasised the need to consider age-appropriateness for children at different ages.
    - Attendees noted that voting age is being lowered to 16, making it important that older teenagers have access to political content.<sup>2</sup>
- Attendees highlighted the importance of ensuring services do not restrict access to supportive content when taking measures prevent children encountering suicide, self-harm and eating disorder content.
- There was support for avoiding the creation of unnecessarily specific new categories. Instead, where possible, attendees suggested that new kinds of harmful content should be incorporated into existing categories (e.g. trends like “Skinnytok” within eating disorder content).

### **Body stigma and depression content**

In our [April 2025 Protection of Children Statement](#), we identified content stigmatising particular body types or body parts (‘body stigma content’) and content promoting depression (‘depression content’) as kinds of NDC. Attendees discussed the challenges of distinguishing these kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that political content including abuse, hate or violent content could be considered PC under the Act.

content from suicide and eating disorder content and explored the case for adding them to the PPC or PC categories in the Act.

***Summary of discussion:***

- Attendees raised concerns about overlaps between body stigma and depression content and various kinds of PPC, noting that boundaries between these kinds of content can be subjective, risking inconsistent interpretation by services. For instance, body stigma content may overlap with eating disorder content.
- Similarities between body stigma and depression content and other kinds of content harmful to children led most attendees to recommend that body stigma and depression content should be recategorised as PPC or PC.
- Attendees agreed that categorising these two kinds of content as PPC or PC would provide greater clarity for services and ensure services account for these kinds of content in risk assessments.
- While there was agreement that body stigma and depression content should be changed to PPC or PC, most attendees also agreed there is merit in retaining an NDC category. However, several raised concerns that services are not currently required to risk assess for kinds of NDC identified by Ofcom unless they identify that content on their services.
- Attendees noted the importance of ensuring children have spaces in which they can express their distress online, while also recognising that it can be harmful for other children to encounter such content.

## Vulnerable children

Attendees discussed how children's backgrounds and circumstances shape both their exposure to and experience of harmful content. They discussed whether the categories of content harmful to children in the Act sufficiently account for these variations.

***Summary of discussion:***

- Attendees noted evidence that certain kinds of harmful content, such as bullying content, are disproportionately experienced by children from minority backgrounds. One attendee referenced demographic data showing higher exposure to PC among vulnerable children.
- Attendees agreed that experiences of harm vary significantly depending on a child's age or developmental stage.
- Some attendees suggested that we should reconsider the current categories of content harmful to children in the Act, including recategorising some kinds of PC to PPC, on the basis of the severity of harm these kinds of content may cause to vulnerable children.

## Cumulative harms and the role of functionalities

Attendees discussed the cumulative harm caused by some kinds of content, which may not be harmful in isolation but can become harmful when repeatedly encountered. Attendees linked the risk of cumulative harm to functionalities of online services that heighten engagement and amplify risk.

***Summary of discussion:***

- Attendees noted the cumulative impact of certain kinds of harmful content, like bullying content, which can have long-term effects on children’s wellbeing.
- Some raised concerns about addictive or persuasive design features, noting that content which poses a ‘low level’ of harm can become more harmful through repeated exposure.
- Several attendees pointed out that some content not explicitly listed in the Act can be harmful when repeatedly encountered, such as ‘fitspo’ content. Attendees noted that these kinds of content could be included in existing kinds of content harmful to children, such as eating disorder content or body stigma content.
- Attendees raised concerns about persuasive design features that promote potentially harmful behaviours like doomscrolling.

## New kinds of content harmful to children

Attendees identified several kinds of content which are not currently included in the Act but which may pose risks to children.

### ***Summary of discussion:***

The group discussed types of content that should be added to the PPC or PC categories in the Act:

(Note: some of the kinds of content suggested by attendees would already be covered by existing kinds of content harmful to children or illegal content. Other kinds of suggested content, such as sexualised advertising, would be out-of-scope of the Act.)

- Content which normalises harmful behaviours, for example smoking, guns, gangs and skin-lightening products.
- Misogynistic and “toxic masculinity” content, including health and mental-health misinformation targeted at boys and young men.
- AI-related harms, including:
  - Children misinterpreting AI-generated material as human-generated.
  - Children perceiving chatbots or GenAI tools as real conversational partners.
- Mis/disinformation, particularly where GenAI creates fabricated or misleading content which can normalise harmful beliefs or influence vulnerable groups.
- Sexualised content, especially advertising, that does not meet the threshold for pornography but may still be harmful.
- Short-form and addictive content.
  - While attendees recognised that this is not a single kind of content, they emphasised that such formats could shape children’s beliefs and behaviours through repeated exposure and questioned how functionalities are reflected in the categories of content harmful to children in the Act.
- Harmful memes, which may present harmful content within humorous framing, potentially obscuring the underlying harm.
- Radicalising content that does not meet the threshold for illegal harm.