

# Factsheet: Frequently asked questions about parental controls online

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## 1. What is the Government doing about illegal and harmful content online?

The protection of children from illegal and harmful content when online is an absolute priority for this Government. More clearly needs to be done on this: the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) brings together over 170 organisations including Government departments, industry, children's charities, law enforcement and academia. UKCCIS members are committed to working together to help keep children and young people safe online.

The UK also has a very successful model of industry-led self-regulation. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) works closely with Internet Service Providers to ensure that webpages which provide access to potentially criminal content, including those hosted outside of the UK, are reported and removed or blocked at source.

In addition, Ed Vaizey MP, Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, hosted a discussion, in February, with Internet Service Providers, UKCCIS, the IWF and other interested groups to look at how parental controls can be further improved. A further discussion has been arranged to look at progress on this issue in May this year.

## 2. What is the current legal position on pornography?

Certain types of pornographic material are legal to view by persons of 18 years and older; however some categories of illegal pornographic material (either published or broadcast in the UK off-line or online) are subject to the Obscene Publications Act 1959 which makes it a criminal offence to publish any article which is considered to be obscene. This applies to distribution of material on the internet or by mobile phone and importantly makes the general principle that an action which is illegal if it is committed offline is also illegal if it is committed online. This applies both to issues such as distributing illegal material and also to harmful behaviour.

The Obscene Publications Act carries a maximum penalty of up to five years imprisonment.

## 3. What is the Government doing to regulate pornographic material?

It is Government policy that controls on published material, including material published online, should strike a balance between freedom of expression and protection of the public. It should be proportionate to the potential harm that is caused. Clearly, some material should not be published at all, and this is covered by the criminal law.

What we are attempting to achieve is to ensure that, in a rapidly changing media environment, it is important that people can make informed choices about what they and their children see and hear. It is also important to realise that most obscene and harmful material on the internet is hosted outside the UK and is not subject to UK jurisdiction. It is for this reason that we are building on the good work already being done by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to work together with industry and other interested parties to improve parental controls which enable parents to effectively restrict their children's access to such content.

#### **4. How does age verification work?**

All adult content sites hosted in the UK are legally required to undertake age verification practices to ensure that their content is not accessed by minors. This includes clearly indicating that adult content sites are unsuitable for anybody under the age of 18 and, when websites charge for access they must place their adult content behind a credit card barrier to further reduce the risk of children and young people accessing it. There is clearly an ongoing role to play for the adult entertainment industry in the UK in monitoring and improving these processes.

Government is working with industry and other organisations such as through the Internet Watch Foundation and the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to create an online environment in which children are protected from potentially harmful or inappropriate content.

#### **5. Why isn't more being done to restrict/censor harmful and inappropriate content?**

The Government has no plans to introduce any censorship measures, and there are certainly no plans to block legal content or websites. People should be able to choose what content is available within their own home – but this also means that they should be able to choose what content should not be available in their home.

The internet is a tremendous tool for education, fun and knowledge and allows information on every conceivable subject to be made available by anyone in the world with access to the internet regardless of geographical boundaries. As a result, it is not always easy or even possible to restrict content, particularly when vast quantities are hosted outside the UK Government's jurisdiction.

There are effective areas of work, such as that being done by the Internet Watch Foundation, to take down illegal child abuse content hosted in the UK and by collaboratively working with authorities in other countries, to take down content hosted abroad. Government is also working closely with industry as part of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety to improve many aspects of children's digital safety. We need to ensure that we have an effective, light touch response to this rapidly changing media that respects adult freedoms but also enables parents to keep their children safe from harmful and inappropriate content. It is important that people are given the tools to make informed choices about what they and their children see and hear.

## **6. Will the Government block sites that feature a small amount of adult content?**

The Government has no plans to block legal content or websites. The Government's guiding principle with regard to the internet remains that what's illegal off-line is also illegal online – we remain fully committed to respecting adult freedoms.

However, we are also committed to ensuring that children are protected from harmful and illegal content and it is for this reason that we are looking to build on the good work already being done by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety and working together with industry and other interested parties to improve parental controls that can effectively restrict access to such content.

There is also a role to play for the adult entertainment industry in the UK, ensuring that its content is not accessed by minors.

## **7. What is the Government doing to stop children and young people accessing harmful and inappropriate content on mobile phones?**

UK mobile phone network operators have developed a 'UK code of practice for the self-regulation of new forms of content on mobiles' which classifies adult content that could be accessed by mobile phones as suitable only for users who are over 18, whilst restricting access to adult content for anyone unable to prove they are over 18.

The effectiveness of this code has been reviewed by Ofcom, the UK regulator for the communications industry. Ofcom found that all mobile operators, in offering classification and internet filtering, as required by the code, were effective in restricting young people's access to material suitable only for adults. The review also made several recommendations to further improve restrictions on access to adult content by those under 18, which industry are taking forward.

Further, the UK code influenced the European Union's 'European Framework for Safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children' which leading mobile phone operators and content providers signed in 2007. This framework commits the countries that have signed up to it to implement it on a national level and includes requirements for the provision of access controls for adult content.

## **8. What parental controls are currently available?**

A variety of software applications exist on the market that can be installed on computers in the home, and the most common computer operating systems provide inbuilt parental controls that can be activated by parents. Several of the mobile phone operators now implement adult content filters and other internet enabled devices, such as games consoles, have methods to prevent access to the internet.

It is the responsibility of parents to help protect their children from harmful content using parental controls, but research shows that many parents do not have the skills to do this and it is important that those parents receive the help they need.

The UK Council for Child Internet Safety's priorities include detailed work on parental controls for all internet enabled devices so that it becomes the norm for parents to use filters

that stop children seeing things they shouldn't, in the same way as holding their children's hands when they walk across the road.

It is important that the internet industry, including Internet Service Providers, give parents the tools they need to keep their children safe, and parents should have the knowledge, skills and understanding to use those tools.

#### **9. What is the Government doing to increase take up of parental controls?**

Media literacy plays an important role in providing parents with the tools to help ensure effective protection from unsuitable material; however activating parental controls is still not automatic for about half of parents. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety is trying to understand the reasons behind this and what can be done to improve the situation, for example, by improving information for parents such as the recently-published leaflets by Carphone Warehouse and Vodafone.

Given the relatively low take up of parental controls and the requirement for parents to manage technology that is often unfamiliar to them, it is also necessary to consider other methods of implementing content filtering, such as network level filtering by Internet Service Providers

#### **10. How will this work stop children bypassing internet blocks?**

With the ever increasing amount of content being added to the internet and constant methods of bypassing filters being developed, it should be recognised that parental controls cannot be 100% effective. Parental controls should therefore be regarded as a way to prevent accidental exposure to harmful content, and to help to prevent determined, proactive attempts to access this kind of content.

The UK leads the world with children's online safety. In January the first British Standards Institution Kitemark for parental control software was awarded, and BT are revamping their e-safety website pages and TalkTalk are developing new safety products for customers.

Educational campaigns, such as the 'Click Clever Click Safe' campaign, which was launched by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety in February 2010, are key in encouraging parents and children to use the internet safely. However, there is clearly a lot more to do: a big concern is that the use of controls by parents still stands today at barely 50%. That is why we want to see the parental controls and services available to parents improved, and in particular, to empower parents who may not be technologically aware.

#### **For more information contact:**

Department for Culture Media and Sport  
Telephone: 020 7211 6000  
E-mail: [enquiries@culture.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@culture.gsi.gov.uk)

