

Research Briefing
2 September 2024
Number 10087

By Joe Tyler-Todd,
John Woodhouse

Suicide prevention: online platforms, print media and broadcasting

Summary

Warning: This briefing discusses suicide and self-harm, which some readers may find distressing.

The government's 2023 [National suicide prevention strategy](#) noted that advances in technology, the internet and the availability of media resources have been "invaluable in raising awareness and improving access to support for suicide and self-harm". However, it also said that the online world posed "new harms that national government, online platforms and media companies must work together to address". The strategy set out five ambitions for improving online safety over the next five years:

- Making social media and online platforms "safer places" for adults and children. This includes decreasing the likelihood that an individual is exposed to harmful suicide and self-harm content.
- Public education "for healthy and safe usage of online platforms".
- Ensuring that signposting and support are prevalent across a range of platforms.
- Exploring the benefits of technologies that can support the implementation of effective suicide prevention activity. For instance, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in relation to suicide prevention.

- Ensuring that the media “consistently portrays suicide and self-harm content responsibly”.

The Library’s briefings [Suicide statistics](#) and [Suicide prevention: Policy and strategy](#) provide further information about suicide prevention policies and strategies throughout the UK.

Online platforms

The [Online Safety Act 2023](#) received Royal Assent on 26 October 2023. It aims to increase user safety as well as improving users’ ability to keep themselves safe online.

All regulated services must protect users from illegal content, such as suicide and self-harm content, that reaches the criminal threshold. There are additional duties for services likely to be accessed by children. For adults, the largest services must introduce optional tools to limit their exposure to legal content that encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide or self-harm. It also empowers [Ofcom](#), the regulator, to disclose information from regulated services to coroners, if requested, following the death of a child.

Ofcom intends to [implement the Act in three phases](#) (PDF), with the entirety of the Act coming into force by the end of 2026.

The Act applies across the UK.

Social media companies

Content on user-to-user online services (for example, X, formerly Twitter, and Facebook) is also governed by the individual platform’s terms of service. For instance, [X’s suicide and self-harm policy](#) or [Meta’s suicide and self-injury community standards](#). Stakeholders, for instance the children’s charity NSPCC, have suggested that [these systems do not do enough to protect users from harmful online content](#). In response, some services have introduced changes to their policies. For example, on 9 January 2024, [Meta \(the parent company of Instagram and Facebook\) announced new protections for users of its services](#). This included beginning to remove self-harm related content (and other age-inappropriate content) from the “Feed and Stories” of teenage users, “even if it’s shared by someone they follow”.

Press

There are two press regulators in the UK. Many titles have signed up to the [Independent Press Standards Organisation](#) (IPSO). The IPSO [Editors’ Code of Practice](#) states:

When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media’s right to report legal proceedings.

There may be exceptions to this clause (and others in the code) where they can be demonstrated to be in the public interest.

A smaller number of publications have joined [IMPRESS](#). The [IMPRESS Standards Code](#) states:

When reporting on suicide or self-harm, publishers must not provide excessive details of the method used, the specific location or speculate on the motives.

Both regulators are voluntary and other publications, for example the Guardian, have not joined either regulator but have appointed their own internal readers' ombudsmen.

Organisations have also published specific media guidelines for reporting suicide. For example, the Samaritans' [media guidelines for reporting suicide](#), and the National Union of Journalists' [guidelines for reporting mental health and death by suicide](#).

Broadcasting

Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, has published a [Broadcasting Code](#) that sets the rules for programmes broadcast on television, radio and BBC on-demand services. [Section 2 of the Code](#) covers "harm and offence" that includes the following on violence, dangerous behaviour and suicide:

2.4: Programmes must not include material (whether in individual programmes or in programmes taken together) which, taking into account the context, condones or glamorises violent, dangerous or seriously antisocial behaviour and is likely to encourage others to copy such behaviour.

[...]

2.5: Methods of suicide and self-harm must not be included in programmes except where they are editorially justified and are also justified by the context.

Compliance with the code is the responsibility of individual broadcasters. Complaints about BBC programmes should initially be made to the BBC. Complaints about the content of other broadcasters should be put to Ofcom.

1

Online platforms

The government's [fifth progress report on its suicide prevention strategy](#) (March 2021) noted an increase in suicide rates among people aged under 25.¹ According to the report, increasing social media use had been identified as one possible factor for the rise in the UK and other countries.² The Samaritans charity has warned that while the internet can be an “invaluable resource” for people experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings, it can also provide access to content that can be distressing and triggering.³

In November 2022, the Samaritans published research, conducted by academics from Swansea University, that considered the impact of self-harm and suicide content online. This included the results from a national survey that was completed by 5,294 individuals aged 16-84.⁴ 83% of the survey respondents reported that they had seen self-harm and suicide content on social media even though they had not searched for it. For example, through TikTok's 'for you' page or Instagram's 'explore page'.⁵ Respondents also said that seeing this content had the following possible impacts:

When asked about the impact of seeing or sharing self-harm content online, over half of survey respondents reported that it depended on their mood at the time. However, 35% of respondents reported a worsening of mood, with only 2% reporting that this content improves their mood. Worryingly, of those that responded to the survey, 77% said they had self-harmed in the same or similar ways “sometimes” or “often” after viewing self-harm imagery, while 76% had self-harmed more severely, “sometimes” or “often” because of viewing self-harm content online.⁶

[The Samaritans' online excellence programme](#) aims to develop a hub of guidance and support on suicide prevention and the online environment. This includes [industry guidelines for managing self-harm and suicide content online](#). The guidelines have been developed with government, technology companies, academics and third sector organisations, and are designed to evolve in response to emerging issues, the evidence base and the government's regulation of online content.⁷

¹ DHSC, [Preventing suicide in England: Fifth progress report of the cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives](#), March 2021, para 2.6 (accessed 2 September 2024)

² As above, para 2.8

³ Samaritans website, [The internet and suicide](#) (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴ Samaritans, [How social media users experience self-harm and suicide content](#), 8 November 2022, p3 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁵ As above, p4

⁶ As above

⁷ Samaritans website, [Guidelines for sites and platforms hosting user-generated content](#) (accessed 2 September 2024)

1.1

The Online Safety Act 2023

The [Online Safety Act 2023](#) received Royal Assent on 26 October 2023 and applies across the UK. Many of its provisions have yet to come into force.⁸

The 2023 Act aims to increase user safety and improve users' ability to keep themselves safe online. All regulated services must protect users from illegal content, such as suicide and self-harm content, that reaches the criminal threshold.

There are additional duties for services likely to be accessed by children. For adults, the largest services must introduce optional tools to limit their exposure to legal content that encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide or self-harm.

It also empowers [Ofcom](#), the regulator, to disclose information from regulated services to coroners, if requested, following the death of a child.

Ofcom intends to [implement the Act in three phases](#) (PDF), with the entirety of the Act coming into force by the end of 2026.

Illegal content

The 2023 Act creates a duty for in-scope platforms to tackle illegal content. Illegal content is that which reaches the criminal threshold. For example, encouraging or assisting suicide (or attempted suicide) or serious self-harm.

This applies to certain services through which people can create and share content or interact with each other ("user-to-user services"); and those through which people can search other websites or databases ("search services").

The duty requires, under [section 9](#) and [section 26](#), in-scope services to conduct a risk assessment as to the level of risk their users may face in encountering illegal content through their service. A platform must then, under [section 10](#) and [section 27](#), operate proportionate systems and processes designed to minimise the risks of individuals encountering this content.

[Section 10\(3\) of the 2023 Act](#) also requires user-to-user services to operate systems designed to minimise the length of time for which illegal content is present, and swiftly take it down where the provider is alerted to its presence.⁹

⁸ [Section 240\(4\) of the 2023 Act](#) sets out the sections of the Act that came into force on the day it was passed.

⁹ [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s10(3)

Ofcom's consultation on its guidance and codes of practice relating to illegal online harms closed on 23 February 2024.¹⁰ Its roadmap envisages that the finalised codes of conduct will be submitted to the Secretary of State for approval in the fourth quarter of 2024.¹¹

Children

[Section 61 of the 2023 Act](#) sets out the content that is defined as “primary priority content that is harmful to children”. This includes the following:

- (3) Content which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide.
- (4) Content which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for an act of deliberate self-injury.¹²

Platforms that are likely to be accessed by children are required to conduct risk assessments that set out the level of risk of children encountering designated harmful content.¹³

Search services must then use proportionate systems and processes designed to minimise the risk of children of any age encountering primary priority content that is harmful for children.¹⁴ User-to-user services must use systems to “prevent children of any age from encountering, by means of the service” this category of content.¹⁵

Ofcom's consultation on its proposals for how internet services approach their children's safety duties closed on 17 July 2024.¹⁶ According to its roadmap, Ofcom intends to submit its finalised codes of conduct to the Secretary of State in the second quarter of 2025.¹⁷

Adults

Protections for adults take the form of the so-called ‘triple shield’:

1. **Illegal:** the duty, set out above, for in-scope platforms to tackle illegal content on their services. For example, encouraging or assisting suicide (or attempted suicide) or serious self-harm.

¹⁰ Ofcom, [Consultation: Protecting people from illegal harms online](#), 9 November 2023 (accessed 2 September 2024)

¹¹ Ofcom, [Ofcom's approach to implementing the Online Safety Act](#) (PDF), 26 October 2023, pp11-12 (accessed 2 September 2024)

¹² [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s61(3-4)

¹³ The definition of “likely to be accessed by children” is set out in [s37 of the 2023 Act](#).

¹⁴ [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s29

¹⁵ [As above](#), s12(3)

¹⁶ Ofcom, [Consultation: Protecting children from harms online](#), 8 May 2024 (accessed 2 September 2024)

¹⁷ Ofcom, [Ofcom's approach to implementing the Online Safety Act](#) (PDF), 26 October 2023, pp11-12

2. Terms and conditions: “Remove content that is prohibited by their own terms and conditions”. That is, under [section 71 of the Act](#), category 1 (the largest platforms, to be designated through subsequent secondary legislation) services would have to ensure they adhered to their own terms and conditions.¹⁸
3. User empowerment: category 1 services must include user empowerment features. These would enable adult users to “reduce the likelihood” of them encountering certain categories of content.¹⁹ This includes content that encourages, promotes or provides instructions for “suicide or an act of deliberate self-injury”.²⁰ Ofcom’s call for evidence relating to the additional duties that will apply to category 1 services closed on 20 May 2024.²¹

Ofcom has enforcement powers including issuing fines of up to £18 million or 10% of a company’s worldwide revenue (whichever was higher), as well as business disruption measures. Ofcom can also require the largest service providers to publish annual transparency reports. Ofcom would be able to specify the information service providers included in these.

Offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm

[Section 184 of the Act](#) introduces a new offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm by means of verbal or electronic communications, publications or correspondence.²²

The offence may apply even if the perpetrator does not know the person they are targeting and could apply regardless of whether the target goes on to cause serious self-harm.

Sharing data with coroners

The 2023 Act contains provisions relating to Ofcom’s disclosure of information to a coroner following the death of a child. During the bill’s report stage, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, described the challenges that bereaved parents and coroners had faced when seeking to access data after

¹⁸ Ofcom submitted its [advice on categorisation](#) (that is, the criteria for determining an online service’s category) to the government on 29 February 2024. Michelle Donelan, the then Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, [wrote to Ofcom on 25 March 2024 requesting further information](#).

¹⁹ [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s15(3)

²⁰ [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s16(3)(a)

²¹ Ofcom, [Call for evidence: Third phase of online safety regulation](#), 25 March 2024 (accessed 2 September 2024)

²² [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s184

the death of a child. He said the clauses of the then bill would create a more “straightforward and humane process for accessing data”.²³

To this end, under [section 101 of the Act](#), Ofcom has the power to require information from a regulated service about a deceased child’s online activity following a request from a coroner. This includes:

- The content encountered, generated, uploaded, or shared by them.
- How the content came to be encountered by them (including the role of algorithms).
- The method of interaction (for instance, by viewing or sharing it).²⁴

Secondly, to “ensure that there are no barriers to Ofcom sharing information with coroners” Ofcom can share information obtained using its powers under the 2023 Act with a coroner without the prior consent of a business to disclose such information.²⁵

Finally, Lord Parkinson said that coroners needed to have access to online safety expertise, given the technical and fast-moving nature of the industry.²⁶ Therefore, under [section 163 of the Act](#), Ofcom is empowered to produce a report dealing with matters relevant to an investigation or inquest, following a request from a coroner or procurator fiscal in Scotland.

The Office of the Chief Coroner issued non-statutory [guidance on obtaining information regarding social media use](#) on 2 April 2024. This aims to help coroners understand the options available to them when obtaining evidence relating to the use of social media.

Digital Information and Smart Data Bill

The King’s Speech 2024 included a Digital Information and Smart Data Bill. This would, among other things, establish a data preservation process that coroners (and procurators fiscal in Scotland) could initiate to support their investigations into a child’s death. According to the background briefing, this would help “coroners get access to online information they need when investigating a child’s death”.²⁷ The Bill has yet to be introduced.

Stakeholder responses

Julie Bentley, CEO of Samaritans, described the Online Safety Act as an “important moment for suicide prevention”.²⁸ However, she said that “without

²³ [HL Deb 10 July 2023 cc1612-13](#)

²⁴ [Online Safety Act 2023](#), s101(2)

²⁵ [HL Deb 10 July 2023 cc1612-13](#)

²⁶ As above

²⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, [King’s Speech 2024: background briefing notes](#), 17 July 2024, p40

²⁸ Samaritans, [Samaritans’ response to the Online Safety Bill](#), 19 September 2023 (accessed 2 September 2024)

full protections for over 18s”, the legislation “falls short of its promise to make the UK ‘the safest place in the world to be online’”.²⁹

After Ofcom’s publication of its proposed approach to children’s online safety, various stakeholders said that the proposals would not adequately protect the under 18s.³⁰ On 8 May 2024, it was reported that Bereaved Families for Online Safety sent a joint letter to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition. They said that while this was an “important moment”, they feared that Ofcom’s “proposed approach may be insufficient”.³¹

Following the 2024 General Election, Peter Kyle was appointed Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology. He has said that the government is committed to “building on the Online Safety Act”.³²

1.2 Social media companies

Content on user-to-user online services (for example, X, formerly Twitter, and Facebook) is also governed by the individual platform’s terms of service. For instance, [X’s suicide and self-harm policy](#) or [Meta’s suicide and self-injury community standards](#). Stakeholders, for instance the children’s charity NSPCC, have suggested that these systems do not do enough to protect users from harmful online content.³³ In response, some services have introduced changes to their policies.

In 2019, Meta (the parent company of Facebook and Instagram), announced updates to its policies around suicide and self-harm-related content on its platforms.³⁴ These policies were amended to prohibit graphic self-harm images. For Instagram, non-graphic self-harm-related content was removed from “search, hashtags and the explore tab”.³⁵ In November 2020, Instagram announced it would use technology to assist with the identification of this content. As of 14 April 2022, content in the UK flagged by the identification technology is then sent on to a review team. These moderators can then

²⁹ As above

³⁰ [Labour vows to toughen child online safety law after Ofcom criticised](#), The Times, 16 July 2024 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³¹ [Online safety rules don’t go far enough, bereaved parents say](#), The Independent, 8 May 2024 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³² [Labour vows to toughen child online safety law after Ofcom criticised](#), The Times, 16 July 2024; [Social media apps could be banned as Labour warns ‘nothing off table’ for safety](#), The Mirror, 28 July 2024 (both accessed 2 September 2024)

³³ [Facebook’s Instagram ‘failed self-harm responsibilities’](#), BBC News, 20 November 2020 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³⁴ Meta press release, [Tightening Our Policies and Expanding Resources to Prevent Suicide and Self-Harm](#), 10 September 2019 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³⁵ Instagram blog post, [Changes We’re Making to Do More to Support and Protect the Most Vulnerable People who Use Instagram](#), 7 February 2019 (accessed 2 September 2024)

“remove it, direct the person posting to local support organizations or, if necessary, contact the emergency services”.³⁶

On 9 January 2024, Meta set out new protections for users of its services. Firstly, for teenage users, Meta said that it would begin to remove self-harm related content (and other age-inappropriate content) from their “Feed and Stories, even if it’s shared by someone they follow”. Secondly, teenage users will now automatically be placed into the most restrictive content setting on Instagram and Facebook. This includes individuals that are already using Meta’s applications. Meta also said that the results from searches for terms related to suicide, self-harm and eating disorders, will be hidden from all users. Instead, the application will direct them to resources for help.³⁷

2

Press

There are two press regulators in the UK. Many titles have signed up to the [Independent Press Standards Organisation](#) (IPSO). The IPSO [Editors’ Code of Practice](#) states:

When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media’s right to report legal proceedings.³⁸

There may be exceptions to this clause (and others in the code) where they can be demonstrated to be in the public interest.

On 1 November 2023, IPSO launched new [Guidance for Journalists on the reporting of suicide](#). This does not replace the Editors’ Code but explains how it applies to the reporting of suicide.³⁹

A smaller number of publications have joined [IMPRESS](#). The [IMPRESS Standards Code](#) states:

When reporting on suicide or self-harm, publishers must not provide excessive details of the method used, the specific location or speculate on the motives.⁴⁰

Both regulators are voluntary and other publications, for example the Guardian, have not joined either regulator but have appointed their own internal readers’ ombudsmen.

³⁶ Instagram blog post, [An important step towards better protecting our community in Europe](#), 10 November 2020 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³⁷ Meta, [New Protections to Give Teens More Age-Appropriate Experiences on Our Apps](#), 9 January 2024 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³⁸ IPSO, [Editors’ Code of Practice](#), January 2021, clause 5 (accessed 2 September 2024)

³⁹ IPSO, [IPSO launches Guidance for journalists and information for the public on Reporting Suicide](#), 1 November 2023 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴⁰ IMPRESS, [Standards Code](#), clause 9.1 (accessed 2 September 2024)

Organisations have also published specific media guidelines for reporting suicide. For example, the Samaritans' [media guidelines for reporting suicide](#), and the National Union of Journalists' [guidelines for reporting mental health and death by suicide](#).⁴¹

3 Broadcasting

Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, has published a [Broadcasting Code](#) that sets the rules for programmes broadcast on television, radio and BBC on-demand services in the UK. [Section 2 of the Code](#) covers "harm and offence" that includes the following on violence, dangerous behaviour and suicide:

2.4: Programmes must not include material (whether in individual programmes or in programmes taken together) which, taking into account the context, condones or glamorises violent, dangerous or seriously antisocial behaviour and is likely to encourage others to copy such behaviour.

[...]

2.5: Methods of suicide and self-harm must not be included in programmes except where they are editorially justified and are also justified by the context.⁴²

Compliance with the code is the responsibility of individual broadcasters. Complaints about BBC programmes should initially be made to the BBC.⁴³ Complaints about the content of other broadcasters should be put to Ofcom.⁴⁴

4 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

4.1 Scotland

One of the priorities of the Scottish Government's [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022-32](#) is to build a whole of government and society approach to address "the social determinants which have the greatest link to suicide risk".⁴⁵ To

⁴¹ National Union of Journalists, [Guidelines for reporting mental health and death by suicide](#), November 2014 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴² Ofcom, [Broadcasting Code](#), June 2023, ss2.4-5 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴³ BBC website, [Complaints](#) (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴⁴ Ofcom, [Complain about TV, radio or on demand services](#) (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴⁵ Scottish Government, [Creating Hope Together: suicide prevention strategy 2022 to 2032](#) (PDF), September 2022, p13 (accessed 2 September 2024)

achieve this, the Scottish Government will: “Undertake work to ensure sensitive media reporting (both traditional and social media).”⁴⁶

4.2 Wales

The Welsh Government’s [Suicide and self harm prevention strategy 2015 to 2022](#) includes an objective to support the media “in responsible reporting and portrayal of suicide and suicidal behaviour”.⁴⁷ This refers to the need to adhere to IPSO’s Code of Conduct as well as an “awareness of tackling stigma in relation to suicide and self-harm, encouraging help seeking behaviour and educating the public” to understand the complexity of reasons why someone might take their own life and how to respond to person in crisis.⁴⁸

Objective six of the draft strategy for 2024-2034 is “responsible communication, media reporting, and social media use regarding self-harm, suicide and suicidal behaviour”.⁴⁹ The consultation on the draft strategy ended on 11 June 2024.

4.3 Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Department of Health’s [Protect Life 2 2019-24 strategy](#) includes an objective to “enhance responsible media reporting on suicide”.⁵⁰ The strategy notes that the internet can promote awareness-raising and signpost sources of help. However, it also warns that social networking sites can facilitate cyber bullying, and the promotion of self-harm and suicide.⁵¹

On 5 September 2023, the strategy was extended to the end of 2027.⁵²

⁴⁶ As above

⁴⁷ Welsh Government, [Talk to me: Suicide and Self Harm Prevention Strategy for Wales](#) (PDF), 2015, p16 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁴⁸ As above, p16

⁴⁹ Welsh Government, [Consultation Document: Draft Suicide and Self-harm Prevention Strategy 2024-2034](#) (PDF), 20 February 2024, p23 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁵⁰ Northern Ireland Department of Health, [Protect Life 2: A Strategy for Preventing Suicide and Self Harm in Northern Ireland 2019-2024](#) (PDF), September 2019, p16 (accessed 2 September 2024)

⁵¹ As above, p38

⁵² Department of Health Northern Ireland, [Suicide prevention strategy extended](#), 5 September 2023 (accessed 2 September 2024)

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