



TAKING STEPS TOWARDS A SAFER ONLINE WORLD FOR CHILDREN

Momentum is building for Baroness Howe's Online Safety Bill following disappointment with the Government's lacklustre response to the proposal to introduce an opt-in system for protecting children online. In the week running up to Safer Internet Day, a series of amendments have been tabled to support Baroness Howe's efforts to improve the safety of children when using the internet.

Baroness Howe, who introduced the Bill and has led the fight to protect children online, has tabled an amendment to strengthen the educational provisions in the Bill. Baroness Howe said:

'Clause 3 of my Bill is all about education. Whilst we know the wonderful education and social advantages of the internet, children need to be taught about the best ways to keep themselves safe online and to understand the potential harms they could encounter in the online world. It is only through better education that we can tackle online behavioural challenges like cyber-bullying and grooming.'

'My amendment further strengthens the educational mission of the Bill, underlying the fact that it has a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand it introduces the opt-in system, requiring proof of being over eighteen years of age, in order to protect children from accidentally stumbling across inappropriate content as well as intentionally seeking it out. On the other hand it has an educational obligation to deal with, among other things, the online behavioural challenges that opt-in was not designed to, and indeed cannot address.'

Former children's television presenter, Baroness Benjamin, has tabled an important amendment that broadens the scope of the opt-in system to cover all adult content. Commenting on the amendment and the Bill Baroness Benjamin said:

'I have raised in the House of Lords before the great concern among parents and teachers and the growing vulnerability of children to websites which contain extreme violent content, and glorify and promote suicide, self-harm and eating disorders. The Online Safety Bill will help protect young people from the harmful messages of these websites. I very much look forward to its Committee Stage and working hard to put in place a strong legal framework to provide our children with the very best online safety protections.'

Baroness Massey, whose speech at the Bill's Second Reading made the news because of her exposure of the failure of the coffee chain Starbucks to filter adult material from its free wifi service, said:

'I was very concerned when the Government consultation on online safety made absolutely no reference to age verification. One of the great strengths of Baroness Howe's Bill is that age verification is right in its heart.'

'Without proper age verification – which we already see working well with online gambling for under-18's thanks to the statutory obligation placed on online gambling sites via the Gambling Act – child protection mechanisms will be fairly useless. Among other things my amendment places an obligation on OFCOM to set the standards for age verification'

Baroness Howe warmly welcomes the amendments put down by Baroness Benjamin and Baroness Massey:

'I very much support these amendments and look forward to the Committee Stage debate on the Bill in the near future.'

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Editors Notes:

1. Baroness Howe's Online Safety Bill can be found here: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2012-13/onlinesafety.html>
2. Safer Internet Day takes place on 5 February 2013 organised by the UK Safer Internet Centre. Full details available on the Safer Internet Day website: <http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/safer-internet-day/2013>
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