**The Panel’s National Stakeholder Hubs – January/February 2024**

The Panel’s National Stakeholder Hubs recently focussed on consumers, citizens and microbusinesses, and their awareness of Online Safety.

Following the Online Safety Bill reaching Royal Assent on 26 October 2023, and Ofcom becoming the regulator, the Panel felt the importance of providing an introduction to Online Safety, what it means to consumers, citizens and microbusinesses, paying particular focus on how Ofcom would implement measures to regulate in the space, and touch upon Ofcom’s consultation: Protecting people from illegal harms online.

As Online Safety would potentially affect everyone in each Nation, we aimed to ‘myth bust’ any pre-conceived perceptions, to better understand the harms faced and learn how to protect users.

**Information from Ofcom’s Online Safety team**

We invited Hub participants to gain knowledge on what the Online Safety Act represents, and the significant steps needed to create a safer online world for all UK users.

Ofcom shared their commitment to transparency and overarching vision to effectively implement a new framework to help in achieving their goal in creating a safer online environment. Items covered included:

* The changes expected by the Online Safety Act and what Ofcom will do to achieve them.
* Key dates and milestones (over the next 3 years), including details on phase 1 – Illegal Harms consultation.
* What is included in the Illegal Harms consultation and how to engage with it.

Hub participants appreciated the information supplied as a first stage approach and would welcome further engagement on Online Safety as more powers are granted to Ofcom over the coming years. Various Hub participants suggested they will respond to the Illegal Harms consultation by the due date and look to respond to future consultations.

**Hub participants discussed issues facing consumers they represent in relation to Online Safety. A summary of the discussion can be found below:**

* Participants were pleased Ofcom were taking a methodical approach to the Online Safety process. More value could be achieved by engaging with a panel of children to hear their views to gain a better understanding of their online world.
* Connections with other organisations around the world would benefit regulatory measures within the UK. Ofcom confirmed they were a co-founder of the [Global Safety Regulators Network](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/international/online-safety/gosrn) and had joined forces with international regulators to enhance global efforts to make the online world a safer place.
* Participants were pleased to understand Ofcom have kept in regular contact with international organisations such as the [Australian e-safety Commissioner](https://www.esafety.gov.au/) and the work they have so far undertaken.
* Northern Ireland participants provided input on how sectarianism can manifest within their nation and suggested whether a different legal framework, language or sentence within the Code may benefit communities to ensure the Online Safety Act is as robust as it can be in all parts of the UK.
* Further engagement within the public health sectors on what Online Safety should encompass would be of benefit.
* Questions were raised on how Online Safety information will be disseminated to educate children as there appears to be a gap between the Online Safety Act and educational needs. Additionally, parents have little understanding and are unaware of how to assist or support their children with this knowledge. (Ofcom provided details of their ‘[Making Sense of Media’](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research) programme and confirmed the upskilling of young people is essential.)
* Consumers should receive the necessary knowledge to correctly flag harmful content and receive feedback on why the contact was or was not removed.
* Discussions were had around the effectiveness of the regime such as the monitoring of illegal harms through the reliance of reports, quantitative research, partnerships with external organisations and requests from Communications Providers.
* User empowerment, building users knowledge and enforcement is key to the success of Online Safety.
* Comments were raised on the complaints and appeals process, and the options available to consumers if they remain unhappy with their initial enquiry. Other areas within communications services have Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) schemes available.
* Participants endorse the need for a more robust age awareness process to be adopted especially by organisations providing social media content.
* Questions were raised on Ofcom’s objectives in making it more difficult for fraudsters and individuals to exploit children by publishing illegal content and what measures may be put in place to rectify the situation.
* Participants were pleased to hear Ofcom’s route to monitor the media, horizon scan to look at future harms and the necessity to employ policy experts within online safety and other harms areas.
* The Illegal Harms consultation will be the first of many consultations on Online Safety and it will affect so many individuals of all ages and households with or without children. A concern was raised to factor in how Ofcom intended to engage with the day-to-day user to ensure all voices are heard at this stage of the process in addition to receiving input from various organisations.

**Stakeholders who took part in our National Hubs are listed below:**

* **Age UK**
* **Cedar Foundation**
* **Communications Consumer Panel**
* **Consumer Scotland**
* **Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)**
* **Countryside Alliance**
* **Department of Finance**
* **Digital Health and Care Wales**
* **Eaware**
* **Essential Services Access Network (ESAN)**
* **Federation of Small Businesses NI**
* **Good Things Foundation**
* **Money Advice Service**
* **Northern Ireland Council on Voluntary Action**
* **Nominet**
* **Ofcom**
* **Ofcom’s Advisory Committees**
* **QMU Dispute Resolution Centre**
* **RNIB**
* **RNID**
* **Scottish Government – Consumer Policy**
* **Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland**
* **Vulnerability Registration Service**
* **Welsh Government**
* **Which?**
* **Younger Peoples Commissioner for NI (NICCY)**
* **Youth Scotland**

**For links to research and insights shared by participants across the Hubs – please see below:**

* [Ofcom's approach to implementing the Online Safety Act](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/270215/10-23-approach-os-implementation.pdf)

**For links to research and insights shared by participants across the Hubs – please see below:**

* [Ofcom’s understanding the Online Safety Act: watch our webinars](https://ofcom.cmail19.com/t/i-e-ahydhkd-thuywlyhr-jt/)
* [Global Online Safety Regulators Network](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/international/online-safety/gosrn)
* [Illegal harms consultation](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ofcom.org.uk%2Fconsultations-and-statements%2Fcategory-1%2Fprotecting-people-from-illegal-content-online&data=05%7C02%7CEmma.Balaam%40ofcom.org.uk%7Cc3d36c1b1f9e42c1732808dc1cfa08e2%7C0af648de310c40688ae4f9418bae24cc%7C0%7C0%7C638417107437335978%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=XjN8uUkzuFp9Y75wYNiAPhr360JVVushLKWTNGpcGe8%3D&reserved=0)
* [Summary of illegal harms proposals and who they apply to](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ofcom.org.uk%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fpdf_file%2F0023%2F271175%2FConsultation-at-a-glance-our-proposals-and-who-they-apply-to.pdf&data=05%7C02%7CEmma.Balaam%40ofcom.org.uk%7Cc3d36c1b1f9e42c1732808dc1cfa08e2%7C0af648de310c40688ae4f9418bae24cc%7C0%7C0%7C638417107437353712%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=KrZUa0gG8fYGuE9yxdz0yqOiAMV%2BkJZk6cGbS5GnzkU%3D&reserved=0)
* [Summary of each chapter in the Illegal Harms consultation](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ofcom.org.uk%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fpdf_file%2F0030%2F270948%2Fchapter-summaries-illegal-harms-consultation.pdf&data=05%7C02%7CEmma.Balaam%40ofcom.org.uk%7Cc3d36c1b1f9e42c1732808dc1cfa08e2%7C0af648de310c40688ae4f9418bae24cc%7C0%7C0%7C638417107437366986%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=I17EbL9MpaKvBHqkRtFfmkvhDPFNjR84iGWLVYAh7Tg%3D&reserved=0)
* Email address to respond to consultation: IHconsultation@ofcom.org.uk
* [Part 5 draft guidance](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ofcom.org.uk%2F__data%2Fassets%2Fpdf_file%2F0018%2F272601%2Fguidance-part-5-annexe-2.pdf&data=05%7C02%7CEmma.Balaam%40ofcom.org.uk%7Cc3d36c1b1f9e42c1732808dc1cfa08e2%7C0af648de310c40688ae4f9418bae24cc%7C0%7C0%7C638417107437378869%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=WRZcicL86RlSDjExux2vRoPtseWJYUgqKtOyKH4fbMA%3D&reserved=0)
* [simple explainer](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ofcom.org.uk%2Fonline-safety%2Finformation-for-industry%2Fguide-for-services%2Fonline-pornography&data=05%7C02%7CEmma.Balaam%40ofcom.org.uk%7Cc3d36c1b1f9e42c1732808dc1cfa08e2%7C0af648de310c40688ae4f9418bae24cc%7C0%7C0%7C638417107437388662%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=ZN5z08ggRuZeltjoX%2FFcTgyem9IRg8%2BukM5EvzU8JGA%3D&reserved=0) of the Part 5 duties and draft guidance
* Email address to respond: Part5Guidance@ofcom.org.uk

Since holding this round of Hubs we have been in contact with the social enterprise Careful Trouble regarding their work on digital inclusion and using technology for good, which includes a participant of our England Hub. Their latest report, [Digital Inclusion: from sticking plasters to sustainable progress](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61b777e69d4a594596081bcc/t/65bcc9876e180d5cd969c7d4/1706871177698/Digital%2Binclusion%2B-%2Bfrom%2Bsticking%2Bplaster%2Bto%2Bsustainable%2Bprogress.pdf) is the first in a series of publications and discussions in which they introduce new perspectives to the digital inclusion policy debate, explore how to make digital inclusion policy fit for the AI age, and address some of the root causes of digital exclusion.

One of our Hub participants (Money and Mental Health Policy Institute) kindly forwarded information on previous research projects they had undertaken which previously looked at online harms. Please find the links below for your interest:

* [Report on online gambling](https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/A_Safer_Bet.pdf.pdf)
* [Report on online retail](https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Convenience-at-a-cost-final-web-report.pdf)
* [Report on online scams](https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Caught-in-the-web-full-report.pdf)
* [A report setting out what the government, regulators and others should do to tackle online harms](https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/publications/safety-net/)

**For more information on previous discussions across the Panel’s National Hubs and who took part – please visit the Panel’s website** [**here**](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/stakeholder-engagement/the-panels-national-hubs)**.**

**Future National Stakeholder Hubs Dates**

**England**

* 23 April 2024 commencing at 2pm
* 25 June 2024 commencing at 11am
* 22 October 2024 commencing at 11am

**Northern Ireland**

* 23 April 2024 commencing at 10am
* 24 June 2024 commencing at 3.30pm
* 24 October 2024 commencing at 2pm

**Scotland**

* 26 April 2024 commencing at 10.30am
* 14 June 2024 commencing at 10.30am
* 25 October 2024 commencing at 10.30am

**Wales**

* 27 March 2024 commencing at 11am
* 24 June 2024 commencing at 10am
* 24 October 2024 commencing at 11am

Topics to be confirmed.

Please note – dates/times may change dependent on topic if necessary and we may hold an All-UK Hub if we need input from across the UK at the same time on a topic of importance to consumers and citizens (and potentially micro-businesses) in all Nations.