

Rt Hon Nadine Dorries MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
By email

20 January 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

UK Online Safety Bill: animal abuse footage

I am writing as Chair of Wildlife and Countryside Link's Animal Welfare Strategy Group to support the case for animal abuse to be added to the scope of the Online Safety Bill.

Footage of animal abuse falls squarely within the definition of harmful online content, which the Bill is intended to combat. A recent report by the Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition, *'Making Money from Misery: How Social Media Giants Profit from Animal Abuse'*, documented 5,480 instances of animal cruelty content on social media sites over the course of one year, including extreme footage of animals being tortured to death.¹ The report found that the internal policies of social media sites are failing to remove the majority of such videos, allowing viewer numbers to grow and creating increased demand for new online animal cruelty content. The coalition warn of a 'rapid proliferation' of animal abuse videos over the years ahead.

Such footage harms not only the animals involved, but also viewers – especially children.

Polling commissioned by the RSPCA has found that 23 percent of 10–18-year-olds had seen animal cruelty on social media sites.² Such viewing at a young age can lead to imitative behaviour. Recent research suggest that children who witness animal cruelty are 3–8 times more likely to abuse animals themselves.³ In the words of an earlier study (2006), 'witnessing animal abuse normalizes the behaviour for the observer, potentially translating to a perception that such acts are socially acceptable'.⁴

The continuing growth of social media use, and the proliferation of animal abuse footage on social media sites, constitutes a new trend that has the potential to increase the prevalence of animal abuse.

The Online Safety Bill offers an opportunity to address this risk. A duty on providers to keep users safe from footage of animal abuse could be added to the duties already proposed to protect against other forms of harmful content. Given that animal abuse footage shares many of the characteristics of other types of harmful content—and indeed is often directly linked to it (see page 54 on the SMACC report on 'crush videos')—such an additional duty would not constitute an onerous additional burden to what has already been proposed.

¹ <https://www.asiaforanimals.com/smacc-report>

² https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/16_10_18_genkind

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329457813_Animal_cruelty_pet_abuse_violence_the_missed_dangerous_connection

⁴ <https://www.animalsandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/thompson.pdf>

The inclusion of animal abuse in the scope of the bill would further progress the government's animal welfare agenda. As stated by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the Animal Welfare Action Plan (2021), 'The way we treat animals reflects our values and the kind of people we are. We will continue to raise the bar, and we intend to take the rest of the world with us'.⁵ The inclusion of measures to tackle animal abuse footage within a new regulatory framework to protect users from harmful online content would be truly world leading.

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter. Please do let me know if any further information would be useful.

Yours sincerely,



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CC: Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/action-plan-for-animal-welfare>