

Online Safety Bill: Animal welfare points to raise

Briefing for Lords second reading 01.02.23

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)), with support from the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and other animal welfare organisations. It sets out the case for adding animal abuse videos to the scope of the Online Safety Bill.

Note for readers: The briefing describes the content of violent and distressing videos.

Animal abuse social media content

The Online Safety Bill does not currently include reference to online social media content depicting cruelty and violence inflicted upon animals. This is a significant omission, which should be rectified.

Most animal cruelty content is produced specifically for sharing on social media, often for profit through the monetisation schemes offered by platforms like YouTube. Examples include animals being beaten, set on fire, crushed, drowned, set on by other animals and even eaten while conscious. The mutilation of infant monkeys is particularly common, there are monkey hatred channels on YouTube that exist solely to promote and post videos of monkey suffering, with videos showing baby monkeys being injured, abused, tortured and killed.

Videos showing animals deliberately placed into frightening and dangerous situations from which they cannot escape, only then to be 'rescued' on camera, are also increasingly popular on social media. Examples include kittens and puppies being placed with pythons, being removed just before predation. Such fake 'rescues' not only cause immense suffering to animals, but they are also fraudulent in that viewers are often asked to donate towards the 'rescue' and care of the animals.

The scale of the problem

The Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition (SMACC)'s 2021 report, *'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.

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

See further SMACC reports on online animal abuse:

<https://www.smaccoalition.com/wild-pets-report>

<https://www.smaccoalition.com/teasing-report>

RSPCA figures also show rising instances of animal abuse online. The charity received 756 reports of animal abuse on social media in 2021, compared to 431 in 2020 and 157 in 2019. In the words of RSPCA Chief Inspectorate Officer Dermot Murphy, *"It's very worrying that we're seeing more reports of animal abuse being posted on social media for likes and kudos. These videos are often accompanied by laughing emojis or silly comments, it's normalising - and even making light of - animal cruelty."*²

The rise in animal abuse videos is also helping to fuel other forms of criminality. A recent BBC Click investigation that revealed how wildlife traffickers are using social media to promote and facilitate illegal trade in endangered parrots.³ Social media algorithms designed to direct individuals towards 'related pages' help to connect wildlife traffickers around the world. Similarly bloodsport enthusiasts are using social media to share videos of their activities, including badger baiting and sett digging, and to coordinate future criminality.⁴

The Online Safety Bill: An opportunity to address animal abuse content

The objective of the Online Safety Bill is to establish a new regulatory framework to increase the accountability of online technology companies and protect users from harmful online content.

Footage of animal abuse falls squarely within the definition of harmful online content, which the Bill is intended to combat. Such content harms not only the animals involved, but also viewers – especially children.

Polling commissioned by the RSPCA in 2018 found that 23 percent of 10–18-year-olds had seen animal cruelty on social media sites⁵, a proportion that is likely to have subsequently increased given the prevalence animal abuse videos in recent years. Such viewing acts of cruelty towards animals can cause psychological harm to children. A study published in 2017, found that *"there is emerging evidence that childhood exposure to maltreatment of companion animals is associated with psychopathology in childhood and adulthood"*.⁶

Viewing animal abuse at a young age can also lead to imitative behaviour. 2018 research suggests that children who witness animal cruelty are 3–8 times more likely to abuse animals themselves.⁷ 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"*.⁸ There is a related link between cruelty to animals and violence toward humans. Children who witness animal abuse are at greater risk of becoming abusers themselves.⁹

² <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-reports-of-animal-abuse-doubled>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-60247540>

⁴ <https://www.badgertrust.org.uk/post/badger-trust-calls-for-animal-crime-to-be-included-in-online-safety-bill>

⁵ https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/16_10_18_genkind

⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.09.004>

⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329457813_Animal_cruelty_pet_abuse_violence_the_missed_dangerous_connection

⁸ <https://www.animalsandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/thompson.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.animallaw.info/article/link-cruelty-animals-and-violence-towards-people>

Given these harms, animal abuse videos should fall within the scope of the Online Safety Bill, as a type of content that online technology companies are currently failing to control, to the detriment of UK citizens.

Expanding Schedule 7 to cover animal abuse content

The Online Safety Bill offers an opportunity to address the harms caused by animal abuse videos (and images).

Animal abuse, including the illegal sale of threatened wildlife, could be added to the list of priority offences set out in schedule 7, which online providers are required to protect users from, as part of the illegal content duties conferred by the Bill. Given that animal abuse footage can overlap with priority offences already included in schedule 7 (especially 'proceeds of crime' and 'sexual images') this simple addition would not constitute an onerous additional burden for online providers.

The inclusion of animal abuse would help deliver on the core aims of the Bill, and also progress the government's animal welfare agenda. As stated by the then 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"*.¹⁰ 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.

If you are interested in developing and taking forward a Lords committee amendment to include animal abuse within Bill scope, please do get in touch with Link on the below details – we would be delighted to support this.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/action-plan-for-animal-welfare> Target 12: 'significantly increase the area and quality and connectivity of, access to, and benefits from green and blue spaces in urban and densely populated areas.'

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 68 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

For questions or further information please contact:

Matt Browne, Head of Policy & Advocacy, Wildlife and Countryside Link

E: matt@wcl.org.uk

The following animal welfare organisations have inputted into this briefing and support the inclusion of animal abuse content within the scope of the Online Safety Bill:

