

The Rt. Hon. Chloe Smith MP

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
House of Commons
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Dear Acting Secretary of State,

I am writing to you as a concerned member of the public, urging you to add online animal cruelty and wildlife trafficking content into the scope of the proposed UK Online Safety Bill.

Content depicting animals being deliberately abused is increasingly being distributed through online platforms. Such content includes videos and images of domestic and wild animals being held captive in deplorable conditions, being physically and psychologically tortured, and sometimes being maimed or killed. Some of the creators are monetising this content.

Since March 2021, the Asia for Animals' Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition has identified more than 13,000 social media links depicting animal abuse. Polling by the RSPCA in 2018 indicated that almost a quarter of 10-18-year-olds had witnessed some form of animal abuse online. Such content poses a high risk of psychological harm and distress, especially when viewed by children, young people and vulnerable adults, by exposing them to violence, gore and the mistreatment of other living beings. This can have a lasting impact on vulnerable minds as well as setting negative examples of how animals should be treated.

Social media platforms are also being extensively used to facilitate the illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products, promoting the perception that such trade is acceptable and undermining efforts by governments to tackle the scourge of wildlife trafficking.

Social media providers are failing to effectively prevent such content from appearing on their platforms.

The Online Safety Bill promises to "deliver the government's manifesto commitment to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online while defending free expression." The bill aims to tackle harmful content online to protect the public from its negative impacts.

I therefore urge you to lend your support to the amendment to the bill proposed by Lord Stevenson of Balmacara, which would add offences under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (unnecessary suffering) and offences under section 1 of the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996 to the list of priority offences set out in schedule 7. I also urge you to add Offences under the Control of Trade in Endangered Species Regulations 2018 (COTES) to Schedule 7 of the Online Safety Bill.

As one of the world's leaders in animal welfare legislation and in efforts to curb wildlife trafficking, the UK government should use the Online Safety Bill to protect animals from abuse and illegal trade by making sure related content has no platform online in the UK.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this important matter.

(Add your name here, and any contact details, if you wish).