

Online safety

New social media curfews and safety controls for 16-17 year olds

Before leaving office, the Starmer government announced [a new set of online safety measures](#) for older teenagers, building on the forthcoming ban on social media services for under-16s. From next year, default overnight curfews between midnight and 6am will automatically apply to 16 and 17-year-olds on major social media apps, alongside the switching off of features designed to keep users scrolling, such as autoplaying videos and endlessly personalised feeds. These protections aim to provide a smoother transition when 16-year olds' social media use is no longer restricted. However, they will be able to adjust these settings. The changes follow a UK-wide pilot involving more than 300 families, many of whom reported that curfews quickly became part of daily routines and improved sleep and concentration. Alongside these social media reforms, further action was announced to ensure children use AI chatbots safely, including regular breaks for under-18s and work with regulators to address services offering harmful or unverified mental health advice. Bans for the most dangerous chatbots are being considered. The Kids Online Safety Hub will be expanded to provide new guidance for children, parents and guardians on safe and confident AI use. As previously announced, Media literacy will be strengthened in schools: from September, RSHE classes will teach critical thinking about emerging technologies, AI chatbots, misinformation and violent or misogynistic content. From 2028, the National Curriculum will embed media literacy across subjects, with enhanced English and History content on analysing sources and bias, and the computing curriculum will be updated to cover AI, data science and technological bias.

Online age checks are expanding rapidly, but children are still reaching unsafe sites

A recent Ofcom report [shows that age checks are now being rolled out at an unprecedented scale](#) across pornography, social media, dating and gaming platforms, with many services strengthening their systems in line with regulatory guidance. The proportion of children encountering highly effective age checks rose from 25% to 43% between July 2025 and January 2026, and all the UK's top ten porn sites now have checks in place. For the small minority of children who attempt to access pornography, these checks act as a strong deterrent, with most visits lasting under 30 seconds. Despite this progress, Ofcom warns that major gaps remain. Some porn sites still lack age checks, and children can easily find them through search engines, with a third of Google's first-page results and over half of Bing's leading to sites without protections. The regulator is working with both companies to reduce this. Ofcom also highlights serious concerns about social media platforms' reliance on age-inference models, which estimate age from behaviour rather than verifying it directly. These systems are not considered effective and can miss large numbers of child users. Ofcom has particular concerns about TikTok's approach and [has launched a formal investigation](#) into whether it is meeting its duty to protect children from harmful content. Dating services also need stronger age assurance, as more than one in ten older teens continue to access major

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Online age checks are expanding rapidly, but children are still reaching unsafe sites (continued)

apps despite existing checks. With Government plans to restrict social media use for under-16s, Ofcom warns that age-inference tools cannot reliably enforce such a ban. The regulator will provide Parliament with a rapid assessment by October 2026 outlining what highly effective age verification should involve.

[NCW has been a key partner in efforts to make social media safer for children, and one of this year's Conference Resolutions will call for stronger global governance of AI, greater platform accountability and meaningful inclusion of women's voices in AI and technology policy. The next priority for NCW is ensuring that new legislation and regulations are adopted and enforced so they deliver real protection for children and women.]

Adult Social Care

Andy Burnham fast-tracks social care reform

Within days of becoming Prime Minister, Andy Burham [pledged a major overhaul of adult social care in England](#) to include a National Care Service, expediting the independent review led by Baroness Louise Casey and cross-party talks. Highlighting the financial impact of care costs on people, the Prime Minister set out a three-part plan to overhaul social care, arguing that decades of political failure had left millions without support and placed unsustainable pressure on families, care workers and the NHS. First, he said that [Baroness Louise Casey's independent review](#) would be brought forward a year to 2027 and would consider how to deliver an integrated national care service aligned with the NHS. It would be built on lived experience, preventative care and the principle of supporting people at home wherever possible. The Prime Minister emphasised that this model must end fragmented provision and reduce avoidable hospital admissions. Noting that thousands of over-65s going to A&E remained stuck in hospital despite being medically fit for discharge, he said fixing issues in social care could ease the pressure on the NHS and make savings. The Casey Review would consider how a National Care Service would be funded. His second commitment was an immediate focus on the social care workforce, expanding the planned fair pay agreement and creating clearer training, progression and integration with NHS roles. He pointed out that staff on poverty pay could not deliver secure care. Third, he said that finding a lasting solution required finding common ground through cross-party talks and consensus rather than political point-scoring. The Prime Minister acknowledged that sustainable reform would require difficult decisions regarding funding. He [did not rule out tax rises](#), but reaffirmed the core manifesto limits on income tax, National Insurance and VAT. [Click here](#) for the opposition parties' views.

[Following its Resolution on adult social care, NCW wrote to Ministers and hosted a free online debate focused on the challenges of maintaining personal independence at home and dignity in care. We must keep the pressure on Government to deliver real change.]

MPs say exercise must become central to NHS support for older people

A new report from the Health and Social Care Select Committee says [physical activity should sit at the centre of NHS support for older people](#), describing it as just as important as medication. MPs argue that helping older adults build resilience to illness, frailty and falls through regular movement is essential to healthy ageing, independent living and shifting the NHS from treating illness to preventing it. The report recommends that advice and social prescribing of physical activity become a routine part of care from GPs and other clinicians. It calls for stronger links between local NHS services, leisure providers and community groups to make exercise easier to access, and for the Care Quality Commission to check that care homes are offering appropriate activity programmes. The Committee also urges a cultural shift in how ageing is viewed, warning that negative assumptions can leave older people feeling resigned to inactivity, increasing their vulnerability to poor health.

Early release scheme and women's imprisonment

The idea of releasing women prisoners has featured in recent news coverage. It has emerged as a possible route to creating additional capacity in the prison system under the early release scheme to keep the most serious offenders, such as PC Harper's killers, in custody. The suggested early release of women prisoners intersects with the broader debate about women's imprisonment as highlighted in the following reports.

Policy statement promises better outcomes for women in the justice system

Before leaving office, the Starmer government issued a [policy statement on women in the criminal justice system](#), committing to improving outcomes for women who were in, or at risk of entering, the system. It recognised that many face overlapping challenges such as trauma, poor mental health and substance misuse, and that meaningful progress requires coordinated action across services. Drawing on the Women's Justice Board's (WJB) March 2026 recommendations, the government set out a reform agenda to reduce the number of women entering and re-entering custody while strengthening community-based support. The package includes £31.6 million for women's voluntary and community organisations from 2026 to 2029, encompassing the previously announced Women's Diversion Fund to support services that help keep women out of prison. Intensive Supervision Courts for women will expand from one to six, offering a rigorous community alternative to custody, and the successful Prison-Based Social Worker pilot will be extended during 2026/27. The government also acknowledged that lasting change required cross-government collaboration, supported by a new Women's Justice Advisory Group to provide expert challenge and guidance. Commenting on the proposals, [the Women's Centre for Justice argued](#) that the statement offered no commitment to implementing the WJB's recommendations and inferred that many of the government's measures were not new. It highlighted the absence of any reference to domestic abuse or VAWG, despite many imprisoned women being victims whose experiences often contributed to their criminalisation. The Centre stressed that reducing women's imprisonment and halving VAWG were inseparable goals and urged action on the WJB's recommendations, including legislating to end the imprisonment of pregnant women except in exceptional circumstances, the creation of a Young Women's Strategy, and an anti-racist, intersectional approach to address disparities affecting Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women. It called for a cross-government strategy with clear, time-bound targets and regular progress reviews.

The Prison Reform Trust calls for a new approach to women's imprisonment

The Starmer government's policy statement coincided with the publication by the Prison Reform Trust of [Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment](#). This report makes the case for changes that bring together national data, personal testimony and cross-sector insights to explain why women's imprisonment has remained high despite long-standing commitments to reduce it. It shows that women are still being remanded and sentenced unnecessarily, often for non-violent offences, and very short sentences are imposed that do little to support rehabilitation. High recall rates, increased use of remand and persistent short sentences continue to drive the women's prison population. The report highlights how women's needs remain unmet across housing, mental health, trauma support, domestic abuse responses and financial stability, and stresses that many women are victims long before they are criminalised. It also underlines the profound impact of maternal imprisonment on children. Although effective, cost-efficient alternatives such as Women's Centres exist, funding is insecure. The report stresses the need for an integrated approach that spans housing, health, social care, VAWG services, children's services and community support. It argues that there is no shortage of evidence or policy frameworks. It is implementation, leadership and sustained investment that are lacking.

[NCW has passed several Resolutions (1990, 2011, 2017), including with the Prison Reform Trust, expressing concern at the unnecessarily high number women prisoners and pointing to clear evidence that community-based, gender-specific support is more effective, less harmful and less costly than custody. These called on the Government to implement a rigorous, cross-departmental strategy with strong national and local leadership to expand effective community services, ensure consistent alternatives to custody, and reduce the women's prison population.]

International Aid

UK aid allocations published

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's recently published [The UK's Modern Development Approach](#) together with its Annual Report and Accounts for 2025–26 outline the department's future UK aid spending plans and its vision for development policy. The FCDO is [continuing to prioritise women and girls](#), including protecting funding for Violence Against Women and Girls, Women, Peace and Security, and Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. The ambition is for 90% of bilateral ODA programmes to contribute to gender equality by 2030. Commenting on the reports, [Gender Action for Peace and Security](#) (GAPS) stressed that although the FCDO has reaffirmed its commitment to embedding women's and girls' rights across diplomacy, security, development and trade, it provided limited information on implementation. GAPS urged clarity on how aid organisations will access long-term, flexible funding and be meaningfully involved in decision-making. Also commenting on the Reports, the [Independent Commission for Aid Impacts](#) (ICAI) noted that the FCDO has [committed around £6 billion to international climate finance](#) over the next three years, representing around a fifth of the total aid budget. While the £6 billion pledge is well below the £11.6 billion in the five years to 2025–26, it will make up a higher share of a reduced overall aid budget. But these pledges sit within a context of significant reductions to overall UK Overseas Development Assistance and sharp cuts in aid to fragile and conflict-affected communities. Aid spending is expected to fall by around 42% from a record high in 2023 to a historic low in 2027–28, according to an ICIA assessment. Eleven longstanding partner countries in desperate humanitarian need—including Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Malawi—face reductions of 80–90% over three years. The most marginalised communities, particularly women and girls and those experiencing conflict, will be deeply impacted by the Government's strategic choices. A recent International Development Select Committee report found that the Government is losing hard-won gains in global gender equality due to ongoing aid cuts.

[A 2020 NCW Resolution urged the government to make reducing gender inequality a key priority within its development aid programmes. It is disappointing that this is being achieved as cuts to UK aid are reversing advances in global gender equality]

Select Committee inquiries:

- **Women and Equalities Committee** – *Equality at work: flexible working and disability; Misogyny: The manosphere and online content; Reproductive health conditions in women and girls (report published).*
- **International Development Committee** – *The UK's international climate finance; Future of UK aid and development assistance (report published); Women, peace and security (report published).*
- **Health and Social Care Committee** – *Children and young people's mental health; Healthy aging (report published).*
- **Education Committee** – *Early years: improving support for young children and parents; The use of artificial intelligence and EdTech in education; Delivering the child poverty strategy.*
- **Science, Innovation and Technology Committee** – *Neuroscience and digital childhoods.*
- **Work and Pensions Committee** – *Employment support for disabled people (report published); Youth employment, education and training.*
- **Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** – *Preventing waste and enabling a circular economy.*