

# 'Wasted decade' in drive to protect children online

**Greg Hurst** Social Affairs Editor

A leading children's charity has accused ministers of failing to keep young people safe online by not implementing most calls for action from a government review a decade ago.

The NSPCC's review of progress since the study of online child safety, published in 2008, asked Tanya Byron, the psychologist who led the original study, to analyse how much progress on its recommendations had been made.

Professor Byron, who is also a columnist for *The Times*, found that of 38 proposals, 11 were ignored, seven had been partially implemented and four no longer applied. Only 16 were in place.

Among those not acted on or partially implemented were a call for an independent watchdog to check the moderation and removal of offensive online comments, industry co-ordination of parental controls for games consoles and a voluntary code for websites to improve protection for children online.

This week *The Times* reported that police in England and Wales are investigating more than 1,300 allegations of children being targeted by online

grooming just six months after a new offence of sexual communication with a child came into force.

Professor Byron said: "The government said they want the UK to be the safest place for children to be online. Yet only now are they starting to play catch-up on recommendations I made ten years ago, while other recommendations have been ignored entirely.

"The internet is absolutely ubiquitous in children's lives today, and it is much too late for a voluntary code for social networks. The internet strategy must absolutely create a legally enforceable safety code to force social networks to keep children safe. The online world moves too fast for government to drag its feet for another decade."

Peter Wanless, NSPCC chief executive, said: "It's simply wrong that the government has allowed social networks to mark their own homework for the past decade and that their new strategy would let that continue.

"It's impossible to fathom how much harm has been done over those years in terms of online sexual abuse, hate speech and cyberbullying."

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