

The Church of England's General Synod has called on the Government to introduce legislation requiring pornographic sites to use age verification systems preventing access by under 18s.



A motion was passed encouraging quicker progress to be made in tightening up laws after previous attempts have stalled.

A large number of children and young people say they have viewed pornography, with one survey before lockdown showing 78 per cent of sixth formers in a school said they had seen porn in the last week, the synod heard.

Introducing the motion, the Revd Jo Winn-Smith (Guildford) said that age verification “ought to be a no-brainer.”

“This is an issue about which parents and children themselves are highly concerned,” she continued.

“Exposure to sexualised material is more likely to lead to young people engaging in more sexualised behaviour and to feel social pressure to have sex, and to think that they can and should have sex in these unhealthy ways and relationships.”

“Friends, there is a time for reasonable patience, and then there is principled frustration. The need to safeguard children and young people is something to unite around.

“Additionally, as parents, as communities, as churches and schools, we all have a part to play in seeking to support young people in their developing sexuality and as they start to experience romantic relationships.

“By engaging with them and teaching them and modelling to them healthy adult relationships, backed up by social structures like age-appropriate safeguards including this essential measure of age verification, we can help young people to develop and grow and flourish as they mature.”

Detrimental effects of pornography include the sexualising of young people, normalising sexual violence against girls and women, and creating a distorted view of what constitutes normal sexual relations.

While it is hoped the Online Safety Bill currently going through parliament will improve matters, it was noted that legislation introduced in 2018 targeting commercial pornography sites never came into effect, and that new laws had been proposed by David Cameron still earlier in 2013.

It was also noted that the industry has made progress in developing the necessary tools to verify age once required.

The motion, from the Guildford Diocesan Synod, also urged more social and educational programmes to increase awareness of the harms, including self-generated sexually explicit images.

A large number of synod members spoke to support the motion, including the Bishop of Guildford who paid tribute to a Deanery Synod member, Charleene Hollington, of Leatherhead Deanery, who first raised the motion.

The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, supporting the motion, said that The Lords Spiritual were “taking great interest” in the issue of internet

safety in the House of Lords, and that conversations with tech firms suggested that age verification systems were a workable possibility.

"The Internet is not a platform, it is a public space, where all the rights and norms you would expect in public should apply," he said.

"It's about making the internet safe by design. This can be done, but we need regulation, a code of practice and a code of conduct to make it happen.

"In the 1970s we quite famously put fluoride in the water supply because we knew it would be great for dental health. What we the Church need to be in the forefront of campaigning about is putting some fluoride in the internet!"

In a counted vote of the whole synod, there were 263 voting in favour, 2 against, and with 3 abstentions.

The motion passed was as follows:

That this Synod

1. acknowledge that our children and young people are suffering grave harm from free access to online pornography and that there is currently no legal requirement for pornography sites to have in place age verification systems to prevent children from having access to those sites.
2. ask Her Majesty's Government to introduce legislation requiring pornographic sites to have in place age verification systems preventing access by people under the age of 18.
3. recommend more social and educational programmes to increase awareness of the harms of pornography, including self-generated sexually explicit images.'

- [General Synod July 2022 information and papers](#)

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