

Tech firms to be forced to hand over data to inquests into child deaths

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Ofcom will be able to force tech platforms to hand over the personal data of children whose deaths are suspected to be related to online harm, the government has confirmed. On the last day of the online safety bill's passage through parliament, the government accepted an amendment backed by a group of bereaved parents that will give coroners the power through Ofcom to force cooperation when investigating the deaths of children. The amendment was brought by Beeban Kidron, the peer and founder of the 5Rights charity, which campaigns for child safety online. "This is an important day for bereaved families affected by online harms," Lady Kidron said. "The government has promised to provide a humane route for bereaved parents and for coroners to access critical information at a tragic time." Her amendment was backed by Bereaved Families for Online Safety, a group started by a group of parents including those of Molly Russell, whose death was linked by a coroner to viewing negative online content, and Breck Bednar, who was killed by a man he met on an online gaming forum. Kidron said: "We must create an online world that is safe for children, where tragedies like the ones of the families with us today are not commonplace. Our shared goal must deliver safety by design and default and build the digital world that children deserve." While social networks sometimes voluntarily share information with coroners investigating deaths, there are limited legal powers to compel such data to be turned over. As a result, parents trying to uncover the circumstances that lead to their children's deaths can face radically different experiences. Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, said this showed "the dire need for a pathway for coroners and families to access online data". "This [measure] must be the first step in stopping the dangerous cycle of leaving other bereaved parents and coroners at the mercy of social media companies," Russell said. In Molly's case, it took five years for the inquest into her death to secure information from Instagram, where she had viewed extensive amounts of content related to suicide, depression, self-harm and anxiety before she took her own life aged 14. Some large tech platforms have "digital legacy" features set up to allow the families of dead users to access their accounts. But such features are rarely appropriate for children who die suddenly and without a will.