

The Online Advertising Taskforce Progress Report

Mark Lund, Deputy Chair

I'm delighted that Minister Bryant has extended the life of the Taskforce for a further year. Over the last 12 months the UK ad market has continued to thrive, with both volume of advertising and levels of public trust continuing to rise, demonstrating the fact that for all stakeholders, trust is key to continued success.

The working groups that now form the spearhead of the Taskforce have made good progress in improving shared knowledge and are now setting targets for improvement in the six identified areas. The next months will see these targets translated into positive action that will shape both best practice and potentially the shape of future legislation.

4 November 2024

Introduction

The Online Advertising Taskforce was set up to bring together government and the advertising sector to work in collaboration to address illegal harms and the protection of children in relation to online advertising. During its first year it has provided a valuable forum to help raise standards, promote initiatives and best practice and share research and evidence about online harms that impact the online advertising sector. This report provides an overview of the Taskforce and its progress to date, focusing on the work of the six industry-led working groups and their planned next steps.

The UK advertising market is the third largest in the world, with total spend topping £36 billion in 2023.¹ For every £1 spent on digital advertising, £4.80 was delivered back to the economy in Gross Value Added in 2022.² Advertising is also a testament to UK creativity, showcasing our production and design skills on the world stage. It enables individuals to freely access services that they might otherwise be financially excluded from and is also an essential provider of revenue to many media outlets and creative sectors such as press, TV and radio.

¹ [AA Annual Review 2023](#) (2024) & AA x WARC Expenditure Reports (quarterly)

² IAB UK 'The Digital Dividend' report

However, as research published alongside this progress report demonstrates, there are also harms associated with online advertising, which need to be tackled in order to foster and protect this valuable sector, enable innovation and support continued investment. Maintaining trust and ensuring transparency in online advertising is essential for the sector's growth and sustainability.

Following the progress outlined below, [it has been/ the government has] decided that the Taskforce will continue for at least a further year, taking forward its important work on building evidence and tackling harms associated with online advertising. There will also be a renewed focus on promoting transparency and trust in the sector.

Who we are

The Taskforce met for the first time in July 2023, and subsequently in October 2023 and February 2024. An [Action Plan](#) was agreed at the second meeting and published on the 30th of November. Commitments in the Action Plan were grouped around two aims:

- To encourage the sharing of information to improve evidence around online advertising harms and facilitate the prevention of adverts by bad actors.
- To advance and promote existing voluntary initiatives that seek to prevent or reduce harms.

The Taskforce is chaired by the DCMS Minister of State, Sir Chris Bryant, with deputy Chair Mark Lund, Chairman of the Advertising Standards Board of Finance. Its membership includes representation from the Advertising Association (AA), Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), Internet Advertising Bureau UK (IAB UK), Incorporated Society of British Advertisers (ISBA) and Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), as well as Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Department for Business and Trade, Stop Scams UK, Tech UK, and News Media Association.

Annex A sets out further background information, including a full list of members.

Industry-Led Working Groups

Six industry-led working groups were established after the publication of the [Online Advertising Action Plan](#) to drive forward the Taskforce's commitments. Each group is chaired by an advertising industry leader and is attended by experts from industry, regulators, civil society and government. The groups have set out their own objectives to complement the work of the wider Taskforce, and their focus is as follows:

- **Age Assurance**
- **Gold Standard**

- **Influencer marketing**
- **Information sharing**
- **Intermediary and Platform Principles (IPP)**
- **Research**

Age Assurance

Led by the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers

Objectives

The age assurance group is looking to improve standards of age assurance to reduce children's exposure to advertising for age-restricted products. It is building a more detailed understanding of the current landscape for age assurance online, and how it can be improved. Within this, specific aims were agreed including:

- gathering information about the current age assurance landscape;
- identifying any potential gaps and challenges in current systems;
- proposing solutions for any gaps identified;
- and agreeing achievable industry thresholds for the exclusion of under-age audiences from targeted online advertising.

Activity and progress

The group undertook an information gathering exercise to determine the state of play of the age verification mechanisms employed by surveyed platforms and the issues they face with those systems. This included an anonymous survey of the working group's members.

The exercise established that all responding platforms use multi-layered approaches to target ads for age-restricted products away from young people, in line with CAP guidance.³ It also identified two key challenges: firstly, the need to balance user privacy with the need for accurate age verification, and secondly, obtaining verifiable data about the effectiveness of age verification measures. The latter concern is also recognised in the Taskforce's Action Plan. Some platforms do have data indicating that there are high levels of targeting accuracy, but cannot necessarily verify it to a universally acceptable standard, meaning its use is limited.

ISBA liaised with the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking and the Global Alliance for Responsible Media to ensure global consistency on work to improve age assurance standards. They agreed to make matching requests of the platforms for verifiable evidence of the effectiveness of their measures to target ads for age restricted products away from young people, to ensure consistency with international

³ In the case of alcohol advertising, for example, "Marketing communications must not be directed at people under 18 through the selection of media or the context in which they appear. No medium should be used to advertise alcoholic drinks if more than 25% of its audience is under 18 years of age." (CAP Code, 18.15).

standards bodies.

A proposed set of industry commitments were drafted, including continued user and advertiser education, development of verifiable measurement of targeting effectiveness, reaffirmation of commitments made to the international drinks industry regarding transparency reporting and enhanced age assurance, and continued enhancement of best practices. These commitments were reviewed and amendments have been proposed by members.

Outcomes and next steps

The revised recommendations propose three next steps for platforms. Firstly, that they continue to follow existing IPP practice, while evaluating whether, and if so how, to formalise IPP into the ASA system regulatory framework. Secondly, they should continue their work with the international drinks industry on delivering transparency reporting on age-screening mechanisms and platform-specific technology. This should include platforms committing to further strengthen safeguards relating to age screening for alcohol advertising by 2025.

Finally, the working group agreed to establish a dedicated workstream on the measurement of ads to eligible audiences (in line with the CAP Code), to explore the feasibility of achieving consistent measurement of the effectiveness of current measures and developing quantifiable and verifiable targets. Terms of reference for this workstream have been prepared.

Gold Standard

Led by IAB UK

Objectives

The Gold Standard is a certification scheme run by IAB UK that seeks to improve the digital advertising landscape through the implementation of standards for buyers and sellers of digital media space. It incorporates requirements based on industry-led standards and initiatives for industry, focused on ad fraud (including scam ads), data protection and ePrivacy compliance, transparency and brand safety. Its purpose is to create a safe and responsible ecosystem, work towards greater consumer safety online and ultimately increase business and consumer trust in online ads.

The working group is concerned with promoting awareness and uptake of the Gold Standard, in line with the Taskforce's Action Plan, including by directly approaching companies that are eligible for certification and increasing advertiser support by securing wider industry backing for the IAB's advertiser supporter pledge.

Activity and progress

IAB UK and the other trade bodies (AA, ISBA, IPA) have worked together on a number of measures to build industry awareness of the Gold Standard. These

include communicating with a wide range of industry members through attending board meetings, delivering presentations to individual companies, and running webinars. Articles have also been placed in the advertising trade press and the Gold Standard has been promoted at sector conferences. Online resources and e-learning materials have been updated and re-circulated to increase awareness.

IAB UK has also identified, and is approaching, target companies from across its membership base. Media agencies were identified as a group with particular potential to encourage uptake across the supply chain. IAB UK and the IPA are working together to raise awareness of the Gold Standard with their respective agency members.

Buyers.json and Demand Chain Object are two component criteria of the Gold Standard, which are being incorporated into ISBA's Media Services Framework (the template of contractual terms and conditions for its advertiser members). Both are demand-side transparency initiatives. Buyers.json is a mechanism for advertising systems and intermediaries to provide transparency about the buyers that they work with and can help to identify the source of an individual ad. The Demand Chain Object enables sellers to see all parties that are involved in buying a particular ad 'slot' through an automated advertising system. Both of these initiatives strengthen transparency and help to manage ad quality risks in the digital advertising supply chain. Their incorporation into ISBA's Media Services Framework will expand this further.

While advertisers are not directly within the scope of the Gold Standard, IAB UK's existing advertiser supporter pledge enables brands to commit to working with Gold Standard-certified companies where possible.

Outcomes and next steps

Working group members will continue the work outlined above, raising awareness and understanding of the Gold Standard while continuing to identify new companies to register, and supporting newly registered companies through the certification process. They also intend to further develop advertiser support by identifying a new cohort of advertiser pledge supporters ahead of relaunching the certification. By November 2024, ISBA will release an updated version of its Media Services Framework for use by its advertiser members.

The Gold Standard is a permanent initiative, and the Working Group has the potential (subject to group agreement) to continue indefinitely, with regular progress reviews, for as long as group members consider it a useful means of collaborating and driving Gold Standard adoption.

Influencer marketing

Led by ISBA

Objectives

The influencer marketing group seeks to identify and agree better standards for influencer advertising, which will be incorporated into the next iteration of the Influencer Code of Conduct. This includes requirements for brands working with influencers, influencer talent agencies, and the influencers themselves. Its objectives include identifying any gaps in current protections and developing specific commitments to address them.

Activity and progress

Over the course of April and May the group carried out an exercise to assess current protections in place and undertook a state of play and background analysis. Its state of play assessment covered the size of the UK influencer industry and current regulations and requirements set by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) for influencers. It also considered recent landscape developments, potentials for harm, in-platform tools for ad disclosure and the most recent version of the Influencer Code of Conduct, which is jointly administered by ISBA and the Influencer Marketing Trade Body (IMTB). The assessment will form the backdrop to a report to be delivered by the working group to the Online Advertising Taskforce later this year. This is in addition to the independent launch of version four of the Influencer Marketing Code of Conduct, anticipated to be delivered by ISBA and IMTB in autumn.

The potential harms identified focused particularly on impacts on young and/or vulnerable audiences who may be less able to identify paid-for promotional content if it is insufficiently or not clearly labelled as an advert. It also suggested that the quantity of influencer marketing online could lead to low self esteem if children and young people are unable to purchase goods recommended by people they admire.

The working group also scoped potential subjects to be covered in the next iteration of the Code of Conduct, including the advent of virtual influencers.

Outcomes and next steps:

The working group will bring a summary report and a fourth version of the Code of Conduct to a meeting of the Online Advertising Taskforce for future discussion, ahead of publication of the Code.

Information sharing

Led by the Advertising Association (AA)

Objectives

The information sharing group examines existing information sharing mechanisms as well as the potential barriers to greater sharing of relevant information (such as internal reporting or monitoring from stakeholders, potentially anonymised or aggregated as appropriate). The purpose of the group is to increase the understanding of the prevalence and origins of online advertising harms. It is intended to help inform the work of regulators and/or enforcement agencies as well as assist them in fulfilling their duties, including monitoring UK advertiser compliance and setting enforcement priorities.

Activity and progress:

The working group brings together a broad and diverse set of stakeholders across the online advertising supply chain as well as consumer groups and government representatives.

The group assessed the current landscape and discussed individual organisations' activities to understand what is already in place and what can be improved through the group. The group conducted deep dives on:

- the types and prevalence of scam ads
- how bad actors enter the advertising ecosystem
- existing information sharing initiatives such as the ASA's scam ad alert system and Trust Accountability Group's (TAG) Threat Exchange
- challenges around information sharing such as legal and privacy concerns,
- the Know-Your-Customer (KYC) processes used by major platforms.

Outcomes and next steps

The group will continue to build upon and finalise the draft proposed industry commitments. Interim steps include mapping of the legal mechanisms for different types of information sharing between organisations and identification of legal and technical barriers and gaps. The group also intends to consider how it can evaluate the impact of information sharing work and how external stakeholders can be integrated into the sharing of relevant information.

The working group is intended to operate for at least 12 months, likely concluding its first phase of work by early 2025.

Intermediary and Platform Principles (IPP)

Led by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Objectives

The IPP group is concerned with enabling the ASA and IAB UK, as facilitators of the IPP Pilot, to provide updates to relevant Taskforce members about the evaluation of the Pilot and any next steps in the IPP's development.

Activity and Progress

The working group centred on the IPP pilot, which ran from June 2022 to May 2023. It tested a set of Principles which major companies operating in the digital advertising supply chain agreed to adhere to in support of the ASA's regulation of online advertisements. In line with the Principles, the companies agree to:

- act swiftly to address ads that repeatedly fail to comply with the UK Advertising Code (the CAP Code). The Code governs advertising standards and is independently administered by the ASA
- promote the advertising regulatory system to the public and the Code and guidance to advertisers.
- raise awareness of the companies' tools to support advertisers to comply with the Code's age-targeting rules, particularly in relation to ads for alcohol, gambling and other age-restricted product advertising.
- provide relevant information to the ASA in support of its investigatory regulatory duties.

The ASA's final report on the Pilot stated that "[t]he independent findings of this report demonstrate, without question, that over the course of the twelve-month Pilot the 10 participating companies implemented the Principles that were applicable to the services they offer. By doing so, they demonstrably supported the ASA to raise awareness of the advertising rules and, as relevant, to remove persistently non-complying ads online". It added that "the ASA considers that the Pilot has therefore showcased the real world value of the Principles; Guidance... and ASA independent reports to enhance the existing self-regulatory system".

Following the end of the Pilot, participating companies have agreed to adhere to the Principles relevant to their businesses, at least until it is decided whether and, if so, how the IPPs could form a permanent part of the ASA system. During this period the ASA is neither monitoring nor formally reporting on the companies' adherence to the Principles but participating companies have provided support to the ASA when requested.

The ASA and IAB UK have provided updates to the working group about the evaluation of the IPP Pilot and next steps in the ongoing consideration of the IPP's development. Top line lessons from the IPP Pilot have been reported to the group, and the fundamental components of any future IPP have been outlined, while acknowledging that discussion of them remains ongoing between the ASA, the IAB and the participating companies.

Outcomes and next steps

The ASA and IAB UK will continue to engage with the group, providing updates on the evaluation process of the IPP and any decisions taken to develop the IPP into the ASA regulatory system.

Research

Led by the Institute of Practitioners of Advertising (IPA)

Objectives

The research group focuses on research about the origin, prevalence, and impact of harmful ads (illegal advertising and adverts for age restricted products). Its objectives are to identify significant knowledge gaps, propose strategies for filling them and share research and evidence with the main Online Advertising Taskforce internally between members.

Activity and progress

To date the research working group activity has focused on sharing research between members, as well as contributing expertise to the development of DCMS-funded research into the prevalence of online harms.

DCMS commissioned Ipsos, a global market research company, to produce a survey that aims to improve understanding of the prevalence of the public exposure to perceived illegal or misleading online advertising across the UK and the impacts this is cited as having on individuals. This research, published at the same time as this report, looks at the main concerns about online advertising harms and provides insights into what illegal advertising people recall. This will help inform future areas for focus, including for the Taskforce.

Outcomes and next steps

Following publication of the DCMS-commissioned research, the working group will re-group to consider a workplan which may include a summary of the online advertising harms in scope of the Taskforce's activity and the gaps identified in the evidence base.

Conclusion and next steps

The Taskforce's industry-led working groups have made promising progress in tackling a number of interconnected challenges facing the online advertising ecosystem, demonstrating the importance of collaboration in a complex and often opaque supply chain.

The working groups have enabled prioritisation of the most pertinent issues facing the online advertising sphere. Supporting the advancement of industry initiatives and facilitating collaboration between major players in the advertising industry is one way of supporting change.

Information and background (Annex A)

Membership

Chair: Sir Chris Bryant MP, Minister

Deputy Chair: Mark Lund, Chair of Advertising Standards Board of Finance

- Emma Merry, Deputy Director of Fraud Policy, Home Office
- Daniel Okubo, Deputy Director of Online Harms Programmes and International, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
- David Marshall, Deputy Director for Consumer Policy, Department for Business and Trade
- Guy Parker, Chief Executive, Advertising Standards Authority
- Phil Smith, Director General, Incorporated Society of British Advertisers
- Christie Dennehy-Neil, Head of Policy & Regulatory Affairs, Internet Advertising Bureau
- Konrad Shek, Public Policy and Regulation Director, Advertising Association
- Richard Lindsay, Director of Legal and Public Affairs, Institute of Practitioners in Advertising
- Sayra Tekin, Director of Legal, News Media Association
- Antony Walker, Deputy CEO, TechUK
- Helen Fairfax-Wall, Chief Policy and Communications Officer, Stop Scams UK

Previous Chairs and members

Sir John Whittingdale MP, Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (MMTCI), May to December 2023.

Julia Lopez MP, Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (MMTCI), February 2023 to July 2024

Simon Miller, Director of Policy and Communications, Stop Scams

Simon Fell MP, Anti-Fraud Champion, Home Office

Information on the background and structure of the Taskforce is set out on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).