

# UK INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM REPORT 2025

Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> December

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Hybrid event

[www.ukigf.org.uk](http://www.ukigf.org.uk)





The UK Internet Governance Forum (UK IGF) is the national IGF for the United Kingdom. IGFs are a UN-led initiative to discuss global public policy issues relating to the Internet. A key distinguishing feature of IGFs is that they are based on the multistakeholder model, whereby different stakeholder groups meet as equals to exchange ideas and discuss best practices. Its purpose is to build shared understanding on how to maximise the benefits of the Internet, while addressing its risks and challenges.

The UK IGF held a hybrid event in London on 11th December 2025, with 139 representatives from government, civil society, industry, the technical community, and academia to discuss this year's theme: Building Digital Governance Together. The event followed the global IGF in Lillestrøm, Norway in June 2025.

The UK IGF has a Steering Committee and a Secretariat. Committee members can be found at [ukigf.org.uk/committee](https://ukigf.org.uk/committee) and the Secretariat is provided by Nominet, the UK's national domain name registry.

The UK IGF Steering Committee shaped the programme using a public Call for Issues, with a focus on making sessions more interactive, featuring new elements such as a workshop and lightning talk. The in-person event also provided opportunities to network during the breaks and included a drinks reception in the evening to continue the conversation.

Diversity remained central to the event's design by the UK IGF Steering Committee. This is why, for the fourth year, the Steering Committee signed the Future of London Diversity Pledge to ensure that the speakers and panels were representative of today's society. This year, 70% of our speakers were women, all panels were mixed gender, 40% were from ethnic minority backgrounds, and three were youth speakers.

We are also pleased to report that just over a third of delegates that registered to attend did so for the first time.

All presentations were recorded and are available to watch at [UK IGF 2025 Highlights - UK IGF](#).

If you are interested in contributing to the UK IGF, please contact [info@ukigf.org.uk](mailto:info@ukigf.org.uk). You can view our Donor Handout at [ukigf.org.uk/donate](https://ukigf.org.uk/donate).

The 2025 UK IGF was sponsored by Nominet and Verisign.

## KEY MESSAGES

### Digital Fragmentation from a User Perspective:

- We should ensure users' rights are respected. One way to do this is by using gender and human rights impact assessments when developing policy.
- We should work towards pluralistic, resilient, equitable infrastructure that allows people to access what they want and need, in a way that works for them.
- User education through gaming could be more powerful than blunt tools such as social media bans, teaching users how to interact safely with the online world.

### Ethics of AI workshop:

- AI ethics is relevant to all components of AI, from energy use, to supply chains, physical infrastructure, data sets, and how AI products are used.
- There is no neat alignment between ethical principles, existing legal frameworks (like GDPR and human rights law), and the challenge of translating ethical values into effective, enforceable practice in AI development and deployment.
- In the workshop, safeguarding the rights of individuals over their data was a major concern, with calls for more granular consent mechanisms, effective opt-out systems, and clearer definitions of what constitutes "public" data.
- Transparency is important, such as watermarking and disclosure of AI models, with humans in the loop to ensure AI systems can be monitored, explained, and held accountable.

### Power Asymmetries in Tech:

- Large companies dominate cloud computing and are exercising 'epistemic totalitarianism' by determining the trajectory of AI development.
- The cloud is more than just infrastructure; it's a powerful ecosystem through which organisations are becoming increasingly dependent.
- There's a need to reimagine digital sovereignty by developing public, democratically governed technological ecosystems.

### The WSIS+20 Review: A Multistakeholder Conversation:

- The WSIS+20 negotiations took place against a challenging backdrop of more polarised global politics, at a time when relatively stable norms of inclusive development were increasingly contested.
- The WSIS+20 Review experimented with innovative methods which embodied the principle of multistakeholderism, such as the Informal Multistakeholder Sounding Board. It's hoped such innovations can be utilised in future UN processes to improve inclusivity.
- Work following WSIS+20 would look at funding mechanisms for the IGF and financing for development, as well as new roadmaps for the WSIS Action Lines to help move the system towards more tactical action.

### A UK Digital ID - how can we ensure a balance of power between the citizen and the state?

- The UK has a long history of proposing ID systems. Each version is purported to help remedy the most pressing social concern of the time.
- Modern digital infrastructure for digital IDs could improve public services, reduce fraud, and simplify everyday life.
- Legal and regulatory frameworks are important, including data protection laws, human rights assessments, and technical audits.
- Current biometric systems often fail marginalised groups, with high error rates that disproportionately affect minorities. These systems need to be designed so that they prioritise the dignity, equality and recognition of people who are most likely to be excluded.

### Children's Rights Online:

- We all have a responsibility to protect and support children and young people online.
- There's no such thing as an 'online life' for young people – it's just their life, with interactions, experiences and relationships happening both online and offline.
- Children's perceptions and experiences of the online world vary greatly from those of adults, including parents and policymakers. Children should be involved and consulted where decisions are being made that impact them.
- Aspects of children's experiences are often 'cherry-picked' to suit the direction of political travel. It can therefore be difficult to provide an accurate and complete picture.



## WELCOME FROM NOMINET

**Elaine Quinn, Director of Corporate Affairs at Nominet opened the event by outlining Nominet's ambition to make the internet safer, stronger and more resilient.**

She highlighted Nominet's long-standing public benefit focus on online safety, through Nominet's Countering Online Harm Fund – the only fund in the UK dedicated to supporting innovative new technologies and collaborations to counter online harms. More recently, Nominet also launched the DNS Fund to support underfunded but mission critical open-source DNS projects that keep the Internet running.

She stressed that addressing today's major digital challenges requires collective effort, which is why the UK IGF plays such an important role. It was noted that this year's forum took place amid heightened geopolitical tensions, increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks, and a fragmented global approach to AI governance. The upcoming WSIS+20 review was also recognised as a key moment for the future of internet governance and digital development.

She closed by emphasising that the essential ingredient – as we Build Digital Governance Together – is the participation from all attendees, whose diverse experience and ideas are essential to making meaningful progress.



## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

**In the keynote, Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE highlighted how the UK IGF brings together leaders and stakeholders from government, business, civil society, and the technical community to discuss the future of the digital world.**

She explored how the decisions made today will shape the internet for future generations and asked 'what Internet will they inherit from us?'

She shared updates on the Government's priorities, starting with boosting digital inclusion – supported by a new £9.5m Digital Inclusion Fund. She then spoke to the UK's approach to AI regulation, standards, and international engagement. This included being a signatory to the Council of Europe Convention on AI – the first legally binding agreement on safe and secure use of AI – and the launch and continued efforts of the AI Safety Institute. She also highlighted ongoing efforts to improve online safety through the ongoing implementation of the Online Safety Act, and to strengthen UK cyber defences through the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill. Beyond legislation, she emphasised the importance of, and continued work in, building partnerships and cooperating globally on digital standards.

Baroness Lloyd affirmed that no single organisation or government should control the Internet. She emphasised the need for an open, secure, and multistakeholder approach to internet governance. She also spotlighted national initiatives that are paving the way for a digital society that is accessible, innovative, and safe for all.





## DIGITAL FRAGMENTATION FROM A USER PERSPECTIVE

**Panel Chair Izaan Khan from the Internet Society Youth Standing Group framed the user experience as the most important aspect of digital fragmentation.**

Fragmentation as experienced from a user perspective is where users of the Internet encounter different online content and options, whether due to their own choices or restrictions imposed by governments or platforms.

Sheetal Kumar, Digital Rights Advocacy Expert, stressed the need to protect diverse online experiences to ensure users' rights, agency, and control. She cautioned that blunt policy actions, such as Australia's selective platform ban, could create unintended consequences. She highlighted the value of impact assessment frameworks from organisations like the Internet Society and the Wikimedia Foundation, which should be used more widely.

Rachel Coldicutt, Founder and Executive Director of Careful Industries, highlighted how discussions on fragmentation must recognise the inherently monopolistic nature of internet infrastructure. She urged the UK to build pluralistic, resilient, and equitable systems that allow people to access what they need in ways that suit them, rather than relying on narrow measures of digital inclusion.

Alice Taylor, Research Manager at Oxford Information Labs Limited, warned against age-based fragmentation. Australia's ban on platforms such as YouTube limits opportunities for under-16s to create and monetise content and pushes them towards unblocked platforms such as Roblox and Steam. Alice also highlighted the educational potential of gaming and argued that education – not restrictive age verification or abstinence-based approaches – could be the most effective way to support young people to stay safe online.



## ETHICS OF AI WORKSHOP

**This workshop, led by Sal Mohammed, Founder of LangSync and CEO of QTA, and Stacie Chan SVP of GTM, NetMind.AI, explored how AI could be developed, deployed, and regulated in an ethical and socially responsible way, through discussion with UK IGF participants.**

These challenges included: the rights of machines, voting and democracy, labour, education, child safety, marriage and relationships, data and IP, surveillance and privacy, news, finance, environment, and housing.



### Across all these topics, five key themes emerged:

- The importance of transparency, such as watermarking and disclosure of AI models. This also included the need for human involvement to ensure AI-driven systems can be monitored, explained, and held accountable.
- Participants discussed how AI is rapidly changing democracy, labour, and education, with issues of job displacement, data-driven manipulation of public opinion, and the potential for a widening digital divide.
- There was a broad agreement that ethical considerations should guide AI development. The focus should not only be on what is technologically possible, but what is societally desirable. This requires collaboration between Government, business, and the public to agree on shared values.
- Safeguarding the rights of individuals over their data was a major concern. Calls were made for more detailed consent mechanisms, effective opt-out systems, and clearer definitions of what counts as 'public' data.
- The workshop also highlighted the urgency of fostering critical thinking and AI literacy among both children and adults, so that society is better equipped to navigate and critically assess AI environments.





## LIGHTNING TALK: POWER ASYMMETRIES IN TECH

**Dr Cecilia Rikap, Associate Professor, Economics and Head of Research at UCL's Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose explored power concentration as a rights issue.**

Her session examined how cloud giants subsume AI start-ups into their networks of control beyond ownership, and how building public-led stacks that replace those giants with infrastructure and platforms could expand democracy. These companies are exercising what she calls 'epistemic totalitarianism' by determining the trajectory of AI development. For example, by controlling which technologies start-ups focus on developing.

She emphasised that the cloud is more than just infrastructure; it's a powerful ecosystem where digital tech is developed, produced, deployed and consumed. Through this, organisations are becoming increasingly dependent.

The session concluded with a discussion about reimagining digital sovereignty, which could potentially be achieved by developing public, democratically governed technological ecosystems to combat dependency on big tech firms and recalibrate the balance of power.



## THE WSIS+20 REVIEW: A MULTISTAKEHOLDER CONVERSATION

**This panel reflected on the process for the UN's 20-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20 Review) in the final days of negotiation on the relevant UN Resolution (70/125). This was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 2025.**

David Souter, Independent Expert on Digital Society, provided introductory remarks on WSIS and described the process for the 20-year review. David noted some observations from the process, including the different concerns and priorities of different geographical blocs, the difficulty of achieving consensus given more polarised global politics, and the challenge of turning rhetoric into substantive outcomes. He added that many governments wanted closer alignment between the Global Digital Compact (GDC) and WSIS, though some questioned the GDC's legitimacy.

The Chair, Nick Wenban-Smith, General Counsel and Head of Stakeholder Relations, turned to panellists for their reflections. Paul Blaker, Head of ITU and Internet Governance, DSIT, said the UK approached negotiations with a positive agenda focused on environmental impacts, diversity and inclusion, human rights, and connecting unserved communities. He stressed maintaining a globally inclusive multistakeholder model and highlighted upcoming work on IGF funding and financing for development.

Ellie McDonald, Policy and Advocacy Lead at Global Partners Digital (GPD), explained GPD's engagement as essential to protecting the WSIS Framework and renewing the UN IGF mandate at a moment when international norms on inclusive development were under pressure. GPD did not only see a threat but also an opportunity, particularly given WSIS' history of experimentation and relative innovation within the UN system. Ellie also described the creation of the Global Digital Rights Coalition for WSIS, which is united around three goals: grounding WSIS Action Lines in International Human Rights Law, maintaining and expanding the multistakeholder approach, and improving coherence across digital governance.

She also commented on the Review's use of innovative, multistakeholder-driven methods – such as the Informal Multistakeholder Sounding Board and the use of satellite consultations. All agreed that these positive mechanisms should be built upon in future processes.





## PANEL SESSION: A UK DIGITAL ID - HOW CAN WE ENSURE A BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN THE CITIZEN AND THE STATE?

**This panel explored the complexities of digital ID systems, balancing their potential for convenience and security with concerns about privacy and exclusion.**

Journalist Wendy Grossman, the Chair, opened by noting the UK's long history of proposing ID systems – each shaped by the most pressing social concern of its time. She encouraged the panel to move beyond the question of whether we need digital IDs, and instead examine what makes a good or bad digital identity system.

David Birch, author, advisor and commentator on digital financial services, advocated for a modern digital infrastructure for digital IDs. David argued that a system could improve public services, reduce fraud and simplify everyday life. He suggested shifting from traditional identity-based systems to one that focuses on verifying specific entitlements and not personal identification.

Karla Prudencio, Programme Director and Advocacy Officer, Privacy International, discussed the importance of legal and regulatory frameworks, including data protection laws, human rights assessments, and technical audits. She also highlighted the importance of protecting the complexity of individual identities.

Professor Mirca Madianou, author and Professor, Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, focused on the shortcomings of current biometric technologies, which often misidentify or exclude marginalised groups. She stressed that digital ID systems must be designed to uphold dignity, equality, and recognition – especially for those most at risk of being excluded.

Overall, the discussion emphasised that digital identification is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and its design must centre the needs of vulnerable groups.



## PANEL SESSION: HOW DO WE PROTECT CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ONLINE IN 2025?

**This panel discussion reframed the discourse that children's rights online are synonymous with child online safety. Panellists shared insights on how we should consider children's rights from various perspectives – whether that's the right to freedom of expression, access to information, or privacy – taking a holistic view of what digital wellbeing for children looks like in 2025.**

The Chair, Mark Russell, CEO at the Children's Society, reflected on how we all have a responsibility to protect and support children and young people online – whether that's as parents and carers, government and policymakers, or tech funds and businesses.

He also reminded us that there's no such thing as an 'online life' for young people – it's just their life, with interactions, experiences and relationships happening both online and offline. Young people ultimately want digital spaces to be safe, to maximise opportunities to connect with others, and help balancing their time online with real relationships in their local communities.

Sonia Livingstone OBE FBA, Professor at the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics (LSE) explored how we consider and apply human rights vs children's rights across the digital world. She highlighted that safety often overrides children's other inherent human rights. This includes their civil rights and liberties, the right to expression, the right to assembly, and the right to privacy. These are often overlooked because we typically represent children on their behalf.

Dr Kim Ringmar-Sylwander, Researcher at the Digital Futures for Children Centre at LSE, noted how children's perceptions and experiences of the online world vary greatly from those of adults, including parents and policymakers. She emphasised that children should be involved and consulted where decisions are being made that impact them.

Finally, Jen Persson, Director at Defend Digital Me highlighted that when it comes to policy making, aspects of children's experiences are often 'cherry-picked' to suit the direction of political travel. It can therefore be difficult to provide an accurate and complete picture that truly reflects young people's experiences of the online world.



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Thank you to our Steering Committee:

