



Department for  
Digital, Culture,  
Media & Sport

Rt Hon Baroness Morgan of Cotes  
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Patricia Harding  
Senior Coroner  
H.M. Coroner for Central and South East Kent  
[Kentandmedwayadmin@kent.gov.uk](mailto:Kentandmedwayadmin@kent.gov.uk)

Dear Ms Harding

Thank you for your correspondence of 3 December, enclosing your report on the death of Callie Lewis. I would like to extend my sympathies to Callie Lewis's family and friends. Please accept my apologies for the delay in replying to you.

I share your concern that young people are at risk of being exposed to harmful content online. These experiences can have a serious psychological and emotional impact, and in tragic circumstances can result in people taking their own lives. I am clear that more needs to be done to protect vulnerable users online and tackle content and behaviour across a comprehensive set of online harms, including content which encourages suicide and self-harm.

The Online Harms White Paper, published in April 2019, set out the government's plans for world-leading legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. This will make companies more responsible for their users' safety online, especially children and other vulnerable groups. While some companies have taken steps to address harmful content on their platforms, including to reduce the risk posed by suicide and self-harm related content, these voluntary measures have not delivered the necessary improvements. Under our proposed approach, a new duty of care will make companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users, and tackle harm caused by content or activity on their services. Compliance with this duty of care will be overseen by an independent regulator. The regulator will set clear safety standards, backed up by mandatory reporting requirements and sufficient powers to take effective action against companies that breach regulatory requirements, including the power to levy substantial fines.

The regulator may also undertake thematic reviews of areas of concern, for example, a review into the treatment of self-harm or suicide-related content. The regulator will have the power to require companies to share research that they hold or have commissioned that shows that their activities may cause harm.

All companies in scope of the regulatory framework will need to be able to show that they are fulfilling their duty of care. This will include a requirement for companies to take robust action to address harmful suicide and self-harm related content that provides graphic details of suicide methods and self-harming, including encouragement of self-harm and suicide. Services would be expected to take reasonable steps to identify and remove content which is illegal or violates terms of use, and act swiftly and proportionately when this content is reported to them by users.

Some of the areas the regulator could include in a code of practice include setting out the steps a company might take to ensure that users who have been exposed to this content are able to access adequate support; ensuring that companies work with experts in suicide prevention so that their policies and practices protect the most vulnerable; and processes to stop algorithms promoting self-harm or suicide content to users. It will be for the new regulator to produce codes of practice when it becomes operational.

The government expects companies to take action now to tackle harmful content or activity on their services. Indeed, there are already some existing arrangements between individual companies and charities to improve the identification and removal of this content when it is reported, and services that signpost help and supportive content to their users. As Secretary of State I do not, however, have the power to prevent the operation of harmful websites.

I can assure you that protecting young people's mental health is a priority across government and a core part of the NHS Long Term Plan. The NHS has set a goal of an extra 345,000 children and young people (aged 0-25) receiving support via NHS-funded mental health services by 2023/24.

The Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Education's Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper, published on 4 December 2017, and the government's consultation response published July 2018, considers the impact of social media on young people's mental health. As highlighted in the green paper, we have convened a working group of social media and digital sector companies to explore what more they can do to help us keep children safe online.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Mental Health, Inequalities and Suicide Prevention held three summits with social media providers last year about suicide and self-harm content on their platforms. Following these meetings, social media companies have committed to increasing their efforts to protect users by establishing and funding a strategic partnership with suicide and self-harm prevention experts to tackle this content, support vulnerable users of their platforms and improve research and understanding in this area. In addition to this support, the Department for Health and Social Care have allocated £100,000 of seed funding to the strategic partnership.

The Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Strategy and Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Workplan published on 22 January 2019, also includes commitments to address suicide and self-harm related content online through the Online Harms White Paper.

Being online can be a beneficial experience for young people and users should be able to talk about sensitive topics such as suicide and self-harm. We know that people who are feeling suicidal may use social media and other online forums to reach out for help and support. But more needs to be done to protect users who are vulnerable, and tackle content and behaviour which encourages suicide and self-harm.

Our challenge as a society is to help shape an internet that is open and vibrant, and also protects its users from harm. We want to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, leading international efforts by setting a coherent, proportionate and effective approach that reflects our commitment to a free, open and secure internet.

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**Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport**

