



Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

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9 April 2020

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair, Petitions Committee

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter dated 30 March, regarding steps which the Government is taking to tackle online harms, in particular misinformation and disinformation related to Covid-19. The Government takes these issues extremely seriously. We are working at pace with partners to ensure tackling online harms remains a priority and that false and misleading narratives about coronavirus are combated, ensuring that the public has the right information to protect themselves.

As the Secretary of State responsible for leading the Government's counter-disinformation policy, I am ensuring that the Government takes all the necessary steps to identify and respond to false information related to Covid-19. Addressing these challenges requires a whole of Government effort, which is why we have increased our counter-disinformation capability, integrating it within wider Government structures responding to Covid-19. It brings together existing expertise from within Government and wider civil society to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and impact of disinformation/misinformation on Covid-19. This includes working alongside Cabinet Office's Rapid Response Unit, which responds to up to 70 incidents a week, as outlined in a press release on 30 March. In addition, this unit, based in DCMS, is working closely with communications teams to ensure the public has access to reliable and trusted information.

This cross-government capability to tackle disinformation was previously activated to monitor disinformation related to the European Parliamentary elections in May last year, and the UK General Election in December 2019. Where expert teams detect evidence of disinformation and misinformation, the Government will respond as appropriate based on a range of approaches. These responses may include direct rebuttals on social media, promoting our public health campaign, or working with social media platforms to remove or down rank harmful content. The capability is resourced full time through existing cross-government teams and we are clear that it will remain standing for as long as needed.

As I set out in my Telegraph op-ed last month, it is clear that addressing the challenges of disinformation and misinformation requires a whole of society approach. We recognise that industry, academia, and civil society have a huge amount of expertise in this space. As such, we have been engaging widely and the Government has been working closely with the NHS, Public Health England and all major social media platforms.

On 8 April, I spoke with major social media companies about their efforts to date, to understand the progress being made and discuss other potential measures we can put in place. Platforms have introduced measures to ensure users have ready access to information on Covid-19 from the NHS and other authoritative sources. Social media companies have also taken a range of



other steps to limit misinformation and disinformation on their platforms. This has included updating their policies in response to Covid-19, to enable them to take action on false and misleading content where it has the potential to cause harm.

Alongside these measures, the Government is also running a counter disinformation campaign. This aims to increase audience resilience by educating and empowering those who see, inadvertently share and are affected by false and misleading information. The 'Don't Feed the Beast' counter disinformation campaign helps users to better spot false narratives, and think more critically about the content they consume online. The Government intends to launch a new wave of the campaign shortly, with a specific focus in building resilience to Covid-19 related disinformation. This will complement the wider ongoing public awareness campaign led by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Cabinet Office which ensures that people have access to the latest information on the steps to take to help them protect the NHS and save lives. This campaign is running across a variety of media to ensure that it reaches the largest audience possible.

In addition to specific actions to counter misinformation and disinformation, DCMS's online harms Covid-19 response team has been engaging with industry to assess what early action is being taken to monitor and respond to emerging online harms during this period. We have been working with key stakeholders including industry, child safety charities and other government departments to ensure our approach is coordinated and those who are at risk of being vulnerable online during this period are being protected.

I would be happy to provide the Committee with any further information, should it be required.



Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP
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