HOUSE OF COMMONS

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: Online abuse and the experience of disabled people, HC 759

Tuesday 6 Feb 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Helen Jones (Chair); Martyn Day; Steve Double; Mike Hill; Helen Jones; Catherine McKinnell; Damien Moore; Paul Scully; Liz Twist.

Questions 1-65

Witnesses

I: Katie Price, petition creator, and Amy Price.

II: Amy Clarke, Digital Assistant, Mencap, Rob Holland, Parliamentary Manager, Mencap, Andie Gbedemah, Public Affairs Officer, Dimensions, and Anne Novis MBE, disability campaigner, Inclusion London.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Andie Gbedemah, Public Affairs Officer, Dimensions,

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Katie Price and Amy Price.

Q1 **Helen Jones:** Can I welcome our first panel of witnesses this afternoon, Katie Price and Amy Price? For all those sitting in the Public Gallery today, welcome. We are very pleased that you have come to listen to this session, but please be advised that you cannot take part in the questioning—so if you want to interject, stop yourselves. If you need to leave the room at any point in the meeting, please do so as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing the session.

Katie and Amy, we are very pleased to have you here today. It is very kind of you to come to give evidence. The Committee really wants to hear about your own experience of online abuse and about why you started the petition. Katie, can you tell us a little about your experience of online abuse and how it has affected your family?

Katie Price: The reason I started the petition was that I have five children and out of all my five children, the online abuse is against only one of them. It happens because of the colour of his skin; he has multiple disabilities, and he gets mocked for his size, the way that his eyes are and the colour of his skin. I kept reporting people and then others were telling me about reporting them; these people would get closed down, but then would reopen and start again. It kept going on and on, to the point that it got so bad that—there were these Vines that you could do, and people were doing videos on Harvey; at one point a guy did a video on Harvey making out that he was having sex with him, basically. It is bad. What goes through people's heads to make them want to sit there and do this about an innocent child who cannot reply?

I gathered everything together and then I went to the police. In fact, I went to the police twice. They arrested two people and got all their computers and mobile phones and everything, but even the police were really embarrassed because it got to a point where they could not take it any further. They could not charge them with anything because there is nothing in place, so they had to drop the cases.

Since then, it has continued and got worse and worse. You name it, Harvey gets it. People mock his picture on sweet packets. They put his head on—what is it, ISIS? They put his head on that. You name it, they do it to Harvey all the time. I have tried my own way of naming and shaming people online to let everyone say, "Do you know these people? How can we get hold of them?" I have done everything I can, but nothing gets done.

Online is the future, and there need to be some more security checks. If, in life, all these things that are said online were said to a person, the person saying them would be arrested. There is nothing in place for it.

They would get in trouble, so why is it any different when it is written online? People do not treat it as seriously.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you Katie. How long has this been going on? You said that it has been a long time. Can you give us a rough idea of how long it has continued?

Katie Price: Over the past few years it has got worse. I have had it before, but at least I have a voice to speak. Harvey hasn't. It is very clear that people who mock Harvey know that he has not got a voice back, and they mock him more. It has even got to the point where there has been a couple of people in the public eye, like Frankie Boyle and the disgusting things that he has said. He basically said that Harvey was going to rape me. I complained to Channel 4—this is why I am doing all this—because they were advertising the Paralympics, and then after the ad break would have Frankie Boyle on talking about Harvey raping me. I went to Channel 4 and Frankie Boyle for an apology. Neither of them would give one, so I did a show on it to see why people do this stuff on Harvey and why it is acceptable for people to mock people with disabilities. Nothing was done then. Like I said, the police couldn't do anything. I tried online to get people closed down, but it still continues and it is just getting worse all the time.

Amy Price: Not only that, it is not just us that it affects. We know by the amount of contact that we have from people that it is everyone, from children to adults—everywhere.

Katie Price: People in the workplace, teachers, whether you are gay or straight, the colour of your skin. I know that I am here because it started because of Harvey and his disabilities, but this is not just for people with disabilities. It will help everybody.

Q3 **Chair:** You said that you think you know why Harvey is singled out for abuse. Is it because of his disabilities that he is mostly marked, or is he subject to racial abuse as well?

Katie Price: It is a lot of racial abuse, and his size—I just think they find him an easy target to pick on. But I am his voice. I am here and I am going to protect him.

Amy Price: The thing with Harvey is I think people also know that he doesn't understand. What makes us angry and hurt as a family is that he can't defend himself. You think how we are, but what must other people feel like when they have a child who gets this abuse—or even themselves? They may be able to help themselves, but there isn't anything that can help them. That is the problem.

Chair: Thank you.

Q4 **Steve Double:** Amy, how do you feel the online abuse has affected the whole family?

Amy Price: I'll tell you what has happened with us. Katie has always been in the limelight, and she has always had an amount of people saying

things about her—"Why do you do this; why do you do that?" Then—this is going back years—as her mum I used to get really angry, but you get used to that kind of thing.

When it started happening to Harvey, and because I know that he is so inoffensive and he can't protect himself, you think, "Why? What can I do to help?" It impacts on all of us, because it does upset you, and you do feel emotional about it. So we need to do something about it. It is hard.

Q5 **Steve Double:** How do you as a family feel about the campaign that Katie has been running?

Amy Price: We are very passionate about it, because there is nothing in place that can help us or other people who suffer this online abuse. The thing that makes me angry is, if someone had to do it face to face, they wouldn't do it. They hide behind these computers, because they know they can get away with it.

It is really hurtful, even for my other grandchildren. They see it about their brother, and they know he has special needs. They take it personally, because he is their brother and they can't protect him. It does have a really bad impact.

Q6 **Damien Moore:** Katie, what would you say to people who say your family suffers abuse because you put pictures and videos of Harvey online?

Katie Price: That is a really good point. I am glad now that I have put myself in the public eye. I am extremely happy that I show Harvey, because there are so many people out there—I get letters and messages all the time from people who have got children or family members with disabilities and they don't know how to cope with it. Some people don't want to go out in public, because they don't know how to cope with people staring. I am proud of Harvey.

If I wasn't in the public eye, I would not be sitting here now, because I would not have got 220,000 signatures in one week. So I am glad. Throughout my career, whatever people think of me—like me or hate me—this isn't about me. I am here to protect others, and it might have taken me 25 years to achieve something, but I am glad if I can sit here and make a new law.

Q7 **Paul Scully:** You mentioned on "Loose Women" how you had had three people arrested and that there had been complaints but nothing had gone with it. How many times have you complained to social media providers?

Katie Price: I have complained so many times to social media providers. You can report people and report people, and you don't really hear what happens, but then you might see them closed down. I have got a big fan base—Harvey has as well—and for anything that anyone says, they say, "Have you seen this? Report this." Sometimes I have to think, "If I keep putting up, 'Do you know this person? Mock this person'," am I giving them more attention to do it? You have to look at that.

I get sent stuff all the time, but the ones I really complain about are not the ones who just made the odd comment. You have to backtrack to see how many times they have made these abusive comments, and are they racist to other people? It is not just the odd comment, because you will get people to do that just from your reaction. I actually look at people and backtrack to see what they are about, basically—how many times they have said something.

Q8 **Paul Scully:** What happened when you reported it? What response did you get from the social media providers?

Katie Price: They just say, "We'll let you know. We've reported it." That's it.

Q9 **Paul Scully:** That was the end of it.

Katie Price: You don't really hear anything, no.

Q10 **Paul Scully:** So it is like an automated response; there was nothing personalised.

Katie Price: No.

Q11 **Paul Scully:** What about the police? Could you go into a bit more detail?

Katie Price: When I went to the police—especially with the video, I went straight to Horsham police because I thought, "Do you know what? I am not having this. This is disgusting." That same person had done it to other people as well—all racial stuff. He had a hell of a lot of stuff on Harvey—a hell of a lot, mocking him. I got all the evidence together and went straight to Horsham police and said, "Right, I need to report this." As soon as the police saw it, they were disgusted themselves. They were so good. It went on for quite a few months. They really wanted to push it far. They said, "Would you be prepared to go to court?" and I said, "Of course I would." But then they were ringing and said, "We really apologise, but there is absolutely nothing we can do because there is nothing in place to charge him with."

Q12 **Paul Scully:** So you felt the police understood the effect the online abuse was having on your family, but the system—

Katie Price: They wanted to do it. They were so angry with those people themselves, because they had children, but they said, "There's nothing in place." They said, "I agree with you. There is nothing in place that we can charge him with."

Q13 **Paul Scully:** What did you want to happen to the abusers?

Katie Price: For example, if you are going to be a nanny or something, you get police checked. If you want to get a car on HP, they want to know your address, your utility bills—they want to know every piece of information so if you don't pay for your car, they know where to find you. If someone came to you for an interview and you really liked them and you thought, "Yep, I'm going to take them on," but someone came into the office and said, "Actually, I think you need to see this," and you

realised they had a criminal offence for online abuse—you would look at that person differently. You would think, "Oh, they have this item," and it would probably put you off taking them on. That is the point.

Q14 **Paul Scully:** You want something on the record, basically.

Katie Price: Yes, there needs to be, but bearing in mind—this is my point of view—that you are allowed freedom of speech, of course you are, and you can have banter. You can have your point of view about things, but there is a point—and this will hopefully get through in the next discussion—where you sit down and draw a line. When does it become a criminal offence? How harsh does it have to become? How many times do they have to say it? I can't sit here now and say, "At this point, it has to be a criminal offence," because I think that is a whole discussion, but there has to be a point. We have to discuss when it would become a criminal offence.

Amy Price: You see, the thing is—

Katie Price: Are you allowed to talk?

Amy Price: I think I am.

Katie Price: Amy Price!

Amy Price: You're so embarrassing. When we came up with the idea of a register, it was because even children, if they realise as they are going through school—I know schools put things in place to stop bullying—that there is something that could influence them or that would stop them getting a job or something at a later date, it would give them a warning: "If you continue this sort of behaviour, this could happen in your future—you may be on it for a few years—and it could impede you getting a job or something." It has to be something that deters people.

Katie Price: At school, people are getting bullied, and maybe the school deals with it then—that is just children, and this is for everyone, but I'm using school as an example. They get told all about bullying, but they forget that after school, it is all online and they cannot control that. There needs to be some kind of control. I truly believe that if it is set in place that it would be a criminal offence if you were caught, I do not think there would be as much of it.

There is definitely nothing in place. You can make up an email or whatever, or a name, and you are straight on that site. You get reported; you could do it again. They need to tighten it up so you can pinpoint those people and go round there. Surely it can't be hard work to do that. I am not on about just this country—it would be worldwide. It would stop so many deaths, so much harassment and abuse. Some of you MPs have even had that as well. It happens to everyone, so it is a no-brainer really.

Q15 **Liz Twist:** Katie, your petition asks for online abuse to be "a specific criminal offence". You have talked a bit about that already. What made you want to ask for that change?

Katie Price: Because of the most horrific things that have been said about my son. It is a joke. Although I have tried everything I can—like I say, gone to the police, reported people—nothing has been done. It still continues and it is getting worse and worse. I am not only protecting Harvey. The more I have spoken to other people about it, it is so damaging to people—people who are starting out—it is just damaging. It has just got to stop.

Amy Price: The law is out of date really, when you think about it. Social media has taken off and that is the way it will go in the future with a lot of things. It has got to be policed a bit more now. I think there have to be laws put in place and guidelines as to what you can and can't do. Kate was touching on freedom of speech, which is still important, obviously, but there have to be guidelines online as there are offline.

Q16 **Liz Twist:** Do the two of you think there is a gap in the law?

Amy Price: Yes.

Katie Price: Completely. Like I said, my petition got 220,000 signatures in one week. A lot of them said to me, "I don't like you"—which is not very nice—"and we are not fans of yours. We don't like you, but what you are doing is amazing, because it will genuinely help a lot of people."

Q17 **Liz Twist:** Do you think all abuse should be criminal, or just the most serious kinds?

Katie Price: This is where freedom of speech comes in. Anyone can voice their opinion. It is a discussion about how far that goes before it becomes online abuse. Even when it is one person—why should they get away with doing it even once? How many times does someone have to abuse you before action is taken? They shouldn't do it anyway. You could have someone who might not be as strong as me. Harvey has had stuff saying, "Why doesn't he just die?" Imagine some young girl who is really vulnerable having someone say, "Why don't you just die?", and then she thinks, "Oh my God, I'm going to commit suicide." That's what I mean; it could take just one abusive message.

Q18 **Liz Twist:** Do you think the law should specifically address online abuse aimed at people with disabilities?

Katie Price: No, I think it should be aimed at absolutely everyone. It doesn't matter how old you are, your race, your workplace or anything else—it should be for everyone. No one deserves abuse. Nobody.

Amy Price: We know that people with disabilities get it more, because people with disabilities have always been mocked. That should not happen anyway, but the issue affects everyone now. It is not just people with disabilities, is it? It is everyone.

Katie Price: I get it all the time, but it is down to me to choose whether I want to write back or not. In my case, I am so used to it through the years. Other people might not be as strong as me. Especially with Harvey, he has not got a voice to speak it, so I am his voice.

Q19 **Mike Hill:** Your petition also asks for a register of offenders. Why is that important to you?

Katie Price: We did it together. It is important that there should be a register of offenders because why shouldn't there be one? They should be named and shamed. If they are big enough to go behind their computer and say these things, I want them named and shamed for what they're about, because that will affect their jobs—it can affect everything for them. It is funny how some of the people we have complained about, or the people who have been arrested, are always like, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it," but they are only sorry because they have been caught. Until they got caught, they were still doing it.

Amy Price: They are also not kids or teenagers. They are fathers.

Katie Price: Some of them are. This one who I got arrested had a daughter.

Amy Price: It's got to be for everyone.

Q20 **Mike Hill:** So you think such a register would help stop online abuse.

Katie Price: I think that the register and having a criminal offence in place would help, but you would have to see it in effect to make people realise. You can always say, "This is going to happen. That is going to happen," but until people realise and hear about people committing a criminal offence or being charged or something, they will not think twice about doing it.

Q21 **Catherine McKinnell:** You are clearly speaking for an awful lot of people today in calling for a change to the law, but are there other things that could be done that might help stop or reduce online abuse?

Katie Price: Yes. It could be when you sign up on social media. Not only that—I bet if you went to Facebook and said, "Every time you see abuse, we are going to charge you," they would not want that. They have to tighten up as well. It cannot be hard to do a security check so that these people can be found. How can that be difficult? It would save so many lives and so many situations. It cannot be difficult. We are asking for a good thing.

Q22 **Catherine McKinnell:** Do you think that the social media platforms have a bit of responsibility here, as well?

Amy Price: They have to, haven't they? Social media is affecting everything now, isn't it? There have got to be tighter guidelines. They have got to look at making things safer on it, as well. It goes to everything: to schools, the workplace—it is everywhere now. It's got to be tightened up.

Katie Price: I know you lot sitting there do agree with me really. There's not one person I have ever spoken to who would not agree. I know you all

agree; we have just got to get the Government to do it and help us. It would help everyone.

Amy Price: Theresa May has even done a speech on it today, hasn't she—so we're getting there.

Q23 **Martyn Day:** I have a couple of questions on the awareness of online abuse. Do you think that people who perpetrate the abuse have any understanding of the harm and distress it causes to the victims?

Katie Price: This is the thing. With online abuse you have got to remember there might be somebody who's been hurt in the past; some people might have mental problems because of something that's happened to them in their past, so they might be behind it because they want to punish people, because of what's happened to them. You have to be careful. That's why I say, on criminal offence and how it stands—it might be somebody who has gone through this experience themselves, who doesn't want to be horrible. It might be a way of getting it off their chest, to abuse someone else because they've been through it.

Amy Price: You have to take into consideration people's background as well. It could be a lot of people who are angry and it is a way of venting their anger.

Katie Price: Some people find it funny—you get so many retweets. If somebody puts a video out, like they did with Harvey, some people like to see how many retweets they get, how many people thought it was funny; they get a buzz out of that. There are so many different factors in why people do these things. Whether they mean it or not, they still did it. When you actually speak to the ones who got arrested, they are all sorry. Even Ben Stokes, the cricketer; he wanted to make a massive apology. Why—for the media, to make out that he's nice? I'm not interested in his apology; he shouldn't have done it in the first place.

Q24 **Martyn Day:** Do you think people would act differently if they genuinely understood the harm and distress that they cause?

Katie Price: In my case, these people who have said things about Harvey, I would bet you any money that if they actually met him they would probably want to cry, or they would be so guilty. Although he's a big guy, and he might look intimidating, he is so innocent that he wouldn't even know how to hit back or defend himself. I know that people feel really guilty about what they do. But I still don't understand how people even have time to do it, or what goes through their mind to even want to do it.

Q25 **Paul Scully:** To follow on from that, you are obviously hugely in the public eye. You have got loads of tweets coming at you, and that sort of thing. How much do you think the negative response that you get is maybe that they don't understand there is a real person at the end of it, who is looking at this? When it is on television, or the newspapers, they

don't really exist. Maybe if you bite back, they are sometimes repentant, as you say.

Katie Price: I think that as a person I'm very misunderstood. You need to remember that I started in the media when I was 17 and I'm 40 this year. So I have had not just the media attacking me—I have had it good and bad with the media. It's like a yo-yo with me: good, bad; good, bad. I'm very used to it. I've had the worst headlines about me, the worst things online. But I'm not a normal case, because I have become tolerant of it, which isn't good either. There are times when I want to bite back, but I've grown not to do it.

Q26 **Paul Scully:** It is one thing for the journalists to do it, which probably will come across to you in some way, in a public form. But someone sitting behind a keyboard just sees your avatar; they don't see you, so they don't connect. I'm not excusing them.

Katie Price: I know that if they actually met me—I am normal, like you. I go home, have my cup of tea, put my tracksuit on. I don't know why people think that I'm up here and it gives them a right to abuse me. I'm just a normal person as well.

Amy Price: That is the same with everyone who does it to other people—they are normal, but they think that that screen, and the fact that they can't see you, gives them the entitlement to do it.

Q27 **Paul Scully:** It is an extreme thing to actually go to the length of making a video—it is one thing to send a statement.

Katie Price: This is what worries me. People even mock Harvey's face. He gets called "you black spastic" and all of this, or they put him on glue. Someone has taken the time to find the glue thing, mock up his picture on it and mock up a word. Is that normal to them? It happens a lot. He has a massive fan base, everyone loves Harvey. They have been seeing him since he was a baby, and they love to see how he's progressed. They say we've done well with him. So many people have got love for Harvey. But then there are so many people who see him as a good excuse to pick on somebody.

Chair: I think everyone who's met Harvey this afternoon would say what a lovely boy he is and—as you say—see his complete innocence.

Katie Price: All he does is talk about trains and frogs, am I right? And going to Japan next weekend on the Gatwick Express.

Q28 **Chair:** Before we wind up the session, is there anything else that you have not had a chance to say in response to questions that you would like to say to the Committee now? We realise how passionate you are about this and how much it has affected your family, not just Harvey but the other children as well. Is there anything else you would like to say to us that you think we ought to know, or that you would like us to do before we wrap up?

Katie Price: I think that you know where I'm coming from, and anyone listening or watching who is being trolled at the moment, I want them all to know that we are trying our best and I really hope that you guys can push and help make this happen. Something has to be done.

Amy Price: It is not just for us, it is for these people behind us as well. Everyone has suffered. Now it is not just lip service, something actually does need to be done.

Katie Price: Otherwise I will be like Arnold Schwarzenegger: I'll be back.

Chair: Katie and Amy, thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us this afternoon. It has been an interesting session for us, and it has been interesting to meet the rest of your family today. We hope that you have enjoyed your day and that you have not found it too intimidating. We look forward to seeing you back here when this is being debated. We hope that you come and listen to the debate.

Katie Price: We are relying on you guys for the next stage.

Amy Price: Make sure it goes through.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Amy Clarke, Rob Holland, Andie Gbedemah, and Anne Novis.

Q29 **Chair:** Can I welcome our second panel, Anne Novis, Andie Gbedemah, Amy Clarke and Rob Holland? Thank you for coming along this afternoon. We would be interested to hear about your experiences. Could I first ask Amy what is good about social media for disabled people?

Amy Clarke: As someone with a learning disability, I think social media is a good thing, as I can promote things I've done at work and find out about news and things that I am interested in, like theatre, soap operas and TV. I feel like I'm being more myself online, as I get self-conscious when I meet new people in person, and speaking online is kind of easier. Being online can be easier sometimes than going out if you are older or have a learning disability or a mental health issue. I normally get a good response on Twitter from other charities and colleagues.

Q30 **Chair:** Thank you. I wonder whether any of our other witnesses would like to contribute to that. Can you tell us about the positive aspects of social media for disabled people? Who wants to come in first?

Anne Novis: It is a tool for communication, and anything that enhances communication in any accessible way for disabled people is a plus. But it is just another tool for communication, and what we experience online is just an echo of what we experience day to day in real life.

Andie Gbedemah: Just to follow up: connecting to other people, communicating with other people, and overcoming social isolation—for people who maybe don't want to meet, or have less confidence meeting, people face to face. Also, there is campaigning. I mean, so many people—this includes why we are here today at this Committee—are using social media for good, and to get their issues heard, and I think that's good.

Q31 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Rob, did you want to add anything to that?

Rob Holland: Just that Mencap, and indeed the sector, is of course focused on participation of disabled people in society as a whole. Many people with learning disabilities are very marginalised and socially isolated, so social media can be a way to connect to people. In that sense, it is a good thing.

Q32 **Chair:** Amy, what would you say to those who advise disabled people to avoid online abuse by staying offline?

Amy Clarke: I would say, yeah, that's a good point, and Katie mentioned it earlier. I actually say, "If you fall over, you get back on the horse." And I fell. If you want to use it, don't avoid it. Do what I do. Keep on till you find somebody like your mate. Social media works for you. On Twitter and Facebook, once in a while you get somebody who's not nice. Go away from them and join something else, like you would in an abusive situation in life. You go away and then you go somewhere else. It's not always easy, but I feel like you can get back on the horse.

Chair: Get back on the horse. Right. Paul Scully.

Q33 **Paul Scully:** Lovely. Thank you, Amy, for coming. I will just ask you first: how does online abuse affect people with disabilities?

Amy Clarke: It affects people a lot. For example, I joined a forum last year on Facebook about "Doctor Who", and someone was rude about some of my posts and called me nasty names, such as retard. It was aggressive and I felt very shocked. It made me leave the forum and I reported the person.

I do think it shouldn't happen. Katie is right; it shouldn't happen. You're behind a keyboard. Would you do it in real life?

Q34 **Paul Scully:** Exactly. Thank you. Rob, can I ask you where you think disabled people, in particular, see or experience online abuse? Is it on some sites or apps more than others?

Rob Holland: We have had cases of people experiencing abuse on the different social media platforms—across most of the ones that you will recognise. We don't have any data on the specific different platforms, where people have experienced abuse and whether it is more on one site or the other. The cases we hear about tend to be on Twitter and Facebook, but then, of course, those are the most popular ones.

So I certainly think it's very important that there is some research carried out that looks at the experience of disabled people online and where online abuse takes place, because up until now quite a lot of the research around

online has focused on whether or not people—disabled people—are online, and we need to look at their experience as well.

Q35 **Paul Scully:** Is that the same experience for you, Andie, in terms of the apps—the variety of apps?

Andie Gbedemah: Yes, Facebook and Twitter particularly. A lot of the stories we have heard are about people who have used Facebook as a means to make friends and connect to people, and who have then maybe become the targets of abuse through certain interest pages they have liked and when they have tried to connect to others. There is certainly a lot of content on Twitter that is very offensive: people hashtagging offensive terms to do with disability and sharing memes that are mocking people.

Q36 **Paul Scully:** Anne, can you tell us how you think online abuse affects people with disabilities in how they use the internet?

Anne Novis: I think we are less cautious about how we interact online. For instance, I do not ever go out on my own now, because of the attacks I have experienced personally.

Q37 **Paul Scully:** Sorry, the attacks you have experienced online?

Anne Novis: Physically. But I am not as cautious online as I am offline. I have learnt from experience now. For instance, I came off LinkedIn, because on LinkedIn people get your contact details. You assume it is a professional network—I have an MBE and journalists want to contact me—but I came off it because of the nasty stuff that came my way as well. There is a way that we adjust our behaviour, because of the hostility we experience online and every day, to make ourselves safer, but that responsibility should not be just down to us; it should be down to the Government and the law.

The reality is that we do not have equal law. Katie was explaining about getting no redress in the law around her son's experiences. You could have exactly the same experiences on the street and still not get any redress in law. There is no difference. Disabled people do not have equal law like race does. That is our reality. Someone could be just as nasty to me as they are to Harvey on the street and there will be no case to take to court, because we do not have the law.

Q38 **Chair:** Can I just follow that up, Anne? What you tell us is very powerful testimony. Are you saying that the law is not adequate in your experience or that it is not being enforced?

Anne Novis: It is not about it being enforced. We do not have parity in law. Around race, which has good law that has been thoroughly researched and put together, every other aspect of hate crime has been an add-on to race hate crime, but none of them are equal. So around LGBT and disabled people we do not have equal rights in law around hate crime as those around race. For instance, around incitement to commit hostility, disabled people and LGBT are totally excluded and the legislation is different. You can be charged with hate crime in and of itself around

race if someone targets you online as well as offline, but you cannot around disability. That is the difference and we desperately need the Government to take on board that we need an equal and fair hate crime law.

Chair: For you and other disabled people, you are saying that that is restricting your lives.

Anne Novis: Absolutely.

Chair: You are effectively self-restricting, because it is not safe.

Anne Novis: Yes, because it is not safe. We know that none of these people will get prosecuted, unless they lay hands on us, in which case they can be arrested for violence and get an aggravated sentence because it is hate crime. Apart from that, they can be as rude and vitriolic as they like. They can spit in my face, they can target me with a blue badge and they can target me online as much as they like, and they will not get charged with a crime. That is our reality. That is what I am trying to say: it is not just online. But you need to see that you have other tools, not just the law, around online. You have control of the users and the controllers of Facebook and Twitter, for example. In other countries they are much firmer around the law on that issue. In Germany, if Facebook allowed hate and hostility to be perpetuated online, their services would be withdrawn.

Q39 **Liz Twist:** Amy, we have heard that people with disabilities can find it difficult to report online abuse to the police. What makes it difficult for people with disabilities to report abuse?

Amy Clarke: I suppose, the important point is police not taking it seriously and saying, "Don't speak up," and it is quite a to-do reporting it. Also, they may not have any disability awareness training to help support us. That attitude may not be very helpful. Also, families, carers and support workers may not be included.

Personally, I have not reported any online abuse—only that thing on Facebook, mainly—so the police have not been involved. However, if there was a case, I would make sure that they took it seriously. However, as Anne said, it does not seem to be as important, from what I gather, as race. That is sad.

Q40 **Liz Twist:** What do you think the police could do to help people report?

Amy Clarke: I think just to take it seriously.

Anne Novis: If they believed us when we reported, that would be quite a good start.

Amy Clarke: Believing people is really important, and not just seeing the disability but seeing the person. If somebody steals from someone or somebody is attacked, the police will be involved and there will be no question of not being able to deal with it because they have a disability. They cannot say they cannot deal with it because someone is a woman or whatever.

Q41 **Liz Twist:** Anne, you were commenting there. Would you like to comment on that?

Anne Novis: The biggest barrier we face is disbelief by professionals and the belittling of what we experience and the impact of it. I am adviser to the Metropolitan Police, the Crown Prosecution Service and British Transport police on hate crime, particularly against disabled people. The reason I took those roles, which are all voluntary, is because of my knowledge that we are not believed and that the issue is not treated as seriously as it should be.

I have reported all sorts of hostility, but the sort of approach I get is, "Well, you should be used to it; you've been in a school playground, haven't you?" It is that sort of mentality. That gradually changes as the police get more training, which is very important, but with the best will in the world they cannot do anything because the law doesn't back them up, so what can they do? All they can try is local mediation if they know the person.

That is one point I wanted to get across: when you are stalked online, it often leads to face-to-face hostility as well. People will follow you and they will find out who you are and where you live. That is not recognised very much. It overlaps. If you look at some of the murders of disabled people—we have had dozens in recent years—a lot of them started with online abuse, which led to hostility face to face, sometimes torture, ongoing harassment and abuse and then murder.

Those crimes have been well recorded and we have given that evidence to many MPs and Government committees, but we still face inequality under hate crime law. We need that justice, and we need you to take this very seriously and to understand that people feel they have permission to be horrible to disabled people.

They feel it is okay, because they have jumped on the bandwagon of welfare reform and the rhetoric around scroungers. It is a norm for me to be called a scrounger and assume I don't work; I have an MBE for all my efforts, but it is assumed I do not do anything and that I am a waste of space and a burden on society. The man and woman on the street and online picks up those messages and distorts them much further than you probably would have intended, but that is the reality of our lives.

That is not new—it was always there before the internet was invented; we were targets—but as I said at the beginning, it is another form of communication, and we will therefore always be a target until we have justice and have an equal law, the same as for everyone else, so that when we go to the police, they can act and the criminal can be prosecuted. There would therefore be no need for a register, because they would have a criminal record. That is what we need.

Q42 **Liz Twist:** Andie and Rob, do you want to comment?

Andie Gbedemah: Our experience is still very low confidence and trust in the system around reporting, because people fear that they won't be

believed or they perhaps think that what has happened to them is not serious enough to bother the police with. That is exacerbated when someone comes forward and reports and there isn't actually something that the perpetrator can be charged with.

A lot of it comes back to the law and issues around it. With the best will in the world, police, and then prosecutors, will not be able to give people the outcome they are looking for when they report if they don't have the mechanism in legislation to do that.

Q43 **Liz Twist:** Rob, is there anything you wanted to add?

Rob Holland: I echo Anne and Andie: it is about being taken seriously, and it is about crimes being prosecuted as hate crimes, not as other crimes.

In our work with police forces, there have been some examples of good practice with reporting. Forces have developed easy-read materials for people with learning disabilities, including jargon-free ways of reporting. There are third-party reporting systems so that people do not necessarily have to go to the police initially—they can go to another organisation that perhaps they are more familiar with.

Of course, while there are some examples of good practice, it is very much about how we make sure that every police force in the country takes this very seriously and has accessible ways of reporting, with people being supported through the process.

Q44 **Liz Twist:** I was going to ask you about organisations other than the police. Do you think other organisations could be doing more to help to report abuse?

Rob Holland: Yes, certainly. Myriad organisations have a role to play. Those that deliver social care certainly have a role, for example. Those who work directly to support disabled people can support them to be safe online, as a start, but also support them to identify and recognise where they might be being befriended by someone with bad intentions, and then report it as appropriate. As well as those in social care, charities and advice agencies have a role in ensuring that the people we work with understand their rights, can report abuse appropriately and so on.

Q45 **Liz Twist:** Would anyone else like to comment on that?

Andie Gbedemah: We should not lose the emphasis on the fact that the police should be able to meet the needs of everyone, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. In our experience, there is still a lot of work to be done around raising awareness and understanding of when someone has been a victim of hate crime. It is really important that the police work proactively with other organisations like those Rob mentioned, to reach out to people who might be victims and help to unpick some of the experiences that people are having, rather than just waiting for people to come to them and report, because at the moment that is not happening enough.

Q46 **Damien Moore:** This is to Amy first, and then I will open it up to the other witnesses. Could organisations like Twitter and Facebook do more to help reporting when this abuse is taking place?

Amy Clarke: Yes, they could make it more obvious how to report abuse. There should be a big button, like a call button, to report abuse, and they should make sure that it is accessible and easy to use. In my experience, it took ages for them to get back to me. If you report something, they should get back to you quicker, but they should also have a number to call so that you can speak to someone. Not everyone is good with emails, so it is good to have someone to chat to. I know that with Facebook you can't call them, but even live chat would help.

It just feels like there is nobody there. If you want to report something, either you don't or it takes ages. This is so important. I haven't reported anything to Twitter, because I haven't really needed to, but I do think Facebook needs to do more. It is about communication. The people you join are a community and they have rules. They are happy to tell you off if you have done something wrong, but if you have a problem with someone else, it takes a bit of time. I think it would be better if people on Facebook were a bit more friendly.

Q47 **Chair:** Do the rest of the panel have anything to add to that?

Anne Novis: We said about the disbelief of some professions, but more and more the police and the Crown Prosecution Service are working hard to try to improve what they can at their end. There is the issue, as Andie raised, about the recognition of disability hate crime and what that is by those professionals. I found that often police do not record it on the evidence that they gather. They might put "vulnerable adult", for example, but they will not tick the hate crime box. If they do not tick the hate crime box, they do not gather any evidence about hate crime, and therefore it cannot be prosecuted or have an enhanced sentence. That is for the cases that can get to court because there was some sort of violence or something like that.

I worked with the MPS last year on this issue and set up an initiative called "Disability Hate Crime Matters". We increased the reporting a thousandfold in one year, just by giving briefings to as many senior officers as possible about ticking that box correctly. If someone says to you they think they were targeted because they are a disabled person, you put it down, and you ask them that question: do they think they may have been targeted because of that? You can see that—it is in your facts and figures—but you will see it going down again this year, because they stopped the briefings because of cuts.

Q48 **Chair:** Anyone else want to come in?

Andie Gbedemah: On what other social media platforms could do, if you go to report on Twitter at the moment because you want to report something that is abuse or harmful, there is a list of things that are harmful to certain groups. Disability is not on that list, even though their policies cover disability—it is not listed. That sort of thing really

discourages not just disabled people but people who are genuinely offended at seeing that kind of content online from thinking that is something they can report. Raising that awareness is very important.

On giving people an outcome, at the moment, if you are not told whether that piece of content is taken down, you have to go back and look at it again and relive it. They could be more proactive in supporting victims who are using the reporting systems that they have designed.

Anne Novis: I have never yet had one successful response to my reports of online abuse. They have not removed any of them.

Chair: Thank you, that is very interesting.

Q49 **Mike Hill:** This follows on from that, but I will ask Rob all the same. Do social media companies take into account the needs of disabled users? What could they do differently? I know it flows from one to the other, but it would be interesting to know what your views are on that.

Rob Holland: In our experience, when many online social media platforms think about disability, they tend to think about access to their site, in particular, for those with visual impairments. There is a lot of focus on ensuring that you can adjust the size of the text and the colours and things like that, and not so much on thinking about access for groups of people with other impairments. For example, for us, it is about whether there is clear, easy-to-understand, jargon-free information for people with learning disabilities so that they can understand how to use the site first of all, then how to use it safely and how to report things effectively.

Just turning to some of the points made earlier, social media companies are looking at protecting children online, for example. They have said publicly that they will do all they can to protect children—they see them as a very vulnerable group—but they are not looking at disabled adults or disabled children in that same way. We would certainly encourage them that there is a huge group of vulnerable adults out there with learning disabilities and they should put some of their focus on them as well.

Q50 **Mike Hill:** The second question I wanted to ask was about vulnerable adults. Does anybody else have any observations on that?

Anne Novis: The issue is not about who are perceived as vulnerable adults. All disabled people experience the same sort of hostility and we all need protection online, in whatever way you can give it and encourage it. The bottom line is that we need some way to protect, and we need access to justice.

Q51 **Steve Double:** A question for Amy first, then the other panel members. The Government are writing an internet safety strategy. What should they put in it?

Amy Clarke: About the internet, or about how to use it safely?

Steve Double: An internet safety strategy.

Amy Clarke: I think people with a learning disability are often vulnerable and can be tricked. In our Safe Surfing project at Mencap, we gave training to people so they could stay safe online.

This was about being careful with your personal details like your address or telephone number and not giving them to people you don't know, only to people you know. Please put that in the strategy. It was also about using a smartphone safely and how to log out of websites when you're not using them in public.

It is about people who don't know they need to ensure their settings are to friends and family. We also need a special guide for people with a learning disability about staying safe online—an accessible booklet. It should be checked by disability charities to make sure it's easy to read.

Q52 **Steve Double:** Do any other panellists want to add to that?

Amy Clarke: If you have to pay for things online—in real life you have the Office for Fair Trading—have something similar online and use reputable companies like Amazon or shops like John Lewis. Make sure there's an "s" is in the address and a little lock.

Q53 **Martyn Day:** My question is to Amy first and then to the rest of the panel. What do you think about making online abuse a specific crime, and should there be a register of offenders?

Amy Clarke: I think they should make the law stronger, definitely, because people feel they can say what they want, especially to people with disability. As for the list, if it is made law, they are going to have a criminal record, anyway. Would a list be helpful? I am not sure.

Rob Holland: At Mencap, as we have touched on, it is about strengthening the law, so that disabled people are treated the same as other groups. As Andie has said, there is no specific offence for a disability hate crime at the moment. If there was to be parity in that respect, there would be that same level of protection whether online or offline. Hopefully, that would lead to more prosecutions and more people having that on their record. For us, it is very much about getting equality in the law. That is very much the focus for us.

Q54 **Chair:** Does anyone else want to add to that?

Andie Gbedemah: Yes, we called for a change in the law through our campaign ImWithSam around learning disability and autism hate crime off the back of recommendations that were made by the Law Commission in 2014, which have not yet been responded to by the Government. That is broader than online abuse. A review in line with those recommendations would be an opportunity to look at online abuse, offline abuse and close the gap that is currently very confusing around "Someone can say this or do this to me offline, but when they do this online, it's suddenly not a crime any more".

We are very clear at Dimensions that we would like the Law Commission's review to be taken forward.

Anne Novis: You have far more than the Law Commission's review. You have the EHRC inquiry into hostility against disabled people, which addresses online and offline hostility and abuse. There is a huge amount of evidence and research out there that we keep on producing for Government but don't get any responses to.

We would like to understand why. Why not make the law equal for everybody? If you cannot make that law equal, amend it so that there is equal justice. That is just common sense, surely. It is our human right to have the same access to justice as everybody else, so I just do not see or understand why we have to keep on and on at successive Governments about this issue. It is common sense, isn't it?

Q55 **Catherine McKinnell:** I want to follow up on that. You have already expressed powerfully some of the concerns about the legislation and how hate crime in terms of disability does not match the other hate crimes. I will start with you, Rob. Why do you think that is and what is the barrier to achieving what you would like to see?

Rob Holland: The legislative thing is that there is not a specific hate crime offence when it comes to disability. As Anne said, it is an aggravating factor. You can get a longer sentence, but it is not a crime in its own right. Picking up on what Andie was saying, we very much support that Law Commission call to look at the law in its entirety and to make sure that it works equally across all the different groups of people.

Q56 **Catherine McKinnell:** What effect would that have in practical terms for the groups that you are here to represent?

Rob Holland: First, it would send a very strong message that the law takes disability hate crime as it does other forms of hate crime. That is an important message that would go out to police forces and the public, and it would raise the issue in the public conscience. That is important because this is hugely under-reported. We think that the disability hate crimes that are out there are scratching the service, so it might encourage more people to come forward and report it. We might see it rise up the agenda, and we might hopefully see disability hate crimes fall.

Q57 **Catherine McKinnell:** Anne, you touched on some of the abuse that you have experienced. It is a crime to stir up hatred against people on the grounds of their race, religion or sexual orientation, but not their disability. What difference do you think it would make for that to become a specific criminal—

Anne Novis: Immediately, it would get rid of a load of sites that are set up to kill us. If you trawl the site for getting rid of disabled people on Facebook you will find several sites that do that at the moment. If they did that around race, it would be criminal. So it would have an immediate impact there. It is about being a society that is fair and equal for all. I cannot say it any plainer than that. Please, just hear us and believe us, because the law doesn't believe us at the moment.

Q58 **Catherine McKinnell:** Sorry Andie, you wanted to come in there, but I

was also going to ask whether you think that the laws around online abuse are clear enough.

Andie Gbedemah: I think that we have lots of different pieces of law that come together to try to prosecute people who are abusive towards disabled people both on and offline. That is not very clear and it does not always give police and prosecutors the tools that they need to take an experience of crime right through to a point where there can be a conviction for hate crime that recognises the motivation of the perpetrator, the hostility of the perpetrator—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: I'm sorry, I have to stop you there. There is a Division in the House, so if you bear with us the Committee will be suspended for 15 minutes to allow members to vote and then we will be back to continue the questioning.

3.34 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Q59 **Chair:** We only have a limited amount of time in this room, so I want to get on. I will hand the questioning back to Catherine McKinnell, who was in the middle of asking her question—and I think Andie was in the middle of an answer.

Andie Gbedemah: I will try to remember where I stopped, which I think was around the point that a change in the law would give police and prosecutors the tools that they need to take crimes against disabled people right through to a conviction. With the best will in the world, they do sometimes fall down because the legislation just is not fit for purpose when it comes to the type of offending that we see against people with disabilities, for various reasons. It is probably not clear enough for people who potentially are victims to be confident around what their rights are in the law and it is not clear enough in helping police and prosecutors to get a criminal justice outcome for disabled people that reflects that this was a hate crime, rather than a crime against a vulnerable person or something different.

Q60 **Catherine McKinnell:** Amy, I wanted to ask you to explain what "mate crime" is. It is a phrase that I think people will find quite strange to hear.

Amy Clarke: It's when someone makes out they're your friend—it's been on "Casualty", as a story—but calls you names, takes money from you or hurts you. It's hate crime really. I call them a "frenemy", which is slang for friend and enemy—a toxic person. It has happened to me, unfortunately. It can come from colleagues, friends, family or someone who is a support worker, who can abuse their client and make out that they are friendly when they're not. A lot of it happens to old people and people with disabilities.

Q61 **Catherine McKinnell:** Is this a big concern online, as much as offline?

Amy Clarke: Both, but more online. It's sneaky, because people can pretend online, and hide. A bit like "Phantom of the Opera", if you know that story. I use that as an example, but it's like when people pretend—smoke and mirrors. Am I making sense?

Q62 **Catherine McKinnell:** Yes; I think you described it very well with "frenemy"—that is a really powerful phrase. To the rest of the panel, have you got anything to say about the issue more generally, but also what more can be done to protect people from this so-called "mate crime", or "frenemies"?

Anne Novis: Personally, I—and many organisations run by disabled people—do not like the term "mate crime", because it's not recognised in law. It's not what we're fighting for. We want hate crime recognised; we don't want anything less than that. But deliberate befriending online and offline of disabled people is very, very real, and deliberately to take advantage of them in different ways. It may be not to be hostile; it may be to have their money, their benefits, or to take some advantage of them. That definitely does happen and it's a type of hostility that needs to be recognised, along with all the other types that lead us into an escalating pattern of abuse that can often end in murder, if not torture beforehand.

It starts like that. I had a case in Greenwich, where I live. A disabled man—physically disabled—had a carer who he called his "friend-stroke-carer", who was paid to be his carer. She started stealing his money. When he found out, she stabbed him 17 times and murdered him. It was never, ever recognised as a hate crime. I fought every way I could to get it recognised as a hate crime; all I could get was that it was "abuse of a vulnerable adult", and it was a murder. So those sorts of things have been happening for many, many years, but we still need that law.

Q63 **Catherine McKinnell:** Do you think that, as well as a change in the law, there needs to be much greater recognition and understanding, not just among those people who are potentially vulnerable to it, but also among wider society as well?

Anne Novis: Yes. Education—raising awareness—is absolutely key. And be more positive about disabled people. You know, any of you could be disabled people. You will all become disabled people as you get older; you're all going to lose your hearing and your eyesight and all that sort of thing, and get a bit arthritic. It happens to all of us. So it's understanding that, rather than seeing us as a separate category—as another group in society. It's integral, it's intersectional, it's not just white, middle-aged women—it's all of us. To see that, it's going to be historic and we need you all to be working on that, every day, and seeing that what you say, what you do, influences the behaviour of others towards us.

Q64 **Chair:** If I may, I just wanted to pick up on a couple of things that have come up in evidence, before we wrap up. The first is that you have made reference a number of times to the fact that things that are said by politicians, or in the papers, can lead to a spiral in hate crime against

disabled people. I wondered if anyone can tell us where we can find the factual evidence that would support that. I don't doubt it happens, but as a Select Committee we are looking for the facts that we can put in a report. Does anyone know of any evidence on that?

Anne Novis: There's loads of evidence, loads of surveys and loads of pieces of research done by universities, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. And we can ensure that, through our organisations, we send all those papers to you, but they are extensive, they have lots of recommendations and it's going to be a lot of reading for you. But seeing it's historic—I'm not going to quote loads of facts and figures to you now. You need to read it for yourselves and it will show you different case examples, as well.

Q65 **Chair:** That would be very helpful. Does anyone else want to come in on that one? No.

The Government are preparing an internet safety strategy, which some of us would think would need to go along with a change in the law as well. What should there be in that internet safety strategy when the Government bring it out?

Andie Gbedemah: The first point that I would make is that at the moment it seems very heavily focused on protecting children and young people online, and there shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all approach to safety online, and the particular needs of different people should be considered within that strategy.

I think that the document that is being consulted on at the moment is looking at the direct targeting of individuals and giving some teeth to what social media companies would be expected to do about that. It's not necessarily addressing some of the more raw background noise that we see—the horrible memes and the disablist slurs that are shared, which may not have a specific victim at the end of it but ultimately that is what marginalises people and "others" people, and can perpetuate the sort of offending and abuse that we see offline against people, as well. So I think there has to be a consideration of how does the online world become very, very real in the offline world—so, online world into offline.

Anne Novis: I really want to strongly recommend that a consultation be done with deaf and disabled people. This can be done in a variety of ways. If you just do it online the way you normally do, it excludes a lot of deaf and disabled people, because it is just not accessible. If you have focus groups and events that are run by disabled people themselves and set up to engage with you, answer all your questions, give you evidence and let you hear the voices of the victims, you will get a lot more content and flavour of what we need, rather than just something we respond to in an extensive online document. Could I just recommend that?

Chair: Thank you very much. May I take this opportunity to thank all our panel—Anne, Andie, Amy and Rob? You have been very patient with us through the Divisions, and we are very grateful, but you have also given us some very powerful and moving evidence that we will want to take into

consideration. The Committee will consider whether it wants to produce a full report, rather than just some evidence to inform the debate—I think I am getting the feeling that we would probably want to do that, with some recommendations to the Government. That means that the debate will come a bit later, but obviously it is an important way of getting the Government to respond to specific proposals.

You have been enormously helpful to us this afternoon. I am very grateful to you all for giving up your time. As I always say to witnesses, if you think of anything after you leave that you wish you had said to us, please feel free to get in touch with the Committee staff and send us that extra evidence. Thank you all very much, once again, for coming this afternoon. I cannot say that we enjoyed listening to you, because some of the things you told us were horrible, but you have been very informative indeed and we are very glad that you came.