



Department for  
Digital, Culture,  
Media & Sport

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Lord Puttnam  
House of Lords  
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Dear Lord Puttnam

Thank you for inviting the Minister of State for the Department of Education, the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office and myself to give evidence to your committee on Tuesday 12 May. As agreed during the session, I am writing to provide further details about the Counter Disinformation Unit for the purposes of transparency and for public scrutiny. I have set out four key areas which provide further information on the purpose of the CDU, its structure and function, the lessons learned to date, and how we are applying this to informing policy decisions. I am also writing to provide further details on anonymisation and GOV.UK Verify.

## **COUNTER DISINFORMATION UNIT**

### **Purpose**

The Government takes the issue of disinformation and misinformation very seriously. It is vitally important, during this national emergency, that the public has access to accurate, reliable information from trusted sources. DCMS is leading work across Government to tackle disinformation and misinformation. We need people to follow the instructions of medical experts so that we can reduce the infection rate, protect the NHS and save lives. Misleading information about COVID-19 online, whether maliciously intended or not, could cost lives.

The Cross-Whitehall Counter Disinformation Unit was stood up on 5 March 2020, bringing together cross-government monitoring and analysis capabilities. Its primary function is to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and the reach of disinformation and misinformation on COVID-19, and to work with partners across industry, civil society and beyond to ensure appropriate action is taken to tackle this evolving threat. It is stood up in times of increased vulnerability to disinformation, such as democratic events, national security incidents, or other crises.

### **Structure and function**

The Counter-Disinformation Unit (CDU) is a cross-Government structure which operates during crises or periods of elevated risk of online disinformation campaigns targeting the UK. To date, the CDU has stood-up three times, during the 2019 European Elections (17 April 2019 to 31 May 2019), 2019 UK General Election (21 October 2019 to 20 December 2019), and the current COVID-19 pandemic (5 March 2020 to present). In its current iteration, the CDU expanded its remit to include identifying and responding to harmful misinformation relating to COVID-19, alongside its core function of disinformation monitoring, analysis and response.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Disinformation' is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is



Although DCMS coordinates and leads the Counter-Disinformation Unit, addressing the challenges of disinformation and misinformation is a whole of government effort. That coordination function is central to the CDU's role. The CDU brings together cross-government capabilities, including monitoring, analysis and strategic communications. It includes teams in DCMS, the Home Office, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office. In the current operations, the team in Cabinet Office is supported by military analysts from the Ministry of Defence, who operate under the same rules and procedures as civil servants.

The CDU monitors for false and misleading information relating to COVID-19 and determines the appropriate Government response. This can include a direct rebuttal on social media, working with platforms to remove harmful content, and ensuring public health campaigns are promoted through reliable sources. The CDU does not respond to all pieces of potential misinformation or disinformation but takes a strategic view of an issue to offer structural and strategic interventions. The CDU's response to these types of information is issue dependent, but where potentially harmful content is identified that breaches a platform's terms and conditions, the CDU flag that content to the platform to ensure it can be swiftly reviewed and acted on. Government does not mandate the removal of any content, only indicating to platforms where we have identified potentially dangerous and incorrect claims about the virus, for platforms to make a decision on.

### **Lessons learned**

The establishment of the CDU was a response to an identified need for coordination of the government's operational response to the evolving threat of disinformation and other forms of online manipulation. Each time the CDU has stood up, we have undertaken a lessons learned process to ensure that we are optimising our approach and working effectively with the cross-Whitehall community.

Whilst the CDU is operational, its structure allows for a flexible approach able to scale and focus the structures and processes to suit the information environment that we are working in. This ensures that the CDU can adapt to emerging narratives which have the potential to cause harm. The CDU's expanded COVID-19 remit, which extended to misinformation, is an example of this and differs from previous iterations of the CDU, which focused on monitoring disinformation campaigns during pre-election periods. We keep our approach under continual review.

Given the nature of the CDU's work, it would not be appropriate to reveal specific tactics or approaches which may compromise operational activities and future policy development.

### **Influencing policy development**

The CDU has worked closely with relevant teams across Whitehall and beyond to ensure that valuable operational insights and lessons learned are used to inform future policy direction. Our priority right now is responding to the crisis. However, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and I are critically aware of Parliament's necessary role in scrutinising the government's actions. In due course, the Secretary of State will issue a Written Ministerial Statement setting out the government's response to COVID-19 related misinformation and disinformation. This will make clear what we have learnt over the course of this response period, and the steps we are taking to get ahead of damaging misinformation and disinformation even more quickly in future.

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intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. 'Misinformation' refers to inadvertently spreading false information.

Our work on the European and General elections demonstrated the need for productive working relationships with social media platforms. As noted during my evidence session, throughout our response to COVID-19 we have been working even more closely with social media platforms to understand the actions they are taking to tackle misinformation and disinformation, and identify where more can be done. The insights gleaned from this engagement are being used to shape our response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation, as we consider both legislative and non-legislative options.

Our findings from the European and General Elections have also informed work across other departments. Our counter-disinformation response forms an important part of the Cabinet Office-led Defending Democracy programme.

### **ANONYMISATION AND GOV.UK VERIFY**

The government expects companies to do substantially more to tackle anonymous abuse online, and we welcome steps that some companies have already taken to better protect user safety. However, being anonymous online does not give anyone the right to abuse others. The government is working with law enforcement to review whether current police powers are sufficient to tackle anonymous abuse, whilst also ensuring the maintenance of a free and open internet, as we respect there are many legitimate reasons why an individual would not wish to identify themselves online.

Digital identity can support platforms that need or wish to proactively and openly prove user identity. In this scenario, the user would be known to the service, but could be anonymous to other users of the service, for instance on a social media platform.

At present GOV.UK Verify is only used for public sector services, however as we look to establish and grow the digital identity ecosystem we are engaging with the private sector to develop digital identity solutions for businesses and the public alike.

Thank you for inviting me to provide evidence and please do get in contact with myself or my team if you have any further questions.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caroline Dinenge', written in a cursive style.

**CAROLINE DINENAGE MP**  
Minister of State for Digital and Culture