

Home Affairs Committee

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Damian Collins MP
Chair of the Joint Committee on Draft Online Safety Bill
Joint Committee on Draft Online Safety Bill
House of Lords
London
SW1A OPW

1 December 2021

Dear Damian,

Online racist abuse of footballers: key concerns to note in the consideration of the draft Online Safety Bill

You may be aware that the Home Affairs Committee held an evidence session on 8 September 2021 about the online racist abuse of footballers.

The Home Affairs Committee has followed the issue of online harms for some years. In 2017 it published a [report](#) entitled 'Hate crime: abuse, hate and extremism online'. This report considered the role of social media companies in addressing hate crime and illegal content online.

Among other things the report concluded that, though the publishing of community guidelines by social media companies was welcome, nowhere near enough was being done. The richest and biggest social media companies were shamefully far from taking sufficient action to tackle illegal and dangerous content and were failing to implement proper community standards or to keep their users safe. It recommended a review of the legislative framework and the imposition of sanctions for failing to remove illegal content within a strict timeframe. It also expressed the Committee's disappointment at the pace of development of technological solutions to tackle inappropriate content on social media.

Following the appalling racist abuse that Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka received after the Euros final in July 2021, this Committee decided to examine the seriously concerning trend of online racist abuse of footballers.

The Committee heard evidence from former footballers, Anton Ferdinand, Lianne Sanderson and Marvin Sordell, and Simone Pound, Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Professional Footballers' Association. We also took evidence from Twitter and Instagram. The transcript of the session can be found [here](#).

This Committee shares the concerns voiced by witnesses who have given evidence regarding online abuse. Therefore, I am writing to you to outline the key concerns that emerged from our

evidence session on 8 September 2021 in the hope that it might assist your Committee in its work on the draft Online Safety Bill.

Key concerns

The problem of racist abuse in football has existed for a long time. Despite improvements in stadiums, it still exists there today. Lianne Sanderson referred to her own experiences of this (see Q181). However, the players also noted that racist abuse is increasingly prevalent online and said that social media companies are not doing enough to tackle the issue (see, Q169, Q173, Q177). Indeed, Anton Ferdinand suggested that, though the issue in stadiums may have lessened over time, social media has provided an alternative outlet for people to communicate racist abuse (see Q183). It was clear from the evidence that we received that self-regulation by the social media companies is not working.

The second concern we identified was that social media platforms are failing to respond appropriately to the reporting of online racist abuse. The players indicated that the platforms are failing to take down offensive posts and offending accounts – even when the posts/accounts have been reported by other users or interested parties (like the Professional Footballers' Association or the Centre for Countering Digital Hate) – and in some instances, after they have been deleted, they reappear (see, Q172, Q175, Q178). Furthermore, clearly offensive posts can, and are, deemed not to violate a platform's rules on hate speech and therefore remain visible.

When questioned about this problem, the social media platforms pushed back. Instagram, for example, argued that this may be because the term is being used as 'reclaimed speech' (see, Q212). Both platforms argued that the context of a post was important (see, Q208, Q212, Q224).

The third concern we identified was that social media platforms are failing to detect racist abuse through the moderation of content. It is common for offensive posts to remain visible for significant periods of time. We presented examples to Instagram of clearly racist posts directed towards the England players racially abused following the Euros. These posts had not been taken down and in some instances were visible for over six weeks (see, Q244-246). The use of emojis in a racist manner is a particular problem which AI moderation is consistently failing to pick up. The quality and speed of the response by social media companies to moderate this content falls appallingly short of what people should legitimately be able to expect.

The fourth concern we identified was that social media platforms are failing to enforce their own hate speech policies. Concern was raised by the former players over the ability of users guilty of online racist abuse to simply create new accounts and continue to post abusive content. Simone Pound, for example, said that it is not just the racist posts that need to be dealt with - the accounts and the account holders need to be dealt with too (see, Q202).

The fifth concern we identified was the significant impact online racist abuse is having on peoples' mental health, including victims and their loved ones. Both Anton Ferdinand and Marvin Sordell questioned whether social media companies are waiting for a tragedy to happen before they take proper action to tackle the problem of online racist abuse (see Q177, Q192).

Finally, we note that the panel of former players unanimously supported the idea of imposing a form of identity verification as a condition of service on social media platforms (see, Q190, Q196, Q197). They argued this would likely deter anonymous abuse and curtail peoples' ability to create multiple accounts from which to post abusive content. However, Twitter voiced concern over such

proposals on the grounds that it might undermine peoples' right to privacy and place vulnerable groups at risk (see Q228). Indeed, when giving evidence to your Committee, Nancy Kelley, Chief Executive of Stonewall, voiced concern over the impact such proposals could have on the LGBTQ+ community. Given the complexity of this issue, we welcome that your Committee has begun to explore it, particularly given its importance to the victims and survivors of online racist abuse that we have spoken to.

Further written response of Twitter and Instagram

Following the evidence session, Twitter and Facebook agreed to write to us on a number of points. We received their responses on 29 September, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#). My further response to Twitter can be found [here](#), and to Instagram can be found [here](#).

Our engagement with the companies has raised concerns that their policies on hate speech and hateful conduct appear to prohibit the act of one person directly racially abusing another person, but do not include an outright ban on racism and racist content. Therefore, we think there is a significant gap in the companies' hate speech and hateful conduct policies; racism in all forms, whether direct or indirect, should be prohibited on the platforms.

For example, during the evidence session and subsequent correspondence, we raised the case of Mr Sunder Katwala with Twitter. Mr Katwala raised a number of statements with Twitter as indicative examples of racist abuse, in addition to several actual examples (see Twitter thread [here](#)). Twitter informed Mr Katwala that the examples did not breach its hateful conduct policy. We pressed Twitter for an explanation. On 29 September 2021, it responded that these statements were hypothetical and that it is not Twitter's policy to review hypothetical Tweets "as it is generally not an accurate representation of how rules are enforced". We do not think this is an acceptable response and have requested a further explanation from Twitter.

Other concerns of this Committee

We note that issues surrounding pornography and online safety have been considered during recent evidence sessions for your Committee. We would also like to register our concerns regarding the accessibility of online pornography by children, particularly violent or extreme pornography.

Do get in touch if it would be helpful to discuss any of the points raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely




Tim Loughton MP
Acting Chair of the Home Affairs Committee