

## Follow-up written evidence submitted by the Parliamentary Security Department

### Provision of vulnerability reduction measures

- **[Q132 Olly Davis] What steps are taken to inform Members of the risk assessments made about them, and could more be done to help reassure Members of the level of actual risk posed to them?**

We need Members to be engaged in their own security, to take it seriously, and to ensure they have timely and appropriate briefings. In order to achieve this, Members need to be aware of the cohort-level risks they face so they are able to make informed choices.

We also offer Situational Awareness Training (SAT) for Members and their staff, which gives them advice about how to identify security issues, deescalate and defuse confrontations, think about how to travel in a security-conscious manner, and keep their personal data and information safe.

Improving this level of generic security awareness is essential, however we cannot ask Members to make decisions about the specific threats and risks they face.

So MPs need to come to us (Police, PSD, BRIDGER) for specific advice and expert guidance.

This is essentially a two-way process. Reporting in also enables us to build a better picture of the risk to individual and the cohort as a whole.

### Threat reduction

- **Are you aware of any international examples of where threat reduction is being done effectively?**

We have compared notes with several international counterparts; the US and Canadians, as well as the Irish Oireachtas and the Dutch Parliament, and the UK's devolved assemblies.

Social media abuse (particularly as an English language phenomenon) is an ubiquitous problem; in America US First Amendment rights make it even harder to combat or regulate abuse of elected officials. There is no country who has come up with an effective solution to this problem. UK Parliament's social media and monitoring and moderation activities are more advanced than similar activities conducted in other legislatures we have spoken to.

In-person protest is also not unique to the UK, although the intensity of MP-focused, pro-Palestinian protest seen from c. October 2023 up until the General Election did feel outlying (in America the reaction was seen very much on University Campuses, for example). The frequency and severity of the protest has lessened since the election, although there are still significant numbers of people who harangue and intimidate MPs in person.

There are no immediate actions that could be borrowed from another jurisdiction and implemented in the UK; differing legal landscapes, political/policing outlooks and traditions and differences in scale/resourcing mean that each legislature is going to need to develop its own bespoke solutions to its unique problems. We will however continue to engage with partners to learn from them and to understand where collaboration can make individual efforts more effective and efficient.

### **Policing**

- **[Q140 Alison Giles] You mention the potential impact of “leveraging chief constables”. Please could you expand on this point, particularly in terms of what that could look like?**

Whilst BRIDGER provides the policing point of contact for Members, much of the activity relating to threat reduction (investigation of specific crimes, specialist investigative tools) is undertaken by policing across the different forces and subject to competing demands on limited resources. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of Policing in the UK (45 civilian territorial forces, run by 45 separate and sovereign Chief Constables) means that it can be difficult to corral Policing as a whole towards tackling a ‘national’ problem without creating new processes to bridge structural divisions.

The National Police Chief’s Council (NPCC) ‘brings UK police leaders together to set direction in policing and drive progress for the public.’ This body could help address the issues of national consistency raised during the Speaker’s Conference by setting a national direction for Policing on this topic, developing and rolling out training through the National College of Policing, and overall ensuring the entire Policing system (not just PLaIT/BRIDGER) is sufficiently aware of and geared towards addressing ‘anti-democratic’ crimes.

- **[Q141 Alison Giles and Olly Davis] Is it fair to take from these comments that you would support a more centralised, national approach to “policing democracy”? Are there any existing policing models that you think could be replicated for this issue?**

Further to comments on the NPCC above, there are a number of ‘national’ issues which benefit from a centralised Policing approach which could serve as a model for a ‘anti-democratic’ threat reduction efforts.

It is likely that a strengthening of existing PaDP structures and coordination with partners such as the Home Office (on Op FORD , the developing policing response to threats against other elected officials), the Crown Prosecution Service, the Probation Service, etc is the best way to achieve this aim. The model provide by the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC, part-funded by PSD and focused on fixated offenders, which incorporates both Policing and mental health/NHS professionals to reduce risk from this specific category of offenders) might be appropriate in this context.

The Police will ultimately be best placed to decide how to deliver a more strategic and centralised response to crimes against MPs.

### **Social Media**

- **Do you have any recourse for action in instances where you believe a platform is not operating within its terms of service?**

No. Social media platforms decide which messages referred to them by PSD or MPs and their staff do and do not breach their terms of service. We have no ability to influence their decision or compel them to take action. A letter sent to X by the Speaker of the House of Commons in early 2024 expressing his disappointment in the amount of abusive, intimidating and threatening material allowed to remain on the platform did not receive a reply.

Under the Online Safety Act (2023), OFCOM will be able to levy fines on ‘tier 1’ platforms which do not make sufficient efforts to police their own terms of service. OFCOM are still developing their thinking on this and it is currently unclear how OFCOM will determine whether a platform has breached its rules, and whether any fines levied against platforms domiciled outside of the UK will be paid, or have an impact on the willingness of platforms to act against harmful material.

- **If you could change one thing about the way social media platforms operate to support you in keeping MPs safe, what would it be?**

In an ideal world, platforms would:

- i) Consistently apply their terms of service which relate to hateful conduct, abuse, harassment, etc.
- ii) Remove from the platform people who breach their terms of service from the platform, not simply hide or down-rank their messages, as there is no deterrent to the user continuing to abuse their victims.
- iii) Invest in more moderators to respond to referrals and proactively identify harmful comments, rather than rely on users to report messages to them, and then leave them in referral queues for months on end.

In reality, we are waiting to understand how OFCOM (see above) will approach the regulation of platforms under the OSA (2023), which is the best lever the community has at this point in time.

### **Data**

- **[Q149 Olly Davis] Would it be helpful for you to have access to information on threats to other elected representatives?**

As threats to MPs are currently collated and assessed by the Police within the Mercury database, this is really a question for them. However PSD can see the wisdom of having information about all individuals posing a threat to MPs and other elected officials managed in a single place within Policing, so that offenders threatening both cohorts can be identified and dealt with, best practice on reducing threats from one cohort can be applied to both, and the relative prioritisation of protective security measures across MPs, Mayors, Councillors and other elected officials can be properly informed by an accurate and holistic risk assessment.

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