

Written evidence submitted the Sport and Recreation Alliance (OSB0090)

The Sport and Recreation Alliance

The Sport and Recreation Alliance is the umbrella body for the national and representative bodies of sport and recreation. We have over 300 members drawn from across the sector including national governing bodies of sport and recreation (NGBs), national and regional associations, Active Partnerships and sport for development charities. Our membership is diverse and delivers everything from traditional sport to outdoor recreation, movement, dance and physical activity.

Our role is to bring together the sport and recreation sector and support our members to tackle the challenges and take advantage of opportunities. We are the voice of the sector with Government, policy makers and the media. We help get the nation active at the grassroots by providing advice, support and guidance.

Social media abuse: The importance of effective regulation

Across all sport and at all levels of the sporting pyramid, players, officials, coaches and administrators have been subjected to racist, sexist, homophobic and other discriminatory abuse on social media. In many instances, the content is legal but incredibly harmful and causes immense distress to those who are forced to face it day in, day out.

More broadly, the scale and severity of the discriminatory abuse we have seen and the ease with which social media allows its targeting and proliferation can have a broader, damaging impact by dissuading people from underrepresented groups from participating in sport. This is particularly concerning at a time when we are striving to make sport more inclusive and for its benefits to be enjoyed by all.

The aggregate impact of widespread social media abuse on individuals and groups must therefore be recognised and addressed in the Bill. While social media platforms have user terms of service that prohibit racism and other forms of discriminatory behaviour, the tools typically used to administer these (content moderation, taking down individual posts after the fact) are clearly ineffective in instances when large volumes of content breach the terms of service at the same time. In this context the Bill should ensure social media companies implement systems and processes which are effective at stopping abuse from spreading at scale and pace, for example ensuring algorithms do not inadvertently promote abusive content.

Ultimately, it is difficult to ensure that social media companies prevent or take down offensive content before it is seen, that online abusers are prevented from deleting and re-registering accounts, or that

authorities have sufficient information and evidence to take prosecutions forward. Individuals can abuse others online anonymously, which means that online hate and discriminatory abuse have no real-world consequences.

Such abuse would not be acceptable in any other walk of life, and we are calling for the Online Safety Bill to be strengthened and expedited in order to ensure that social media is safe for everyone to use.

Proposed changes to the Bill

The proposals below are in line with those made by Alliance members and we would encourage the Committee to refer to these individual submissions for more detailed comments on the Bill.

We propose that the Online Safety Bill can be strengthened in the following ways:

- The Equality Act 2010 affords certain groups statutory protection from discrimination in certain activities. The Online Safety Bill should provide the same protection to these groups online.
- Ofcom should be given powers on ‘legal but harmful’ content.
- Some form of verification should be required for all accounts and limiting the reach of anonymous accounts should be part of the Codes of Practice (s.29).
- Discrimination and hate speech should be the subject of specific Codes of Practice (s.29).
- Discrimination and hate speech should be categorised as “priority illegal content” in the Bill in order to put an increased obligation on service providers to take positive actions to minimise the presence of such content on their platforms (s.5(2) and s.9).
- There should be a specific obligation on providers to specify how they will mitigate and manage the risks of content which is harmful to adults (including racism and/or hate speech) - mirroring the obligation in the current draft Bill in relation to services likely to be accessed by children (s.5(5) and s.11).
- There should be a statutory power to enable the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to clearly specify content that is harmful to adults in secondary legislation (including discriminatory abuse and hate speech).
- Comments on news publishers’ platforms should be included within the scope of the Bill.
- Transparency reporting requirements should be defined by the Bill.
- Social media companies should be required to assist the authorities with their criminal investigations (s.49).

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