

## **Written evidence submitted by the Local Government Association (COR0159)**

### **1. About the Local Government Association (LGA)**

- 1.1. The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We are a politically-led, cross party membership organisation, representing councils from England and Wales.
- 1.2. Our role is to support, promote and improve local government, and raise national awareness of the work of councils. Our ultimate ambition is to support councils to deliver local solutions to national problems.

### **2. Summary**

- 2.1. Councils have a core and statutory responsibility for the safeguarding, protection and wellbeing of children. The internet has created a huge medium for the exploitation and abuse of children on an international scale. With the closures of UK schools and nurseries and children spending more time at home due to the lockdown, their risk of exposure and exploitation increases.
- 2.2. Councils have a responsibility to protect their residents from radicalisation, terrorism and crime. The internet has created a huge platform for these threats. Social media has made individuals more traceable and accessible, raising safety issues for those fleeing from domestic abuse. It has also created the medium of 'revenge porn' as another form of domestic abuse.
- 2.3. The spread of misinformation and disinformation related to COVID-19 and the lockdown on the internet includes stories around councils and council services. This can lead to mistrust in our public services and their messages during this crucial time.
- 2.4. Councillors experience online intimidation, abuse and threats against them, and the increased use of social media and online meetings during this time has increased this risk.

### **3. The nature, prevalence and scale of online harms during the Covid-19 period;**

- 3.1. Councils have important responsibilities for vulnerable children, including those at risk of or having been subjected to child sexual exploitation and/or abuse. There are concerns that during the COVID-19 period, "a shortage of moderators who combat sexual abuse online combined with children spending more time on the internet at home has created a perfect storm for abusers to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic"<sup>i</sup>.
- 3.2. Europol, the law enforcement agency of the European Union, has also said it had seen "increased online activity by those seeking child abuse material"<sup>ii</sup>.

- 3.3. The LGA has highlighted that some councils are seeing up to a 50 per cent decline in referrals of vulnerable children<sup>iii</sup>. The impact of the pandemic on some children will be far-reaching, and it will be essential that the right services are there to support them. Councils are working with their partners and communities to try to identify children who may be at risk and putting in place plans to ensure that if referrals spike when children return to school, they are able to ensure children and families get the right help quickly.
- 3.4. Councils are not statutorily responsible for providing treatment for harmful gambling. However, the multiple layers of harm that this addiction can cause do interplay with council responsibilities, as well as councils' role in licensing and public health. It is therefore a key issue of concern for local government. The LGA has produced guidance on how councils can adopt a whole-council approach to tackling gambling-related harm<sup>iv</sup>.
- 3.5. YouGov research for the Gambling Commission found that whilst staying at home during the COVID-19 crisis has not significantly increased the number of people gambling for the first time, and indeed the closure of gambling venues and the hold on live sport has curtailed some gambling activities, two thirds who are 'engaged gamblers' have increased the amount of time or money they spend on at least one online gambling activity<sup>v</sup>.
- 3.6. This research is unlikely to have picked up the experiences of children and young people, who are now likely to spend more time than ever before online<sup>vi</sup> and the introduction of young people to gambling experiences often occurs in the home setting, with early onset of gambling being a risk factor for problems later in life.
- 3.7. According to a blog in the BMJ:<sup>vii</sup> "online gambling has the potential to exacerbate prior debt, and lead to further harms to individuals and others. Debt itself is a risk factor for physical and mental ill-health. Of note, both alcohol and problem gambling associated with intimate partner violence, and there are already reports of pandemic-related rises in cases of domestic violence. Alcohol, gambling, debt, isolation, and economic uncertainty are a toxic mixture which may precipitate a wider mental and physical health crisis."
- 3.8. Councils are concerned by the emergence of extremism issues online related to the pandemic. While face-to-face extremism incidents have inevitably reduced since lockdown measures were introduced, we have seen a refocussing of extremist activity online with the pandemic being used to fuel extremist narratives (in many cases using existing core themes). Examples have included blaming certain communities for the origins of the virus and/or for breaching lockdown measures leading to its spread – often using fake videos or memes<sup>viii</sup>. These issues have led not only to concerns around increased community tensions, but also that these sentiments could lead to an increase in extremism incidents offline as lockdown measures continue to ease.
- 3.9. Several conspiracy theories have also been propagated relating to the pandemic, and these are seeing mainstream circulation/advocacy in an unprecedented way. There are a wide range of examples, including several suggesting the 5G network is responsible for causing, spreading or lowering immunity to COVID-19. There have been attacks on (or what are perceived to be) 5G masts and reports of engineers receiving threats of violence, which are clearly of significant concern<sup>ix</sup>.

- 3.10. There is also the potential for the pandemic to feed traditional extremist narratives about mistrust in government and mainstream media which could affect national efforts in response to the virus, and in the longer-term, there are fears that economic decline will provide further fertile territory for extremists to exploit.
- 3.11. These issues sit alongside a further concern that many people have been spending increased time online during lockdown who may be at risk of radicalisation.
- 3.12. The LGA has been issuing warnings about the significant rise in the selling of counterfeit and unsafe products related to COVID-19, including over the internet<sup>x</sup>. Some councils have recorded a 40 per cent increase in reported scams since the start of the COVID-19 emergency, with officers continuing to seize illegal and low-quality products – including more than half a million substandard face masks by one council<sup>xi</sup>.
- 3.13. Latest figures show that more than 220 online scams have been stopped by the National Cyber Security Centre after it received more than 12,000 reports of suspect emails since it launched a service on 21 April for the public to report suspicious emails, including those claiming to offer coronavirus-related services.
- 3.14. The LGA has advised staying vigilant against criminals using the coronavirus crisis to trick people, including online, by phone, text or email. Recent scams reported include fake coronavirus test kits and hand sanitisers, bogus medical products claiming to treat or prevent COVID-19 and false communications about how to claim school meals funding and government grants.
- 3.15. One scam involves a message sent by text or email stating that the recipient has been fined £60 for leaving their home more than once a day. Weblinks on these messages connect to websites that steal your personal information or hack into your computer or phone.
- 3.16. Dealing with the increase in counterfeit and unsafe goods places additional pressure on already stretched council regulatory services.
- 3.17. We have also seen an increase in the spread of mis and dis-information regarding the virus, treatment of the virus and also the public sector's response to the virus. The spreading of dis and mis-information regarding public services undermines local credibility and can put vulnerable residents at risk if they follow wrong advice and/or are dissuaded from contacting their council.
- 3.18. In December 2019, the LGA, Welsh LGA (WLGA), the Confederation of Scottish Authorities (COSLA) and the Northern Ireland LGA (NILGA) launched a campaign called 'Civility in Public Life<sup>xii</sup>', with the aim of curbing the public intimidation of councillors. Local councillors and decision-makers may be experiencing an increase in online threats and intimidation, particularly given public fear and uncertainty, curbs on freedoms, increased anxiety and stress, the spread mis and dis-information, and the increased volume of correspondence and meetings taking place online.

#### **4. Steps that could be taken to mitigate these concerns;**

- 4.1. The LGA has been working with colleagues at the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE)<sup>xiii</sup>, a local authority led network chaired by Leeds and Luton councils, to explore some of these themes further, encourage councils to share their experiences and share resources and research into emerging issues.
- 4.2. Further action is needed to remove misleading information or disinformation online which might cause harm or undermine trust in public services.
- 4.3. It is also important to raise further awareness about measures to promote online safety and encourage people to access support if needed or raise concerns about vulnerable people where they arise. We also know very little about the psychological impact of the lockdown and whether it might, for instance, significantly increase the number of people susceptible to extremist messages or willing to act on them.
- 4.4. Councils will continue to prosecute and seek the toughest penalties for criminals selling counterfeit and dangerous goods online.
- 4.5. The LGA has produced guidance for councillors on handling abuse and intimidation<sup>xiv</sup>, which includes online activity. This is being developed by the LGA into an e-learning course for councillors.

#### **5. The adequacy of the Government's Online Harms proposals to address issues arising from the pandemic, as well as issues previously identified.**

- 5.1. In the LGA's response to the Government's Online Harms consultation, we recommended that:
  - 5.1.1. The proposed online media literacy strategy goes further to embrace the principles of digital citizenship and good public discourse.
  - 5.1.2. The regulatory framework should be extended to children's mental safety as well as physical safety, as abuse is not always physical.
  - 5.1.3. There is a more consistent and serious police response to the online intimidation and harassment of those in public office.
  - 5.1.4. Action to protect MPs from harassment and abuse includes protections for local councillors.
- 5.2. The LGA also supports the Government's proposal of establishing an independent regulator to hold online and social media businesses to account.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-lockdown-raises-risk-of-online-child-abuse-charity-says>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-lockdown-raises-risk-of-online-child-abuse-charity-says>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/child-abuse-how-get-help-coronavirus-lockdown-nspcc-a9515471.html>

<sup>iv</sup>

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/10.28%20GUIDANCE%20ON%20PROBLEM>

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[%20GAMBLING\\_07.pdf](#)

v <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/news-action-and-statistics/Statistics-and-research/Covid-19-research/Covid-19-and-its-impact-on-gambling---what-we-know-so-far.aspx>

vi <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/04/06/covid-19-we-must-take-urgent-action-to-avoid-an-increase-in-problem-gambling-and-gambling-related-harms/>

vii <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/04/06/covid-19-we-must-take-urgent-action-to-avoid-an-increase-in-problem-gambling-and-gambling-related-harms/>

viii <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/01/coronavirus-weaponised-way-to-be-openly-racist>

ix <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-5g-conspiracy-theories-michael-gove-a9447576.html>

x <http://www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus-half-million-shoddy-face-masks-among-surge-virus-related-scams-and-illegal-goods>

xi <http://www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus-half-million-shoddy-face-masks-among-surge-virus->

[related-scams-and-illegal-goods](#)

xii <https://www.local.gov.uk/civility-public-life>

xiii <http://www.local.gov.uk/sigce>

xiv <https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-intimidation>