

Tackling Online Abuse: Written evidence submitted by Royal Mencap Society on 13/10/2021 (TOA0015)

About Royal Mencap Society and learning disability

We support the 1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK and their families. We fight to change laws and improve health and care services as well as access to education and employment.

A learning disability is caused by the way the brain develops before, during or shortly after birth. It is always lifelong and affects intellectual and social development.

About this consultation response

We welcome the Petition Committee's inquiry and its continued efforts to keep this important work progressing. We supported the findings from the Committee's previous inquiry into *Online Abuse and the experience of disabled people* which together with the Law Commission has said that the current law on online abuse is not fit for purpose and needs reform in order to protect disabled people.

At Mencap we know that being online and using social media can be a great way for people with a learning disability to connect with others and build positive friendships and relationships which can often be difficult in a society where sadly many are not included and can be isolated.

However, we also know that many have had negative experiences online including abusive messages, scamming and grooming.

This mixed picture has not changed during the past year and we have concerns that the greater use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic has potentially exposed more people with a learning disability to abuse, scamming and grooming.

While social media providers have taken some steps towards being more active in responding to complaints and reports of abusive content, there is still room for improvement in making the process more accessible and removing abusive content quicker.

In responding to the White Paper consultation, Mencap undertook a short piece of research to better understand the views and hear the experiences of people with a learning disability. This included two surveys of 46 and 67 people and the findings from these are used throughout our submission.

We broadly welcome the intentions of the Online Safety Bill which could play an important role in helping people with a learning disability stay safe online and report harmful content.

Progress in last year

The COVID-19 pandemic has showed the growing importance of social media in the social lives of an increasing number of people, including people with a learning

disability. Lockdowns, shielding and self-isolation have forced many people to begin utilizing social media or increase the use of it to remain in contact with friends and family.

Added to this has been the drive to move services, such as GP appointments, online meaning that people are now almost required to have some form of technology to connect to the services they have for years attended in person.

These developments have shown that more needs to be done to increase access to technology and social media for groups that have tended to be more socially isolated such as people with a learning disability. But this must be done in tandem with better education and reporting processes to ensure that people with a learning disability can access and use social media safely.

Over the past year we are pleased to say that we have engaged with social media companies to begin addressing the issues of reporting and general accessibility. In particular Facebook and YouTube have sought to work constructively with us on making things better and we look forward to continuing this work.

Scale and impact of online abuse

Sadly, people with a learning disability tend to have fewer friends, are less likely to be in a relationship and have fewer opportunities for socialising than the general population.

Research from Scope in 2017 uncovered that a shocking 85% of young disabled adults from the 18-34 year old age group feel lonely.

As a result, over half of working age disabled people who have felt lonely in the past year said they experienced depression (62%) and anxiety (58%); and half (49%) experienced stress (Scope.org.uk. 2018).

Children with a learning disability usually have smaller social networks than children without a learning disability. In many cases their network is limited to close family and carers. Almost 1 in 3 young people with a learning disability told us that they spend less than 1 hour outside their home on a typical Saturday (Mencap, 2016).

Being online and social media can be a useful way of forming friendships and relationships.

Online abuse

Increasingly we are finding that people with a learning disability say they often feel uncomfortable online due to actual or potential abusive comments.

A number of respondents to our surveys said they felt that they have been bullied or have received nasty messages. One respondent told us:

“I do not enjoy being online. Because I find it hard to read and write I find it awkward to use things online. I prefer to talk to people face to face. Talking to people online makes me feel uncomfortable and like I am not in control. I think social media can be over the top sometimes with people fighting and making nasty comments online”

We have also heard from a number of families that their loved one has been targeted on social media by ‘vigilante’ groups. These groups tend to target vulnerable people living alone and the pattern that has emerged is one where the group establishes contact over social media with the individual pretending to be someone underage and then arrange a meeting.

In the examples we have seen the person with a learning disability doesn’t realise or understands the reference to the person being under-age, meaning they believe they are meeting with or going on a date with an adult.

At these meetings the group ambushes the person, usually filming the encounter. In videos we have seen, the group approaches and intimidates vulnerable people into admitting to a crime then these videos are posted on social media.

The targeting of vulnerable people based upon their disability over social media is unacceptable and the spreading of videos of these events over social media has the potential to ruin people’s lives regardless of the outcome of any investigation or court case.

We want to see strong action taken by the police and social media companies to prevent the targeting of vulnerable innocent individuals by these groups. Social media companies need to do more to remove videos and other content which seeks to label someone as a ‘paedophile’ or vilify them. The police need to have a better understanding of learning disability and the impact this has on individuals and an awareness of the actions of these groups.

Scams

An issue that was highlighted by a substantial number of respondents to our survey is that people with a learning disability have been scammed by people befriending them online and then grooming them in order to extract money.

Given that less than 6% of people with a learning disability known to social services are in paid employment and tend to have little in the way of savings, financial losses can be catastrophic.

Our survey highlighted a number of these cases of scamming which had occurred when people had tried online dating.

“I was on a dating & met someone who told me to communicate on WhatsApp. When I did they got my bank details & scammed me out of £800. .there’s a lot of adverts online that I’m always tempted to buy then get myself into debt. I sometimes get scammed through gaming or emails & finish up with a virus on my computer.”

A sibling described how her autistic brother was particularly vulnerable

“My brother says he likes being on line because there is so much interesting information and it is like an encyclopaedia. From my point of view and I am his sister and appointee I find the internet is a very very dangerous place for my brother. My brother lives in supported living. In other words he has his own flat and has a support team who come and visit him each day to provide support in learning how to live independently. The internet is extremely dangerous for someone like my brother. He is a vulnerable adult and as such would be easily taken in by people who would say for example - give me £100 and I will be your friend and other such things. I have had to put on a child protection software called NetNanny on his computer to stop him accessing content that is totally inappropriate and would affect his behaviour negatively he saw it.

This type of ‘befriending’ often referred to as ‘mate crime’ in the learning disability sector. In some cases it can extend beyond money to people being groomed for inappropriate images or sex. A respondent told us how:

“Someone threatened to hurt my family when I wouldn't send them a dirty picture.”

What has become clear through respondents is this scamming or grooming is not uncommon. It can be targeted, persistent, sophisticated and tragically life changing for the individual and have a significant impact on their loved ones.

A sibling wrote about the experience of her brother which encapsulates this.

“My brother was contacted by who he thought was the popstar Rita Ora. He had been tweeting about her and someone posing as the celebrity contacted him.

He sent photos of itunes vouchers worth £2000 as ‘Rita’ had said she desperately needed the money to buy her own records. In addition he was asked to give a further £600 to help ‘Rita’s’ mother.

He also gave them his address, his father’s address and sister’s address as well as details of when he was on holiday. He was also asked to collect a package from Lagos and pay for flights from the USA for her.

He earns the minimum wage and works 1.5 hours a day (6.30-8am) – he cleans a supermarket before it opens - so this money represented months of work as well as money left to him by his mother.

The police took no action despite us reporting, although a Police Community Support Officer did keep an eye on his home while he was away on holiday. We contacted Rita Ora’s agent who did succeed in closing some of the accounts down.

He’s now had to promise his father not to use Instagram or Twitter. My father is looking into setting up some sort of trust so that he will not have access to large sums of money in the future. So basically, it has changed the shape of his life because it’s clear we can’t keep him safe. The real pain that it caused was he genuinely thought he was dating Rita Ora and that she loved him. He’s heart broken and was depressed for months.”

Scams such as the one described above are having a profound impact on people with a learning disability and have the potential to devastate lives. Social media companies have sophisticated methods to detect copyright infringements and other violations. We believe this same level of attention should be given to detecting scams targeted at vulnerable people.

Making complaints systems accessible

People with a learning disability tell us that routes for raising concerns and registering complaints are often not accessible. In response to questions regarding the accessibility in reporting online abuse and bullying, Amy Clarke, Digital Assistant at Mencap, gave evidence to the Petitions Committee as part of said the above mention inquiry. She said:

“[Social media companies] can make it more obvious how you report abuse. There should put a big button to report abuse and make sure it’s accessible and easy to use. In my experience, it took ages for them to get back to me as well. If you report something, they should get back to you quicker, but also have a number to call to speak to someone. Not everyone is good with using emails so it is good to have someone to speak to.”

We remain concerned at the lack of easy read information in the reporting system and the difficulty in reaching someone to speak with over the phone. Easy read information is a way of communicating, using jargon free, simple to understand text and accompanying images. While we continue to have discussions with social media companies on this issue, more action is needed to ensure that people with a learning disability, carers and families have the skills, knowledge and support to keep themselves as safe as possible online.

Government proposals to tackle this through the Online Safety Bill

Duty of care

The introduction of a ‘duty of care’ on companies to regulate and remove harmful content is a welcome step. This could help tackled some of the issues mentioned above through introducing accessible and consistent reporting systems so that people with a learning disability can report potentially harmful content and have the confidence that this will be dealt with quickly and fairly by the platform.

Regulator

The new regulator, expected to be Ofcom, will play an important role in implementing the intention of this legislation through creating Codes of Practice. It is important that the process to create the Codes of Practice is accessible and takes an approach of co-creation with people with a learning disability, families and carers. We also hope that this work will sit alongside an increase in engagement between social media companies and people with a learning disability, families and carers.

Education

We welcome the Government's intention to publish an 'online media literacy strategy' in 'Spring 2021' and we hope that the strategy's development will continue to involve people with a learning disability, families and carers to ensure it will meet people's needs.

The additional duties being placed on the regulation (Ofcom) to promote media literacy is also welcome, and as above it is crucial that any initiatives or campaigns are co-produced and co-delivered with people with a learning disability to ensure their accessibility and maximise their impact. Additionally, it is important that social media companies work with Ofcom on media literacy programmes. While Ofcom will oversee 'industry activity' we hope that further measures around requiring companies to engage with media literacy programmes will be considered. A more joined up approach to media literacy will enable people with a learning disability have access to education materials regardless of their age or what platforms they may be using.