

Tackling Online Abuse: Written evidence submitted by Protection Approaches on 13/08/2020 (TOA0018)

Executive Summary

1. Prejudice has become mainstream in the UK and the internet is the latest means through which it is exploited, driving identity-based violence (IBV). The Government's 2019 Online Harms White Paper sought to examine the ways 'online harms' could be combatted and regulated. While Protection Approaches welcome commitments to digital regulation and internet citizenship education, we are concerned solutions to online harms and abuse remain too focused upon the online sphere, where dangerous and divisive behaviour is most clearly seen, rather than on the causes of that behaviour. We advocate a preventative approach rather than one of firefighting.
2. We support the findings earlier this year of the Commons DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation which concluded that strategies to respond to the impact of online abuse on internet users, including disabled people, the LGTB+ community and other marginalised groups, must not be confined to the online space.¹ Attention should also be given to the offline contexts within which online harms arise, and the offline actions that can demonstrably contribute to reducing risks online.²
3. **Although the internet is the latest method used to spread hate and drive division, strong offline communities are integral to both offline and online social cohesion. We present the case that online and tech-based efforts to tackle online abuse - including intimidation, hate speech, incitement to violence, misinformation, conspiracy, disinformation, and their impacts – must also be matched by investments in offline activities such as education-based and community-building interventions.**

About Protection Approaches

4. Protection Approaches is the UK's leading organisation working to predict and prevent identity-based violence, from hate crime to violent extremism and genocide. Protection Approaches is registered charity in England and Wales, charity number 1171433 For more information please see www.protectionapproaches.org.
5. This submission was prepared by Nasyah Bandoh, and Dr. Kate Ferguson, Co-Executive Director, all at Protection Approaches. Ms. Bandoh is a communities and policy analyst with a BA in Modern History and Politics from Royal Holloway, University of London. She is a volunteer with the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London and at #WOKEWeekly as a Discussions Coordinator, facilitating debates centred around and beyond Black communities. Dr. Ferguson is an experienced analyst in the fields of atrocity prevention, violent extremism, and civilian protection. She has published widely about communications-based strategies to reduce violence and has advised governments in the UK, US and elsewhere on counter-extremism policy. She is Chair of Policy at the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, University of Leeds and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia. She is a member of the Centre for Science & Policy's Network for Evidence and Expertise at the University of Cambridge. Dr. Ferguson holds a PhD from UEA and an M.Phil in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Oxford.

¹ Protection Approaches, [Written Evidence to the Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation: Online Harms and Disinformation Inquiry](#), April 2020; House of Commons DCMS Committee, [Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic](#), p.34, July 2020

² Dr Kate Ferguson, [Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies](#), March 2016

6. For further details about this submission please contact.

Online harms and identity-based violence (IBV)

7. As part of our 2019 'A Gathering Storm' series, Protection Approaches conducted two national social attitudes surveys to assess the risks of identity-based violence in the UK.³ Our research showed that prejudice towards minorities has become mainstream. There is a relationship between the apparent normalisation of abusive, divisive, and exclusionary commentary in both public and political spheres, and the rise in IBV. This has been exacerbated by a weakened confidence in the political establishment post-Brexit.
8. The internet has become the latest means by which prejudice is exploited and created, driving IBV. The Commission for Countering Extremism 2019 report *Challenging Hateful Extremism* stated social media platforms and the internet have become 'key tools' for extremists, with disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories reaching 'countless people in an unprecedented way'.⁴ This is supported by evidence from the APPG on Hate Crime who stated children and young people were particularly vulnerable to hate crime 'through absorbing harmful online content' in their *How do we Build Community Cohesion when Hate Crime is on the Rise?* report.⁵ This report also drew attention to the overlap between the digital and physical realms can have real consequences, pointing to the tragic murder of Labour MP Jo Cox in June 2016. For this reason, the APPG described the online world as "a fertile breeding ground for hate crime and acts of speech which are hateful and/or seek to encourage violence".
9. The COVID pandemic has, in many ways, brought communities closer together. The New Local Government Network described mutual aid groups as an 'indispensable part' of the UK's COVID response.⁶ Numerous social attitude surveys underline the fact that the shared experience of lockdown has sparked unprecedented levels of neighbourly connection.⁷ But as experts in identity-based violence, we know that in times of social, political or economic crisis the risks of marginalisation and division increase; and we know that the most vulnerable groups – including minority groups - too often pay the greatest price. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated these existing challenges.
10. While for some the pandemic has ushered in feelings of increased togetherness, many of the communities we work with including Chinese, Asian, and Black community partners have documented rising anxieties and increasing incidents of hate-based abuse both online and offline during this period. There has been a rise in COVID-related hate-based incidents in the UK. Our local partners, including Chinese and East Asian civil society organisations, are communicating rising incidence of hate crimes, particularly against their elderly and disabled. Other organisations within our network have also expressed concerns about rising online and offline abuse against Black communities following the latest wave of support for the Black Lives Matter movement and comments blaming certain groups for the continued spread of the virus.⁸ These concerning trends are matched by warnings from our partners in the Metropolitan police and local councils who are also recording rising levels of hate crime, community and neighbour disagreements, and tensions on the community level.

³ Protection Approaches, [A Gathering Storm?: Assessing the risks of identity-based violence in Britain](#), March 2019

⁴ Commission for Countering Extremism, [Challenging Hateful Extremism](#), October 2019

⁵ APPG on Hate Crime, [How do we Build Community Cohesion when Hate Crime is on the Rise?](#), 2019

⁶ NLGN, [Communities vs. Coronavirus: Rise of Mutual Aid](#), July 2020

⁷ Esther Addley, [Making up with the Joneses...](#), Guardian, 5 June 2020

⁸ Ian Payne, [Muslim and BAME communities not taking coronavirus pandemic seriously, Tory MP says](#), LBC, 31 July 2020

11. Other groups experiencing COVID-related and COVID-exacerbated hate, both online and offline, include LGBT+ communities. According to the LGBT Foundation, between the beginning of the UK's lockdown and 27 May 2020, their helplines received a 450 per cent increase in calls about biphobia, 100 per cent increase in transphobia calls, and a 52 per cent increase in reports of homophobia.⁹
12. **The pandemic has ushered in feelings of togetherness while also exacerbating pre-existing trends regarding the normalisation of identity-based violence and hate. Responses to the pandemic including national lockdown measures and social distancing have meant the threats posed by the virus to social cohesion have played out in the online space. However, many are ill-equipped to navigate these new and existing challenges, particularly at times of high stress – and high screen time. Low offline social resilience impacts the safety of our online spaces. The challenges driving online abuse are societal not technical; the prevention of online abuse therefore requires people-oriented solutions.**

Offline solutions to online harms

13. It is evident that new forms of media and communication can serve as a conduit for the divisions we are witnessing in our world today, and so pose a real threat to social cohesion. Yet, as Protection Approaches made clear to the Commons DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation, little attention – if any at all – has been given to how ‘offline solutions’ alongside the proposed online measures could contribute to the tackling of online abuse and other harms.¹⁰
14. The Government's Online Harms White Paper has been welcomed by practitioners, civil society, charities and stakeholders concerned about the safety of the online space. The paper examined how the regulation of the internet and tech company practices might be effective in the reduction of ‘online harms’. Some of the conclusions drawn included establishing a regulatory framework tackling a broad range of harms; the development of a safety framework and support for innovation in safety technologies and a coordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education for children, young people, and adults. However, online spaces and harms are rooted in and reflect offline communities. Therefore, to limit interventions to prevent online abuse to digital strategies would represent a failure to comprehensively and effectively address the issue of online abuse and harms.
15. **We recommend that these online strategies are matched by an investment in offline interventions that reduce vulnerability to perpetrating harmful behavior online. We argue that offline solutions to online harms remain too frequently absent from policy and civil society efforts to respond to the growing challenge of online abuse and other online harms.**
16. We are concerned that the discourse of how to combat online harms rests upon unproven assumptions that online communities are replacing offline communities; that online behavior can be influenced by online interventions; and that communications-based challenges require communications-based solutions.

⁹ LGBT Foundation, ‘[Since the UK went into lockdown...](#)’, Twitter, 27 May 2020

¹⁰ [Written Evidence to the Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation: Online Harms and Disinformation Inquiry](#)

17. We are likewise concerned that the growing emphasis on internet regulation and internet citizenship has unintentionally led to a de-prioritisation of offline, in-person community building and school-based educational strategies which equip young people with the tools they need to navigate a complex online world. Protection Approaches' March 2020 national teachers' survey showed that educators want resources focused on building resilience against mis- and disinformation, including divisive online content.¹¹ The DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation share this concern, recommending Her Majesty's Government invest in offline interventions that encourage resilience against online harms and abuse, while bringing together citizenship, health and relationships education.¹²
18. No amount of blocking or reporting of content will be sufficient to protect the public at large from the scale of this challenge. Concerns about online radicalisation, abuse and identity-based violence are not new. But lessons must be learnt from the limited and sometimes harmful impact communications-based approaches to 'countering' violent and abusive content online can have. Studies continue to show that community building, one-on-one dialogue, and education have long-lasting preventative and positive impacts while there is little evidence that strategic communications, counter narratives, advertising campaigns, and blocking are effective.¹³
19. Our responses - whether tech-based or in-person - to online harms and the challenges of harmful content, need to be informed by a 'real life' community-based preventative framework that works backwards from the perspectives of the wrong-doer, in order to interrupt the processes that encourage that behaviour.
20. **An 'offline approach' to online harms should never replace or supersede technological activities aimed to protect people from online abuse or harmful content but should be pursued concurrently and intersectionally.**

Recommendations

21. We therefore recommend the Committee considers taking evidence from civil society and HMG relating to offline solutions to online harms and abuse, including but not limited to:
 - a. **Publish a media literacy strategy:** as called for by the DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation, we would like the Government to expedite the publishing of its media literacy strategy, in time for the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year. We believe such a strategy would be a key step in mitigating the impact of misinformation, and online abuse and harms during these times of high stress and high screen time.
 - b. **Offline and online community building:** The most effective and long-term way to tackle harmful online content and abuse is building strong, resilient communities both online and offline. 82 per cent of secondary school and college educators expressed a desire for resources dedicated to recognising and building resilience against 'fake news' and divisive online content.¹⁴ However, such solutions to online harms will only be effective together with offline responses that provide teachers and local grass roots organisations with the resources and skills needed to encourage positive real-life, interpersonal debate - the civic skills young people will need to navigate controversy and ambiguity throughout life. In this way, young people and adults can be better equipped to think critically about information and develop community resilience to hate – as perpetrators and victims

¹¹ Protection Approaches, [Building resilience through education](#), May 2020

¹² [Misinformation in the COVID-19 Infodemic](#)

¹³ [Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies](#); Michael Jones, [Assessing Communications-Based Activities to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism](#), RUSI, 7 August 2020

¹⁴ Protection Approaches, [What educators say: how can we support educators during and after Covid-19](#), May 2020

- c. **Regarding hate, division and identity-based violence in general:** while online harms and abuse have not been created by COVID-19, they have certainly been exacerbated by the pandemic. Moments of acute crisis increase the risks of identity-based violence and prejudice. Any response to tackling online abuse against vulnerable groups and online harms more broadly must also recognise the increased risks of division and identity-based violence caused by the pandemic. The Covid-19 crisis has given us all opportunity to remember what is most important; family, community, and the interconnected nature of a society. The government should use this moment to refocus attention and resources on those most vulnerable in our society, recognising that stronger, inclusive, intersectional, equal, and empathetic societies are not just nice to have but benefit us all.