

# Submission

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# Online Harms White paper

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## Local Government Association (LGA) consultation response

The LGA is the national voice of local government, working with councils to support, promote and improve. We are a politically-led, cross-party membership organisation that works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

### Summary

The LGA supports the Government's undertaking to address the abuse and exploitation of our online environment and social media through the creation of duty of care on online platforms, the creation of codes of practice, and the role of a regulator in monitoring and enforcing compliance. Whilst the internet and social media has undoubtable enriched our lives, councils have a strong interest in making our online environment safe and should be regarded as important stakeholders in the development of this policy. This is because:

- 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, and this must be tackled on a local to national to international level.
- Councils have a responsibility for the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, as well as for suicide prevention. The internet has created a new and harder to monitor space for abuse and bullying. Social media has provided a platform for the sharing of harmful images and information affecting self-esteem, self-image and mental health.
- 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 also made individuals more traceable and accessible, raising safety issues for those fleeing from domestic abuse.

- Councils have responsibilities around tackling addiction and other public-harm issues through their public health functions, and there is increasing evidence that social media can become addictive and harmful. We have also seen it used as an additional gambling platform, enticing young and vulnerable people without adequate safeguards for their protection.
- Councils are concerned about the increase in online hate crime against our communities and against our vulnerable residents.
- The spread of misinformation on the internet includes stories around councils and council services. This can lead to mistrust in our public services.
- Councillors are experiencing online intimidation, abuse and threats against them, which in turn is putting prospective councillors and candidates off from standing. This is undermining the integrity of our democracy. Women, those from BAME groups, members of our LGBT+ community and those with disabilities are being particularly targeted, and the current police advice to remove their social media presence curtails the ability of these candidates to campaign using this platform – in effect hampering them from gaining public office and affecting our democracy and equality.

### **Specific points**

The LGA would like to see Government go further in some areas. We would like to recommend that:

- The proposed online media literacy strategy goes further to embrace the principles of digital citizenship and good public discourse.
- The regulatory framework should be extended to children's mental safety as well as physical safety, as abuse is not always physical.
- There is a more consistent and serious police response to the online intimidation and harassment of those in public office.
- Action to protect MPs from harassment and abuse includes protections for local councillors.

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