

House of Commons

Petitions Committee

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# **Online abuse and the experience of disabled people: draft recommendations for consultation**

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**First Special Report of Session 2017–19**

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by authority of the House of Commons

## **Petitions Committee**

The Petitions Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider e-petitions submitted on [petition.parliament.uk](https://petition.parliament.uk) and public (paper) petitions presented to the House of Commons.

### **Current membership**

Helen Jones MP (*Labour, Warrington North*)  
(Chair)

Martyn Day MP (*Scottish National Party, Linlithgow and East Falkirk*)

Michelle Donelan MP (*Conservative, Chippenham*)

Steve Double MP (*Conservative, St Austell and Newquay*)

Luke Hall MP (*Conservative, Thornbury and Yate*)

Mike Hill MP (*Labour, Hartlepool*)

Catherine McKinnell MP (*Labour, Newcastle upon Tyne North*)

Damien Moore MP (*Conservative, Southport*)

Paul Scully MP (*Conservative, Sutton and Cheam*)

Liz Twist MP (*Labour, Blaydon*)

Daniel Zeichner MP (*Labour, Cambridge*)

## **Powers**

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 145A. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

## **Publications**

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website and in print by Order of the House.

## **Committee staff**

The current staff of the Committee are Anne-Marie Griffiths (Clerk), Samir Setti (Second Clerk), Kate Anderson (Petitions and Communications Manager), Emma McIntosh

(Petitions and Engagement Manager), Zoe Hays (Senior Committee Assistant), Shane Pathmanathan (Petitions Moderation Officer), Katherine Gammie (Enquiries and Engagement Assistant), Khadijah J Khatun (Committee Support Assistant) and Mark Jenner (Media Officer).

## **Contacts**

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Petitions Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 4272; the Committee's email address is [hcenquiries@parliament.uk](mailto:hcenquiries@parliament.uk).

## Special Report

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Our inquiry into online abuse and the experience of disabled people was prompted by a petition by Katie Price, signed by more than 200,000 people. Her petition calls for a specific criminal offence to cover online abuse and a register of offenders. It talks about online abuse directed at people from all backgrounds, but also highlights the shocking abuse directed at her disabled son, Harvey.

Parliament and Government have looked at whether abuse on social media requires new laws and different approaches to enforcement and regulation. We did not want to replicate the excellent work done by our colleagues on other Committees, but Ms Price's petition raised an issue that seemed in danger of being lost in the conversation—the experience of disabled people online.

Ms Price has five children. Four of her children are white and able-bodied. One of her children,

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Harvey, is biracial and has multiple disabilities. It is surely no coincidence that it is Harvey who suffers a torrent of online abuse.

In our inquiry, we have come across some examples of good practice in attempting to meet the needs of disabled people and their families. More often, though, we found that disabled people were not being consulted or even considered. This was particularly apparent in the very disappointing evidence we received from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and heard from social media companies. We do not intend to make the mistake of ignoring disabled people here.

We release our draft recommendations as a special report to allow us to consult disabled people and their families. These draft recommendations come from our conversations with and evidence from disabled people, the police, social media companies and legal experts. We will consult online and offline in

August and September 2018 to ensure that our final recommendations have the support of disabled people and their families.

This is the first time a House of Commons Select Committee has run a full consultation on its recommendations.

We are grateful to Ms Price for bringing this issue to Parliament and allowing us to amplify disabled people's voices.

An Easy Read version of these recommendations will also be made available.

## Annex

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### Overview

Katie Price's petition, and our inquiry, have highlighted the specific problems faced by disabled people online. We agree with Ms Price that the laws around online abuse are not clear and need urgent attention from the Government. The Law Commission and Committees of both Houses have already made strong recommendations on this and it's time for the Government to act.

The Government has not acknowledged the problems faced by disabled people online in its work on online safety. The absence of disabled people's voices from its internet safety strategy is shocking. For too long disabled people have not been included in the conversations about online abuse. We are pleased that the petition has brought online abuse and the experiences of disabled people and their families to Parliament. We hope that the inquiry will be



a wakeup call to the Government. They must ensure that the voices of disabled people are always heard.

With the Internet Safety Strategy, the Government appears to have started making steps towards acting, but we expect the Government to go much further to ensure that the internet is no more dangerous for those with disabilities than those without. We were very disappointed to hear about how little the Government had engaged with disabled people.

**1) The Government needs to acknowledge the importance of the internet to disabled people and commit to ensuring that the internet is no more dangerous for those with disabilities than those without. The Government must ensure that the voices of disabled people are included at the heart of its discussions about online safety.**

## Consultation and inclusion

Given the particular needs of disabled people, we are shocked that the Government failed to consult disabled people fully about its Internet Safety Strategy. Failing to even have these conversations with disabled people is sadly the norm rather than the exception. It must become second nature to the Government and other organisations to include disabled people's voices.

**2) We expect the Government to include disabled people explicitly in all consultations, including on digital strategy. All consultations must be accessible to all disabled people, including adults with learning disabilities.**

## Social media companies

Social media companies have been neglecting the needs of their disabled users for too long. When we heard from representatives of social

media companies, it was clear that our inquiry had prompted them to think more carefully about the needs of disabled people than they had before. We were disappointed that some of them didn't even seem to know what "Easy Read" is. Social media companies now need to take urgent action to tackle abuse of disabled people on their platforms.

**3) Social media companies should be required to ensure that terms and conditions, community standards, account policies and other forms of guidance are accessible to all disabled people, including people with learning disabilities. That includes Easy Read versions of all relevant policies.**

**4) Social media companies should be required to ensure that systems for reporting abuse or other concerns and**

**setting privacy and other preferences are accessible to all disabled people, including adults with learning disabilities.**

**5) Social media companies should be required to demonstrate that they have consulted and worked in partnership with disabled people when developing their policies and processes.**

## **The law**

We agree with Katie Price that the current law on online abuse and hate crime is not fit for purpose. This is particularly worrying when it comes to hate crimes against disabled people. Hate crime laws do not treat all protected characteristics equally. Under current laws, it is a crime to incite hatred because of religion or race, but not disability. Guidelines, codes and strategies can only go so far. The Law Commission reviewed hate crime laws in 2016, but the Government has still not responded to its recommendations. Although we welcome the

recent announcement of a Law Commission review into offensive online communications, we are concerned that the Government may again fail to act.

**6) The Government should make it a specific crime to incite hatred because of disability.**

**7) We heard again and again that the law around online abuse and hate crime is not well understood, either by the police or disabled people themselves. It is not enough to repeat “what is illegal online is illegal offline”. With the Law Commission review already taking place, the Government will soon have all the information needed to make appropriate changes. We expect the Government to commit to bringing forward legislation by 2020.**

**8) Katie Price’s petition calls for a “register of offenders”. We don’t agree that a separate database, similar to the sex offenders register, is needed. However, the**

**Government should look at different ways to enable employers to find out if a person has been convicted of online abuse.**

### **Reporting and recording disability hate crime**

We welcome the work that police forces, the CPS and Ministry of Justice have done to improve the experiences of disabled people when reporting crimes or acting as witnesses, but more can and should be done.

**9) The Government must conduct a full review into the experience of people with learning disabilities reporting crime or giving evidence. In particular, it must develop an action plan to ensure that the appropriate training and procedures are in place so that that adults with learning disabilities are treated as “reliable witnesses”.**

**10) We heard concerns about how the “vulnerability” designation and the “motivated with hostility towards the victim’s disability” designation affects accurate reporting and recording of crimes against disabled people and sentencing of the perpetrators. The Government must look at how useful designations are for crimes against disabled people and vulnerable disabled people and the impact this has on recording of, and sentencing decisions about, hate crimes towards disabled people.**

### **Sharing best practice and guidance**

We heard some excellent examples of local projects to tackle online abuse, but there is some evidence that practice is uneven and effective initiatives are not being shared. It’s time for the Government to ensure that best practice is celebrated and acted on nationally.

**11) Individual police forces are demonstrating some encouraging practice**

**in dealing with crimes against disabled people and online abuse and in working in partnership with disabled people.**

**The Government must make sure that every frontline police officer receives the necessary training to ensure that disabled people have equal access to, and treatment in, the criminal justice system.**

**12) A disappointingly high proportion of online abuse towards disabled people is committed by young people. Educating children about disability and the effects of online bullying and abuse of disabled people in particular must become mandatory, not optional, in schools.**

**13) We have heard that some disabled people need support to get and stay online. Support workers need guidance to help them to identify abuse of adults with learning disabilities. The Department for Health and Social Care should develop**



**guidance to help families and support workers identify and manage cases of hate crime and online abuse.**

### **Mate crime**

For adults with learning disabilities, online abuse may also include so-called “mate crime”, when people with learning disabilities are befriended by someone who uses the relationship to exploit or abuse them. This can lead to financial, physical and sexual abuse. “Mate crime” and the exploitation that stems from it is largely overlooked by the Government. Disabled people have the same rights as everyone else to make unwise decisions, but that in no way lessens the Government’s responsibility to ensure that people are safe from abuse and exploitation. Social media and online dating sites have increased the exposure of vulnerable disabled people to those who might exploit them.

**14) The Government should develop an action plan to address so-called “mate**

**crime” on and offline. This should include working with social media companies and online dating websites to identify and tackle mate crime.**

## Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 17 July 2018**

Members present:

Helen Jones, in the Chair

Martyn Day

Mike Hill

Steve Double

Liz Twist

Luke Hall

Daniel Zeichner

Draft Special Report (*Online abuse and the experience of disabled people: draft recommendations for consultation*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Special Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 8 read and agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Special Report be the First Special Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 4 September at 4:00pm