



Department
of Health &
Social Care

Jonathan Stevens

Assistant Coroner for the
Coroner area of Inner North London
St Pancras Coroners Court
Camley Street
London
N1C 4PP

22 May 2022

Dear Mr Stevens,

Thank you for your correspondence of 23 November 2021, regarding the tragic death of Berenice Nadika Bell. Every suicide is an absolute tragedy, and we must do all we can to prevent suicides as far as possible. Preventing suicide is an extremely important part of my portfolio, and I am grateful to you for bringing this issue to my attention.

I would also like to echo colleagues across Government in extending my sympathies to Ms Bell's family and friends.

Regarding your first concern, it is true that suicide is the leading cause of death in the UK amongst people aged 20-34¹, this is a concerning statistic and highlights the importance of doing all that we can to support individuals who may be experiencing harmful or suicidal thoughts. Every suicide is a preventable loss, and I assure you that it remains a priority for the Government and for me personally, that we take action to reduce suicide rates as far as possible through the National Suicide Prevention Strategy².

We recognise the devastating impact that exposure to harmful pro-suicide and self-harm content can have on those who view it. I am also extremely concerned by how easily accessible, currently, this type of content is, and particularly the pro-suicide websites which seek to normalise and promote suicide amongst users.

¹ ONS, Leading causes of death, UK: 2001 to 2018, March 2020

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/articles/leadingcausesofdeathuk/2001to2018>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-strategy-for-england>

You mentioned in your report that Ms Bell's family have discovered other parents whose children had viewed harmful pro-suicide content online before they took their own life. Unfortunately, I too have heard of tragic cases of people who have engaged with harmful material online prior to their death. These sites are often pivotal in the spread of information on suicide methods and entirely undermine suicide and self-harm prevention efforts.

The Government is committed to tackling this and making the UK the safest place in the world to be online. I understand that my Right Hon. Friend Nadine Dorries, Secretary of State for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) has already responded to your report, setting out the Government's ambitions for the Draft Online Safety Bill, and specifically how we envision this legislation will protect users online. The Bill has recently been subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee, and we expect the Bill to be introduced into Parliament shortly.

We will continue to work closely across government, including with colleagues at DCMS, to understand the impact of the forthcoming legislation on harmful suicide and self-harm content and where we might be able to go further.

However, I am also aware that the implementation of legislation takes time, during which individuals, some of whom may be experiencing harmful or suicidal thoughts, will potentially be exposed to extremely harmful and inciting online content. In advance of the legislation coming into force, we are working with online platforms to encourage action to remove or reduce access to harmful suicide and self-harm material. In addition, there are a broad range of further measures taking place to tackle online harms, including our continued partnership with the Samaritans as set out in DCMS's response, and cross-government working to make beneficial changes now such as embedding signposting to support services.

As set out in the DCMS's response, in July 2021, the Law Commission published a report following their review of harmful online communications. This report recommended the introduction of a new criminal offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm, which would relate to both online and offline communications³. We will be working closely with DCMS, the Ministry of Justice, and stakeholders, over the coming months, as the Government formally responds to the Law Commission recommendation and develops any potential new offence.

Alongside our work on tackling online harms, we are also currently investing an additional £57million in suicide prevention by 2023/24 through the NHS Long Term Plan⁴. This will see investment in all areas of the country to support local suicide prevention plans and the development of suicide bereavement services. This is part of the additional £2.3billion a year that we are investing into mental health services by 2023/24, which will ensure more people have access to vital mental health services.

³ Modernising Communications Offences: A final report <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/2021/07/Modernising-Communications-Offences-2021-Law-Com-No-399.pdf>

⁴ NHS Long Term Plan (2019) <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/nhs-long-term-plan-version-1.2.pdf>

The additional funding will both directly and indirectly support suicide prevention efforts.

I hope this response is helpful. Thank you for bringing these concerns to my attention.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gillian Keegan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gillian" being more prominent and the last name "Keegan" following in a similar style.

GILLIAN KEEGAN