∞ Meta

Mr A Walker
HM Senior Coroner North London
Barnet Coroner's Court
29 Wood Street
Barnet
EN5 4BE

By email

6 December 2022

Dear Coroner

Inquest touching upon the death of Molly Russell: Response to Regulation 28 Report to Prevent Future Deaths

1. Meta Platforms Ireland Limited[1] ("**Meta**") writes in response to the Regulation 28 Report to Prevent Future Deaths (the "**Regulation 28 Report**") dated 13 October 2022, made following the inquest into the death of Molly Russell (the "**Inquest**"). At the outset, we wish to again express our deepest sympathies to Molly Russell's family and friends for their loss.

2. Meta has carefully considered the evidence given to the Inquest, particularly the evidence given by Mr Russell, and the concerns raised in the Regulation 28 Report. We are committed to providing a positive experience on Instagram, especially for teenagers, and to continually taking steps to develop our policies, tools and technology in consultation with experts. Meta has engaged in the development of the UK Online Safety Bill from the outset, and will continue to do so. We support the Government's focus on suicide and self harm content within the Online Safety Bill, recognising how complex this issue is, and we welcome the Government's guidance on how to strike the balance between allowing for mental health dialogue and preventing people from seeing content on our platforms which may be sensitive. There is always more to be done in this space, and we will continue to carefully reflect on the views of the Coroner and the Russell family on these difficult issues.

---

[1] Although the Regulation 28 Report was addressed to "Meta Platforms, 1 Hacker Way, Menlo Park, California, CA 94025", Meta Platforms Ireland Limited is the relevant entity which operates and controls the Instagram service in the UK and which had Interested Person status in the Inquest. The Regulation 28 Report was therefore provided to, and this response is provided by, Meta Platforms Ireland Limited.

1

Matters of concern

3. We note that the Regulation 28 Report refers to six matters of concern in relation to "online sites" and "platforms". We respond to each of the six matters raised with respect to the Instagram platform. Given the interlinked nature of certain matters, some are addressed jointly below.

Separate platforms for children and adults (Concern 1); *controlling content so as to be age-specific* (Concern 3):

4. Meta's Terms of Use prohibit people under the age of 13 from using Instagram and our platforms are designed for use by people aged 13 and over. This is in line with legislation and guidance in the US, Europe, and the UK on privacy and data processing, including the UK General Data Protection Regulation.[2]

5. Providing a safe, positive and inclusive environment for all of the people who use our apps is of paramount importance. We design our policies and services, including our Community Standards and Community Guidelines (hereafter our "**Content Policies**") which define what content is and is not permitted on our platforms, with our youngest users in mind. These policies seek to balance freedom of expression alongside other important values, such as safety, privacy and dignity. We work hard to enforce our Content Policies and use a combination of ever-advancing technology, user reports and human reviewers to detect and remove content that violates them. Meta has also implemented Recommendation Guidelines (discussed further below) in conjunction with leading experts, through which we work to avoid recommending content (for example, on the "Explore" surface) that could be sensitive or inappropriate for younger users.

6. While Meta does not currently provide separate platforms for adults and teenagers in the UK, Instagram provides a tailored experience for teenage account holders. As a result, a teenager's experience on Instagram is different from that of an adult in a number of ways (in addition to the parental controls discussed further below). While we will continue to look for further opportunities to adapt our services to ensure teenage users have a positive and age-appropriate experience on Instagram, some of the most significant differences at present are:

    a. Users in the UK and the EU who tell us they are under 18 years old are defaulted into a "private" account when signing up to Instagram. For teenagers already on Instagram, we prompt them to review and update their account privacy settings. Private accounts provide users with greater control over who sees or responds to their content (which can only be seen by users who they allow to follow them).

---

[2] Article 8(1) of the UK GDPR.

∞ Meta

b. We have introduced the "Sensitive Content Control", which applies to all surfaces on Instagram where content or accounts are recommended.[3] As set out in our Recommendation Guidelines, we work to avoid recommending certain types of content to people. As part of this, the Sensitive Content Control seeks to provide users with some degree of choice over how much non-violating (i.e. does not violate our Content Policies) but potentially sensitive content is displayed to them on these surfaces. The Sensitive Content Control has only two options for teenagers: "Standard" and "Less". Whereas users aged 18 and over can select to see "More", we do not allow teenagers to access the less restrictive sensitivity settings. Additionally, teenagers under the age of 16 are defaulted into the "Less" option when signing up to Instagram. For teenagers already on Instagram, we send a prompt encouraging them to select the "Less" experience. This feature seeks to make it even more difficult for young people to come across content which does not violate our Content Policies but which could be sensitive.

c. We already work to limit the ability for users under the age of 18 to view certain categories of content, for example diet products, alcohol, and tobacco (this is called "age-gating"), and we are currently looking at expanding the types of content that we are able to age-gate.

d. We collaborated with experts to develop the "Take a Break" feature to encourage people, particularly teenagers, to make informed decisions about how they are spending their time on Instagram. All Instagram users have the ability to set reminders to take more breaks from using Instagram. These reminders show expert-backed tips to help users to reflect and reset. To make sure that users under the age of 18 are aware of this feature, we show them notifications suggesting they turn these reminders on. This feature builds on our existing "Daily Limit" feature, which allows people to see how much time they are spending on Instagram and set limits for how long they want to spend on Instagram each day. We are currently testing new tools that help teenagers reduce distractions and give them more ways to take time away from Instagram, and we hope to launch these to our community in the UK soon.

e. We have introduced an alternate topic nudge feature for teenagers in a number of countries, including the UK. On Instagram, teenagers are now shown notifications that encourage them to switch to a different topic if they have been dwelling on the same type of content on Explore. We designed this feature based in part on research which suggested that nudges could be effective for helping people, especially teenagers, to be more mindful about how they use social media.

f. We have implemented technology which seeks to limit teenagers under the age of 18 from receiving unwanted contact from adults. The technology identifies adult Instagram accounts which have displayed potentially suspicious behaviour and limits these accounts

---

[3] Instagram has a number of recommendation surfaces including the "Explore" and "Reels" (short videos) tabs, where users may be shown content from accounts that they do not already follow. The purpose of recommending content is to enable those who use our services to discover new communities and content that they might be interested in.

from following or interacting with users under the age of 18. We also work to avoid recommending content posted by teenagers' accounts to potentially suspicious accounts and prevent these accounts from being able to see comments from teenagers on other posts. Further, we do not allow potentially suspicious accounts which search for a specific username belonging to a teenager to then follow that teenager's account.

g. We work to restrict direct messaging between teenagers and adults by limiting users we identify as adults from sending direct messages to people we have identified as under 18 years old, where the teenager is not already following the adult's account. As an extra layer of protection, we are currently testing removing the "message" button on teenagers' Instagram accounts when the accounts are viewed by suspicious adults. Additionally, we prompt teenagers to be more cautious about interactions in direct messages by providing safety notices to this effect.

h. We have developed a number of tools so that teenagers can let us know if something makes them feel uncomfortable while using our apps, and we have recently introduced new notifications that encourage them to use these tools. For example, after a teenager blocks an account, we prompt them to report the account to us.

7. Consistent with our continued efforts to provide age-appropriate services, we have developed the Best Interests of the Child Framework[4] to be used during app and feature development. The framework helps us consider, and incorporate into the services we provide, guidance and principles from the Information Commissioner's Office's (the "**ICO**") Age-Appropriate Design Code ("**AADC**"), the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other children's rights groups. The framework includes six key considerations that our teams can consult to seek to ensure their work is rooted in global best practices and that our services support the well-being and rights of young people. We also recognise that to do this effectively, we must account for a range of different perspectives. We therefore incorporate a variety of views, including from teenagers and their parents and guardians, when designing our apps. An example of this process is the virtual co-design methodology employed in the development of Family Centre and Education Hub. Between December 2021 and October 2022, Meta and the Trust, Transparency and Control ("TTC") Labs[5] conducted co-design sessions with a diverse sample of teenagers and their parents/guardians, alongside consultations with external experts from government, nonprofit organisations and academics to help inform the development process. We will continue to evolve the guiding questions and resources in Meta's Best Interests of the Child Framework as we learn more through expert consultation, user research and co-design.

8. More broadly, we continue our engagements with experts in this space and our work to implement new tools and features which are designed to help ensure people have a safe and positive

---

[4] https://www.ttclabs.net/news/metas-best-interests-of-the-child-framework

[5] TTC Labs is a cross-industry effort initiated and supported by Meta to create innovative design solutions to give people more control over their privacy.

experience on our platforms. A recent example is the safety tools we announced in October 2022, which include: (i) allowing an individual, when blocking another user, to select to block other accounts they may have created, making it more difficult for that user to interact with them on Instagram; (ii) "nudging" users by sending them notifications which encourage them to pause and consider their response before replying to a comment that our systems tell us might be sensitive; and (iii) sending users a reminder to be respectful when sending direct messages to people who use creator accounts.[6]

Age verification when signing up to the online platform (Concern 2):

9. Understanding people's age online remains a complex, industry-wide challenge that requires thoughtful solutions to appropriately balance privacy, effectiveness, and fairness. Many people, particularly teenagers and people from underserved communities, do not have access to formal identification. As an industry, we have to explore novel and equitable ways to approach the dilemma of verifying age online that are not reliant on a form of identification. We have recently been testing new methods to verify age online and we are committed to continuing to work with governments, regulators, experts and others in our industry to develop clear and equitable solutions and guidance for age assurance online.

10. Meta recognises that there is no perfect solution to online age verification and we have therefore sought to develop a multi-layered approach to address this complex issue. Meta's Terms of Use have always prohibited people under the age of 13 from using Instagram and we have developed a number of methods to help to prevent people under the age of 13 from misrepresenting their age to use our platforms and to ensure those who do meet our minimum age requirement receive the appropriate experience for their age (these methods are summarised below):

    a. We require all users to enter their date of birth when they sign up to Instagram and have asked users who signed up prior to age being required in 2018 (for users in the UK and EU) to provide their age in order to continue using Instagram. We implement mechanisms in the user registration process to seek to prevent people under 13 from circumventing age restrictions. For example, if an individual tries to sign up using a date of birth which reflects that they are under 13, they receive a generic error message informing them that they cannot create an account. After two attempts at entering an underage date of birth, the individual is blocked from creating an account for a period of time.

    b. As well as seeking to deter people under 13 from creating an account, we also continue to work to improve the mechanisms we have in place to detect and remove underage accounts. Anyone (not just individuals who themselves have an Instagram account) can report suspected underage accounts to Instagram. When we become aware that an account may belong to an individual under the age of 13, we prohibit the user from

---

[6] Creator accounts are a type of professional (rather than personal) Instagram account.

accessing their Instagram account until they are able to demonstrate that they meet our minimum age requirement; if a user cannot demonstrate they are 13 or older within 30 days, their account is permanently disabled and removed from the platform. In the last two quarters of 2021, Meta removed 1.7 million accounts on Instagram globally because the users were unable or unwilling to demonstrate that they meet our minimum age requirement.

c. We have invested heavily in artificial intelligence models to help us estimate age. We use this technology to help us identify whether someone is an adult or a teenager and work to tailor their experience accordingly, for example, by restricting teenagers' interaction with potentially suspicious adults (as explained above). We are working to improve the accuracy of this technology and to deploy it in additional use cases as part of our ongoing efforts to provide our users with an age appropriate experience.

d. Meta continues to work to develop accessible, privacy-protective and technology-driven age assurance solutions. This year, we began partnering with online age-verification specialist Yoti to bring new age verification tools to Instagram. Now, when someone attempts to edit their date of birth from under the age of 18 to 18 or over, we require them to verify their age by selecting either to: (i) provide a video "selfie", with Yoti's face-based age prediction technology then predicting their age; or (ii) upload their identification documents. We are continuing to explore expanding these tools to new use cases.

***Algorithms are used to provide content together with adverts* (Concern 4):**

11. Along with most search engines, news websites, online marketplaces and websites, Meta uses technology, including algorithms,[7] in a number of ways, including to help us to remove content that violates our Content Policies and avoid recommending content that is contrary to our Recommendation Guidelines. Meta also uses content-ranking algorithms which aim to identify and show people content they are likely to find the most interesting by ordering the content on a user's Instagram feed and making recommendations of content and accounts.

12. Content-ranking is almost ubiquitous on the modern internet, due to the sheer volume of content available online and the need for users to be able to sort through and identify the most relevant information. Instagram uses many pieces of information (known as "signals") to rank content. Safety and security considerations are at the forefront of our decision-making processes at Meta, and we work to ensure we build safety and integrity measures into the algorithms we use.

13. Content which violates our Content Policies is not permitted on Instagram; we work hard to enforce these policies to seek to ensure that this content is not available to be ranked or recommended. Separately, Meta has published its Recommendation Guidelines which express at a high level the

---

[7] An algorithm being a formula or set of steps for solving a problem, and a standard tool used in computer programming.

types of content we work to avoid recommending. Our Recommendation Guidelines are designed to set a higher bar than our Content Policies, because recommended content comes from accounts that the user has not chosen to follow. Meta's algorithms are designed to apply these Recommendation Guidelines such that we avoid making recommendations that may be potentially sensitive, whilst respecting the rights of other users to express themselves by not removing such content from the platform entirely. As explained above, we have recently introduced an alternate topic nudge feature for teenagers that prompts them to switch to a different topic if they have been dwelling on content on the same topic on Explore.

14. We provide a number of mechanisms which enable users to control the content they see on Instagram surfaces. For example, users are able to report or "hide" content from their Instagram, included by unfollowing or "muting"[8] accounts. We also made changes to Instagram Feed to provide users with the choice to view a "Favourites" feed (which shows posts from accounts selected by the user as their "favourites") or a "Following" feed (which shows recent posts from accounts that a user follows). Both options display posts in reverse chronological order (i.e. without content ranking by algorithms).

15. With respect to advertisements, Meta takes extra precautions when providing advertisements to users under the age of 18 and has long restricted the type of advertisements that can be shown to teenagers on our platforms. For example, in the UK advertisers can only target advertisements to people under the age of 18 on the basis of age, gender and location. Moreover, we do not allow advertisements on certain topics such as alcohol, tobacco, weight loss or dating services to be shown to users under the age of 18 in the UK.

***Parental access to and control over material viewed* (Concern 5) *and linking of and monitoring of accounts by parents* (Concern 6):**

16. Meta has wide-ranging parental supervision and support tools in place today, and is committed to continuing to work in consultation with parents, teenagers and experts to seek to provide additional parental oversight and support features over time, and to explore more ways to both foster communication between parents and their teenagers and to support teenagers in having age-appropriate experiences online.

17. We recognise and support the important role that parents and guardians have to play in helping their teenagers navigate social media. We use expert and regulatory guidance to assist us with assessing the appropriate degree of parental supervision of teenagers' use of social media and how to balance privacy and parental oversight. For example, the ICO's AADC, which applies to online services likely to be accessed by children, cautions that *"children who are subject to persistent parental monitoring may have a diminished sense of their own private space which may affect the development of their sense of their own identity. This is particularly the case as the child*

---

[8] If a user selects to "mute" another user on Instagram, they will not see their posts or stories in their Feed or see incoming messages from the muted user.

matures and their expectation of privacy increases." The AADC recommends that online services which provide parental controls should provide children up to 12 years old with materials which explain that their parent is being told "*what they do online to help keep them safe*". For teenagers aged 13-15 (described in the AADC as "early teens") the recommendation changes to suggest that materials be provided to "*explain how your service works and the balance between parental and child privacy rights*". In light of this guidance, we consider that it is important for in-app parental supervision tools to reflect the evolving maturity of teenagers and their increasing expectations of privacy as they get older.

18. Meta has accordingly implemented wide-ranging parental tools and resources, including tools which allow parents and guardians to supervise their teenager's use of Instagram in-app, in addition to monitoring in person or at a device level. In 2022, Meta launched the Family Centre, a centralised place where parents can access supervision tools and information resources from leading experts. Through the Family Centre, once both the parent and teenager have accepted the supervision tools, parents can view the accounts that their teenager follows and the accounts that follow their teenager on Instagram, see the amount of time that their teenager spends on Instagram, set daily time limits on their teenager's Instagram use, and schedule breaks for specific times of day or night when they do not want their teenager to use Instagram. If a teenager reports another user, they can also share details of this with the supervising parental account. We have recently expanded these supervision tools; new features include the ability for parents to see who their teenager has blocked, if their teenager changes their default privacy settings, and if they have any new connections (i.e. if they have begun following or being followed by any new users).

19. In addition, experts have told us that it is important for parents to have conversations about internet use with their teenagers, and Meta has long endeavoured to provide helpful information and resources to assist those conversations, for example, through the Education Hub (accessible from the Family Centre). This includes, by way of example, the Instagram Parents' Guide which has been published for several years and which we continue to update in line with current expert guidance, a guide to media literacy with ConnectSafely,[9] and a resource for encouraging supportive conversations about mental health produced by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

---

[9] A nonprofit dedicated to educating users of connected technology about safety, privacy and security.

Meta

Conclusion

20. We hope that this response is helpful in explaining the work Meta is doing related to the concerns raised by the Coroner. This work is ongoing and we will continue to build on and constantly re-evaluate the approach we take. We look forward to continuing to work with experts, people impacted by these complicated issues, regulators and legislators, including as the Government and Ofcom take forward the Online Safety Bill, so that we can ensure that we best serve the people who use our services.

Meta Platforms Ireland Limited