



Department
of Health &
Social Care

From [REDACTED]
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department of Health & Social Care

39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Our Ref: [REDACTED]

Mr Paul Rogers
HM Assistant Coroner
Inner West London Coroner's Court
33 Tachbrook Street
London
SW1P 2ED

8 May 2024

Dear Mr Rogers,

Thank you for your correspondence of 19 December to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the death of Chloe Elizabeth MacDermott. I am replying as Minister with responsibility for mental health and suicide prevention, and I thank you for the additional time provided to the department to respond.

Firstly, I would like to say how deeply saddened I was to read of the tragic circumstances of Mrs MacDermott's death, and I offer my sincere condolences to her family and loved ones. The circumstances your report describes are very concerning and I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

I would like to assure you that the Government remains concerned about the prevalence of suicide and self-harm content online. The Government is taking a leading role in tackling methods of suicide, collaborating with partners across the world in policy, law enforcement and society more broadly to limit access, and share research, evidence and lessons learned. There are multiple actions in place to reduce and restrict access to this website, and others like it. This will include seeking to tackle at source the suppliers of harmful substances for the purposes of suicide.

The Department leads a cross-government and cross-sector group established specifically to identify and proactively tackle emerging methods of suicide. This involves close working across government and with others to ensure we are taking rapid, targeted action to address these methods- and has been prioritising tackling sodium nitrite. Through this group's close working, there are currently over 30 live actions and interventions that collectively are:

- reducing public access to methods, including by reducing the sale and importation of methods where appropriate;
- reducing references to, and limiting awareness of, emerging methods, including by tackling online content and working with the media to ensure responsible reporting; and
- monitoring data and trends to inform rapid and targeted responses, improving the data we collect, and how that information is best shared to inform responses.

The suicide prevention strategy for England published on 11 September 2023, identifies promoting online safety and tackling methods of suicide as priority areas for action. The Department has also launched a national near real time suspected suicide surveillance system in November 2023 to improve the timely reporting and action to prevent suicides. This will support the rollout of a new national alert system to notify schools, universities, and charities of emerging methods of suicide and risks.

To address your concerns about unfettered access to harmful content and restricting such content, we have made enquiries with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). Under the Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA) all in-scope services such as user-to-user platforms and Search services will have new duties to prevent users being harmed by illegal content that they encounter via their services. User-to-user platforms will also need to take steps to reduce risks that their services are used to perpetrate offences. These duties extend to the unlawful supply, or offer to supply, of controlled drugs. Platforms and Search services will need to take steps to prevent users encountering illegal sale of drugs content via their services. Platforms will need to remove this content when it does appear. You may wish to contact the DSIT for more detailed information regarding how the Online Safety Act will address illegal and harmful self-harm and suicide content.

It is not clear from your report the form of the substance or product used by the deceased. My department has written to you separately (e-mail of 28 March) to clarify this point and will be happy to look again if this information is supplied. But we made some enquiries with the Food standards Agency (FSA) which may be of interest to you.

The regulations that cover the use of nitrates and nitrites in food sits with the FSA in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland responsibility rests with Food Standards Scotland (FSS). Nitrates/nitrites are and remain important preservatives and are one of many ways that a food business can choose to hinder the growth of harmful micro-organisms. All food additives including nitrates and nitrites (E 249 – E 252) are subject to assimilated legislation, Regulation (EC) No. 1333/2008, on food additives, which establishes conditions of use for all food additives authorised in Great Britain. The group of nitrates/nitrites regulated include E 251 – Sodium Nitrate. The legislation sets out the acceptable conditions of use, the foods in which they may be used and where necessary, maximum permitted levels. The [FSA](#) website provides information on permitted food additives for the public and food business operators.

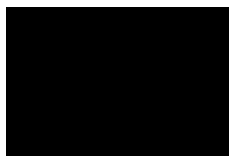
Nitrate is commonly found in curing salt (also known as 'pink salt' or the branded product called 'Prague powder' which is a mixture of table salt and sodium nitrite; or table salt, sodium nitrate and sodium nitrite) which can be sold on-line for home curing and is often sold as a component of DIY sets such as 'make your own ham, bacon and chorizo' kits. However, there are mandatory labelling provisions in assimilated Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011, which requires foods, including food additives, to be labelled with conditions for use and instructions for use, including any required dilution factors. The DIY kits come with instructions on safe use. When sold to the final consumer such kits must be labelled as 'for food use' and can only be sold in a mixture with salt or a salt substitute. If a food does not bear the appropriate safety labelling, then under the assimilated General Food Safety legislation (EC) No 178/2002, such omission would mean the product cannot lawfully be

placed on the market. If found to be non-compliant with the legislation the product can be recalled and there can be prosecution for placing unsafe food on the market.

I note that the Home Office is a recipient of this report and for your concerns around border and/or custom controls, I refer you to the Border Agency as the lead on preventing the importation of drugs at UK borders. A priority of the [Government's 10-year drug strategy](#) is to "break drug supply chains." The Government made further commitments in its [Serious and Organised Crime Strategy 2023-2028](#), including to deliver an "end-to-end plan to tackle drugs supply", which includes strengthening border controls on illicit commodities. The National Crime Agency (NCA), which leads and coordinates the UK law enforcement response to serious and organised crime and may also be able to provide further information on this topic.

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

Yours sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.A solid black rectangular box used to redact contact information, likely an email address.