



Department for
Science, Innovation
& Technology

Secretary of State for Science, Innovation
and Technology
100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

4 September 2025

Dear Ms Hillson,

I want to thank you for the opportunity to respond to this Report to Prevent Future Deaths, regarding the death of Guy Douglas Scotchford. I was deeply saddened to read about the circumstances surrounding Guy's tragic death and would like to extend my deepest condolences to his family and friends for their loss.

As the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, I am responsible for the Online Safety Act (the 'Act') which received Royal Assent in 2023. The Act lays the foundation for strong protections against illegal content for all users and harmful material for children. The government is committed to working with Ofcom, the independent regulator, to ensure the Act is implemented quickly and effectively. The new laws apply to search services and all companies that allow users to post content online or to interact with each other (referred to as user-to-user services in the Act). This includes a broad range of websites, apps and other services, including social media services, consumer cloud storage sites, video sharing platforms, online forums, dating services, online instant messaging services and online marketplaces where they allow (regulated) user-generated content, for example images or content descriptions uploaded by users.

Under the Act, all in-scope services, regardless of their size, must have proportionate systems and processes to prevent all users from encountering priority illegal content. Under the Act, intentionally encouraging suicide and certain drug-related offences are priority offences and content that amounts to those offences is deemed 'priority illegal content'. Priority offences reflect the most serious and prevalent illegal content and activity, against which companies must take proactive measures, as well as ensuring their services are not used to facilitate or commit a priority offence. These duties came into effect in March 2025, and within the first month Ofcom had already launched several enforcement programmes against companies failing to comply with these duties, including a pro-suicide forum. On 1 July, this forum decided to voluntarily restrict access to UK users due to the legal risks associated with its duties under the Act. The Act also introduced a new communications offence of intentionally encouraging or assisting serious self-harm, which was commenced on 31 January 2024.

Regulated suicide content is illegal under the Online Safety Act where it amounts to an offence under the Suicide Act 1961 (which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice). Under section 2(1) of the Suicide Act 1961 (as amended by section 59 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009) it is an offence for a person to do an act capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person, with the intention that their act will encourage or assist suicide or an attempt at suicide. The person committing the offence need not know the other person or even be able to identify them. An offence may be committed whether or not a suicide or attempted suicide takes place.

Under the Interpretation Act 1978 a "person" committing an offence "includes a body of persons corporate or unincorporate" unless the relevant provision says or implies otherwise. As with other offences, the offence under section 2(1) of the Suicide Act is capable of being committed by a company though. However, simply making available, or facilitating the provision of, resources which provide information detailing methods of suicide, where there is no intention to encourage or assist suicide, is not an offence under the Suicide Act. The criminal offence has a high threshold to avoid criminalising people who are expressing suicidal feelings and those offering them support, by for example, sharing their own experiences.

Whether a prosecution for encouraging or assisting suicide can be brought is a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service following a police investigation. The CPS policy on assisted suicide¹ sets out the factors which prosecutors in England and Wales will consider, in addition to those already outlined in the Code for Crown Prosecutors, when deciding whether it is in the public interest to prosecute in cases of encouraging or assisting suicide.

The strongest protections in the Online Safety Act are for children, and the legislation provides them with additional protections from harmful content which does not reach the criminal threshold. Under the Act, where a user-to-user service is likely to be accessed by children, they must put in place measures to prevent children of all ages from encountering legal content that encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide or self-harm. The measures must include the use of age assurance. These duties came into effect on 25 July.

We know that users may find online suicide content via search services. Under the Act, search services have targeted duties that focus on minimising the risk of all users encountering illegal suicide and self-harm search content, and children from encountering legal content which encourages or provides instructions for suicide or self-harm. In practice, this could look like removing results for sites that are known to host illegal suicide and self-harm content. These duties also include a requirement to take or use, where proportionate, user support measures, for example, signposting users towards sources of support. Combined, these duties are expected to play a key role in reducing the volume of user traffic directed to websites with illegal suicide and self-harm content, reducing the ease with which users can find these kinds of sites and content.

In your report, you raise concern that [REDACTED] is still available online to members of the public. I would firstly like to clarify that under the child safety duties, regulated search services must minimise the risk of children encountering (in search results or directly by clicking on them) content which encourages or provides instructions for suicide or self-harm, even where it is legal. This would involve such content on an online marketplace, and if such search results included content – related to a book – which *itself* encouraged or provided instructions for suicide, or a search result led directly to a digital copy of a book which did so, the risk of children encountering this content would have to be minimised by the search service.

As previously explained, the Online Safety Act does not prevent adult users from accessing legal suicide and self-harm content. In some cases, such content may be trying to provide support to those in need and this is therefore a complicated area to regulate. To be clear, I am not saying that [REDACTED] is such a book.

The issue therefore is whether the authors or distributors of [REDACTED] or similar books are committing an offence. However, the enforcement of existing offences is not for the government, but for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service and it is ultimately for the courts to decide if an offence has been committed. As you are aware, relevant criminal offences have a high threshold to avoid criminalising people who are expressing suicidal feelings and those offering them

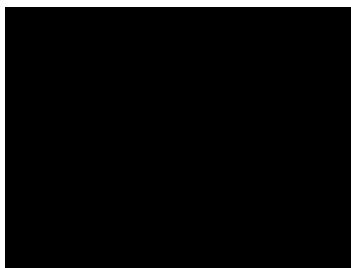
support, by for example, sharing their own experiences. As noted above, offences under the Suicide Act 1961 and their thresholds are under the remit of the Ministry of Justice.

The government is committed to delivering a renewed drive to tackle the number of lives lost to suicide. Cross-government action is key in achieving this, and coordinated action is taking place across government to enable us to rapidly identify and proactively tackle emerging methods of suicide as quickly and effectively as possible, with a series of interventions to reduce access and awareness of dangerous methods.

As leaders of the Suicide Prevention Strategy, officials from the Department for Health & Social Care (DHSC) lead a Concerning Methods Working Group to raise awareness of and tackle access to emerging methods of suicide. Deaths using nitrogen are monitored routinely as part of this. The working group involves representatives from the voluntary community and social enterprise sector, police, academics and the NHS, as well as government departments including Department of Science, Innovation and Technology. DSIT officials will raise the concerns in your letter around Nitrogen with this group and suggest that engagement with UK sellers is undertaken to raise awareness of and minimise the risk of harm to individuals.

I would like to thank you again for drawing this to my attention and I hope that this response is useful in setting out where the Online Safety Act will offer significant new protections against illegal content for all users. The government will continue to keep online safety policy under review and identify areas where we can build on the Act, so it is important for me to be made aware of online safety related Reports to Prevent Future Deaths.

Yours sincerely,



Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology