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Emma Hilson
HM Area Coroner, Cornwall
and the Isles of Scilly
By e-mail only

25 March 2024

Dear Ms Hilson,

Thank you for your letter of 1 February 2024 in relation to the death of Guy Douglas Scotchford.

I would like to say how deeply saddened I was to read about the circumstances of Mr Scotchford's death. I would like to offer my condolences to his family and loved ones.

Thank you for bringing to my attention your concerns regarding the availability of inert gasses and information regarding suicide methods online.

The NCA recognises that the sale of nitrogen and other inert gasses is not in itself prohibited due to their many uses, primarily in industry, which include within hydraulic systems, cooling applications, creation of various beverages, and food packaging. The Health and Safety Executive sets out and enforces regulations in respect of the safety standards of gas canisters but this does not extend to who can purchase the canisters.

As a result of your letter we have been engaging with Ofcom, the online safety regulator under the Online Safety Act 2023, to scope out how we can work effectively together, within our respective roles, to combat suicide content online. The NCA understands that Ofcom is in the process of consulting on its draft codes of practice and guidance that will explain the steps that regulated online services will need to take to meet their legal duties under the Act to protect their users in the UK from this sort of content.

The NCA also welcomes the government's commitment to reducing the lives lost to suicide set out in the Suicide Prevention strategy, published on 11

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1 of 3

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September 2023 by the Department of Health and Social Care, The strategy sets out national ambitions for suicide prevention over the next 5 years, and includes a wide range of individuals and organisations having a role to play in suicide prevention. As a consequence of the strategy, all areas of the country now have local suicide prevention plans, including guidance on providing bespoke support to specific groups and communities of concern, including those who have been in contact with mental health services. I understand this is supported by a £57 million investment through the NHS Long Term Plan.

Within the strategy, the NCA particularly welcomes the references to continuing to support search engine and social media platforms to remove content that encourages suicide and provide ready access to suicide prevention services, and the read across to the Online Safety Act 2023. The strategy also aims to clearly define who is responsible and accountable for keeping the public safe from this content. Work so far has involved high quality signposting and support being prevalent across a wide range of platforms. A recent example of the latter is the Google OneBox, a pop-up alert that provides details about how to contact Shout, a mental health support service, or the Samaritans.

The strategy foreshadows the recently enacted Online Safety Act 2023, which you will no doubt be familiar with. This Act requires all in-scope companies to tackle illegal content, such as suicide and self-harm content. Requirements have also been made that the largest services will have to offer adults optional tools to limit their exposure to legal content that encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide or self-harm. A further extension of this is the Criminal Justice Bill, introduced to the House of Commons on 14 November 2023, and, at the time of writing, is in its reporting stage at the House of Commons. Sections 11 and 12 of this bill look to replace Section 184 of the Online Safety Act 2023 with a broader offence covering “any act capable of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm of another person”, with an emphasis on harmful intent.

The handbook in question also describes a number of drugs that may be used for suicide purposes and which are classified as Class A and Class B under schedules 2 and 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. These are being tackled under the HMG Drugs Strategy, by prioritising breaking drug supply chains and limiting the volume of illicit drugs available in the UK.

I also wanted to bring to your attention the work that the Department of Health and Social Care are doing with the Samaritans on the delivery of their online excellence programme. This involves developing a hub of excellence in suicide prevention and the online environment, working in partnership with

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Facebook, Instagram, Google, YouTube, Twitter and Pinterest and aims to promote consistently high standards across the sector. This will be crucial in changing the availability of harmful content online.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to our attention. I hope you find this summary of the work being done across the government and the NCA, helpful.

If I can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.



T/Deputy Director
Borders & Commodities
National Crime Agency