



Department for
Science, Innovation
& Technology

Secretary of State for Science, Innovation
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Ms Kirsten Heaven
Assistant Coroner
Swansea & Neath Port Talbot

6 May 2025

Dear Ms Heaven,

Thank you for your Regulation 28 Report to Prevent Future Deaths dated 12 March 2025, regarding the tragic death of Rhiannon Williams. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Rhiannon. Every death is a tragedy, but incredibly so when it involves a young person who had their whole life ahead of them. The circumstances of Rhiannon's death are deeply concerning, and I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

As you reference in your report, the Online Safety Act ('the Act') received Royal Assent in October 2023. The Act lays the foundation for strong protections against illegal content for all users and harmful material for children, and the government is committed to working with Ofcom, the independent regulator, to ensure it is implemented quickly and effectively.

As the Act is a regulatory framework, I turn first to the relevant criminal law in this area (which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice). As you will be aware, under section 2(1) of the Suicide Act 1961 (the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice) 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 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.

I will now turn to the regulatory framework of the Online Safety Act, which tackles illegal and legal forms of online suicide content in a number of ways. The Act's duties apply to search services and platforms that allow users to post content online or to interact with each other. 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, and online instant messaging services. It will apply to services even if the companies providing them are outside the UK.

As of 17 March 2025, the Act's illegal safety duties came into force, requiring in-scope services to have proportionate systems and processes in place to proactively prevent users from encountering priority illegal content via their service, and to minimise the length of time for which such content is present. Content is 'priority illegal content' where it amounts to a 'priority offence'. Under the Act, intentionally encouraging or assisting suicide is a priority offence. 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. Under the Act, all in-scope services (regardless of their size) must now proactively prevent all users from being exposed to illegal user-generated suicide content. The Act also introduced a new communications offence which criminalises relevant acts capable of intentionally encouraging or assisting the serious self-harm of another person, and this was commenced on 31 January 2024. On 5 March, Ofcom published an article



setting out what online service providers operating in the UK need to do to protect people from suicide and self-harm material.

On 3 March 2025, in advance of the illegal safety duties coming into force, Ofcom announced that it had launched an enforcement programme to assess industry compliance with the first set of duties for in-scope services to submit illegal harms risk assessments to the regulator. Services are required to keep these assessments up-to-date and update them before making a significant change to the design or operation of their service which could put their users at risk. They will ensure that providers thoroughly identify the risks on their own sites, enabling them to mitigate and manage potential harms arising from them. Ofcom were clear that platforms that failed to provide a sufficient response by 31 March could face enforcement action. On 9 April, Ofcom launched an investigation into whether the provider of an online pro-suicide forum has failed to comply with its duties under the Act. This enforcement action taken by Ofcom is the first investigation opened under these new laws, demonstrating pro-suicide forums are a high priority for enforcement.

The strongest protections in the Act are for children. In-scope services that are likely to be accessed by children will have a duty to protect children from encountering legal but nonetheless harmful content. This includes taking steps to prevent children from 'primary priority content', which includes that which encourages, promotes, or provides instructions for self-harm, eating disorders or suicide. Providers of user-to-user services have a duty to use highly effective age assurance (HEAA) to prevent children encountering this type of content. The child safety codes of practice are currently being finalised by Ofcom and will set out ways in which providers can comply with the child safety duties. They are expected to be laid in Parliament in April 2025, with the child online safety regime expected to be fully in effect by Summer 2025.

We also know that users may find or encounter online suicide content via search services. Under the Act, search services have targeted duties that focus on minimising the risk of users encountering illegal search content, including illegal suicide and self-harm search content. 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, which might for example, signpost 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 addition, search services must minimise the risk of children encountering PPC in search results or on the pages they land on when they click on them.

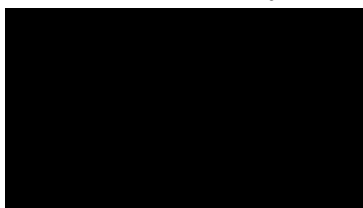
In your report you express particular concern around content found on online pro-suicide forums. I share your concern around these 'small but risky' sites, which is why in September 2024 I wrote to Ofcom's CEO [REDACTED] about their approach to regulating these services. Ofcom have established a dedicated supervision taskforce which is developing and delivering a workplan focussing on high priority themes like suicide offences. Additionally, such services are required to comply with the existing illegal content and child safety duties of the Act which are already in force. As has been shown by Ofcom's investigation on 9 April, if there is evidence of non-compliance Ofcom will undertake enforcement action against such services.

Ofcom's enforcement powers are robust and will promote strong compliance with the Act. Ofcom will be able to direct platforms to come into compliance, issue substantial fines to non-compliant services (up to 10% of qualifying worldwide revenue or £18 million, whichever is greater), or apply to the courts for business disruption measures that require third parties to withdraw their services from, or restrict access to, non-compliant services in the UK. Ofcom can take enforcement action against any company that provides services to UK users, wherever they are located. This is necessary given the global nature of the online world.

This government has committed to tackling suicide and will continue to look at ways we can extend protections under the Act, while maintaining our focus on swift implementation. Alongside this, officials from my department continue to work closely with officials from The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), who coordinate the government's approach to preventing suicides and improving people's mental health, and lead on the Suicide Prevention Strategy for England. The Strategy identified online safety as a priority area for action and committed to tackling harmful suicide and self-harm content. In addition, the Strategy proposes targeted support for priority groups such as children and young people.

I would like to thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention. I hope that this response is helpful and demonstrates the government's commitment to tackling suicide, and my own commitment as the Secretary of State responsible for the Online Safety Act, to work with Ofcom to ensure the Act is implemented as quickly and effectively as possible.

Yours sincerely,



Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology