

Response to Ofcom Consultation: Transparency Guidance

Introduction

Samaritans is the UK and Ireland's largest suicide prevention charity. We respond to a call for help every ten seconds and in 2023 Samaritans volunteers spent more than 900,000 hours responding to calls for help.

Over the last four years we have developed a hub of excellence in suicide prevention and the online environment with the aim of minimising access to harmful content and maximising opportunities for support. Our Online Excellence Programme includes industry guidelines for responding to self-harm and suicide content, an advisory service for sites and platforms offering advice on responding to self-harm and suicide content, a research programme exploring what makes self-harm and suicide content harmful and for whom, and a hub of resources helping people to stay safe online. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and commend Ofcom for moving rapidly following passage of the Online Safety Act.

Samaritans welcome the new measures proposed around transparency and think it will be a vital tool in increasing the safety of online services.

We were encouraged to see:

- Ofcom's commitment to continued engagement with stakeholders and experts to iterate and improve the transparency regime
- The inclusion of core measures which can be comparable over time and between platforms but also thematic categories to respond to current issues and particular threats.

We would however like to highlight a number of important issues that need to be addressed by Ofcom:

- **Services who have to comply:** It is essential that small but high-risk sites (such as those hosting step-by step instructions on methods of suicide) are held to the strongest protections. This must include transparency reporting so that we can evidence the harm that is being caused by the poor practices on these sites. Therefore, in your service categorisation list (page 9), it must include factors around risk of harm to ensure these sites are captured.
- **Encouraging best practice:** Whilst only certain services will have to comply with transparency reporting, Ofcom plays a vital role in encouraging all platforms to voluntarily share or report on how they manage self-harm and suicide content as best practice. Ofcom should also encourage services to pro-actively share insights and early warnings/trends about content they are seeing with key stakeholders in order to prevent the spread of harmful content online.
- **Ensuring that transparency reporting reflects the safety of their service for all users:** It is vital that the transparency data requested reflects the experience of all users of the service. Whilst we agree stronger protections are needed for under 18s, services should still be required to share transparency data that relates to all of its users. People don't stop being vulnerable to self-harm and suicide content online when they turn 18. Having this transparency data for all users, will allow key stakeholders (e.g. researchers

and third sector organisations) to understand the impact on under and over 18s and help to identify what protections are needed for both groups.

- **Capturing context:** It is important that transparency regime does not place overemphasis of stats/figures and a lack of context as this may lead to inaccurate representations. For example, a platform may have low rates of self-harm and suicide content on their platform, but this could be due to how the content is classified or it may have poor detection systems. Alternatively, a platform could have extremely high levels of self-harm and suicide content, but this could be because they have more positive and supportive content on their site (e.g. content encouraging help seeking, information about available support services). Transparency reporting should therefore encourage the inclusion of narrative feedback from providers to ensure an accurate representation of the platform is achieved by Ofcom.
- **Harm reduction:** The guidance is not specific on how harm reduction will be explored and understanding what 'actions taken' result in. For example, it is useful to know how much content is being taken down, but Ofcom should require services to provide further detail including the subsequent actions. For example, is the user then banned or issued a warning? Is the content reposted at a later date?
- **Highlighting poor practice:** We are pleased that Ofcom plan to highlight poor practice based on transparency reporting, however, it must be accompanied by swift action from Ofcom to hold the service to account. If not, highlighting the dangers of the site may inadvertently draw more people to it, causing more harm.
- **Safely reporting transparency data relating to suicide and self-harm:** Services reporting high levels of self-harm and suicide content or poor content moderation could inadvertently draw vulnerable users to those platforms. Ofcom should therefore provide clear guidance to services on how they can report transparency data in a safe way. If sharing data with the media, services can also contact **Samaritans' Media Advisory Service** for guidance on working with media to support responsible reporting. The team is available at mediaadvice@samaritans.org
- **Transparency reporting on safety functions and user empowerment tools:** Ofcom should require the largest services to provide data to illustrate the effectiveness of their safety features and tools. It is not enough for services to have these features if they are not effective. We regularly hear from people with lived experience that safety features and tools are inaccessible and unfit for purpose. There is also limited awareness of them.
- **Ofcom's engagement with civil society:** Ofcom should consider how civil society will be able to feed in suggestions for material to be covered in transparency reporting. Given their expertise and their work with people who are directly impacted by harms online, it is essential that they are consulted with regularity to ensure the right information is being requested.
- **Lack of transparency regarding conversations between services and Ofcom that occur after the issuing of the draft transparency notice:** It is suggested that services can negotiate reporting requirements in private with Ofcom. There should be some

transparency over these conversations. This will help ensure that platforms are accountable.