



Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

11th January 2024

Dear Prime Minister,

Six months ago, you were elected on a platform that promised an end to short-term sticking plaster solutions. I am writing to you as a bereaved father and online safety campaigner because it is evident that urgent action is required to protect young people from the horrors they are routinely exposed to online.

It's now over seven years since the death of my youngest daughter Molly. More than ever before, I am convinced that strong and effective online safety regulation is the most powerful tool available to prevent the loss of ever more young lives at the hands of social media platforms whose indifference to children's safety is fundamentally baked into their commercial strategies, business models and products.

However, in recent months it has become clear that progress towards online safety has stalled – and we are now going backwards. Regulation as it is currently designed is failing to deliver the protection that children and parents need, want and deserve. No one can credibly claim that Ofcom's implementation of the Online Safety Act is anything other than a disaster – a view not only shared widely by civil society but also increasingly privately shared across many parts of your Government.

Ofcom's choices when implementing the Act have starkly highlighted intrinsic structural weaknesses with the legislative framework. We not only have a regulator which has fundamentally failed to grasp the urgency and scale of its mission, but a regulatory model that inherently and significantly constrains its ability to reduce preventable harms.

While I understand that this is legislation you inherited and did not design, the reality is that unless you now commit to act decisively to fix the Online Safety Act, the streams of life-sucking content seen by children will soon become torrents: a digital disaster driven by the actions of tech firms, and being left unchallenged by a failing regulatory model. This preventable harm would be happening on your watch.

At the same time as the UK's overdue regulation is falling badly short, the very industry being regulated is ominously changing. The Online Safety Act was developed around a

premise that large tech firms would increasingly accept their responsibilities, and we would see safer social networks develop over time.

However, this is a time when platforms readily say they will now ‘catch less of the bad stuff’; allow underdeveloped AI to generate and spread disinformation; and promote targeted and polarising content leading to isolation and despair. We have now entered a different era, and we will need a different regulatory approach that can address it.

Put simply, people like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk are at the leading edge of a wholesale recalibration of the industry. We should be in absolutely no doubt that when Zuckerberg speaks about a ‘cultural tipping point towards prioritizing speech’, he is signalling a profound strategic shift away from fundamental safety measures towards a laissez-faire, anything goes model. In this bonfire of digital ethics and online safety features, all of us will lose, but our children lose the most.

It’s on that basis that I now encourage you to act swiftly and decisively to address this coming flood of preventable harm. In the immediate term, that means strengthening the existing framework. Beyond that, it means committing to substantially strengthened regulatory model – with primary legislation being introduced as soon as possible to enact its provisions.

It is not just a new Online Safety Act that is required, but a wholesale re-imagining of the framework to ensure it is capable of responding to the threats of today and beyond. A new framework must be fundamentally oriented towards tackling the reckless behaviours of social media leadership – a goal which can best be achieved through establishing an overarching Duty of Care supported by a robust set of conduct-based rules to enforce it.

A bolstered OSA must have harm reduction at its core. That means having a clear harm reduction duty on Ofcom, transparency and safety-by-design as integral components of the regulatory regime, and a regulatory design that puts victims at its core – a major failure of the current regime, where the asymmetry between the interests of victims and industry has if anything been substantially reinforced. The voices of those with lived experience must be heard clearly if big tech’s powerful players are not to shout them down in this debate.

Crucially, this must also mean an extension of the Duty of Candour to extend to tech firms. This vital measure stands to correct the historic injustices faced by so many victims, and the power of this measure to address the cultural issues driving harms in the tech sector – and the asymmetry between industry and victims which perpetuates further harm – would be considerable.

Too many parents have lost hope that governments will deliver the online safety reform they urgently need. Among bereaved families, there is widespread dismay that successive governments have chosen to dither and delay when the consequences of inaction has been further lost lives.

As Prime Minister and as a father, I implore you to act. You now have a profound opportunity, but also a great responsibility, to act clearly and decisively and to show to millions of parents across this country that meaningful change is on the way. It is time to decisively protect children and young adults from the perils of our online world.

Yours Sincerely,

Ian Russell,
Chair of Molly Rose Foundation, and Molly's dad.