



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

28th August 2020

Dear Constance,

RE: REGULATION OF NEWSPAPERS' COMMENTS AND 'ONLINE HARMS' LEGISLATION.

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of the regulation of comments sections on newspapers' websites; your comments upon which I have read with great interest.

As in physical public spaces, there must be a reasonable balance online between protecting freedom of speech and preventing harm. I am encouraged that the Government are taking action to improve protections for users online via the *Online Harms White Paper*.

It is important to emphasise that this legislation is not aimed at limiting individuals' freedom of speech online. Rather, it aims to get online businesses to take more responsibility for content shared on their platforms.

As it stands, the Government has set out only its initial response to the consultation on the White Paper. Final decisions on which businesses the new regulation will apply to are yet to be taken. However, Ministers have stated that the legislation will not duplicate existing legislation that applies to comments sections on media sites.

I believe many newspapers already operate some degree of control over their comments sections. This can be seen when comments are deleted, or indeed when newspapers close comments sections under articles on particularly proactive issues.

In addition, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) does regulate user-generated comments under these news articles; as long as these comments have been moderated by the publication and the concerns relate to an issue covered by the 'Editors' Code'. This can include comments under articles on a publication's social media page where they have shared the article.

Comments which have been brought to a publication's attention and remain online are considered to have gone through a process of editorial control and are therefore within IPSO's remit.

The *Online Harms White Paper*, jointly published by the Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) last year, sets out plans for world-leading legislation in this area. I understand that Ministers plan for legislation to be ready in this parliamentary session.



The Bill will establish a new duty of care on companies towards their users, which will be overseen by an independent regulator. In its initial response to the consultation on the White Paper, the Government has stated it is minded to appoint Ofcom as the regulator. The regulator will have a suite of powers to take effective enforcement action against companies that have breached their statutory duty of care.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again - and I hope that the above allays some of your concerns.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Tom'.

**TOM PURSGLOVE MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**