Online Suicide Prevention:

A Pro-active Strategy for Government and the Internet Industry

By The Rt. Hon Grant Shapps MP

January 2018

Online Suicide Prevention

"Samaritans welcomes this report, which includes a number of important recommendations. We hope that the Government and technology companies take notice of it and work to ensure that fewer people die by suicide as a result."

Barnardo's Chief Executive, Javed Khan said:

"We welcome this report because while the Government's Green Paper on children's mental health is a step in the right direction, it lacks the necessary vision and resources for a truly joined up system of prevention and support – both online and offline.

"We know from our work with the UK's most vulnerable children about the positive and negative impact the internet can have on their lives. It is deeply concerning that material which effectively promotes suicide is so easily accessible online.

"Grant Shapps is correct that much more needs to be done to protect children from such shocking material. It's vital the Government works closely with mental health charities, internet companies and content creators to work out when and how restricting such items is appropriate and necessary.

"Instead of facilitating access to such sites, internet firms should be encouraged to create signposts on their webpages with helpline numbers for those who appear particularly vulnerable."

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"We take our duty to ensure that our platform is used responsibly and not to cause harm, very seriously. Mental health can be a complex issue; and so we partner and learn from leading experts in this area such as the The Samaritans. We are grateful for the insight of the report and look forward to continuing to work with a wide range of organisations on protecting people's mental health." **Katie O'Donovan, UK Public Policy Manager**
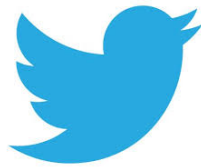
"This timely report makes clear how there is more to do across government, industry and within society to prevent suicide and support people who may be in distress. This is an issue we are committed to and we will shortly be further improving the way Twitter helps people find expert help." Nick Pickles, head of UK public policy for Twitter.

It is so important that we continue to work together so that internet service providers, social media platforms, content editors, legislators, organisations, families and communities and young people themselves effectively play their part in preventing young suicides. PAPYRUS hopes that today reignites everyone's interest in creating an ever more suicide safe internet.

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<u>Preface for Online Suicide Prevention Report</u>

This report has been compiled following a comprehensive Call for Evidence and an Online Suicide Prevention Summit, which was held in Parliament on 10th May 2016. The summit brought together representatives from search engines, internet service providers, social media sites and suicide prevention charities to discuss what more can be done on online suicide prevention.

Charities and organisations have been involved in the work of this report include Google, NSPCC, Samaritans, Virgin Media, Papyrus, BT, Twitter, Facebook, Action for Children and many more.

The report includes recommendations for Government on what action we believe should be taken now to address this growing problem, such as launching a more detailed public health strategy on online suicide prevention, and enforcing existing guidelines on the availability of suicide-related content.

The report also includes recommendations for the internet industry, such as ensuring there are signposts to helplines and support sites and curbing the auto-complete functions of search engines when suicide-related terms are searched for, as well as regularly getting the sector together to find more ways of assisting in online suicide prevention.

We conclude that more needs to be done by Government and the internet industry in their approach to tackling online suicide. Government has an important role to play in producing a more detailed and specific strategy to deal with this problem, and internet service providers, search engines and social media sites can do more to ensure that the internet is a source of support and guidance for people who are vulnerable.

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Executive Summary

A lot of important work is being done and has been done in tackling mental health and in preventing suicide. We are on the right track to changing attitudes and responses in this area. However, where there is currently a gap is with regard to the lack of pro-active policy. This is clear for example in the current government's approach to online suicide prevention. In addition, there still remains much more that the internet industry* can do as a whole.

Recent research has highlighted the affect that the internet is having on those who are vulnerable. The study showed that 8% of people who were presented to hospital after a suicide attempt said they had used the internet in connection with their attempt, and this rises to 12% for those aged 16-24. Those who had self-harmed and were identified as having a high suicidal risk were even higher at 24%. It also found that in a survey of 21 year olds, of those who had made suicide attempts, almost three quarters had used or accessed suicide related material on the internet.[1]

However, this report suggests that this most likely represents only part of the picture. At the moment there is a lack of strategy and direction from the government in confronting a sizable problem and while many positive steps are being made by suicide prevention charities and in the internet industry in addressing these issues, more can be done. After a comprehensive Call For Evidence from internet providers, internet search engines, social networking sites, and suicide and mental health charities, plus an Online Suicide Prevention Summit held in Parliament on the 10th May 2016** this report calls for the government and the internet industry to take a more pro-active approach.

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[1] L Biddle et al, "Priorities for suicide prevention: balancing the risks and opportunities of internet use" Policy Bristol 7 (2016).

* "Internet Industry"- Term used in this report, and by many charities consulted to refer to internet providers, search engines, and social media sites.

** This summit was led by a panel consisting of the Rt. Hon Grant Shapps MP, Alistair Campbell, Ruth Sutherland, Chief Executive of Samaritans, and Hamish Elvidge of the Matthew Elvidge Trust. The event was attended by suicide prevention charities, internet providers, search engines, and those representing social media to discuss more steps that could be taken in relation to online suicide prevention.

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Recommendations for the government:

We recommend the Government launches a new and more detailed public health strategy on online suicide prevention. This strategy should include:

- The Government working with suicide prevention charities, health bodies, and the internet industry to make 'the National Suicide Prevention Alliance's guidelines for online community moderators 'Responding to suicidal content online' more visible. There is more the government can do to promote these guidelines and better publicise them.

- Government must also be more pro-active in exploring ways of restricting access that exist principally to promote suicide. Ministers can work closely with suicide prevention charities and the internet industry about when it may be best to intervene.

- Recognise that technical solutions aren't always the answer and education will often be more effective. There is more the Government can be doing to educate people about using the internet and about suicide related online support. This would involve the Government and the NHS working closer with the Department of Education and suicide prevention charities about how best to do this.

- Not enough detailed research is being carried out by the Government or public health bodies on the impact the internet is having on suicide. We recommend that the Government therefore undertake to work closely with suicide prevention charities and the internet industry to do more research on actual online behaviour of vulnerable individuals and what approaches would most effectively minimise harm.

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Recommendations for the internet industry:

Internet providers, internet search engines, and social networking sites have taken positive steps in addressing the threats the internet poses to those who are vulnerable. This report recognises their progress but suggests there is more that they can still do. Including:

- Staying relevant and exploring new ways they can engage with those who are feeling vulnerable, such as helping facilitate instant messaging services for those who they believe, through for example the nature of their internet usage, may be vulnerable.

- Calling on all internet providers to create signposts on their webpages with helpline numbers for those who appear particularly vulnerable, including forcing ISP's and search engines to curb the auto complete feature to ensure it excludes a small set of search terms that would appear as predictions.

- Optimising support sites when suicide related terms have been searched.

- Get the sector together in conference regularly to debate the issue and discuss how to be more vocal and pro-active.

While it is clearly wholly unrealistic to suggest that three or four policies taken up by the Government and the sector will eradicate suicide attempts or suicide deaths, there are areas currently which inadvertently or otherwise help 'encourage' suicide. Tackling these with proposals that balance the danger of over-regulation with the suggestion that more needs to be done is a difficult yet nonetheless essential task.

Thousands of people take their own lives each year and yet there remains a lack of detail and specifics on what the Government is and has been doing to work with the internet industry in this area. Having said this, the internet plays an invaluable role in preventing suicide and expanding this network through support from Government, local authorities, internet providers, search engines and social media will be vital in ensuring all those who are vulnerable can access the help they need. An approach is needed where working to change attitudes to suicide goes hand-in-hand with effective policy making. This report proposes a step in this direction.

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1. How many people have taken their life in the UK?

- The latest figures from the Office of National Statistics on suicide deaths in the UK are from 2016. They state that there were 5,965 classified suicide deaths in the UK, which is a suicide rate of 10.4 deaths per 100,000 people.

- 75% of the suicides in 2016 were males and 25% were females. For males this was 16 deaths per 100,000, and the female rate was 5 per 100,000.

- The highest suicide rate in the UK was among men aged 40-44 with 24.1 deaths per 100,000. For women, the highest suicide age group was 50-54, with 8.3 deaths per 100,000.

- In England the highest suicide rate was in the South West, with 11.2 deaths per 100,000, while the London had the lowest rate with 7.8 deaths per 100,000.[2]

1.1   It is important to not read too much into yearly statistics, as evaluating long term trends is often more beneficial and appropriate as it will better identify those who are most vulnerable. What the long terms trends currently show is that men are much more likely to take their life than women, with those whom are middle aged and from poorer socio-economic backgrounds the most vulnerable.

1.2   Each suicide is a tragic case and every individual will have their own motives. However, research by the charity Samaritans has found that the main general reasons of the long-term trends are based around unemployment, relationship breakdown, fragmentation of social relationships, correlating with psychological characteristics like impulsivity and perceived barriers to talking about emotions and seeking help.[3]

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[2] Suicides in the UK: 2016 registrations, Office for National Statistics, December 2017.
[3] "Men, Suicide, and Society", Samaritans, September 2012.

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2. What role might the internet be playing in facilitating suicide?

2.1 Very little research had been done on assessing how many people use the internet when they are feeling suicidal and what impact the material they were accessing might be having on them. However, a recent ground-breaking study by the University of Bristol in partnership with charities Samaritans and Papyrus has shed a huge amount of light on the role the internet plays. In a clinical sample of over 1500 patients arriving at hospital following a suicide attempt, it found:

> "The internet is used by people who self-harm and/or attempt suicide, often as a way to explore possible methods and read other accounts of those who are feeling suicidal."

- 8% of people had used the internet in connection with their suicide attempt
- Of those aged 16-24, 12% used the internet in connection with their suicide attempt
- 24% of those who had self-harmed and were identified as having a high suicidal intent had used the internet in connection with their suicide attempt.
- In a survey of 21-year olds, of the 248 participants who had made suicide attempts, three quarters reported some form of suicide related internet use, while one in five had accessed sites giving information on specific methods of suicide (although most of these people had also accessed help-sites).

2.2 The findings highlighted that the internet is used by people who self-harm and/or attempt suicide, often as a way to explore possible methods and read other accounts of those who are feeling suicidal. Material that could be seen as harmful is also easily accessible through a variety of different means, including through popular information sites, and it is the younger users to whom the internet poses a particular danger.[4]

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[4] L Biddle et al, "Priorities for suicide prevention: balancing the risks and opportunities of internet use" Policy Bristol 7 (2016).

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3. What is the Government's current online suicide prevention strategy?

> "Both reports fail to provide sufficient detail and any specifics about preventing suicide online. This is no longer good enough. More vocal and robust action is required from the government"

3.1 The Department of Health set out the National Suicide Prevention strategy for England and Wales in September 2012 with the objective of reducing the suicide rate and offering better support for those bereaved or affected by suicide. They laid out six areas which they believed action was needed:

i. Reduce the risk of suicide in key high-risk groups
ii. Tailor approaches to improve mental health in specific groups
iii. Reduce access to the means of suicide
iv. Provide better information and support to those bereaved or affected by suicide
v. Support the media in delivering sensitive approaches to suicide and suicidal behaviour
vi. Support research, data collection and monitoring.[5]

3.2 The Government strategy in 2012 stated that part of point five of the strategy, to support the media in delivering sensitive approaches to suicide is "continuing to support the internet industry to remove content that encourages suicide and provide ready access to suicide prevention services".[6]

• Within this, they stress what the law states in regard to the encouragement of suicide online. They highlight that the Director of Public Prosecutions has issued guidelines in respect to Cases of Encouraging Suicide, and state their commitment to work with the internet industry and content providers. They plan to do this by partnering with the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) to create a safer online environment

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[5] "Preventing suicide in England: A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives", Department of Health, September 2012, Available from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/430720/Preventing-Suicide-.pdf

[6] Preventing suicide in England, 2012

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through industry self-regulation, improving e-safety education, and raising public awareness.[7]

- The Government also highlight the important work Samaritans and other charities such as Papyrus are doing in this area.

3.3   The government have followed this up with two further reports, one in February 2015 and a second in January 2017 intended to provide an update on the progress that this original strategy is having.

3.4   However, the only significant mentioning of online prevention in the report of 2015 highlights the Department of Health funded research study on understanding the role of social media and suicide, which found suicidal tweeters show a high degree of reciprocal connectivity when compared with other Twitter users, suggesting a community of interest and raising concerns that suicide related cases were seen to be newsworthy in social media.[8]

3.5   The report in January 2017 points to the vital work the National Suicide Prevention Alliance and Samaritans have been working on, highlighting the guidelines that they have issued and the projects that they have taken part in to learn more about the online environment. It also notes the funding that the government provided to support the research carried out by the University of Bristol and Samaritans.[9]

3.6   While all this is welcome, both follow up reports fail to provide sufficient detail and any specifics about what policy and what larger role the government can or could play in online suicide prevention. This is no longer good enough. More vocal and robust action is required from the government.

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[7] ibid
[8] "Preventing suicide in England: Two years on, Second annual report on the cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives", Department of Health, February 2015, Available from
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/405407/Annual_Report_acc.pdf
[9] "Preventing suicide in England: Third progress report of the cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives", Department of Health, January 2017, Available from
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/582117/Suicide_report_2016_A.pdf

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4. What more must the Government do?

4.1 Given the lack of detail so far, we recommend that the government launches a new and more detailed public health strategy specifically relating to online suicide prevention.

We recommend:

"We recommend the government launches a new and more detailed public health strategy specifically related to online suicide prevention"

    i.   **The Government working with suicide prevention charities, health bodies, and the internet industry to make current guidelines on how the internet industry and users should respond to suicidal content online much more visible.**

    o   The National Suicide Prevention Alliance have issued guidelines for online community moderators 'Responding to suicidal content online'. These guidelines explain clearly what to do, what suicidal content is, how to respond, what to say, and how to develop effective policies.[10]

    o   These guidelines are informative, easy to understand and given the backgrounds of the draftees, authoritative.

    o   The government has a duty to make these guidelines more visible. Working with suicide prevention charities and the internet industry about how best to do this, through funding, educational, or vocal support the Government can contribute much more than they currently do to ensure that all users know what to be aware of when coming across suicidal content.

    ii.   **The Government to be more pro-active and make efforts to discourage access to sites that exist principally to promote suicide.**

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[10] National Suicide Prevention Alliance, "Responding to suicidal content online: Best practice guidelines", Available from http://www.nspa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/NSPA-Guidelines-Responding-to-Suicidal-Content-Online-2016.pdf

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o While we understand that there are difficulties in regards to the law and what may be most beneficial for the user, the Government must do more to restrict access to certain sites, pages, or chatrooms that exist primarily to promote suicide and self-harm. Wikipedia in particular publish what can easily deemed to be irresponsible material. Below is just a small example of the material that is accessible online that we believe is inappropriate or promotes and encourages suicide.

Figure A: A diagram showing people how to use a suicide bag on Wikipedia

Screenshots of online material are deliberately low resolution in order not to promote its content, but instead to highlight an overview of our research in this area. Original screenshots of the material are available through accredited organisations.

Figure B: A detailed and graphic explanation of the act of hanging on Wikipedia

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Figure C: Website ranking suicide methods on lethality, time, and agony.

> "Government should be taking a much more aggressive approach in stamping down on sites that exist primarily to promote suicide and self-harm."

> "There remains scope for further research in this area… The Government have an opportunity here"

o   Such information serves no positive purpose, and the Government should be taking a much more aggressive approach in encouraging sites like Wikipedia to establish more responsible practices.

o   We would urge the Government to work closely with suicide prevention charities and the internet industry and the relevant organisations publishing such material to work out when and how restricting such material is appropriate and necessary.

o   This is also an issue the Health Select Committee recognise, as they call in their interim report on Suicide Prevention for the government to work with internet providers and social media platforms to consider what changes should be made to restrict access to sites which encourage self-harm or give detailed advice on suicide methods.[11]

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[11] Health Select Committee, Suicide Prevention: Interim Report, December 2016

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iii. **Recognise that technical solutions aren't always the answer and education will often be more effective.**

- o Education will often be more effective or appropriate when informing young people about how to use the internet, what to be aware of in regards to suicide related material, and how to respond appropriately. Technical solutions can offer necessary and effective means to tackling the problems that occur as a result of online suicide use, but ultimately to tackle the root causes of such issues it requires in depth education of the dangers the internet can pose. This requires the government to be more pro-active and detail specifics about what further can be done to tackle this problem.

- o In order to achieve substantial results, we believe the government and the NHS should work closer with the Department of Education and charities to explore other ways that may prove effective in educating people about online suicide prevention and the positives and negatives that the internet poses in this regard.

- o We believe that with the areas of further education, skills, and higher education moving from the responsibility of the Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to the Department of Education (DfE) it offers a valuable opportunity to explore new ways of how more young people can be educated about suicide related material online.

- o This may include increasing funding to help support charities who aim to provide such education, or looking at how digital citizenship methods could be explored and furthered, so youngsters are taught how to best use the internet with the particular dangers of online suicide content highlighted as an example.

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iv. **The Government to commission more detailed research**

o The most recent new research by the University of Bristol and the charities who worked in partnership with them was much needed and incredibly informative, but there remains scope for further research in this area.

o This area has too often been left subjective and there has been insufficient research in relation to the importance and danger of the internet. The Government have an opportunity here to become more pro-active and supportive. Finding the most appropriate ways to explore the impact the internet is having on those who are suicidal, why they use the internet, how they view the material that they come across, and determining how many of those who have taken their life might have used the internet as a source of information or received encouragement through it may be a lengthy and difficult process, but it is an essential one in order to work out how best to tackle this problem.

o Such research is vital for users and charities to stay up to date, relevant, and to be able to make the right decisions around critical issues as they continue to develop. More research will lead to more awareness, and better designed methods of engagement with those that are vulnerable.

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5. What has the internet industry done to help tackle this issue?

> "The internet plays an invaluable role in reaching out to those who are vulnerable"
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> "It is extremely important that support is continually expanded by social media sites, internet providers, and search engines. The internet must be used as a tool to reach out to as many people that are feeling vulnerable as possible... Good progress has been made on this front"

5.1.   The internet plays an invaluable role in reaching out to those who are vulnerable. Whether this is through the laudable work many charities are doing through online help sites and interventions, or through working with the internet industry and engaging in new ways to help prevent the promotion and encouragement of suicide, and expanding the internet as a source of support, the internet can be a force for good.

5.2.   Social media sites, internet providers, and search engines will all play a role in helping facilitate connections, and allowing and promoting easy access to sites that provide awareness and support, as well as offering this support themselves and helping implement certain prevention techniques. The internet can provide a space for people, often anonymously, to share and discuss their feelings and without fear of being judged. It is vital that people can feel open and supportive in discussing suicide, and the internet is a perfect way to engage people to talk more about these emotions.

5.3.   It is extremely important that this support is continually expanded upon by organisations such as social media sites, internet providers, and search engines. The internet must be used as a tool to reach out to as many people that are feeling vulnerable as possible. As the charity Samaritans have highlighted, by developing responsible practices relating to suicide and having easily accessible guidance on how to appropriately respond to users that express suicidal intent is an effective way of being able to respond quickly. Engaging with organisations and charities that specialise in suicide prevention and mental health, and whom are often best placed to know and provide accurate information when forming and implementing this guidance and strategy is essential.[12]

5.4.   Good progress has been made on this front. Samaritans and Facebook have worked on a revised suicide prevention tool

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[12] Policy Briefing: Suicide and the Online Environment, Samaritans, May 2014

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which was rolled out in January 2011, and Facebook have adapted their 'report this post' tool to include a category highlighting when someone might be at risk of harming themselves. The user can then contact Samaritans if they wish.[13] Samaritans have also established partnerships with YouTube and Twitter.[14]

5.5.   With Twitter, after assessing a report of self-harm or suicide contact the reported user and let him or her know that someone who cares about them identified that they might be at risk, and they provide the reported user with available online resources encouraging them to seek help.[15]

5.6.   Instagram has a new suicide prevention tool that allows a friend to report a post that worries them, and their friend will get a message saying, "someone saw one of your posts and thinks you might be going through a difficult time. If you need support, we'd like to help." They are then given the option to talk to a friend, contact a helpline or receive further support. Instagram also has a response in place that when someone searches for a self-harm flagged hashtag, a content advisory warning pops up. Clicking on that button will then lead to a website for Befrienders Worldwide.[16]

5.7.   Furthermore, the role of search engines is important, as it will be the first place many people go to find information. Important steps have been made here with Google, Yahoo, Bing, and Ask Jeeves all displaying helpline numbers above results when users have searched suicide and self-harm related key words. This is hugely significant as it is the first thing that someone will see when arriving on the page and it is a welcome attempt to reach out and provide support.

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[13] Summit on Online Suicide Prevention: Call for Evidence Response, Samaritans, May 2016
[14] ibid
[15] "Dealing with self-harm and suicide", Twitter help centre, Available from https://support.twitter.com/articles/20170313
[16] Call for Evidence: Online Suicide Prevention Summit, Facebook, May 2016

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6. What more can the internet industry do?

6.1 While we have established the important role that the internet can and must continue to play we cannot ignore the dangers it poses. Whether this is through online pro-suicide discussion or allowing and promoting access to potentially harmful information. The internet has been shown to normalise self-harm and potentially discourage professional help-seeking with cyberbullying[17] and ultimately the difficulty is having to strike a balance between freedom of expression and public protection. This is especially difficult given the global nature of the internet.[18]

6.2 As some have argued the internet is currently a lot less regulated than other forms of media. For example, if radio, television, and newspapers broadcast or publish material that is questionable or inaccurate then they are held accountable by independent regulators and can lose an audience as a result. However, with the internet and social media, information is decentralised, and it is changed or updated constantly by its users and this means the internet has very few restrictions on content compared to other media outlets.[19] [20]

6.3 As the World Health Organization have also argued, internet sites and social media have been implicated in both inciting and facilitating suicidal behaviour and there are concerns over the supplementary role the Internet and social media are playing in suicide communication.[21] Social media can allow a platform for cyberbullying, and as the Department of Health funded research study on understanding the role of social media and suicide has found, suicidal tweeters show a high degree of reciprocal connectivity.[22] Furthermore, as shown by further

> "Suicidal tweeters show a high degree of reciprocal connectivity… people posting about suicide on the internet are often initially unsure, but their resolve strengthens as others encourage them, and seeking help becomes more difficult."

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[17] K Daine et al, "The Power of the Web: A Systematic Review of Studies of the Influence of the Internet on Self-Harm and Suicide in Young People", Public Library of Science 8 (October 2013).

[18] L Biddle et al, "Suicide and the internet", British Medical Journal 336 (April 2008).

[19] D. Luxton et al, "Social Media and Suicide: A Public Health Perspective", American Journal of Public Health 102 (May 2012).

[20] JG Fiedorowicz et al, "Internet and Suicide", (New York 2009).

[21] "Preventing Suicide: A global perspective", World Health Organisation (2014).

[22] Preventing suicide in England: Two years on (2015)

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research, people posting about suicide on the internet are often initially unsure but their resolve strengthens as others encourage them and seeking help becomes more difficult.[23]

6.4   There is a difficulty in striking an appropriate balance on the issue as users, charities, and bodies need to work within the parameters of the law and respect the right of privacy, freedom of speech, moreover social media, search engines, and internet providers are all private actors in the online world. However, after an online suicide prevention summit held in Parliament on the 10th May 2016, attended by suicide prevention and mental health charities, internet providers, social networking sites, and politicians, followed by a comprehensive call of evidence from those that attended we have advanced a programme. We believe this can show where there are gaps to be filled and where we can make a real difference. We asked three questions:

- "What do you think about Social Networking Sites with regard to their particular influence on mental health and suicide in particular? Do you think that Social Networking Sites should be doing more to try and protect vulnerable users, or would this be asking the impossible in a largely unregulated space? Do you believe that public good is delivered from shared experience and information on social media?"

- "How do you think Internet search engines can help? Is there more to be learnt from other experiences; e.g. tackling extremism or child pornography online?

- "What about the role of Internet Providers themselves? Should they have a greater role and responsibility in monitoring the state (and potentially the mental state) of their users? Or does this represent a step too far- is it realistic to ask the provider of the internet connection be involved in this way?"

6.5   Based on the responses that we received and what was debated at the summit we put forward recommendations that we believe the

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[23] P Baume et al, "Cybersuicide: the role of interactive suicide notes on the internet", Crisis 18 (1997).

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internet industry should pursue in order to further tackle this issue.

We recommend:

i. **Staying relevant and exploring new ways they can engage with those who are feeling vulnerable, such as helping facilitate instant messaging services for those who they believe may be vulnerable.**

> o   With those who are younger being more likely to use the internet, and indeed use the internet to engage with suicide related material, it is vital that internet service providers, search engines, and social media sites stay relevant. For example, for many young people feeling vulnerable a signpost directing them to phone a number may not be enough to engage with them or encourage them to seek help.

> o   The National Suicide Prevention Alliance have argued that there is scope for search providers to go further than just display numbers at the top of the page and think about how they can deliver more substantial information on sources to help.[24] Staying relevant, being innovative and adapting to your user's needs is essential for any business to stay successful and the same must apply when reaching out to those who are vulnerable online.

> o   Organisations such as Samaritans are exploring such methods, including instant messaging services as they recognise many people need instant online support. This is something the internet industry can continue to engage with, and see how they may be able to help facilitate or help promote so that more people can be reached out to in new innovative and creative ways so that online support stays current and effective.

"Staying relevant, being innovative and adapting to your user's needs is essential for any business to stay successful and the same must apply when reaching out to those who are vulnerable online"

"For many young people feeling vulnerable a signpost directing them to phone a number may not be enough to engage with them or encourage them to seek help"

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[24] "Response: Summit on Online Suicide Prevention", National Suicide Prevention Alliance, May 2016.

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ii. **Calling on all internet providers and search engines to create signposts on their webpages with helpline numbers for those who appear particularly vulnerable. This included internet service providers and search engines curbing the auto complete feature to ensure it excludes a small set of search terms that would appear as predictions.**

- While searching for new innovative ways to engage with people that are vulnerable is essential, there remains room for improvement with signposting on the internet.

- Of the five most used and popular search engines (including Google, Yahoo, Bing, Aol, and Ask Jeeves) four of these have a helpline number on the top of their news feed after searching specific key words

Screenshots of online material are deliberately low resolution in order not to promote its content, but instead to highlight an overview of our research in this area. Original screenshots of the material are available through accredited organisations.

relating to vulnerability.

Figure D: Red circle highlighting where Google displays a helpline number

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Screenshots of online material are deliberately low resolution in order not to promote its content, but instead to highlight an overview of our research in this area. Original screenshots of the material are available through accredited organisations.

Figure E: Red circle highlighting where Yahoo displays a helpline number

Figure F: Red circle highlighting where Ask Jeeves displays a helpline number

Figure G: Red circle highlighting where Bing displays a helpline number

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Figure H: A cross highlighting that AOL do not display any helpline number

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- o AOL did not provide any helpline numbers on its page. There is a necessity for all search engines to work together on this, and all should have helpline numbers and suitable signposting.

- o Furthermore, when people are searching for certain terms around this issue every attempt should be made to curb the auto complete features away from predicting or encouraging direction to harmful content.
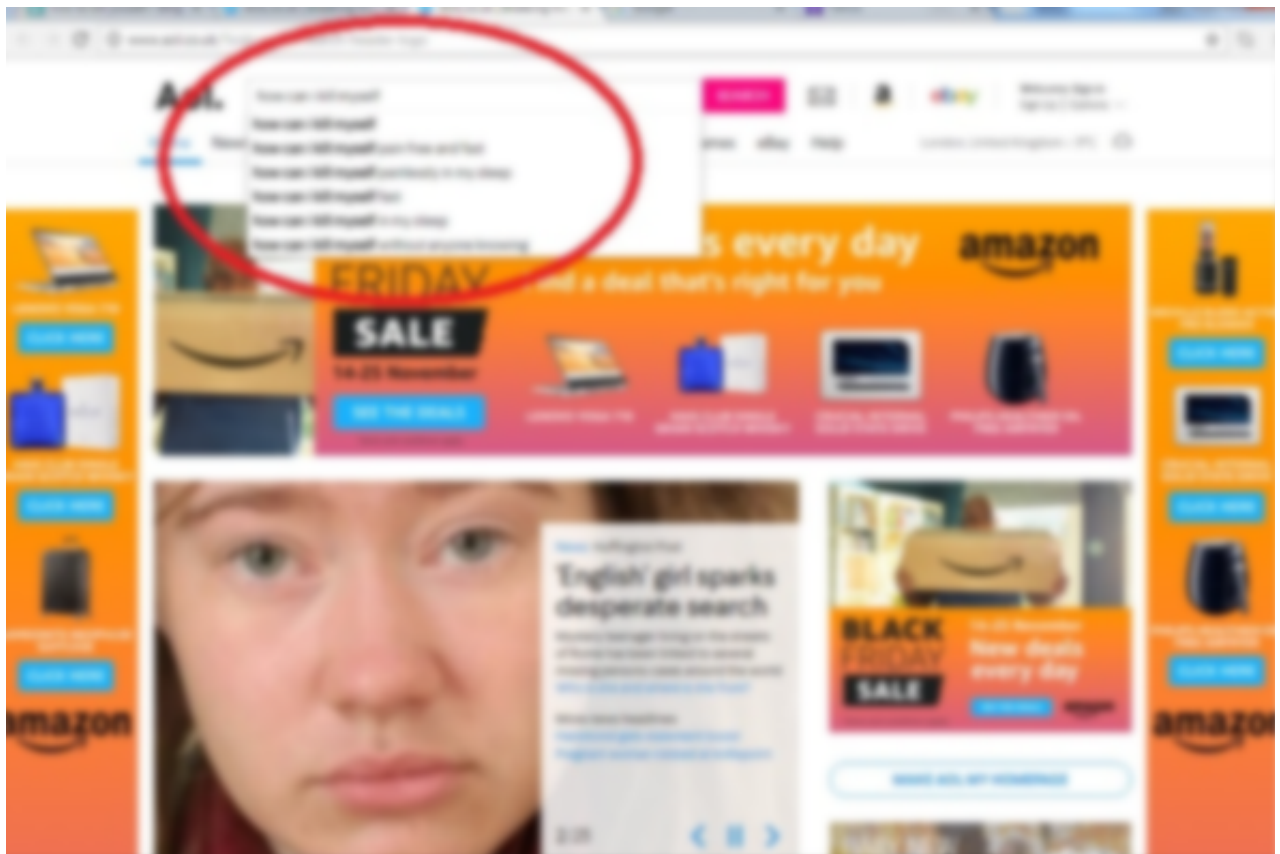

Figure I: Red circle highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on auto-complete when typing 'how can I kill myself' on AoL.

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Figure J: Red circle highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on auto-complete when typing 'how can I kill myself' on Yahoo.

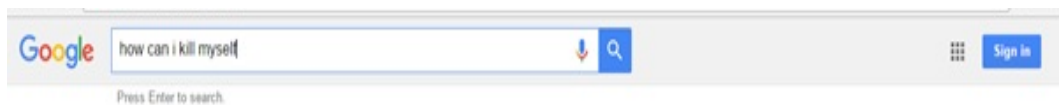*Figure K: Screenshot highlighting that no unhelpful suggestions appear on auto-complete when typing 'how can I kill myself' on Google.*

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o   As you can see, while Google has curbed these auto complete features, others have not. We feel Google's approach demonstrates the best practice. Other should follow their lead.

o   Equally, search engines and internet service providers should be avoiding any other attempts to help users find potential harmful material and by automatically trying to finish or find what the user is searching for it gives the impression that what they are searching for is the norm. They must ensure that they are not subtly or indirectly encouraging user's to engage with suicide related content.

iii.   **Optimising support sites when suicide related terms have been searched.**

o   After typing in such phrases such as "how to kill yourself" the initial pages that search engines display are mainly not ones offering support.

Figure L: Red square highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on the first page on Yahoo after searching 'how to kill yourself'.

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Figure M: Red square highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on the first page on Google after searching 'how to kill yourself'

Screenshots of online material are deliberately low resolution in order not to promote its content, but instead to highlight an overview of our research in this area. Original screenshots of the material are available through accredited organisations.

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Figure N: Red square highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on the first page on Ask Jeeves after searching 'how to kill yourself'

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Figure O: Red square highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on the first page on AoL after searching 'how to kill yourself'

Screenshots of online material are deliberately low resolution in order not to promote its content, but instead to highlight an overview of our research in this area. Original screenshots of the material are available through accredited organisations.

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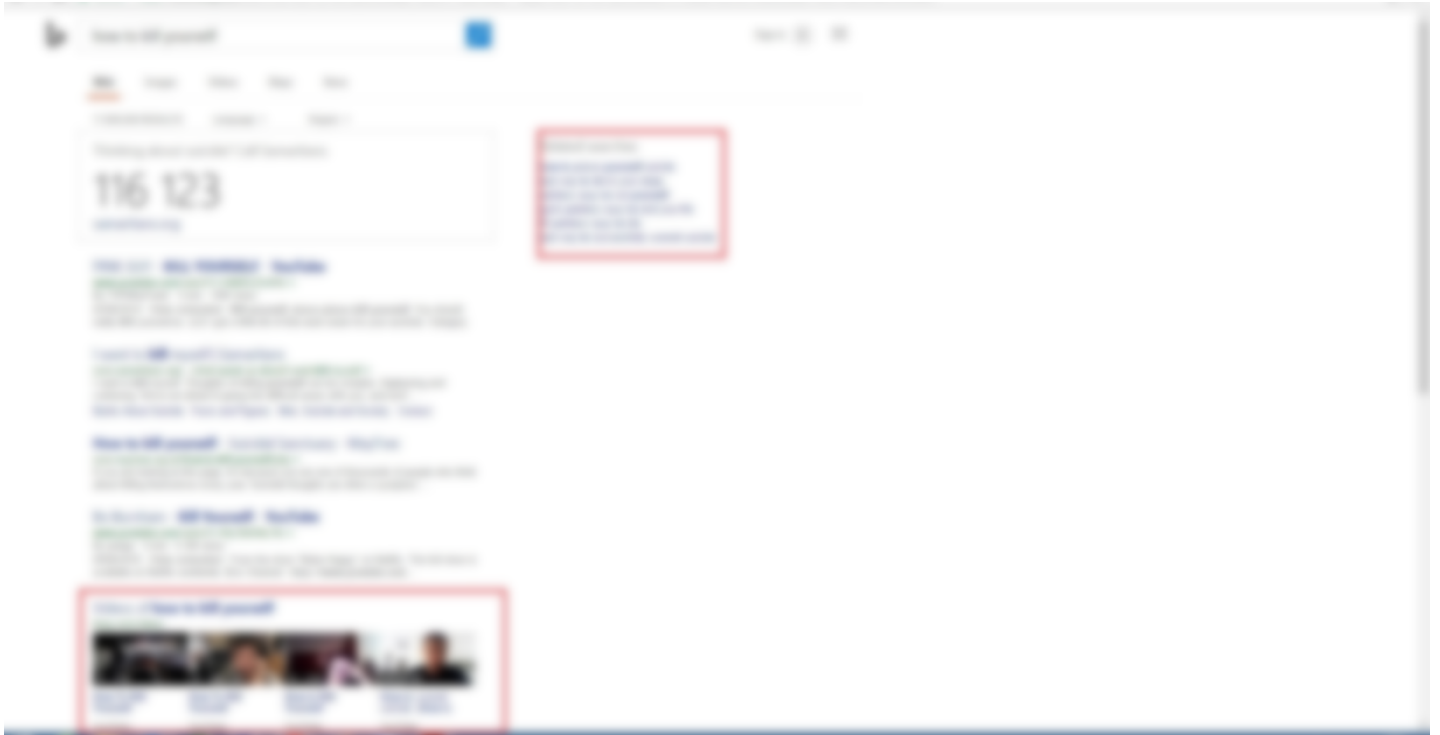
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Figure P: Red square highlighting the unhelpful suggestions that appear on the first page on Bing after searching 'how to kill yourself'

Screenshots of online material are deliberately low resolution in order not to promote its content, but instead to highlight an overview of our research in this area. Original screenshots of the material are available through accredited organisations.

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"There remains room for improvement with signposting on the internet. Of the five most used and popular search engines only three of these have a helpline number"

"Search engines and internet service providers should be avoiding any attempts to help users easily access potentially harmful material. However, after typing in phrases such as "how to kill yourself" the initial pages that are displayed are mainly ones not offering support"

o   More must be done: search engines must actively remove harmful options relating to search terms from appearing at the top of the list. The first number of results after searching keywords like the above should not be so explicit but instead be offering support or guidance.

o   The importance of encouraging such methods is enforced by further research by Biddle et al that has highlighted the benefits of having service providers pursue website optimisation strategies to maximise the likelihood that vulnerable people have access to helpful rather than harmful sites. They have pointed to how easy it is get access to detailed information about methods of suicide, pointing out how suicide sites were the three most frequently occurring web pages.[25]

o   The importance of responsible media reporting when talking and informing about suicide is vital and has been shown to reduce suicide rates according to the WHO.[26] This responsible reporting is defined as "avoiding detailed description of suicidal acts, avoiding sensationalism and glamorization, using responsible language, minimizing the prominence of suicide reports, avoiding oversimplifications, educating the public about suicide and available treatments, and providing information on where to seek help".[27] Therefore the internet industry plays a hugely important role in ensuring that the access vulnerable people have to certain sites is appropriate and that they are not contributing by indirectly helping people gain easy access to sites that sensationalise and glamourize suicide.

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[25] Suicide and the internet, 2008

[26] "Towards evidence-based suicide prevention programmes: World Health Organisation Regional Office for the Western Pacific", World Health Organisation (2010), Available from, http://www.wpro.who.int/mnh/TowardsEvidencebasedSPP.pdf

[27] "Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals", World Health Organisation (2000), Available from http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/426.pdf

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- By ensuring search engines have helpline numbers available to all, and that the first main posts are ones in which offer emotional support and guidance, it increases the effectiveness of the internet as a place of support.

iv. **Increase communication and cohesive action among the sector**

- Those who are working in the internet industry are among the brightest in the world, with innovation, creativity and imagination at the centre of everything that they do. These innovators should not rely on charities and government to just take the lead and rely on them to implement the necessary measures.

- While there may be people better placed to advise on the specifics of how to respond to those who are feeling vulnerable, internet providers, search engines, and social media sites can and must be more vocal as an industry on this issue.

- They have made many positive steps, but we are calling for the internet industry to be even more vocal and positive around the potential to improve online suicide prevention and by the end of 2017 we would like to see internet service providers, search engines, and social media sites working and sharing their best practices on the issue.

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7. Conclusions

7.1 What this report has attempted to do is highlight that the Government, internet providers, search engines, and social media sites must be more pro-active and continue to take positive steps in their approach to tackling suicide and online suicide prevention.

7.2 We have established that a lot of good and important work has been done in attempting to reach out to those who are vulnerable, and that attitudes are changing across the country when it comes to mental health and suicide. However, we cannot be complacent, and we must recognize that there are gaps and more can be done.

7.3 The Government has laid out a strategy to help tackle suicide, but it lacks detail and specifics and we believe with recent research highlighting the impact the internet is having, there is more for them to do.

7.4 Furthermore, in an era where the internet is now the go-to source for information and access to a wealth of knowledge, it must continue as an effective source of support for people who are vulnerable. Internet service providers, search engines, and social media sites have taken important steps in helping prevent suicides by trying to reduce where the internet can inadvertently promote or encourage suicide. However, they too must recognize that there is more that can be done by making sure the internet is a source of support and guidance about the impact the internet is having on suicide.

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Thank you

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Ask 4
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Cruse Bereavement Care
Dr Luke Sullivan
Facebook
Network Rail
Farming Community Network
Ged Flynn, PAPYRUS
Google
Grassroots Suicide Prevention
Great Lumley Street Community Centre
Hafal
Hamish Elvidge, the Matthew Elvidge Trust
Hanover Communications
Harmless
If U Care Share
IMAGO
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Lighthouse
Listening Ear
Maytree: A Sanctuary for the Suicidal
MedConfidential
National Suicide Prevention Alliance

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NSPCC
Origin Broadband
Outlook South West
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Paul Farmer, Chief Executive of MIND
Prof Louis Appleby, Chair and general spearhead of National Suicide
Prevention Strategy
Red Balloon Learner Centres
Ruth Sutherland, Chief Executive of the Samaritans
SANE
Selfharm UK
Selfhelp: Improving Mental Health
Suicide Safer London
Talk Talk
The Children's Society
The James Wentworth Stanley Memorial Fund
The Open Rights Group
Twitter
UNO (xilo)
Youth Access
Youth Scape
Zen Internet

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