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THE PRIME MINISTER

6 February 2018

Dear Paul

**COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE:
REVIEW OF INTIMIDATION IN PUBLIC LIFE**

Thank you again for your Committee's considered and thorough report on intimidation in public life. As you said, we are at a watershed moment in our political history, and it is time for a new and concerted response. This is why I will today mark the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage with a speech on the issue of debate in public life, where I will endorse the Committee's broad recommendations.

I will be writing to you with the Government's substantive response in due course, but I wanted to give you an overview of the measures I will announce today in a partial response to the Committee's findings. Some of these issues touch on devolved matters, and the UK Government will liaise with our colleagues in the Devolved Administrations accordingly. A number of your recommendations also fall to organisations and groups other than Government to take forward, so I will set out how we are encouraging and working with those bodies to make sure our public debate is rooted in decency, tolerance and respect.

Individuals standing for elected office

It cannot be right that people looking to put themselves forward to act as representatives in our democracy are subject to abuse for doing so, and for its part, the Government will act on all of the Committee's recommendations. We will consult on the introduction of a new offence in electoral law on intimidating candidates and campaigners. We will also extend the protection, already offered to Parliamentary candidates, to candidates for local government by removing the requirement to include their home addresses on ballot papers.

Online content

Social media are one of the defining technologies of our age, but as well as being places for empowering self-expression, online platforms can become places of intimidation and abuse. Tackling online harms is a key priority for this Government, and the Internet Safety Strategy, to be published in the spring, will set out details of a comprehensive new social media code of practice.

We want users to be better informed about what is happening on the social media platforms that they are using and how reported content is dealt with. We will therefore establish a new Annual Internet Safety Transparency Report, to improve our understanding of the offensive content being reported, how social media companies are responding to complaints, and what content is being removed.

I will today call on social media companies to set out how they will respond to the recommendations in the report, and I have been encouraged by the positive response we have seen thus far. I very much welcome that social media companies have agreed that they will take forward the recommendation for a 'pop up' social media reporting team for election campaigns and they will actively provide advice and support to Parliamentary candidates so they can remain safe and secure while on these sites. These are important steps in safeguarding the free and open elections which are such a key part of our democracy.

Online platforms are clearly no longer just passive hosts of the opinions of others, and I believe it is right, as recommended in your report, that we look at the liability of social media companies for illegal content on their sites. This issue is far from straightforward, so we will continue to work closely with international partners, as well as the companies themselves, to understand the impacts of such action on the digital economy, and assess whether there is indeed a case for developing a new definition for these platforms.

Political Parties

The report also outlines a series of recommendations for political parties. Whilst I cannot speak for other political parties, the Conservative Party has put in place a new code of conduct for members and supporters that puts respect and decency at its core, building on those steps that the Party has already taken, as outlined in the Party's submission to your review. I will encourage the leaders of other parties to follow this example in my speech today.

Law, police and prosecutors

The Committee made a number of recommendations for national police leadership bodies, including the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and the College of Policing, on devolved operational policing matters. Both the NPCC and the College will be responding to the Committee's report separately, but I am pleased to confirm that they will implement each of the recommendations in the report that refer to them. The Home Secretary and I support the broad application of these important principles: it is important for police officers and staff to have the necessary support to meet new and emerging threats and protect the public, particularly in relation to online activity.

Everyone in public life

All those in public life have a responsibility to demonstrate their opposition to intimidation and call it out, and report it when they see it. This Government takes this issue extremely seriously – last month I published a new Ministerial Code, updated to make clear the standards of behaviour I expect from my Ministers and to reinforce the need for a culture of respect at the centre of public life. We must all work together to combat this issue.

I want to thank you and your Committee again for your important contribution to these issues. Your report presents a credible plan of action to help build a safer and more public sphere, and has been invaluable in moving forward the debate. I look forward to setting out in more detail the action the Government plans to take next.

I am copying this letter to Lesley Bainsfair, the Secretary of the Committee on Standards in Public Life; the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; the Home Secretary; the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government; the Chancellor of the Duchy Of Lancaster; Chloe Smith, the Minister for the Constitution; the Cabinet Secretary; and Sue Gray, Director General of Propriety and Ethics in the Cabinet Office.

Yours sincerely
