

# Government publishes first ever national action plan to protect journalists

- Plan sets out how journalists will be protected from threats of violence and intimidation
- Includes new measures to research the problem and training for police forces and journalists
- Broadcasters, publishers, social media companies, law enforcement, industry bodies, unions and the government all make pledges

It follows reports to the government from journalists who have suffered abuse and attacks while going about their work, including being punched, threatened with knives, forcibly detained and subjected to rape and death threats.

A survey of members of the National Union of Journalists in November also found more than half of respondents had experienced online abuse while nearly a quarter had been physically assaulted or attacked.

The plan will increase awareness of the safety challenges faced by journalists operating in the UK and introduce measures to tackle them in a joint effort by law enforcement, broadcasters, publishers, industry bodies, unions and the government.

Measures include new training for police officers as well as aspiring and existing journalists, and commitments from social media platforms and prosecution services to take tough action against abusers – including responding promptly to complaints of threats to journalists' safety.

The plan has been endorsed by the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, membership of which comprises industry stakeholders including the National Union of Journalists and Society of Editors.

It will be reviewed as necessary on an ongoing basis and supports the wider work the government is doing to uphold freedom of speech, in particular protecting journalistic content from censorship and takedown online. The Government is also publishing a broader update today on its ongoing work to tackle intimidation in public life.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

“Freedom of speech and a free press are at the very core of our democracy, and journalists must be able to go about their work without being threatened.

“The cowardly attacks and abuse directed at reporters for simply doing their job cannot continue.

“This action plan is just the start of our work to protect those keeping the public informed, and defend those holding the government to account.”

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

“Attacks on journalists are not only horrendous for those individuals but an assault on our democracy. Today’s action plan will make sure journalists can go about their vital work without fear.

“But just as we protect the physical safety of journalists we must protect their freedom to write and report too. Tackling worrying trends on online censorship of journalistic content and controversial views, we will ensure our forthcoming online safety laws build in robust protections for journalism.”

Minister for Media and Data and Chair of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, John Whittingdale, said:

“We will not tolerate a world where journalists are silenced through fear or censorship and want the UK to set an international example for the respect, treatment and protection of those working in the field. This plan is the first step towards achieving those aims.”

The plan sets out a series of commitments from relevant organisations focused on protecting the safety of journalists based in the UK.

## **The government**

The Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) and the Home Office will shortly issue a call for evidence to build a better understanding of the volume and type of threats and abuse against journalists. It will build on existing reports from journalists – for example, of hospital admissions following assaults and online death threats – to develop a targeted approach to tackling the issue.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) will use its global network, including its co-chairship of the Media Freedom Coalition, to share insights and strategies on the protection of journalists, with the aim of strengthening approaches in other countries.

## **Online platforms**

With online abuse being one of the biggest challenges facing journalists today, particularly for BAME and female journalists, Facebook and Twitter have committed to respond promptly to complaints of threats to journalists’ safety.

The government is already tackling online abuse through the forthcoming Online Safety Bill. All social media users, including journalists, will be better able to report abuse and be supported by the platforms if they do so.

Online platforms will be required to protect users and enforce their terms and conditions or face sanctions – including fines of up to 10 per cent of their annual turnover or having their services blocked. The Bill will also enshrine in law protections for journalistic content and free debate online.

## **Police**

The National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) will work with the police which will provide training for journalists reporting on police operations, initially through a workshop at the University of Portsmouth.

The police will engage with the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Society of Editors and others to update their training offer for police around journalists covering demonstrations and investigating crime against journalists.

Every police force is to be given access to a designated journalist safety liaison officer while the National Police Chiefs' Council has appointed a lead officer – Chief Constable Gavin Stephens – to take responsibility for crime against journalists at national level.

## **Media organisations**

Organisations such as the Media Lawyers Association will produce further guidance to help journalists recognise and understand when abuse breaks the law and what they can do about it. The NCTJ will provide safety training for student journalists while the NUJ and Society of Editors will collate and host a free online support pack for journalists.

Publishers and broadcasters have committed to providing new training for staff and freelancers on managing threats. They will review and collaborate on safety policies and ensure they are well publicised, and establish designated safety officers within their organisations.

## **Prosecution services**

Freedom of expression and the right to receive and impart information are recognised and protected by law. Criminal offences committed against journalists exercising those rights jeopardise both the right to free speech and public service, and prosecutors rightly take such offences extremely seriously.

In the plan, the separate UK prosecution services for England and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland reaffirm their commitment to taking a robust approach to crimes against journalists and bringing those responsible to justice.

Ian Murray, executive director of the Society of Editors said:

“The Action Plan recognises the urgency of protecting journalists carrying out their vital role in protecting democracy.

“Due to their role in holding the powerful and those in authority to task journalists attract strong reactions. But this should not manifest itself in ways that threaten journalists and their families. This action plan makes that clear.”

NUJ general secretary Michelle Stanistreet said:

“Attacks on journalists are designed to silence and intimidate those who work to uphold the public’s right to know. NUJ members have shared horrific experiences of being attacked, abused and threatened – on and offline – simply for doing their job.

“It’s clear that reported incidents are the tip of the iceberg and that harassment and abuse has become normalised. This action plan, with its range of practical measures and protections, is an important step towards changing that and ensuring journalists can get on with their vital work free from harassment or intimidation.”

News Media Association chief executive David Newell said:

“The coronavirus crisis has thrown a spotlight on the importance of trusted news and information yet abuse of journalists, often on social media, has risen markedly over the same period.

“There can be no place in our democratic society for abuse and attacks on journalists, which constitute a threat to free speech, and the national action plan is a welcome development to help address this.”

Chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council’s Communications Advisory Group, Chief Constable Gavin Stephens said:

“Journalists are a vital cog in a functioning society and deserve to be respected for the role they play in providing a public information service and holding authorities to account.

“Any restriction of those values severely impacts public confidence and trust both of which are core principles in policing and what drive the communities we serve to be safe and feel safe.

“I’m committed to raising awareness within policing of the long term damaging impact that targeting journalists can have and will be doing so through my new role. The impact of these crimes is not just on individuals and their welfare but also on press freedom itself, which has to be upheld and protected.”

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- In 2020, the first meeting of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists took place and plans were made for the development of the National Action Plan. This was in response to a recommendation from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the world’s largest intergovernmental security organisation.
- The Commitments in the plan are applicable throughout the UK.
- The National Committee is co-chaired by the Minister for Media and Data and the Minister for Safeguarding and includes representatives from policing and prosecution services, journalism organisations, and non-

governmental organisations.