

Rt. Hon. Baroness Hallett DBE
c/o Covid 19 Inquiry

Sent via email: contact@covid19.public-inquiry.uk

Subject: Dame Priti Patel's evidence to the Covid-19 Inquiry

Dear Baroness Hallett,

I take this opportunity to write to you as Chair of the Covid-19 inquiry following evidence given by the former Home Secretary, Rt. Hon. Dame Priti Patel MP, on Thursday 9 November 2023.

During the former Home Secretary's evidence, she mentioned the work of the Internet Watch Foundation as one of the third sector organisations, she, and the Home Office would work closely with to counter the increasing threat of online child sexual abuse during the pandemic as we all spent more time online.

During her evidence she stated:

“Throughout the pandemic, it is fair to say that I had some very forthright discussions with technology companies about their own responsibilities – to data-sharing, closing down platforms that effectively promoted, facilitated and enabled all sorts of terrible things on the web, which could also compel and entice children to be on those sites.

“I remember having a specific discussion with technology companies – I think the National Crime Agency were involved as well – because we saw a surge in activity online, almost the inevitability of lockdown.

“With that of course, perpetrators are spending more time online. The dark web in particular is a dreadful place for just terrible activity. But we found that some of the third-party organisations we would work with, for example the Internet Watch Foundation and others, they themselves were affected by the pandemic, so they were not in the office.”

I thought it might be helpful to clarify these remarks and explain our response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was very important to us as an organisation that we remained open during the pandemic as the threat to children was increasing online. However, we also had to strike a delicate balance in ensuring the health, safety, and welfare of our staff. We also had to ensure we were putting in place contingency measures should a member of our staff contract Covid-19 to ensure the Hotline could remain operational for as long as possible, in the interests of children.

This meant that we sent all our staff who do not view child sexual abuse content home, once Government had issued a “stay at home order.” We then worked closely with officials in the Home Office and Government to ensure our analysts, who cannot work from home due to the

nature of the content they were reviewing, to be designated as key workers so our offices could remain open and processing reports of online child sexual abuse.

We did, temporarily, reduce the capacity of the Hotline during this initial period, to split our Hotline team in half. This was to ensure that should anyone succumb to Covid-19 we still had another team which would be able to swap in for the affected team and ensure we were not spreading the virus further and putting some of our vulnerable colleagues or their family members at risk of contracting or spreading the virus.

I am proud to say that these measures were effective and during the lockdown periods, we had no confirmed cases of Covid-19 reported within our organisation.

We worked closely with the Government to hold technology companies to account, over ensuring their trust and safety and content moderation teams were still operational and we convened several virtual roundtable discussions with our industry Members and Government Ministers, Rt. Hon. James Brokenshire and Rt. Hon. Victoria Atkins, who also wrote to our team to thank them for their dedication and contribution to keeping children safe during the pandemic.

I wanted to ensure you were aware of the work we conducted with the Government during this period and to ensure that this is as accurate as possible. I would be happy to share any information about the steps outlined in this letter if it is of further interest to the inquiry.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

Susie Hargreaves OBE
CEO