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Guidance

National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists

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Ministerial foreword



Journalism in the United Kingdom has a long and proud history. Since the days of John Wilkes, journalists have never shied away from holding the powerful to account - and in so doing, their work has shaped our society.

Underneath this lies a fundamental principle: that a journalist, whatever their persuasion, can do their job to the best of their ability, without fear or favour.

Unfortunately, too many journalists working in the UK today can no longer take that right for granted, and are facing both abuse and threats to their personal safety as well as encroachments on their freedom of expression.

A world where journalists are silenced by either fear or censorship is a much poorer one. This government, which was elected on a manifesto commitment to defend the freedom of the press, will be robust in shielding them from both. This action plan will help guard them from threats to their safety, while our forthcoming online safety legislation will enshrine in law protections for journalistic content and free debate.

This Plan - the UK's first ever National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists - acknowledges that there is work that we must do fully to understand the scale of the problem, while recognising that there is already much that can be done to begin to tackle it. This work is critical in its own right, and it will also serve to

support the wider work this government is doing both to uphold freedom of speech - in particular protecting journalistic content from censorship and takedown online - and to address intimidation of those in public life.

To take credible, lasting action to support the safety of journalists will require efforts from all quarters. We are grateful to the broadcasters, publishers and other stakeholders from across the industry whose input has led to this Plan, as well as to those who have engaged with us from the police service and the criminal justice system. We would like to extend our particular thanks to the members of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, established in July 2020, who have come together to make clear commitments to take meaningful action, and whose diligence and support will be of crucial importance as we look to ensure that journalists are kept safe; and we invite publishers, broadcasters and all involved in news - those who produce it, and those who read, watch and listen to it, to respond in that same spirit.

We are setting our sights high. We are committed to making the UK a country in which journalists are kept as safe as possible to undertake their vital work.

This is a critical challenge for the future of this country. We stand ready to meet it.

Rt Hon John Whittingdale, Minister of State for Media and Data, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

Rt Hon Victoria Atkins, Minister for Safeguarding, Home Office

Statements of support from political parties

“ 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.”

Rt Hon Boris Johnson, MP, Prime Minister and Leader of the Conservative Party

“ A free press is a central pillar of democracy, but not one that can be taken for granted. Press freedom is fragile, all too easily overrun. We have to regularly renew our commitment to a free press, and that includes defending journalists and journalism in the UK and across the globe, so they may play their part in our democracy without fear or intimidation.”

Christian Matheson, MP, Labour Party Shadow Spokesperson for DCMS

“ Democracy thrives on debate. But that debate must be respectful. As a society, there may be much on which we disagree. But our disagreements must never take the form of abuse or threats. Attacks on journalists or our free press can never be justified. Nor can any attempt to silence voices with whom we disagree. On the need to defend free speech and a free press we are united.”

John Nicholson, MP, SNP Shadow Spokesperson for DCMS

“ In an age where fake news is becoming all too common, an independent and courageous press is crucial to our British democracy and our basic British freedoms. Protecting our journalists, so they can always speak truth unto power, is vital.”

Jamie Stone, MP, Liberal Democrats Shadow Spokesperson for DCMS

Statement from the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists

“ We strongly welcome the publication of this National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists. The work that journalists do is crucial to our society, and we are delighted that positive steps are being taken to ensure that they are protected. We look forward to working together to ensure that journalists operating in the UK can continue in their vital work of speaking truth to power.”

Introduction

If the purpose of journalism is [“to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments \(https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/purpose-journalism/\)](https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/what-is-journalism/purpose-journalism/), then a society in which there are threats to the safety of those who are working to that end is one in which that process is being undermined. As the UN Human Rights Committee has said, [“a free, uncensored, unhindered press or other media ... constitutes one of the cornerstones of a democratic society” \(https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf\)](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/gc34.pdf).

This is not, of course, to set journalists and their reportings above fair criticism, any more than it is to say that there cannot be legitimate scrutiny of publishers’ or broadcasters’ operating methods. Yet while it is part of the function of journalism to provoke informed and robust debate, and to promote the exercise of free speech.

There is an important distinction between reasoned debate and personal abuse, threats and harm. Journalists, while working in the UK, have reported being punched, threatened with knives, and forcibly detained. There have been hospital admissions following assaults. Others have reported having shots fired at their house, their pets killed, and having received rape threats and death threats.

And if this represents the more extreme end of the spectrum in terms of UK-based journalists' experiences, countless more are being subjected, on a regular and ongoing basis, to unacceptable abuse online. In total, more than half of respondents to a recent National Union of Journalists (NUJ) [survey](https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-safety-report-2020.html) (<https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-safety-report-2020.html>) reported experiencing some form of harassment and abuse.

It is this problem - and the long-term outlook that accompanies it, where threats and violence silence journalists and censor debate - which the UK's first National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists has been put in place to address. While it would not be right to compare the situation in the UK with that in some other nations, the risk is stark - it is journalists leaving the profession, and a decline in new entrants; it is self-censorship of those that remain; it is anxiety, stress and depression; it is less challenge to those in power; it is a weaker democracy.

This Plan has not emerged from an empty page. It builds on action that is already being taken by the police, by employers, by organisations such as the News Media Association (NMA), and the Society of Editors, by the NUJ, by prosecutors across the UK, by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), and by many others besides. It reflects the important programme of work that has come out of the [Government's response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's Review of Intimidation in Public Life](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life-review-of-intimidation-in-public-life) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life-review-of-intimidation-in-public-life>) and it draws inspiration from the long-standing efforts led by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) to support media freedom across the world, from assistance to projects in developing countries that promote and support media freedom, to the launch of the Media Freedom Coalition and work with UNESCO, which has adopted a UK proposal for a UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

It recognises, though, that there is more that can and must be done. This Plan calls on publishers and broadcasters to do more to support their employees and the freelancers that they engage; it calls on platforms to do more to tackle online abuse; and it calls on the criminal justice system to ensure that those who attack and threaten journalists are brought to justice.

In drawing together this Plan, it has been acknowledged that a number of journalists who operate in Northern Ireland have been subjected to [threats](https://rsf.org/en/reports/dispatch-one-year-after-killing-lyra-mckee-press-freedom-remains-under-threat-northern-ireland) (<https://rsf.org/en/reports/dispatch-one-year-after-killing-lyra-mckee-press-freedom-remains-under-threat-northern-ireland>) by paramilitaries and criminals. The Plan does not, however, draw out those threats into Northern Ireland-specific action, as to do so would be to take them out of their wider context. In addition to the work undertaken by law enforcement agencies in response to specific threats, the [Northern Ireland Executive's Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised](#)

[Crime \(https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/executive-programme-tackling-paramilitary-activity-and-organised-crime\)](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/executive-programme-tackling-paramilitary-activity-and-organised-crime) aims to address the long-term, underlying problem of paramilitary activity. The success of both will clearly be of critical importance in terms of keeping safe those journalists reporting from, and on, Northern Ireland. As well as these specific issues, journalists in Northern Ireland also face the same, wider issues as their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. For that reason, the Plan sets out a number of commitments that are applicable throughout the UK, to ensure that stakeholders, while mindful of the relevant context, are robustly held to account.

Perhaps of most importance, the Plan is a living document. It will be revisited as new evidence is received on the nature and scale of the problem; as the issues that underlie it are further explored; and through the ongoing engagement that will be taking place with journalists. At each and every meeting that it convenes, the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists will hold all to account for delivery, and will keep under constant review what additional steps could be taken as we find out more about the challenges that face us.

Objective

Our aim is to ensure that journalists operating in the UK are as safe as possible, reducing the number of attacks on and threats issued to journalists and ensuring those that are responsible for such are brought to justice. In order to support this goal, we are taking steps to:

Increase our understanding of the problem;

Enhance the criminal justice system response in tackling crimes against journalists;

Support journalists and their employers to build the resources they need to protect personal safety;

Help online platforms to tackle the wider issue of abuse online; and

Improve public recognition of the value of journalists.

The Plan

1. Increase our understanding of the problem

That there is a problem is undeniable. Too many journalists currently working in the UK do not feel safe from threats, abuse and physical harm, and “harassing journalists”, in the words of Reporters without Borders, [“has never been as easy as it is now”](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsf_report_on_online_harassment.pdf) (https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsf_report_on_online_harassment.pdf). However, if we are to take meaningful action to support their safety, we must have a firm evidential base on which to do so.

This is not to say that we do not have a sense of the problem. A survey published by the National Union of Journalists in November 2020 found that more than half of respondents had experienced online abuse, while nearly a quarter had been physically assaulted or attacked. One respondent said:

“ The impact has profoundly affected my relationships with my family and friends - shock, anxiety and depression caused by this abuse.”

An account such as this - of the serious impact that abuse can have - is reflected in published research on the scale and effect of the problem overseas. A [study carried out in Sweden](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2016.1164614) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2016.1164614>) found that more than a quarter of the journalists who had reported threats had avoided covering specific topics and groups as a result; a [Council of Europe study](https://book.coe.int/en/human-rights-and-democracy/7284-journalists-under-pressure-unwarranted-interference-fear-and-self-censorship-in-europe.html) (<https://book.coe.int/en/human-rights-and-democracy/7284-journalists-under-pressure-unwarranted-interference-fear-and-self-censorship-in-europe.html>) came to similar conclusions, suggesting that knock-on effects included reporting content in a less controversial manner, as well as being selective about what to report. Furthermore, the Swedish study found that nearly one in ten respondents who had experienced threats or abusive comments had considered leaving the profession as a result.

Reports of this nature - and international evidence including UNESCO and [International Center for Journalists \(ICFJ\) research](https://www.icfj.org/news/online-attacks-women-journalists-leading-real-world-violence-new-research-shows) (<https://www.icfj.org/news/online-attacks-women-journalists-leading-real-world-violence-new-research-shows>) illustrating that online attacks can escalate into real world violence cannot be ignored. They underline the vital importance of establishing and maintaining a comprehensive understanding of the full extent of the threats that journalists are currently facing while working in the UK - an understanding, what is more, that must be broken down regionally, so that each action that is taken is appropriately targeted.

It is against the above backdrop that this Plan confirms the following commitments:

- The Home Office will issue a call for evidence on threats / attacks. This will be issued in early 2021, with the intention of building a better understanding of the volume and type of threats and abuse against journalists, as well as their impact, in order to develop a targeted approach to tackling the issue;
- DCMS, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Society of Editors will conduct an annual survey of journalists. The details of the design of this survey will be finalised after the conclusion of the Home Office’s call for evidence, so it can respond to specific information gaps; and

- The FCDO, which promotes, supports and defends media freedom internationally through its bilateral and multilateral diplomatic work, including its co-chairship of the Media Freedom Coalition and overseas development assistance, will use its global network, including multilateral and ministerial fora, to share insights and strategies on the protection of journalists, and to help share best practice, with the aim of mutually strengthening domestic approaches.

2. Enhance the criminal justice system response in tackling crimes against journalists

Where the harm caused to a journalist amounts to a criminal offence, it is crucial that everything possible is done to bring those responsible to justice.

This covers a number of issues, from an understanding on the part of the journalist in question of what can and should be reported, to a willingness to report their concerns to the police, to the gathering of sufficient evidence to allow charges to be brought. It is critical, therefore, that there is an understanding of the nature and scale of the problem on the part of the police and prosecutors - not least given the effect of threats towards journalists, which is to quash the right to freedom of expression, and to risk the suppression of important information.

This Plan confirms the following commitments:

- The police will work with the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) to provide training on police operations for journalists, initially through a pilot workshop on the NCTJ course at the University of Portsmouth;
- Every police force within the UK will have access to a designated journalist safety liaison officer;
- The police will engage with the NUJ, the Society of Editors and others to update their training offer for police in relation to demonstrations (and the role of journalists in covering these), and in relation to investigating crime against journalists; and
- The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) will identify an existing lead to take responsibility for crime against journalists.

In addition to the above, the separate UK prosecution services - the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in England and Wales, the Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland (PPSNI) and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) in Scotland - have reaffirmed their commitment to a robust prosecutorial approach in relation to crimes against journalists. 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.

3. Support journalists and their employers to build the resources they need to protect personal safety

In order for effective action to be taken when a threat is received, journalists need to understand the options available to them, and be supported by their employers in preventing and addressing threats. It is, of course, important to recognise here that many employers already do take the concerns raised by their journalists seriously, and that actions taken by those employers can and do have significant positive impacts on journalists' wellbeing; however, this is not always the case. In the words of one respondent to the NUJ survey:

“When I had death threats and rape threats for one piece I wrote, nobody understood how bad it was. The abusers found me on every platform, there were thousands of abusive messages and I was afraid for my family that I would be doxed [i.e. have private information published online]... I felt completely alone.”

Where this is the experience of even one working journalist, then we cannot stand by. Where experiences of this kind are not unique - where a journalist cannot do her job properly for fear that her sex puts her at risk, and that she will be left to face that risk alone - then we still have far to go.

This Plan confirms the following commitments:

- The Media Lawyers Association will produce [guidance](https://medialawyersassociation.org/news-2/) (<https://medialawyersassociation.org/news-2/>) to help journalists understand the law in this area and help them recognise abuse that may be illegal
- The NUJ and Society of Editors will collate and host a free online toolkit / support pack for journalists
- The NUJ, Society of Editors and others will engage closely with UK police representatives and the NCTJ to review their training offer on police operations
- The NUJ, Society of Editors and others will work with DCMS to explore the possibility of an emergency safety fund for journalists under immediate threat of harm, and
- The NCTJ will provide safety training as part of their training offer

In addition to the above, it is important to acknowledge that, while journalists must of course take responsibility for their reporting, those who publish or broadcast that reporting owe those journalists a responsibility of their own. That is to recognise when a story is likely to give rise to abuse and to reflect that in their approach to publication, comment moderation and social media use; to acknowledge that some may face particular abuse related to their sex, or other protected characteristics, and to provide support accordingly; and to take additional action to provide appropriate security for journalists whose work puts them at higher risk - for example, those who report on politically and socially contentious issues, organised crime, paramilitary activity, or on political extremism.

The government has held a number of stakeholder discussions on this issue, and many publishers and broadcasters have committed, in their role as employers of journalists, to:

- Provide safety training for staff and freelancers on managing threats
- Review their safety policies, and engage in a collaborative approach to developing best practice safety policies across the industry
- Ensure safety policies are well publicised to staff and freelancers, and
- Establish designated safety officers

The government calls on all those who publish and broadcast the work of journalists in the UK to take action to embed the above into their working practices.

4. Help online platforms to tackle the wider issue of abuse online

As touched on earlier in this Plan, online abuse - which can range from obscene messages to death or rape threats - continues to be the most significant safety challenge facing journalists. This abuse, which is often aimed at women and BAME journalists, can leave a lasting and chilling impact. It drives talented individuals away from the profession, and piece by piece, it corrodes our democratic values.

The government has recognised the importance of addressing this issue and is already taking action. The forthcoming Online Safety Bill will require companies to tackle abuse on their services and take reasonable steps to protect users' safety online, while all users, including journalists, will be better able to report abuse, and should expect to receive appropriate support from the relevant platform if they do so.

This Plan confirms the following commitments:

- The government will make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, through the introduction of an Online Safety Bill, and
- Facebook and Twitter will respond promptly to complaints of threats to journalists' safety

Furthermore, the government is also looking at the criminal law and if it can more effectively address online abuse. A Law Commission review, sponsored by DCMS, has found the law in need of updating to address a range of abusive behaviours online, including pile-on harassment, cyber flashing and the glorification of self-harm, and the Commission has therefore consulted on proposed reforms, suggesting potential new offences to tackle the harms arising from online abuse. Where necessary and appropriate, legislation will be introduced.

5. Improve public recognition of the value of journalists

While this Plan has been put in place to support the vital work that journalists do to hold those in power to account, there is a proportion of society which rejects this as a premise - that approaches 'mainstream' news and journalism, and the processes by which this is gathered, from a starting point of distrust and disengagement.

Where there are those who see news as "at best, irrelevant and, at worst, actively complicit with a distant and self-serving political and economic establishment", and many see the role of journalists "[not as bringing important subjects to light, but as actively covering them up](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1808516)" (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1808516>), it is part of the role of this Plan to seek to engage with them. In the changing media environment which faces us as we enter the 2020s, it is crucial that citizens recognise that a free and independent media is of fundamental importance; that without strong journalism, a democratic society cannot survive.

This Plan confirms the following commitments

- The government will publish an Online Media Literacy Strategy which will include supporting wider public understanding of the role of journalism, and
- The government will use the existing Journalism Matters week to highlight the safety of journalists

Next Steps

This Plan has been agreed to by stakeholders across the industry. As new information comes to light - about the problem and about the impact of interventions as they are put in place - it will be revisited and updated.

The government will work with stakeholders to report to the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists annually on progress against all commitments. The Committee will hold to account each stakeholder who commits to an intervention, both at the formal meetings which it will hold twice a year and in its day-to-day interactions within the sector.

Table of interventions

Action	Owner
Increase our understanding of the problem	
Call for Evidence	Home Office & DCMS
Annual survey of journalists	DCMS, NUJ & SoE

Share insights and best practice internationally	FCDO
Enhance the criminal justice system response in tackling crimes against journalists	
Training for student journalists on police operations	Police forces & NCTJ
Designated journalist safety liaison officer for police forces	Police forces
Training for police to be updated to reflect the role of journalists	Police forces, SoE & NUJ
Appointment of NPCC lead on crime against journalists	NPCC
Support journalists and their employers to build the resources they need to protect personal safety	
Publication of guidance on laws on online harassment (https://medialawyersassociation.org/news-2/)	Media Lawyers Association
Online safety support pack for journalists	NUJ & SoE
Journalists' training on police operations to be reviewed	SoE, NUJ, NCTJ & Police forces
Exploration of the potential to develop an emergency safety fund for journalists	DCMS, SoE & NUJ
Student journalists to receive safety training	NCTJ
Training for staff and freelancers on managing threats	Publishers & Broadcasters
Review safety policies and collaborate to develop best practice across industry	Publishers & Broadcasters
Ensure safety policies are well publicised to staff and freelancers	Publishers & Broadcasters
Establish designated safety officers	Publishers & Broadcasters
Help online platforms to tackle the wider issue of abuse online	
Introduce an Online Safety Bill	UK government
Respond promptly to complaints of threats to journalists'	Facebook &

safety	Twitter
Improve public recognition of the value of journalists	
Publication of a media literacy strategy	DCMS
Highlight the safety of journalists through Journalism Matters week	DCMS

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