



Department for  
Digital, Culture  
Media & Sport



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

All MPs

MC2020/28682/DC  
24 December 2020

Dear Colleague,

Three weeks ago we witnessed a landmark moment in our battle against coronavirus - the launch of a safe and effective vaccination programme.

While confidence in vaccines across the UK remains high, there are some citizens who will understandably have questions and we must answer them. It is unacceptable that some people are seeking to exploit those legitimate questions and deliberately create and spread dangerous lies about vaccines for their own malicious reasons.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen a range of baseless, and, in some instances, absurd narratives being shared about vaccines.

It is vitally important that false information about vaccines is tackled, and we would like to take this opportunity to briefly set out the work underway to address vaccine misinformation and disinformation. I would also urge all members to share the NHS information with constituents through all possible channels. We have annexed some key resources to this letter.

#### Reassuring, though promoting authoritative information

The Government is committed to ensuring that people have access to accurate information about the virus and vaccines. The Department for Health and Social Care and the NHS are leading extensive communications activity to reassure the public, providing advice and information to support those who have been prioritised to receive a vaccine and anyone who has questions about the vaccination process. Our public communication is informed by analysis of prominent and emerging vaccine narratives.

It is encouraging to see that traditional media has remained the top source of information about Covid-19 throughout the pandemic, demonstrating the importance of the UK's print and broadcast media. Similarly, Ofcom research shows that the NHS continues to be one of the most highly trusted sources of information about the virus.

#### Rebutting false information

The Government stood up the cross-Whitehall Counter Disinformation Unit in March, bringing together cross-Government monitoring and analysis capabilities to tackle online misinformation and disinformation.

The Counter Disinformation Unit looks for trends on social media platforms so that we can work with them and other partners to respond to misleading content rapidly. Given the importance of protecting freedom of expression, this can be a range of actions from labeling, to downranking, to removal where there is significant risk of harm, in line with platform terms and conditions.

The unit is not designed to spot every instance of false information across all social media platforms. That said, the Government acts wherever false harmful content appears to gain traction, by either flagging the content to platforms, or through direct rebuttal on social media via our Rapid Response Unit. These efforts are supported by the National Security Communications Team with the Army's 77th Brigade tackling disinformation from hostile state activity.

The Government is also working to build audience resilience to misinformation and disinformation. We have developed the SHARE checklist which aims to increase audience resilience by educating and empowering those who see, inadvertently share and are affected by false and misleading information.

#### Removing and reducing the impact of false information through working with social media platforms

On 3 November, we jointly hosted a roundtable to address the growth of vaccine misinformation and disinformation. During this meeting we secured commitment from Facebook, Twitter and Google to the principle that no company should profit from or promote COVID-19 anti-vaccine misinformation and disinformation and to respond to flagged content more swiftly.

We intend to hold them to their commitments and have set a series of policy fora in motion to enable regular dialogue and information sharing. These meetings, which began earlier this month, are chaired by the Minister for Digital and Culture and bring together social media platforms, civil society organisations and academia to develop better responses to online misinformation and disinformation.

The major platforms have updated their terms of service, and taken positive steps to reduce the spread of harmful and misleading narratives, and to promote government and NHS messaging, including around anti vaccination content. But we continue to press for further action.

This week, the Government published the Full Government Response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation. This response included details of new laws to deal with harmful content and behaviour online, including misinformation and disinformation that could cause significant physical or psychological harm to an individual. While this will take some time to be legally enforceable, we expect to see companies meeting their duty of care on misinformation and disinformation around vaccines now.

#### What to do if you spot misinformation or disinformation

If your constituents see misleading information on social media, one of the best actions they can take is to report it to the social media companies who can take action against it if it breaches their terms of service. Each platform has a different method for users to report content. The World Health Organisation has produced a guide that explains the reporting process for each of the major social media platforms.

Further parliamentary engagement

Caroline Dinenage, the Minister for Digital and Culture, is hosting a number of events to provide more detail about our collective activities, and provide an opportunity for members to ask questions. The first of these was on 26 November and further sessions will be held in January. Dates for these will be circulated to all colleagues in the new year.

Yours sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Oliver Dowden in blue ink.

**Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP**  
Secretary of State

Handwritten signature of Matt Hancock in blue ink.

**Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP**  
Secretary of State

## **ANNEX A - List of resources**

### Authoritative sources of information on vaccines

- **NHS**  
(<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/coronavirus-vaccine>)
- **GOV.UK**  
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covid-19-vaccination-programme>)
- **World Health Organisation**  
(<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>)

### Building resilience to misinformation

- **SHARE Checklist** ([sharechecklist.gov.uk](http://sharechecklist.gov.uk))
- **GoViral! Game** (<https://www.goviralgame.com/en>)

### Reporting health information to social media platforms

- **World Health Organisation**  
(<https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/how-to-report-misinformation-online>)