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To online service providers in scope of the Online Safety Act:

Keeping people in the UK safe online during the World Cup

On 11 June, the FIFA World Cup 2026 will begin, running until 19 July. Major sporting events such as this have often been periods of heightened risk to users in the UK coming across harmful content and conduct covered by the Online Safety Act 2023.

In previous tournaments, players, officials and coaching staff representing the home nations have experienced online hate, threats, abuse and harassment. Spikes in the circulation of this content have often targeted Black and minority ethnic players, as well as being on the basis of perceived sexual orientation or disability status. Our own [research](#) shows that people who work in sport are subjected to abuse online, which has devastating impacts on them, their livelihoods and their families.

I am setting out the research we have on this issue to support your understanding of the risks involved, as well as the preparation we expect providers to take to ensure a safer life online for people in the UK during the FIFA World Cup 2026.

Online hate and abuse in sport

Last year, Ofcom published [research](#) into online hate and abuse in sport, conducted in partnership with Kick It Out. This work highlighted the scale, severity and normalisation of abuse online, including racist and threatening content directed at sportspeople, commentators and others in the public eye. Participants reported that such abuse is often relentless, highly visible and difficult to control. It can result in fear for personal and family safety or withdrawal from public life, as well as affecting health and wellbeing. These reflections from the participants in our research are supported by wider evidence. For example, in the 2022 World Cup, FIFA's [own research](#) showed that England's quarter-final with France saw the largest spike in online abuse targeting players across the tournament.

Illegal hate, harassment, threats and abuse

The online abuse people experience can often be illegal under UK law. This includes types of threatening or abusive behaviour and harassment. While these harms can occur on different types of services, our evidence shows increased risks of harm arise from:

- Social media services
- Services where users can post or send content anonymously, including without an account
- Direct messaging and/or commenting
- Livestreaming
- Reposting or content forwarding
- Content recommender systems
- Revenue models based on engagement

More information on how illegal harms manifest, including hate, harassment, threats and abuse can be found in our [Register of Risks](#). Providers can also consult our [Illegal Content Judgements Guidance](#) which provides information on what constitutes illegal content.

Expectations for providers to tackle illegal content

We expect providers with exposure to these risks to ensure their mitigations are effective and that they are adequately prepared for increased occurrence during the World Cup. This includes minimising the presence and dissemination of illegal content, and enabling rapid and effective action where it arises for UK users.

Duties related to illegal content

Services are [required to address](#) illegal content within scope of the Act. This includes content amounting to criminal offences of threats, harassment, abuse and hate crime.

Service providers must have conducted illegal content risk assessments to identify and assess the risk of users encountering illegal content. We have engaged extensively with a large number of providers to make sure these are suitable and sufficient. Providers must mitigate risks identified, and user-to-user services must take down illegal content they are aware of, including content identified via user reports or internal moderation systems.

Steps providers should take to mitigate the risk of illegal hate, harassment, threats and abuse

Services are expected to have regard to Ofcom's Illegal Content Codes of Practice and associated guidance. In particular, services should:

- Have adequately resourced content moderation teams to rapidly remove illegal hate, threats, harassment and abuse when it is reported to them. This includes being resourced to deal with spikes in demand for content moderation.
- Set performance targets for the removal of illegal material.
- Have accessible and easy-to-use reporting processes for this illegal material.
- Acknowledge complaints about activity users believe may be illegal, and provide a timeframe for responding to them.
- Provide accessible information about how complaints are handled.
- Enable users to block or mute other users.
- Enable users to disable comments.
- Adequately train and provide a code of conduct for staff involved in protecting users from illegal behaviour, including harassment.
- Name a senior individual who is accountable for complying with these duties.
- Where services conduct on platform testing of recommender systems, use the results of these tests to feed into risk assessments.

We have carefully assessed the impact of these measures on users' rights to freedom of expression within UK law. As you will be aware Ofcom does not make decisions on individual pieces of content, and the Codes are not designed to restrict the ability of adult users to post, share or engage with legal content. Service providers can consult our [regulation checker](#) for further details, including which Codes apply to your service.

Additional information to support your preparation for the World Cup

Sports fans are of all ages, meaning that people under 18 could encounter hateful and abusive content online related to the World Cup. In our research carried out in partnership with Kick It Out, a broadcaster shared that its sports accounts on social media were appealing to children and young people and it was concerned about the nature of the content that children were being exposed to in

the comments beneath posts. Services should note that, where children in the UK are able to access their platforms, additional duties apply. These include obligations to protect child users from encountering content that is harmful to them, such as abusive content or content inciting hatred. More information about your responsibilities if children are present on your service can be found [here](#).

The online risks related to major sporting events is an area of significant concern for Ofcom. In February 2026 we established a new partnership with the UK Football Policing Unit and leading English football bodies – the Football Association (FA), Premier League, English Football League (EFL), Women’s Super League (WSL) Football, Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), Professional Game Match Officials (PGMO), League Managers Association, and Kick It Out, the anti-discrimination in sport group. The new partnership ensures that information and insights are shared about the online abuse of people who play or work in football to support a range of preventative and investigatory action.

In addition, our media literacy programme is also working directly with football clubs to support them to embed media literacy skills into their existing community outreach work. We are also publishing resources to remind people in the UK to report illegal content they encounter online to the service.

Services should also be aware that we have a live compliance programme to assess how services are tackling illegal hate content. This means that we will be scrutinising evidence that services have not met their duties including during the FIFA World Cup 2026, or other major sporting events, and will be prepared to take appropriate action.

If you would like to talk to anyone at Ofcom about the information set out in this letter, please contact OSqueries@ofcom.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,
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