



**Protecting police officers,  
police staff and their  
families from online harms**

**Policy  
Recommendations**

**National & Force Level  
United Kingdom Version**

# Introduction to Policy Recommendations

Findings of the 3PO project, from engagement with police forces and staff across the UK, suggest that in response to the growing threat of online harms faced by officers and staff in their public-facing roles, a culture of care and the promotion of staff wellbeing needs to be embedded into policing, and requires a systematic, whole service/organisational approach to achieve this.

The following briefing paper adopts a four-part approach, each of which overlaps and is dependent on the others. We start from the assumption that addressing online harms requires that they receive formal **recognition**, that police organisations provide sufficient **training** to officers and staff, line managers and police leaders, that there is a formal **reporting** system to record and then manage experiences of online harms, and that there is a consistent baseline of **support** provision for all police officers, staff and their families when online harms are caused because of their role in policing.



*Benefits of policy recommendations implementation*

# + RECOMMENDATIONS SET 1

## Recognition of online harms and physical-world impacts

**There needs to be a broader acknowledgement within policing that officers, staff and families are facing increasing pressures as they seek to balance public-facing roles with their online privacy and security.**

01.

Policing should better understand the online challenges, risks and harms faced, and the impacts on wellbeing experienced, by staff and families because of their role in the police. This should include an understanding of how diversity and demographics can shape and drive online harms and thus the different effects on individuals and groups within organisations.

02.

Online harms and their impact on individuals and families need to be recognised and acknowledged meaningfully, and specifically, through holistic organisational policy, guidance and enhanced digital literacy.

03.

Policy and guidance to address online harms and impacts should be distinct from narratives focusing on the misuse of social media or other internet platforms by staff. Organisations should actively embed a focus on care, support and wellbeing for staff and families as potential victims. Where applicable, forces should consider moving the responsibility for online harms policy and guidance away from the Professional Standards arena to enhance staff confidence and engagement.

04.

Policing should ensure it is considering, and has plans to manage, the difficulties of recruiting younger staff into specialist, covert roles when they will likely have an extensive online social media presence and footprint.

# + RECOMMENDATIONS SET 2

## Training for online harm prevention, recognition and response

**Organisational training needs to support officers and staff in recognising, minimising the risks of, and managing online harms for themselves and their families. Training should acknowledge the essential nature of a digital life and refrain from simply advocating for the non-use of social media and the internet by its staff.**

01.

Awareness raising and training are required across the policing organisation at various levels: recruitment/induction, frontline and specialist, line management, and leadership. Each has a specific but interdependent role in collectively improving the online safety and security of staff and their families.

02.

Training should be proportionate, prioritised, and allocated appropriate time and resources to enable meaningful improvements in staff digital literacy, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions in their digital lives, prevent online harms, and take mitigating actions when required.

03.

Training packages and delivery mediums should be subject to regular review, evaluation and refresh to recognise and respond to the ever-changing online landscape and the threats and challenges thereon.

04.

Focus should be given to officers and staff who have potentially grown up with a more significant presence and footprint in the online world, and who may require more support and guidance to engage safely and protect themselves and their families online.

05.

Policing should consider what staff training could be adapted and extended to families, and encourage other awareness-raising opportunities to collectively provide families with the tools to better protect themselves from online harms.

# + RECOMMENDATIONS SET 3

## Reporting online harms

**Policing, locally and nationally, should implement and support an effective system for the reporting, recording, assessment and investigation of online harms incidents/events.**

01.

Supported by policy and guidance, clear and consistent reporting mechanisms should be embedded that recognise the broad nature and potential impact of online harms, encouraging officers and staff to report all negative experiences/incidents.

02.

Reporting and recording should be harms-based and not tied to legislation. Current procedures should be adapted to record crime and non-crime online harm instances that can be monitored locally and nationally to identify, better understand, and respond to emerging trends and threats.

03.

Online harms reporting by officers and staff should be extended to include the negative experiences and impacts affecting their families when the incident/event is related to their role in the police.

04.

Effective mechanisms should be embedded for the consistent triage and proportionate investigation of online harms reports made by officers, staff and families. Investigative and management responses to reports should focus on wellbeing and support, be non-judgemental, and not aligned to or connected with disciplinary processes or professional standards. Outcomes from all assessments and investigations should be provided to reporting persons in a timely manner.

05.

With an enhanced understanding and recognition of the online threats and harms being experienced by officers, staff and their families, policing organisations should work to raise awareness across the criminal justice system to jointly consider legislative gaps and appropriate responses to better address online harms.

# + RECOMMENDATIONS SET 4

## Supporting officers, staff and families that experience online harms

**In recognising the psychological and potential physical impact of online harms on its officers and staff, policing should endeavour to shape and align wellbeing frameworks to provide effective support.**

01.

Common and consistent standards should be introduced that explicitly recognise negative online experiences as a core category of harm that necessitates wellbeing support.

02.

The investigation and management of online harms incidents should be directly linked to, and complemented by, effective and longer-term wellbeing support considerations and provision.

03.

Support mechanisms should recognise that individuals experience harms differently and have different support needs.

04.

Forces locally should assess their capabilities and capacity to deliver support (wellbeing, psychological and technical) to officers, staff and families experiencing the impacts of online harms and potential physical world consequences.

05.

Online harms should be integrated into the remit of force's 'wellbeing champions' who can actively recognise potential harms, signpost guidance, encourage reporting and support colleagues experiencing negative impacts.

06.

Protecting police officers, staff and their families from online harms should be specifically referenced in workstreams under the Police Covenant and incorporated into new and/or ongoing priorities.

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# Contact

If you have any questions about this document, the 3PO Toolkit, or the project generally, please contact us at [centric@shu.ac.uk](mailto:centric@shu.ac.uk). For more information about the project background, please visit [3po-project.co.uk](http://3po-project.co.uk).

## Access to the 3PO Toolkit

This document forms part of the 3PO Toolkit. To access the remaining elements of the toolkit, visit: <https://centric-research.co.uk/projects/3po/toolkit>.

## Project Details



3PO (Protecting Public-Facing Professionals and their Dependants Online) was a three-year research project supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council under UKRI's Strategic Priority Fund (Grant Ref: EP/W032368/1; duration April 2022 - March 2025).

3PO investigated the unique challenges and risks faced online by police officers, police staff, and their families. Whilst considerable research about online harms is being conducted on groups such as journalists and elected officials, the awareness of police officers and staff as potential victims remains limited. 3PO aimed to increase awareness and knowledge of this challenge by exploring the extent and nature of online harms faced by officers and staff in their policing roles and in their private lives, as well as the impact of these harms on them, their families, and police forces. It used these foundations to develop approaches and solutions to improve prevention, mitigation and support.

The 3PO project was led by CENTRIC (Centre of Excellence in Terrorism, Resilience, Intelligence and Organised Crime Research) and brought together five universities (UCL, Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh Napier U/SIPR, Sheffield Hallam), six UK police forces, and the UK Home Office.

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