

## JUNE MEETING NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

**Topic:** Online Scams

**Date:** Wednesday 16 June 2021

**Time:** 15:00– 16:00, via Zoom

**Chair:** Julie Elliott MP, Chair of the APPG on Digital Skills

### **Speakers:**

- David Clarke, Chair of Fraud Advisory Panel
- Didi Denham, Public Policy, Google
- Dan Dalton, Senior Campaigner, Which?

### **Parliamentary Attendees**

Lord Aberdare  
Stephen Timms MP  
Baroness Featherstone  
Lord Lipsey

### **Minutes**

Chair of the APPG **Julie Elliott MP** welcomed guests and introduced the APPG meeting. The focus today is online scams, Which? have reached another level during the pandemic with particularly distasteful scams involving fraudsters posing as vaccination booking sites, a matter the Chair has raised in the House. The Chair thanked the sponsors BT, Google and City and Guilds for facilitating the discussion. Julie Elliott MP welcomed the speakers David Clarke, Didi Denham and Dan Dalton and invited David Clarke to speak first.

**David Clarke** introduced himself as Chair of the Fraud Advisory Panel (FAP), a charity. He also introduced his colleagues Mia Campbell and Zara Walker. The FAP has been in existence for 20 years and is the voice of the counter fraud community in that they work across all sectors. Their main work is in education, fraud detection and prevention and they want to see a world free from fraud. They collaborate and lobby parliamentarians, host event conferences and collate reports. David has worked in investigations for 40 years and was formerly a Detective Chief Superintendent in the City of London Police and worked on the fraud review in 2005/2006. He has worked with the FAP in a number of roles for 12 years.

Criminals love a disaster/terrorism and they look for money-making opportunities. They use the same criminal techniques but ramp up the scale at this time. The Government work well with Police in supporting financial services but there are 33 other sectors. FAP established the 'COVID-19 Fraud Watch', Which? brings many agencies together, 75 in all, where information was shared. They engaged with Chancellor and other ministers to inform policy with a laser focus on 'solutions, solutions, solutions'. FAP also set up a 'Future Fraud Professionals Network' so there is a handover to fraud prevention operatives of the future and they would love to grow this organisation more.

FAP has five recommendations Which? are; 1/ They would like to see fraud and cybercrime included in the Online Safety Bill. 2/ Would like a voluntary charter created for social media providers. 3/ To encourage voluntary adoption of verified IDs online. 4/ They would like a review of the domestic legal framework with particular attention on the Computer Misuse Act 1990. 5/ They would like to see a national awareness campaign similar to the old public awareness videos of yesteryear. FAP are open to working with everyone to help people of all ages be more resilient to scams.

**Julie Elliott MP** recalled the green cross code and seatback public awareness videos and agreed with David on the use of these types of campaign methods. The Chair invited Dan Dalton to speak to the meeting.

**Dan Dalton** introduced himself as Senior Campaigner for Which? working primarily on online consumer issues. This is a very important issue for Which?, the largest UK consumer organisation. Scams is one of their four key areas of the organisation where they are seeking to drive positive change. They have been reaching out to their 1.5m members and supporters and scams consistently comes out on top of these surveys. Which? looks at all areas of scams and takes a holistic approach.

To protect individual consumers Which? launched a free scam alert service in response to scammers attempting to exploit the pandemic. This service is a weekly email on how to detect and report scams and sharing information on what to look out for. There are over 250,000 subscribers to this email and the feedback is that members value the service and find it reassuring. This shows there is demand for providing information that protects consumers from scams.

To help prevent consumers from being exposed to the content that leads to scams, Which? look at how systems work in practise and have discovered through their insights that consumers are unable to manage the risk of scams alone. The reasons for this include consumers having limited awareness of the types and levels of sophistication of scams, particularly because scams are always evolving and changing, but also an overestimation of their own ability in being able to detect and avoid a scam. Which? found that a third of people did not know fake products are often advertised on social media and a quarter of those surveyed did not know how to spot a fake celebrity endorsement that led to an investment scam. Therefore, Which? campaign for improved system-wide protection as well as better redress for victims.

Which? recommends making fraudulent content that leads to scams being included in the Online Safety Bill. They want better business verification before products for sale goes online and better reporting tools for consumers. Which? also wants improved regulatory oversight.

**Julie Elliott MP** thanked Dan for his remarks and introduced Didi Denham of Google.

**Didi Denham** introduced herself as the Lead on Consumer Policy for Google in the UK. Google know the Internet has been a lifeline for people in the last year and Google feels a great responsibility to the consumers on providing trustworthy information to their consumers. Google values being part of the conversation on what best practise looks like. Google want to help users protect themselves and provide tools to boost digital skills so families can stay safe online. In partnership with Which?, Google runs a cyber-safety workshop that teaches adults how to stay safe online and protect themselves from scams.

They also have two education programmes targeted at primary school children, 'Be Internet Legends' and 'Be Internet Citizens'. These programmes are now running online and they have reached over 1.9m children in the UK helping them become safe explorers of the Internet. Google have also developed a tips sheet that provides COVID-19 scams and this can be forwarded and shared with constituents on request.

Google are particularly alert to bad actors looking to exploit COVID-19. During the pandemic, Google's systems have detected 18 million phishing or malware Gmail messages per day relating to COVID and this is in addition to over 240 million COVID related spam messages per day. Google are proud they block 99.9% of these messages from ever reaching their users. Google track trends to identify points of vulnerability. Google are determined that when a user clicks on an ad the ad is clear and the business can deliver what they say. Google have worked with the FCA for the last 18 months and have introduced new policy updates. Ads that link to websites flagged on the FCA website are prevented, financial services advertisers must undertake two additional steps of verification checks and updated financial advertising policy bans the use of terms that make unrealistic claims. Google continues to work with the FCA to tackle financial fraud but note they must not inadvertently harm legitimate advertisers.

Google know organised criminals are adaptable and will target weak spots. People in the UK are being targeted by increasingly sophisticated scammers, both online and offline, and to tackle the issue will take strong collaboration across Government, online industry, telecoms and tech and Google is determined to play a part in this effort and to assist they have pledged \$5m of ad credits to support public awareness campaigns. They have also joined a Government online fraud steering group and hope this will lead to cross-industry positive actions. This issue is an important one for Google and they will continue to educate consumers to help them stay safe online.

**Julie Elliott MP** invited members of the meeting to ask questions. The Chair praised the Google 'Be an Internet Legend' education courses. Julie invited Reg Walker to ask a question.

**Reg Walker** – He has worked for 25 years to stop ticket touting and has been responsible for numerous convictions and over 200 fraudulent websites being taken down. He raised a concern about two specific instances where paid adverts had remained on Google following representations from the private sector and the Police with a clear record of fraud against both companies.

**Didi Denham** offered to review the specific cases and have further discussions offline.

**Julie Elliott** said that criminals are constantly evolving and it can be difficult to keep up with them. Julie invited Stephen Timms MP to speak.

**Stephen Timms MP** was puzzled that adverts for financial and pension scams that are clearly scams often stay live on Google for a long time and can lead to people falling victims of crime. He asked why the process of ad removal was so slow.

**Didi Denham** confirmed Google had had previous discussions with Stephen Timms MP about this issue and said bad actors are constantly changing and are increasingly sophisticated in how they try to get around Google's policies. Fraudsters proactively adapt to policy changes and Google are looking at implementing several layers of defence against bad actors. Google takes the reports seriously.

**David Clarke** said this issue is not just about Google but about the digital environment as a whole. He feels fraudsters have been given online platforms 'on a plate' and a new mindset is needed. When money is being transferred through a channel the money becomes a proceed of crime, Which? is a concern when the platform takes fees from a scammer, they themselves obtain proceeds of crime. He feels that online platforms could do a lot more to make a system that makes it harder for scammers.

**Julie Elliott MP** said these views would be useful to Government as they consider the Online Safety Bill.

**Chris Winter** highlighted that many people are offline because they are nervous about Internet fraud. He feels we must take a more balanced approach and highlight the good things about the Internet, providing people follow certain methods to keep themselves safe online.

**Julie Elliott MP** invited Dan Dalton to answer, querying if Which? are looking at tech scams that ask for very small amounts of money in their scams.

**Dan Dalton** said improving confidence of Internet users is a key issue and Which? recognise the many benefits of the Internet. There has been a shift to digital payments. People must feel confident using these methods and feeling safe when doing so. It is crucial for people to know what to do when things go wrong. Research by Which? found around half of people did not know how to report online scams. Being able to do so as well as knowing how to keep safe will address the lack of confidence some users have. Which? are looking at the tech scams the Chair raises, but at other types of online scam too. There is no one organisation that will ensure we stay ahead of the scammers, but scams go on a journey and there are various points during a scam where the journey can be broken.

**Julie Elliott MP** invited Jo Tasker to speak.

**Jo Tasker** felt there are hundreds and thousands of scams and cyber threats. There are many scams and some are long-standing that has been around for many years. Feels a larger, wider taskforce group is required involving many agencies in order to tackle this complex issue and keep up with scammers.

**Julie Elliott MP** agreed and said people need retraining in digital skills every five months to avoid their skills becoming out of date. The 'Be Internet Legends' course gave children basic training and demonstrated to them the benefits of the Internet. It is hard to imagine a world without Internet search engines but we need to be better as a country in identifying what does not look right and what could be a scam. No legitimate company asks for money or personal details in an email and this is should sound alarm bells straight away. If these messages could be highlighted in a universal campaign would help massively. Scams prey on vulnerable people and during the pandemic everyone was more vulnerable than we have been before, but

unfortunately no-one ever seems to get caught or made an example of. The Chair invited Reg Walker to comment on what problems he had found in getting major frauds investigated.

**Reg Walker** said he regularly deals with Police and national trading standards. Trading standards has a total budget of £15m Which? is not sufficiently resourced to run national and regional units. Reg's business identified £2m to £4m worth of tickets that did not exist and was a blatant fraud. Trading standards conducted three raids several years ago where convictions for fraud were obtained with £5.5m worth of assets frozen. These successes unfortunately completely emptied the entire Trading Standards budget for online fraud and whilst the Police do help, officers are involved in this and many other types of police work. Fraud is not a big enough priority.

**Julie Elliott MP** said the lack of resources is clearly a very big issue. This session demonstrated how wide this subject area is and we will look to hold a follow-up session as it is impossible to do this very wide-ranging issue justice in one hour. The Chair thanked those present at the meeting and the speakers for their time and insights.

The meeting closed at 4.00pm.