Online Challenges and Hoaxes and Apps of Concern - Guidance

Position statement

While we work together to keep children, young people and adults in Dudley safe from harm, we need to be cognisant that some information that circulates in relation to risks may be misinformation, (false information, regardless of whether or not it's intended to mislead or deceive people) or disinformation, (false information which is intended to mislead).

Every so often, information about dangerous online challenges circulate that give concern about the impact these may have on our community. We need to be aware however, that often these challenges are no more than hoaxes and circulating such information can be counterproductive.

Government guidance

The government has released [guidance](#) on how to respond to such information in educational settings. This document is adapted from this guidance:

A hoax is a deliberate lie designed to seem truthful, and online challenges generally involve users recording themselves taking a challenge, and then distributing the video through social media channels, inspiring or daring others to repeat the challenge.

An online challenge will generally involve users recording themselves taking a challenge and then distributing the resulting video through social media sites, often inspiring or daring others to repeat the challenge. Whilst many will be safe and fun, others can be potentially harmful and even life threatening.

Everybody should be free to enjoy the internet safely. How we respond to harmful online challenges and online hoaxes, and how we raise awareness of online safety, are important.

Each 'challenge' that comes to light should be taken on a case by case assessment, establishing the scale and nature of the possible risk to children, young people and adults in Dudley including considering, (where the evidence allows), if the risk is a national one or localised to our borough. Quick local action, may prevent a local online hoax or local harmful online challenge going viral (quickly and widely spread).

Generally speaking, naming an online hoax and providing direct warnings is not helpful. Concerns are often fuelled by unhelpful publicity, usually generated on social media, and may not be based on confirmed or factual occurrences or any real risk to individuals.

There have been examples of hoaxes, where much of the content was created by those responding to the story being reported, needlessly increasing exposure to distressing content.

Members of the workforce should check the factual basis of any harmful online challenge or online hoax with a known, reliable and trustworthy source, such as the [Professional Online Safety Helpline](#) from the UK Safer Internet Centre, before circulating an alert to a wider audience.

We should avoid sharing upsetting or scary content to show individuals what they "might" see online. Exposing individuals, (many of whom will not be aware of or have not seen the online challenge or hoax) to upsetting or scary content, will be counterproductive and potentially harmful.

If you do feel it is necessary to directly address an issue, this can be achieved without exposing individuals to distressing content.

It's important that, as partnerships with a duty to safeguard the welfare of children, young people and adults in Dudley we only share accurate information

If we are confident that individuals are aware of, and engaged in, a real challenge that may be putting them at risk of harm, then it would be appropriate for this to be directly addressed. However careful consideration should be taken on how best to do this.

It may be appropriate to offer focussed support to a particular cohort of individuals at risk. Even with real challenges, many individuals may not have seen or be aware of it. We must carefully weigh up the benefits of highlighting the potential harms related to a challenge, against needlessly increasing individuals' exposure to it. Where harmful online challenges or online hoaxes appear to be local, (rather than large scale national ones), local safeguarding advice, such as from the local authority or local police force, may also be appropriate and as such will be disseminated by Safe and Sound, Dudley's Community Safety Partnership and Dudley's Safeguarding People partnership, as appropriate.

Whatever response is taken we need to ask:

- is it factual?
- is it proportional to the actual (or perceived) risk?
- is it helpful?
- is it appropriate to the individuals at risk?
- is it supportive?

Messages that focus on positive and empowering online behaviours, such as critical thinking, how and where to report concerns about harmful content and how to block content and users will be more productive than merely sharing the perceived risk.

Apps of concern

Similarly to online challenges, we often receive alerts about new apps of concern, and while some apps may have features that could put individuals at risk, most also have similar safety settings.

Again, highlighting these apps as dangerous is likely to push individuals towards 'trying them out'. It is key to educate individuals about how to keep themselves safe when using various apps and to be aware of the apps that individuals you work with are actually using.

More information on specific Apps can be found at the below links:

Internet Matters provide information in relation to the 'trending' apps and how they may be predominantly used for certain online activities, such as live streaming and chat.

https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/apps-guide/

The NSPCC now host information that was previously provided through O2, through their partnership with NetAware.

https://www.nspcc.org.uk/support-us/partner-with-us/nspcc-O2-online-safety-partnership/

For more information in respect of online harms, including educational resources and access to training visit: https://www.dudleysafeandsound.org/onlinesafety