

Response to the European Commission's Draft Guidelines on Trusted Flaggers under the Digital Services Act

The essential role of victim support organisations as Trusted Flaggers

Victim support organisations should play a central role within the Trusted Flagger framework established under Article 22 of the Digital Services Act (DSA). While trusted flaggers are often associated with the identification of specific categories of illegal content, their contribution extends far beyond content detection and removal. Victim support organisations bring unique expertise grounded in direct engagement with victims, practical understanding of harms, and evidence-based knowledge of emerging risks. Their inclusion as trusted flaggers would **strengthen risk reduction, protection, resilience, reporting mechanisms, and the overall effectiveness of the DSA.**

The harms caused by illegal online content are not limited to the digital environment. Child sexual abuse material (CSAM), non-consensual sharing of intimate images, hate speech, online harassment, fraud, scams, terrorist content and other forms of illegal content have profound and lasting impacts on victims' wellbeing, safety, privacy, dignity and participation in society. Victim support organisations are often among the first entities to witness these harms and their consequences. Through their daily contact with victims, they possess specialised expertise that complements the technical and legal knowledge of platforms and regulators.

The Trusted Flagger mechanism should therefore recognise **victim support organisations as key stakeholders** capable of identifying illegal content, understanding patterns of victimisation, and providing valuable context that facilitates swift and accurate platform responses.

The role of victim support organisations in preempting the escalation of risks

Victim support organisations contribute significantly to the **risk reduction and alleviation of harm.** Through their frontline work, they identify emerging trends in online abuse, exploitation and victimisation before these become widely recognised. They often detect new forms of online fraud, evolving methods of coercion, emerging patterns of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and novel forms of online exploitation. As trusted flaggers, they can help platforms respond proactively to harmful trends, reducing the number of victims and limiting the spread of illegal content before it causes further damage.

Illegal content rarely exists in isolation. Individual incidents frequently form part of broader patterns of abuse, coercion, trafficking, radicalisation, extortion or exploitation. Victim support organisations are uniquely positioned to recognise these connections. Their notices can therefore provide important contextual information that enables platforms to assess risks more effectively and take proportionate action. Such expertise is particularly valuable in cases involving vulnerable individuals, repeat victimisation, organised criminal activity or cross-border harms.

Victim support organisations also play an important role in reducing future risks and preventing repeat victimisation. Their work extends beyond identifying individual pieces of illegal content to understanding how online harms evolve, escalate and affect victims over time. Through direct support services, they can identify risk factors, recurring patterns and vulnerabilities that may expose individuals or groups to further harm. This expertise enables them to contribute to more effective risk assessment processes and to support platforms in developing measures that not only remove illegal content but also reduce the likelihood of future victimisation. Trusted flagger status should therefore be recognised

not only as a mechanism for content detection but also as a tool for broader harm prevention and risk reduction.

The role of victim support organisations in promoting recovery and resilience

Another important contribution relates to **reporting**. Many victims do not report harmful or illegal online content directly to platforms or authorities. Fear, stigma, lack of awareness, distrust of institutions and concerns about secondary victimisation often act as barriers to reporting. Victim support organisations frequently serve as trusted intermediaries that help victims navigate reporting mechanisms and understand their rights. Designating such organisations as trusted flaggers can strengthen reporting pathways, improve access to justice and ensure that victims who may otherwise remain invisible receive support and protection.

The DSA aims not only to improve the management of illegal content but also to create safer digital environments. Victim support organisations support individuals and communities in recovering from harm, rebuilding trust and, thus, **strengthening resilience against future victimisation**. Their involvement in the Trusted Flagger system would help ensure that responses to illegal content are informed by victim-centred principles and consider the broader societal impacts of online harms.

Victim support organisations also have a long-standing role in advocacy and legislative development. Across Europe, they have been instrumental in shaping laws and policies related to victims' rights, child protection, gender-based violence, trafficking in human beings, terrorism and other forms of victimisation. Their participation as trusted flaggers would create an **important feedback loop between online harms, victim experiences and regulatory frameworks**. Insights generated through trusted flagging activities can help policymakers identify implementation gaps, emerging risks and areas where further legislative or policy action may be required.

Enhancing the Trusted Flagger mechanisms through the role of victim support organisations

Victim support organisations are valuable contributors to **monitoring and evaluation** efforts. The effectiveness of the Trusted Flagger mechanism will depend not only on the volume of notices submitted but also on its **ability to address evolving forms of illegal content and reduce harm**. Victim support organisations can provide qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding trends in victimisation, platform responses, recurring challenges and systemic shortcomings. This information can support Digital Services Coordinators, the European Commission and online platforms in assessing the effectiveness of existing measures and identifying opportunities for improvement.

Equally, beyond the already foreseen considerations for the **onboarding of trusted flaggers**, it is essential that victim-centred principles are also included. This will help ensure that the mechanism does not operate solely as a technical content moderation tool, but also as a safeguard that is responsive to the lived realities of victims of online harm. Beyond demonstrating technical competence in identifying illegal content, designated organisations should be able to show an understanding of victimisation dynamics, including trauma awareness, secondary victimisation risks, and the broader impact that harmful online content can have on victims' safety, dignity, and recovery.

Operationally, it is important to establish **dedicated and secure channels for submitting notices**, ensuring that Trusted Flaggers can transmit reports safely and in a structured manner that reduces delays in responding to harmful content. These channels should be designed to support clarity, traceability, and consistency in submissions, while also safeguarding sensitive information where victims are involved. Further, platforms should be tasked with putting in place processes to **monitor the quality of**

submissions. Where a Trusted Flagger is consistently submitting a high volume of inaccurate notices, there should be a clear obligation to escalate such concerns to the relevant Digital Services Coordinator.

The guidelines should further encourage **cooperation** between trusted flaggers, Digital Services Coordinators, law enforcement authorities, child protection organisations, consumer protection bodies, equality institutions and victim support services. A multi-stakeholder approach will strengthen the quality of notices, improve coordination and contribute to a more comprehensive response to online harms.

Inclusion of victims and victim advocates in policy design

A further unique contribution of victim support organisations is their ability to facilitate victim-centred and survivor-informed responses. Effective responses to illegal online content should not be designed solely by regulators, platforms or technical experts. Victims themselves possess valuable knowledge about the harms they experience, the barriers they encounter when seeking help, and the measures that would make online environments safer. Victim support organisations act as a bridge between victims and decision-makers, ensuring that lived experiences inform policy, platform design and operational responses.

A truly victim-centred digital ecosystem recognises victims not merely as beneficiaries of protection, but as **valuable contributors to risk reduction, safety and resilience.** When appropriately trained, supported and safeguarded by a dedicated Victim Care Team, victims of cybercrime and online abuse can play a meaningful role as Trusted Flaggers under the Digital Services Act, helping to identify harmful content, detect emerging risks and improve the protection of others. Their lived experience provides unique insight into how online victimisation occurs, enabling them to support peers through buddy networks, strengthen early-warning mechanisms and contribute to safer digital environments. In this way, victims move from being passive recipients of support to **active partners in risk reduction, helping to shield potential victims from harm while ensuring that participation remains voluntary, trauma-informed and subject to robust safeguards and supervision, guided by a Victim Care team.**

Online platforms, Digital Services Coordinators, and victim support organisations should pilot victim-led Trusted Flagger programmes that enable victims of cybercrime and online abuse to contribute to the identification and reporting of harmful content. Participation should be voluntary, trauma-informed, and supported by a dedicated Victim Care Team responsible for training, safeguarding, supervision, and psychological support. Such programmes should integrate peer-to-peer buddy mechanisms, allowing victims to use their lived experience to protect others, strengthen early detection of online harms, and contribute to safer digital spaces while minimising risks of re-traumatisation and secondary victimisation.

Through structured consultations, victim participation mechanisms and ongoing support relationships, victim support organisations can help platforms and authorities understand what effective remedies, reporting pathways, communication practices and protection measures look like from the victim's perspective. This co-design approach is particularly important in addressing complex forms of online victimisation such as non-consensual intimate image sharing, online harassment, hate crime, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, child sexual abuse and online fraud. Responses developed with victims are more likely to be trusted, accessible and effective, while also reducing the risk of secondary victimisation.

Recommendations

The Trusted Flagger mechanism should not be viewed solely as a content moderation tool. **It is also an instrument for protecting fundamental rights, reducing victimisation and fostering safer online environments.** Victim support organisations are uniquely positioned to contribute to these objectives because they combine expertise in identifying harms with direct knowledge of their human consequences.

Their inclusion as trusted flaggers would strengthen the implementation of the Digital Services Act, enhance protection for victims and ensure that Europe's approach to illegal online content remains firmly grounded in the experiences and needs of those most affected. Victim support organisations contribute not only to the identification of illegal content but also to prevention, resilience-building, risk reduction, victim empowerment and the development of victim-centred solutions. Their ability to translate victims' experiences into practical improvements for platforms, regulators and policymakers makes them uniquely valuable actors within the Trusted Flagger ecosystem. Recognising and supporting their role would help ensure that implementation of the Digital Services Act remains grounded in fundamental rights, informed by evidence and responsive to the real-world impacts of online harm.

To achieve said objectives, Victim Support Europe recommends:

- **Recognise victim support organisations as eligible Trusted Flaggers.** Organisations providing support to victims of crime (be it generalist or specialised support) possess unique expertise in identifying illegal content and understanding the harm caused to individuals. Victim support organisations should be able to demonstrate expertise based on their knowledge of the impacts of online harm as well as their direct contact with victims, rather than solely through technical moderation experience. In line with this, victim-centred considerations should be included in the onboarding of trusted flaggers, to ensure that the mechanism does not operate solely as a technical content moderation tool, but safeguards fundamental rights.
- **Establish secure channels for submitting notices that cater for victims' safety.** Dedicated and secure channels for submitting notices should be established, to ensure Trusted Flaggers can transmit reports safely and in a manner that reduces delays in responding to harmful content. Procedures for flagging and handling illegal content should minimise the disclosure of personal information, and should be designed to avoid re-traumatisation or further exposure of victims.
- **Strengthen multi-stakeholder cooperation within the Trusted Flagger ecosystem.** Cooperation is essential to contribute to a more comprehensive response to online harm. Beyond the removal of content itself, clear referral mechanisms with victim support services and other specialised organisations should be established, ensuring that individuals affected by illegal content can access appropriate information, assistance and support.
- **Ensure the inclusion of victim advocates in policy design.** Digital Services Coordinators and the European Commission should consult victim support organisations when evaluating the Trusted Flagger mechanism and reviewing related guidelines and practices, ensuring that policies are shaped by victims' experiences and needs.
- **Ensure that Trusted Flagger procedures complement victims' rights frameworks.** The implementation of the DSA should be coherent with the objectives of the Victims' Rights Directive and other EU instruments, ensuring that online content moderation contributes to the protection, participation, and recovery of victims.

About Victim Support Europe

Victim Support Europe (VSE) is the leading European umbrella organisation advocating on behalf of all victims of crime, no matter what the crime, no matter who the victim is. VSE represents 80 member organisations in 36 countries, providing support to around 3 million people affected by crime every year. Founded in 1990, VSE has been working for 35 years for a Europe, and a world, where all victims have strong victims' rights and services, whether they report the crime or not. We work towards this mission through advocacy to improve European and International laws, through research and knowledge development and through capacity building at national and local level.