First Light Research: Abuse from Online Dating

Findings, Implications, and Strategic Recommendations Based on Service User and Professional Feedback

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First Light Research: Abuse from Online Dating

Executive Summary

Overview

Online dating is now a routine way for people to meet potential partners. However, alongside connection and convenience, it has become a significant site of harm. First Light's research brings together feedback from 131 dating-app users and 32 professionals across domestic abuse, sexual violence, policing, youth work, and safeguarding. The combined findings reveal widespread abuse linked to online dating, high levels of non-reporting, and a system that is currently not equipped to respond consistently or effectively.

Key Findings

Widespread Harm

A large majority of users had experienced some form of abuse on dating platforms. This includes harassment, unwanted sexual messages and images, verbal abuse, coercion to share intimate content, pressure to meet, stalking, catfishing, fraud, and in some cases physical and sexual assault. Unsolicited explicit images were described as common or very common by nearly 90% of respondents.

Safety Concerns

Most users did not feel fully safe on dating apps. Only a very small proportion felt "very safe," while nearly half felt unsafe meeting matches in person. Several respondents shared accounts of serious harm, including coercion, stalking, and sexual violence following meetings arranged through apps.

Low Reporting and Limited Trust

Reporting behaviour was extremely low. Many users did not report harmful behaviour to apps or police because they felt it would not be taken seriously, did not know how to report, felt embarrassed, or believed nothing would be done. Those who did report often described inadequate or dismissive responses.

Lack of Awareness of Support

Nearly 60% of respondents did not know where to go for help. Only a small number had ever contacted a support organisation. This highlights a major gap in public awareness of available support and legal protections.

Professional Insight

Professionals across multiple sectors confirmed an increase in cases involving online-initiated abuse. They reported similar patterns of harm to those described in the public survey. However, many

expressed uncertainty about whether their service could support such cases, lacked clear referral pathways, or reported that their data systems could not record online-dating-linked abuse, leaving the issue largely invisible.

Systemic Gaps

The research highlights systemic weaknesses, including inconsistent recording practices, lack of shared definitions, limited training for frontline staff, inconsistent responses between services, and safeguarding risks for young people. Minors were found to be accessing dating platforms and encountering harmful or illegal content, indicating failures in platform age-verification systems.

Implications

Online dating creates a unique environment for abuse to flourish, combining anonymity, rapid intimacy, and minimal platform accountability. Harm is both digital and physical, often escalating quickly. The system's inability to recognise, record, or consistently respond to online-dating-related abuse leaves victims unsupported and perpetrators unchallenged. Without intervention, the prevalence and severity of this issue will continue to grow.

Recommendations

The research identifies key areas for action:

- Establish a clear definition of online-dating-related abuse across all services.
- Introduce standard recording fields in all case management systems.
- Develop multi-agency referral pathways for responding to disclosures.
- Specialist training for frontline staff on digital abuse and online-initiated harm.
- Support public awareness campaigns on safety, rights, and reporting options.
- Work with dating app providers to improve age verification, reporting tools, and signposting.
- Strengthen safeguarding protocols for minors accessing digital platforms.
- Invest in specialist support roles and services tailored to online-initiated abuse.

Conclusion

Abuse linked to online dating is now a significant and growing public protection issue. The gap between the scale of harm experienced and the system's capacity to respond is widening. By acting now, commissioners can lead the development of a coordinated, trauma-informed response that recognises online-initiated abuse as a distinct and urgent area requiring targeted investment and strategic attention.

First Light Research: Abuse from Online Dating

Findings, Implications, and Strategic Recommendations Based on Service User and Professional Feedback

1. Introduction

Online dating has become the primary source for contemporary relationship-seeking behaviour. Increasing numbers of people across all age groups now rely on digital platforms as their primary means of meeting romantic or sexual partners. The rise of dating apps has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of human connection, offering convenience, immediacy, and access to a broad pool of potential partners. However, these same platforms have also opened new pathways for harm. The proliferation of harassment, coercion, identity deception, stalking, unwanted sexual content, financial exploitation, and in some cases serious violence has become an embedded and normalised part of online dating culture.

First Light's *Abuse from Online Dating* research was specifically designed to investigate these harms. The study drew on two complementary sets of insights: one from app users themselves, capturing real-life experiences of abuse and the barriers they faced when seeking help; and a second from professionals working across sectors likely to encounter victims, including police, sexual violence services, domestic abuse support, safeguarding teams, youth organisations, sexual health services, and criminal justice providers.

Together, these datasets paint a compelling picture of an emerging public-protection issue that no longer sits on the periphery of safeguarding but is now centrally embedded in modern social interaction. Abuse linked to online dating is widespread, chronically under-reported, poorly understood, and inconsistently supported across services. Despite the scale and severity of the harm experienced by users, many professionals remain uncertain about whether their service can or should intervene. This disconnect leads to gaps, missed opportunities for support, inconsistent responses, and ultimately preventable harm.

This report synthesises those findings into a coherent narrative, exploring the prevalence, nature, and impacts of online-dating-related abuse, as well as the systemic challenges that limit effective support. It concludes with evidence-informed recommendations aimed at commissioners, highlighting the structural changes, investment needs, and strategic responses required to keep users safe.

2. Methodology Overview

2.1 Public Survey

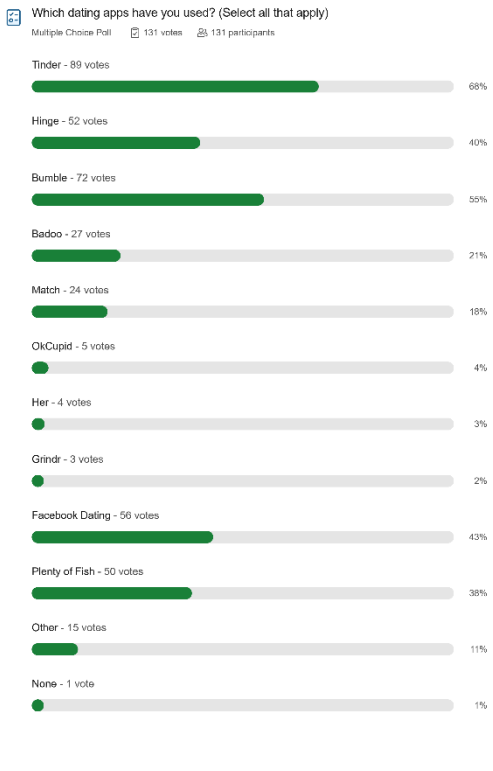
The public survey generated responses from 131 individuals aged sixteen and above, though the overwhelming majority were adults. Notably, more than 88% of respondents identified as women, reflecting both higher participation and potentially higher exposure to certain forms of gendered online harm. The survey asked participants about their use of dating platforms, the types of behaviour they encountered, their perceptions of safety, their reporting behaviour, and their awareness of available support.

Respondents used a wide variety of dating apps, often multiple simultaneously. Tinder was used by 68% of participants, Bumble by 55%, Facebook Dating by 43%, Hinge by 40%, and Plenty of Fish by 38%. This multi-platform usage reflects the fluid nature of digital dating, where users may switch between apps to maximise their connection opportunities or avoid harm experienced on another platform. *(See Figure 1.)*

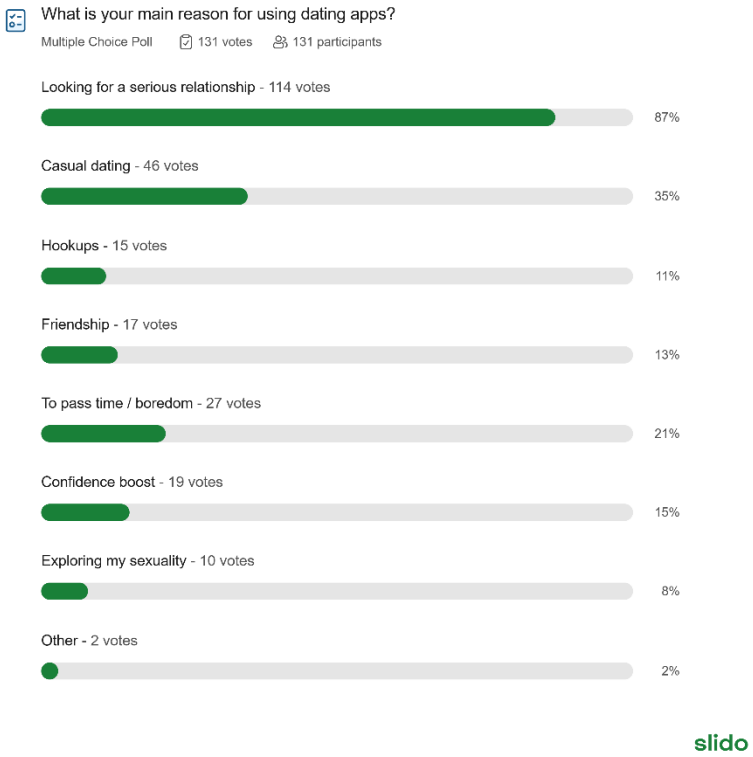
Participants' motivations were diverse: 87% reported that they were primarily looking for a serious relationship, while 35% used apps for casual dating. Others used them for reasons such as boredom (21%), building self-confidence (15%), or exploring sexuality (8%). This variety is important because harm was not associated with any particular intention; individuals seeking meaningful relationships were just as likely to face abusive behaviour as those using the apps casually. *(See Figure 2.)*

Crucially, the presence of users aged 16–17 revealed that minors can easily access dating apps, despite official age restrictions. This discovery underscores a significant safeguarding issue: under-18s are vulnerable to sexualised content or predatory contact that is both harmful and illegal.

(Figure 1. Which Dating Apps Have you used?)



(Figure 2. What is your main reason for using dating apps?)



2.2 Professional Survey

The professional survey gathered insights from 32 individuals working in criminal justice, health, safeguarding, and support roles. These included police officers, SARC workers, ISVAs and IDVAs, youth support staff, social care professionals, sexual health workers, and victim support services. Professionals were asked whether they had encountered cases linked to online dating, what types of harm they had seen, whether their systems captured such cases, and how confident they felt responding to them.

Their responses highlighted widespread uncertainty and inconsistency across services. Some professionals had encountered numerous cases linked to online dating, while others had encountered few or none. Some services offered structured pathways for responding to disclosures, while others had no established process at all. Many found that their data systems had no way to record or identify whether a case originated through a dating app, which limited the ability of services to track trends or influence commissioning decisions.

3. Findings From Service Users

3.1 Demographics and Usage Patterns

The user survey demonstrated that online dating is widely used across age groups, though participation was highest among women. Most users reported using multiple platforms simultaneously, suggesting that online dating is not a niche or occasional activity but an integrated part of social life for many. This has implications for exposure: the more platforms individuals use, the greater the number of interactions and potential risks they encounter.

People's motivations also revealed important nuances. Those seeking serious relationships used apps with the same frequency as those seeking casual dating or entertainment, reinforcing that harm is not limited to specific intentions. Whether a user's goal was emotional connection or social exploration, the risk of harmful behaviour remained consistent across groups.

3.2 Experiences of Harm

The scale of abuse reported by users was concerning. *(See Figure 3.)* Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73%) said they had felt harassed by someone they matched with. Harassment took multiple forms, including persistent unwanted messaging, aggressive demands for attention, and threatening language. This was not limited to one gender or age group, although the overwhelming majority of those reporting harm were female. *(See Figure 4.)*

84% of respondents had received unwanted messages, images, or videos, including unsolicited sexual content. The sending of explicit images, often referred to as "digital flashing", was widely described as normalised, with 68% of participants saying that receiving explicit images was "very common" and a further 23% describing it as "somewhat common." In other words, nine out of ten users believed unsolicited explicit content was common behaviour on dating platforms. *(See Figure 5.)*

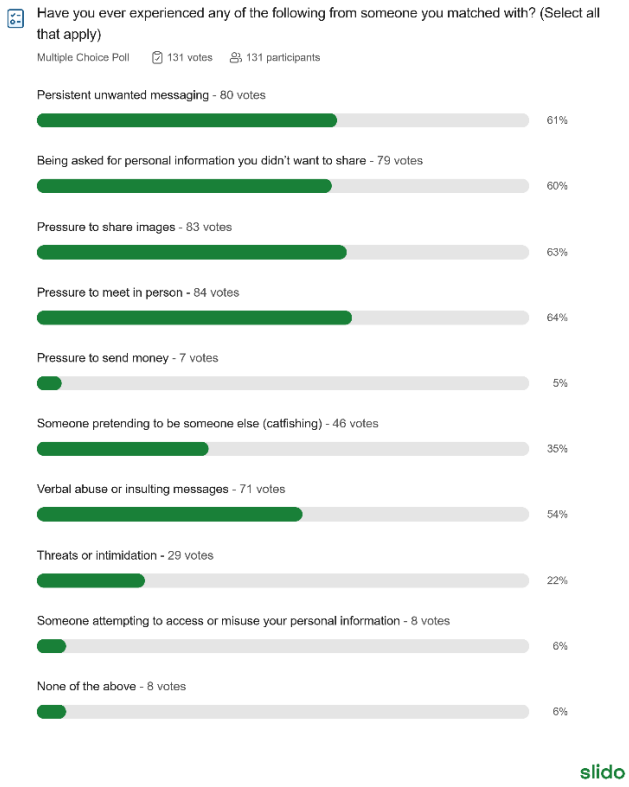
Coercive behaviour was also widespread. 63% reported that they had been pressured to send intimate images, while 64% felt pressured to meet in person before they felt ready. These behaviours illustrate how online interactions can replicate, and sometimes accelerate, patterns of coercive control. *(See Figure 6.)*

Verbal abuse was reported by more than half of respondents (54%). Many described receiving insulting or degrading messages, often immediately after declining sexual advances or refusing to meet. This indicates how gendered entitlement and misogyny shape interactions on these platforms, with women disproportionately targeted when asserting boundaries.

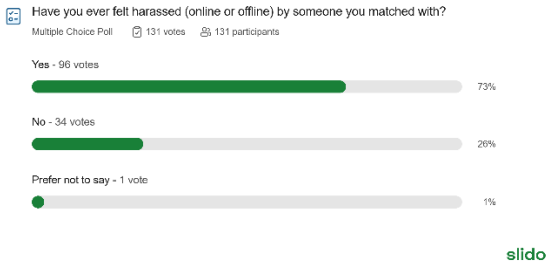
Beyond digital harms, respondents shared accounts of serious real-world consequences. Some described being filmed without consent, having intimate images shared without permission, being stalked, or discovering that a match had lied extensively about their identity. Others recounted being physically or sexually assaulted by individuals they met through dating apps. Several noted that they had entered long-term relationships with partners initially met online, only to later experience domestic abuse.

These findings demonstrate that online dating platforms can act as a gateway for both digital and offline abuse. Harassing or coercive behaviour that begins within an app can escalate into real-world harm, sometimes rapidly.

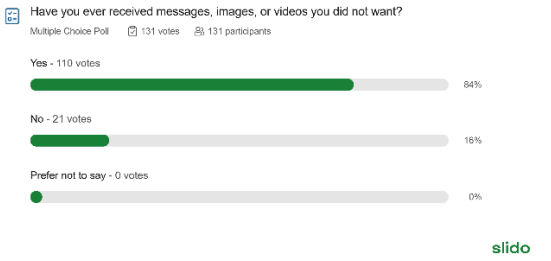
(Figure 3. Have your experienced any of the following from someone you matched with?)



(Figure 4. Have you ever felt Harassed (online or offline) by someone you matched with?)



(Figure 5. Have you ever received messages, images, or videos you did not want?)



(Figure 6. Have you ever felt pressured to do anything sexual, online or offline, that you did not want to do?)

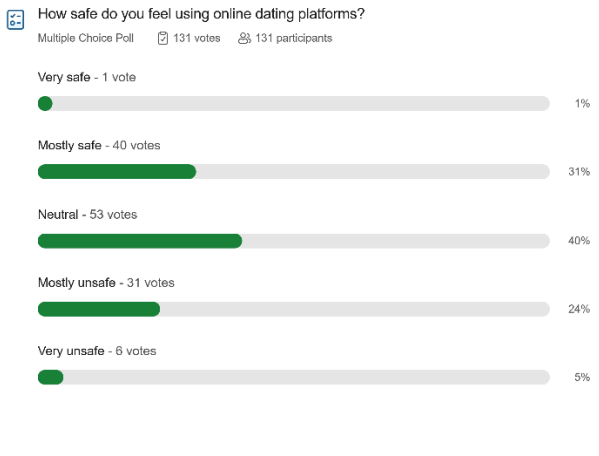
3.3 Safety Perceptions

When asked how safe they felt using dating apps, only a negligible proportion felt "very safe." Most people fell into "mostly safe," "neutral," or "mostly unsafe" categories. A significant number described feeling anxious about digital interactions, while others expressed resignation and stated that online dating simply felt unsafe by default. *(See Figures 7.,8.)*

Similarly, when meeting matches in person, around half of respondents reported feeling safe, while nearly half felt unsafe. This balance indicates that meeting someone from an app is perceived as a moderate-to-high-risk activity for many users.

User comments reveal that this fear is grounded in lived experience. One respondent described being stalked for two years by someone she had met online. Another described a partner who filmed her without consent. Others spoke of identity deception, sexual coercion, or being manipulated into harmful relationships.

(Figure 7. How safe do you feel using online dating platforms?)



(Figure 8. Do you feel dating apps do enough to keep users safe?)

3.4 Reporting Behaviour and Barriers

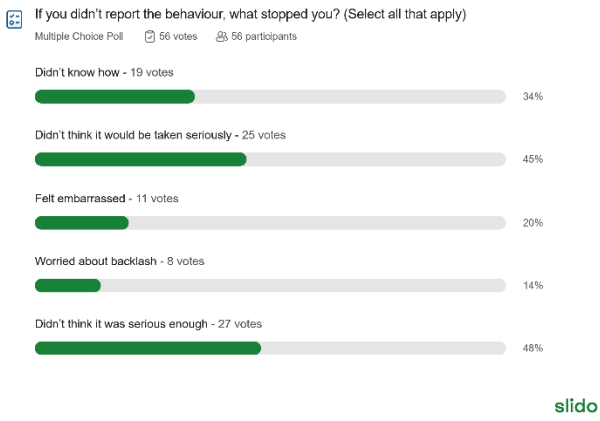
Reporting harmful behaviour was rare and fraught with challenges. Just over half of respondents said they had reported behaviour to the dating app, but nearly one-third did not. A further 13% wanted to report but did not follow through, and 6% did not know how to report incidents at all.

Among those who chose not to report, the most common reasons were feeling that the incident would not be taken seriously (44%), not believing it was serious enough (48%), not knowing how to report (34%), embarrassment (20%), and fear of backlash (14%). This suggests that users both minimise their experiences and lack confidence in platforms' willingness to act. *(See Figures 9.,10.)*

Reports to police were even less likely. Only around one in ten individuals had contacted the police about harmful behaviour linked to a match, with many stating they did not believe their experience would be considered a crime or that the police would take the matter seriously.

(Figure 9. Have you ever reported someone's behaviour to the dating app?)

(Figure 10. If you didn't report the behaviour, what stopped you?)



3.5 Awareness of Support

Services

Nearly 60% of respondents did not know where to seek support after experiencing harmful behaviour online or offline. Only 14.5% had ever contacted a support organisation. This highlights a significant gap in public awareness and suggests that victims often navigate online dating abuse in isolation.

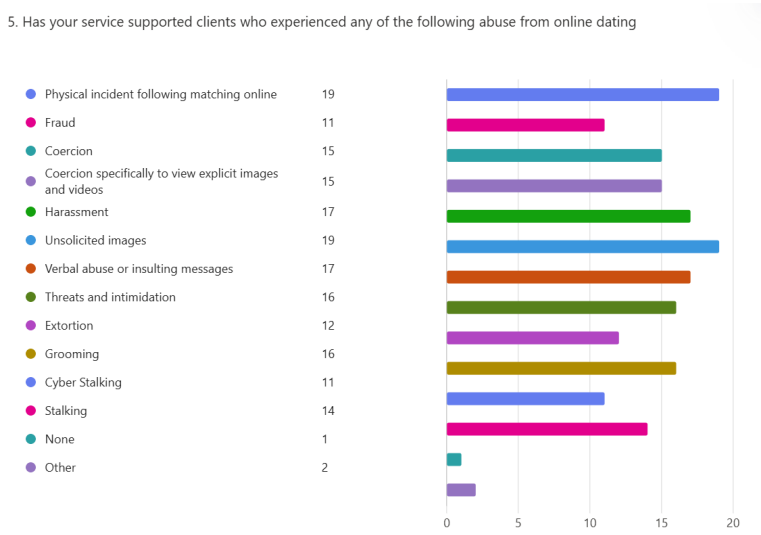
4. Findings From Professional Services

4.1 Harm Encountered

Professionals reported a wide range of abuse linked to online dating. Cases included unsolicited sexual content, coercive control, threats, intimidation, stalking, identity fraud, extortion, grooming, and physical or sexual violence following a meeting arranged online. This mirrors the public survey almost exactly, indicating strong alignment between user-reported experiences and what front-line workers observe in their caseloads.

Professionals across sectors noticed a trend of increasing cases, particularly relating to image-based abuse. Youth workers raised concerns about young people being targeted online, including cases of catfishing and coercive sexting. *(See Figures 11.)*

(Figure 11. Has your service supported clients who experienced any of the following abuse from online dating?)



4.2 Inconsistent Understanding

Within services, understanding of online-dating-related abuse varied dramatically. Even within the same organisation, some staff believed their service absolutely supported such clients while others said they were unsure or believed they could not. This inconsistency suggests a lack of internal communication, training, and clarity.

4.3 Recording Limitations

Many services lacked the ability to formally record whether a case originated through online dating. In some instances, professionals said that even if they included this information in narrative notes, the data could not be extracted or counted. This severely undermines the ability to understand scale, identify trends, and plan services.

4.4 Pathway Uncertainty

Professionals reported inconsistent approaches to supporting victims. Some referred clients to police or specialist domestic or sexual violence services. Others signposted to national helplines. Several said they lacked knowledge of appropriate organisations or simply did not know what to do.

4.5 Systemic Concerns

Professionals expressed concern about:

- increasing prevalence of online-dating-related harm
- lack of awareness that unsolicited explicit images are illegal
- absence of platform-level safeguards

- rising risks for young people
- absence of training and guidance

These insights reinforce that the system is struggling to keep pace with the rapidly evolving nature of digital relationships.

5. What These Findings Reveal

5.1 Widespread and Normalised Harm

The research clearly shows that abuse on dating apps is common, normalised, and harmful. The anonymity of digital communication removes social barriers, allowing aggressive or coercive behaviour to flourish.

5.2 A Culture of Non-Reporting

Users are hesitant to report to apps or police, either through lack of trust, lack of knowledge, fear, or a belief that their experience is not serious enough. Consequently, the majority of harm goes unreported.

5.3 Professionals Share the Same Uncertainty

The same uncertainty affecting users is mirrored by professionals. Lack of training, unclear processes, and limited recording systems mean professionals often do not know how to respond.

5.4 Young People Are at Significant Risk

Minors' ability to access dating platforms exposes them to predatory behaviour. Youth services confirm rising concerns in this area.

5.5 Misclassification Masks the Issue

Because online-dating-related harm is often fitted into other categories, it remains invisible within data systems and therefore invisible to commissioners.

6. Key Systemic Problems

- Widespread under-reporting
- Exposure of minors to illegal content
- Weak safety features on apps
- Variable police responses
- Inconsistency across services
- Inadequate data collection
- Limited training
- Low public awareness

These factors combine to form a fragmented and insufficient response.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Establish a Clear Definition

Develop a sector-wide definition of online-dating-related abuse.

7.2 Standardise Recording

Introduce a dedicated recording field across all support services.

7.3 Create Clear Pathways

Implement a simple, multi-agency response pathway.

7.4 Invest in Specialist Training

Build staff confidence in responding to digital abuse.

7.5 Enhance Public Awareness

Campaigns explaining legal rights, reporting processes, and safety strategies.

7.6 Engage Dating Platforms

Push for improved safety features, age verification, and signposting.

7.7 Strengthen Safeguarding for Young People

Develop new protocols for responding to under-18 disclosures.

7.8 Commission Specialist Services

Invest in new roles, such as online-dating-abuse Advisors, digital safety clinics, or integrated support packages.

8. Conclusion

Abuse associated with online dating is now a significant public protection issue. This research makes one point clear: harm is widespread, escalating, and insufficiently understood by both the public and professionals. Despite this, structural pathways, training, data systems, and safeguarding measures have not caught up. Without intervention, victims will continue to fall through gaps.

Commissioners have an opportunity to lead the development of a coordinated, evidence-informed response that recognises online dating abuse as a distinct and urgent area requiring sustained attention and investment.