



## HURLEY v HOLDEN

...who's the queen of lockdown?

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### SHOCKING...COWARDLY ATTACKS ON THE VULNERABLE

# NEW LAW MUST STOP VILE TROLLS PREYING ON OUR YOUNG

**EXCLUSIVE**  
By Cyril Dixon

A VILE gang of organised internet trolls is cruelly targeting vulnerable epileptic sufferers without fear of being brought to justice.

At least three victims suffered convulsions after the anonymous internet bullies unleashed thousands of strobos and garish messages.

Today the Express backs Zach's Law which demands action to bring the perpetrators to

TURN TO PAGE 4



**BRAVE:**  
Epilepsy sufferer Zach Eagling was targeted by internet trolls



Red-carpet treatment...Zach Eagling completing his charity walk

# 'New law will flush people as a form

Pictures: JULIAN HAMILTON; GLEN MINIKIN

## Mel C: I could not have coped with social media fame

By Georgia Mulraine

**SPICE** Girl Mel C says she could not handle becoming famous in today's social media world.

And she wishes she had sought professional help as her girl band stormed the charts in the Nineties.

Mel, 47, admits: "I don't think I'd hack it, I don't think I'd survive today."

The singer feels for youngsters "growing up exposed to so much more" as she prepares for a "maternal" role as a coach on *The Voice Kids*.

She says: "I'm one of the more mature coaches. I kind of feel maternal over everybody. I've always been like that. Back in the day, I looked after Baby Spice quite a lot."

The star, who in 2000 said she suffered depression amid media digs about her weight, says she now wishes she had sought "professional help".

She added: "Even though we had each other, and us girls were experiencing the same things at the same time. But everybody deals with things differently.

"Becoming famous at a young age is a really hard thing to get your head around.

"I don't think there's enough support for young artists. Being thrust into the public eye does your

Coach...Mel joins *Voice Kids*

head in." Mel, who has an 11-year-old daughter Scarlett, joins *The Voice Kids*, as a replacement for Paloma Faith, who is on maternity leave ahead of the birth of her second child.

She told the *Sink The Pink Pop Tarts* Instagram series: "We did some filming at the weekend, the kids are so amazing, so talented, so wonderful."

### FROM PAGE ONE

justice. Police are investigating the assaults which have peaked with up to 200 dangerous tweets a day.

In one vile attempt to cause maximum distress, Zach Eagling, 8, who suffers from epilepsy and cerebral palsy, was targeted after he raised £20,000 by walking 2.6km unaided around his garden.

He was inspired by his hero Captain Sir Tom Moore.

Zach's mother Claire Keel, 39, said: "I was crying my eyes out, just thinking that somebody wants to see harm done to my child.

"It was just this completely reprehensible act. They weren't thinking of the consequences."

Claire, of Liversedge, West Yorks, added: "There was a little gang of them messaging each other and us. It was organised and they were intentionally trying to harm people." The



trolls struck when Zach announced on Twitter that he wanted to raise money for the Epilepsy Society after being inspired by Captain Tom's heroics for the NHS.

Zach's account on the social media platform was bombarded with tweets of strobos and multi-coloured images designed to spark convulsions.

He did not see any of the images but several people with epilepsy did suffer seizures.

Police are now investigating the trolls for possible assault.

The society is campaigning for legislation - dubbed "Zach's Law" - to protect people with the disability from being targeted in vile cyber attacks.

Its campaign mirrors the Daily Express crusade to wipe trolls off the internet by pressuring the tech giants

## COMMENT

IMRAN AHMED  
Chief executive, Centre for Countering Digital Hate

**SOME** of the richest and most intelligent people in the world work at the top of the social media companies.

A lot of time and effort has gone into keeping us on the platforms, making us addicted to likes and comments and other notifications.

However, it seems almost no work goes into protecting users from becoming victims of hate and abuse.

### Appalling

When we have reported hundreds of posts in breach of platforms' terms in the past, the vast majority have not been removed.

We have reported accounts and groups which haven't been acted on, despite posting appalling material.

It shows that the platform cannot be relied on to offer basic protection.

There's no industry which operates with no regulation, and social media has repeatedly demonstrated it can't regulate itself.

The tech giants must be subjected to democratic oversight through the law.

and the Government to take action. The society said it had been attacked by the same group.

But the message blizzard peaked around the time of Zach's walk last May.

More than 200 toxic tweets landed as he completed the "2.6 challenge",



### DAILY EXPRESS VOTE

**Q** Should these trolls trying to cause seizures be jailed?

**YES:** 0901 133 4440

**NO:** 0901 133 4441

**Yes text DXYES to 84988**

**No text DXNO to 84988**

Texts cost 50p plus standard charges. Calls cost 50p plus your telephone company's network access charge. Vote closes at midnight tonight. The Daily Express may contact you by post, SMS and/or email with offers, goods or services that may be of interest to you. To stop receiving SMS messages please text 'NSNOINFO' to the originating number. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390.

the fundraiser to replace the postponed London marathon.

He had never walked without his walking frame before, so, accompanied by his mother and supporters, he completed 2.6km in laps round their garden.

The online attack took the form of

## Why it is possible for abusers to evade justice

**BEFORE** pursuing trolls, police and prosecutors have to assess whether they have broken the law.

The worst offenders are usually prosecuted under the Malicious Communications Act 1988 or the Communications Act 2003.

Under the earlier act, it is illegal to send an "indecent or grossly offensive" message with intent to cause "distress or anxiety", while

By Cyril Dixon

section 127 of the more recent legislation allows the courts to convict where threats or false statements have been directed.

Investigators say the tech giants are generally helpful when tracking down the more serious and persistent law-breakers.

However, many believe a lot of

vicious online abuse does not hit the criminal threshold for charges to be brought.

One said: "The level which it has to hit before it comes an offence is set too high. Because it doesn't hit a threshold, the police are not allowed to start looking at identifying who that person is.

"Facebook and Twitter would just say they're not breaking the

law and they are not breaching our conditions, so we can't help you."

The trolls persecuting Zach Eagling and other Epilepsy Society members are already likely to have broken the law. They could already be deemed to have acted in a way which was intended to cause harm.

The Law Commission is recommending a new offence of sending messages likely to

trigger a seizure, which would make prosecution easier.

The Government is also due to bring in a new Online Harms Bill.

But experts believe there will always be a category of unpleasant online behaviour which falls below the criminal threshold. Taking that off the web can only be done by social media firms tightening up their own security protocols.

# out the cowards who target of perverted entertainment'



Zach on his walk and, right, with his mother Claire who is determined to fight the vile trolls who took to Twitter



messages, tagging in the society's Twitter account and those of individual members who tried to watch a video of Zach.

They came from anonymous accounts, apparently based overseas, and included photographs, GIFs, cartoons and sick taunts.

Dozens contained flashing pictures from concerts by pop divas Lady Gaga and Miley Cyrus.

Others contained moving shots from nightclubs.

The society wants ministers to create a new offence of sending messages capable of inducing an

epileptic seizure. The new definition would be included in the forthcoming Online Harms Bill.

Clare Pelham, chief executive of the Epilepsy Society, commented: "The new proposals will enable the law to flush out the cowards who hide behind

names and target people with epilepsy as a form of perverted entertainment."

One man, who did suffer a minor reaction to the flashing messages, told the Daily Express: "To me it is assault, and to see someone enjoying hurting people is shocking." Ms

Keel added: "We didn't want this. We just wanted to do something in lockdown, and raise a few quid for a charity."

"The social media companies should be held accountable for what's on their platform."

Damian Hinds, Tory MP for East Hampshire, said: "You know somebody has this condition and you send them these flashing messages? You wonder what goes through the heads of people who do that."

A Twitter spokeswoman said: "Last year, we took the decision to ban three key search terms, 'epileptic, photosensitive and photosensitivity' from our GIF search function."

"If Twitter determines accounts are dedicated to causing offline harm, they will be permanently suspended."

NEARLY every day at the Epilepsy Society we hear stories from adults and children like Zach who have been sent messages designed to give them a seizure.

When they glance at their phone, they may be holding a scalding cup of coffee, they may be chopping vegetables, or carrying the baby upstairs...

The bullies don't care.

And, of course, sometimes seizures can be fatal.

We work literally night and day trying to delete these messages, report the senders and comfort the victims.

But we are only a small charity facing a

## COMMENT

CLARE PELHAM

of the Epilepsy Society



flood of worldwide criminal activity. There really is only one answer: we must use the full force of the law.

We need the Government to make this behaviour a specific offence in their new Online Harms Bill - Zach's Law.

But we don't want to just prosecute

criminals after they have hurt people with epilepsy, we want to stop these dangerous messages at source.

The social media companies could do this, but their progress is snail-like.

We are putting our faith in Ofcom to impose tough financial penalties so they get the message. Because until they do, these attacks will continue.

Every day I ask people for money to support those with epilepsy. I don't think it's right that all those marathons have been run to raise funds to make Twitter and Facebook safer for disabled people because their billionaire owners won't act. Do you?



## DAILY EXPRESS

One Canada Square, London E14 5AP  
Tel: 020 8612 7000 (outside UK: +44 20 8612 7000)

### Zach's Law vital to stop sadistic online trolls

**T**HE cruelty of online bullies who triggered seizures in epileptic sufferers defies comprehension. The vile gangs even targeted Zach Eagling, 8, who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy, and was inspired by Captain Sir Tom Moore to complete laps of his garden for charity. He succeeded in raising more than £20,000 for the Epilepsy Society and attracted the attention of the internet stalkers.

The Twitter account which publicised his efforts was bombarded with flashing messages intended to send Zach into convulsions.

Mercifully, the boy did not see any of the images but several people did suffer seizures. The charity is now campaigning for "Zach's Law" in a bid to stop internet "trolls" targeting people with the disability.

His mum broke down in tears when she saw the messages and the nation will feel revulsion at the hideous and dangerous acts of sinister trolls. This is why we are demanding that tech giants and the Government take action and get these loathsome individuals offline.

We can honour the heroism of Zach by ensuring those responsible for these sadistic acts cannot harm others.

### Freedom from isolation

**A**CROSS the country families are longing for the moment when they can hug loved ones in care homes. There are hopes that permission could be granted to visit relatives and hold their hands as early as May.

The separation of families is one of the most heartbreaking aspects of the pandemic. Waving at one of the most important people in your life through a window is no substitute for holding them in your arms.

Care minister Helen Whately has said she does not see why we should have to wait for people to receive a second vaccination dose before relaxing visiting rules.

Families have been angered by an apparent postcode lottery, with homes in some areas barring visits while others have done everything possible to allow people to see each other face to face. As we exit the lockdown, it is vital that we all have the greatest possible freedom to spend quality time with men and women who have suffered the anguish of isolation.

### Paradise found for Dora

**F**EW things in life are as strong as the bond between a man and his dog. Actor Ralf Little fell in love with a homeless puppy while shooting Death In Paradise and ended up spending around £2,000 to bring the pooch from Guadeloupe to his Florida home.

Dora, the former stray, must think she has arrived in a paradise of her own after her 1,366 mile journey. But the happiness that a four-legged tail-wagger can bring to a household is incalculable.

DX151

# Support is vital to give young people hope for the future

**T**HE UNPLEASANT truth is that one year on, the pandemic continues to affect all our lives. Living in uncertainty is difficult for all of us; but young people have been hit hard during their transitional years, facing disrupted learning, a shrinking jobs market and isolation from their friends and loved ones.

As this generation looks forward, further into 2021, they will continue to see question marks around their education and employment prospects. I know from our work at The Prince's Trust that it is times like this that vulnerable young people need the most help, to avoid the damage of long-term unemployment and poor mental health.

The transition from education to work can be turbulent at the best of times, even without a global health crisis and recession exacerbating their experience. We must continue to do everything we can to protect young people's future employment opportunities, while also recognising the potential for a mental health crisis if support is not provided quickly.

We have just published two major studies into young people's mental health and wellbeing, both of which highlight the priority support for young people must take in our recovery from Covid-19.

**I**N PARTNERSHIP with the Education Policy Institute, we looked at the factors and drivers that influence young people's wellbeing as they move from childhood to adolescence, with low family income, bullying and lack of physical activity playing a negative role.

This report made it all too clear the challenges young people face even without the pandemic, and the importance of early intervention, including through mental health support in schools.

The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index showed us the toll this pandemic is having on young



UNEMPLOYMENT: The young must be a priority as the country recovers from the pandemic



**Jonathan Townsend**  
Chief Executive, The Prince's Trust

people's mental health and wellbeing, with feelings of anxiety and depression at their lowest points in the study's 12-year history.

It is particularly sad to hear about the feelings of hopelessness many young people have, with the report finding that a quarter of 16 to 25-year-olds have felt unable to cope since the start of the pandemic.

As ever, it is unemployed young people – and those with few qualifications and little confidence – who suffer an even more negative experience. The report indicates that young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) are significantly more likely to feel anxious or depressed.

Recent figures from the Office for National Statistics show the number of young people (aged 16-24) in employment has fallen by more than 260,000 since the start of the pandemic. Young people are approxi-

mately four times more likely to be unemployed than any other working age group, and we all know that the sectors that typically hire young people, such as hospitality, have taken the brunt of the economic damage.

It must be a priority for all of us to tackle the dual crisis of youth unemployment and worsening mental health if we are to protect the next generation. And it is in all of our interests to support young people into jobs, not just to improve their prospects but to advance our communities, economy and society as a whole. It is a skilled, capable and confident young workforce which will help the country get back on its feet in the months and years ahead.

All of this is why The Prince's Trust is working with employers across the UK to help young people build their skills and confidence, and support them into jobs and training.

We are working with the

NHS and partners such as CareTech to support young people into critical work in the Health and Social Care sector, and we're helping to deliver the Government's Kickstart scheme, working with employers like Tesco to tackle rising youth unemployment rates.

**W**E ARE here for those young people who have faced adversity on the path from childhood to adulthood and now feel furthest from the job market. For those who have no experience in the world of work and don't know where to start, as well as those who may have lost their job, we can provide a mentor, build self-esteem, and help them reskill for work.

The Trust's youth support workers remain available to chat online every day. It's easy to feel powerless in the face of the unprecedented challenges we have experienced in the last year, but together we can be the turning point for a generation of young people who are in danger of losing all direction.

At this time, it has never been more vital for businesses, government, and individuals to come together to stop a generation losing hope in their future.

**'It's easy to feel powerless in the face of unprecedented challenges'**