Written evidence submitted by Witness Confident

1 Introduction

1.1 Witness Confident is an independent charity, established in 2009. We work to reduce the levels of crime and fear across society by making it easier for the public to engage with and help the police. In 2013 we started to promote Self Evident, a crime reporting smartphone app, which is provided by Just Evidence, our sister social enterprise. Self Evident is the only app that allows people across the country to report crime, capture and validate evidence and send it securely to the police.

1.2 In October 2015, Boris Johnson as Mayor of London and Katy Bourne as Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner launched a new hate crime build of the App. As a result the app provides police with ready details of the hate type and whether the case involves a repeat or vulnerable victim. An enhanced feature offers people in London and Sussex the option of reporting the incident to specialist third party support (inc. Community Security Trust, Galop, Tell Mama, The Monitoring Group and Victim Support) instead of the police.

1.3 Self Evident has 17,000 registered users, and since the hate crime build was launched last October, downloads have increased by 34%. The app is in use daily to report crime and send evidence to the police. It is the only practical way we are aware of that enables the police to receive photo and video evidence from the public. The significance of this is apparent from this quote:

“Citizens increasingly capture what is happening around them on video, generating potential evidence of crimes... Police forces must follow the example of banks and retailers and do more to connect with citizens who increasingly live their lives on line.’

Rt. Hon Theresa May - Home Secretary, 27 Jan 2016

1.4 As the hate crime app has not been publicised or promoted by either police force, the numbers of hate crime reports have been modest. Nonetheless the qualitative and quantitative data from its use so far demonstrates its value and its positive impact on the issues the Inquiry is considering.

2 Summary

This submission explains how the Self Evident app will

- Accelerate the improvements in conviction rates and guilty pleas for hate crimes by providing reliable, credible evidence (5.1)
- Reduce the barriers that deter victims and obstruct witnesses from reporting hate (5.2)
- Help challenge the attitudes that underpin hate (5.3)
- Contribute to the understanding of statistical data around hate crime (5.4)
- Enhance the support that is available to victims and their families (5.5)
3 Snapshots on how the Self Evident App is being used for Hate

Race Hate: victim report for Third Party Support attaching statement
I was walking down Park Road when all of a sudden two white males threw an egg on my shoulder which was painful but the egg cracked on the pavement. Within two seconds they came back and threw another egg that went in my hair and all over my clothes. They then sped off on a moped. They were white and dressed in black clothing and had helmets on.

Disability Hate: witness report to Police attaching video
Incident took place on bus. Drunk female possibly street drinker with male friend who was on crutches. Female used the terminology fecking retard, was abusive to bus driver and passengers. Was threatening and intimidating.

Race Hate, victim report for Third Party Support, no evidence attached
My next door neighbour has been drinking for a few hours now. When he noticed that my light in my room was on he started shouting he hates Polish. Also he was shouting "I hate Muslims" I live in a share house and two of my housemates are Muslims. He must have seen them preparing their meal. He can see our living room from his garden. He is drunk and aggressive.

Religious Hate: witness report to Police attaching photo
Malicious and offensive communication on my personal Facebook page. I have taken several screen shots.

LGBT Hate, victim report to Third Party Support, no evidence attached
When walking past the ABC train Station with a friend, we were insulted as faggots and told to get back to Brighton. He was intimidating. I just carried on walking as I wanted to avoid any physical altercation.

Disability Hate, victim report to Police attaching photo
Came home after lunch to find graffiti once again all over my garage door. There is CCTV in the locality. It was not there when I left home this morning.

Race Hate, victim report to Third Party Support, no evidence attached
I was thrown water by a white woman with kids. I asked to stop it but she just laughed and left. I am not sure if this is a hate crime. But I thought I should report this in case there are other victims.

Anti-muslim Hate, victim report to Police, no evidence attached
I was on the bus on my way to university. An old man got on at X Road. He stared at me first then came right up to my face swearing using racial terms very bad language and telling me I’m with 'Isis'. No one intervened not even the bus driver and I got off at the next stop. I was very upset and frightened.

Disability Hate: victim report to Third Party Support attaching video
Neighbour shouting and using abusive language.

The above snapshots come from the 46 hate crime reports made in London and Sussex via the app since the new build. The numbers of the app crime reports in Sussex is increasing following Katy Bourne’s promotion of the app at the start of August and we expect those in London will increase substantially once the Met Police Hate Crime
Officers are briefed on it at the end of September. Until then, officers are unaware of it and unable to advise victims in fear of a repeat attack that the app can be used to report crime, capture and validate evidence, seek support and so help make them feel less vulnerable.

Of these initial hate reports,
- 74% had evidence attached
- 54% were sent to third party support rather than the police
- 20% were sent by witnesses
- 59% were sent by repeat victims

4  Context

4.1 The Self Evident is the only app that allows people across the country to report non-emergency crime, capture validated evidence and send them securely to the police. It has 17,000 registered users and is used to send crime reports daily.

4.2 A survey published in March 2016 but undertaken prior to the hate crime build) found its key features are valued positively or very positively by users:
- 94% the ability to report crime by smartphone
- 96% the ability to send the police evidence
- 91% the ability to record an early reliable account
- 96% the ability to validate their evidence
- 94% the ability to track when the police access their report
- 96% the ability to keep a copy of their report and evidence

4.3 The potential of such features to tackle hate crime, boost confidence and improve police-public engagement was endorsed on the launch of the hate crime build:

"Many minority groups have not always had the same trust in the police. I am determined to improve this for everyone and that is why I fully support any initiative that tackles hate crime, which is a key priority in my Police & Crime Plan. The modified app will empower victims of hate crime by allowing them to choose the kind of support they want to receive. Ultimately, the app puts the victim in the driving seat”

Katy Bourne, Chair of Police ICT, Sussex PCC 9 Oct 2015

“I am very pleased we have been able to launch this app. It will help increase reporting even further, boosting confidence, reducing repeat offences and helping victims get the support they need.”

5  Submissions

5.1 Accelerating the improvements in conviction rates and guilty pleas for hate crimes by providing reliable, credible evidence

5.1.1 Over three quarters of people in the UK own a smart phone, and their use to take and share photos and videos has become ubiquitous. The Self Evident app is the only practical way that people can send evidence of hate incidents to the police or support groups. Its unique evidence validation service and its feature for making an early
statement enhances the quality and reliability of the evidence, and thereby increases the likelihood of prosecution and guilty pleas and improves the experience and confidence of both victims and witnesses.

5.1.2 But for the app, the options presented to a citizen who has witnessed and captured evidence of hate on their phone are to (i) distribute the footage through social or traditional media, (ii) hand in their phone to the police, or (iii) do nothing. Despite this, and notwithstanding Theresa May’s insistence in January that the police to do more to let people connect with and send them evidence online, no police force publicises or promotes the app generally, and neither Sussex nor the Met Police mention it as an option to report hate crime on their websites.

5.1.3 The nature and quality of the evidence that the Self Evident app captures has significant “downstream” benefits. Aside from providing verified contact details for the victim or witness, the app shows a map of the location, gives the time and a summary of the incident and users can attach photo and video evidence and timely witness statements. Where the evidence is captured on the app itself, it is validated and its authenticity readily corroborated. The CPS has acknowledged the value of the timeliness, quality and validation features of the app’s evidence gathered. The potential of this for hate crime is clear from the DPP’s remarks on recent improvements (not involving the app) that “More than four in five prosecuted hate crimes result in a conviction, which is good news for victims. Over 73 per cent are guilty pleas - this means that more defendants are pleading guilty due to the strength of the evidence and prosecution case, so victims do not have to go through the process of a trial.”

5.2 Reducing the barriers that deter victims and obstruct witnesses from reporting hate

5.2.1 The best way to reduce barriers to reporting and improving reporting rates is to make it easier for the public to report hate crimes and incidents. Smartphone use has become ubiquitous, and the sharing of videos and photos is now part of the daily life of a substantial proportion of the population and an overwhelming proportion of the young (the group least likely to report hate, whether as victims or witnesses). Consequently, a smartphone app that enables members of the public report hate crime and incidents to the police or third party support groups, is a practical and positive way to address these barriers.

5.2.2 The Self Evident app is quick and easy to use, and allows people to capture validated photo and video evidence, record the incident in their own words and both save and send reports directly to the police or specialist support group. Its aims are to secure and facilitate the engagement of the victim or witness, to increase their confidence and to enhance the quality and reliability of their evidence. By offering hate victims a choice of whether to report to the police or specialist support, the app puts the victim – in the words of the Sussex PCC Katy Bourne – “in the driving seat”.

5.2.3 While 101 costs users 15 pence a call, the app is free. Although this charge for 101 is not a significant sum for most people, it may deter poor and young victims of hate and we do not see how it can encourage witnesses to contact the police. Additionally while many 101 calls are reportedly abandoned before they are answered, this risk is avoided with the app.
5.2.4 Recognising that some people are uncomfortable making a phone call to report hate, many police forces now allow it to be reported online (often using True Vision). However, this can be quite a cumbersome process; there is no requirement for the person to provide contact details; and there is no way that they can attach video or photo evidence. While the app allows people to report and help the police from their phone at the time of the incident, online forms can only be used at a later time when there is a risk that some victims or witnesses may feel the matter is less pressing.

5.2.5 The Crime Survey of England & Wales Report on Hate Crime 2014/15 found that 52% of hate crime victims were satisfied with the police’s handling of the matter (down from 73% for all crime victims). As a higher proportion of hate victims suffer repeat attacks, this is likely to be a barrier to them reporting again. The app has the potential to help overcome these barriers as over 90% of users value the facts that they can track police access to, and keep a secure copy of, their report. If the police inform hate victims about the app when they first contact them, we believe it will increase the confidence of victims and increase the likelihood of reporting any repeat offence.

5.2.6 We believe that many victims and witnesses of hate crime are deterred from reporting not because of the police but because of their expectations of what they may be involving themselves in further along the criminal justice process. We recognise there have recently been improvements by both the police and the CPS in their approach to hate crime and we hope that this Inquiry will lead to further progress. In our view, the facts that the app enables people to provide reliable credible evidence will give them more confidence to embark on the process and where they do, as the DPP observed (see 5.13 above), less need for them to have to go to court.

5.3 Helping challenge the attitudes that underpin hate crime

5.3.1 We welcome the strong statements from Government and Parliament about the unacceptability of hate crime in modern Britain. We support their concern that a few hateful people in the country seem to have assumed that the majority who voted for BREXIT shared their hostile views toward different peoples, backgrounds and cultures and this encouraged them to voice or act out their hate. The response of political leaders, the police and the courts will, we hope, make clear that such conduct will not be tolerated. In terms of challenging the attitudes that underpin hate crime, we believe the app can play a supporting role.

5.3.2 As we explain in 5.1.2 above, the options facing a citizen who has witnessed and captured evidence of hate on their phone are – but for the app - to (i) distribute the footage through social or traditional media, (ii) hand in their phone to the police, or (iii) do nothing. We do not believe many people hand in their phones to the police and so the choice presented to most is to do nothing or distribute the footage through traditional or social media.

5.3.3 In either case, there is a risk that some of the hateful minority may assume that the silence of some or many of the public present is more a reflection of their support for the hate, rather than their reluctance or fear to get involved. For this reason alone, we consider the public should be told, as the Prime Minister urged in January, of simple, practical ways they can submit video and photo evidence to the police – be it via the app or otherwise. We are confident that the more people who are given the option and tools to act as responsible citizens, the more will.
5.4 Contributing to the understanding of statistical data around hate crime

5.4.1 While the Self Evident app is primarily a crime reporting app, it can also play a helpful role in improving the understanding of statistical data around hate. First, the app enables victims and witnesses in London and Sussex who are reluctant to notify the police to report the incident to specialist support organisations and so for their data to be factored in. Second, unlike reports of hate incidents via 101, True Vision or Crimestoppers those made through the app provide verified contact details for the person making the report. This allows the police or third party body to revert to and assure the individual, to obtain further information if needed, and to distinguish hate incidents from crimes. By contrast those channels that do not or cannot verify user details can face difficulties (a) producing data that distinguishes anonymous unspecific notifications from incidents and crimes, and (b) avoiding the risk of double counting.

5.5 Enhancing the support that is available to victims and their families

5.5.1 It was the initiative and decision of the Mayor’s Office in London and the PCC in Sussex that the app should be enhanced to offer victims of hate the option of reporting the hate to the police or to third party support. Their thinking was not only important that this option allows victims to access support services but also that these agencies can act as safe havens and give the victim the confidence to report the matter to and engage with the police where the incident warrants it. The fact that over half of users have so far chosen to report to third party support rather than direct to the police vindicates their approach and we believe it is one that the Committee should recommend be adopted more widely.

Witness Confident

References

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