

Address by Minister Stanton at Keeping Children Safe Online Seminar

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Address by the Minister of State with special responsibility for Equality, Integration and Immigration

David Stanton TD

at the "Keeping Children Safe Online" Seminar

NUI, Galway

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I am delighted to be here today to address you on the important question of how we can keep our children safer online. I know that Minister Naughten is disappointed not to be with you today as I know this is a subject close to his heart.

This is a very useful initiative in the context of International Safer Internet Day and I thank the Galway and Roscommon Children and Young People's Services Committee for organising it. We are constantly seeking to promote awareness of internet safety and to highlight its importance for parents, children and young people. The internet is a marvellous tool. It allows for enhanced access to education, entertainment and social contact. However, there are traps for the unwary. It is essential for parents and professionals who work with children to educate themselves on the potential dangers of the internet and, in particular, on how children and young people interact with it.

Each new generation of parents, and indeed professionals, dealing with children and young people, needs to grapple with issues of cyber-safety in order to guide the next generation. Parenting must now involve discussions and conscious decisions on cyber matters. The necessary topics range from age appropriate access levels, to family rules about in-app purchases, social media contact and conduct, risks of "sexting" etc. A survey of parental attitudes published for Safer Internet Day shows that parents remain concerned about bullying, exposure to pornography and exploitation but now they are also concerned about managing the *time* children spend online.

I will refer to various online resources, including the survey I just mentioned. I will arrange to make the references to websites and resources available to the organisers so that they may be of use to you in your work.

I will now outline some of the work on internet safety that is currently being carried out by Government Departments.

In relation to legislative updates, you will be interested to know that the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill contains provisions to significantly strengthen existing criminal law in combating child exploitation and, in particular, address the use of modern communication technologies as a tool which may lead to child sexual exploitation. I know that the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, Mr. Geoffrey Shannon, has welcomed the creation of new criminal offences which will provide additional protections for children. The Bill is finishing its passage through the Oireachtas and is expected to be enacted in the coming weeks.

The Office for Internet Safety was established in 2008 in the Department of Justice and Equality. It promotes internet safety particularly in relation to combatting child pornography. The Office for Internet Safety has a dedicated website www.internetsafety.ie providing information and links to further useful resources on internet safety. It also makes information resources available in hard copy, on request. Its work is informed by the Internet Safety Advisory Committee which includes representatives from An Garda Síochána, Non Government Organisations, the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, external cyber safety experts etc.

Ireland participates in the EU Safer Internet Programme. The Office coordinates and channels EU funding to four partner organisations which carry out awareness raising work, run helplines, and a hotline for reporting illegal internet content. This work is captured at a very practical level on the EU *Better Internet for Kids* online platform. This platform gathers together best practice examples and information materials from across the EU Member States including contributions from the Irish partners. The platform can be accessed at www.betterinternetforkids.eu.

As some of you may have seen, the Safer Internet Day events in Ireland yesterday were coordinated by another of the partner bodies in the consortium namely the PDST – Professional Development Service for Teachers - Technology in Education – this is part of the Department of Education and Skills. They launched a parenting booklet and an online parenting hub to assist parents to help their children to have a positive experience online. These resources were developed in conjunction with the National Parents’ Council (Primary). The booklet and the parenting hub can be accessed at www.webwise.ie/parents .

An Garda Síochána has engaged with a large internet service provider company to block illegal content on the internet in Ireland. The company agreed to block specific content in accordance with a list that is provided by the Gardaí. This initiative is aimed at decreasing the amount of illegal content, and in particular child abuse content, that is available on the internet in Ireland. Research has shown that the inadvertent viewing of such content can be detrimental to the psychological development of children and young people and may even stimulate curiosity leading to further viewing. The Gardaí are engaging with other companies with a view to expanding the initiative.

At an international level the work of Hotline.ie and An Garda Síochána in identifying child sexual abuse material feeds into efforts to track down perpetrators and victims of this heinous activity. In this context Ireland, is a founder member of the *Global Alliance against Child Sexual Abuse Online* which is an EU-US initiative.

All of this is by way of illustrating the complexity of the challenges and the range of possible responses to child safety on the internet.

Given its remit, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has primary responsibility for online content, for example communications policy and cybersecurity. Its work in this area is primarily focused on two key issues. The first area concerns the negotiation of the revision of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive, which includes a levelling up of protection for minors in on-demand broadcasts and Video Sharing Platforms. The European Commission’s stated intention is that the revised Directive will protect children better in a world where media convergence is progressing at a very high rate.

The second area of work of the Department of Communications is the implementation of Action 1.4 of the HSE’s *Connecting for Life* plan, which has the vital aim of seeking to reduce suicide in Ireland. The objective is for the Department to engage with online platforms to develop best practice in the reporting of suicide online. The Department intends to begin a process of consultation with a selected number of platforms shortly, in the hopes of agreeing a code of best practice by the end of 2017.

Widespread concern at the seeming proliferation of cyberbullying and of other misbehaviour online led the Law Reform Commission to research the topic and to publish a report on “Harmful Communications and Digital Safety” in September 2016. This important report is wide ranging and makes a large number of recommendations including the establishment of a Digital Safety Commissioner. This will require drafting of additional legislation.

The Internet Content Governance Advisory Group Report was published in 2014. It contained recommendations on actions to be carried out by then Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in relation to internet content governance as well as recommendations on transferring and expanding part of the work of the OIS within the Department of Children. An Interdepartmental Group chaired by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural

Resources on internet content governance was also envisaged by the report. The implementation of the Report will require inputs from a range of Departments.

Both of these reports explore the challenges facing Ireland in dealing with online safety and related matters and their detailed recommendations are under active consideration by Government. I can assure you that the safety of children all over this country is our priority in this consideration.

I know that you have a number of eminent speakers coming before you today and I am sorry that I cannot stay to hear some of the discussion. It only remains for me to wish you well with your work in this Seminar.

ENDS

Internet resources cited above

Website of the Office for Internet Safety – www.internetsafety.ie

EU Better Internet for Kids – www.betterinternetforkids.eu

Survey of Parental Attitudes carried out for Safer Internet Day – available on www.webwise.ie

New parenting booklet and hub – www.webwise.ie/parents

Website where you can anonymously report suspected illegal content online in Ireland – www.hotline.ie

Law Reform Commission Report “Harmful Online Communications and Digital Safety” – www.lawreform.ie

Internet Content Governance Advisory Group Report – available on www.internetsafety.ie