

Full Government response to Online Harms Consultation

Ministerial Statement: Tuesday 15 December 2020

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Introduction:

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) is a charity that works in partnership with the tech industry, law enforcement and government to remove images and videos of child sexual abuse wherever they are hosted in the world.

Key Asks:

- 1. That the Government recognises the strong and effective mechanisms that are already in place to tackle online harms, such as the IWF, and partners with them to further online safety**
- 2. That the Government recognises the critical importance of education and awareness raising initiatives and that whilst regulation is welcome, it will not solve all these complex challenges.**
- 3. To ask the Secretary of State to ensure that once EU funding for the UK Safer Internet Centre ends it is replaced by the UK Government.**

We provide a secure and anonymous place for the public to report suspected child sexual abuse images and videos and we use the latest technology to proactively search the internet for this content. The technical tools and services we provide help to keep technology companies' platforms and services free from child sexual abuse.

Effective mechanisms for dealing with online harms, the IWF's impact:

The IWF believes that the new regulator will have a huge and complex task in trying to effectively regulate over 29 areas of online harms. To be successful, they will need to work in partnership with other organisations with specific expertise in the areas they are regulating.

The IWF has been working with industry and law enforcement for 24 years to tackle online child sexual abuse. Our partnership approach has been a success, and we are respected globally as a model of best practice and as an innovator of the technical solutions required for tackling the most egregious online harms.

- UK hosting of child sexual abuse images and videos has been reduced to less than 1% since 2003 and 0.1% today, compared with 18% in the year we were founded:**

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse concluded "In the UK the IWF sits at the heart of the national response to combating the proliferation of indecent images of children. It deserves to be publicly acknowledged as a vital part of how, and why so comparatively little Child Sexual Abuse Material is hosted in the UK."¹

The International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), following a recent audit, described the organisation as meeting "exceptional standards in all areas" and said its operations and structures set the standards for those around the world."²

- IWF services blocked at **least 8.8 million UK attempts to access child sexual abuse material** during one month in the Covid-19 pandemic:**

Throughout the first lockdown in April, we worked with three major Internet Service Providers and Mobile Network Operators serving the UK market to ascertain how many attempts had been made to access known child sexual abuse material. They measured hits from across their networks to the

IWF's webpage blocking list which proved that it prevented many millions of attempts to access child sexual abuse imagery from the UK. This underlines the importance of the services we provide to industry and how effective their deployment is to protecting internet users in the UK from committing viewing offences.

- **We innovate and change:**

Offenders perpetrating these crimes are sophisticated and organised. Our response to this challenge must constantly innovate and change to keep up. We have invested in web crawling technology that is deployed to improve our proactive searches and we are developing new image classifiers in partnership with industry to speed up our accurate detection of this content. Over the past 24 years we have been able to innovate and continually remove more and more content year on year. Often legislation is outpaced by technology.

Given our experience and expertise, the IWF believes we are uniquely placed to help in shaping the Code of Practice, investigating reports related to CSE/A on behalf of the regulator and monitoring compliance with the Code.

Importance of Education and Awareness Raising Initiatives:

- The National Crime Agency recently estimated that as many as 300,000 people in the UK³ pose a serious sexual threat to children either online or through contact offending. We must tackle this problem as well as ensuring that the online environment is as safe as possible for children.
- Technology in and of itself is not a silver bullet to solving these problems. That is why the IWF is one third of the UK Safer Internet Centre working alongside Childnet International and SWGfL to ensure that the harms we see daily are mitigated through effective awareness raising in schools and with parents.
- The Centre in the past decade has trained 21,000 professionals working with the nation's six million children and we also run Safer Internet Day each year which is a vital touch point in the online safety of the nation's children. In 2020, 2,000 organisations and 49% of children and 26% of parents were involved in the day in the UK, encouraging the safe and responsible use of the internet.

The UK Safer Internet Centre currently receives £1.3m per annum from the EU, and the Government is yet to confirm they will replace that funding once it ceases from the EU.

We, [25 leaders from the online safety sector](#) and [33 MPs and Peers](#) are calling for the UK Government to replace this vitally important funding in the spending review.

Questions to the Secretary of State:

- The newly appointed regulator will be seeking to regulate up to 29 different online harms. This will include everything from hate speech to child sexual abuse. What consideration has he given to giving enabling powers to the regulator to partner with organisations, like the IWF that bring so much relevant experience and knowledge about the harms that they deal with online?
- The IWF is recognised as an international model of best practice. The tools and services they provide to the industry are deployed globally and have real world impact on disrupting child sexual abuse online. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to the international nature of these offences when considering the introduction of a regulator through this online harms legislation?
- We welcome the Government's commitment to improving online safety and making the UK the safest place in the world to go online. Regulation is a welcome step towards achieving those ambitions, but can the Secretary of State confirm that the organisations that make up the UK Safer Internet Centre on the frontline in dealing with harms day in day out, dealing with Revenge Porn, incidents of child sexual abuse and working directly with the nation's six million children will continue to receive UK Government funding after their EU funding ends?

The IWF response to the Government's announcement this morning can be found [here](#).