

# **Speech by Minister for Justice & Equality Frances Fitzgerald T.D., Launch of Hotline.ie Annual Report 2013, Wednesday 28 May 2014, Merrion Hotel**

## **Check against delivery**

I would like to thank the Internet Service Providers Association of Ireland for their invitation to launch the Hotline.ie annual report for 2013. I would also like to take this opportunity to applaud the continuing excellent work of Mr. Paul Durrant and his team at ISPAI and Hotline.ie.

I know that the Irish hotline was one of the founder members of the international umbrella body of hotlines – INHOPE. I am pleased to see this international dimension of the work of Hotline reflected here today with the presence of Mr. Russell Chadwick, the Executive Director of INHOPE. I know that Ireland has contributed greatly to the INHOPE organisation over the years and I anticipate that this will continue into the future.

I am particularly interested in the work of Hotline.ie insofar as it concerns the detection of crimes against children, both nationally and internationally: the work of Hotline.ie contributes to Ireland's efforts as a signatory of the 'Global Alliance Against Child Sexual Abuse Online'.

The protection of children is of paramount importance, something I know well from my previous role as Minister for Children & Youth Affairs.

Similarly, I know; and we all know of the increasing centrality of digital media in our children's lives... from their smartphones to their social media accounts.

Infants are now familiar with how to use touchscreens.

Budding young entrepreneurs are more likely to be writing code and designing apps than making lemonade.

But while the online world brings many new opportunities, it also brings risks.

The first Irish report of the 'Net Children Go Mobile' project, published earlier this year found that:

- 40% of children aged 9-16 and over 60% of teenagers in Ireland own a smartphone; and
- 21% of children reported seeing sexual images while 22% had received contact with people they have never met face to face.

This confirms the very real concerns of many Irish parents regarding the potential access for young and curious minds to a whole range of inappropriate material online as well as the risks arising from contact online with strangers.

I see that Mr. Oisín Byrne, the MD of iReach Market Research, is also speaking here today. Mr Byrne will share the key findings of research which his company has carried out on 'Parental Attitudes to Children Online'. This is a very useful addition to our knowledge of what trends society can expect into the future. Separate research has been carried out in relation to children's views of online safety but this research focuses on parents' views. The safety of children cannot be over emphasised in this day and age when the world is literally at our fingertips – on a multitude of devices.

Parents, children and teachers must all work together to ensure that digital literacy and ability to stay safe online are seen as being just as important as the three R's.

However it is also vital that where concerns exist, that they are addressed!

It is vital that reporting structures are in place.

In Ireland we have Hotline.ie which acts on reports that it receives and passes on pre-vetted suspicions to the Gardaí.

Members of the public play a vital role in combating crimes against children when they report suspect content online. Whether the suspect content is on the web or on peer-to-peer or on a cloud platform, I would strongly encourage the general public to report anything that upsets them online. I would also remind people that reports can be made anonymously, if that is what they prefer. Illegal content on the internet can be child sexual abuse content – also referred to as child pornography – or indeed other content such as incitement to hatred, financial scams, racism and xenophobia et cetera. But whatever it is, report it so that Hotline.ie can address it.

As you are all doubtless aware, when Hotline.ie receives reports of suspected illegal content on the internet, it is scrutinised by their specially trained analysts and, if it is assessed as being probably illegal, it is referred to the Gardaí for possible prosecution, as well as to host companies in Ireland for takedown. If the host company is outside of Ireland, the report goes through INHOPE, within its member countries, and through law enforcement channels elsewhere in the world, so that the content can be removed from circulation.

I am told that the format of the annual report has altered over time – and I am sure that this has only enhanced the quality of the information provided. Indeed this revised format is readily accessible and user friendly and it allows for information to be transmitted to the reader with the use of infographics.

The report shows that the average number of reports to the Irish Hotline each year since 2006 has been just under 2,500. In the 2013 calendar year the number of reports was slightly greater than the average at 2,568 reports. I note that the majority of the reports came in through the Hotline's online forum and most reports concerned content on websites. Nevertheless, as I have already mentioned, reports are welcome about any online platform including peer-to-peer and cloud services.

Each and every report is thoroughly assessed and followed up, once sufficient information has been supplied in the original report. It is unfortunately the case that a full assessment may not be possible if there are not enough details available to the analyst. While reports can be made anonymously, Hotline can seek more details from those who report if they give contact details – and it must be stressed that such contact details go no further.

Despite the high number of reports, only 185 of the reports assessed were deemed illegal.

- 1 relating to child grooming;
- 47 relating to financial scams;
- 135 relating to child pornography; and
- 2 relating to racism and xenophobia.

Only 7 reports were traced to Ireland, demonstrating the global nature of the internet and the threats it can carry.

The presence of any illegal reports is undesirable. But identifying such illegality is the first step to rooting it out.

In relation to the very important international networking in which Hotline.ie is engaged, the report highlights one particular case. A report that was made to Hotline.ie in Ireland ultimately led to the removal in another jurisdiction of sizeable amounts of illegal child pornography content from the internet. I am sure that Mr. Durrant will give you more information on this shortly. The case illustrates the value and significance of having reporting mechanisms in place to allow swift action to be taken regardless of distance and borders. It also illustrates the seriousness with which such illegal material is viewed throughout the world and the high level of coordination and cooperation that happens between jurisdictions to stamp it out.

The report cites INHOPE information which shows that the vast majority (93%) of all reported Child Sexual Abuse Material was removed from the internet within a week. This was an improvement over the previous year when the figure was 88%.

It is heart-breaking to note that children in all categories are at risk in this vile online trade: the report includes a profile of victims. On the positive side, it would seem from the report that Irish people are less likely to stumble across illegal material than they were in the past. On the negative side, this may mean that those who provide and those who seek out such material are getting better at concealing it. Once again, it the general public which has a crucial role here in reporting child abuse material no matter where they come across it.

Finally, I would like to welcome this Hotline.ie annual report and to commend the Internet Service Providers Association of Ireland for their excellent work.

Thank you.