

Child Exploitation and Online Protection

Executive Summary

Recognising the unparalleled opportunities the internet presents and the inherent dangers of unrestricted access by children/young people, Lanarkshire Division of Police Scotland embarked on a preventative campaign of early intervention and education. The project, delivered interactive inputs to children/young people, parents/guardians and fellow professionals to raise awareness, inform decision-making and highlight reporting mechanisms to protect children/young people. The aim of the project was to keep children and young people safe online, now and in the future.

Research conducted by police officers in Lanarkshire identified a prolific rise in inappropriate online activity by children/young persons leading to an enhanced risk of exploitation. Concurrently, a review of preventative activity revealed it to be both minimal and uncoordinated.

Multiple partner inputs were given at a number of education and awareness events to highlight the dangers on the internet, with representation from the national Crime Agency Education Services, NHS Lanarkshire and third party members that included Anti-sectarian charity 'Nil by Mouth' and the UK Safer Internet Centre.

Internet safety, and in particular child sexual exploitation, was an incredibly difficult, emotive topic for adults to approach. This was compounded by the fact that the young people are the subject matter experts on the internet rather than the traditional authoritarian position of the parent/guardian or professional.

The project was very successful, reaching over 200,000 children and young people. Through the inputs young people developed an understanding how to report issues, became more aware how to stay safe online. In addition the process helped to improve the resilience of individuals and organisations engaged in tackling internet exploitation and helped to reduce the fear associated with using the internet.

This project was a finalist in the Wider Partnership Safer Communities Award in 2016.

Background and Aims

The internet presents unsurpassed opportunities for education, entertainment and engagement between individuals on a global scale. The ability to engage in this manner is particularly attractive to children/young people and internet usage permeates all aspects of their lives. The internet also presents the opportunity for children/young people to have an alternate online identity, and take risks in a manner that they would not ordinarily consider. This presents a clear danger and places

them at risk of exploitation/radicalisation as that same anonymity can be used by predators who seek to cultivate inappropriate relationships.

This initiative sought to treat the target audience of children/young people as the experts who simply needed some guidance as to the parameters in which they could safely interact with the internet. Advice was sought from the audience as to how improvements could be made. By respecting the young people's knowledge and focussing discussions on their decision-making process, police officers were able to get children/young people to open up about their experiences through which the real underlying issues could be identified and addressed.

Activities

Since the initiative began over 20,000 individuals took part in the inputs, which were complimented by events and a media campaign.

The National Crime Agency provided officers with training in Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP), which provided the project team with a greater understanding of the issue and how it could be tackled. This understanding resulted in additional activities been identified, such as the addition of a Child Exploitation Online Protection (CEOP) button on the Police Scotland webpage to allow children and young people to directly report exploitation and inappropriate content to the experts.

North and South Lanarkshire Councils formulated a joint preventative education initiative, which allowed partners to deliver interactive inputs across the whole region assisting teaching staff from primary and secondary schools. Organisations such as the National Crime Agency, NHS Lanarkshire, Anti-sectarian groups and the UK Safer Internet Centre all engaged in activities that strengthened the message of the initiative.

The initiative actively supported the global Safer Internet Day which resulted in additional partners becoming involved such as the UK Safer Internet Centre (UKSIC) and the South West Grid for Learning. The UKSIC Director visited and delivered an online safety presentation to 130 professionals/policy makers.

Impact

The project has reached a wide audience with over 20,000 people across Lanarkshire; delivering the message of online safety and the prevention of exploitation. The project received a great deal of positive feedback from participants, partners and professionals alike who universally agreed that their knowledge has improved and the risk of harm to children/young people in Lanarkshire has reduced.

The project has widen the audience to include parents and guardians as well as child care professions, which has highlighted issues to those that care for children/young people, in either a personal or professional capacity. It is felt that by expanding the audience of the project there will be additional levels of protection and support for children and young people.

The projects activities have encouraged young people to think about their decision-making processes and key issues related to the internet, from topics such as sex and relationships to cyber bullying, hate crime and online radicalisation. The

involvement of the NHS enhanced the delivery in respect of the mental health implications relating to bullying/exploitation together with the potential risk of self-harm or even suicide. This combined with the wider audience participation has assisted in improving the resilience of individuals, families and the wider community across Lanarkshire, reduced their fears regarding internet use and led to a positive outlook regarding the safe use of the internet.

As a result of adopting a system that deliver services to children/young people, practitioners and parents/guardians at minimal cost and with staff trained to a high level the project is very sustainable, transferable and has had a positive impact on local policing approaches making it more proactive rather than reactive.

An example of the impact the project was having was recorded at the end of one of the sessions when a 14 year old female disclosed that she had been the subject of cyber bullying. This progressed to sexual exploitation by one of her peers whereby she was forced to send inappropriate sexual images, causing her to feel isolated. Her mental health deteriorated, she engaged in self-harm as a coping mechanism and considered suicide. The young person praised the initiative for raising awareness, she realised that she was far from alone, had access to a support network and her feelings of isolation dissipated.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Throughout this project there have been numerous examples of children/young people providing feedback, which identified positive behavioural change in children and young people. This validation assisted in keeping the project on track and provided feedback to funders, practitioner and parents/guardians validating the aims of the project.

Lessons Learnt and Sustainability

Due to the specialised nature of the project the requirement for detailed training and investment in training was identified early and was included into the project. Within Police Scotland there is always the possibility that officers will be moved to new assignments which can have a negative impact on the sustainability and continuity of a project. To prevent this, the project has invested in having a senior police officer trained to instructor level to maintain sustainability.

Resources

The officers, schools and partners incorporated the initiative into their regular work routine, thereby avoiding personnel costs and despite the initial specialist training being provided for free the project identified that the cost of one officer training up to instructor level was £199.

There were no delivery costs because the schools, local authority premises and private sector venues were allocated free of charge. The Community Safety Partnership provided funding of £1000, which was spent on a variety of materials to aid in the delivery of the initiative and promote the campaign.

Practice Note Information

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