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To:
1. Minister for Safeguarding and Vulnerability and Security Minister
2. Home Secretary

From: Russell Bagnall, TEAU,
TSED, I&S
SCS: Christian Papareontiou, TEAU,
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Date: 27 April 2020

Information to note

COVID-19: Child sexual abuse threat and response update

Issue

It is assessed that COVID-19 has increased the risk of child sexual abuse, whilst limiting our ability to properly assess and detect it.

Russell Bagnall's note of 11th April set out our contemporary understanding of the threat and the updated action being taken to most effectively respond. This is the fourth summary of updates, linking to wider and fuller advice as appropriate.

Threat Update

Key judgements for week commencing 20th April are:

- **With medium to high confidence, it is highly likely that COVID-19 will increase the risk of online child sexual abuse but we have not yet seen reporting to support this.** This is based on academic insight, initial reporting from law enforcement and third sector charities here and overseas.
- **There has been an 89% drop in number of webpages containing CSA being taken down during lockdown.** As a result of lockdown restrictions
- **Despite a predicted rise in offending, it is a realistic possibility that there will not be an increase in the level of reporting until children return to education or have further interactions with support workers.** Since restrictions were imposed, there has been a decrease in public reports to ClickCEOP, likely due to lower reporting from professionals following school closures.
- **Increases in the number of children engaged in creating and sharing of 'self generated indecent imagery'** is highly likely to create additional opportunities for offenders to obtain child sexual abuse material and groom/blackmail children.
- **It is likely that the IWF will encounter increased volumes of 'first generation' CSAM on the clear web** as this material is likely to remain live for longer due to a reduced response time, thus increasing its spread and making it harder to remove permanently.
- **Interpol Opinion: It had been predicted that there was likely to be a higher consumption of CSAM due to COVID-19.** While an increase could be caused by additional users it could also be caused by the habitual users having more time to consume. Increased consumption therefore itself does not directly indicate more victims and Interpol are currently continuing to monitor consumption and have not released statistics yet.

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Response

- 1. Europol released a report on the 3rd April on how COVID-19 has impacted cybercrime.** While some indicators suggest a rise in the threat of online child sexual abuse these must be caveated by the limited collection period, a lack of assessment across the whole-system and that they contrast with some UK figures. For instance, while Spain saw a 25% increase in the connections used to download child sexual abuse material, the UK has seen a week on week decline. We are increasingly cautious of single-source reporting where we cannot independently assess the veracity or scale of the data. Nonetheless, our response assumes the worst to ensure every opportunity is taken to safeguard victims. We have commissioned further assessment from the National Assessment Centre on key threats including livestreaming; and we are continuing to feed into the Global WeProtect Alliance assessment of the threat that will likely be published in early May.
- 2. There has been a significant - 89% - reduction in the take down of web pages featuring child sexual abuse in the last month.** An impact of social distancing measures globally means there are fewer people to staff hotlines so fewer people to chase up 'live' content. Some hotlines like the IWF are working because current UK guidance means IWF's work falls under 'key public services' albeit at reduced capacity; some European hotlines have closed altogether for a period of time (France, Spain, Croatia and others). The companies themselves that receive Notice and Takedown notifications from hotlines are potentially taking longer to respond, as they are in the similar position of having reduced resources. Options to address this such as moderators working from home are very difficult to implement given the significant welfare (as well as technical) issues involved – a point discussed and endorsed in a call with FCM Partners on 8/9 April. However, we are beginning a piece of work to help the hotlines agree the operating procedures for taking down the 'legal but harmful' material agreed as part of the Voluntary Principles. We will use this to assess the scope for introducing better operating guidelines for the take down of child sexual abuse material overall and the willingness of the hotlines to do so.
- 3. In a short note to the Security Minister on the Friday 24 April we outlined what 'Zoombooming' was and that it was unlikely to pose a threat to children.** Instead, it is highly likely that online 'trolls' are seeking to disrupt meetings for entertainment. They are exploiting behavioural issues, not technical exploits, in which Zoom meetings are either not secured via a password or where the password has been widely shared. We raised that there were ongoing solutions being implemented by Zoom but that we have raised this issue with FCM partners and have followed up with US counterparts who are engaging Zoom based on a long-established relationship; the NCSC have released guidance here; we have provided this advice to the Press Team; and are continuing to monitor the situation. Notably, meetings that were infiltrated by people sharing child abuse images are being investigated by the NCA.
- 4. The Internet Watch Foundation released their annual report on Monday 27 April.** The IWF raise a number of concerns including hosting sites, dark web services and Self Generated Indecent Images. We are already proactively tackling all the points raised in the report and will only continue to increase our efforts to ensure the safety of children online. The report highlights that only 0.1% of global CSAM is hosted in the UK, down from 18% in 2017, which shows how aggressive the UK has been to tackle this threat.

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