

Children's Charities' Coalition for Internet Safety



Ms Patricia Hewitt
Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce
Department of Trade and Industry
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

28th March, 2000

Dear Patricia,

Re: Meeting on 6th March, 2000

Many thanks for seeing the children's charities to discuss our concerns about the Internet. On our side we all found the exchange to be hugely informative and extremely useful. You will recall that we entirely endorsed the broad sweep of Government policy in this area and we fully understand the importance to our economy and our society of us all rising to the new challenges of the digital age. However our collective involvement with child-care, child development, and child protection issues has brought us face-to-face with a number of continuing difficulties which we believe require serious and urgent attention and we were grateful for the opportunity to air them.

We were particularly delighted to hear you say that, in your capacity as Minister with lead responsibility for Internet policy across Government, you intended to consider calling an inter-Departmental Ministerial meeting to review progress under several of the headings we raised. Apart from the obvious tie-ups with the DFEE, Home Office, DCMS and the Cabinet Office, we also specifically mentioned some of the Department of Health's responsibilities.

We very much look forward to hearing more about the possible inter-Departmental meeting. We would, of course, be more than happy to assist the preparations for this meeting by, for example, drafting papers giving greater detail in relation to any of the matters we discussed with you or which you might want to look into further.

I thought it would be useful in the remainder of this letter to try to recap on the main points we raised with you. I apologise in advance for the length of this epistle but as this was the first meeting of its kind there may be some advantage in setting out matters in a fairly full way.

1. We applauded the Government's decision to make such a huge investment in bringing the Internet into schools, through the NGfL. This will soon result in every school-age child in the UK having an email address and Internet access at their school, and presumably it was intended to lead to these very same children making greater use of the Internet outside of school, for instance to do their homework.

Thus, while acknowledging there are others pressures as well, it is still true to say that as a direct result of Government policy, hundreds of thousands, eventually millions, of children are being driven towards the Internet. However whereas the Government has made various stipulations about Internet safety within schools, no comparable effort seems to have been made to ensure that similar levels of protection exist at home or in other places where children might be expected to be found using the Internet. We are not even sure, given the arms- length relationships which exist between Government, LEAs and individual schools, what monitoring is taking place of how well, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the advice on Internet safety in schools is being taken up and observed in practice.

2. Whilst we also applauded the fact that around £200 millions is going in to retraining existing teachers, to make them "Internet savvy" and better able to exploit the educational resources being made available through the NGfL, we note that there are several other professions who work with children, for example social workers of various kinds and branches of the police service, who also need retraining or other forms of help to ensure that they too are fully up to speed. More than one of our group recounted to you how some of their social work staff who are working with sex offenders, or who intervene in families where sexual abuse might be an issue, are sometimes finding themselves coming across a vocabulary and ideas that are clearly linked to Internet usage but about which they might understand little or nothing. I know from my dealings with the ADSS that similar concerns exist within the statutory sector. In that context we discussed briefly the resource limitations of the current ACPC structures.
3. We also raised the question of NCIS and were keen to hear about progress on establishing the computer crime division with a specific Internet section. We expressed the hope, and this is perhaps linked to our earlier point about training, that police officers in local forces would also be able to build their knowledge base and experience of dealing with Internet-related issues.
4. Whilst understanding why the Government changed its position on key escrow, we nonetheless felt it was important for us to reiterate our concerns about the loss of compulsory key escrow powers. We expressed the hope that the emerging T-scheme would not lose sight of the important policing concerns which lie behind our anxieties in this field. Of course there is a commercial dynamic pushing the T-scheme forward but the policing issues are, or ought also to be, among the key drivers.
5. We very much hope that in the RIP Bill currently in Parliament the Government does not give any ground at all to those who are pressing for an

abandonment or a watering-down of the proposed penalties which might apply to anyone who deliberately fails to provide their decryption key. We also have a concern about how people who refuse to hand over their key might escape being placed on the existing registers which employers routinely refer to before offering someone employment with children who are in their care. We will be making representations along these lines to members of the Bill's Committee and I will soon send you, for information, a copy of the brief. More generally in relation to the Bill we trust that it will not lead to a reduction in any existing police powers to pursue child sex offenders.

6. We noted that, whereas in the USA, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies regularly used "sting" operations to apprehend paedophiles and child pornographers who used the Internet to perpetrate their crimes, this did not seem to be such a common feature of UK practice. However, as we understand it, this is not so much due to a lack of legal powers and is more down to resource limitations on the part of the police.
7. We alluded to the Internet dimension of the sex offences review, which is currently being conducted under the auspices of the Home Office. We also mentioned the work being done by the Department of Health, following a Foreign Office initiative, co-ordinating Government input to the National Plan for the Eradication of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. This arises from the UK's participation in the UN's 1996 Stockholm Congress.
8. We were all in complete agreement about the importance of the UK avoiding a gap opening up between the information rich and the information poor. Since the meeting some of us have, as you suggested, made contact with both DFEE and the Treasury in relation to exploring the possibilities of us utilising our roots in various disadvantaged communities across the UK to assist with the Government's declared policy of closing that gap.
9. We very much took your point about the need for establishing a definitive set of key messages in relation to child safety and children's use of the Internet. We will give this some further thought and get back to you. Most of us have already done some work in this area but there may be a case for the children's charities coming together to establish a new focal point of some kind, either on their own or with others. This might raise questions of resources. The IWF clearly has an important role to play but its remit is rather narrower than the full range of child welfare issues which we address on a daily basis.
10. This latter point resonates with another that we made at the meeting, about the current absence within the UK of a means for citizens, as opposed to atomised consumers, to articulate their views or express their anxieties about the impact of the Internet on society, perhaps particularly at the social, as opposed to the narrowly economic level. Moreover I'm afraid we do not necessarily share your apparent optimism that as larger consumer-oriented companies become bigger players on the Internet so some of the problems we face today will start to disappear. For that to happen it would require these companies to become access providers as well as content providers and effectively to supplant the

role currently played by ISPs. Otherwise for as long as children can obtain unrestricted access to the Internet the issues we discussed will remain relevant.

It was in that context that we expressed the hope that the Government would stand ready to act as the people's friend or champion in relation to the way the Internet develops over the coming period, perhaps even going as far as to fund research into the technical or other solutions which we think are necessary if the Net is to be made a safer place for children.

We pointed out that in the USA the Federal Government had earmarked specific funds to develop anti-paedophile and pro-child safety initiatives on the Internet, and had taken a high profile generally on these issues. Moreover increasingly within Congress we are seeing more and more measures coming forward which aim to enhance child safety online and which implicitly acknowledge the limitations of a 1st Amendment drafted, as it was, in the 18th century in response to the anti-democratic posturing of "Mad" King George. The Internet age requires a more sophisticated response which preserves free speech and balances the interests of children: after all, children are a permanent feature of our society. The Internet-world has to recognise that fact and not simply treat it as an inconvenient irritation that "someone else" has to deal with.

11. We noted that whereas the larger Internet companies, and companies with a stake in e-commerce, had acted fairly swiftly to resolve issues which touched or concerned their vital or immediate commercial interests, other questions had not been given the same priority and had been allowed to slip down the agenda. In that context we cited the IWF's still scant resources and the way in which it now seems to be inextricably linked to the EU's decision-making cycles for obtaining funding for key parts of its work. We fear they will therefore be doomed to coming up with yesterday's solutions for the problems of the day-before-yesterday. If the industry shared our concerns about child safety, matters would not be thus. We think this is incredibly short-sighted, and is mainly linked historically both to the US origins of the medium and to established cultural norms within the industry. However as the Internet moves from the Ivory Tower to the High Street and into our living-rooms, and especially as it starts being integrated into our TV sets, we believe new attitudes are needed if the medium is to become truly trusted by the new waves of Internet users, and their children.

Once more many thanks for seeing us and we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

John Carr

Internet Consultant