European Online Grooming Project

Summary of the Project findings

Background to the Project

The sexual abuse of young people via the Internet is an international problem, a crime without geographical boundaries. A recent report from the Centre for Missing and Exploited Children described 2,660 incidents of adults using the Internet to befriend and establish and emotional connection with a child, in order to entice them into meeting. As more young people use the Internet to socially network with friends, the potential for contact with sexual offenders' increases. There is however limited information available about the behaviours of Internet sexual offenders to inform effective risk management strategies for policy makers, law enforcement agencies, parents and young people. In response to this, the European Commission Safer Internet Plus Programme commissioned a consortium of leading experts from the UK and across Europe to develop an understanding of the different ways in which sexual offenders approach, communicate and 'groom' young people online. The consortium includes: Stephen Webster NatCen; Professor Julia Davidson Kingston University; Professor Antonia Bifulco Kingston University; Professor Thierry Pham Belgium; Professor Vincenzo Caretti Italy; and Professor Petter Gottschalk Norway.

Project phases

The Project has three phases, a review of recent police case files and a literature review; in-depth interviews with men who have been convicted of online grooming in each consortium country; and workshops with young people, parents and educators to contribute to the development of educational awareness and prevention initiatives.

Key findings from phases one and two

Phases one and two of the project are complete.

Headline findings from the Project are that online grooming cannot be comprehensively understood and managed without understanding the interaction between the offender, online environment and young person. In particular, the nature of online disihibition and how this influences the behaviour of both online groomers and young people.

A further finding is that online groomers are not a homogenous group. Consequently, the key features of grooming behaviour the study identified *do not* apply to all groomers in all contacts they have with young people. These features of online grooming include factors that help *maintain* the behaviour such as the online environment, dissonance and offenders perceptions of young people and their behaviour. The research also identified *salient behaviours* in the grooming process such as: *scanning* the online environment for potential people to contact, the *identity* adopted by the groomer (be it their own or another); the *nature*

of contact with the young person; the different ways in which the online groomer can *intensify* the process of grooming and the diverse range of *outcomes* toward the end of the process. In particular, it is clear from the research that not all episodes of online grooming result in a physical meeting.

Given the diversity of online groomers behaviour, the consortium has developed a classification of three 'types' of online groomer.

The first is the **distorted attachment** offender. Men in this group had offence supportive beliefs that involved seeing contact with the young person as a *'relationship'*. As such, they did not get involved in other online behaviours that indicated to them, and others, that they were sexually offending. Men within this group did not have any indecent images of children and they did not have any contact with any other sexual offenders online. This group also seemed to spend a significant amount of time online talking to the young person before they met the victim. All men in this group went on to meet the victim to develop or further the *'relationship'.*

The second type is the **adaptable online groomer**. This group of men had offence supportive beliefs that involved their own needs and seeing the victim as mature and capable. Unlike the group above, they did not seem to have discussed the encounter in terms of a relationship. Some men in this group had collections of indecent images of children but they were not significant collections in terms of size. They also tended not to have significant contact with other sexual offenders online. Men in this group were adept at adopting their identity and grooming style according to how the young person presented online. Similarly, the speed at which contact developed could be fast and/or slow according to the how the victim responded to contact.

Finally, the **hyper-sexualised** group of men were characterised by extensive indecent image collections of children and significant online contact with other sexual offenders or offender groups. Some men in this group also had significant collections of extreme adult pornography. They adopted different identities altogether, or had an identity picture that was not of their face but of their genitals. Their contacts with young people were highly sexualised and escalated very quickly. Their offence supportive beliefs involved 'dehumanising' young people. They tended not to personalise contact and so did not seem to be using the phone or other personal media like the other groups of offenders.

The final key finding relates to the young people who were groomed. It was clear from the accounts of offenders that safety messages are getting through to a resilient group of young people. However, those young people who seemed to be susceptible to the approaches of online groomers displayed a range of vulnerability features that could include: loneliness, low self-esteem, self-harming behaviour, family break-up, and incidence of ongoing sexual abuse by other offenders.

Looking ahead – phase three

The third phase of the Project, workshops with young people, parents and educators, will feedback key findings from the interviews with online groomers to contribute to the debate surrounding the development effective online safety messages.