

eSafety Commissioner – Opening Statement – Budget Estimates – October 2020

Good evening Chair and Senators. Thank you for this opportunity to make a brief opening statement about the special challenges COVID-19 has created for many Australians and how they have been impacted online.

As we know, when online exposure goes up, so do the risks, and we have seen significant increases in harms across all our reporting areas and many more people turning to eSafety for help and information.

From March to September this year, when compared to the monthly average for 2019, we've seen an 49% increase in adult cyber abuse, a 32% increase in youth-based cyberbullying, a 123% increase in illegal and harmful content, and a more than 172% increase in image-based abuse.

During the peak COVID periods of March to May, traffic to our website more than doubled, going from approximately 300,000 page views per month to around 650,000.

In June, the Australian Government recognised the new online threat profile we were facing, and provided eSafety with \$10 million in surge funding for the current financial year. These extra funds have allowed us to bolster our investigator ranks, and just last week, we welcomed a new, energised batch of cyberbullying and image-based abuse team members.

eSafety has also responded to the increase in online harms by supercharging our prevention and education efforts. From March to September, our webinars reached over 84,000 people delivering important online safety advice and training.

For Child Protection Week last month, a record 31,000 students and teachers participated in our eSafety webinars.

The \$39.4 million funding top-up announced in the Budget importantly addresses funding shortfalls that would otherwise have occurred as specific program funding ended over the next three years. Importantly, this work can now continue.

We know that new online threats can appear out of nowhere. One shocking example was the emergence of a suicide video last month which found its way into TikTok feeds that children could easily access.

As part of our coordinated response efforts on the day the video began circulating in Australia, eSafety teamed up with Christine Morgan, National Suicide Prevention Adviser to the Prime Minister, to provide detailed advice on what schools and parents should do to limit exposure to such horrific content. We were also able to point principals and educators to our Online Safety Toolkit for Schools to help them manage the many threats that all school communities face in the online environment.

In recent months we have also released a number of important research reports and provided our expertise in support of global efforts to deal with online threats. Throughout the pandemic there has been increasing international interest in eSafety's regulatory model and in leveraging our education and prevention materials.

We also continue to work with the tech industry to promote Safety by Design, encouraging sites, apps and social media platforms to prioritise the safety of their users.

This is supported by our latest research, which shows Less than a quarter of Australians believe tech giants like Facebook, Instagram and Google are doing enough to protect users from harm on their platforms.

Thank you, and now I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.