

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES – OCTOBER 2021

Commissioner's Opening Statement

Thank you Chair, and Committee members, for this opportunity to meet with you today to update you on our achievements in this important process of accountability.

In a year defined by dislocation and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift towards online learning, working and connecting continued for millions of Australians, exposing many citizens to unfamiliar and increased online risks.

There has been a corresponding surge in people experiencing online harms, as we saw a 30 per cent increase in reports of cyberbullying and an increase of more than 35 per cent in informal adult cyber abuse complaints

eSafety responded with increased support, delivering heightened levels of compassionate citizen service through our regulatory schemes, rolling out new and improved initiatives for both the prevention and mitigation of harms.

In our annual report released last week, 2020–21 saw a record number of Australians reporting all forms of online abuse to eSafety. Our investigators handled more than 23,500 reports of illegal and harmful content – more than ever before.

During this time, our investigations team has worked diligently with the online platforms, to help this growing number of Australians – particularly young people – to have their harmful content removed swiftly. We handled some 2,687 complaints about intimate images and videos that had been shared without consent. Through our research, we know our rapid action significantly reduces the impact on victims' wellbeing.

Our core operational model that focuses on the three key pillars of Protection, Prevention, and Proactive and Systemic change has served the Australian community well in protecting them from online harms.

Our work has not gone unnoticed internationally: Ireland and Fiji have established their own online regulators based on the Australian model, and Canada and the United Kingdom are well down the path of setting up their own. We've also taken steps to expand our ability to assist other countries in capacity building efforts.

Online Safety Act

Since I met with you in May, the most significant milestone was the passage of landmark reforms in Parliament of the *Online Safety Act 2021*.

Australia will once again lead the world – offering a robust safety net for people who are the victims of seriously harmful online abuse.

The legislation provides us with further tools to bolster our ability to protect Australians from online harms and to drive long-term, systemic change towards a safer online environment. It includes a new scheme to facilitate the removal of serious online abuse targeting adults and broadens the spectrum of online services covered by our schemes, including online gaming platforms, dating sites and private messaging services.

We are already working with industry on co-regulatory industry codes that will require them to proactively protect people from harmful material. We will also continue our collaborative engagement with industry on a range of initiatives.

The Act and the growth of our functions means we are refreshing our strategy, harnessing extra organisational capability, building new reporting and information systems, and developing clear regulatory guidance, all in time for enactment of the new Act on 23 January 2022.

Prevention

Demand for our education and training outreach has been heightened and we have increased our engagement by 67 per cent on the previous year. We've also had more than 136,000 students participate in virtual classrooms - an increase of 98 per cent over pre-COVID levels.

There were also record levels of attendance at our webinars for parents and carers and increasing demand across the Australian community for online safety content and resources with more than 5 million visits to esafety.gov.au.

Since May we have launched the [Best Practice Framework for online safety education](#), and new webinars including our: '*Parents guide to digital technologies and mental health*' and '*eSafety's parent guide to online gaming*'.

We are also progressing a roadmap for possible implementation of a mandatory age verification regime for online pornography, ensuring proper research, analysis and consultation to bring the public along and are releasing the updated Restricted Access System declaration this week.

Proactive and Systemic Change - Safety By Design

In June this year, after consultation with 180 industry bodies, experts, and non-government organisations, we launched our Safety by Design initiative. This is a definitive guide for technology companies to anticipate, detect and eliminate online risks so digital environments are safe and more inclusive.

Another world first, Safety by Design is a game-changer in the technology sector, providing companies a 'how to' on embedding end-user safety throughout the lifecycle of their products, platforms, or services.

To date, the Safety by Design toolkit has been downloaded in over 30 countries, and the concept has been introduced into university curricula to inform the next generation of tech industry leaders. We are also advancing our work with the financial and investment community at pace.

Looking forward

Major risks exist for the wellbeing of the online public, and expectations on technology companies to provide safety for their users continue to grow. Empowered by our broadened remit, in what will be a momentous year, we remain committed to working with government, industries, and stakeholders to implement our new legislation, designed to protect all Australians.

We will continue to improve our holistic approach to removing online harm, through prevention, protection, and proactive and systemic change and look forward to building global capacity so that in the coming years, we'll be working in tandem with a network of like-minded regulators.

Julie Inman Grant
eSafety Commissioner