Creating a better and safer Internet for children

**WHY INVEST IN SAFER INTERNET FOR CHILDREN?**

The internet is the natural playground and place of encounter, learning and creativity for the youth of today. Children are going online at an ever younger age on an increasingly diverse range of interconnected and mobile devices – they can go online, anytime, anywhere and to any site, often without adult supervision. However, the digital environment is not specifically designed for children, either in terms of easily accessible content and services or in terms of adequate protection and support measures when they encounter risks.

The internet is also one of the main distribution channels for material (images, films etc.) depicting sexual abuse of children. The content is becoming worse: 43% of the content reported to the hotline in the UK in 2014 show sexual activity between adults and children including rape or sexual torture of a child and 80% of the victims are under the age of 10.²

The overall challenge is to improve the quality of experience and content for children, appropriate to their ages, to provide tools and services to protect children online according to their age, and to prevent online exploitation of children through child pornography, grooming etc. Making use of the ESIF to co-finance activities aimed at creating a better internet for children and young people would help regions to become active players in contributing to EU objectives on promoting a safer use of the internet and in supporting the removal of online child sexual abuse content.

**BARRIERS & CHALLENGES**

There are bottlenecks in the online environment that children face today: the services through which children can come across harmful content, conduct and contact are increasingly international and an infrastructure is needed to route them (and their parents, carers, teachers as appropriate) to support and complaint services that operate on a national or regional basis. Reporting and sharing information on sexual child abuse imagery and sites is not yet fully developed and comprehensive at an EU-wide level both in terms of support organisations for taking down such content and concerning law enforcement in combating it. And the resources to support children, parents, carers and teachers to acquire the awareness and learn how to manage the online environment – for positive experiences and for risks – are fragmented and not readily accessible. The EU-funded project EU Kids Online has gathered evidence on children’s experiences of online risk in 25 European countries. The aim of the project was to enhance knowledge of European children’s and parents’ experiences and practices regarding risky and safer use of online technologies and services in order to promote a safer digital environment for children.

**EU Kids Online II** Enhancing Knowledge Regarding European Children’s Use, Risk and Safety Online. Adopting an approach which is child-centred, comparative, critical and contextual, EU Kids Online II has designed and conducted a major quantitative survey of 9-16 year olds experiences of online dangers.

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¹ This area of activity can be an important element of a digital strategy. It might, however, not be eligible for funding through ESIF.

² https://www.iwf.org.uk/assets/media/annual-reports/IWF_Annual_Report_14_web.pdf
risks in 25 European countries. The findings were systematically compared to the perceptions and practices of their parents, and they were disseminated through a series of reports and presentations during 2010-14.

**How to Act?**

In 2012, the European Commission launched the European strategy for a better internet for children with the following priorities:

- Stimulate the production and promotion of quality content for children;
- Step up awareness and empowerment of children and parents by pooling resources;
- Create a safe environment for children by providing tools for parental controls, age verification and content classification;
- Fight against child sexual abuse online by providing interoperable tools for law enforcement/Industry/hotline cooperation in this field.

Under the framework of the Connecting Europe Facility, the EC supports a European Digital Service Infrastructure for making a better and safer internet for children, which has an important role for implementing the strategy. This infrastructure allows national Safer Internet Centres (SICs) to coordinate activities and bring together stakeholders to act and help transfer knowledge and services locally, regionally and throughout Europe. Under the coordination of Insafe and INHOPE, SICs work together to deliver a safer internet, ensure responsible use of online technologies and services by children, young people and their families, and identify and remove illegal content online. Through this network of SICs – comprising awareness centres, helplines and hotlines – children and young people, and their parents and teachers can access information, advice, support and resources, or indeed report any illegal content they encounter online.

**Deployment of a Safer Internet infrastructure** for the delivery of a service platform providing access to and delivery of child-appropriate and child-safety related content, including databases that support helpline and hotline transactions. The services include: a single entry point to online tools, resources and services for SICs; secure environments for gathering and sharing data of child sexual abuse imagery by hotlines; a central point of access for the general public – the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal; and provision of capacity building and stakeholder outreach. The specific objectives of the infrastructure are to ensure maximum co-operation and effectiveness of awareness-raising, hotlines and helplines actions across Europe and to provide logistical and infrastructural support for the Safer Internet Centres, ensuring European-level visibility, good communication and exchange of experiences so that lessons learnt can be applied on an on-going basis.
Regions wishing to invest in order to support and contribute to the activities carried out by the SIC in their country should consider the following steps:

1. **Analysis:** Assess the kind of activities and the regions covered by the SIC and in which way actors at regional level could contribute to reaching a bigger audience. Investigate the potential sources of public and private financing, including through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs).

2. **Stakeholder involvement:** Public regional and local authorities should engage with relevant stakeholders. The stakeholders will vary depending on the specific situation in the MS and in the region, but may include:
   - public sector; media councils, schools (awareness raising/education), law enforcement bodies (fight against child sexual abuse images);
   - universities (gathering research and evidence available on children online for knowledge sharing);
   - children’s welfare NGOs (awareness raising, running services like hotlines and helplines);
   - private sector and companies (providing technologies and quality content for children).

Besides ESIF to co-fund safer internet activities as part of projects having an impact on the regional and national economy, MS and regions should consider PPPs to create new ways of funding. Stakeholders may therefore also include companies willing to invest in creating a better internet for children.

3. **Priority setting:** Discuss and agree on the level of ambition with the SIC which is coordinating the current activities in your country. Establish a roadmap to reach the defined goals. Further details and national contact points are listed on the BIK portal.

4. **Policy mix:** In this process, regions should also seek synergies with other national and regional initiatives and EU activities. The coordination of the network of Safer Internet Centres and the activities at national level supported under the Connecting Europe Facility framework (2014-2020), in particular regarding the deployment of Digital Service Infrastructures which aim at providing trans-European interoperable services of common interest for citizens, businesses and governments. The issues related to the creation of a better internet for children are global and need regional, national, European and international solutions. As internet access and the use of mobile devices become more widespread in Europe and in the rest of the world, children are increasingly becoming active users of the technology. Material depicting child sexual abuse may be produced in one country, hosted in a second and downloaded all over the world. This means that cooperation at European level (and at international level for fighting illegal content online) is important and there needs to be a strategy for how regional activities will align with national priorities to ensure that there is a coordinated national approach which will facilitate the development of European strategies.

**Further reading**

http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/safer-for-children