

Police recover 30 million images of child abuse



Police Scotland's first national operation to tackle online child sexual abuse has resulted in the identification of more than 500 children, aged between 3 and 18 years, who were either victims or potential victims of online predators, as well as the recovery of 30 million images of abuse.

Operation LATTISE ran for six weeks from early June to mid-July drawing together resources from across Police Scotland, including prevention, investigation, local policing and specialist teams.

It has resulted, to date, in 77 people being arrested and charged; the recovery of more than 30 million sexual images; the assessment of over 100,000 chat logs; and more than 390 charges libeled, including: rape; sharing indecent images of children; grooming for sexual purposes; sexual extortion; indecent communication with children; possession of a firearm; bestiality; and drugs offences.

Many of the investigations are still ongoing.

Operational activity focused on five key areas of online child sexual abuse:

- Distribution, sharing and possession of images depicting child sexual abuse (known as Indecent Images of Children – IIOC);
- Online grooming of children for sexual purposes, including child sexual exploitation;
- Online or webcam sexual extortion of children;
- Live streaming of child sexual abuse;
- International/ Specialist investigations.

Police Scotland Assistant Chief Constable (Major Crime and Public Protection), Malcolm Graham, said: "Online child sexual abuse is a national threat – the reality is it is happening now, not only in Scotland but across the world, to children of all ages, from infants to teenagers.

"Operation LATTISE was about shining a light on the scale of this issue – it was focused activity to tackle the many forms of online child sexual abuse by identifying those who pose a risk to children online and, more importantly, identifying victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as preventing more youngsters becoming victims.

"Let me make it clear – child sexual abuse and exploitation, which can range from sharing images depicting the rape, sexual torture or assault of a child to grooming or sexually extorting a child takes place solely because of decisions made on the part of the abuser.

"Online child sexual abuse is not a victimless crime: children, from toddlers to teenagers, are being sexually abused and exploited now in Scotland and when an image or video clip is shared or viewed, they are being re-victimised.

"Police Scotland is committed to Keeping Children Safe and the protection of children was absolutely at the heart of Operation LATTISE. All children have a right to protection against abuse, exploitation, neglect and violence. We will continue to work with our partners to protect and promote the wellbeing of all children.

"Our commitment to tackling this horrific threat will continue."

Mark McDonald, Early Years Minister, said: "Children and young people should be able to enjoy and learn from the internet, but we also want them to stay in control and know what to do and who to go to if they feel at risk.

“Keeping children safe is a priority for both Police Scotland and the Scottish Government, so although there are many positive aspects to the online world I recognise there are also risks we have to be aware of.

“Police Scotland is doing excellent work to ensure they are able to tackle all forms of online child sexual abuse and Operation LATTISE forms an important part of ending online exploitation.

“The outcomes of the operation will help to inform our Child Protection Improvement Programme, where child internet safety and tackling child sexual exploitation is a priority.”

Joanna Barrett, NSPCC Scotland Policy and Public Affairs Manager, said: “We are increasingly concerned about the harm caused to children through online activity. Too many children are exposed to dangerous and harmful content through the internet, or are subjected to online harassment, grooming, and sexual exploitation.

“We recently highlighted how the internet is playing an increasing role in the sexual abuse of younger children in Scotland, with a 60 per cent rise recorded over a year in the number of indecent communications offences carried out by adults against children aged under 13.

“It is vital we learn more about the nature and scale of this offending in Scotland and its impact on children and young people. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that children are protected online and we welcome the work carried out by Police Scotland and others to tackle online abuse and help keep children safe from abuse.”