

## SENATE ESTIMATES OPENING STATEMENT

23 March 2021

### Julie Inman Grant eSafety Commissioner

Thank you Chair, and committee members, for this opportunity to meet with you today and to make an opening statement.

The last time we met, we were firmly in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic, and while Australia has successfully managed to flatten the curve, we have not been as fortunate in reducing the disturbing peaks we've been seeing in the online harms space.

Six months ago, I mentioned we had seen significant increases in public reports across all our schemes and this continues to be the case.

Over the course of 2020, as citizens turned to digital intimacy tools and sextortion scams proliferated, we saw a 114% increase in reports of image-based abuse (otherwise known as the non-consensual sharing of intimate images). Serious cyberbullying of children increased by 30%, and the number of Australian adults reporting online harassment increased by nearly 40%.

Our Cyber Report team received 21,000 public reports, the majority of which involved child sexual abuse material. This was the most in the scheme's 20-year history and a 90 per cent increase compared to 2019.

We also continue to see high volumes of coerced child sexual exploitation material where young children have been manipulated or intimidated into performing sex acts for the camera on iPhones or iPads in the 'privacy' of their bedrooms and bathrooms. Increasingly, this abuse may include the practice of '**capping**', where a predator screen captures images and later uses this material to further extort the child for more explicit sexual content.

In many of these cases, we can hear the voices of their parents, unaware, in the next room.

And our recent landmark report into the *Digital Lives of Australian Teens* revealed **1 in 3** had been approached by a stranger online, up from **1 in 4** only three years ago.

I think we would all agree these represent concerning trends and the need for more work to be done to empower parents and our children to stay safer online.

Over the past six months, we've also been very focused on the new Online Safety Bill and what its implementation might look like, particularly around a potential new world-first adult cyber abuse scheme.

There is a tremendous amount of work to be done to set up new schemes, and important supportive scaffolding, to ensure we can scale up our operations to meet increasing demand and provide relief to Australians experiencing seriously harmful cyber abuse. We are working hard on this in anticipation of the Bill being passed and I am confident we will be well positioned to deliver on our new functions.

And we know this need is great with the number of Australian adults coming to us for help surging by 130% in January and 108% in February this year alone.

But of course, preventing the harms from happening in the first place remains a major focus for us.

Over the past six months our world-leading online safety research and education programs reached large new audiences spearheaded by Safer Internet Day on 9 February.

We created brilliant new resources for children, parents and educators including our very first online safety song and story book for littlies. And this year, we had thousands more organisations behind us than ever before, and inspired millions of Australians to #StarttheChat about online safety in accordance with this year's theme.

And demand among older Australians for eSafety resources surged by 700% – helping reduce their isolation and keep them safer when they do venture online. The social value of our #BeConnected program was recently demonstrated by an independent Swinburne University report that found that for every \$1 we spent on the programme, Australian seniors received \$4 worth of value.

And finally, we're nearing an important milestone in our work around **Safety by Design**, an eSafety initiative designed to lift safety standards across the tech industry and minimise the threat surface for the future.

We have spent the past three years working with big tech to achieve this, and soon we will be deploying free, interactive assessment tools for companies of all sizes and levels of maturity so that they can assess and mitigate their safety risks.

A 'tech wreck moment', with our citizens becoming the online casualties, need not be an inevitability. So, as always, I remain committed to working collaboratively with industry to ensure the safety of all Australians online.

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