

Stop It Now!

UK & IRELAND

**Helping prevent
child sexual abuse**

An initial analysis
of the impact of the
coronavirus pandemic
on callers to the
Stop It Now! UK and
Ireland helpline

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This document looks into the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on callers to the Stop It Now! helpline during the initial six months of the pandemic. This analysis was based on the collation of all call logs which directly mentioned 'lockdown', 'pandemic', 'Covid-19', 'Coronavirus' and similar terms. Once an understanding on the quantity of calls was gained, an in-depth analysis was completed to look for common themes within these call logs; with brief call examples generated for illustrative purposes.

Initial findings

Between 1 April and 3 September 2020, 111 out of the total of 2,650 callers to the Stop It Now! helpline mentioned Covid-19 as having an impact on their circumstances. These 111 callers made a total of 582 calls to Stop It Now! over the period analysed, which is 10.7% of the 5,430 calls we received over this six-month period. We believe this is an under representation on the impact of Covid-19 on callers, as the helpline had yet to introduce a systematic mechanism for logging the impact of the virus. Since 1 October 2020, the impact of Covid-19 is now being routinely recorded when mentioned and, in the first six weeks of this systematic measurement, we have received 115 calls from 65 callers who have identified that their circumstances have been directly impacted by the virus. We believe this current document, therefore, only captures a portion of callers impacted by Covid-19 over the period analysed. A more comprehensive and rigorous analysis will be conducted in Spring 2021.

Of the 111 callers identified, 79% (88) were calling with concerns about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour towards children; 15% (17) were calling about someone else's concerning behaviour; 4% (4) were professionals seeking advice or support; and 2% (2) were calling about a general internet concern.

For some, the impact was felt in provoking illegal behaviour that had not previously existed or that they felt was being managed. For others, the impact came from stressful circumstances around their arrest and engagement with the criminal justice system. For others, the impact was from an absence or (lack of) responsiveness from support services. It is natural for people to look for excuses, normally beyond themselves, for poor behaviour or circumstances. That said, Covid-19 has had a range of impacts on the whole population and is not any excuse for child abuse or other illegal behaviour. However, in understanding how different individuals have variously struggled over these six months of Covid-19, we are more likely to fashion and implement effective responses that can assist in coping better. More than that, we can help develop and implement strategies that mean the illegal behaviour is avoided in the first place.

Stop It Now! helpline

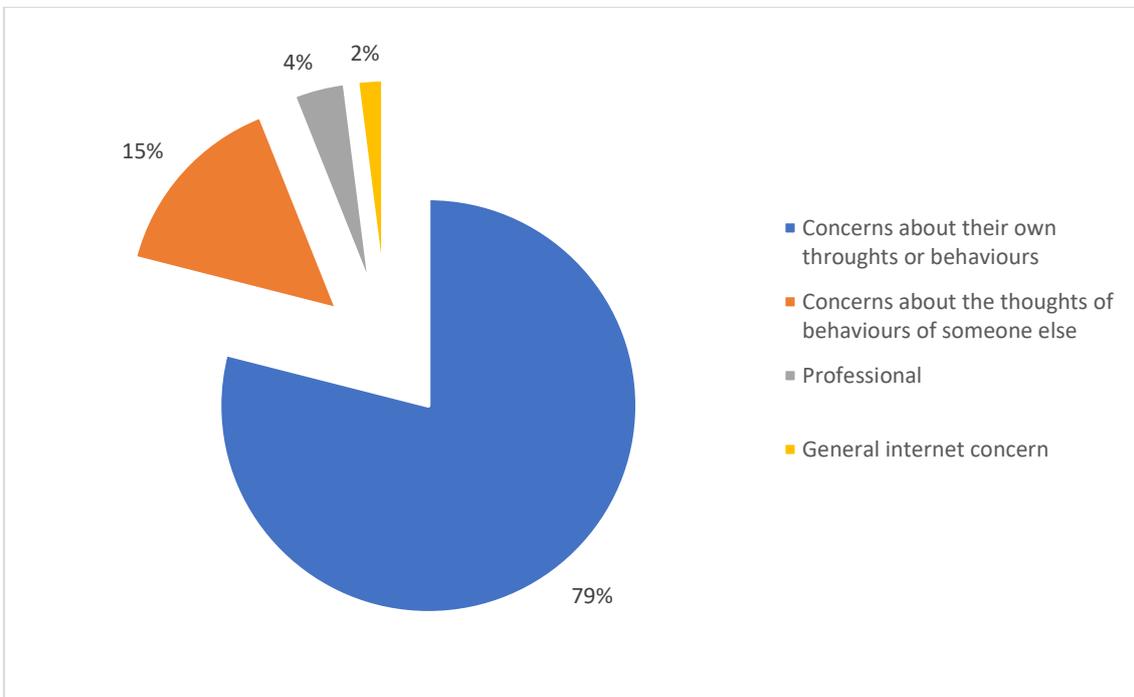
Our confidential helpline offers anonymous support for anyone concerned about their own thoughts or feelings and behaviours, or worried about another adult, young person or child as well as professionals looking for information and training. Alongside the helpline, we also offer a live chat and anonymous messaging service for those who don't feel able to speak on the phone.

Get Help and Get Support

For those looking for support, advice and resources to change and manage problematic behaviours, we offer two online self-help courses. Get Support offers support for people troubled by their sexual thoughts about children or young people and guidance about how to manage these behaviours. Get Help provides advice and information for those who are concerned about their online behaviours, including the viewing of indecent images of children or those starting sexual conversations with young people.

Parents Protect

Parents Protect offers online resources and advice for parents and carers who are concerned about child sexual abuse and want to learn how to protect their children from harm. The website also has our sexual abuse learning programme, which aims to educate viewers on how to prevent child sexual abuse and what to do if you are concerned about an adult or young person.

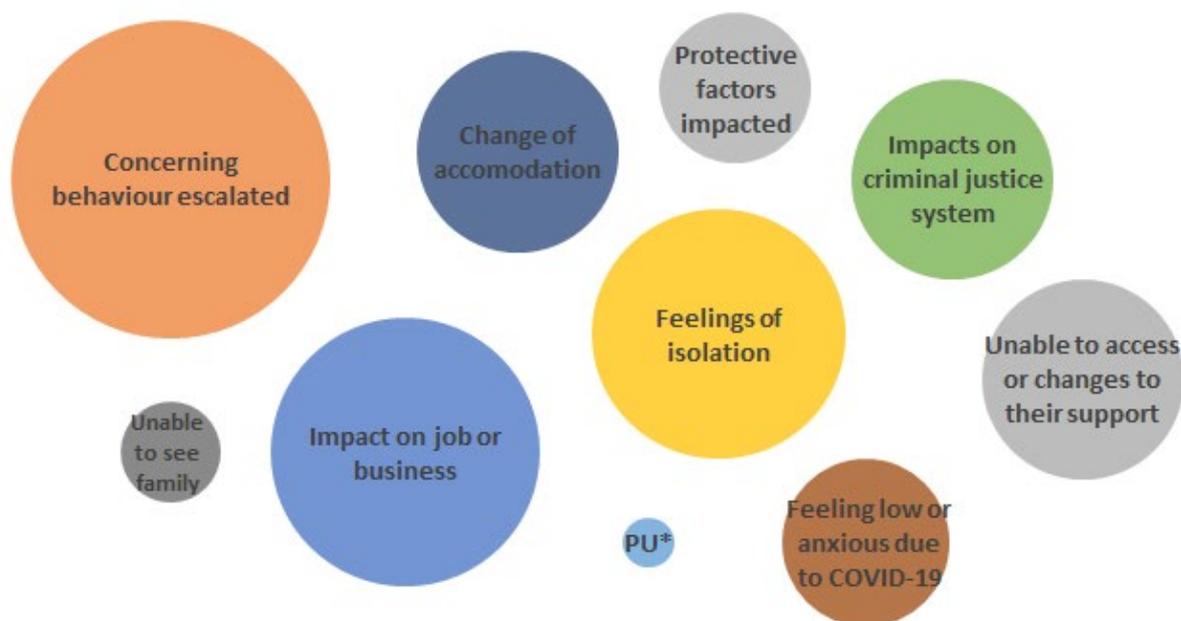


Graph 1: Pie chart of the 111 callers who mentioned Covid-19 broken down by caller category

Identified themes

When analysing the circumstances described by these 111 callers, a number of themes arose that the caller believed to be pertinent to risk:

- Nineteen individuals identified that the concerning behaviour had escalated during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Sixteen individuals identified that they had been furloughed, made redundant, or had their business impacted due to the current pandemic, with knock-on consequences for concerning thoughts or behaviour.
- Fifteen individuals identified feelings of isolation, including twelve individuals who experienced changes to their living situation due to Covid-19 that amplified a sense of isolation.
- Twelve individuals highlighted that their experience of the criminal justice system had been impacted (e.g. slowed down) because of the pandemic, leading to additional stress and anxiety.
- Twelve people identified that their professional support mechanisms had been adversely affected, including a number where such support was no longer available due to the pandemic.
- Ten individuals identified depressive or anxious moods due to the pandemic.
- Nine individuals identified that protective factors had been reduced due to the pandemic.
- Six people identified that they could no longer see adult family members due to the pandemic.
- Three people directly identified that their adult pornography use had increased during the pandemic - with such adult pornography use implicated in their previous access to indecent images of children.



Graph 2: Visual representation of the themes that arose in an analysis of call where Covid-19 was directly measured.

*PU: Pornography use

Individuals concerned about their own behaviour

As mentioned previously, 88 individuals were calling about their own behaviour; of these, 24 were calling regarding offline abuse or concerning sexual thoughts, and 64 were calling about illegal or risky online behaviour.

Individuals concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviours towards children offline

Within this category 62.5% (15) of the callers were not involved with the police and 37.5% (9) had been arrested.

For these individuals, the most common themes were: concerning thoughts or behaviour escalated during lockdown (9); feeling of isolation (6), unable to access support or their available support reducing (5), and protective factors reduced during lockdown (4).

* All identifying information has been changed in case studies to preserve confidentiality

Case study 1: Potential abuser

Kevin (mid 30s) lives alone, has no children and works as a labourer; however, he is currently not working due to Covid-19 lockdown. He has been on anti-depressive medication for some three years.

He called Stop It Now! with concerns about his intrusive thoughts about sexual contact with underaged/pre-teen girls. Kevin has suffered with inappropriate, intrusive thoughts for a several years, but since lockdown restrictions were imposed these thoughts have become stronger and more intrusive and are troubling him. Kevin also stated that on a number of occasions he has accessed indecent images of children online but has not be arrested for this behaviour, which he knows is illegal. He is not in contact with any children and states he has never acted on these thoughts other than accessing images online. But he has engaged in making plans in the past and his current

thoughts occur two to three times a day. He stated that these thoughts led to 'mixed emotions'; initially they arouse him, but then afterwards he feels 'horrible'. Kevin is concerned that these thoughts are getting stronger.

Kevin was praised for contacting the helpline and seeking help. We discussed various ways he can keep himself busy and his mind occupied during lockdown, including maintaining contact with adult family members and friends. Strategies for managing his inappropriate sexual thoughts and fantasies were discussed and he agreed to implement these immediately. He was advised to contact the helpline on a weekly basis (or more often if needed) to discuss how these strategies were working and for continued support. He also agreed to work through the Get Help online self-help programme over the weeks ahead, as well as the fantasy management module of the Get Support self-help website. Kevin was advised on the illegality of accessing incident images of children under 18 years old and the harm this does to children, as well as the consequences of this behaviour.

Case Study 2: Arrested abuser

Derick lives alone and is unemployed. He was convicted and sentenced for indecent exposure to two schoolgirls over a year ago. Due to his offences, he has lost touch with friends and family. He has no access to the Internet.

He was calling to check in with the Stop It Now! helpline because he is unable to see his probation officer face-to-face in the Covid-19 pandemic and wanted to contact someone as he is struggling with deviant sexual thoughts. He tries to manage these thoughts by keeping busy and distracting himself by reading books and completing household chores. But sometimes these distractions are not enough. He stated he is motivated to not re-offend and wants any support he can get.

Derick was advised to engage in good self-care – including getting plenty of exercise. A range of additional distraction/replacement activities were discussed for him to try. He was asked to call the helpline next week and then as required, to update us on distraction and replacement activities and how they help him manage his thoughts and behaviours. He was also asked to phone his probation officer and confirm he has spoken to us.

Case study 3: Potential abuser and online abuser

Bill is single, lives alone and suffers from mental health problems – anxiety and depression which have been treated in the past with CBT, but now medication. Had a stroke a year ago. Is very anxious about the possibility of catching Covid-19, has his shopping delivered and has not left home for months.

Bill clarified that he has a sexual interest in children but has not previously acted on this interest. He explained that he had been talking to people online in chat rooms, mainly about sexual matters, and that some of the males he'd been speaking with had sent him indecent images of children which he'd deleted. He states his chat room use is to meet his need for company and for distraction. As far as he is aware, he is currently unknown to the police.

His use of chatrooms has escalated, massively, during lockdown. His monthly chats have now become nightly. And over the last weekend he had been speaking with a man about sexual fantasies involving children and this man had put his 10-year-old daughter on to chat to him. Bill asked the child several questions regarding what she was wearing but insists he did not raise any specifically sexual matters.

The helpline operator commended Bill for getting in touch with Stop It Now! and for recognising he needed help. But also advised him that it was essential for him to cease his online chat room behaviour immediately – with the adults as well as any children. It was advised that he abstain from further use of online pornography, which was often a precursor to his online chat room use. He was advised to undertake modules in the Get Help online self-help website and to access a number of recommended books, including "Your Brain on Porn". He was advised to contact his GP to discuss his feelings of anxiety and so that his medication could be reviewed.

A number of strategies for managing illegal sexual fantasies were discussed, including use of an elastic band for immediate distraction, but also including immersion in hobbies or interests for longer term benefits. The operator encouraged him to engage in hobbies which may assist him in feeling more positive about himself, and offer distractions in the evening such as exercise or cooking. The helpline operator asked him to consider the various

consequences of continuing down the path he was on – the potential involvement of criminal justice agencies, how online vigilantes operate in the same places as he has been visiting, and what he might end up losing. Bill was asked to call back in one week to update us on progress with his agreed actions and for ongoing support.

Individuals concerned about their own online behaviour

Of the 64 individual who were calling about their illegal online behaviour, 7 (10.9%) were not arrested and 57 (89%) were arrested for either accessing indecent images of children or engaging in sexual communication with a child.

For these 64 individuals the most common themes arising were: that they had been furloughed, made redundant or had their business impacted (13); depressive or anxious moods due to Covid-19 (9); concerning behaviour escalated during lockdown (8); feelings of isolation (8); unable to access support or their available support reducing (7); their criminal justice process being impacted (7); changes to their accommodation or living circumstances (6), and protective factors reduced during lockdown (5).

Case Study 4: Internet offender

Greg is a labourer who currently lives alone. He has an adult daughter and his ex-wife, who he still sees, has three children from her current marriage.

Greg first called the helpline in June 2019 seeking support and advice following his arrest for accessing indecent images of children. At this time, he identified a couple of possible triggers to his offending behaviour, including an escalation from heavy adult pornography use. He was given a range of advice, including a recommendation to read the "Porn Trap" and complete the relevant Get Help online self-help modules. He was also advised to see his GP in light of a number of issues he had raised. He had subsequently followed this advice, engaged with talking therapies arranged by his GP, and sought additional help for pornography addiction. He stated he was doing well to divert his thoughts away from unwanted sexual images and avoided all online sexual material. He ceased contact with the helpline in December 2019.

When he called in June 2020, he disclosed that he had begun watching legal adult pornography when laid off from work during lockdown. He recognises his use of this material was a precursor to his previous viewing of illegal material, but he is struggling to resist the temptation. Greg made four further calls to the helpline during the lockdown period and has followed advice given, including returning to working through the Get Help modules, placing parental controls on his internet to assist with him abstaining from explicit sexual content. He stated he is beginning to understand his unhealthy relationship with online sexual material but needed ongoing support in implementing day to day strategies to help him manage his online behaviour. As he still has contact with his ex-wife and adult daughter who are aware of his previous illegal behaviour and arrest, we recommended that he give them the helpline number so we can share similar advice with them, too.

Case Study 5: Online abuser

Sam (late 50s) currently lives with his wife who has physical health problems. Their relationship is no longer intimate as a result. Sam is a store manager but is currently not working due to the pandemic. He and his wife have adult children but no grandchildren.

Sam contacted Stop It Now! because he was worried about his online behaviour in chat rooms. For several years he has engaged in sexual chat with adult females online. But during lockdown and unable to work, his online life has got out of control and he is now engaging in sexual chats with girls under 16 years old. These online sexual chats start first thing in the morning when he would otherwise be at work, before his partner is up and about. He believes he is unknown to the police. He stated that he has also accessed indecent images of children on this chat site. He believes he has become addicted to chat rooms and that he has somehow lost his "moral compass".

Sam was given relevant advice around the likely consequences if his illegal online behaviour continues and asked to consider all that he has to lose by getting arrested. The operator then discussed ways to manage his online life,

including developing offline interests and putting parental controls on his internet. He was encouraged to engage in the Get Help online self-help website and read a copy of “Your Brain on Porn” and “The Porn Trap”.

Case Study 6: Potential internet offender

George is a 27-year-old male who is in a relationship with an older man. George tends to view sexual videos depicting older and younger men, as in his current relationship. But after a conversation with a friend is concerned about the legality of some of this material. During lockdown he is aware that he has been viewing a lot more sexual content, including much amateur content that seems to include younger participants. He is worried that he might have viewed indecent images of teenagers which he now realises are illegal.

George was advised about the law – that sexual images of under 18s are illegal. He was further advised to only view adult pornography if he is confident that all participants are over 18; and to report content that he thinks contains people under 18 to the IWF. He was informed of the content of the Get Help self help website which clarifies the criminal law, the harm done to children by sexual abuse and exploitation, and advises on strategies for self-management and for leading a “good life”.

Case Study 7: Internet offender

Ben is 30-years-old and lives in Scotland and is currently furloughed from work due to the pandemic. He was convicted seven years ago for accessing indecent images of children and completed a community sentence. He thought he had put such illegal behaviour behind him He was arrested again last week for recent reoffending.

Ben stated that the police had given him information about Stop It Now! upon arrest. He has already started the online Get Help modules and is finding these helpful in beginning to make sense of the triggers to his behaviour. These include boredom during lockdown; not having enough to do, and spending time “looking around” the Internet, including viewing sexual materials involving adults and then involving younger people.

Ben was advised to place immediate internet restrictions on all devices newly purchased, continue to work through the Get Help modules on the Stop It Now! website and call the helpline at least weekly for the next month as he develops habits of self-management. The operator also discussed Inform Plus – a psycho-educational programme for those arrested for IIOC offences - and encourage Ben to contact the Scottish Stop It Now! office to discuss beginning this programme in the near future.

Individuals concerned about someone else’s behaviour

Within the analysed calls, 17 individuals were calling about someone else’s behaviour. Of these individuals, 14 were calling as a loved one had accessed indecent images of children, 2 individuals were calling as a loved had committed contact child sexual abuse, and one individual was calling because they were concerned about the sexual behaviour of another adult offline.

For these 17 callers the most commons themes were: - unable to see family due to Covic-19 (5); change in accommodation or living circumstances (3); and impact on their loved one’s criminal justice proceedings (3).

Case Study 8: Adult concerned about an internet offender

Abby and her partner, Steven, have two sons together aged 8 and 11 years old. Her partner has been arrested for accessing indecent images of children.

Steven moved to his mother's house after his arrest and children's services have allowed him to see the boys for one hour a day, but on the understanding that he remained living at his mother's address. She has a one bedroom flat and he sleeps on a camp bed. He is an HGV driver and keeps unsocial hours due to his work.

Abby stated that children's services have paused the Children in Need investigation until the outcome of the police investigation, having been advised by the Police that there is a considerable delay due to lockdown, the increase in investigations of this nature and reduced availability of staff. Her two sons are not coping well in these uncertain and volatile circumstances and are now seeing a school counsellor.

Since Abby's first call she has made regular use of the helpline for support – feeling unable to share her current circumstances with her own family and friends as “everyone is having to cope with lockdown and Covid-19 in their own way.” Abby was advised about strategies to ensure her own self-care. She was also advised to visit two websites - the Parents Protect website to support her in her protection of her sons; as well as the Families and Friends Forum to hear from and potentially engage with other partners in a similar situation for practical advice and support.

Case Study 9: Adult concerned about an internet offender

Ciara and her partner Peter have a three-year-old son. Peter, a primary school deputy head, has recently been arrested for accessing indecent images of children. His bail requires him to live away from the family home; and he is suspended from his job. Ciara says she isn't coping well – she isn't used to living alone or having sole responsibility for their child. She has no family to turn to and doesn't want children's services to think she's not coping. She is torn about her feelings for Peter and dare not discuss her ambivalence with her friends who have told her to leave him.

Children's services have stated that Peter can have supervised contact with his son for one hour each day. It was planned that Peter's dad would provide this supervision, but he is currently shielding due to health vulnerabilities, so Peter can only see his son online as an alternative. Peter's court appearance has been put back for another month, apparently for reasons related to Covid-19. This delay, and lack of assistance in childcare, is making it difficult for Ciara to cope.

Ciara has called the helpline on a number of occasions for support in just having someone to talk to about all that is going on for her and her family. If childcare can be arranged, she is hoping to attend the Inform psycho-educational course for partners and family of men arrested for online offences.

Professionals calling for case advice

We received four calls from professionals from four different sectors: social worker, police officer, counsellor and family support worker within education setting.

Case Study 10: Professional

Daisy is a support worker within a school. She is concerned about a family that she was working with prior to lockdown, where the mother, Susan, had brought to her concerns about her 8-year-old daughter, Heidi, searching inappropriate, sexual search terms and possibly accessing pornographic material. The child was awaiting an ASD/ADHD assessment. At the time Daisy made a referral to the MASH team, but they declined any involvement.

Daisy bumped into Susan after a number of months to discover that during lockdown Heidi's behaviour had deteriorated. A recent search had been for “how do children have sex”. The ASD/ADHD assessment had been postponed for reasons related to Covid-19. There are no counselling facilities available at the school and avenues of support are sparse. Heidi's behaviour at school had raised no concerns.

The family circumstances are complex. Heidi has a different father from her two, soon to be three siblings. She spends time with her natural father every fortnight and seems comfortable with this.

A number of aspects were discussed for Daisy to take forward with Susan. It was important that the ASD/ADHD assessment was pursued. And whilst a re-referral to MASH might be considered, suggest that Susan see her GP to explain her concerns and seek potential referral to CAMHS.

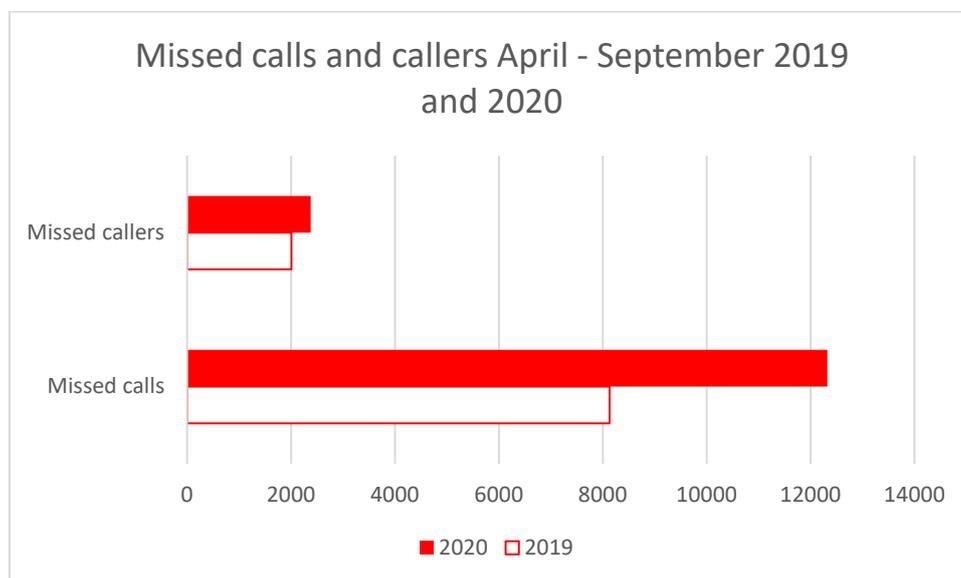
There is a lot going on at home, including a new baby on the way, and perhaps Heidi was seeking attention. Concerns about Covid-19, and the stresses and strains that brought for families was a further consideration. Could Susan arrange to spend time with her discussing anything that might be worrying or troubling her. But also, Susan needs to explain her concerns about the online searching she is doing and ensure appropriate parental controls are installed to ensure, as best she can, that there is no further access to pornography. A number of books and online resources were recommended to view with Heidi. This online life also needs to be supervised by an adult – the Internet has been used as a baby-sitter over recent months and some clearer parameters were needed. It was important that these steps were discussed with Susan's current partner and Heidi's father to ensure they were supportive.

Daisy was asked to pass on details of the Parents Protect website and the helpline number to Susan.

Call and email numbers

Missed calls and callers

The helpline also saw an increase in missed calls and callers during this time period compared to the same time period last year. As displayed below, we missed 12,323 calls and 2,381 callers in April - September 2020, which is (respectively) a 51.6% and 18.8% increase in missed calls and missed callers in comparison to the same period in the previous year. This is despite a 7% increase in operator hours.



It is important to note that the increase in missed calls and callers, was accompanied by an increase in answered calls and callers. Between 1 April - 30 September 2020 the helpline answered 5,433 calls from 2,650 callers - a 14.5% increase in calls and a 0.3% increase in callers compared to the previous year. Combining missed callers who never got through and taken callers, it is evident that there has been an overall increase in demand for the helpline of 6.7%. During this time period we also noted an increase in demand to our anonymous and confidential email system, which aims to offer support and advice to individuals via the use of an encrypted email. Between 1 April - 30 September 2020 Stop It Now! received 940 emails from 749 emailers - a 52.1% increase in emails and a 50.1% increase in emailers compared to the same time period in 2019. A number of factors may contribute to this increase in demand; but given

the significant impact of Covid-19 noted in the calls itemised above, it is highly likely that the pandemic is one of the factors responsible for the increase.

In closing

This is an initial analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on callers to the Stop It Now! helpline over the first six months from lockdown starting in the UK. Information about the impact of the virus and its surrounding circumstances has been more rigorously recorded since October 2020. A further, more in-depth analysis will be undertaken in Spring 2021 to describe the ongoing impact revealed through recent calls and callers. We hope that such insights might help in the battle against child sexual abuse in all its forms.

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