

## **A STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION ON THE SPARKLEBOX TEACHING RESOURCES WEBSITE : 8<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2010**

I wish to make a Statement on the Sparklebox teaching resources website.

Sparklebox is a website containing resources for primary school teachers, which can be downloaded for classroom use with pupils.

The site was owned and operated by Samuel Kinge, a teacher who had been jailed in Warwick in January 2005 for possession of child pornography. Kinge started Sparklebox in February 2006 having changed his name from Daniel Kinge. He was arrested again in September 2009 for making and possessing indecent images of children. Worcester Crown Court sentenced him to twelve months in prison on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2010, together with a 15 - year sexual offences prevention order, banning him from using a computer unless it has a police detection programme installed.

The site was used by teachers in Ireland north and south, England, Wales, and Scotland.

Sparklebox was available to schools here through the C2K network, which provides an ICT managed service to all grant-aided schools. The provision of the service is managed on behalf of all the Education and Library Boards by the Western Education and Library Board.

I am advised that C2K became aware of the issues surrounding Sparklebox in December 2009. I understand that they liaised with the Regional Broadband Consortia in England, a number of which had blocked access to this particular site until they satisfied themselves that sufficient safeguarding arrangements were in place. Seemingly C2K took the view that sufficient arrangements were in place to ensure the safety of users and did not therefore initially remove access to the site. C2K's position is that their system has automatic filters in place to block any possible interactive component (blogs and toolbars) in the site.

On 28<sup>th</sup> January 2010 a parent from a Belfast primary school, who had heard of Kinge's conviction informed the school, which instructed its teachers not to use Sparklebox, and reported its position to C2K.

On Monday 1st February C2K changed their decision from not blocking the site to blocking it, and I'm advised that they informed schools of their decision, and that the site remains blocked.

I became aware of this issue on 29<sup>th</sup> January. My Department issued a press statement to confirm that the C2K system has filters in place to block potentially harmful web content, and that the Department was liaising with C2K on this matter.

As you will appreciate I take very seriously my, and my Department's duty to ensure that the safety of pupils in all aspects of their education is safeguarded. I regard their safety as of paramount importance and I seek to ensure myself on an ongoing basis that the policies and procedures in place are appropriate and effective.

On a without prejudice basis, I remain to be convinced that responses to this particular situation were proportionate and timely.

Accordingly, my Department has written to the Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board to instruct him to investigate the manner in which this situation was handled and to make recommendations on what lessons can be learned from this in terms of further enhancing policies and procedures for protecting the safety of children.

On the basis of this Statement I am writing to Batt O'Keefe TD, Minister for Education and Science in the south, and to my ministerial counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to inform them of my approach to this matter.

A copy of this Statement will issue today to all schools and other bodies grant-aided by my Department.

My Department will issue follow-up guidance to the Circular on Internet Safety issued in June 2007. This new guidance will specifically allude to safeguarding arrangements in light of the Sparklebox experience.

Furthermore, my officials remain fully engaged with the DHSS&PS Inter-departmental Group on Safeguarding Children. This group is progressing work on an action plan which will set in place measures to enhance even further e-safety for our children and young people.

By way of concluding remarks, the Sparklebox site remains blocked by C2K, the handling of this incident will be fully investigated, and I will revert to the Assembly on this matter at the earliest opportunity.