

Missing children alert system gets go-ahead

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Thursday April 16 2009

A NEW early-warning 'Amber Alert' system to find children abducted or missing in Ireland got the go-ahead yesterday after years of campaigning.

The system, named after the American model of rapid response to find children, was given the green light by Justice Minister Dermot Ahern.

The move came after the Garda Inspectorate made 18 recommendations in a report, including the need for gardai to work more closely with the media and foreign police.

The report, led by Chief Inspector Kathleen O'Toole, also urged better funding of the Garda Missing Persons Bureau, more training for new officers at the garda college and a better website to make it more publicly accessible.

But Mary Nicholson of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children said more needed to be done, including adopting a special emergency number already in use in Greece and Belgium.

While welcoming the new initiatives, she said: "We also need to ensure that other mechanisms that are operational across Europe are operational in Ireland.

"This includes the introduction of the 116000 telephone number. This has the overall aim of creating a common emergency number which would be utilised to raise an alert on missing children, to provide support to parents and guardians of children who are missing and to support missing children themselves."

Establishing the scheme could take months and the Garda Inspectorate said it had no input into the timing of its set-up, a source said yesterday.

The scheme, when established, will allow authorities and media to spread the alarm about a disappeared youngster by sharing photos and data.

Distress

Mr Ahern said: "It is heartbreaking when a person, and particularly a child, goes missing. Families and friends suffer immeasurable distress. We must do all we can to help locate that missing loved one.

"This will be a challenging task and it will require the support of a whole range of governmental agencies, NGOs, the media as well as the public."

The initiative was backed by the family of missing teenager Amy Fitzpatrick and by Kate and Gerry McCann, the parents of missing Madeleine.

The Amber Alert began in the US in 1996 and it stands for 'America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response'. It was created in the name of Amber Hagerman (9), who was kidnapped in Texas.