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More than 5,000 contact drug information website

By Cormac O'Keeffe

MORE than 5,000 people contacted a drug information website last week after the Government said it was going to use the internet as part of a new national drug awareness strategy.

The Drug Awareness Programme, which runs a web and text information service, said it was "swamped" with requests for information after drugs strategy minister Pat Carey said he was going to use sites like Bebo to reach out to young people.

The programme's Michael McDonagh said: "Since he came out with his comments on online resources, we've had over 5,000 extra requests for information that we wouldn't normally see.

"We would normally see a couple of hundred requests a week. Five thousand is absolutely massive. It highlights the fact that people are actively looking for information and help."

The programme, which is part of Crosscare, the social care agency of the Dublin Diocese, is the longest running drug education project in the country, set up more than 25 years ago. He said the programme was launching an online drug information service on social network site Bebo in January. This was part of an online drug awareness programme that the programme had been asked to develop by the Health Service Executive.

Mr Carey said he envisaged the initiative forming the central part of a national drug awareness campaign he wanted to roll out next year.

"I could see an organisation like Crosscare being able to provide it," said Mr Carey. "To be honest, I have the sense that those outside main medical providers may be user friendly. Sometimes there's a level of formality with any engagement with the main health providers, this could put people off. Clearly Crosscare have street cred, they wouldn't be getting hits like this if they didn't have."

Mr Carey said the intended web service would have to be backed up by drug professionals who could offer advice to people, something the awareness programme does on its website.

Mr McDonagh said 700 people spoke to their counsellor or nurse online during the week. He said there was a live help button on their website. Also, close to 3,000 people sought information online from their site. About 900 of these had accessed the site through Bebo. He said more than 1,000 other people texted their service for information.

"We've been running online services for six years and we've noticed more and more that people don't want to access information in the traditional medium any more."

DAP contacts: web: www.dap.ie or text 51900 for drug information.

On the Bebo website, type [wwwdap.ie](http://www.dap.ie)