

P-06-1308 Take immediate action to end sexual harassment in ALL Welsh schools, not just secondary schools

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 5 Rhagfyr 2022
Petitions Committee | 5 December 2022

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Petition Number: [P-06-1308](#)

Petition title: Take immediate action to end sexual harassment in ALL Welsh schools, not just secondary schools.

The recent Senedd inquiry into sexual harassment in secondary schools has shown the scale of the problem, particularly for girls. The evidence shows that harassment is also rife in primary schools and colleges, and the report recommends further reviews. We can't wait for yet more inquiries before taking action. The Welsh Government must ensure that the actions taken from the report are immediately extended to cover all settings, keeping learners safe from sexual harassment throughout education.

More details

The July 2022 report 'Everybody's affected: Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners' from the Children, Young People and Education Committee and the Estyn report 'We don't tell our teachers' from December 2021 have both shown the size and scale of the problem of sexual harassment in schools, particularly facing girls.

The evidence showed that this doesn't only happen in secondary schools, it begins in primary, and follows young women and girls into further education and beyond. The committee recommended that the Welsh Government commission further reviews into these settings.



Children and young people in Wales have been waiting long enough for action to be taken on this issue that is affecting their daily lives and learning experiences. Another inquiry will only delay the important work of changing a culture that regards commonplace sexualised bullying as a normal part of society and schooling, action must be taken now across all schools and colleges.

www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/we-dont-tell-our-teachers-experiences-peer-peer-sexual-harassment-among-secondary

Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners
<https://business.senedd.wales/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?>

1. Summary

- [Estyn's report](#) and the [Children, Young People and Education \(CYPE\) Committee inquiry](#) focused on secondary school aged pupils and found that sexual harassment is a big problem and has become “normalised”. It predominantly affects girls and LGBTQ+ young people.
- Little research has been carried out into the position in primary schools, partly because of the sensitivities of discussing such subject matter with children of this age.
- The Welsh Government accepted the CYPE Committee's recommendation that it commission a review in primary schools and is now considering the scope and approach of such a review.

2. Background

Sexual harassment between young people has received more coverage in the past eighteen months, with the [Everyone's Invited website](#) providing a platform for victims to record their testimony and experiences anonymously. Victims can name the school, college or university where the harassment or abuse happened or originated.

The [BBC reported in June 2021](#) that over 90 schools in Wales were listed on the website. It also [reported in November 2021](#) that children as young as 11 are learning about sex from pornography. There are therefore concerns about the exposure of children and young people to sexualised content, including online, and whether this is a cause or at least an exacerbating factor in peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

In June 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language asked the education inspectorate, Estyn, to investigate sexual harassment in and around **secondary schools**. Estyn published its report in December 2021. The Senedd's Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Committee subsequently undertook an inquiry into the issue, reporting in July 2022.

A joint statement from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, and the Minister for Social Justice in December 2021, said Estyn's report "makes difficult reading" and "highlights the uncomfortable truth about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment in our schools". The Ministers responded to the CYPE Committee's report in October 2022, ahead of a Plenary debate on 26 October 2022.

3. What Estyn's report and the CYPE Committee inquiry say about the current problem in secondary schools

3.1. Estyn's report

Estyn reported that, in secondary schools, **pupils generally do not tell their teachers** when they experience sexual harassment. This is mainly because it happens so regularly it has become "normalised" and because:

- pupils do not feel confident enough;
- the school has not created a culture and environment for them to do so; and
- pupils do not see it as something they should share with their teachers.

Estyn visited 35 secondary schools in autumn 2021 and heard from 1,300 pupils. The inspectorate found that, where school leaders are aware of incidents of sexual harassment, they generally respond suitably to formal complaints and make appropriate referrals, for example to social services and the police. However, it also found inconsistency in school staff's understanding of what sexual harassment is, meaning there are discrepancies in how they respond. Estyn's main findings were that:

- **half of all secondary school pupils** say they have personal experience of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and three quarters of all pupils report seeing other pupils experiencing this;

- a **majority of female pupils (61%)** report having personal experience of peer-on-peer harassment and many (82%) report seeing others experience it. This compares with a lower proportion of male pupils (29% and 71% respectively);
- **LGBTQ+ pupils** have substantial personal experiences of verbal homophobic harassment, with many saying homophobic bullying is happening all the time;
- some sexual harassment takes place face-to-face during the school day, although occurs more so **online and outside school hours**; and
- there are **weaknesses in the collection and use of data** on incidents of sexual harassment in and around secondary schools.

A review by Ofsted found a similar picture in England. Like Estyn's report, it did not look at primary schools.

3.2. The CYPE Committee's report

The CYPE Committee's report echoed Estyn's findings and concluded that "sexual harassment among learners is shockingly commonplace". The Committee made 24 recommendations, including that **the Welsh Government commission a similar review in primary schools**, given that sexual harassment is likely to sometimes be a problem at younger ages as well. The Welsh Government has agreed to do this and has also commissioned Estyn to carry out a review in colleges.

Little research has been carried out into peer on peer sexual harassment in primary schools, so the extent of the problem is unclear. Professor EJ Renold, Professor of Childhood Studies at Cardiff University, told the CYPE Committee:

"There is less research in this area, mainly because of the difficulty in designing affirmative methods that allow children to talk about some of the most sensitive experiences at that age. A lot of ethnographic research often captures this; this isn't survey data, it's being with children over a period of time allows you to see what's happening in those classrooms and in playgrounds and so on, and building that trust that they can talk to you about maybe what's happening."

However, the CYPE Committee heard some **indications**, including from teaching unions and Barnado's, that sexual harassment is **likely to be a problem also amongst primary school aged children**, particularly at years 4, 5 and 6. This is documented at paragraphs 54-57 of the Committee's report.

The CYPE Committee therefore recommended:

The Welsh Government must commission a review into peer on peer sexual harassment among primary school-aged children, drawing on the expertise and guidance of children's charities, academics and the Children's Commissioner for Wales as appropriate.

4. What the Welsh Government is doing to tackle the problem

The Welsh Government **accepted the recommendation that it commission a review in primary schools, responding:**

It would be beneficial to have a greater understanding about children's experiences of gender based bullying or sexual harassment in primary settings and listening to children would be an essential part of any review into this area. However, the participation of children in any learning or discussion on themes of this nature must be developmentally appropriate and topics of discussion should be relatable to children's own experiences and understanding (experience-near). We will therefore take forward discussions with key stakeholders to determine the scope of the review and provide further details to the committee in due course.

The Minister's letter to this Committee **recognises that peer on peer sexual harassment is not limited to secondary schools** and that action is needed in all settings and across society. However it says it is **important to respond with "appropriate and tailored" interventions** at different ages.

In terms of the problem more generally and its response to the Estyn's review and the CYPE Committee's inquiry, which both focused on secondary school aged learners, the Welsh Government is **developing an action plan**. This action plan will involve various relevant agencies and government departments and will set out what the Welsh Government and partners will do to tackle the problem. The Minister's letter says the Welsh Government aims to publish the action plan before Christmas.

As the Minister's letter outlines and as he set out to the CYPE Committee, the Welsh Government has a range of guidance in place to safeguard learners. The Welsh Government intends that the teaching of "developmentally appropriate" Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the new Curriculum for Wales

will better protect young people and promote better attitudes and understanding.

The new curriculum is now being taught in primary schools and will be statutory in secondary schools for Year 7 and Year 8 from September 2023, before being rolled out to additional year groups annually until it reaches Year 11 in September 2026. Unlike the current sex education it replaces, **RSE will be mandatory in primary schools as well as secondary schools**, with parents having no right to withdraw their children from its study.

The principle of teaching RSE in a “**developmentally appropriate**” way is in an important one and is stipulated in the [legislation](#) establishing the Curriculum for Wales. It has also been reiterated in [correspondence from the Welsh Government to all head teachers](#).

5. Further information

Senedd Research has previously published two articles regarding sexual harassment among young people, in [February](#) and [October](#) 2022.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.