

NSPCC's written evidence for CYPEC's Peer on Peer Sexual Harassment Inquiry

Key points for the committee to consider:

- **Contacts to Childline are increasing about peer sexual abuse – as demand rises so too should resource to support young people.**
- **The gendered nature of online abuse and how this is impacting girls' experiences of sexual harassment in school.**
- **The high number of LGBTQ+ young people who experience both online and offline abuse.**
- **The central role professional learning must play in the new curriculum.**
- **How contextual safeguarding can enable 'context weighting' to understand the spaces that are most harmful to peer groups.**
- **How pornography is shaping attitudes to sex and consent and the role of the Online Harms Bill in Wales.**
- **Schools need the right kind of training, time and support to successfully implement a whole school approach to RSE.**

Strategic Context:

NSPCC Cymru urge the Committee to consider the various strategies and action plans that already exist and are relevant to this inquiry. Including:

- National Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse
- VAWDASV Strategy
- LGBTQ+ Action Plan
- Anti-Racism Action Plan

Scale and nature in education settings:

Report Abuse in Education Helpline - Department of Education commissioned helpline in response to Everyone's Invited:

- As of December 2021, the Helpline had handled a total of 979 contacts across the UK.

Childline Counselling about Peer Sexual Abuse:

- Between April 2021 and January 2022, Childline delivered 522 **counselling sessions** about peer sexual abuse. This figure is already higher than the whole of 2020/21, when we delivered 512 counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse.

Scale and nature outside educational settings and online:

Figures obtained by the NSPCC show that there were more than 300 offences involving sexual communications with children - which can include asking children to send explicit images - in Wales between April 2020 and March 2021.

Between April 2021 and January 2022 Childline delivered 103 counselling sessions about online peer sexual abuse.

Impact

For children subjected to technology-facilitated abuse, the impacts can be devastating, long-lasting and life-changing. The impact of 'online' and 'offline' abuse is the same, no matter how the abuse took place.ⁱ

Adults who contacted the Report Abuse in Education Helpline spoke of the lasting impact of their experiences of childhood abuse. Some disclosed for the first time because they didn't feel they had the opportunity to previously.

The impact on specific groups of learners

Girls

While all children are at risk of, and experience online abuse, girls' exposure to harm within online spaces can often be very different to that of boys. Research shows they are more likely to experience online abuse than boys. Research undertaken by NSPCC shows over 80% of victims of online child sexual abuse crimes were girls.ⁱⁱ

Solutions:

Any work to tackle peer harassment must centre the prevalence of sexual harassment of girls in schools. The stories shared by Everyone's Invited have highlighted the role that intimate images play in the gendered abuse that girls experience at school and beyond, and their experiences of pressure, coercion and control facilitated through images shared non-consensually online. We must recognise this context of toxic masculinity. Any guidance for schools should make it clear sexual insults such as 'slut' or 'whore' amount to gendered harassment and should be treated appropriately.

We also hosted a roundtable event on the necessity for the Online Safety Bill to consider harm against women and girls and want to see recognition of the additional challenges girls face online.

LGBTQ+

Evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ children and young people may be more at risk of abuse, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, than their heterosexual counterparts¹.

LGBTQ+ children and young people can also be at risk of experiencing online harms. The Stonewall School Report Cymru (2017) shows that nearly all (97 per cent) LGBTQ+ young people have seen homophobic, biphobic or transphobic content online, and 40 per cent have been the target of online homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic abuse².

A report from the LGBT+ charity Just Like Us in 2021 found that LGBT+ young people are more likely to experience sexual harassment than their straight counterparts. 7% of LGBT+ young people and 2% of non-LGBT+ young people say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching over the last 12 months.ⁱⁱⁱ

Solutions:

Evidence shows that trans children and young people face particular challenges at school^{iv}, and are more likely to experience social isolation and bullying than their peers. This can have a devastating effect on trans children's mental health, and on their ability to learn. In the LGBTQ+ Action plan, we welcomed an action to provide statutory national trans guidance for schools and local authorities. It is vital that this guidance is developed and sets out concrete steps for how schools and local authorities can prevent and tackle transphobic bullying and effectively support and safeguard trans and gender questioning young people.

One key tool for tackling sexual harassment of LGBTQ+ pupils, is good quality, inclusive RSE (further detail below). Teachers must feel confident to talk openly with their pupils about bullying, harassment or abuse.

Effectiveness of interventions

NSPCC Cymru/Wales was jointly commissioned with Barnardo's Cymru to write the guidance on safeguarding children from harmful sexual behaviour in schools. As such, it would not be appropriate for us to comment on the effectiveness of this guidance.

NSPCC Cymru/Wales hosted the cross-party group on preventing child sexual abuse on 15th February. The meeting heard from Professor EJ Renold and Professor Carlene Firmin. The meeting found the role of professional learning is essential to improving outcomes for young people harmed by peer sexual abuse and Welsh Government should invest in this as part of the new curriculum (more detail under the role of the new curriculum below).

The meeting also considered the vital role of contextual safeguarding to tackle peer sexual abuse. For example,

- Building a school's capacity to play a protective role in safeguarding young people.
- The importance of assessing an entire peer group rather than an individual young person/family to avoid 'victim vacuums'
- Mapping activities around the school – context weighting to understand the most significant context that is likely to cause the most harm.

The wider context

An online survey carried out by the NSPCC with 1,001 girls and boys aged 11-16 across the United Kingdom^v found that 476 young people (48%) had seen online pornography, whilst 525 (52%) reported not seeing online pornography.

In 2020, Ofcom also reported that 31% of surveyed 12- to 15-year-olds said they had seen something online that they found worrying or nasty in some way that they didn't like.^{vi}

We know that being exposed to pornography, violent and inappropriate content online shapes young people's perceptions of relationships and can have a negative impact on the way they interact with their peers online and offline.

Today, social media is a ubiquitous part of childhood, and an inescapable utility. Around half of UK children aged 12 have at least one social media account, despite the minimum age requirements for most sites being 13. By age 13, that figure rises to almost two-thirds^{vii}. The pandemic underlined the central role technology plays in children's lives. In England and Wales, since 2017/18 there have been over 10,000 police-recorded offences for sexual communication with a child. 70% of offences took place on just three sites: Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram.

Solutions:

In England, the recent Ofsted review has rightfully highlighted the potential of the Online Safety Bill to transform the online space for children, and the Children's Commissioner has been commissioned jointly by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education to look at the wider societal factors influencing sexual violence and rape culture in schools - in particular how attitudes are shaped by access to pornography and driven through online channels. **We would like to see a similar exercise carried out for Wales.**

Role of families, parents and carers

Families have a key role to play in educating young people and building respectful and inclusive cultures in and outside school. They are also crucial to helping young people stay safe online.

Solutions:

It is important that families can have open conversations about online risks, but to do this, they need support to navigate a fast-changing environment. The NSPCC has produced a number of resources to help parents understand their children's online world.^{viii}

Role of the new Curriculum for Wales:

RSE has the potential to prevent sexual abuse and harm to children - in two key ways:

- by enabling more adults to identify concerning behaviour, and children to recognise abuse and seek help;
- and reducing instances of peer sexual abuse by supporting children to recognise how concepts like consent must also apply to their own actions with their peers.

The Estyn report demonstrates what a pivotal role high quality and inclusive RSE can play in creating a culture that fosters healthy relationships and challenges harassment and abuse^{ix}.

Solutions:

Estyn's report was clear about the need for training and support for all schools to design and deliver RSE. As a key priority, we believe there needs to be a distinct strategy/coherent plan for professional learning on RSE, and a commitment for ringfenced investment in ongoing professional development on RSE for teachers and wider school staff. This would support schools to map out the issues that are most relevant to their learners and be more confident in creating and delivering their new inclusive RSE curriculum in a trauma-informed way. It would also support schools to be equipped with the tools to help spot signs and symptoms of trauma and abuse, sensitively interact with a child who is disclosing and be confident in taking action and supporting children through the disclosure journey.

We feel it is very important for the designated RSE leads in schools and local authorities to be identified by September 2022. We also believe that dedicated investment will be needed to ensure that these leads^x have protected hours for RSE and specific training to help schools implement a whole school approach to RSE.

To help oversee the implementation of RSE, we suggest Welsh Government convene a RSE implementation group, made up of cross sector stakeholders to help monitor and support the development of RSE within the new curriculum.

ⁱ NSPCC research Hamilton-Giachistis 2017

ⁱⁱ NSPCC news report on online grooming of girls 2021 <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2021/online-grooming-crimes-girls/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Growing Up LGBTQ+ Report (2021)

<https://www.justlikeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Just-Like-Us-2021-report-Growing-Up-LGBT.pdf>

^{iv} Stonewall School Report 2017

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/the_school_report_2017.pdf

^v Martellozzo, E., Monaghan, A., Adler, J.R., Davidson, J., Leyva, R. and Horvath, M.A.H. 2016. I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it. London: NSPCC

^{vi} Ofcom (2021) Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2020. London: Ofcom.

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} [Keeping children safe online | NSPCC](#)

^{ix} HSee Estyn (2021) [“We don't tell our teachers” Experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales, Welcome - Everyone's Invited; Our abuse in education helpline receives hundreds of calls since launching in April | NSPCC](#); Ofsted (2021) [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#) [London]: Ofsted.

^x [Written Statement: Sexual harassment and abuse in education settings](#). June 16th, 2021